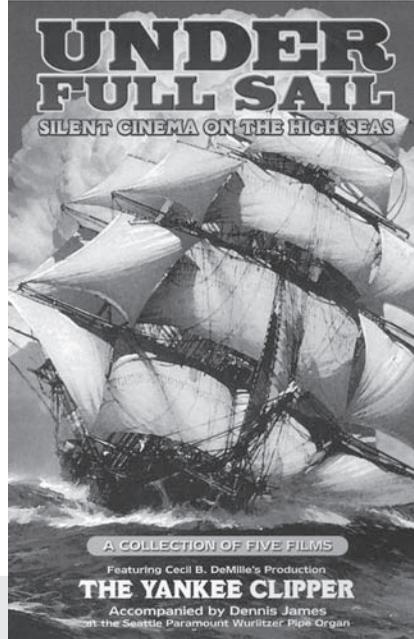


the groundwork that would eventually make him a huge star, one of the most recognized figures in the world, and one of the most important filmmakers in the first half century of movies. Thanks to the committed team of the Chaplin Keystone Project, we now can learn much more about how Chaplin's first year in the movies set him on that trajectory.

NOTES

1. Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).
2. Bengston is the author of a wonderful book of cinematic archeology on the locations where many of Chaplin's movies were shot. John Bengston, *Silent Traces: Discovering Early Hollywood through the Films of Charlie Chaplin* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Santa Monica Press, 2006).
3. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 152.
4. David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and His Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 98.



*Under Full Sail: Silent
Cinema on the High Seas*

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY FLICKER ALLEY, 2009

Rielle Navitski

The Flicker Alley DVD *Under Full Sail: Silent Cinema on the High Seas* is an eclectic assemblage of cinematic representations of “tall ships” dating from the 1920s and early 1930s. The DVD contains both documentary and fictional content, including a Fox Movietone short amid silent pieces with original accompaniments by Dennis James and Eric Beheim. Drawing on material from multiple prints found in the collections of Blackhawk Films, Lobster Films, Kevin Brownlow, and John E. Stone, author of the DVD booklet, the DVD has as its centerpiece a restored version of the 1927 DeMille production *The Yankee Clipper*.¹

The Yankee Clipper was planned as one of DeMille Productions' two annual specials, cost nearly a half a million dollars, and was to be directed by DeMille himself but was ultimately entrusted to Rupert Julian.² As the film was a box-office failure on its 1927 release, it might be argued that Flicker Alley has resurrected a curiosity rather than a masterpiece of silent

cinema by either historical or contemporary standards.³ The short films portraying the voyages of clipper ships still operational at the time of production are often more fascinating than the feature, which repurposed a ship stranded in frigid Alaskan waters.⁴ *Under Full Sail*'s packaging promises viewers the "grandeur and allure of windjammers sailing open waters," and the accompanying booklet seems to be primarily targeted to sailing enthusiasts and others susceptible to the romance of the high seas, as suggested by the choice of Stone, a film collector employed as a navy engineer, to write the film annotations. The information provided about the films' production history and the technologies and practices of sailing they document or re-create is primarily factual. Stone's notes do not situate the film among other productions of the late 1920s, but they do speculate about the keen interest in representations of clipper ships at that historical moment, a phenomenon pertinent to the rerelease of *The Yankee Clipper*. Reissues of silent films on DVD use new technologies to capitalize on consumer nostalgia; in an analogous fashion, the films on *Under Full Sail* portray a mostly obsolete mode of transportation through the then-novel technology of cinema.

The brand of nostalgic rhetoric that frames the DVD release is already embedded within several of the films. The 1928 Fox short *Ship Ahoy*, which depicts the daily routine of a vessel shipping lumber along the Atlantic coast, opens with an intertitle stating, "Almost vanished from the matter-of-fact world of today are the picturesque sailing vessels that one time bore the commerce and the romance of the high seas." *The Yankee Clipper* articulates a similar sentiment in explicitly nationalistic terms: "Today American ships are reappearing in the world's ports, as our Nation, humiliated by her lost prestige upon the seas, strives to regain the glory she so gallantly won in the Nineteenth Century."

