

TEREZA FRODLOVÁ / 28. 4. 2021

Digital Restoration of the Film Distant Journey

The digital restoration of *Distant Journey* was intended to make the film available under current technological conditions, so as to remain as faithful as possible to its hypothetical form when first released. The decision regarding the restored version and subsequent technical realisation was preceded by a survey of preserved film materials and non-film sources, which served to obtain the most detailed information possible on the production and presentation of the film and its original form. From the archival sources and period prints it is apparent that, among other things, the film completed in December 1948 was censored and approved only in May 1949.^[1] Although a Prague premiere was also scheduled for May 1949, *Distant Journey* was not officially released – it was screened in a limited distribution circuit mainly in cinemas outside Prague, and very little was written about it in the press.^[2]

Preserved in the Národní filmový archiv (NFA) is the original film negative, duplicate negative sound, two duplicate positives and seven combined prints from various periods (two of which are on 16mm film). A duplicate positive made from the original negative in the 1970s was chosen as the starting material for digitisation. The duplicate positive, divided into 11 parts, is preserved on an acetate base of raw Orwo black-and-white film material. The material survived in good technical condition, suffering from only minimal mechanical damage in the form of slight scratches and lines in the images.

At the same time, it was necessary to select the reference print as a model for colour grading of the digitised images, so as to get closer to the original character of the film via luminance and tonal adjustments. There was no original print from the period of the first release in the NFA, so we asked film archives of countries to which the film was sold in 1949 or the early 1950s. Two flammable nitrate prints from France's

La Cinémathèque de Toulouse and collections of materials preserved in world archives were selected and borrowed.^[3] Out of these, a print on Kodak material, which benefitted from better laboratory processing and on which the film was distributed at the time of its initial release, was selected for reference.

The film was digitised on FilmLight Northlight 2 in 4K resolution. Parts in a range of several windows that did not survive in the duplicate positive were digitised from a nitrate print on Kodak material. This single print also includes the original opening title “Czechoslovak State Film Presents...” – which was replaced in the early 1960s with a new title by one of the Central Film Rental Fund (Ústřední půjčovna filmů). The luminance and tonality of the sources used were subsequently compensated so as to minimise the visibility of different materials being used. Where missing parts were not preserved even in later generation prints, the black frames remained.

Subsequent luminance and tonal adjustments to the image were made using the FilmLight Baselight system according to the continuously projected reference print. The colour grading retained the original characteristics of the reference print, including tonal changes in sequences where archival materials or trick shots were used. The decision resulted from the fact that the different photographic characteristics of these shots could not be fully compensated by using contemporary laboratory technology.

Automatic image processing followed by manual retouching was used to remove visual damage. In the spirit of a conservative approach to restoration, only signs of wear and tear were removed while those elements that have arisen during filming or laboratory processing were retained, as they are evidence of period technology and procedures. Characteristic defects that were digitally retouched include lines and scratches, dirt or splices, and corrections of perforations that significantly intrude into the image field. On the contrary, the characteristic appearance of archival footage remained, as it was significantly mechanically worn already at the time when used in the film. Significant damage (scraped grooves) was also preserved in several short passages, which were cut into sequences consisting mainly of archival materials, as this was probably a creative intention.

Furthermore, automatic image stabilisation and deflicker were used throughout the entire film. Image stabilisation was chosen to compensate for instability only in the case of material shrinkage caused by aging or impeded passage of the film through the scanner around the grooves. On the other hand, in cases where instability was clearly the result of production technology or laboratory processing, it was left as is. To digitise the sound, a duplicate positive on Agfa material was chosen, the sound track of which was in good condition throughout and had suffered only minimal mechanical damage. The transcription into digital form was performed on a Sondor Resonances scanning device. The sound restoration aimed also at conveying to today's viewers, albeit under different technological conditions, the viewing experience of original filmgoers. Therefore, an academic filter was applied to the audio rewriting according to the standard of that time, and the volume subsequently reduced to the expected level at the time the film premiered. Defects caused by wear and tear of film materials such as popping and cracking have been eliminated as part of the retouching of sound. On the other hand, elements resulting from the contact sound technology used were retained. The final frequency and dynamic adjustments were made according to the Dolby Room mixing standard, with the overall performance adjusted to the parameters of the current sound reproduction chain to simulate the cinematic acoustic conditions of the time.

The image and sound were then merged and synchronised, and metadata documenting each stage of the intervention was added. Finally, the final outputs (DCP and HD master) were secured in the NFA digital archive system.

Note:

Distant Journey contains archival footage from the 1930s and 1940s newsreels and the Nazi propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). Due to doubts as to whether the rights to their use were legally obtained at the time the film was made, we contacted Germany's Bundesarchiv (which administers the rights) to request permission to use them in the restored film.

The restoration under the supervision of the Národní filmový archiv, Prague, took place at Universal Productions Partners and Soundsquare in 2019.

Notes:

[1] Zápis o jednání censurního sboru, 26. 5. 1949. NA, f. Ministerstvo informací, Praha, k. 151, inv. č. 137.

[2] Daleká cesta. *Kino* 4, 1949, no. 9 (28. 4.), p. 114.

[3] Both nitrate prints are for legal reasons deposited in the specialised depository of Le Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (the CNC)