

## Life to Those Shadows: Kevin Brownlow Talks about a Career in Films

John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh

Over the last thirty-five years Kevin Brownlow has established himself, in the words of *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman, as “a wonderful historian as well as a master cinema restorationist” (98); and, according to *L.A. Weekly* critic John Powers, as “the master chronicler of the silent cinema” (1). Stanley Kauffmann has written that Brownlow’s indefatigable researches have “opened the lost frontiers” of international cinema history. His work, continues Kauffmann, “is wonderfully valuable. It enlightens; it shakes preconceptions; it adds fascinating colors to a fabric assumed to be more or less monochrome” (26). Brownlow’s first book, *The Parade’s Gone By* (1968) remains an indispensable volume of discovery, lauded by Stuart Klawans in *The Nation* as “the standard work on the art of early cinema.” Brownlow has not only waged virtually a one-man mission to revive the cinema past, he has, in Klawan’s words, “recomplicated our relationship with it” (43). His theatrical films, *It Happened Here* (1964) and *Winstanley* (1975)—recently re-released by Milestone Films in theatrical and video formats—have been hailed as landmarks in the British independent cinema. And his television documentary series have been praised by Richard Corliss in *Time* as “glorious time machines” which allow us to relive a time “when films were possessed of such ambition, achievement and optimism [that] you could believe that nothing mattered more than films—and that they could only get better” (64).

Kevin Brownlow was born in 1938 in Sussex, about fifty miles from London. Among his earliest memories are vivid images of the V-1 bombings.

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"The teachers assumed we would be terrified by these monsters roaring by overhead," he recalled in a 1995 interview; "and they fed us orange juice—which was very scarce—to console us. What they didn't know was that none of us were in the least frightened—even when fighter planes followed the V-1s, firing at them with their machine guns. It was all tremendously exciting: The sight of a V-1 meant not death and destruction to us children, but the certainty of a glass of orange juice" (Tibbetts 1997, 74)!

He first discovered motion pictures while attending a boarding school in Crowborough, Sussex. He remembers his excitement at school when a now-forgotten American version of *Oliver Twist* with Dickie Moore was shown to the boys and—lo and behold!—there on screen was a character named "Mr. Brownlow"! Moreover—"Halfway through the film, there was an accident. The projector jammed and ripped the film. A few frames fell beside me where I sat (as close to the projector as possible). I picked these up and as soon as the show was over, I raced up to the dormitory and tried to project them on a wall with a torch. This will tell you something about the technical knowledge of this nine-year old child . . . . But that night I fell passionately in love with the idea of showing films. The darkened room symbolized blissful escape from the miseries of school, and the shaft of light promised anything. . . ." (Brownlow 1995, 84).

Stimulated by these first encounters with film, he got a part-time job after school and on Saturdays in a photographic shop in Hampstead. In 1956 at age eighteen he began work as a trainee in the cutting rooms of World Wide pictures, a documentary film company based in Soho. While making his first film, *The Capture*, an adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's story, "Les Prisonniers," he also started writing about films for a magazine called *Amateur Cine World*. The publication in 1968 of his first book, *The Parade's Gone By*, was a seminal event in silent film scholarship. It and other subsequent books, including *The War, the West and the Wilderness* (1979) and *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (1992) have established him as the world's leading authority on the silent film. Meanwhile, with co-director (with Andrew Mollo), he released two theatrical features, *It Happened Here* (1964) and *Winstanley* (1978). The first was a work of "counterfactual" history, a speculation about life in a wartime England under German occupation; and the second was a rigorously researched historical recreation of 17<sup>th</sup> century England during the time of Cromwell. In 1967-68 he worked as editor on Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Brownlow's restoration of Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) took thirteen years, leading to screenings in the early 1980s in Europe, in Washington at the Kennedy Center, and in New York at Radio City Music Hall. Since then, he has turned increasingly to television documentary production. With his producing partner, the late David Gill, Brownlow has presented several Emmy and Peabody-Award winning television series and documentaries for Thames Television and

