



# Interview with David Robinson

## *Entrevista com David Robinson*



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**Abstract:** David Robinson (1930) is an inescapable character in the historiography of cinema, especially silent cinema. Besides being film critic and author of a vast bibliography – which includes books such as *Hollywood in the Twenties* (1968), *The History of World Cinema* (1973), and the official biography of Charlie Chaplin, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (originally published in 1985) – Robinson also plays an active role in *Giornate del Cinema Muto* (or *Pordenone Silent Film Festival*), an annual event that takes place in October in the small town of Pordenone, in northern Italy. Throughout the interview, which took place in the last *Giornate*, Robinson discusses extensively about the filmic object, from the materiality of the film to the historical senses linked to the works, highlighting the fundamental importance of archival research, cataloging, preservation, restoration and diffusion of the audiovisual work produced during the vogue of silent cinema.

**Keywords:** silent cinema; cinema and history; cinema's history.

**Resumo:** David Robinson (1930) é personagem incontornável na historiografia do cinema, em especial do cinema silencioso. Além de crítico e autor de uma vasta bibliografia – que inclui obras como *Hollywood in the Twenties* (1968), *The History of World Cinema* (1973) e a biografia oficial de Charlie Chaplin, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (publicada originalmente em 1985) –, Robinson também desempenha papel ativo na *Giornate del Cinema Muto* (ou *Jornada do Cinema Silencioso de Pordenone*), um evento anual que ocorre em outubro, na cidadezinha de Pordenone, ao norte da Itália. Ao longo da entrevista, que se deu na última *Giornate*, Robinson discorre extensivamente sobre o objeto fílmico, desde a materialidade da película aos sentidos históricos atrelados às obras, destacando a fundamental importância da pesquisa arquivística, catalogação, preservação, restauração e difusão da obra audiovisual produzida durante a voga do cinema silencioso.

**Palavras-chave:** cinema silencioso; cinema e história; história do cinema.

## Introduction

David Robinson (1930) is an inescapable character in the historiography of cinema, especially silent cinema: film critic (having collaborated on newspapers such as *The Financial Times* and *The Times*), as well as author of a vast bibliography (which includes books such as *Hollywood in the Twenties*, from 1968, *The History of World Cinema*, from 1973, and the official biography of Charlie Chaplin, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*, originally published in 1985 and revised in 1992 and 2001). Robinson also plays an active part in the *Pordenone Silent Film Festival*, an annual event that takes place in October in the small town of Pordenone, in northern Italy.

Created in 1982 joining the efforts of “Cineteca del Friuli” (situated in Gemona) and “Cinemazero” (from Pordenone), the *Giornate* is the main international event dedicated to the preservation, diffusion, and reflection upon silent cinema. The event is promoted by the cultural non-profit association of the same name, whose president is Livio Jacob. David Robinson directed the Festival between 1997 and 2015, when he passed the baton to Jay Weissberg. He now occupies the position of director emeritus, what allows him to attend projections without the constant demands inherent to the director’s role, as well as permits him to keep long conversations with the participants of the event.

The following pages are the result of one of these conversations. In them, Robinson discusses extensively about the film object: from the materiality of the film (and the fundamental importance of archival research, cataloging, preservation, restoration, and diffusion) to the historical meanings linked to moving pictures. To do so, he reflects upon the assertive role of Pordenone in what regards the incentive to restoration (in the absence of the association’s empirical funds aiming this target); and also ponders about what titles should be restored and what aspects should be taken into account while doing the job.

The multiplicity of copies of the same film found in collections around the world causes him to debate the concept of “original filmwork”. What version to restore and present to the public, considering the interventions of censorship (or of the author himself), over the years? The subject brings him to Griffith, one of the most controversial artists of the period, whose ambiguities the Brazilian scholar Ismail Xavier so well underlined in a volume dedicated to the director: at the same time a brilliant artist and an original orchestrator of the set (actors, cameras, scenarios, plot), and a religious and reactionary man. A contradiction that the essayist defines as belonging to the relation between History and Art:

As we traverse it [the trail left by the filmmaker], it is difficult to separate the artist from the preacher; the film that innovates from the Protestant sermon; the admirable performance from the message whose prejudices sometimes pass from the account, even considering the context in which they are inserted. (XAVIER, 1984, p.11)

Griffith had a preeminent presence at the *Giornate*, which from 1997 to 2008 held the “Griffith Project”, which was intended to show his full production. *The Birth of a Nation* was shown in 1997. When asked to recall the audience’s reaction to the blatant racism of the film (reinforced by the musical accompaniment that Breil composed in 1915, played in its full in Pordenone), Robinson recalls above all the audiences thrill towards the film’s technical exuberance<sup>2</sup>. Two decades of arduous social achievements would still be necessary for the film to be looked at in perspective; and with it, the society that generated it.

