

# *Un corps exquis.* (Re-)Restoring Fedor Ocep's DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM / ŽIVOJ TRUP (THE LIVING CORPSE)\*

Moscow, before the Revolution: Fedor ›Fedja‹ Protasov, a simple man from the upper classes, believes his wife Liza to be in love with another man. Not wanting to stand in their way, Fedja pleads for a divorce, only to be blocked by the rigidity of the Orthodox Church. After encountering Liza and her lover, Viktor Karenin, at home, a demoralised Fedja seeks solace in Moscow's gypsy quarter. When he meets Maša, a young gypsy girl, Fedja's *joie de vivre* is renewed. Liza, still in love with Fedja, goes to the gypsy quarter to convince Fedja to return to her but when she catches him with Maša, there can no longer be any salvation for their marriage. To forcibly bring about a divorce, Fedja is roped into a farcical arranged liaison with a prostitute but, unable to commit such a dishonest act, he flees. Rescued from an attempted suicide bid by Maša, a desperate Fedja finds himself reduced to faking his own death and taking to the streets as a ›living corpse‹. Fedja's tragic journey concludes in a Moscow courtroom where, unmasked and with his newly remarried wife now facing a bigamy charge, he is left with no other solution than to take his own life.

An early German-Soviet co-production, director Fedor Ocep's 1929 film adaptation of Tolstoj's socio-critical stage play ŽIVOJ TRUP (THE LIVING CORPSE) is a fascinating example of the kind of cross-cultural exchange which took place in filmmaking at the tail end of the silent era. A mixed Soviet-German film crew created an atmospheric depiction of pre-Revolutionary Moscow from almost entirely within the Jofa film studios in Berlin-Johannisthal. Writer-director Ocep, now out of the Soviet Union and on the way to developing a form of cinematic ›transnationalism‹<sup>1</sup>, combines Soviet montage techniques with elements of Ger-

man expressionism to produce a film that proved to be as commercially popular as critically polarising.

Sergej Eisenstein was among those who were openly critical of the film, claiming it reduced Soviet montage technique to ›lifeless literary symbolism and stylistic mannerism.«<sup>2</sup> Others, meanwhile, hailed it as a masterpiece. The Austrian critic Friedrich Porges called it a film of ›[...] high artistic qualities [...] A valuable, memorable [and] beautiful film! Those unfamiliar with Tolstoj's stage play will find themselves in the midst of an incredibly powerful motion picture.«<sup>3</sup> In an international poll conducted by the German newspaper *Der Deutsche*, THE LIVING CORPSE ranked fifth in the top films of 1929.<sup>4</sup>

Often at the receiving end of the critics' praise was the towering central performance of Vsevolod Pudovkin as Fedja. The film provided the great Soviet film theorist and director of such masterworks as MAT' (THE MOTHER, 1926), KONEC SANKT PETERBURGA (THE END OF SAINT PETERSBURG, 1927) and POTOMOK ČINGIS-CHANA (STORM OVER ASIA, 1928) with his only leading role. Recalling his experience in taking on this ›big and complex‹ task, Pudovkin later remarked: ›my work in THE LIVING CORPSE was carried out to an extent with considerable and profound inner feeling and was heavily charged emotionally [...]«<sup>5</sup>

Although its anti-religious tone brought it into conflict with the censors in some countries, the film was a worldwide success; the ›thunderous applause‹ that reportedly followed the premiere screening at Berlin's Capitol Theatre on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1929 echoing internationally.<sup>6</sup> When the film arrived in Vienna on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1929, its Austrian distributor – the Allianz-Filmfabrikations- und Vertriebsgesellschaft m.b.H. – marketed it with the slogan, ›the film everyone must see‹; a claim, which turned out to be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Before going on general release on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1929, the film played in a four-week exclusive run at the Schwedenkino to a constantly packed house.<sup>7</sup>

Even before it was seen by audiences, the film already existed in two different versions: an initial 3,552m cut rushed together to fulfil the yearly quota was later reduced to 2,968m just prior to the film's Berlin premiere.<sup>8</sup> The film's widespread popularity led to the creation of several other versions, as international distributors each took it upon themselves to conform the film to local tastes. The extent of the changes made by distributors could at times be extreme.

