

The Restoration of Silent Films Produced by Nordisk Films Kompagni

MARGUERITE ENGBERG

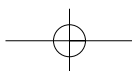
Thanks to *Nordisk Films Kompagni's* long life, from 1906 until this day, we possess much archival material as well as film material from the production company. Thus we have the original negatives of many films produced by the company, and the Danish titles, intertitles and manuscripts of all the films produced from 1907 and onwards.

ASSEMBLING VERSUS RECONSTRUCTION

In the early 1950s the Danish *Filmmuseum* made an agreement with *Nordisk Films Kompagni*, so that the museum could make new prints of all existing original negatives. In that way the museum obtained a fine collection of Danish silent films, because these prints were made from the original negative material. Major editorial work awaited the staff of the *Filmmuseum*, because the negatives were not in chronological order. Two people from the museum worked on the reconstruction of these films. They did not use the word 'reconstruction' at that time - they just said that they were 'assembling' the films for showings. They did not work methodically, but used a kind of common sense principle. The result was that now and then they found it difficult to know exactly where to place a frame or an intertitle, and sometimes when they had finished assembling a film, some frames were left over as unplaceable. And even worse: the editing was not always as the director had meant it to be, as we shall see.

At the end of the 1950s the museum asked me to take over the work. I had been wondering for some time whether there should not be a principle to apply. The first thing I did was to have a close look at one of the negatives. I found a great many different numerals, some black on white background, some white on black background, some placed horizontally, some vertically; even Roman numerals. The two people who had worked on the films had simply ignored these numbers. I phoned Nordisk Film and asked whether they could put me in touch with someone who had been working in the editing room during the silent period. They gave me the telephone number of a woman, then retired, who had worked at their factory. I phoned her, and she gave me all the information I needed. Here is what she told me:

1. Large numbers written with a broad pencil and placed horizontally are **the numbers for the intertitles.**
2. On the bottom left hand side of the first frame of the film will be a number which is **the registration number of the film.**





3. In the bottom right hand corner of the same frame will be another number which indicates **the number of reels the films consists of.**
4. In the bottom left hand corner will be a number telling **the length in meters of the scene in question.**
5. A white number on a black background is **the editing number.** This is the most important of all numbers, as the film is to be edited according to these numbers.
6. **The tinting colour** is indicated in writing.

Furnished with this key I began to edit the first film: *Folkets Ven* (Holger-Madsen, DK, 1918). With a pair of scissors I cut the film into all the shots it consisted of in such a way that I always had the editing number first and then the shot. *Folkets Ven* consisted of 440 shots. After I had finished the editing, no shots were left over. They had all been placed into the film.

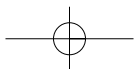
Upon the whole this key works well. There may be minor deviations from film to film, from director to director, but they are only trifles.

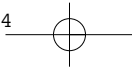
TINTING AND TONING OF SILENT FILMS

Already from its first year of existence Nordisk Films Kompagni tinted its films. But only when a customer ordered a tinted print, for which he had to pay 1.25 kroner per. meter instead of 1 krone per meter, which was the price of a black-and-white print. From 1907 all the films from the company were sold in tinted prints at 1 krone per meter.

The first Danish film theorist was Urban Gad. To most of us he is known as the director of Asta Nielsen's first film *Afgrunden* from 1910 and after that of 35 films with her. But he was also a film theorist and published his work *Filmen, dens Midler og Maal* [The Film, its Means and Ends] in 1919. At that time Urban Gad worked as a well established director in Germany, and as early as in 1921 his book was translated into German with the title "Der Film: Seine Mittel, seine Ziele". His book treats all the different aspects of film work, and he spends almost a whole chapter on the tinting and toning of films. Here he tells us that in the early years of cinema it was common to use loud colours such as scarlet, bright yellow, grass-green and purple in a jumble regardless of style and action and he continues: "It is still important to pay attention to use light colours".

The use of colours mentioned by Urban Gad corresponds very well to the colours which Nordisk Films Kompagni applied until about 1923, when the colour plan was reduced to two or three colours. It was the director Benjamin Christensen who was the originator of this change. During the years 1920-1922 when he worked on his film *Häxan* (Christensen, SE, 1921), he decided to use three colours only. We know this from Johan Ankerstjerne who was chief cinematographer on the film and Christensen's technical manager. Ankerstjerne gave a lecture at Tekniska Museet in Stockholm in 1951, and here he told the audience how Benjamin Christensen made experiments with the use of several colours but ended up with three colours only: light brown, dark brown and blue. His argument was that if he used many different colours, the film got out of balance, which spoiled the effect of his work.





"Häxan" (Christensen, SE, 1921)

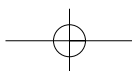
In 1923 Johan Ankerstjerne became the head of the technical department at Nordisk Films Kompagni, and from this position he introduced the restricted use of colours, which he and Benjamin Christensen had worked out on *Häxan*. So from 1923 onwards the tinting of Danish films was gradually limited to two or three colours. This reduction was not a specific Danish phenomenon but was seen in the silent films everywhere. Paolo Cherchi Usai confirms this in his book *Silent Cinema* from 2000 where he writes:

"The technique went into three phases. The first from 1900 to about 1907 saw the occasional use of tinting and toning. In the second from 1908-1925 the uniform colouring of the film base became a widespread practise. The great majority of films during this time were coloured, using one or the other technique, or both combined. This period may be further subdivided into two trends, initially the frequent use of both tinting and toning, later, the slow decline of toning in the years 1921-25".

