

## Nitrate Did Wait. And It Looks Fabulous

Sabina Negri<sup>1</sup>

*The Nitrate Picture Show* at the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY; May 1-3 2015)

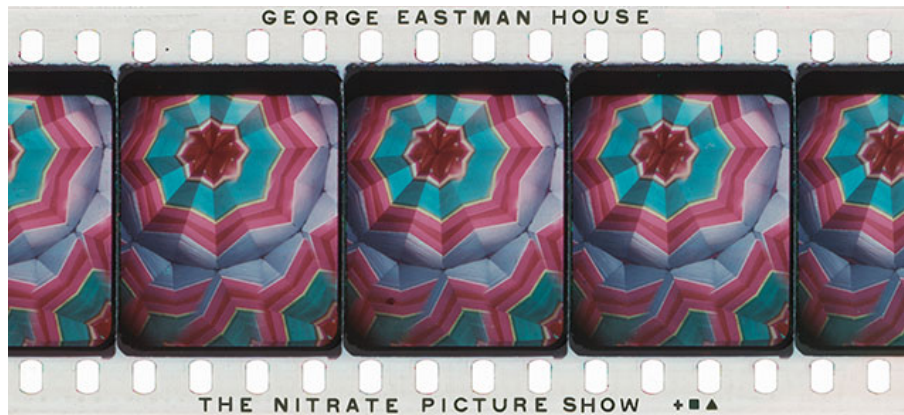


Image 1: The Nitrate Picture Show logo. © George Eastman House

Velvety. Tangible. Bold. Brilliant. Electric. Stunning. Pearly. Eerie. Metallic. Dense. Sparkling. Magical. These are some of the terms that the George Eastman House staff use to describe the legendary “nitrate look” in *My Nitrate Memories*, the blog where each of them tells the story of their first nitrate experience. As much as some of these adjectives might sound excessive, or meaningful only for those who have a close familiarity with archival prints and the nuances of their looks, they are not too distant from the experience reported by the audience during *The Nitrate Picture Show*. Nitrate film does look different from safety film stocks and digital transfers; and it looks stunning.

But what is nitrate film, and why is it so special? Cellulose nitrate is the material that was used for manufacturing film stock until the early 1950s, when acetate-based film stocks became the standard. Nitrate film production was discontinued because of its high flammability; nitrate fires were frequent both in movie theaters and in film vaults, causing the death of hundreds of people, as well as the loss of a substantial part of our film heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Chicago, Department of Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago 60637, United States.

From an archival perspective, safety is not the only issue to consider when dealing with nitrate: as film archivists know well, the chemical instability of the material condemns it to a steady process of decay, and, eventually, to its complete decomposition. This frightening threat posed to the world's film heritage led film archivists worldwide to advocate for the preservation of their endangered materials. Since the 1960s, nitrate films have been duplicated onto safety stock to ensure their survival, and “Nitrate Won't Wait!” became the rallying cry for the archival movement (Slide 1992).



Image 2: Clipping from the Turconi collection, showing the effects of nitrate decomposition on the image. © George Eastman House

In more recent years, however, the looming threat of a “nitrate Armageddon” has diminished as archivists realized that, if stored properly, nitrate film could last for decades without showing signs of decomposition. In addition to this, a sort of magical aura started surrounding those materials that were previously seen as the cross that film archives had to bear. Not only nitrate proved more resistant than it was thought; apparently, it also looked immensely better than any other film stocks. The so-called “nitrate look” became a legend among those film enthusiasts who saw nitrate as the Holy Grail of their cinephilia.

As nitrate screenings are banned mostly everywhere, the

forbidden fruit seemed to be doomed to remain unattainable for everyone, except those lucky few who work in film archives or live close to one of the very few venues equipped for nitrate projection. With *The Nitrate Picture Show*, the George Eastman House created a bridge between these nostalgic cinephiles and the object of their desire. Over the course of three days, nitrate prints of nine features and two short films were screened in the Dryden theater. The titles in the program were kept secret until the first day of the festival: as curator Paolo Cherchi Usai explained in his introduction, this strategy was not a mere publicity stunt. It was consistent with the nature of the festival, and it was a way to make it explicit: *The Nitrate Picture Show* is the celebration of a certain kind of cinephilia, that prizes the importance of film as a material artifact as well as a work of art, and that values the communal experience of sitting in a movie theater and looking at a screen where the images projected are the same that were seen by the audience at the time the films first came out – in the vast majority of cases, the prints projected during the *Nitrate Picture Show* were struck at the time of the film's first release, sometimes directly from the camera negative. It was the closest possible experience to that of audiences seeing the films during their first run.

The choice not to disclose the titles in advance, as well as the very decision to organize a festival like *The Nitrate Picture show*, shows the courage and the determination of the organizers, their belief that their mission matters and that, therefore, the audience would understand the reasons behind their decision. It was a risky choice, but it proved to be the right one. The theater was crowded for every screening, the public was very diverse, and everyone was completely satisfied.