Channel 4 in England, and for PBS and Turner in America, including *Hollywood: The Pioneers*, *Buster Keaton: A Hard Act to Follow*, *Harold Lloyd: The Third Genius*, *D.W. Griffith: Father of Film*, *The Unknown Chaplin*, and *Cinema Europe: The Other Hollywood*. After David Gill died in 1997, Brownlow's company, Photoplay Productions, carried on, and he and his other partner, Patrick Stanbury, produced the documentary, *Universal Horror*. Their most recent feature film restoration has been Erich von Stroheim's *The Wedding March* (1928), which was presented in London with live orchestra in the autumn of 1998 (these "Live Cinema" presentations were inaugurated in 1980 and have been a feature of the London Film Festival ever since).

At this writing, Brownlow's new book, *Mary Pickford Rediscovered*, is slated to be published by Abrams in May 1999.

Brownlow has devoted his life to a race against the clock to locate, preserve, and present artifacts of our film past before they deteriorate into dust. Otherwise, he warns, "posterity will judge us harshly." Fortunately, as Angela Carter writes in *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, "His own work will evade such judgment" (26).

The following interview was conducted on 15 January 1999 in Brownlow's Photoplay Productions offices at 21 Princess Road, London.

*Everybody knows your name from your restoration of Abel Gance's "Napoleon." How did you get involved with that?*

BROWNLOW: Some of the standard histories of silent film I read as a young boy contained *outrageous* distortions. Did you ever read Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now*? According to him, American silent films were factory-made fodder, of no artistic value at all, except for Griffith and Chaplin. He claimed the only aesthetically worthwhile silents were German or Russian. In the mid-1950s as a teenager I used to go to the British Film Institute to see these officially approved "classics" and would often be bored out of my mind. I had better films at home in my own collection. One film that Rotha and the other historians particularly slammed was a French film by Abel Gance called *Napoleon* [1927]. Rotha called it "tediously cumbersome." When I was fifteen years old, I had a chance to buy a couple of reels of this, but I was reluctant because the price was twelve-and-six a reel (about \$1.50 in those days). But knowing how wrong he'd been about other things, I took the risk. The film arrived and I remember dragging my projector into the sitting room, summoning my parents, and showing the film on the wall. Before the first reel was over, my mother said, "This is beautiful. It's the best film you've got." I was as pleased as if I'd made it myself. I looked it up in a Pathescope 9.5 mm catalogue, and realized that more of the film had been released in the late

twenties. So I advertised, I undertook what I termed “cine-crawls,” searching junk shop and photographic shops across London. I put together a six-reel version, then I went to Paris in 1958 and found more. Later, I graduated to 16 mm and my version of *Napoleon* grew longer and longer. The longer it got, the better it got. And so I was appalled when I saw a 35 mm print from the French Cinémathèque at the National Film Theatre. It was such a travesty, that I had to walk out. I couldn’t watch another minute (I found out later it was the Cinémathèque’s “second best” print and included tests and out-takes). Eventually, the NFT presented the Cinémathèque’s best print of *Napoleon*, which was an original print that was tinted and toned. It was a tremendous experience to see it, but I knew that a great deal was still missing—some reels made no sense at all. Furthermore, it was in such a shredded condition that the NFT projectionists had refused to run it. Only after I had gone through it sticking the sprocket holes together with cello tape, would they agree to show it.