The Yankee Clipper returns to this historical moment to depict a sailboat race between the eponymous American vessel and the British ship *The Lord of the Isles* for control of the Chinese tea trade. Manifesting a longing for a mercantile age in which international trade meant adventure, *The Yankee Clipper* idealizes an economic system in which indi-

vidual achievement is supposedly paramount, in contrast to the assembly-line commodity capitalism of the era in which the film was made and of which it was arguably a product. (It should be noted that DeMille Productions was a peripheral, short-lived player among Hollywood studios of the period, struggling to attain vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition.⁵)

Paralleling the race between the British and American ships, the film (somewhat predictably) elaborates a romantic competition between *The Yankee Clipper*'s captain, Hal Winslow (William Boyd), and the deceptive and cowardly Paul de Vigny (John Miljan), who is engaged to Lady Jocelyn (Elinor Fair), daughter of the captain of *The Lord of the Isles*. The men's rivalry is established in early scenes set in the port city of Foo Chow. Winslow meets and immediately admires Jocelyn; shortly after, he rescues her from a mob of aggressive beggars, while Paul hides in a nearby doorway. Just before the two boats embark, Winslow discovers that Paul has been unfaithful to Jocelyn but keeps silent. When the engaged couple visits the boat, Winslow abruptly sets sail without allowing them to return to shore, seeking to thwart their marriage. The European Paul is portrayed as effeminate and irremediably self-interested: in an intertitle, he tells his Chinese lover Wing Toy that he is interested only in his fiancée's money, and he later steals some of the ship's precious water reserves after a storm. Jocelyn initially considers Winslow a "brute" for his brusque ways, but ultimately rugged American masculinity prevails. Paul's death at the hands of angry crewmen who have discovered his theft provides for the possibility of a romantic reconciliation between the two competing countries. Although *The Yankee Clipper* triumphs over *The Lord of the Isles* by a narrow margin, it is implied that Americans possess both the nautical skill and the moral qualities necessary to control imperial trade.

The Yankee Clipper combines a number of historical events, including an actual clipper ship race from Foo Chow to Boston and a mutiny that occurred on the *Challenge* during another race, into a single plot, a choice with marked ideological effects.⁶ The viewer is assumed to sympathize with Captain Winslow, who privileges a US victory in the race

over the well-being of his sailors. When the crew demands that Winslow concede defeat and turn the boat toward shore to seek water, they are portrayed as selfish and, in one case, even lecherous. “Iron Head Joe,” who seems to be in partial blackface and is described in an intertitle as “a mongrel whelp of the Seven Seas,” takes advantage of the chaos to try to rape Jocelyn in a sequence reminiscent of the attempted assault on Little Sister in *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Yet here the roles are reversed, and the sailor is the one who suffers a great fall, plunging from the rigging to his death in the sea. Given the conservatism of the film’s style and politics, it is difficult not to unfavorably compare this scene with the triumphant mutiny sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (*Броненосецы Потемкин*; 1925).

Despite its conventionality in terms of composition and montage, *The Yankee Clipper* contains engaging sequences of maritime action—the scene in which a typhoon ravages the vessel, dramatized using a model ship awash in waves, is gripping. The high quality of the images, sepia-tinted throughout, with night scenes tinted in blue, enhances the viewing experience. *The Yankee Clipper* takes advantage of the unique visual opportunities provided by shooting aboard ship: overhead shots from the rigging, the bobbing of the camera on an unsteady surface, the striking verticality of the masts as the camera tilts to follow actors scaling them. Such techniques recur frequently in the shorts, which more freely explore poetic and quotidian images of life at sea without placing them in the service of a narrative.

Filmed for Fox’s Magic Carpet of Movietone series, *The Square Rigger* (1932) showcases early sound technologies, although its sound track is mostly limited to a synchronized score, supplemented with the crew’s rendition of “Anchors Aweigh” in Polish. The least engaging of the shorts was the sixteen-minute *Around the Horn in a Square Rigger* (1933). With the poorest image quality among the films, it failed to add variety to the images of nautical life provided by *The Square Rigger* and *Ship Ahoy*. In contrast, for this reviewer, the most revelatory part of *Under Full Sail* is an excerpt from the 1922 film *Down to the Sea in Ships*, which documents the voyages of New Bedford

whaling ships. Although a whale hunt may be a disconcerting subject for twenty-first-century viewers, the rapid traveling shots capturing the chase are riveting. The real-life suspense inherent in the endeavor is dramatized by a moment in which a small whaling boat capsizes; a menacing shot of a shark is intercut with images of the struggling sailors, an apparent sleight of hand with the direct recording of events comparable to that used in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, released the same year.

Though *Under Full Sail* seems to have been marketed to lovers of all things maritime, it also has relevance for scholars who wish to broaden their consideration of early documentary and ethnographic film as well as to historians interested in issues of American expansionism and masculinity in silent film.

NOTES

1. John E. Stone, DVD booklet to *Under Full Sail: Silent Cinema on the High Seas* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Flicker Alley, 2009), 15.
2. As Stone points out, at the time of *The Yankee Clipper*’s filming, Julian had recently directed Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Stone, DVD booklet, 7.
3. The film cost \$436,748 and had taken in \$288,882 by July 9, 1927. Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 366.
4. Stone, DVD booklet, 4, 6.
5. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 205–7, 234.
6. Stone, DVD booklet, 5–6.

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