

# DANISH FILM HISTORY

By Peter Schepelern

## 1896-1910

The first film screening in Denmark takes place in 1896; the following year, in 1897, Peter Elfelt makes the first Danish produced films. The first movie theatres begin to appear in 1904, and in 1906 Ole Olsen founds the Nordisk Film Company. Beginning in 1910 the Nordisk Film Company gambles on producing full-length feature films. This was the beginning of Danish cinema's golden age.



Viggo Larsens Lion Hunting (Løvejagten, 1907).

### Film at City Hall Square: The first movie showing in Denmark

The first Danish film screening took place on June 7th 1896, just half a year after the Lumière brothers' first public film screening in Paris in December 1895. It was the impresario Vilhelm Pacht who screened a handful of short films, presumably English productions, in Copenhagen's Panorama, a wooden pavilion that had been erected at City Hall Square in Copenhagen in front of the yet unfinished city hall.

### Elfelt and Olsen: The first films and movie theatres

The first Danish-produced film arrived the next year, in 1897, recorded by photographer Peter Elfelt, who got the technically adept Jens Poul Andersen, known as "The Man from Nellerød" to build an operational film camera. From 1897 to 1907 Elfelt filmed approximately 100 films, typically no longer than a few minutes, documenting Danish culture, everyday life, and public events; with a particular focus on the royal family (he became the official royal photographer in 1900).

Among his films are Driving with Greenland Dogs (Kørsel med grønlandske Hunde, 1897), which traditionally is considered the first Danish film; also produced were Brandvæsenet rykker ud (1897), Brydekamp mellem Beck Olsen og Poul Pons (1899) and Czar Nikolai II's Ankomst til Helsingør (1901). He also made a single short fictional film Capital Execution (Henrettelsen, 1903, only saved in fragments), which apparently was inspired by an actual French court case about a woman who killed her children.

The first successful Danish movie theatre, Kosmorama on Østergade in Copenhagen, opened in 1904, and was run by Constantin Philipsen, who in the following years established a chain of theatres over the entire country. In 1905 the Biograf-Theater was opened, also in Copenhagen, by Ole Olsen, who would go on to become a central figure in early Danish cinema. He came from humble beginnings and had worked his way up to run, among other things, a Swedish amusement park. To ensure films for his theatre he went into film production and in November 1906 he founded the company, Nordisk Films Kompagni (today: Nordisk Film), that—with the exception of a bankruptcy 1928-1929—has been a central factor in the Danish film and media industry since.



Nordisk Films Company with leader Ole Olsen in the middle.

### **Polar bears and lions: Nordisk Film begins**

Nordisk Film, whose logo is a polar bear on top of a globe, received immediate success with farces such as *The Anarchist's Mother-in-Law* (*Anarkistens Svigermoder*, 1906), literary films such as *The Lady with the Camellias* (*Kameliadamen*, 1907), and especially dramatic adventure stories like *The Robber's Sweetheart* (*Røverens Brud*, 1907) and the famous *The Lion Hunt* (*Løvejagten*, 1907), where hunters chase and kill two lions, filmed on the little island Elleore in the Roskilde Fjord on Zealand. The films, directed by the company's regular director Viggo Larsen, were 10-15 minutes long. Nordisk Film was also very successful internationally and in the following years established branch offices in a number of different countries, especially Germany, England and the USA.

The company's eye-opening economic results lead to the development of a number of rival firms. It was one of these firms, the small company Fotorama, based in Aarhus, the country's second largest city, that in 1910 released the melodrama *The White Slave Trade* (*Den Hvide Slavehandel*), a remarkable film; it was three reels long (around forty minutes) at a time when a maximum of one reel was the norm. Nordisk Film immediately went about plagiarizing the film, releasing their version four months later. It was at this point that Nordisk Film, as the first company in the world, gambled on lengthier films. It marked the beginning of the short golden age for Danish film, which in the following years stood out in the international market.



August Blom's *The White Slave* (*Den Hvide Slavehandel*, 1910).

Video clips: <http://www.dfi.dk/Service/English/Films-and-industry/Danish-Film-History/1910-1920.aspx>

### **1910-1920**

The Danish cinema's golden age lasted from 1910 to 1920. The period's leading director is Benjamin Christensen, and the two Danish actors Asta Nielsen and Valdemar Psilander achieve both national and international fame.



The period's film stars Asta Nielsen and Valdemar Psilander in *The Ballet Dancer* (*Balletdanserinden*, 1911).

