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Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk & Movies Dream in Color
(2003–2004) (review)

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One flawless sequence in *Girl Shy* (1924), Lloyd's first independent production after parting ways with Roach, commands particular attention. The scene begins as Harold drifts in a rowboat, sighing over a box of Acme dog biscuits (a totemic souvenir from his first meeting with The Girl, and The Girl's dog) and sees his beloved's reflection in the calm surface of the lake. Of course the audience knows that The Girl has walked onto the bridge and is leaning over the edge sighing with her Cracker Jack box clutched tight in her hand (her souvenir from the first meeting with The Boy). But neither character recognizes the presence of the other. Harold takes the reflection of her face as a projected mirror of his thoughts; lost in her own thoughts, The Girl walks away. The dramatic suspense of the missed moment tightens as The Girl exits the bridge and then stumbles, falling onto a raft that clumsily sails into his side. From melodramatic suspense to slapstick pratfall, the scene now shifts to shy sentimentality, even as the natural world turns coyly sensuous. On dry ground, "girl shy" Harold labors towards conversation. His stutter gets in his way as does a litter of piglets suckling at their mother's teats. Moving The Girl away from any semblance of suckling, he leans against a sapling that oozes on his hand. He inadvertently wipes the sap on his pants. He nervously seeks a safer spot for chatting. Sitting down seems wise, so as she rests on a tree trunk, he collapses on a rock, which the audience sees is not a rock at all but rather a large turtle. Finally at ease, The Boy gazes into her eyes as the tortoise carries him slowly towards the murky depths.

Lloyd never shouts about the sensuous. It rather leaks, bubbles, shimmers and sprays through and across the surface of things. Because he so loudly voices the platitudes of romance and the secure recognition of the couple—"LET'S GET MARRIED" reads the final intertitle for *Grandma's Boy*—it is sometimes hard to hear what is flooding everywhere beneath. The miracle ultimately revealed to us in this collection is a figure in which the sentimental *and* the sexual, the dramatic *and* the comic, the innocent victim *and* the sly trickster, the certainty of direction *and* the aimless quality of spray, seamlessly merge in what appears, at first glance, to be a rather simply

dressed kind of fellow, the most average of Nebraskan guys.

NOTES

1. Leonard Maltin, *The Great Movie Comedians* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1982), 47.
2. Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 149–50.
3. Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 190–202.

Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk & Movies Dream in Color (2003–2004)

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY FLICKER ALLEY, 2007

Joshua Yumibe

Having worked on the history of color in silent film for a number of years and being much indebted to the preservation work of Eric Lange and Serge Bromberg's Lobster Films, I am happy to comment on their two-disc DVD documentary released by Jeffery Masino's Flicker Alley, *Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk & Movies Dream in Color* (2007). Lange directed and Bromberg produced these two richly illustrated and researched documentaries for the French Histoire television channel

in 2003 (*Les premiers pas du cinéma: À la recherche du son*) and 2004 (*Les premiers pas du cinéma: Un rêve en couleur*) and Lobster Films originally released the two together as a two-disc DVD set in France in 2005. Each feature is approximately fifty-two minutes long and is comprised of a mixture of narration, still and moving image, musical accompaniment by Neil Brand and Eric Le Guen, and insightful interviews with various scholars and archivists. Additionally, both discs are also full of remarkable extras, more of which will be said below.

Discovering Cinema is a technological history of the medium, specifically focused on the development of sound and coloring practices during the so-called silent era. To contextualize the set, technological accounts of cinema have been one of the most enduring genres of historiography. Dating from the very emergence of the medium, early writings on cinematic technology continue to prove both insightful—especially about the various, at times eccentric yet wonderful, ideas about what the inchoate medium might become—and (often) contentious, given the frequent claims about priority of invention. Who made what first: the Lumières, Edison, Friese-Greene, Jenkins, etc. In reaction to such chronicles of invention, various revisionist approaches have also taken shape, be it Gordon Hendricks's critique of the "Edison motion picture myth," or more systematically of apparatus theory in the 1970s, which though ahistorical in fundamental ways, nonetheless raised key issues about the ideological nature of cinematic technology. The recent reexamination of film history that began in the late 1970s [epitomized by the 1978 Brighton conference of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF)] has attempted to revise and ground such theoretical insights with nuanced historical research. The best works as of late that deal with the technology of cinema have in general moved away from simple accounts of invention to emphasize instead the variety of "intermedial" technologies and cultural practices that have structured the cinematic medium from its emergence to the present day.¹ The cinema thus emerged at the turn of the last century from a convergence of diverse technologies, such as instantaneous photography and lanternslide projection, with popular entertainment and educational

practices, such as vaudeville, travelogue and science lectures, and fairground exhibition. Much of the historical work over the last thirty years has productively explored these and various other connections.

Following these recent historiographic approaches, the strongest aspect of *Discovering Cinema* pertains to its account of the diversity of color and sound technologies and practices during the silent era. Recent works on early sound such as Rick Altman's *Silent Film Sound* and James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema* have shown that sound practices and representational strategies were far richer and heterogeneous during the silent period than to be construed simply as primitive precursors to the standardization of synchronized sound with moving image.² Stage music, lanternslide lectures, and illustrated song slide sing-a-longs each had their own audiovisual styles that are as crucial to the history of sound cinema as is the eventual synchronization of sound and image in "the talkies." The issue of course, methodologically, is how to think about these various technologies and accompanying practices without reducing them to a single teleological pattern of development.