By the time THE LIVING CORPSE had reached America in January 1931 (its delay in no small part due to the appearance of a ›talkie‹ version of the same Tolstoj play directed by



**DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM / ŽIVOJ TRUP**  
Vintage publicity still of Gustav Diessl as  
Viktor Karenin and Maria Jacobini as Liza  
Protasov (Courtesy of the Austrian Film  
Museum Stills Collection)

Fred Niblo and starring John Gilbert), the film was a pale shadow of its former self: shortened drastically and with an added soundtrack. Ironically, *Variety*, which praised the film, felt it might have been even better had it been one or two reels longer. »And,« the reviewer concluded, »there is no higher praise than that.«<sup>9</sup>

In the long run, the success of *THE LIVING CORPSE* has proven bittersweet: the film's original negative no longer survives. While the film's international popularity has ensured that prints and duplicates of varying lengths and quality have ended up in film archives around the world, none of these elements correspond exactly to the film that was seen by Berlin audiences in February 1929.

A major restoration carried out by Martin Koerber for the Deutsche Kinemathek in 1988 attempted to return Ocep's film to some semblance of its original form by combining footage from three different sources. However, owing to the deficiencies of the available film elements, there was still room for improvement. When it was decided that the retrospective of the 2012 Berlin International Film Festival would be dedicated to the work of the production companies behind *THE LIVING CORPSE* – the ›red dream factory‹ Mežrabpom-Fil'm and its German counterpart Prometheus – an opportunity arose to revisit the restoration.

In the quarter century that had passed since the first restoration, several film elements had resurfaced in European film archives that would allow for a more complete, authentic reconstruction of the film's original premiere cut. The increasing affordability and availability of

digital technology for use in archival film restoration projects meanwhile opened up new possibilities for realising the complex technical work required.

The new restoration of *THE LIVING CORPSE* was a collaboration between the Deutsche Kinemathek and the Austrian Film Museum. For the Film Museum, who provided not only an important source element but also (thanks to a collaborative project with the Austrian Film Gallery and Filmarchiv Austria) key technical resources, the restoration would serve a dual function: on the one hand, it would ensure the preservation of a valuable artefact from the Film Museum's collection, and on the other hand, would allow contemporary (and future) audiences to experience Ocep's film in the closest form possible to its no longer existent premiere version.

The project was a complex undertaking, involving the use of both analogue and digital techniques to combine footage from four different film elements. The experience has proven an invaluable one for the Austrian Film Museum's restoration staff. Being their first large-scale digital restoration project involving several different source elements, a great deal of learning-by-doing was inevitably required. However, the knowledge gained from the experience will serve to aid future projects of a similar nature. This article charts the steps in the restoration, explaining the main curatorial and practical decisions that were taken and providing a detailed account of the technical processes applied.

The first step in the restoration was to collate the various film elements that had been provided for the project by the two partners and fellow members of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP). An assessment was carried out in May and June 2011.

Available from the previous restoration was a 35mm duplicate negative printed (for the most part) from a fine grain duplicate positive of the Danish distribution version belonging to the Danske Film Museum in Copenhagen. The analogue duplication work had been carried out by the Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR in East Berlin, one of very few archives in Europe with a working film laboratory.

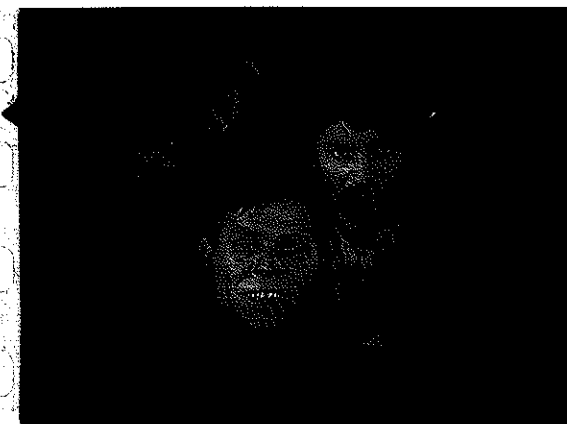
The Danish duplicate positive originated from a nitrate dupe negative, which itself had been printed from a vintage nitrate release print. While no less than four generations removed from the original camera negative, the dupe negative nonetheless bears images of high photographic quality. Unfortunately, a number of key scenes were missing from the Danish source element. Martin Koerber attributes these losses, which include virtually all of the ›kaleidoscopic‹ Soviet montage sequences, to the more conservative tastes of the original Danish