For reasons such as this, David Robinson demands the (re)writing of the History. Therefore, the importance he attaches to the formation of new audiences; and in what Pordenone is concerned, the importance he gives to the *Collegium*: A group of young researchers chosen every year through the analysis of a letter of interest sent to the association. The following year, the delivery of an essay about a film (or a group of films) exhibited at the Festival guarantees them the return, and the chance to win a prize sponsored by a local bank. The discussion about the importance of injecting new blood into the *Giornate* clears the way for the emergence of the David Robinson that six decades ago was dragged by a friend to the home of Kevin Brownlow (another boy then), and there discovered a reel of the mythical *Napoleon* (1927), by Abel Gance, a film then considered lost.

In the years to come, *Napoleon* would be pieced together and reassembled by Brownlow, the author in 1968 of the book that would make silent cinema reborn from the ashes, *The Parade’s gone by*; another constant presence at the event. Exhibited in a London theater in the 1980s by a full orchestra conducted by Carl Davis (who during the *Giornate* of 2017 conducted the young orchestra of Pordenone during the performance of his musical score of *The Crowd*, 1928, composed at the same time), the show recuperated the splendor of those cinematographic exhibitions occurred 50 years before. From the height of his nearly 90 years old, David

<sup>2</sup>It is no coincidence that Griffith’s reputation for *The Birth of a Nation* preceded the screening of the film in a number of countries; hence the racial question put there had not been brought up. In Brazil, the film was only seen by a small group of journalists eleven years after its filming. Imported by the agency of United Artists located Rio de Janeiro, it was returned to the USA, once its subject was considered “too American”, and its technique was described as “too backward” for the time, what would make it a box-office failure (RIBAS, 1949, 44).

Robinson reviews these and other stories, throwing at his history a gaze that is filled both with nostalgia and pragmatism; once he demonstrates a clear perception that the affective encounter with the silent cinema is only made possible by effective actions aiming its guard, restoration, and diffusion.

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THE JAZZ Singer. Alan Crosland, EUA, 1927.

# Interview with David Robinson<sup>3</sup>

By Danielle Crepaldi Carvalho<sup>4</sup>

**Danielle:** What is the role played by the “Pordenone Silent Film Festival” in the restoration field? Do you choose what to be restored? Do the pictures chosen to be shown enable their restoration (or on the contrary, the programs are organized after the restoration of a certain picture is done?).

**David Robinson:** It’s usually too late to start restoring a picture while the program is being organized. But of course, if we know that something needs to be restored, we obviously encourage the archive to do so. And this reversely. If an archive makes a restoration we ask them: Can we do the first show of it? The archives are usually rather pleased about this because restoring a film costs an awful lot of money, and if they get a prestigious show of it, it helps very much to justify the expenses.

**Danielle:** So even if the money doesn’t come from the Festival, its influence helps to push things?

**David Robinson:** I don’t think that our budget would enable us to support restorations, except that, of course, we are very much allied to the “Cineteca de Fiuli”, which is involved in the restoration field as well.

**Danielle:** How do you choose what to be restored? We have the historical point of view that everything is important to be kept, but at the same time, there is a huge amount of pictures that, in the field of the so-called “silent cinema”, covers three decades...

**David Robinson:** Well, we think about two things: lost films, rare films or new prints that turn up are restored; but films that are already in circulation are also restored (when there is more material about it and it’s time to restore it again). Some films, for example, *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), are frequently being restored.

**Danielle:** Indeed I was about to ask you for some examples and I was thinking exactly of *Metropolis*, which have already had many “final versions”. What leads me to another parallel matter: How do we state that we are dealing with a “final version” of a picture? Considering that *Metropolis* – to keep our example – was filmed with different cameras and several different *montages* gathered these different results? Is this a relevant matter to you while deciding what to program in Pordenone?

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<sup>3</sup>Interview held on October 6, 2017, during the XXXVII Pordenone Silent Film Festival.

<sup>4</sup>Some questions that comprise this interview were thought out during conversations with our colleague Débora Butruce – who is currently developing a doctorate’s dissertation in the area of Restauration – to whom I am very grateful.