### **Age of the melodrama: August Blom and Benjamin Christensen**

The lead director for Nordisk Film after the breakthrough of longer films was August Blom. He expanded into the dominating genre of the time, the melodrama, often with an erotic theme. He made the remake of *The White Slave Trade* (1910) as well as *The Temptations of A great City* (*Ved Fængslets Port*, 1911), and most importantly, the ambitious, internationally oriented epic *Atlantis* (1913), an artistic melodrama based on the Nobel prize winner Gerhart Hauptmann's novel about an Atlantic Ocean steamship's dramatic shipwreck. The novel was not inspired by the sinking of the Titanic, but the actual event undoubtedly contributed to the company's gamble on the epic and expensive production, which disappointed both artistically and commercially. The movie was impressively filmed by cinematographer Johan Ankerstjerne (whose film laboratory, founded in 1932, went on to be Danish cinema's leading). Other films of note from the period include Eduard Schnedler-Sørensen's circus melodrama *The Great Circus Catastrophe* (*Døds-Spring til Hest fra Cirkus-Kuplen*, 1912), an example of one of the period's typical 'sensational films,' and Holger-Madsen's drama of redemption *The Candle and the Moth* (*Evangelieemandens Liv*, 1915).

The period's leading Danish director was Benjamin Christensen who, for other production companies, made three striking films. *Sealed Orders* (*Det hemmelighedsfulde X*, 1914) was a spy story, which offered outstanding filmic storytelling, especially in the scene where the villain is locked in the basement of a windmill and can't get out. *Blind Justice* (*Hævnens Nat*, 1917) was a criminal melodrama influenced by Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*. The Swedish produced *Häxan* (1922), filmed in Denmark and one of film history's most original works, was a mixture of cultural history slide show and historical reconstruction of the history of witchcraft from the Middle Ages to the present, but provoked much contemporary indignation.



Benjamin Christensen's *Sealed Orders* (1914).

### **The first stars: Valdemar Psilander and Die Asta**

Notably two Danish actors reached stardom, also internationally, during the silent film period. The leading male actor was Valdemar Psilander, who excelled at playing the melancholy male who falls for erotic or criminal temptations in melodramas such as *Temptations of a Great City* (1911) or throws himself into the dark hands of fate in 'sensational films' such as *The Great Circus Catastrophe* (1912) or *The Clown* (*Klovnen*, 1917). He was Nordisk Film's highest paid actor from 1911 to 1916 and was able to establish his own company shortly before his untimely death in 1917.

The most famous actress of the period was Asta Nielsen. Her debut in Kosmorama's *The Abyss* (*Afgrunden*, 1910), directed by her later husband Urban Gad, shined with her intense and psychologically realistic acting. It was a melodrama about a young woman, engaged to the son of a vicar, who runs off with a faithless circus entertainer and ends up killing him.

Unfortunately for Danish cinema her success led her, and her husband, to quickly leave for Germany, where she — applauded as *Die Asta* — had a big career with many varied roles (including the leading part in *Hamlet*, 1921) all the way through to the late 1920s. She only made four Danish silent films; in *The Ballet Dancer* (*Balletdanserinden*, 1911) she co-starred with Psilander.



Asta Nielsen in *The Abyss* (1910, Urban Gad).

### **War and Peace: World War I and Danish film**

The First World War meant a drastic change for Danish cinema; access to the European market became complicated. However, there were also benefits; for example, the Germans banned French and English films. Nordisk Film was able to take advantage of this, until they were forced to sell their German assets to the new national film combine UFA, established in 1917.

After this Nordisk Film focused on big, expensive productions that were expected to achieve international interest. They produced a series of ambitious films with pacifist and social themes. This included August Blom's *The Flaming Sword* (*Verdens Undergang*, 1916), in which a comet strikes the planet, as well as the pacifist *A Trip to Mars* (*Himmelskibet*, 1918), a science-fiction film about a space trip to visit the peace loving Martians, and the politically charged *A Friend of the People* (*Folkets Ven*, 1918), both directed by Holger-Madsen.



Holger-Madsen's A Trip to Mars (1918).

In 1911 the Victoria Theatre opened in Copenhagen, the first purpose-built Danish cinema. The following year executive manager Sophus Madsen opened Palads Teatret in Copenhagen's former central train station; with its 3000 seats it was northern Europe's largest movie theatre. In January 1918, it was replaced by a new building on Axelortv, still a major cinema today.

Video clips: <http://www.dfi.dk/Service/English/Films-and-industry/Danish-Film-History/1910-1920.aspx>

### 1920-1929

Throughout the 1920's Nordisk Film's decline continues. The company receives strong competition from another company, Palladium, which achieves success with the comedy duo Fyrtaarnet og Bivognen. It is in this period of decline that Carl Th. Dreyer debuts as director.



Carl Th. Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc, 1928).

#### **Post war crisis: Nordisk Film's downturn**

Throughout the 1920s Nordisk Film's decline continued, due both to difficult economic conditions and problems trying to find an artistic profile that matched the tastes of the time.

The company's new leading director was A.W. Sandberg who was behind a number of grand screen versions of Dickens' novels. – Our Mutual Friend (Vor fælles Ven, 1921), Great Expectations (Store Forventninger, 1922), The Love Story of David Copperfield (David Copperfield, 1922) and Little Dorrit (Lille Dorrit, 1924). A.W. Sandberg also directed Mists of the Past (Fra Piazza del Popolo, 1925), based on a colourful Danish classic novel, and the circus melodrama The Golden Clown (Klovnen, 1926, which had already been made in 1917 with Psilander), now in a handsome version with the famous Swedish star Gösta Ekman. The films were respectable pieces of work, but never found their place internationally.