Usefully stressing heterogeneity over teleology, *Learning to Talk* breaks down the early history of sound cinema into three "parallel" developments of sound technology and practice: "artistic sound" (the live mixing of images and sounds in front of an audience), and two "scientific" approaches, sound on disc (sound and image recorded and played back from different media) and optical sound (sound and image on the same medium, also commonly known as "sound on film"). Of these, the artistic sound section is worth highlighting. Beginning with the hurdy-gurdy accompaniment of itinerant lanternslide showmen, Lange and Bromberg use a variety of illustrations, transforming lanternslides, and film clips to bring to life the varieties of sound accompaniment present during the silent era. Of particular note is *Learning to Talk's* footage of the various means employed in the 1920s to maintain a synchronized tempo between moving image and live accompaniment: from the Grimoin-Sanson system of printing a conductor's baton in the bottom corner of the film frame to the more elaborate Notofilm method

of printing the accompanying melody line as a scrolling subtitle at the bottom of the film frame.

The sections on the scientific development of sound recording and playback technologies are also well grounded in the various sound experiments that preceded and influenced the development of sound cinema. Beginning with Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville and Etienne-Jules Marey, *Learning to Talk* discusses the various nineteenth-century experiments with graphing sound and movement. It then progresses from Thomas Edison's work on the phonograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetophone to various ensuing developments in sound-recording technology such as Lee DeForest and Theodore Case's experimentation with optical sound and Warner's Vitaphone sound-on-disc system. Except for an epilogue on the recent changes in digital sound technology, *Learning to Talk's* historical account ends somewhat abruptly and too briefly with Vitaphone's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Lights of New York* (1928) and a short summary of the ensuing transition to and dominance of optical sound. It would have been useful if *Learning to Talk* had explored these changes more thoroughly, though the general outlines of this trajectory are well-known and covered in more detail in Warner Brothers' recently produced *The Dawn of Sound: How Movies Learned to Talk* (2007) and Robert Gitt's *A Century of Sound: The History of Sound in Motion Pictures: The Beginning: 1876–1932* (2007) and certainly in Donald Crafton's excellent book, *The Talkies*.³ However, what is unique about Lange and Bromberg's account is the emphasis it places on the earlier, international (especially French) development of sound technologies. Focusing on less-discussed experiments, at least in U.S. accounts of sound, *Learning to Talk* contains remarkable examples of the sound cinema work of Auguste Blaise Baron, Henri Lioret and Clement-Maurice's Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, and Léon Gaumont's Chronophone system.

Pursuing a similar intermedial and international approach to the history of color, *The Movies Dream in Color* also breaks the material into a three-part system of parallel developments, again divided between artistic coloring practices (the "applied color" processes of hand coloring, stenciling, tinting,

and toning) and the two scientific approaches to natural, photographic color ("additive" processes such as Kinemacolor and Technicolor's first two-color system and "subtractive" processes such as Technicolor's later two-color and three-color systems). Beginning with the histories of lanternslide coloring and the scientific toys that developed from studies in motion perception (e.g. the zoetrope and Charles-Émile Reynaud's marvelous praxinoscope), *The Movies Dream in Color* usefully traces how the coloring practices and at times even coloring ateliers that were used for these media were adapted for coloring early films.

Again, the footage that is used to document these techniques and technologies is remarkable: from animated chromatropes, Reynaud's *Pauvre Pierrot* (1892), and Loïe Fuller to early hand-colored films of the Lumières, the stencil-color films of Pathé, and a wonderful variety of tinted and toned sequences. The account of stenciling is of particular note for its clarity: using Gaston Velle's *La Peine du talion* (Pathé, 1906), Lange and Bromberg dynamically demonstrate how stenciling was performed on black-and-white prints. Being used for more than just fairy films like *La Peine du talion*, *The Movies Dream in Color* demonstrates how Pathé also employed stenciling extensively in its nonfiction films in the 1910s, and the clips illustrating this are currently the best available anywhere on commercial DVD. Stenciling was used well into the 1920s in feature films such as Augusto Genina's *Cirano di Bergerac* (1925) and Viatcheslav Tourjansky's *Michel Strogoff* (1926), but unfortunately *The Movies Dream in Color* does not explore this later history of applied coloring. In addition to these examples of stenciling, there was a remarkable hybridity of coloring processes found in feature films in the 1920s: a film such as *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) might include sequences that were tinted, along with Handschiegl coloring (a complex applied-color, dye-transfer process similar to chromolithography), and natural-color Technicolor sequences. The aesthetics of this hybridity have yet to be fully explored.

