

The Davide Turconi Collection of Nitrate Film Frames (1897-1944)

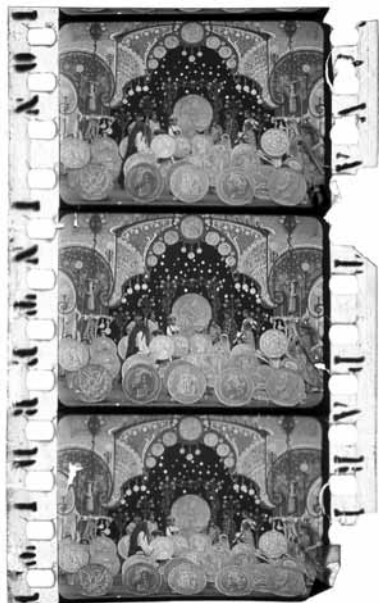
Paolo Cherchi Usai, Joshua Yumibe

News from the Affiliates

Gemona / Rochester



Das Geheimnis von Chateau Richmond, Germany, 1913, dir. Willy Zeyn, prod. Karl Werner



Au Pays de l'or, Pathé, France, 1908

As part of its celebrations for the 30th year of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, the Cineteca del Friuli presented a new internet database (www.progettoturconi.it) dedicated to the 35mm nitrate film frame clippings collected by Italian film historian Davide Turconi from the Josef Joye Collection in Switzerland and from other unidentified sources. The collection consists of approximately 23,500 clippings in total (usually two to three frames each). The vast majority of the frames cover the early years of cinema (from ca. 1897 to 1915); however, some items in the collection represent films produced as late as 1944.

The Turconi Collection Database is the result of 12 years of ongoing work (2000-2011). The database is the largest of its kind currently available, and provides a unique tool for film scholars, archivists, and curators. Scans of the frames are represented there in a single digital repository. Most of the original frames are now preserved at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; smaller groups of frames are held by other institutions. As a tribute to Turconi's belief that knowledge is a treasure to be shared, the Turconi Collection Database is being made available for free online with the financial support of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and the Cineteca del Friuli.

Davide Turconi

Film historian Davide Turconi (17 January 1911–27 January 2005) is regarded as one of the founding fathers of cinema studies in Italy. A specialist in American silent cinema, he achieved an international reputation with a groundbreaking monograph on Mack Sennett (*Mack Sennett, il "re delle comiche"*, 1961), translated into French in the "Cinéma d'aujourd'hui" series by Seghers (1966). After curating programs on Sennett (1961) and Buster Keaton (1963) at the Venice Film Festival, he established in 1964 the Italian Association for Studies in the History of Cinema (Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema), one of the first organizations of its kind worldwide. Six years later he founded the Incontri Cinematografici di Grado (1970-1972), a short-lived but influential attempt to develop a festival entirely focused on the rediscovery and promotion of the silent film heritage.

Turconi's encounter with a Palestinian-born film collector, Angelo R. Humouda, and with the newly founded Cinepopolare in 1977 (renamed in 1982 as La Cineteca del Friuli) sparked the idea of a follow-up to the Grado festival, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, of which he was the first Director and then Honorary President until his death. His collaboration with the Swiss priest Stefan Bamberger sparked the rediscovery of the Josef Joye

À l'occasion du 30e anniversaire des Giornate del Cinema Muto, la Cineteca del Friuli a ouvert au public la collection de photogrammes sur support nitrate du fonds Davide Turconi. Constitué à partir de la collection du Suisse Josef Joye et autres sources non identifiées par l'historien italien Davide Turconi, le fonds comprend quelque 23.500 éléments, datant principalement des premières années du cinéma. Il s'agit de la plus importante collection du genre.

Outil important pour quiconque travaille sur les débuts du cinéma, la collection Turconi est désormais accessible sans frais, grâce à l'appui financier des Giornate del Cinema Muto et de la Cineteca del Friuli, à l'adresse suivante: www.progettoturconi.it

Les photogrammes numérisés y sont accessibles; les éléments d'origine sont conservés au George Eastman House de Rochester et dans plusieurs institutions italiennes.