distributor.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of completeness, these scenes had to be inserted from an inferior quality duplicate, sourced from 35mm material held by the DDR film archive. These sequences are easily identifiable on account of their higher contrast and lower definition, as well as the presence of a thick double frame line at the bottom of the frame, the result of careless printing work undertaken in the past.

The original German intertitles play a significant role to serve the film's narrative, their highly stylised design providing a graphical expression of Fedja's inner emotional turmoil. These had to be recreated for the 1988 restoration by Thomas Wilk, modelled after flash titles which had survived in a nitrate duplicate negative held by the BFI National Film Archive in London. Flash titles, named as such because they typically measured just two or three frames and would thus appear as a short ›flash‹ if the film were to be projected at full speed, were often spliced into negatives as reference markers for domestic and foreign distributors. In prints struck from this negative, the flash titles were intended to be cut out and replaced by full length intertitles. By their very ›ephemeral‹ nature, they are not usually suited to reprinting. The opening credits, missing in the BFI's negative, were created from scratch, imitating the design of the originals. In addition, three vintage 35mm black and white nitrate prints were provided by the Austrian Film Museum, the Cinémathèque suisse and the Fondazione Cineteca Italiana respectively. The Austrian Film Museum's print is a first generation print struck on German Agfa and Zeiss Ikon film stock directly from the original camera negative, most likely at the time of the film's initial release. Since the original camera negative itself is not known to exist, such a print represents the earliest surviving element and therefore the most valuable source for a restoration. Triangular marks are present on the edge of the frame, left by the printer originally used to strike the print. The marks, which alternate between a single and a pair of triangles, were a convenient method employed by German film laboratories to denote the particular machine that had been used to print the film. In the event of a problem, the markings could be used to identify the printer in question and thus solve the problem more rapidly.<sup>11</sup> The same marks can be seen on the Deutsche Kinemathek's dupe negative, although they have been partially obscured as a result of several generations of reprinting. This suggests that the no longer existent Danish release print had, like the Austrian print, been produced in Germany. Like the BFI's dupe negative, the Austrian print contains the original German language titles as flash titles. However, the Austrian print also significantly contains the long-unknown original opening titles. The opening titles present in the Austrian print reveal subtle differences to

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Scanned frame from the Austrian Film Museum's nitrate print. Note the triangular printer mark top left (Courtesy of the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna)



the reconstructed opening titles of the 1988 restoration. Where Anatolij Mariengof and Boris Gusman are credited as scriptwriters in the 1988 restoration, director Fedor Ocep receives sole credit for the screenplay in the Austrian print. Another curious revelation was that the name of the Soviet production company – Mežrabpom-Fil'm – had been originally misspelled, the titler having inexplicably left out the ›b‹.

Since the flash titles were still present, the Austrian print had clearly not been prepared for public screening at the time of release. As a result, the print is in remarkable physical condition compared to a well-used projection print of the same vintage. Unfortunately, in the interim years the 83-year-old print has suffered some damage, including a number of splices and scratches on both the base and emulsion sides (its journey before reaching the Film Museum's archive still somewhat clouded in mystery). The editing of the Austrian print is identical to the 1988 restoration except for one short sequence, in which three shots were mistakenly printed twice in the DDR archive's source material used for the previous restoration. The print measures 2,357m but, on account of the flash titles, its missing footage amounts to only 190m (corresponding to seven and a half minutes of screen time). This makes it the longest of the surviving prints. The nitrate print provided by the Cinémathèque suisse is, like the Austrian print, a first generation print struck directly from the original camera negative on the same kind of film stocks at the same German laboratory. The print features the same triangular marks on the edge of the frame as the Viennese print and which were also still present on the 1988 restoration nega-

