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Sight & Sound



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LOVE, DEATH AND RELIGION IN THE FILMS OF THE DEEP SOUTH

SOUTHERN GOTHIC

PLUS

- VIGGO MORTENSEN ON 'JAUJA' ● RADICAL BRITISH CINEMA OF THE 70S ● ROY ANDERSSON
- ROBERT SIODMAK ● CAROL MORLEY'S 'THE FALLING' ● 'FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD'

STOPPING THE ROT

A recent week-long film preservation school in Mumbai suggests the tide is turning in the battle to protect India's film classics



By Mark Cousins

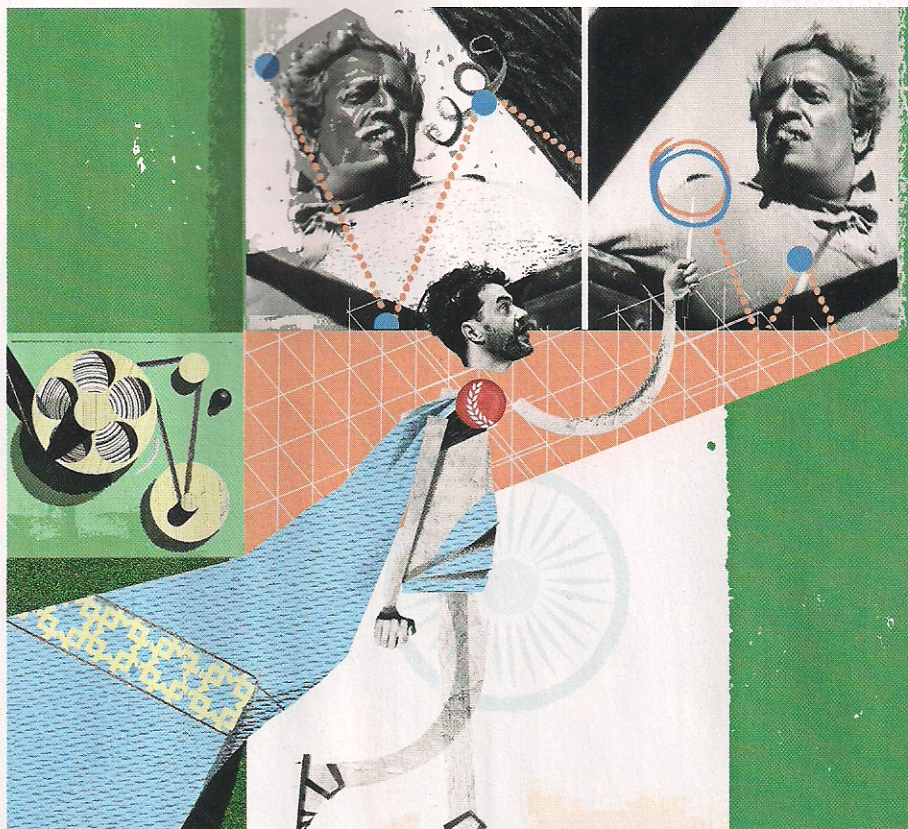
Islamic State's bulldozing of Nimrud in Iraq made headlines around the world. The Reformation turned European churches into rubble.

Alexander sacked Persepolis. Europe's 20th-century wars destroyed thousands of works of art.

Great things are always disappearing, through rage or neglect. The present order is the disorder of the future. But wilful iconoclasm and indifference are differences of degree, not kind. The result is the same: fading, blurring, erosion, burial.