El artículo traza una breve historia de la colección Davide Turconi de películas de nitrato, colección presentada por la Cineteca del Friuli en el marco de las celebraciones del 30º aniversario de Le Giornate del Cinema Muto de Pordenone. La colección está dedicada a las tomas en nitrato de 35mm coleccionadas por Davide Turconi, historiador italiano del cine, a partir de la colección de Josef Joye (Suiza) y de otras fuentes no identificadas. Consiste en alrededor de 23 500 imágenes, en su mayor parte pertenecientes a los primeros años del cine. El acceso a la colección, la más extensa de este tipo, es una fuente importante para la investigación sobre los primeros años del cine y, desde ahora, está disponible gratuitamente en una base de datos en línea (www.progettoturconi.it), gracias al apoyo económico de Le Giornate del Cinema Muto y la Cineteca del Friuli. Escaneos de las imágenes están disponibles también a través de la base de datos, mientras que los originales se conservan actualmente en la George Eastman House en Rochester (Nueva York) y en algunas instituciones italianas.

Collection, now considered one of the major sources for research on early cinema.¹

Josef Joye

Jesuit abbé Josef-Alexis Joye (1852-1919) collected in Switzerland in the early 1900s a large number of early films from that period. Joye was born in Romont, near Freiburg, and entered the Jesuit order as a young man. He studied in Germany and Great Britain, and returned to Switzerland in 1886 as the Vicar of St. Clara Church in Basel, a position he held until 1911. There he worked to establish a charitable institution in 1898, later renamed the Borromäum, to strengthen the local Catholic community. Joye focused the institution on popular, community-based social endeavors: caring for and instructing orphans, providing Sunday school classes, and offering adult education programs for the working class and recent Catholic *émigrés* to the area.

It is within the context of the Borromäum that Joye turned to visual media for his pedagogical initiatives. In the 1890s and early 1900s he made extensive use of lantern slides, many of which he created himself for lectures on subjects ranging from biblical stories to historical topics, current events, and popular science. Also in the early 1900s, he began to collect films and incorporate them into his lectures. These films have become known as the Josef Joye Collection.

A Brief History of the Collection

In the 1960s, Davide Turconi culled the bulk of the film frames from Joye's collection. Joye had acquired a wide variety of international films, as well as magic lantern slides, over a number of years from the second-hand market in Switzerland and Germany. After Joye left Basel in 1911, the films remained at the Borromäum, and some titles were added after his departure. According to a yet-unverified estimate, there were approximately 1,540 prints in the collection, most of which were produced between 1908 and 1912. A first inventory was made in 1942; a second, more detailed catalogue was compiled in the early 1960s. In 1958, under the supervision of Jesuit Father Stefan Bamberger, the films were moved to more appropriate storage facilities in Zurich, which is where Turconi encountered them.

Upon inspection, Turconi found many of the prints to be in advanced stages of decomposition. He arranged for some of the Italian films to be duplicated on safety film stock in Italy, and approached a number of other archives to preserve the rest of the collection. However, given the expenses involved with a large number of prints, no institution could undertake such a project at the time. Finding no means of saving the collection as a whole, Turconi resorted to a desperate step: he cut frames from the films and carefully organized them in envelopes by title and date (when identifiable) in order to preserve in fragments what he feared would soon disappear. Fortunately, many of the remaining prints did survive, and in 1976 – at the instigation of British filmmaker David Mingay – the remainder of the Joye

1 At a time when research tools were not widely available to scholars, Turconi authored a number of bibliographies on the history of cinema. His autobiographical memoir, "Ricordi di un bibliofilo e storico del cinema" (now available on the Internet at www-3.unipv.it/cinema/extra/turconibibliofilo.htm), was published in *Bollettino per Biblioteche* (Amministrazione Provinciale di Pavia / Assessorato alla Cultura), no. 36, December 1991, pp. 47-53.



