
 THE UNKNOWN



Cinema was never part of the entertainment industry but of the cosmetics industry, the mask industry, which is a subsidiary of the industry of lies.

Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Monde*,
 15 December 1994

Tod Browning's films and unforgettable freaks seem like fantastic operating vectors of comparison at the heart of Langlois's programming art (the Rue d'Ulm period in the late 1950s). *Mr Wu* is thus found alongside *The Man Who Laughs* (Paul Leni) and *Othello* (Buchowetzki). And Langlois sums up the team of monsters: 'An extraordinary comparison, justified on the mask, the grimace, and seductive ugliness¹'.

On the subject of *The Unknown*, we cannot say precisely what was the point of origin for the fetishism: a censored film, detested by American critics when it was released, considered lost, an eccentric film library object (the boxes long remained unidentified or impossible to find, labelled 'Unknown'), Lon Chaney's magnetic presence and his mythical dressing up, the first disturbing images of a Joan Crawford before her MGM transformation, or the circus milieu, Tod Browning's favourite tragic terrain for twisting the lines of the inconceivable and abnormality, of generally accepted ideas and the bizarre.

Henri Langlois wrote about *The Unknown*²:

What is going to save the school, what is going to be breeding ground for the geniuses who will soon appear, is the out-of-town theatre, the theatre of travelling companies that go from city to city, covering thousands of kilometres, from Chicago to New Orleans, Boston to San Francisco, this enormous mixing of companies, which have to be able to satisfy all needs, is the humus in which American cinema has thrust its roots; the greatest acting school that ever was. The family of actors in which the child climbs onstage and knows the trade at an age when in Europe one is barely beginning to study it. Young people from good families, having taken refuge in this Bohemia, gradually create a trade by themselves that no one would have taught them. It is to those companies that American cinema owes its youth.

¹ Brochure: '20 ans de Cinémathèque – 25 ans de cinéma', programming from 1 October 1956 to 31 March 1957.

² Henri Langlois, *Écrits de cinéma*, texts collected by Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ed. Flammarion / Cinémathèque française, 2014

The Unknown

United States, 1927 – 65 minutes

Direction: Tod Browning

Script: Waldemar Young

From a story by Tod Browning based from the novel « K » by Mary Roberts Rinehart

Production: MGM

Photography: Merritt B. Gerstad

Editing: Harry Reynolds, Errol Taggart

Set: Richard Day, Cedric Gibbons

Cast: Joan Crawford, Lon Chaney, Norman Kerry

To escape from the police, a disabled criminal takes refuge in a circus and becomes a knife-thrower, quickly falling under the charm of the director's daughter.

The first element would be a release print with French insert titles, acquired by Henri Langlois in 1949 and duplicated in 1959, in combination with a new print. Today, only the duplicate remains in the collections. Of the film's original footage (1,681 metres), the element preserved at La Cinémathèque is cut (1,360 metres), but without penalizing the narration. The film probably survived thanks to this European distribution element (camera B negative, intended for export), which Langlois gave to the George Eastman House in 1970. A print was also given to Warsaw's Filмотeca Narodowa.

In 2014, on the occasion of the Langlois centenary, a new 35mm duplicate was made at the Cinenova laboratories.

