
JEAN EPSTEIN

Rachmaninoff's Prelude is a British independent film entirely conceived, produced and acted by Castleton Knight. It was a real discovery of La Cinémathèque française when a nitrate print was found in a box labelled '*Boulogne Billancourt, ville moderne*'. The story is inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Premature Burial* and, obviously, Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C sharp minor*. *Rachmaninoff's Prelude* was projected for the first time at the London Film Society in 1927. In the winter of 1934, Iris Barry, the first programme planner of MoMA's Film Department, presented the film in the 'Experimental, Amateur Films and Animated Cartoons' series at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. The aim of this programming was to affirm that cinema was an art and that it should be shown and preserved in museums in the same way as painting and sculpture. This reminds us how much film could count in the art world and the first American archive at the time before falling into oblivion.

One of Jean Epstein's best-known films, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, marked the end of the first wave of the French avant-garde and of his independence vis-à-vis production companies. Symbolist working drawing and technical symphony, ties to the history of the arts are not lacking in this splendid 'misappropriation' of two texts by Edgar Allan Poe, like Claude Debussy's study. *The Fall of the House of Usher* exults a mastery of editing and rhythm, in which the effects of speed and movement play a role in the same way as the actors, like the surprise of orthochromatic¹ or of a high-speed camera. The characters seem to be both holding their breath and weightless; the natural reference points of perception are blurred, and fantasizing is omnipresent as in an Odilon Redon drawing. In his article 'L'âme au ralenti', printed in *Paris-Midi* in May 1928, Epstein wrote a phrase that became famous, or how slow motion can create purely poetic images: 'I believe it more and more. Someday the cinematographer will be the first to photograph the human angel'. If we are able to see Jean Epstein's films today it is certainly thanks to Henri Langlois who, by choosing and saving his films to constitute the Cinémathèque's collection, forged the expression of a taste. Let us also keep in mind the devotion of Marie Epstein who, as of 1954, assisted Langlois in his mission of safeguarding and preserving Epstein's filmography.

In an article in homage to Jean Epstein, Langlois wrote²:

In the history of French cinema, Usher is the counterpart of [Dreyer's] The Passion of Joan of Arc. Dating from the same year, they stirred up the same enthusiasm and the same criticisms. These last two expressions of the first avant-garde already arrived quite late, at a time when all the young were fighting for extreme simplicity. Thus, neither Joan of Arc nor Usher could find favour with them. They were overly wrought, overly deliberate. That is what explains why neither of the films was mentioned. On the other hand, the general public and the mass of critics adopted them unconditionally; they were truly not only the final expression of ten years of research but also their justification. They were both avant-garde works of extraordinary, almost baroque technical richness, by dint of being skilful, works that could not age, flawless, classics. The public has never been mistaken about this, and the reception given The Passion of Joan of Arc in art-house cinema and The Fall of the House of Usher at the reopening of Studio 28³ confirmed this. So they are today, so they will be tomorrow and were yesterday in the eyes of their admirers.

¹ Black and white photographic emulsion of complex sensitivity, this medium was used in the 1910s, notably by Louis Delluc.

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

³ Translator's note: a mythical cinema located in Montmartre and still in operation.

THE FILMS OF THE SHOWING « JEAN EPSTEIN »

Running time: 69 min.

Rachmaninof's Prelude

United Kingdom, 1927 – 7 minutes



Direction: Castleton Knight

Author of the original work: Edgar Allan Poe

Cast : Castleton Knight

A man falls asleep reading Edgar Allan Poe's *Premature Burial* and dreams that he is buried alive.

La Cinémathèque française has the only original tinted nitrate print, probably acquired by Henri Langlois. The present print was established from the duplicate using the Desmetcolor process in 2009 by the ANIM laboratory of the Cinemateca portuguesa.

The Fall of the House of Usher / La Chute de la maison Usher

France, 1928 – 62 minutes



Direction: Jean Epstein

Assistant director: Luis Buñuel

Author of the original work: Edgar Allan Poe

Production : Les Films Jean Epstein

Photography : George Lucas, Jean Lucas

Set: Pierre Kéfer

Cast: Marguerite Gance, Jean Debucourt, Charles Lamy

Madeline Usher is mysteriously wasting away. Her panic-stricken husband, Roderick, sends a message to an old friend, asking him to come to his aid. 'Based on motifs by Poe', specify the credits.

The film was restored in 1997 by the Cinémathèque Royale of Belgium, in collaboration with the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna from an original black and white negative with insert titles in French, preserved by La Cinémathèque française, and a tinted black and white positive nitrate print from the Nederlands Filmmuseum.

The restoration of the colours was on the basis of a tinted black and white positive nitrate print from the Fernando Pereda Collection of the Archivo Nacional de la Imagen – Sodre (Montevideo).

In 2013, the film was digitized and set to music by Gabriel Thibaudeau from his score, performed by the Octuor de France. The work was entrusted to the Digimage laboratories for the digitization and calibration and to L'immagine Ritrovata for the synchronization.