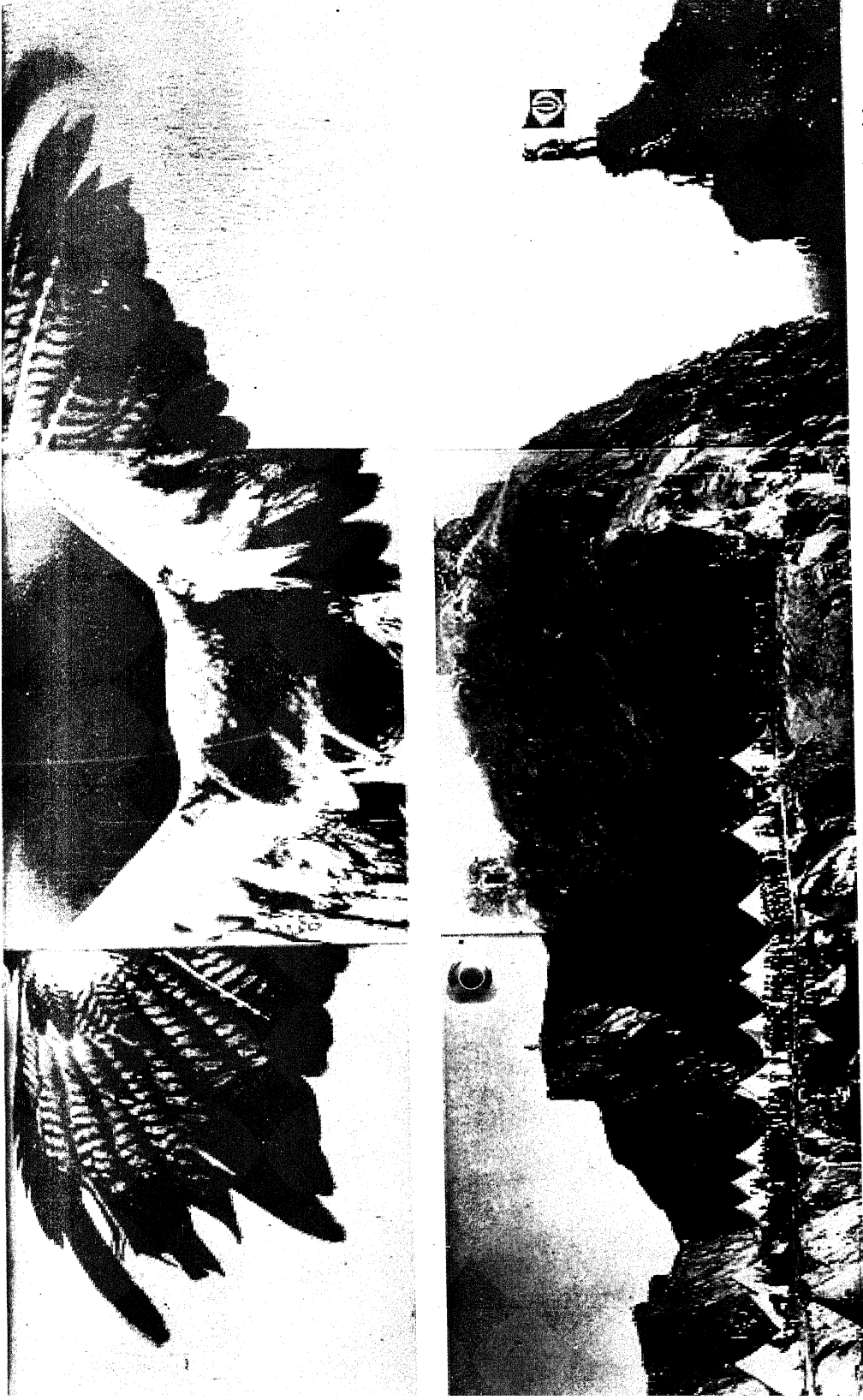
I resolved to restore the film to as near as possible its original length. I had met Abel Gance, and learned that he was going to make a new version from the old footage. He had a terrible time getting his material back from the Cinémathèque, because Henri Langlois claimed he owned the rights. Anyway, once it was all in the labs, Gance gave me access to all the fine grains and negatives so I could go through it on the rewind and try and recognize shots I hadn’t found already. Jacques Ledoux of the Royal Belgian Film Archive took it upon himself to contact all the archives of the world that had even a single reel of *Napoleon*, and he asked them to send the material to me. Without such help, I couldn’t have done the job. Ernest Lindgren, who ran the National Film Archive in those days, did not approve of my activities, by the way, but one of his deputies gave me access to a cutting room once Lindgren had gone home.

*How do you account for Lindgren’s attitude?*

KB: Ernest Lindgren detested collectors. As a young man he started the Archive. But he was very puritanical, and he would never deal with collectors. He once threw me out of his office for daring to suggest a deal with an American collector who was offering a priceless rarity. Lindgren lost his temper completely. That’s why the NFA has always been so trusted by the big companies—they knew that no collector would ever be allowed within miles of their material so long as Lindgren was in charge.

