

Book Review

Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung (eds), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910–1914* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013). 392 pp. \$38.00

After the anthology *Early Cinema Today. The Art of Programming and Live Performance* (2011), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910–1914* is the second, fascinating publication in the series KINtop Studies in early cinema, distributed by John Libbey and edited by Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung. The almost 400 pages volume consists of thirty-two contributions by experts on early cinema in case studies from twenty-two countries worldwide. All deal with the international breakthrough of the Danish actress Asta Nielsen, often considered the first film star, or at least the first European one. Since the 1990s, the aesthetics of Nielsen's films have been increasingly connected to socio-economic research into exhibition and distribution strategies and rise of the feature film. This has resulted in studies such as Corinna Müller's *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie* (1994), and the more recent two-volume publication *Asta Nielsen* (2010), edited by Heide Schlüpmann et al. The latter explores the revolutionizing element of her screen acting, arguing that Nielsen's films portray cinematic instead of stage acting.¹

Importing Asta Nielsen expands this rich palette by focusing on the varied and vast distribution, exhibition and reception of the Danish-German film star who peaked in the early 1910s in countries as distant from Europe as Australia and New Zealand. While Nielsen's outstanding acting skills were early recognized by film critics, further research was necessary to explore the pivotal role Nielsen and her films played in the revolution of the film business around 1910. The first iteration of this research was the 2011 conference 'Importing Asta Nielsen: Cinema-Going and the Making of the Star System in the Early 1910s', held at the Deutsches Film Museum in Frankfurt. As Loiperdinger and Jung explain in their introduction to *Importing Asta Nielsen*, 'More than two dozen film scholars scrutinized the role Asta Nielsen films played in different film markets of various countries, in distribution and exhibition practices, in the competition between local cinemas, in the innovation in film marketing and film advertising, in short, in the establishment of a new basis for the film markets in many countries around the world' (2). The present volume makes the scholarship presented at this conference newly available.

In their introduction, Loiperdinger and Jung indicate that Asta Nielsen's rise to international fame in 1910–1911 was closely connected to the parallel introduction of a new business model in the film industry. Reacting to a crisis brought about by the overproduction of short-film programmes, early German Asta Nielsen films were used to introduce the longer feature film. These films were distributed and exhibited on the basis of an exclusive rights model ('Monopolfilm') which involved film rental by exhibitors. They were pre-sold as a 'series' (in film parlance, 'blind selling'). The German model soon spread internationally,

changing the structure and function of film business. Indeed, because the feature film was culturally prestigious, it created a hierarchy in the programme that, in turn, affected film exhibition and cinema going. Around this, film publicity developed: there was the branding of films by the actor's name, the build-up of the star by references to the legitimate stage, and star merchandise. Film audiences, lured by the commodification of the star, were newly expanded to include the educated middle class. Genres were now labelled according to genre characterizations of the legitimate stage. While distributors and exhibitors consequently had to invest more in the promotion and circulation of film, the gain was not only economic. It also increased the prestige of cinema, creating public demand and a fast-moving industry in the space of just four years. As Jon Burrows indicates in his article on the British situation, even resistant exhibitors were won over to the exclusive feature film (203–213). The outbreak of the First World War changed this situation.

Importing Asta Nielsen deliberately gives special attention to Nielsen's star status on a local level. Connected to research projects on local film history – projects which in particular Loiperdinger has developed for years now² – many authors reveal how varied the exhibition and reception of Nielsen's films were. These critical and public differences emerge not only nationally, but also regionally and locally. Even within different sized cities, there are differences in opinion. Indeed, the eight sections of the book tell us that it is very difficult to generalize the impact and effect of Nielsen's films. It is consequently hard to come up with a shared thread in terms of her exposure and reception. While in Australia and New Zealand, for instance, no exclusive distribution and exhibition rights system existed for her films as very few prints circulated, in the Netherlands, a same low number of prints was no excuse for discarding this exclusive system.³ Further, although Australia had produced feature-length films long before Nielsen's films were made, local press admitted that the quality of local film acting couldn't compete with Nielsen's superb acting on film.

The book is well-structured and (as mentioned above) is divided into eight complimentary sections. It opens with a section that explores Asta Nielsen's background and reception in her home country, Denmark. As Julie Allen writes in her chapter, 'Ambivalent Admiration: Asta Nielsen's Conflicted Reception in Denmark', Nielsen's reception in Denmark wasn't without conflict (39–51). Indeed, Nielsen's Danish stage career had been modest, she only made three films in Denmark (in contrast to the twenty-three films she made within three years in Germany), and in bourgeois circles Danish cinema was still afforded little respect. Further, the supposedly more restrained Danes didn't join in the massive Nielsen merchandise and fan-craze that buoyed her exposure in Germany, and Danish critics didn't know whether to praise or downplay Nielsen's international stardom.⁴ Finally, the Danish ideal of female beauty was associated with blonde and buxom women, while Nielsen was very slender and dark haired.

The second section of *Importing Asta Nielsen* focuses on Nielsen's stormy and erotic debut film, the Danish film *Afgrunden* (*Abyss*, Urban Gad, 1910). It examines the reception of this film in countries as diverse as Finland (Outi Hupanittu), Poland (Andrzej Debski) and Egypt (Ouissal Mejri). In two related sections, the volume then moves on to explore Nielsen's German career and the development of her celebrity. It traces Nielsen's local career in European cities such as Berlin (Martin Loiperdinger), Metz (Pierre Stotzky), Mannheim (Andrea Haller), Zürich (Mattia Lento, Adrian Gerber), Lausanne (Pierre-Emmanuel Jaques), Innsbrück (Patrick Blaser), Luxemburg (Paul Lesch) and Barcelona (María Antonia Paz and Julio Montero).