**David Robinson:** Usually we present the last version of the pictures, which means, the most complete version of it. I mean, personally, I've sort of gotten tired of seeing restorations of *Metropolis*. But that is very personal. Already for me, it was long enough (laughs). In my opinion, there's a danger in restoring a version when what is being restored is not the director's final cut. This happens very much with the great Griffith films, once he kept cutting them out. By the way, it was a terrible thing either for musicians who composed the score for his pictures and had to keep cutting the scores. The director's cut is the director's cut. We don't want to restore a film that is not the director's ultimate cut, which he felt he could improve. It's not a common problem but it was a problem with Griffith. So once or twice we found ourselves showing these films, and there'd be a sudden blackout, and the score continued... But there is a thought amongst some people that once we find these scores complete, we should add their correspondent moving images back to the movie. This doesn't seem to me like restoration.



Image 1: David Robinson.

Source: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (2017). © Valerio Greco

**Danielle:** One of this great Griffith pictures shown in Pordenone was *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). [From 1997 to 2008 Pordenone held the “Griffith Project”, which intended to show his full production. *The Birth of a Nation* was shown in 1997]. Did you play the Breil's version of the music?

**David Robinson:** Yes, the complete one, before Griffith started cutting the picture for streaming.

**Danielle:** Did he cut the picture after 1915?

**David Robinson:** When it was on show already.

**Danielle:** Were his cuts due to censorship?

**David Robinson:** He was always improving it.

**Danielle:** I'm asking that because according to the extensive study done by Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner, the picture (mainly the picture's score) caused a riot. There was something regarding how the music composed for the African-American characters was supposed to underline the badness and wildness the picture intended to convey to them. Do you remember what the public's reaction in Pordenone was when the picture was presented?

**David Robinson:** Well, it's interesting how the feeling about this picture has developed. For many years it was just a great piece of film art and nobody would look too hard about its political implications. I remember far back in 1956. I was involved in bringing the great exhibition for 60 years of films, held by Henri Langlois in Paris. For various political reasons, they put this young guy (I was around 25) to be the sort of intermediate between the "British Film Institute" and the "Cinémathèque Française". We were going into public places and asking people: What ancient film would you like to see the most? And 90% knew the title: *Birth of a Nation*. It was a legendary great film, and nobody was bothered about the political implications of it. When we showed it in Pordenone, back in 1997, there was also no protest. It was purely accepted. On the other hand, we closed the Festival that year with *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), and someone told me "I'll never come to this Festival again". At that time, 20 years ago, the political implications hadn't really hit people. People now are taking this matter more seriously. But it's interesting that the big objection hadn't developed for – let me think – fifty years.

**Danielle:** This maybe has to do with the changing in the Festival's audiences, as well as with the social achievements of the African-American people in the last decades, and therefore the criminalization of racial prejudice.

**David Robinson:** It really would be important to put the dates together and see when things happened. One of the most popular weekly shows on the BBC television was "The Black and White Minstrel Show" [a 45-minute show created by George Mitchell and broadcasted in the United Kingdom from 1958 to 1978].

**Danielle:** In fact, when watched nowadays, *The Birth of a Nation* is at the same time amazing and disturbing. This has a lot to do with the picture's genre,



the good *versus* bad dichotomy which structures the Melodrama. This picture is an exemplary melodrama, that's why it's so disturbing. The plot is built in a way that leads the African-American characters (and therefore all African-Americans) to degradation. The film reviews and tries to justify a prejudicial History that was written centuries before and by doing so, helps it to remain.

**David Robinson:** Something related to the feeling towards it: I took a Film History class in the "National Film [and Television] School" (UK). I was almost lynched for showing *The Birth of a Nation*. The daughter of a known Polish composer came to my defense. We had another section the next week and the discussion was: times changed.

**Danielle:** At the same time I think this picture shouldn't be transformed into a taboo. It has to be shown. The question is: How is it to be shown in a way we underline that it is a part of our Film History, for that it has to be preserved, and showing it doesn't mean endorsing the history it builds.

**David Robinson:** From what I know it is never screened anywhere anymore.

**Danielle:** Changing subjects. What is the role played by Pordenone regarding new generations?

**David Robinson:** Well, I think one of the best things I did was starting the *Collegium*. I had a very practical purpose of trying to bring down the average age because the same people came by year after year. The *Collegium* was a way of bringing young people to the Festival. In the beginning, we didn't know what we were doing, but anyway we gave it a follow. And I think it worked, as people from the *Collegium* come back and bring along their friends. Definitely, we brought down the average age of people who are crazy about silent films. Also, I think we've done a lot for film music too. I mean, to establish the importance of music as an essential element in silent cinema.

**Danielle:** What you say regarding music is really important, considering the "silent cinema" period wasn't silent at all. Even in the early beginnings music was supposed to be played either during the film or between films, being an extremely important part of the show.

