



IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

The Black Dream

(Den sorte Drøm)

In this early role for Asta Nielsen, suited to her mastery of melodrama, she plays Stella, a circus star pursued by two suitors – a handsome count and a creepy jeweller. *The Black Dream* becomes a high-stakes love triangle as the jeweller's jealousy threatens to destroy Stella's chance of happiness. Just like many of Nielsen's characters, Stella won't go down without a fight.

The Film Primadonna

Nielsen plays a movie star with a tempestuous love life.

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Asta Nielsen was one of the first truly global film stars, and she wasn't just famous, she was first-name famous. Once she made it big, she was known simply as *Asta*, or *Die Asta* in her adopted Germany. She was celebrated for the expressiveness and sincerity of her performances, but also for her unique sex appeal, a quality the critic Béla Balázs summed up as 'a spiritualised eroticism [that] is demonically dangerous, since it works at a distance through all of her clothes'.

As far as film audiences were concerned 'Asta' was an overnight sensation, but that was never the whole truth. Nielsen was born to working-class parents in 1881, in Copenhagen, though she spent some of her youth in Malmö, Sweden. She dreamed of becoming an actress, but although she gained a position at the Danish Royal Theatre in 1900, she had to leave a year later after giving birth to a daughter out of wedlock.

For the next decade she tried to make a career in the Danish theatre world, before finding fame in front of a camera in 1910. Nielsen's big break was her lead role in Urban Gad's erotic melodrama *The Abyss*: she played a music teacher engaged to a clergyman's son, but who runs off with a circus cowboy instead. Nielsen's performance in the film is both soulful and sensuous, most notably in one scene in which she performs a gaucho dance, slinking around her partner in a tight black satin dress as she undulates her body. She has a rope tied provocatively around her waist that she uses to bind him before continuing the dance.

Nielsen's slim androgynous figure and large dark eyes gave her an especially striking appearance on film. Combined with the intensity of her performance and the sexual content of her films, this made her an unforgettable presence on screen. In the era of the vamp in US cinema and the diva in Italian film, Nielsen presented an alternative mode of romantic tragedienne, with her own seemingly bottomless reserves of passion and physicality.

The Abyss made Nielsen famous around the world and gave her the opportunity to take control of her career, her image and the films that she made. In 1911, she moved to Germany, signing a contract to make 32 films in four years, with benefits including an annual salary, a third of the profits, artistic control and, perhaps most importantly, her choice of director: Gad,

whom she married in 1912. The producer she signed with, Paul Davidson, said that when he saw her on screen ‘I realised that this woman was the first artist in the medium of film.’

Throughout the 1910s, Nielsen made films in Germany, often erotic melodramas in the vein of *The Abyss*. Nielsen later suggested that the screenplays were rather vague and gave her plenty of room in which to improvise, to build up her role. In Gad’s *The Film Primadonna* (1913), which does not fully survive, she tellingly plays a film star who is heavily involved in all aspects of her film’s production; naturally her character also has an active love life, which leads her to a tragic end.

Nielsen had less artistic freedom after the war and she chafed at the loss of control, falling out seriously with Ernst Lubitsch on the set of *Intoxication* (1919). In 1921, she established her own production company, Asta Films. One of its best-known films, which provided a dream role for the woman known admiringly as ‘the Duse of the cinema’ (after the great Italian theatre actress Eleonora Duse), was Svend Gade’s *Hamlet* (1921). Nielsen played the lead role but, in a reimagining of Shakespeare’s plot, this Hamlet is a woman, whose true gender has been kept secret for reasons of primogeniture.

Greta Garbo, surely Scandinavia’s most famous silent film actress, once said that she learned everything she knew from watching Nielsen. They starred together in *The Joyless Street* (1925). The film’s director, G.W. Pabst, said: ‘One has long spoken of Greta Garbo as “the divine” – for me Asta Nielsen has always been and will always remain “the human being” par excellence.’ Nielsen retired from the cinema after making one sound film in 1932. When Adolf Hitler invited her to tea to entice her to work in the film industry under the Nazi regime, she refused, returning to Denmark to write her memoirs instead. During World War II, she sent assistance to Jews in the concentration camps. Nielsen remains an entirely unique figure in film history, a self-defined sex symbol, and a star who was palpably, thrillingly human.

Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight and Sound*, December 2020

THE FILM PRIMADONNA (DIE FILM-PRIMADONNA)

Director: Urban Gad

Production Company: Projektions A-G Union

Screenplay: Urban Gad

Directors of Photography: Axel Graatkjær, Karl Freund

Production Designer: Fritz Seyffert

Cast

Asta Nielsen

Paul Otto

Fritz Weidemann

Fred Immler

Germany 1913

17 mins (fragment)

Restored in 2006, combining materials from EYE Filmmuseum and George Eastman Museum

THE BLACK DREAM (DEN SORTE DRØM)

Director: Urban Gad

Production Company: Fotorama

Screenplay: Urban Gad

Director of Photography: Adam Johansen

Production Designer: Emil Poulsen

Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Stella*)

Valdemar Psilander (*Johann Graf von Waldberg*)

Gunnar Helsengreen (*Adolf Hirsch, jeweller*)

Ellen Gottschalch

Peter Fjelstrup

Denmark 1911

53 mins

**With live piano accompaniment by
John Sweeney**

IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

The Abyss (Afgrunden) + The ABC of Love (Das Liebes ABC)

Thu 3 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson);

Fri 11 Feb 18:20

Zapata's Gang (Zapatas Bande) +

The Eskimo Baby (Das Eskimobaby)

Fri 4 Feb 18:00; Sat 12 Feb 18:00

The Black Dream (Den sorte Drøm)

Fri 4 Feb 20:40; Sat 12 Feb 15:40

Dora Brandes

Sat 5 Feb 15:20; Thu 17 Feb 18:00 (+ intro)

The Queen of the Stock Exchange (Die Börsenkönigin) +

The Guinea Pig (Das Versuchskaninchen)

Sat 5 Feb 18:00; Thu 17 Feb 20:40

Towards the Light (Mod Lyset) + Asta Nielsen

Wed 23 Feb 18:10; Sun 27 Feb 15:50

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