But, of course, the biggest risk was related to the famous “nitrate look” that drew cinephiles from all over the world to the George Eastman House. Does it really exist, or is it just one of the many myths surrounding this material? Does nitrate film really look that different? The titles chosen for the festival were the perfect testing ground for the validity of this general belief: the opening film was *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, U.S. 1942), a movie that nearly everyone in the audience had already seen several times in different formats. The risk of a disappointment dissipated immediately after the curtains opened. The print projected was actually stunning: the black and white had a density that I had never seen before, and the amount of detail was incredible.

The “nitrate look” is particularly impressive in black-and-white prints because of the amount of silver grains in the emulsion, which was much higher than in more recent prints. *Casablanca* is a perfect example of this: the blacks had a depth that would be impossible to reproduce

with today's materials. The experience was similar with the other black-and-white prints: *Les Maudits* (René Clement, France 1946), a beautifully shot, claustrophobic thriller set in a U-Boat, and especially *The Fallen Idol* (Carol Reed, U.K. 1948), in which the imaginative use of depth of field was greatly enhanced by the sharpness that even the smaller details in the background had. *Portrait of Jennie* (William Dieterle, U.S. 1948) was a little gem, and was projected the way it is supposed to be shown, with the last reel in color and widescreen. The only slight disappointment was the first version of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (U.K. 1934), a reissue print from 1943; although the catalog does not specify the source from which this print was struck, a greater generational distance from the camera negative might be the reason why this film did not look as amazing as the others.

The color screenings were not less impressive. *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, U.K.1948) affected me the same as *Casablanca*; I had seen the film before, but I had not *really* seen it. The colors were violently intense, and their contrast with the repression magnificently conveyed by Deborah Kerr's restrained performance was almost physically painful. Same thing with my personal favorite, *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, U.S. 1949); the colors of this nitrate print were delightfully lustful, punctuating the sadomasochistic relationship between the protagonists with such an accuracy that not even the rich restoration presented at the *Cinema Ritrovato* festival in 2012 was able to reproduce. And Gene Tierney never looked as gorgeous and wicked as in the unconventional Technicolor noir *Leave Her To Heaven* (John M. Stahl, U.S. 1945).



Image 3: Gene Tierney in *Leave Her to Heaven* | © George Eastman House

Not all the prints were obviously beautiful: *Nothing Sacred*



(William A. Wellman, U.S. 1937), the oldest print in the program (with the exception of the two, gorgeous, original Gasparcolor shorts screened on the first night), showed some issues with matching the brightness of consecutive shots. But its beauty stands in its very imperfection, which shows how the technological path of cinema was a succession of experiments, errors, evolutions and involutions, jumps forward, pauses and steps back. Digital restoration is able to mask most of the imperfections of the original prints, but, in doing so, it flattens some of the details that reveal the discontinuities in the history of film technology. Vintage prints like this stand as testimonies of this history, and it is also for this reason that they are so precious.

The famous “nitrate look”, therefore, is more than a legend. Its beauty might not derive by the nitrate film base itself, but rather from a combination of factors such as the greater amount of silver grains in the emulsion (in the case of black and white); the difficulty to reproduce faithfully the look of Technicolor with more recent color systems; the prints' generational proximity to the camera negative, that minimizes the loss of density and the increase in contrast brought on by every printing step. Whatever the reason, *The Nitrate Picture Show* proved that the format in which a film is shown and experienced does matter, and that even a non-specialized audience is able to appreciate the difference.

This, I believe, is one of the main goals of the educational mission that should be at the core of a film archive's activity. In the context of this festival, this was pursued not only through the screening of precious and rare prints, but also through scholarly talks, a roundtable on the future of film projection, and even a workshop on how to manufacture nitrate film base. These corollary activities were meant to give the audience some historical and technological context to the films they were going to see. Roger Smither, David Bordwell, and Kevin Brownlow discussed their own approaches to film, providing the audience with some useful coordinates for navigating the historical and technological complexity that the festival screenings displayed. In the roundtable, film curators from the United States, Europe, and Australia exchanged views on the future of film as a viable exhibition format, challenging the assumption that an all-digital fruition landscape is unavoidable.

In Rochester, nitrate was not only projected; it was handled, talked about, thought about, celebrated as an old friend rather than a relic. *The Nitrate Picture Show* proved that, even in the age of digital cinema and ubiquitous tiny screens, film is still very much alive and able to teach us something new about the ever-changing practices that constitute the so-called “cinema experience”. This is not to say that nitrate film can still play a major role in the movie-going practices of

most spectators; that would be naïf, inaccurate and fetishistically nostalgic. But events like this demonstrate that each material form that cinema assumed in the course of its history can maintain its own identity even in our contemporary multi-medial landscape. From this perspective, nitrate film can exist alongside digital moving images without necessarily being completely supplanted by them; and it is in this material diversity that we can find the very essence of that manifold experience called “cinema”.

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