*How long did the restoration take?*

KB: It took me twelve weeks (of evenings) to reconstruct it to the point where it made sense all the way through. That version was first shown by the AFI in



Brownlow labored many years to restore and present Abel Glance's masterpiece, *Napoleon* (1927). Pages 85 through 87 show scenes from the famous concluding triple-screen triptych. (Stills courtesy of Kevin Brownlow)





Washington and by Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley in 1977, I think. Meanwhile, over the years, more and more sequences kept turning up. Finally, Bob Harris of Images Film Archive in New York acquired the rights. He managed to secure the 1928 MGM version, a very emasculated version, but which contained yet more scenes. He and his partner, Tom Luddy, arranged for the film to be shown at the 1979 Telluride Film Festival with the three-screen triptych conclusion intact. Gance was present. It was the event of a lifetime! It took thirteen years in all. And now more material has been found—not so much extra footage, but footage of better quality. And a print was found in Corsica, appropriately enough. It contains some shots missing from the reconstruction. It also contains tints and tones that allow us to eliminate the guesswork out of recreating the color palette. And with recent technical developments, it's possible for the first time to duplicate the beauty of the original titles. It seems as if work like this never ends. Everything I do seems endless, it seems to me. My first feature film, *It Happened Here* [1964], took eight years; my next, *Winstanley* [1975], took three.

#### **Brownlow's Theatrical Films**

*And all the while you're hovering between being a film historian and a film maker?*

KB: I'll tell you that I never expected to make my living at film preservation. I always thought I was going to go into feature filmmaking—which, alas, never happened. When making feature films, I tended to abandon all the values I espoused as a historian. I would reject Hollywood completely and go out into the field with the smallest crew possible and make pictures which were extremely documentary in their style, extremely non-commercial—which is why I didn't make very many of them. I'm too eccentric a filmmaker to work within the commercial, theatrical system.

*Now that It Happened Here and Winstanley have been released on video, a new generation will have a chance to see them. Both have aroused their share of controversy over the years—It Happened Here because its view of a counterfactual history (what would have happened if Nazi Germany had occupied England during World War II); and Winstanley because it was such a pure, severe reconstruction of a little-known aspect of 17<sup>th</sup> century England.*

KB: The title, *It Happened Here*, was inspired by the British wartime cliché, "It couldn't happen here!" (I didn't find out that Sinclair Lewis had written a novel with a similar title until after the film was released.) Although it deals with Fascist elements in England, it's a story that could have happened anywhere. Having done a lot of research on the American scene in the teens, twenties and thirties for my book, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*, I'm surprised that the Third Reich



actually didn't take place first in the United States. In the midst of the Depression there were demagogues like Huey Long and Father Coughlin. Racism was everywhere—the Ku Klux Klan had four million members. Chain gangs and prison camps were run like concentration camps. Adolf Hitler, then an up-and-coming politician, wrote a fan letter to Lina Basquette after seeing her in the violent reform school drama, *The Godless Girl* (1929).

The seed of *It Happened Here* was planted when I saw a curious thing one day on a London street: I was walking along Charlotte Street when a black Citroen screeched to a halt beside me. Two men jumped out and ran into a delicatessen, shouting all the while to each other in German. I was struck by the moment: It seemed to me like a scene out of an old World War II movie—only it was happening *here*, now, in London.

After I began *It Happened Here*, I was joined by Andrew Mollo, who thought what I had shot was so amateurish I should junk it—which I did. We started again, aiming at absolute authenticity. We had collected a lot of Nazi materials, and some people came to us asking to borrow a swastika flag. We asked, “What do you want it for?” They said they were giving a party. Well, of course, it turned out to be a Nazi Party Party! They were celebrating Hitler's birthday. We went along out of curiosity, and found all these advocates of the Third Reich. They told us things that staggered us. We realized we could never write that sort of dialogue—the best way was to get these people into uniform and into the film. Here they were, respectable English types, talking National Socialist propaganda, and it was chilling to hear them. I think they condemned themselves out of their own mouths much more efficiently than if somebody in the context of the story had jumped up to oppose them.