It was in this period of decline, that the young Carl Th. Dreyer made his debut as director.



A.W. Sandberg's *Great Expectations* (1922).

### **The great classic: Carl Th. Dreyer**

Carl Th. Dreyer was a young journalist when he was introduced to movies in 1912, became a title card writer and later a script consultant and editor for Nordisk Film. His directing debut, *The President* (*Præsidenten*, 1919), is a melodrama about a judge who must pass sentence on his own long-abandoned illegitimate. The ambitious *Leaves from Satan's Book* (*Blade af Satans Bog*, 1920), told in four stories, from four historical epochs about evil. His most famous Danish silent film was *Master of the House* (*Du skal ære din Hustru*, 1925), which, exceptionally, told the story of regular people in a contemporary environment. Dreyer's intense artistic ambition led him to an international career, making films in Sweden, Norway, Germany — for example *Heart's Desire* (*Michael*, 1924) based upon Herman Bang's novel *Mikaël* — and France, where he made his masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) which, in intense, soul-searching close-ups, tells the story of Jeanne's trial and martyrdom.

He continued with *The Vampire* (*Vampyr*, 1932), a privately financed French-German talkie, which effectively mixed horror material with poetic dream-like photography. A decade of failed projects passed, during which time he went back to working as a journalist. It wasn't until the 1940s that he was able to begin directing again, first the documentary *Good Mothers* (*Mødrehjælpen*, 1942), followed by the feature film *Day of Wrath* (*Vredens Dag*, 1943), a dark and grandiose drama about the witch trials of the 1600s. Dreyer, due to his artistically uncompromising and un-commercial cinematic style, stood alone in the realm of Danish cinema. In 1952 he received a cinema license for the Dagmar theatre in Copenhagen and made *The Word* (*Ordet*, 1955), based upon Kaj Munk's play about faith and resurrection, as well as his final work *Gertrud* (1964), based on Hjalmar Söderberg's play from the beginning of the 1900s about 'lust of the flesh and the soul's irreparable loneliness.' During the last thirty years of his life, Dreyer worked on a film about Jesus, *Jesus of Nazareth*. The manuscript was finished (and published in 1968), but the film was never realized. Dreyer, with his convincing psychological insights and his intentionally abstract style, retains his status as one of film history's greatest figures.



Carl Th. Dreyer's *Master of the House* (1925).

### **Successful Comedies: Palladium and Fy and Bi**

During 1920s recession period Nordisk Film received strong competition from Palladium. The company, originally Swedish, acquired the director Lau Lauritzen Senior and the actor Carl Schenstrøm from Nordisk Film. Lauritzen paired the tall, thin Schenstrøm with the short, fat Harald Madsen and coined the comic duo Fyrtaarnet and Bivognen (Lighthouse and the Trailer), shortened to Fy and Bi.

Palladium was run by Danes from 1922, and Fyrtaarnet and Bivognen was the strongest asset in 1920s Danish film, with farces such as Film, Flirt and Film (Film, Flirt og Forlovelse, 1921), Sun, Summer and Students (Sol, Sommer og Studiner, 1922), He, She and Hamlet (Han, hun og Hamlet, 1922) and At the North Sea (Vester-Vov-Vov, 1927). The comedians also achieved a large international audience and were especially well known in Germany (as Pat und Patachon), as well as in England (as Long and Short) and Eastern Europe. The duo, which continued after talkies broke through, was just once used in a more ambitious project, Lauritzen's Don Quixote (1926) based upon Cervantes' novel, filmed in Spain.



Fyrtaarnet and Bivognen—also known as Fy and Bi.

### **Early animation: Storm P.'s animations**

It was also during this period that Danish animated movies humbly began. Artist extraordinaire Robert Storm Petersen, well known for his funny cartoons, made a few short animated movies, among them were Gaasetyven (1920) and Peter og Ping Trylleri (1922).

### **Movie theatre law of 1922**

From the beginning, Denmark sorted movies and movie theatres as a separate entertainment market under the Police and Justice Ministry. In 1907 movie censorship was introduced; in 1913 the state took control of the censorship. In 1922 Denmark acquired its first movie theatre law, which put steep taxation on movie tickets into effect (40%). At the same time a cinema license system was put into place. Permission to run a theatre relied upon licenses and was in essence put under government control. A cinema license was often used as a type of artistic pension. Also production companies could get access to run a theatre (a so called 'production license'). The system continued under the Film Law of 1938 until the film law of 1972.

In the silent movie era there were approximately 1600 short and feature length films and over 1000 documentary films made in Denmark, about 250 of them have been preserved.

Video clips: <http://www.dfi.dk/Service/English/Films-and-industry/Danish-Film-History/1920-1929.aspx>