

London — Restoring Hitchcock

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In this year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics, Britain's cultural institutions, including the BFI, wheeled out their big guns for the London 2012 Festival. Shakespeare, Dickens, and Turner were obvious candidates, and who better to represent British film than its most celebrated genius, Alfred Hitchcock. The preservation and reassessment of his work is a top priority for the BFI, so this seemed a propitious moment to look again at his first nine surviving films. Of all of his films these were most in need of restoration and rediscovery, and the BFI National Archive was in a position to make a real difference both to the film materials and to their reputation.

His early work is still relatively unknown except among completists and is ripe for reassessment. It's surprising that although these films have always been available due to Hitchcock's prominence, none of the many prints and DVDs in circulation have benefited from full archival restoration. Some re-mastering or re-printing work has been done over the years by the BFI and the rights-owners. Only *The Lodger* (1926) was fully restored in the pre-digital era, but the new combination of photochemical and digital restoration techniques now make it possible for really significant improvements to be made in the surviving materials.

The BFI's restoration team consisting of curators and technical experts have undertaken detailed print source research with partner archives and rights-holders, and have worked with external digital laboratories, as well as doing much of the restoration work at its own facility, to produce restored 35mm prints (and DCPs) of the nine titles, three of them tinted, and new preservation masters.

There was a definite benefit to doing all nine titles at the same time – we learned a lot about Hitchcock's filmmaking style and predilections. We learned a lot too about contemporary studio practice, which was vital in the restoration process, as we only had the evidence of the film prints themselves to go on. No production paperwork survives for any of Hitchcock's silent films, and the British film censor records for the silent era were destroyed in the Blitz. British International Pictures, for example, made second or "export" negatives compiled from alternative shots (rather than filming with a second camera, a common practice in Hollywood). We can see this in two surviving prints of *The Ring* (1927) – the British release and the French version, which if you look very closely is made up almost entirely from different shots. In this instance, although we couldn't use the French version as a source it proved invaluable as a guide for checking

the sequencing and continuity of the British version. This practice also explained the feeling of “wrongness” about *Champagne* (1928), in which shots are clumsily juxtaposed and several shots exhibit sub-standard acting. For this title, unless another print turns up one day, we don’t have the finished film as Hitchcock produced it. Hitchcock paid scrupulous attention to details, so if something was wrong in filmmaking terms – even if he disliked the *subject* matter, as we know he did with *Champagne* – there was reason for us to question our source material. It was as we were pondering this that Claire West, who did the comparison work on all the different elements, discovered the words “2nd Neg” scratched into the leader of Reel One.

Gainsborough, the company which took over from Famous Players-Lasky at the Islington studio, and for whom Hitchcock made his first four films, seems to have been less-well-funded, and, as well as doing almost no marketing by comparison with better-heeled companies, preserved no negatives, so we were obliged to work from prints. An unexpected compensation, however, has been that for *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), *The Lodger* (1926), and *Downhill* (1927) we have evidence of the original tinting scheme, which we have been able to restore.

The most exciting outcomes of the restoration process have been to the first and last of Hitchcock’s silents – the astonishing quality which was possible with a combination of wet- and dry-scanning from the original negative of *Blackmail* (1929), and the reinstatement of footage to *The Pleasure Garden* (1925). Working with five different elements, we were able to reposition small details which make the film flow better and add to our knowledge of Hitchcock’s style. There was no debate about where the pieces of this puzzle would fit – the scripting is so logical that they wouldn’t fit anywhere else. A good case in point was a seemingly random close-up of a cup of tea, found in one print but not the others. Close observation reveals that floating in the cup is a tea leaf – which according to an English “old wives’ tale” foretells the arrival of a stranger, for good or evil. It fits into a scheme Hitchcock has created of omens which warn Patsy against involvement with the character of Levet. The shot fits exactly with a

reaction shot from Patsy as she points out the tea leaf to Hugh, and the arrival of Levet, the stranger, right on cue.

Of course presentation is the key to getting to the hearts of the audience. At the time of writing, four gala screenings have taken place, to great acclaim: *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), at Wilton’s, a little gem of a Victorian London music hall, with a score by 24-year-old musical prodigy Daniel Patrick Cohen, and the orchestra bathed in coloured lights that changed in time with the film’s tints; *Blackmail* (1929), with Neil Brand’s powerful score, at the British Museum, where the dénouement of the film takes place; *The Ring* (1927), at the Hackney Empire, a theatre Hitchcock would certainly have known, with a vibrant new jazz score by Soweto Kinch; and *The Lodger* (1926), with Nitin Sawhney’s full orchestral score, triumphed at the Barbican concert hall.