But English audiences were upset by the whole idea that the English could be capable of collaborating with the Nazis. I think that now, when we see “storm troopers” on the football terraces and we see black citizens kicked to death at bus stops by white youths—I think we now realize it is possible that Fascism could have flourished here; that it could arise at any time, anywhere. But it has taken thirty years for people to get that message.

*Those scenes with the National Socialists were originally cut from release prints, weren't they?*

KB: Yes. Protests from various groups convinced United Artists that the scene should be deleted. People felt that we were supporting these Nazis! They thought *we* were Nazis! It is incredible how simple-minded people are when you show them political films. They think that if the sentiment is expressed on the screen, it must be the sentiment of the person who made the film! But I don't regret the controversy. I still think that, by and large, *It Happened Here* is the only feature

film which has tried to explain what National Socialism is. Think of all those films made about the Second World War; and not one of them bothered to explain just what we were fighting against.

*Winstanley seems like a completely different kind of history film—not a “what if?” sort of thing, but a strict chronicle of past events about the Diggers in the time of Cromwell. The critics loved it, but the public apparently thought otherwise.*

KB: I wanted to make a very English film set in the seventeenth century, which I didn't think had ever been properly done. All the English films we know seem to have been about monarchs or Robin Hood—and none of them were about the ordinary people. The story of Gerrard Winstanley and his commune on St. George's Hill struck me as fascinating. We got the rights to a historical novel about Winstanley by David Caute, *Comrade Jacob*, but I'm ashamed to say we somewhat abandoned it. We discovered that Winstanley's original pamphlets were in the British Museum, and when we got those out and read them, we were overwhelmed by the beauty of the language. Andrew and I thought, we'll do this properly, absolutely as Winstanley describes it, word for word as he wrote it. It's true that it would have been a much more commercial film if we had stuck to the historical novel. You could still do that, but it would have very little to do with our film. We wanted to see what would happen if we made an austere, correct, accurate historical film. Well, we now know—nobody went to see it!

*Yet the battle scenes are quite effective.*

KB: People think those scenes were inspired by Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*. That's only because we used some of Prokofiev's music score. We were very embarrassed about using it, by the way, because it's hardly English music! But it has that medieval quality, an almost religious intensity that I desperately needed. No, our real inspiration was Orson Welles. I think that *Chimes at Midnight* has the best battle scenes I have ever seen. It taught us how to get something effective out of a real economy of means. So we established a mass of soldiers in one shot, and then for the rest of the scene worked with just six. That's all we needed, just six men in the field shot in extreme closeup. It took me three weeks to edit that sequence, which is outrageously long. It was very difficult to do.

By the way, 1999 marks the 350th anniversary of the Diggers. I think there are going to be all sorts of celebrations, including the reoccupation of St. George's Hill. Well, that area is now the richest part of the stockbroker belt. It's where all the pop singers live. It'll be interesting to see how they'll react. The new Parson Platt might turn out to be George Harrison, or Elton John!

**Mary Pickford**

Mary Pickford Rediscovered *is due out this summer. It seems strange that after all these years you haven't written much about Mary Pickford.*

KB: Don't forget that I interviewed her for my first book, *The Parade's Gone By!* My new book will be about 75,000 words of text, along with the pictures. It's a joint project sponsored by the Mary Pickford Foundation in Los Angeles and the Motion Picture Academy. With the help of Elaina Archer of the Foundation and Robert Cushman, curator of the Academy's picture archive, we've amassed an incredible number of lovely stills and rare photographs. They will look gorgeous! In a way, this book has been on my mind for quite a long time. As you probably know, one of the first people I ever contacted as a kid when I first became interested in this was her cameraman of many years, Charles Rosher. During his trips to London, I used to meet him, and eventually he left me his film material, including Mary Pickford's stills camera. It's sad that the moment you say "Mary Pickford," people switch off at once for they have only this sense of someone quaint, fusty, and boring. When we interviewed Sir John Gielgud, he said, "I never went to see them; I considered them trash" [imitating Gielgud's cultivated accent].