A Trip to Mars, Edison, US, 1910



Bruxelles, Nordisk, c.1908

Collection was rescued by David Francis, then Curator of the National Film Archive at the British Film Institute in London. As of 2011, 1,158 of them are reported to survive in some form at the BFI National Archive.²

Over the years, Turconi donated the bulk of his collection of frames to Paolo Cherchi Usai and to the Cineteca del Friuli; smaller batches were also given to the Arts and Culture Department at the Province of Pavia, the Cineteca di Bologna, and to the film historians Aldo Bernardini and Riccardo Redi. In 2004, Cherchi Usai offered his frames to George Eastman House, where they could be properly safeguarded and made available to all; his example was followed in 2010 by Bernardini and Redi, and by the Cineteca del Friuli. The original frames in Pavia and Bologna are held, respectively, by the laboratory La Camera Ottica at the University of Udine (upon arrangement with the University of Pavia, custodian of the frames on behalf of the Province of Pavia) and the Cineteca di Bologna; both institutions have made digital copies available for the Turconi Collection Database.

This project was initiated in 2000 by the Giornate del Cinema Muto and the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. Patricia De Filippi (then at the Selznick School from the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo) established the initial technical and curatorial parameters for the long-term conservation of the collection and for the organization of the database. Since then, many other Selznick students have contributed to the project in the course of their training program at George Eastman House. In 2003, Joshua Yumibe (then a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago, now a Lecturer at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland) took over the management of the project in collaboration with Paolo Cherchi Usai.

The Turconi Collection Database

Each entry in the database includes a low-resolution reproduction of a film fragment from the Davide Turconi Collection. Additional information on the identity of the film and its technical features has been added when possible. Film fragments in the database can be searched in a variety of ways: by the title of the film from which they came (if known), by year, by production company, by nation, by coloring process, and so forth.

The Color of Nitrate

We have endeavored to reproduce the colors of the original frames as accurately as possible. It should be kept in mind, however, that the frames have been scanned over several years, by different people, and with different pieces of equipment, thus making it impossible to achieve a perfect uniformity in color grading. This is particularly noticeable in some titles where multiple frames belonging to the same shot may be slightly different from each other in terms of color balance. Also, the scans are meant to suggest how the frames appear on a light table, and it is worth remembering that the colors would have looked relatively different when projected. Relatedly, the colors will vary depending on the calibration of your monitor. For practical purposes, colors listed in the database have been

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² Further information on the history of the collection can be found in Roland Cosandey, *Welcome Home, Joye! Film um 1910: Aus der Sammlung Joseph Joye* (Basel: Stroemfeld Verlag, 1993 [KINtop Schriften 1]), and in Joshua Yumibe's essay, "From Switzerland to Italy and All Around the World: The Josef Joye and Davide Turconi Collections", in Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, and Rob King (eds.), *Early Cinema and the "National"* (Bloomington / New Barnet, UK: Indiana University Press / John Libbey, 2008), pp. 321-331.



Fillettes de Bretagne, Pathé, France, 1909



Unidentified film, c.1905



Unidentified film, c.1910



[Trommelkünstler], Gaumont/Messter, France/Germany, c.1907

reduced to a limited range of fields. For the same reasons, some colors (for instance, “orange” and “amber”) have been merged into a single field. Color assessment and definition should therefore be considered as approximate. In the event that a more accurate analysis is required, a direct examination of the original frames is strongly recommended.

Access to the Collection

Each nitrate film fragment in the collection is identified by the institution currently holding the original item. Its owner should be contacted directly at one of the following addresses in order to consult the originals or request reproductions in a higher resolution:

- George Eastman House: stills@geh.org
- University of Pavia: bib.petarca@unipv.it
- Cineteca di Bologna: cinetecaarchiviofotografico@comune.bologna.it

Please note that the Giornate del Cinema Muto and the Cineteca del Friuli are not responsible for handling requests or obtaining permissions for access to the Turconi Collection.

Corrections to the Database

A database of this magnitude is necessarily a work in progress. Many items are still awaiting identification, and errors or ambiguities may be found in the information provided for the entries. You can help us by clicking the “corrections” link located at the top of each page. If appropriate, your notes and comments will be included in the database.

If you own other nitrate film frames received from Davide Turconi, please contact us at turconi.collection@gmail.com. With your agreement, we will do our best to include a reproduction of each item in the database.



Vues d'Espagne en cartes postales, Pathé, France, 1907

All illustrations for this article are from the Davide Turconi internet database, www.progettoturconi.it