THE RESTORATIONS

Restoration work on Hitchcock’s nine surviving silent films as director will have taken over three years to complete when it finishes later this year. The team has striven throughout the project to make the restored films the products of thorough print research, intensive comparison and selection of source materials, rigorous and innovative scanning, and, finally, sensitive reproduction of the films’ original textures in 35mm print and DCP.

The BFI National Archive restored the films in close collaboration with Deluxe 142 in London, and as a result the work was spread across multiple locations. Additionally, the commission of new scores for seven of the films meant their reconstruction was carried out in collaboration with the composers. The project’s focus, however, has been the individual design of restoration for historically significant films.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH

Starting in 2009, we undertook a search for all existing film elements. It is testament to the continuing respect in which Hitchcock’s work is held that we were actively approached by several archives and collections with details of



Tea leaf close-up insert shot from *The Pleasure Garden* (1925)

their holdings. Overall, as might have been expected, the search revealed that the majority of the extant copies were within the BFI National Archive collections and many of those in other archives were access prints derived from them. Fortunately, however, among the important discoveries were four nitrate prints and six other elements that have become sources in the restorations or benefited the project greatly.

Thanks to the generosity and enthusiasm of our FIAF colleagues and lending institutions from three continents, these copies were assembled at the BFI National Archive's Conservation Centre, where detailed inspection and comparison work was completed. This print research, always the crucial foundation of restoration, has informed and enabled the subsequent technical work in identifying both source materials and original copies useful for reference. Any restoration project is first and foremost a report back on the nature of a film's existence. In the case of Hitchcock's silent films, the report has been both sobering in its picture of films ultimately existing in either singular or fragile copies and also exhilarating in the opportunity it presented for restoring and presenting the films properly.

ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTS

A thorough analysis of the physical characteristics, technical provenance, and photographic quality of the available film elements then followed. The conclusions of this analysis determined the most appropriate restoration route for the source materials, as well as their authentic editorial reconstruction. It was at this stage that plans for the scanning of the original elements were tailored accordingly. Scanning and reconstruction are critically intertwined aspects: choices affecting the latter will be informed by the results of the former, just as scanning methods will be adjusted to the demands of reconstruction.

The materials that exist for each of Hitchcock's silents can be broadly categorized into three groups:

1. those films for which original negatives exist (*The Manxman*, *Blackmail*, and *Champagne*);
2. those that exist only as vintage nitrate prints (*The Pleasure Garden*, *Downhill*, and *The Lodger*);

3. and the films which no longer survive in the form they were released (*The Ring*, *The Farmer's Wife*, and *Easy Virtue*).

Let's start with the first group, those films for which original negatives exist: *The Manxman*, *Blackmail*, and *Champagne*. Although the existence of the original camera negative ensures the best image quality in the restoration, our understanding of its "nature" and correct reproduction is always enhanced by the corresponding evaluation of contemporary release prints. These can indicate the original edit, length of intertitles, and grading. We are fortunate that this is the case for *The Manxman* (1929), but it is almost the sole example within the project. The nitrate print confirmed the black and white release of the film, as indicated by the instruction "B/W" which was scratched on the negative's leaders, and provided additional frames for a shot that had been abbreviated in the negative by damage.

Famously, *Blackmail* was released as Britain's first part-talking feature, and two negatives were assembled: one for the silent version and one for the sound. Although the silent negative was in a parlous state dimensionally, described below in the section about scanning, it was incredibly complete. Indeed, it is a fascinating locus of how optical effects were being produced at this time. Examining the negative demonstrates that the optical effects, the fades and dissolves which are so important in the B.I.P. films, were produced in three ways: in the camera; as "(over)lap" dissolves; and in the lab as dupe negatives which were then cut into the original negative. The latter method is, of course, how opticals were made in the subsequent decades of sound production. However, the sophisticated optical printers and duplicating stocks designed for the purpose were not available in the 1920s, and it is interesting to see that producers wanted to include opticals even at the expense of image quality.

"Lap" dissolves were made up of the two shots to be mixed. Fades were created at the end of the outgoing shot and the start of the incoming shot. These were bi-packed in the printer, in contact with the print stock, and the effect was therefore generated for each print

directly from the camera negative. Over time, as the negatives were repeatedly handled and acquired into archive collections, the overlapping shots were disassembled and joined end-to-end. When printed, the sequence appears as a fade-out and fade-in rather than a mix, and this is the way many have been seen in archive access prints. Inspection of the negatives at these points, judged in their narrative context, can lead to a reasonable decision to overlap the scans and make the dissolve. The effect will look quite authentic, even as part of a digital process, because the unevenness of the fades is incorporated in the negatives. Again, this decision is easier if contemporary prints are available because the opticals will be incorporated in them.