*How did you respond to that?*

KB: Well, I offered to send him some examples of her work to show him what a fine actress she was. Too many people only know them from lousy prints projected at the wrong speed. By the way, Pickford's later films should be projected a little faster than most other films of the 'teens and '20s, otherwise, they tend to 'float,' as if they were in slow motion. The Academy has promised to help restore the remaining Pickford films which survive only in foreign archives. Milestone Films of New York will be releasing newly-restored video versions with tints and new music scores.

*You're organizing your book around the movie stills. Are you able to account for all the films, even the lost ones?*

KB: Almost. For something like *In the Bishop's Carriage* [1913], an early theatrical feature for Zukor's Famous Players, there was virtually no information. *Variety* never bothered to review it. Nobody wrote anything about it. It has not survived. Robert Cushman sent me all his notes. Over the years I kept every reference I came upon, from French magazines of the 20s, to American publications like *Picture Play*, *Photoplay*, *Motography*, trade journals, taped interviews, etc. And then I've got the new biographies of Pickford and Frances Marion by Eileen Whitfield, Scott Eyman, and Cari Beauchamp, which I'm

pillaging ruthlessly. Plus Pickford's own autobiography [*Sunshine and Shadow*], which was ghost-written.

### **Film Preservation and *Cinema Europe***

*Are the kinds of problems you're outlining pretty typical of the difficulties in silent film scholarship in general?*

KB: There *are* lots of treasures out there to see, but the problem lies in trying to pry them loose. This is what appalled me when David Gill and I were making our documentary series, *Cinema Europe*. For the episode on German film, we requested a German organization to make transfers of material. They said, "We will give you a cassette, you mark up what you want, we send it to the lab, and you pay the rights." But when we asked for scenes from *Variety* [1926], the classic film by E.A. Dupont, the material they provided looked like the first transmissions from the moon. Appalling. And I said, "Is this just a rough print?" They said, "This is the best there is." I said, "Well it isn't, because I've got a better print on 16 mm." And they repeated, "This is the best material there is." But when I told them I was going to go elsewhere, they said, "You are not permitted to do that. If you do not take from us, we do not give you the rights." I asked them if they wanted me to make a tribute to German cinema or a documentary on German bureaucracy. This didn't make me very popular. In fact, our interpreter said, "I will not translate that." So we had a very rough time, indeed. Eventually, we shamed them into admitting that we could go elsewhere. It's sad that, in general, classics like *Variety* are in pretty bad shape. The SDK (Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek) are doing sterling work. They restored Pabst's *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929) recently. And they hope to start work on *Metropolis* (1926). The Film Museum at Munich did excellent work and we benefitted from their restoration of *Nosferatu* (1922). But many of the others are still in a dreadful state.

The French are better because the Cinémathèque had been doing restorations for a while. But there again, the quality is not great, not as good as it should be. A real tragedy is the loss of much of the Scandinavian silent cinema. Apparently, a long time ago an enormous amount of material was all stored in one place in a factory far out in the country. One day there was a terrific explosion and the whole thing went up in flames, taking with it many original negatives. So much of what we have are only dupe prints. Things are different in Denmark. They have kept beautiful negatives, and you can still see much of the great era of Danish cinema in 1911-1914, when they were making features before the Americans.

*And as far as the English episode goes, were you satisfied with that? English films of the 1920s don't seem to enjoy a very good reputation.*

KB: Well, I'll tell you, I have been prejudiced for a long time about English silent films. When I was writing the David Lean book a few years ago, I discovered that Lean had been given his first job as a cutter by a little-remembered director named Maurice Elvey. And Lean admired Elvey, so I thought I'd better take a look. I had always thought Elvey was the worst of the worst; even after meeting him and talking with him, I thought this man was the worst director I had ever encountered. But to my surprise, I found that he had done a few impressive silent features. But, on the whole, unfortunately, a lot of the British output of the day was simply awful compared to the output of any other country I can think of. Really awful. But towards the middle of the 1920s, artists of high quality did appear, like Anthony Asquith and Alfred Hitchcock. Take a look at Asquith's *A Cottage on Dartmoor* [1928] sometime, it's quite remarkable. Anyway, we put the best gloss we could put on the British silent film.