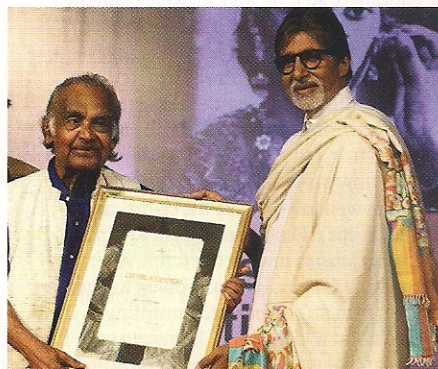
The films of India are the movie world's greatest loss. The country has made more films than any other – it has so many regional and linguistic film cultures that it is better to think of it as a cinema continent – yet its movies are woefully underseen by Western movie buffs, who think it's either Bollywood or Satyajit Ray. This is in part because of our post-colonial inattention or, worse, our racism by omission, but it's also because many of the great films have fallen into disrepair in a culture that has traditionally treated film as a business rather than an artform. Producers' and copyright holders' neglect, climatic conditions, nitrate film fires and the sale of black-and-white film for its silver content and colour film for its use in dyes, have all taken their toll. As a result, when the world's leading film festivals have tried to do full retrospectives of, for example, Mrinal Sen – the political, modernist filmmaker who has won scores of awards – they have largely been unable to do so, as the films were in no fit shape. I wanted to put more Guru Dutt films (my favourite Indian director, who I've sometimes compared to Orson Welles) in *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, but the materials were not there. Many of Bengali director Tapan Sinha's masterpieces, such as *Nirjan Saikate*, are not available in good prints. The original camera negatives of the films of key figures such as P.C. Barua, Debaki Bose, Sohrab Modi, Bimal Roy, Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor, V. Shantaram and Ritwik Ghatak are our era's Nimrud, our Persepolis. They are as important to Indian cinema as, say, Frank Capra, William Wyler or Fred Zinnemann are to American film. The decay, or loss, of their negatives should outrage *Sight & Sound* readers.

Which is why what happened in Mumbai in late February matters so much. Filmmaker and historian Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, who recently founded Film Heritage Foundation, invite the world's expert archivists for a week-long school on film preservation and restoration. Some 126 students applied – from India, Sri Lanka and Nepal – and 52 were selected. The key preservation people from the Cineteca di Bologna, the Film Foundation, Paramount Pictures, L'Immagine Ritrovata (the great laboratory in Bologna that specialises in film preservation), the World Cinema Project, London's Imperial War Museum, the BFI, the Criterion Collection and



If restoration and preservation skills can be taught and spread in India, then a massive problem can be met by a massive solution

the International Federation of Film Archives presented a series of lectures. Subjects included preservation workflow (identification, repair, scanning, restoration, colour correction, sound restoration and film mastering), film technology, digital and the ethics of digitisation, and the challenges of preserving in India (heat, etc.). And there were case studies of the restorations of *A Fistful of Dollars*, the Chaplin shorts, *The Colour of Pomegranates*, the Hitchcock films, *Pather Panchali*, Ghatak's Bengali film *A River Called Titas*, *Badlands*, *The Leopard* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. The events took place at the Films Division of



Amitabh Bachchan (right) with P.K. Nair

India, India's government film body, established in 1948, and at the Art Deco Liberty cinema, billed at its inception as "the showcase of the nation".

Dungarpur, through the foundation, is working towards stemming the loss of some of the world's film heritage, and teaching skills that could then be replicated, to prevent further losses. India has a huge workforce, of course, many of whom are highly computer savvy – Bangalore, for example, is sometimes called the country's Silicon Valley. If film restoration and preservation skills can be taught and spread, then a massive problem can be met by a massive solution.

I wasn't at the Mumbai event, but it seems to have been a landmark. The Criterion Collection's Lee Kline wrote that it is changing film history. The Cineteca di Bologna's Gian Luca Farinelli (whom I always think of as the pope of film restoration) called it extraordinary.

And then there's the photograph on this page. Arguably the world's most famous man, the Hindi megastar of nearly 200 films, Amitabh Bachchan, is presenting a lifetime achievement award to one of the great men in film history, P.K. Nair, the founder of the National Film Archive of India. The story of how, for decades, Nair heroically collected Indian film prints and negatives is told in Dungarpur's documentary *Celluloid Man*, an epic threnody of cinephilia and loss. For those who care, this is a very moving image. It's like seeing Humphrey Bogart giving a prize to keeper of the flame of the Cinémathèque Française, Henri Langlois. Stardom on the right, scholarship on the left. The visual, emotional embodiment of Indian film's success on the right, its *memento mori* on the left. It's like Bachchan is saying, "Thank you for keeping me alive." ☺