In the second group of Hitchcock's silents are the films that exist as nitrate prints: *The Pleasure Garden*, *Downhill*, and *The Lodger*. *The Lodger*, hitherto perhaps the best-known of Hitchcock's silent films, survives as an assortment of nitrate print reels. Comparison with Ivor Montagu's typewritten list of intertitles (one of the few pieces of documentary evidence relating to Hitchcock's silents, apart from press books) revealed that the film's continuity is nevertheless embodied almost fully.

The Pleasure Garden is *sui generis* among the restorations, not least because it is Hitchcock's first film as director. It is also the film which has been unequivocally transformed by reconstruction and restoration. For a long period, the film had circulated in what were apparently two versions. The first was the BFI's viewing print, derived from the sole nitrate print in the collection. The other was a print from the Raymond Rohauer collection. Such were the differences between the two that it was possible to believe the film had been released originally in two versions. The restoration team's patience in pursuing the international search was rewarded with the discovery of four nitrate prints – one from the BFI, one from EYE Film Institute Netherlands (who also loaned a nitrate print of *Downhill*), one from the Cinémathèque française, and one from Southern Methodist University in Dallas (which is preserved at George Eastman House). The fifth copy was an acetate low-contrast positive, the master for the Rohauer printing negative, and was kindly lent by Douris UK Ltd.

Once the prints could be examined together, it became clear that there had only been one negative. The Dutch nitrate print acted as a “key” because, although certainly incomplete, it overlapped intricately with the footage of the other copies. It was therefore possible not only to see how the film could be reconstructed overall, but also how small insertions could be made at the local level. In one shot, Miles Mander throws his hat onto a table; the flight of the hat is comprised of frames from the Dutch and Rohauer prints. This one example is synecdochically indicative of the vast improvement made to the narrative’s sense.

Lastly, there are the films which do not exist in the form in which they were released: *The Ring*, *The Farmer’s Wife*, and *Easy Virtue*. Hitchcock’s last film for Gainsborough, *Easy Virtue* (1927), is the only one of the nine which can currently be confirmed as existing only in 16mm reduction prints. Five of these are being compared for quality and completeness prior to restoration of the best sources. Acetate duplicating positives of *The Ring* and *The Farmer’s Wife*, made in the 1960s from original negatives, are the earliest-generation sources.

APPROACH FOR INTERTITLES

Considered as examples of the sophisticated narrative productions of the 1920s, Hitchcock’s silent films are particularly interesting for their employment of intertitles. Again, there appears a difference between the two production companies, Gainsborough and British International Pictures. The literary, at times florid, style of Gainsborough is correspondingly illustrated by “art” cards. These gave way to the sparse and more elegant style of B.I.P., used almost solely as dialogue, and illustrated simply by white text on a black background.

Given the importance of intertitles in the films, we decided to afford them due attention in the restoration work. *Blackmail* was the only film for which we could use the original titles intact, because they existed in the negative in the correct length and could be repaired digitally as “sequences”, similar to the picture. Intertitles for the other films were restored extremely carefully, using a mix of lab

and digital techniques. Careful reconstruction of each card in Photoshop was followed by film-recording of individual frames. These were stretch-printed on negative and printed again to introduce grain, movement, and fluctuation. These new film elements were then scanned and edited into the digital master.

ASPECTS OF THE RESTORATION PROCESS SCANNING AND COLOUR

The BFI National Archive acquired an ARRISCAN film scanner last year, with funds from the government’s Screen Heritage UK project. The Hitchcock project marked the initial use of the scanner, equipped with a wet-gate. The nitrate copies for Hitchcock’s first and last silent films – *The Pleasure Garden* and *Blackmail* – were scanned at the Conservation Centre. The nitrate prints of *The Pleasure Garden* were scanned exclusively with the wet-gate. However, just as in printing, wet-gate scanning entails a slight but perceptible loss in definition, and we were extremely keen to avoid this in the case of the *Blackmail* camera negative. The negative was scanned dry, at 4K resolution, and the scans were reviewed in Deluxe’s theatre to identify those scenes which would benefit from wet-gate scanning because of scratching. As anticipated, these occurred at the head and tail of reels, where handling has been most intrusive.

The challenges of managing the ARRISCAN’s wet-gate with original materials has been very usefully described by Fumiko Tsuneishi.¹ Our experience mirrors that, and, similarly, we have been very happy with the results of scanning. The reproduction of the photographic tones in *Blackmail*’s negative is astonishing, but the curl of the film stock, dangerously combined with its incredibly precise but narrow splices, demanded intensive handling. By contrast, good results have been achieved from the nitrate prints of *The Pleasure Garden* using the scanner’s “double-flash” system, which outputs a scan combined from two differing exposures of the film.

1. Fumiko Tsuneishi, “From a Wooden Box to Digital Film Restoration”, *Journal of Film Preservation* 85, October 2011, pp. 63-72.