ive. Unsurprisingly, as a result of their common origins, the Swiss print is virtually identical to the Austrian print in terms of photographic quality, though it tends to air on the darker side. The print represents a version produced for distribution in Switzerland, containing bi-lingual intertitles in German and French that have been rendered in a more conventional design than the more stylised titles of the German release version. In contrast to the 'unreleased' Austrian print, the Swiss print has suffered increased wear and tear as a result of heavy use. The majority of the damages are present within the film frame (e.g. scratches, flecks of dirt, blotches, etc.), while the perforated area remains surprisingly well-intact, despite some light misshaping. Like the Austrian print, the Swiss print follows the editing pattern of the 1988 restoration with the exception of the aforementioned superfluous shots. Measuring 2,644m with full-length intertitles, the Swiss print is missing more footage than the Austrian one. Most notably all of the Soviet montage sequences have been removed from the print in what appears to have been a deliberate act similar in nature to the 'conservatism' of the film's Danish distributor. Despite this, the Swiss print still contains several shots and sequences not present in the Austrian print.

The third nitrate print, coming from the Fondazione Cineteca Italiana in Milan, was not struck from the original camera negative like the Swiss and Austrian prints but rather from a duplicate negative. While edge-markings printed through from the negative reveal it to have been produced on Pathé safety film stock of French origin, the print itself is on nitrate film stock made by Ferrania, Italy's only manufacturer of raw stock, and was presumably struck at an Italian laboratory.<sup>12</sup> Belonging to a later printing generation, the Italian print falls much below the Austrian and Swiss prints in terms of photographic quality with soft images lacking in any fine details and featuring muddy shades of grey in place of strong blacks and whites. Damage printed through from previous generations is also apparent.

The Italian print is the only one of the available prints where the editing deviates sharply from the familiar pattern of the other prints, as well as the 1988 restoration. Many key sequences have been either moved to a different position within the film or removed altogether. Likewise, individual shots within sequences have also been rearranged or cut out. Indications in the print reveal that much of the re-editing work had already been carried out on the duplicate negative before printing.

The distributor's re-editing and re-titling work removes the anti-religious overtones of Tolstoj's original tale and places the character of Liza at the centre of the drama (the fact that she

was played by the popular Italian actress Maria Jacobini seems hardly coincidental). Fedja, meanwhile, has been reduced to little more than a villainous supporting player now actively standing in the way of Liza and Karenin's happiness. A number of key supporting characters, in particular those of a dubious moral nature (such as the prostitute with whom Fedja must conduct his staged affair), have been removed from the story entirely.

At only 1,320m in length, the Italian print is the shortest of the surviving prints. Gaps in the narrative and surviving censorship records suggest that it may have once been longer (the Italian release version is recorded as originally being 1,930m). Its physical condition is also less than perfect, with much damage present to the perforated area.

While inspection work was being carried out, tests were made to determine a suitable restoration workflow. Although the Berlin Film Festival would provide a prestigious venue for the new restoration, it also imposed a strict deadline upon it. It was important therefore to establish a workflow that would ensure the project could be completed on time without compromising the archival and curatorial standards set by the archival partners.

A sample of the Austrian Film Museum's print was scanned on the *Arriscan* 084 installed at Filmarchiv Austria's archival storage facilities in Laxenburg. The scan data was then graded and recorded out to 35mm negative film. A 35mm answer print was struck from this negative and the result compared side-by-side with a 35mm print of the 1988 restoration. While the test print marked a definite improvement in visual quality over the previous restoration in some regards, the improvement was not deemed significant enough to warrant a full-scale digital restoration on the basis of the nitrate prints.

Tests carried out on the 1988 restoration negative at Synchro Film laboratories in Vienna proved that good results could still be obtained using standard analogue printing methods. It was decided, therefore, to retain this duplicate negative as a printing master, removing the poorer quality sequences originating from the DDR material (around 10% of the total film) and replacing them with the equivalent footage from the Austrian, Swiss and Italian prints to achieve a more uniform image quality. The 1988 restoration negative had itself already been preserved in the form of a duplicate positive and several screening prints. Records of this version therefore would remain for future reference, despite the inevitable 'destruction' of the negative as a result of the chosen workflow.