Part of the rise of long feature films in the early teens, Nielsen's films also were part of a new debate about whether film could be (an) art, in competition with the stage. Clearly, audiences for the legitimate theatre – or highbrow culture at large – were sought when Nielsen was marketed as 'the Duse of the art of cinema'. While some comical actors were already well known, mostly under their character names, Nielsen was the first dramatic film celebrity with her own fan community to work in feature film. Moreover, Nielsen was a highly versatile actress, excelling in different genres. Yet, despite the respect for Nielsen's acting, local authorities were worried about her daring roles, calling for local and national censorship.⁵ Length was also seen as a challenge. As Loiperdinger and Jung explain in their introduction, 'the growing complexity of the stories told in films was answered by state and local authorities by calling into question whether the complex structure of meaning was in line with official and officious demands political and clerical circles made on society' (10). Hence, while Giovanni Lasi and Laui Piispa reveal Nielsen's incredible popularity in Italy and Russia, Richard Abel makes clear this 'Asta Craze' was much less the case in the United States. As mentioned above, this discussion of Nielsen's varied reception is brought to different countries and continents. Rielle Navitski explores the context of Brazil, Dafna Ruppin of the Netherlands East Indies, Stephen Bottomore of Australasia, and Sawako Ogawa focuses upon Japan. The concluding section of the book moves from this thorough-going exploration of local film histories to more general explorations of Nielsen and early film. Caroline Henkes explores Nielsen's characterizations, Annemone Ligensa offers a study of her general reception in Germany, while Ian Christie contextualises her star status as part of the more general rise of stars in early cinema.

The volume closes with a useful filmography of Nielsen's films, indicating the various language versions of the film titles. In hindsight, this seems to also mark the start of a larger transnational research project: Loiperdinger's attractive and ongoing online database, also called *Importing Asta Nielsen* (http://importing-asta-nielsen.deutsches-filminstitut.de/index.php?site=database_first). Indeed, this would be my only comment, or rather plea: while local and national research into Nielsen's films is both fundamental and fascinating, a *transnational* comparison is now the next necessary step. Following this volume by Loiperdinger and Jung, we might now combine an aesthetic and socio-economic approach to Nielsen and her films. In other words, we might today explore how exceptional or normative the connection is between Nielsen as a new film actress and an emergent (and later institutionalised) business model for film. The database seems an excellent starting point for this.

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Notes

1. C. Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale, wirtschaftliche und und kulturelle Entwicklungen, 1907–1912* (Stuttgart/Weimar, 1994). For a comparable Dutch approach, see my own book *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam, 2003); H. Schlüpmann, E. de Kuyper, K. Gramann, S. Nessel, M. Wedel (eds.), *Asta Nielsen. Vol. 1: Unmögliche Liebe. Asta Nielsen, ihr Kino. Volume 2: Nachtfalter. Asta Nielsen, ihre Filme* (Vienna, 2009).
2. For example, F. Kessler, S. Lenk and M. Loiperdinger (eds.), *KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films. KINtop 9: Lokale Kinogeschichten* (Frankfurt am Main, Basel, 2000); Martin Loiperdinger: "The Audience Feels rather at Home..." Peter Marzen's 'Localisation' of Film

- Exhibition in Trier' in F. Kessler and N. Verhoeff (eds.), *Networks of Entertainment: Early Film Distribution 1895–1915* (Eastleigh, 2007), pp. 123–130; V. Toulmin and M. Loiperdinger, 'Is it You? Recognition, Representation and Response in Relation to the Local Film', *Film History*, 17: 1 (2005), 7–18. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/183421/pdf>.
3. For Australasia, see S. Bottomore, "'The Great Favorite, Miss Asta Nielsen". Asta Nielsen on Australasian Screens', in M. Loiperdinger and L. Jung (eds.), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910–1914* (New Barnet, 2013), pp. 309–320. For the Netherlands, see A. van Beusekom, 'Distributing, Programming and Recycling Asta Nielsen films in the Netherlands, 1911–1920', in M. Loiperdinger and L. Jung (eds.), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910–1914* (New Barnet, 2013), pp. 259–272.
 4. Actually, looking at early film actresses such as Madeleine Roch in France, Maria Caserini and Vittoria Lepanto in Italy and Henny Porten in Germany, one may conclude that the buxom type was quite popular in cinema around 1910. After 1910, this changes not only with Nielsen but also French actresses such as Polaire and Suzanne Grandais, who also acted in early German films.
 5. In their articles, Jon Burrows and Anne Bachmann have treated matters of censorship explicitly, while censorship is otherwise implicit in many of the other contributions. See J. Burrows, "'The Great Asta Nielsen", "The Shady Exclusive", and the Birth of Film Censorship in Britain, 1911–1914', and A. Bachmann, 'Vindicating The Great Moment against Swedish Censorship. Asta Nielsen's Soulful Eyes as On-Screen Performance', in M. Loiperdinger and L. Jung (eds.), *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making 1910–1914* (New Barnet, 2013), pp. 203–213, 215–231.