We are very conscious that what we did in *Cinema Europe* is merely a "trailer" for the story of the silent film in Europe. If you knew the silent era as well as we did by the end of the project, you would be rather ashamed of the series. If you went back to the footage we had to leave out, or have since located, you could make a series of a dozen episodes and still only scratch the surface. For example, we now know that the Soviet film archives have lovingly preserved a number of wonderful pictures made during the Tsarist regime. Although most of them are without titles, which makes following the story lines rather difficult, the image quality is right off the camera negative; and it is uncanny to go back as if in a time machine to Moscow before the days of the motorcar. Another hour's episode could concentrate on the German *commercial* cinema. I've come to the conclusion that general audiences in Germany didn't like the "art" cinema at all. They didn't go to see *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920], but preferred the more commercial product. You could say the same thing about audiences everywhere! One of my favorite German films is *I Kiss Your Hand, Madame* [1928], starring Marlene Dietrich. I saw it too late to include it in the series. Dietrich has denied making any silent films, but actually she made seventeen appearances. She is so good in it, and the picture is so enchanting, it would be a delight to have the chance to show it today. There are so many pictures like that one wants to bring to the public's attention. People today deserve the chance to see silent films like this under the proper conditions. Really, their lives are changed by seeing them. For example, the director Alan Parker came to see *Napoleon* and was so impressed by the camera technique that he scrapped what he had already shot for the swimming pool scene in *Pink Floyd—The Wall* [1982] and used a swinging camera in Gance's style.

*How did you get Kenneth Branagh to do your narration?*

KB: It turns out that Branagh is a great film enthusiast. We heard him do a reading of *Samuel Pepy's Diary* and thought he had exactly the right quality of voice. When we met him he turned out to be an absolutely wonderful character.

### **Current Scholarship and Preservation**

*Any thoughts on the state of film scholarship today?*

KB: As soon as scholars discovered cinema as an "academic" subject, they imposed their own private language upon it. Perhaps because the motion picture is, in reality, a cheap entertainment, they have set out to make it more "respectable" with language borrowed from different areas of study, like psychoanalysis. It's heartbreaking. I have been approached by many students who have been so put off by this that they have left cinema studies. Why do we need to learn another language in order to study something that has its own universal language? Teaching is supposed to mean communication, not alienation. Academics were so busy with theory that they let the first and second generation of filmmakers die without getting any information from them. Had they got the facts, the theorizing might have been based upon a solid foundation. As it is, it has nothing to do with filmmaking. Filmmakers can't understand it—but perhaps that's the point. If we could understand, it would be revealed as gossamer.

*How do you feel about the current awareness—or lack of it—concerning film preservation and restoration?*

KB: A great deal of lip-service is paid to film preservation but very little solid support is given to those of us who practice it. All archives are under-funded and under-staffed. If Hollywood failed to make one \$200 million epic, an incredible number of films could be saved (if we had the labs to handle it). The number of people who are genuinely interested in this subject in America is not much larger than in England, and we think that's pathetic enough! There's little market for silent films, which is compounded over here by so few video distributors putting out silent films on video.

*How do you think future generations will regard the silent film?*

KB: There are some young people who are fascinated by the silent era. But none of them have ever had the chance to see an original print—to watch a nitrate copy being projected. They can never experience the glow it once had, thanks to all the silver in the stock which has since been taken out to save money. Kodak manufactures only one type of black-and-white stock, so we've become

accustomed to black, white, and a couple of shades of gray. Once old films are transferred to videotape, the subtle art of the cinematographer all but disappears. The lighting all looks the same. The definition and tonal range of a nitrate print is just a memory.

I feel like somebody who has been through a monastery in the Middle Ages and seen all the great paintings as they originally appeared, as they *should* be seen; but who now comes into today's galleries to find they've all been replaced by postcards. . . .

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Note: *It Happened Here* and *Winstanley* may be rented or purchased from Milestone Films, 275 West 96<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 28C, New York NY 10025. Phone: (800) 603-1104.



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