The comparison had shown that no major editing changes were required, other than removing the three superfluous shots carried over in the previous restoration from the DDR archive's

source material. New renditions of the film's original opening titles, created digitally from the flash titles in the Austrian print, were added in place of the reconstructed titles of the 1988 restoration. Although historio-ethically suspect by today's standards, occasional spelling mistakes had been corrected in some of the intertitles in 1988. For consistency's sake, therefore, the missing >b< in *Mežrabpom-Fil'm* was re-instated.

Of the 51 individual sequences that would have to be replaced, 48 existed (either wholly or partly) in the Austrian print, while 40 had survived in the Swiss print, and 23 were available in the Italian print. Owing to the Austrian print's completeness and superior quality, it was decided, where possible, to take the replacement footage from this print. If the sequence was not present here, it would be taken from the Swiss print, determined to be in second best condition and photographically the closest match to the Austrian print. One sequence missing from both the Austrian and Swiss prints could be recovered from the Italian print, which despite its inferior picture quality still represented an improvement over that which had previously been available.

Since the Austrian print was to provide the majority of replacement sequences, and in order to produce a record of the archival artefact in the exact same state in which it survived, the Film Museum decided to scan its own print in its entirety. This record would then be retained for study purposes and could potentially serve as a basis for future restoration attempts, should it one day prove necessary to revisit the film again.

The required sections of each print were scanned on the *Arriscan* in >soft archive mode<, whereby less tension is applied to the fragile film elements as they are transported through the scanner gate. A wet-gate appliance was used to hide the appearance of superficial scratches to the film base on the scans, thus reducing the amount of correction work that would need to be carried out later on. Samples of the Deutsche Kinemathek's duplicate negative were also scanned to provide a visual reference when conforming the various digitised source elements later on. All elements were scanned at 3K resolution (3072x2160 pixels) and a 10-bit logarithmic colour depth. The scans were saved as sequential image files in Digital Picture Exchange (DPX) format. The scanning of the Film Museum's nitrate print took the entire month of June 2011, with the partial scanning of the Swiss and Italian prints being performed in August. The raw scan data was then transferred to the digital restoration facilities in Krems, where around 28,000 individual frames were digitally stabilised, cleaned and graded before being recorded back onto 35mm film.



**DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM / ŽIVOJ TRUP**  
Example of Opening Title Restoration. Title as it appears in the Austrian Film Museum's nitrate print (top) and restored title with >corrected< spelling mistake (bottom) (Courtesy of the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna)

Two different kinds of image instability present in the raw scans had to be corrected. The first, resulting from the scan process itself, appeared at points in the prints where particularly thick splices were present, causing the film to >jump< as it passes through the scanner gate. The other form of instability derived from the mechanical imprecision of the printers used to produce the prints originally. In contrast to the jump effect caused by the scanner, which usually lasted for only one or two frames, this latter kind of instability could affect entire sequences or even whole reels.

Tests showed that automated digital tools could not suitably correct the instability caused by the scanner. This work was therefore carried out manually using the HS-Art programme

*Dust Buster Plus* in Clone mode. Up to 30 seconds were required to correct each individual frame in order to successfully remove the jump effect without altering the film's natural motion. Automated processes could be used to reduce the instability caused by the printing methods employed at the time of the film's original production. Excessive stabilisation was avoided so that the film's original historical characteristics would not be erased and that the new replacement sections would not appear over-restored alongside the parts retained from the existing duplicate negative.

A significant amount of dirt was also present on the scans that would have to be removed digitally. Here the Italian print, which was extremely dirty but could not be subjected to aggressive cleaning treatments prior to the scan on account of its fragile state, proved particularly problematic. To clean the one sequence required from this print took several hours of work and utmost care and attention, as digital dirt removal can often lead to unwanted visual artefacts. After the images were stabilised and cleaned, they were graded using the digital post-production software *Scratch* developed by Assimilate Inc. in the US. The sample scan of the Deutsche Kinemathek's duplicate negative served as a reference for the grading to ensure a level of consistency between the 'new' digitally restored material and the pre-existing negative. A second test was recorded out to 35mm negative film and printed to check the grading before proceeding to the final step.