**David Robinson:** Even the Lumière's (from 1895 on) had music accompanying them. Cinema has never really been without music. When people started little shop cinemas they had music outside to attract people in.

**Danielle:** Paolo Cherchi Usai once said that decades ago silent pictures were not properly appreciated because they were poorly presented. Could you comment this?

**David Robinson:** I saw my first silent picture when I was in my late school

years, inspired by a Spanish teacher who said I had to join the “Film Society [of London]”. I went to the Film Society, we had meetings and we saw 16 mm projections in total silence. It was so wonderful, very exciting. I didn’t realize there was something missing. Then when the “National Film Theatre” opened in 1952, they showed a lot of silent films, and they found an old pianist who played in an orchestra in 1915. From this moment on there was always someone playing, and the same thing was happening in America. It did happen really quite early, probably from the 40s. Come thinking now I think the music wasn’t quite so sophisticated but it went out from there. The idea of having an orchestra for a film happened decades later, in November 1980 to be exact. Kevin Brownlow has done this big series of features, which was entitled “Silent Films”. About 20 programs, for Channel 4<sup>5</sup>, and Carl Davis was commissioned to write music for them, and then they had the great idea of showing *Napoléon* (Abel Gance, 1927) in a big theatre in London downtown, during the London Festival, in November 1980. It shocked everyone, as the show started at 10:00 o’clock in the morning. Carl put together an orchestra that felt that was playing for circus instead of playing for a film. They weren’t terribly good in the first section: there was a lot of noise from Carl yelling at them things like “Put yourself together”. And then the first section ended, and the audience was on their feet, so enthusiastic. The score orchestra was shocked, asking what had happened. From this moment on the performance was great. And you know actually, this is a piece of history! This was the beginning of it all. 37 years ago. Then, the same thing happened to a series of films, such as *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), which was by the way shown in the opening night of the Pordenone Festival of 2017, accompanied by the same score composed then, also conducted by Carl Davis.

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<sup>5</sup>For nearly a decade, between 1980 and 1990, the British “Channel 4” supported Photoplay Productions (owned by Kevin Brownlow) in the restoration, production of musical accompaniment and live performance of silent films, which were finally shown by the channel. The team was completed by David Gill and Carl Davis. Cf. Cf. *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto: The Crowd; Food in the arts: lost films*.



Image II: Carl Davis rehearses the *Orchestra San Marco*, by Pordeone, for the exhibition of *The Crowd*. Source: *La Giornate del Cinema Muto* (2017). © Valerio Greco

**Danielle:** Could you talk a little further about Mr. Brownlow (whom I meet practically every night while buying ice-creams at the ice-cream shop that's just across the street from the Teatro Verdi)?

**David Robinson:** Kevin Brownlow is the key to it all. When Kevin was about fourteen or sixteen, somebody took me to his flat, on a Sunday, when I was going for a nice walk. A nice bourgeois apartment where I found a little child. We were led to this child's bedroom, and he projected, in a 9,5 mm projector, a single 78 [rpm] turntable for record. We sat down to watch this child (I was getting pretty socky about this...). He began projecting a newsreel from 1925, what made me feel, "Ok, it isn't so bad". And then there comes the title: *Napoléon*, by Abel Gance, which was supposed to be a lost film!

**Danielle:** How could he reach this picture?

**David Robinson:** Well, it only ran about 16 minutes or so.

**Danielle:** But just the same!

**David Robinson:** Well, this is how Kevin started. He got passionate about this whole thing. When he learned about *Napoleon*, by Abel Gance, he found a 9.5 mm with some 10 minutes, one reel film, which should be "Napoleon schooldays", or "The Battle of something", and he realized that these were all extracts. They were

Pathé's extracts, so he began to put them together and to assemble *Napoléon*.

**Danielle:** How old did you tell me he was at that time?

**David Robinson:** I probably exaggerate. I said he was fourteen but I think he was probably sixteen.

**Danielle:** And you were around 22 (there is a seven-year difference between them). This is wonderful. So that's how he got in contact with this picture?

**David Robinson:** Yes, and then he became obsessed with this picture. One day he was at school, and there was a phone call from his mother, saying: "Mr. Abel Gance is in London. You may meet him". So he ran away from school.

**Danielle:** It's like the Truffaut's stories, running away from school to go to the movies!

**David Robinson:** Yes, to go to the movies, to go to meet Abel Gance (laughs).

**Danielle:** It's thrilling to get a glimpse of how the Film History was made.

**David Robinson:** His work is totally incredible.

**Danielle:** Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson.



Image III: David Robinson and Kevin Brownlow.

Source: La Giornate del Cinema Muto (2017). © Valerio Greco

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