



EXPERIMENTA

The Surviving Films of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson

Polish avant-gardists the Themersons were multi-disciplinary artists who infused their work with a tactile sense of irreverence and wit. Their legendary anti-fascist film *Europa* (1931), looted by the Nazis, was recently discovered in the Bundesarchiv, Berlin and screened for the first time in nearly 90 years in the 2021 London Film Festival, to great acclaim. To further understand the development of the Themersons' work +and ideas, we present *Adventures of a Good Citizen* (1937), the premiere of the newly restored *Calling Mr Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and Ear* (1944).

Each film will be introduced with a short presentation by curator and Themerson estate representative, Jasia Reichardt.

Stefan + Franciszka

While pacing up and down on the terrace of his London house, Stefan Themerson says at one point, 'I am not a noun, I'm a verb,' meaning that for a long time he didn't exist, now he does exist, and soon he will stop existing.

Europa

Originally believed to have been destroyed by the Nazis, Stefan and Franciszka Themersons' incendiary film was rediscovered by chance in the Bundesarchiv, Berlin, in 2019. On behalf of the Themerson Estate, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe negotiated the restitution of the film from the Bundesarchiv, which had preserved the original nitrate film since the reunification of Germany in the 1990s.

The restitution of *Europa* in July this year is the first time a unique film masterpiece has been restituted from Germany in decades. *Europa* has now been donated by the Themerson Estate to the BFI National Archive for long term preservation. Housed at the BFI's Master Film Store in Warwickshire, it has been brought together with original material from the Themersons' other surviving films, most made after they arrived in England during the war and where they lived for the rest of their lives.

The Themersons were Polish artists who met in Warsaw in 1930 and began a lifelong collaboration as writers, illustrators, publishers and avant-garde filmmakers. Made in Warsaw, in the couple's bedroom, *Europa* was their second film, and the first significant avant-garde film made in Poland.

A startling prescient outcry against the rise of fascism in Europe, based on Polish poet Anatol Stern's 1925 futurist poem of the same name, *Europa* utilises an incredible array of avant-garde film techniques; photograms, collages and repetitions to translate words into a montage of images and ideas that articulate the horror, inequality and moral decline that the artists witnessed from Poland, with Europe at the edge of a precipice. It was among the greatest achievements of European avant-garde film of the time.

The Themersons took one copy of each of their five films, including *Europa*, to Paris when they moved there in 1938. With the outbreak of war, *Europa* was deposited for safekeeping at the Vitfer Film Laboratory, together with the other four films, when the couple volunteered to join the Polish Army. All five films were seized from the film lab by the Nazis in 1940 and always believed to have been destroyed and lost forever.

Recognised as an important piece of avant-garde filmmaking, while *Europa* may have been lost it was not forgotten and there were several attempts to re-make and re-imagine it. Stefan Themerson made a reconstruction with the London Film-Makers Co-op in 1983 using surviving stills from the film, and in 1988, Piotr Zarębski, in homage to the Themersons, made his own reconstruction.

Both Franciszka and Stefan died in 1988, still believing that *Europa* had not survived. It was only in 2019 that their niece and heir Jasia Reichardt learned from Poland's Pilecki Institute that a copy of *Europa* might be in the Bundesarchiv. In February 2020, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe was contacted by Robert Devcic, agent for the Themerson Estate, for help to identify and recover the film, and to negotiate its restitution from the Bundesarchiv.

The Commission's research revealed that, after seizure in Paris, the original nitrate film of *Europa* had entered the Reich Film Archive (Reichsfilmarchiv) in Berlin and by 1959 it was in the holdings of the East German State Film Archive (Staatliches Filmarchiv). After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the Film Archive became part of the German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv) where the film had remained ever since. The Commission found there were two copies of the film in the Bundesarchiv, the 35 mm nitrate copy left at Vitfer Laboratories in 1940, and a preservation copy made by the Bundesarchiv.