Reproduction of the tones and tints found in three films, *The Pleasure Garden*, *Downhill*, and *The Lodger*, has also constituted a major aspect of our restoration project. In the absence of scripts or other primary documentation, it appears that these are the only Hitchcock films which were released domestically in tinted and toned prints. Perhaps it is fortunate therefore that they survive only as prints, because the prints themselves are the witnesses, often contradictory, to the films' tinting and toning schemes. Examination has been aimed at determining the colour schemes of British release prints, and these have been followed in the restorations.

Following earlier work on Ponting's *The Great White Silence* (1924) and Mander's *The First Born* (1928), we aimed to reproduce the colours in the digital intermediate grade. This allows, of course, for practically limitless control over colour and contrast, as well as the opportunity to independently alter regions of the frame and parts of the image's tonal range. These latter possibilities were particularly advantageous in the reproduction of the tinting and toning scheme of *The Lodger*, which combines blue toning and amber tinting in many night-time exterior sequences to mimic the foggy atmosphere of the narrative. Having graded the colours, we are very happy with their subsequent duplication in a variety of preservation and presentation formats: 35mm colour negative and prints; DCP; and HD video master.

Every ten years since 1952, the BFI's magazine *Sight & Sound* has conducted a worldwide poll to find the "greatest film of all time" as voted for by critics and historians (and indeed several FIAF archivists). It is timely that we were able to bring audiences all nine of his surviving silent films just as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, after many years of climbing up the list, finally toppled *Citizen Kane* from the No. 1 spot. With any great artist, early works are always revealing, and we hope that peeling back the years of damage to these films will encourage all of us to look again at the work of a master.

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Les Jeux olympiques de Londres en 2012 furent le cadre d'une série d'événements culturels exceptionnels. La National Archive du British Film Institute a choisi de célébrer cette occasion avec le projet le plus ambitieux qu'il n'ait jamais mis en avant : la restauration des neuf films muets d'Alfred Hitchcock qui ont survécu. Le défi était de taille, de la recherche de fonds à la rareté des matériaux d'origine. Les résultats sont cependant plus que satisfaisants et vont permettre à plusieurs générations d'étudier les premiers travaux d'un réalisateur dont la renommée n'en finit pas de grandir. Le travail de restauration a été l'occasion de plusieurs nouvelles découvertes pour les chercheurs qui travaillent sur Hitchcock. L'absence de scripts, de dossiers de studio, même d'évaluations de censure, a imposé à l'équipe du BFI de pratiquer une véritable expertise sur l'art de faire un film chez Hitchcock de manière à s'assurer du bien fondé des diverses décisions qu'il fallait prendre et des interventions pratiquées. En cours de route, les chercheurs ont appris à mieux connaître l'homme et l'activité des studios britanniques dans les années 20, ainsi qu'à se familiariser avec l'histoire complexe des matériaux d'archives. Bien qu'il ne s'agisse pas de la première restauration numérique entreprise par le BFI, les techniques mises au point pour le projet « Hitchcock muet » ont assurément aidé à améliorer de façon notable le travail final et du coup à assurer la conservation à long terme de l'héritage de ce génie du cinéma.

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Los Juegos Olímpicos de Londres de 2012 inspiraron una serie de eventos culturales fecundos en Gran Bretaña. El Archivo Nacional del BFI decidió celebrar el acontecimiento con un proyecto ambicioso: la restauración de las nueve películas mudas de Alfred Hitchcock que perduran hoy día. El reto fue considerable – desde la obtención de Fuentes de financiación hasta el manejo de la escasez de material original –, pero los resultados fueron altamente satisfactorios y permitirán a los jóvenes de hoy y a las generaciones futuras disfrutar y estudiar las primeras obras de un director cuyo prestigio sigue creciendo. El proceso de restauración condujo a varios descubrimientos que constituyen una primicia para los estudiosos de Hitchcock. La ausencia de guiones, fichas de los estudios, o incluso de apreciaciones de la censura, obligó al equipo del BFI a sumergirse de lleno en el proceso mismo de dirección cinematográfica de Hitchcock para asegurarse de que sus decisiones e intervenciones eran las que él deseaba. Recorriendo este camino, aprendimos más sobre el hombre mismo, sobre la práctica de los estudios británicos de los años 1920s, y sobre la compleja historia del material-fuente de los archivos. Esta no es desde luego la primera restauración digital del BFI, pero las técnicas desarrolladas durante el proyecto "Silent Hitchcock" contribuyeron de manera significativa a mejorar el resultado de los trabajos de restauración y a asegurar la salvaguarda a largo plazo del legado de este genio de la cinematografía.



The Lodger (1926) at the Barbican concert hall, London



The Ring (1927)