According to Usai the reason for this decline was the gradual introduction of panchromatic film material. This material was less suited to the general application of colour than the orthochromatic film for which the technique of tinting and toning was originally designed. The first Danish film where panchromatic film was used - but in a few scenes only - was in Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan*.

RESTORING FILMS FROM NORDISK FILMS KOMPAGNI

On the original negatives from Nordisk Films Kompagni indications tell us which colour to use. So if the negative is complete, and if no one has cut away the indications, it is rather easy to tint the film. But unfortunately the two restorers mentioned earlier cut away all the indications. Therefore in films restored in the early fifties much valuable information has been irredeemably lost.





The next problem that arises when you intend to produce a tinted/toned print is the chemical colour composition. It is sometimes difficult today to determine the right colours. But we try to get as close to the original colour as possible. My experience tells me that red is especially difficult to obtain. Nowadays, when the tinting is made in the printer, it is important to make an exact plan of the colouring, i.e. to indicate which colour each scene is to have, before you edit the film.

As mentioned earlier, my work as a restorer began with *Folkets Ven*. Several films directed by A.W. Sandberg followed. For instance his Dickens film *David Copperfield* (Sandberg, DK, 1922). In the middle of the 1960s my work stopped. There were several reasons: 1. The museum found it difficult to find the means for this expensive work. 2. The most important films of the collection had been restored by then. 3. There did not seem to be an audience for these Danish silent films at home or abroad.

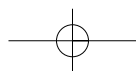
In the early 1980s the Film Museum asked me to restore *Atlantis* (Blom, DK, 1913). It was among the films restored in the fifties, but due to a mishap the print had disappeared. I asked Ib Monty, then head of the Film Museum, whether we should produce a tinted version of *Atlantis*, but he preferred a black-and-white print. Silent films have been preserved in black-and-white duplicates and prints. This lack of colour has become a convention which is accepted everywhere. In 1998 Ingmar Bergman expressed his ideas of the tinted films with the words: "They are so damned ugly". During my work on *Atlantis* I got hold of a Japanese excerpt from the film. It was an excerpt dating back to 1913, a very beautiful tinted print. How I wish that we might have had the whole film like this excerpt.



Clara Wieth is kidnapped by white slave traders. Tinted blue. From *Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer* (Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1911). Photo: Nordisk/DFI.



Clara Wieth bound and bagged in the den of the slave traders. Tinted lilac. From *"Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer"* (Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1911). Photo: Nordisk/DFI.





Thora Meincke in a dangerous situation. Tinted blue. From *Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer* (Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1911). Photo: Nordisk/DFI.

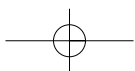
Soon afterwards I restored my first film in a tinted version. It was *Den hvide Slavehandels sidste Offer* (Blom, DK, 1911) – a minor work in Danish film history. Luckily it had not been restored during the fifties. In this case I found a complete negative. It was arranged according to the tinting order – that is, not in a chronological order, with all the information still on the film. Therefore the editing of this film was rather uncomplicated, and it has become a kind of model for me in my continued work as a restorer.

RESTORING CARL TH. DREYER'S FILM *PRÆSIDENTEN*

My latest work has been the restoration of Carl Th. Dreyer's *Præsidenten* from 1919. This is his first film as a director, produced by Nordisk Films Kompagni. The film was restored in the fifties, and therefore much information is lost. My starting point was the original negative edited in the fifties, the manuscript and all the intertitles of the film – 124 in all. I found some numerals on the negative, but not enough to make a reliable edit. Then I began speculating on what help the 'editors' at Nordisk Film had had besides the numerals on the negative. Suddenly I remembered that Dreyer had once mentioned an editing script in some autobiographical notes. I looked for such a script, but found only part of it. It gave me much important information, though, and moreover it was a great help for the reconstruction of the tinting, as it contained information from the different shots which made it possible for me to conclude which shots were to have the same colour. As the tinting process was to take place in the



Halvard Hoff as the president and Richard Christensen standing by the open window looking at the torchlight procession held in honour of the president. Tinted red. From "*Præsidenten*". Photo: Nordisk/DFI



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Young love represented by Jacoba Jessen and Elith Pio in one of the few optimistic scenes of the film. Tinted bright yellow. From "Præsidenten". Photo: Nordisk/DFI

printer, I had to work out an exact plan for the tinting by counting all the frames. There were 70140 frames in all. The plan consisted of four columns: one for the number of the frames, one for the colour, one for the shots and one giving a short description of the content of each shot. After that all that remained for me to do was to follow the work of the technical department and to discuss with them the changes in the colour, if any.

The restoration of *Præsidenten* was finished in the spring of 1999. It had its premiere at The Danish Film Institute and was afterwards shown to an international audience at the Festival of Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna in July 1999.