Returned to the UK in July this year, *Europa* was subsequently restored by Fixafilm in Warsaw with a newly commissioned soundtrack composed by Lodewijk Muns. Both original copies and the restoration film files for *Europa* were donated by the Themerson Estate to the BFI National Archive, which holds the three surviving films made by the Themersons, two made in England for the Film Unit of the Polish Government-in-Exile: *Calling Mr. Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and the Ear* (1945) as well as the Polish-made *The Adventure of a Good Citizen* (1937). Their four other films seized in Paris in 1940 – *The Pharmacy* (1930), *Moment Musical* (1933), *Short Circuit* (1935) and the Paris copy of *The Adventure of a Good Citizen* (1937) – remain missing.

bfi.org.uk, 14 September 2021

Adventures of a Good Citizen

One day, an ordinary clerk – the 'good citizen' – happens to hear someone say on the phone: 'The skies won't fall in if you start walking backwards!' He takes these words as a command and thus sets off for an unusual journey through the city.

Calling Mr Smith

In 1942 the Themersons came to England and worked for the rest of the war in the Film Unit of the Polish Ministry of Information and Documentation in London. *Calling Mr Smith*, made in 1943, calls on 'Mr Smith' to support the

war effort as an anti-fascist struggle, illustrating its appeal with examples of Nazi oppression in Poland. The film is experimental in technique, using anamorphic lenses, still and moving images and vivid colour (the Dufay-colour process). Premiere of a restoration by LUX.

The Eye and Ear

Four types of experimental, interpretative visualisations of four songs by Karol Szymanowski.

Jasia Reichardt is a writer on art and an exhibition organiser. She was born in Poland, educated in England, and has lived in London for most of her life. She was Assistant Director of the ICA in London, 1963-71, and Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1974-76. She has taught at the Architectural Association for 10 years, and other colleges, written many articles, several books, and served on various boards and committees. She is interested in art that encroaches on other fields, be it science or literature, and has spent many years following up the connections between art and technology. After Franciszka and Stefan Themerson died in 1988, she spent many years looking after their work, their exhibitions, and their archive. Together with Nick Wadley, she edited the 3-volume catalogue of their archive, designed by Pedro Cid Proença, which was recently published by the MIT Press.

Burt Caesar is an actor/director of film, television drama and theatre. He is a former Associate Director at the Royal Court Theatre and an Artistic Advisor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). His broadcasts for BBC Radio include the epic poem *The Schooner Flight* by Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, Costa Poetry Prize winner Hannah Lowe's *Borderliners*, readings on *Poetry Please*, and radio features including *To Sir, With Love Revisited*, *Black Students in Red Russia* and *The John La Rose Story*.

STEFAN + FRANCISZKA

Director: Tomasz Pobog-Malinowski
Production Company: Poland Interpress
Poland 1975
14 mins extract

EUROPA

Directors: Franciszka Themerson, Stefan Themerson
Poland 1931
12 mins

ADVENTURES OF A GOOD CITIZEN

Directors: Franciszka Themerson, Stefan Themerson
Poland 1937
9 mins

CALLING MR SMITH

Director: Franciszka Themerson
Production Companies: Concanen Productions, Polish Film Unit
Producer: E. Cekalski
Dialogue: Bruce Graeme
Director of Photography: Stefan Themerson
Photography: Franciszka Themerson, Stefan Themerson
Editors: Franciszka Themerson, Stefan Themerson
UK 1943
9 mins

THE EYE AND EAR

Director: Stefan Themerson
Production Company: Film Unit of the Ministry of Information
Script: Stefan Themerson, Franciszka Themerson
Commentary Writer: Bruce Graeme
Director of Photography: Franciszka Themerson
Photography: Stefan Themerson, Franciszka Themerson
Editors: Stefan Themerson, Franciszka Themerson
Music: Karol Szymanowski
Soprano: Sophie Wyss
Music Director: Ronald Biggs
With:
James McKechnie
UK 1944
10 mins

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