



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

Earth Spirit (Erdgeist)

Another outstanding film of this [early 20s] period was *Erdgeist*, directed by Leopold Jessner. Based on the play by Frank Wedekind, the film features one of the most fascinating characters of the German screen: Lulu, the ultimate *femme fatale*, the heartless siren whose life is spent in gratification of an insatiable physical passion. To those who have only seen her photograph it is perhaps difficult to imagine Asta Nielsen as a sex symbol; but from the fragments of *Erdgeist* which have been preserved it is easy to understand why some of her admirers regarded her as the most erotic screen actress of her time. True, on appearance alone, she does not have the immediate attraction of a Garbo or a Dietrich; but her not unattractive features, combined with an intense power of expression, make her Lulu just as erotic as Dietrich's garter-belted Lola Lola. When Lulu yields to the caresses of her ruined lover, we see in her half-opened eyes not only her boredom and disgust with her exhausted lover, but also the attraction which ruined him.

By the mid-1920s, films of the calibre of *Erdgeist* were becoming scarce. Many studios had fallen into the hands of greedy distributors, and American interests had invaded the German industry, reducing some domestic producers to grinding out 'quota films' necessary for American imports. As Asta Nielsen described the situation:

'The films I was forced to act in for a while were not only pure film-hawking, but were ground out in the studios at breakneck speed for reasons of economy. Often the photographer was not allowed to adjust his lighting and long shots and close-ups whirled among each other in the same constant light. The same decoration served widely different interiors, only from another angle of view. The result ... was technically at the 1908 level.'

Robert C. Allen, 'Asta Nielsen: The Silent Muse', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973

Asta – die Asta – *the* Diva, before and above them all, was not just alive and kicking from the moment of birth to that of death at 90, but was also in all respects the opposite of what the myth had made of her.

This myth, evolved around her screen image in the 1910s and 1920s, was avidly absorbed in later decades by her compatriots, who felt guilty at not using her talents and barely tolerating her presence. It painted her as the unfeeling, man-eating monster of some of her films – notably her Lulu in *Erdgeist* – and added legends of her self-absorbed, misanthropic character and affected life-style. She wasn't even spared rumours of having colluded with leading Nazis, since she was still working in Germany when they took over.

None of this has any bearing on reality, though one can understand how some of this malignant untruth arose. She was certainly not the true-to-type prima donna, capricious, inane and humourless. And if she was not the usual dumb star, but a bright, strong personality – well then, she must surely be heartless and the rest of it. It is the old Romantic idea of the incompatibility of heart and head. But heart and head *are* regularly joined in great artists; and to

prove that they were so joined in Asta, it is enough to offer – beyond the testimony of a friend – reference to her work in three fields of expression. Where, if not in Asta herself, was the indomitable soul of her films; where was the clear intelligence and compassion of her autobiography, *The Silent Muse*; where was the observation, the sense of colour and composition, the baroque humour, of the bright collages she did in her retirement? As to her life-style, it may be hard for people brought up to consider clinical sterility the height of good taste to understand that her ‘theatrical’ home, full of baroque art, was a natural milieu to her, an extension of her personality. But it was none the less so. And the most vicious charge was also the most untruthful. Her attitude to Nazism and racism was wholly negative from the start.

She was difficult, all right. Difficult as the true artist is, and as the deeply honest person is, and as the combination of the two is to the second degree. Mercilessly clearheaded, sharp, witty and thoroughly incorruptible, she was clearly not cut out to be a popular figure, no matter how far her fame went as a star. She was also one of those rare, wholly independent women who, without regard to prejudices and patterns, run their lives and their careers, with some providential help but not much. If she wanted a child but not a husband, she had it and not him, no matter what the world thought – and it disapproved strongly around 1902. Husbands were dispensable, until at 88 she found one that wasn’t, and knew it. Work was self-chosen and necessary. And on top of it she, the Free Woman, the career monster, the relentless artist who refused to divulge one bit of her private life, was for two decades the ultra-feminine erotic image of Europe, desired and admired as the essence of womanhood, madonna and whore in one.

She *was* the Tenth Muse, not its handmaiden, the force that shaped the language of the new, raw film medium with her unique blend of intuitive spontaneity and documentary observation. Like no star before or after, she *characterised* not just the human types she portrayed – from gypsy to *grande dame*, from proletarian girl to upper-class spoilt brat – but also their professions and milieus. Getting into a role was not a matter of learning plots and expressions, but of using her insights as a person continuously observant of life. It was no accident that she spoke so strongly to poets and artists. They could not only admire her as a colleague but passionately identify with her – like Apollinaire, who wrote of her, ‘When hatred flames in her eyes, we clench our fists, and when she lifts her eyelids, the stars shine out.’ That she had had to overcome terrible handicaps – deafness, and having to turn inside out the tastes of an age – only seemed to strengthen the courage that never left her, even in the sad, long years of retirement.

Elsa Gress, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973

EARTH SPIRIT (ERDGEIST)

Director: Leopold Jessner

Production Company: Leopold Jessner-Film

Screenplay: Carl Mayer

From the play by: Frank Wedekind

Photography: Axel Graatkjær

Art Director: Robert Neppach

Piano accompaniment will be by

Stephen Horne on Sat 5 Mar and

Meg Morley on Wed 9 Mar

Digitisation of the 35mm restored in 2003, reconstructed from Dutch and Russian nitrate sources from EYE Filmmuseum and Gosfilmofond of Russia. Dutch intertitles recreated from German censorship cards.

Introduction by season curator Pamela Hutchinson (Sat 5 Mar only)

Cast

Asta Nielsen (*Lulu*)

Rudolf Forster (*Alwa Schoen*)

Albert Bassermann (*Dr Schoen*)

Carl Ebert (*Schwarz*)

Alexander Granach (*Schigolch*)

Gustav Rickelt (*Dr Goll*)

Heinrich George (*Rodrigo*)

Erwin Biswanger (*Eulenber*)

Julius Falkenstein

Lucy Kieselhausen

Anton Pointner

Germany 1923

68 mins

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

In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz)

Tue 1 Mar 20:50; Mon 7 Mar 18:15

Hamlet

Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by Prof Judith Buchanan)

Earth Spirit (Erdgeist)

Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz)

Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse)

Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar 18:00

Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)

Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Skate Kitchen

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

Divines

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

Jinn

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

Somersault

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

THE CAMERA IS OURS:

BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

From Beside the Seaside to the English Inn: Restoration Programme 1 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Thu 3 Mar 18:15

For Sama + intro by director Waad Al-Kateab + Children of the Ruins

Thu 3 Mar 20:30

The Camera Is Ours: Study Day + Independent Miss Craigie + Q&A with director Lizzie Thynne and producer Hollie Price

Sat 5 Mar 12:00-17:00

From the Sea to the Land Beyond

Sat 5 Mar 18:15

Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

Cow

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

NEW RELEASES

La Mif (The Fam)

Continues from Fri 25 Feb

Rebel Dread

From Fri 4 Mar

Ali & Ava

From Fri 11 Mar; Tue 15 March 14:00 Seniors' matinee + discussion

Cultural partner



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