Once the grading had been checked and approved, the graded files were up-sampled to 4K resolution (4096x3112 pixels) and recorded out to 35mm negative film using an *Arrilaser 01*. Since the Deutsche Kinemathek's duplicate negative had been printed on acetate film stock, the digital intermediate data was recorded onto Kodak 5234 acetate film to facilitate the joining of the two negatives by 'wet splicing'. To avoid the loss of frames through re-splicing, it was decided to incorporate always the shot preceding and following the required sections. This meant that a new splice could be made at a point in the film where no splice had previously existed. The editing of the two negatives was carried out in two days at the close of 2011 by Edith Schlemmer, the Austrian Film Museum's senior archivist. The cut negative was then delivered to Synchro Film for the production of a new 35mm print. Inevitable differences in the two negatives, due to them having been produced by very different means at different times on different film stocks, could be compensated to a certain extent in the grading of the positive print. The debut screening of the newly restored 35mm print of *THE LIVING CORPSE* took place during the Berlin Film Festival on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012 – in the same city and almost 83 years

to the day since the film's world premiere in 1929. The screening was accompanied by a live recording of the original musical score compiled by Werner Schmidt-Boelcke for the premiere. The score had been reconstructed from fragments surviving in the Library of Congress by Frank Strobel and Gerd Luft at the time of the last restoration and recorded for broadcast on the German television channel ZDF that same year.

The reinsertion of the original opening titles now brings *THE LIVING CORPSE* closer to matching its premiere version than had been previously possible. The improved picture quality of the replacement sequences, meanwhile, has produced a more homogenous result, which aids the viewing experience greatly. The result still remains, however, a compromise between curatorial fantasies and archival realities, influenced by the availability and state of the source materials, as well as the technological and practical limitations that every restoration is ultimately subject to. While a handful of the shots to be replaced had not survived in any of the nitrate prints, they may resurface in a better form in future. That these shots must for now remain in poor quality serves as a reminder that the restoration of *THE LIVING CORPSE*, despite the film's literary origins, is far from being a 'closed book'.

\* All Russian names and film titles are here transliterated from the original Cyrillic script following the scientific transliteration standard. This standard is employed by the Austrian Film Museum in all its publication activities.

<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie, Scott (2003). »Soviet Expansionism: Fedor Ozep's Transnational Cinema«. *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12 (2), 92-104.

<sup>2</sup> Eisenstein, Sergej (1929). »A Dialectic Approach to Film Form«. In: Eisenstein, Sergej & Jay Leyda (eds./trans.) (1949). *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Porges, Friedrich (1929). »Tolstoj-Film. DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM mit Pudovkin als Fedja«. *Der Tag* (2260 = Wednesday, 10<sup>th</sup> April), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Gillette, Don C. (1930). »German

Newspaper Selects Best Productions of 1929«. *The Film Daily* 51 (3 = Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> January), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Pudovkin, Vsevolod & Ivor Montagu (trans.) (1949). *Film Acting*. New York: Lear, 147-149.

<sup>6</sup> Anon. (1929). »Tolstois LEBENDER LEICHNAM im Film«. *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* (Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Anon. (1929). »DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM«. *Der Tag* (2274 = Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> April), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Meier, Gerd (1962). »Materialien zur Geschichte der Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH. 1926-1932« (Part 3 of 8). *Deutsche Filmkunst* 10 (3), 97.

<sup>9</sup> »Waly.« (1931). »THE LIVING CORPSE (Russian Made) (Synchronized)«. *Variety* (14<sup>th</sup> January).

<sup>10</sup> Koerber, Martin (1988). »Über die Restaurierung«. From the distribution leaflet produced to accompany the film, available on the Deutsche Kinemathek's online rentals catalogue, accessible at <http://verleih-filme.deutsche-kinemathek.de/>

<sup>11</sup> Wilkening, Anke (2010). *Filmgeschichte und Filmüberlieferung: Die Versionen von Fritz Langs SPIONE 1928* (=Filmblatt-Schriften Beiträge zur Filmgeschichte 6). Berlin: Cinegraph Babelsberg, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Giuliani, Luca & Sabrina Negri (2011). »Do you have any 16mm nitrate films in your collections? The Case of Ferrania materials in the San Paolo Film Collection at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin«. *Journal of Film Preservation* (64), 36.