The account of natural color systems on *The Movies Dream in Color* is well structured, and runs from Newton's investigation of the color spectrum and James Clark Maxwell's

experimentation with additive color photography in the 1860s to the application of these principles to film in the early 1900s by pioneers such as William Friese-Greene, Charles Urban and George Albert Smith with their Kinemacolor system, and Léon Gaumont through his extraordinary Chronochrome process. One of the issues with additive processes for color cinematography is that they require special projectors and skilled projectionists for exhibition. Due largely to the technical and financial drawbacks of these systems, there was a shift in the late 1910s towards developing subtractive, film-coloring processes, as these do not require special projectors for exhibition. After its first problematic additive system in 1917, Technicolor for instance switched to subtractive color and developed three increasingly sophisticated systems, beginning in 1922 with its first two-color subtractive process and culminating in 1932 with its renowned three-strip, subtractive dye-transfer system.

Technicolor was not the only company developing subtractive systems during this period: dozens of others were being experimented with in the 1920s, such as Prizmacolor, Multicolor, and Brewstercolor, and Lange and Bromberg usefully sketch the international diversity of these various experiments. Extending the historical period further than the *Learning to Talk* feature, *The Movies Dream in Color* usefully tracks the adoption of natural color processes by the film industry into the 1930s through Technicolor's successes with Disney's Silly Symphonies series and its live-action short *La Cucaracha* (1934) and its first three-strip feature *Becky Sharp* (1935). This period of Technicolor history is also well-explored in Scott Higgins' recent book, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow*.⁴ In a brief, but effective conclusion, *The Movies Dream in Color* quickly outlines the development of color cinema during and then beyond the 1930s: from Kodak's 16mm amateur reversal stock, Kodachrome, which was commercially released in 1935, to Germany's Agfacolor system, which like Kodachrome was a tripack, but unlike it, Agfa developed a corresponding negative color stock in 1939, which allowed for easier reproduction of prints. It is this stock, which, following the war and the dissection of

Agfacolor by both the Soviets and the Americans, became the basis for modern color film-stock.

While there are certainly points on *Discovering Cinema* that could have been developed further, it is notable how much material Lange and Bromberg have been able to fit into the series given the constraints of the sixty-minute television slots they were working with. Offsetting the relatively condensed length of each feature, both discs are full of extraordinary extras of short films and excerpts organized in the tripartite structure of both documentaries. Some of these highlights include a compilation of four hand-colored Lumière films (e.g. the *Death of Marat*, 1897, and *The Execution of Joan of Arc*, 1898); Gaumont's stenciled, sound on disc *La légende du roi gambrinus* (1911); Albert Schomer *The Chamber of Mystery* (1920, with excellent piano accompaniment and spoken dialog printed as comic dialog bubbles within the shots); Charles Urban's *Inauguration of the San Marco Campanile* (1912, Kinemacolor); and a pristine transfer of Lloyd Corrigan's *La Cucaracha* (1934, Technicolor). This wonderfully eclectic collection of extras is in line with the type of material compiled in Bromberg and Lange's ongoing *Retour de flamme* DVD series, which is now up to six, soon to be seven, volumes and has also recently been condensed and released by Flicker Alley as the three-disc set, *Saved from the Flames* (2008).

In closing, I do have one general criticism to make about the set, which pertains in part to the titling of the series but relates more substantially to some of the methodological assumptions that the documentaries make about the standardization of sound and color in the late 1920s and 1930s. First with the titles: *Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk*; *The Movies Dream in Color/Les premiers pas du cinéma: À la recherche du son*; *Un rêve en couleur*: there is a tendency here to anthropomorphize the technology of cinema. It is of course difficult, if not impossible, to avoid such metaphors altogether when speaking about the origins/beginnings/emergence of a technological medium, but if left unchecked, such metaphors often lead to the misapplication of biological patterns of development to inorganic systems that develop in much more

complex ways—e.g. economically, politically, internationally—than a trajectory from birth to growth to maturity belies. Furthermore, these metaphors often result in teleological assumptions about what the cinema in its maturity is or should be. If “the real sound cinema is born” only with the advent of optical sound in the late 1920s, as *Learning to Talk* contends, what then was the sound cinema that preceded it? Or similarly, if applied coloring techniques, despite being “ingenious and poetic,” were only “stopgaps” until one could reproduce “life’s natural colors” on film, why did so many of these methods continue into the 1930s in feature film production and even longer in experimental and avant-garde traditions? And what is one now to make of the recent and widespread mutations (to lapse into biology) of the color film image through digital effects?

I raise these objections because such issues are inconsistent with the broader emphasis and overall achievement of *Discovering Cinema*, which is to show the parallel developments and amazing diversity of sound and color technologies present during the first decades of cinema history. At this, it succeeds remarkably well, for it reminds us once again that the cinema did not have to be what it became, and does not have to stay what it is.

NOTES

1. On intermediality, see Andre Gaudreault, “The Diversity of Cinematographic Connections in the Intermedial Context of the Turn of the 20th Century,” in *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19th Century*, eds., Simon Popple and Vanessa Toulmin, trans. Wendy Schubring (Wilshire, UK: Flick Books, 2000), 8–15.
2. Ibid.
3. Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound: 1926–1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
4. Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Projektionen der
Sehnsucht: Saturn.
Die erotischen
Anfänge der
österreichischen
Kinematografie