Norah Baring taken hostage by Uno Henning in Anthony Asquith's 1929 study of mad love, *A Cottage on Dartmoor*

A COTTAGE ON DARTMOOR

Imogen Sara Smith

A man goes to the movies, but instead of watching the screen he projects his own obsessive, murderous fantasies in the dark: his own private film noir.

Cinema is full of scenes in which characters go to the pictures, but there is nothing else quite like the long sequence at the heart of *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929) that is set in a movie theater. This radically experimental *tour de force* may be the most deeply probing examination of the collective experience of watching movies—a visual treatise that unfolds almost entirely without words.

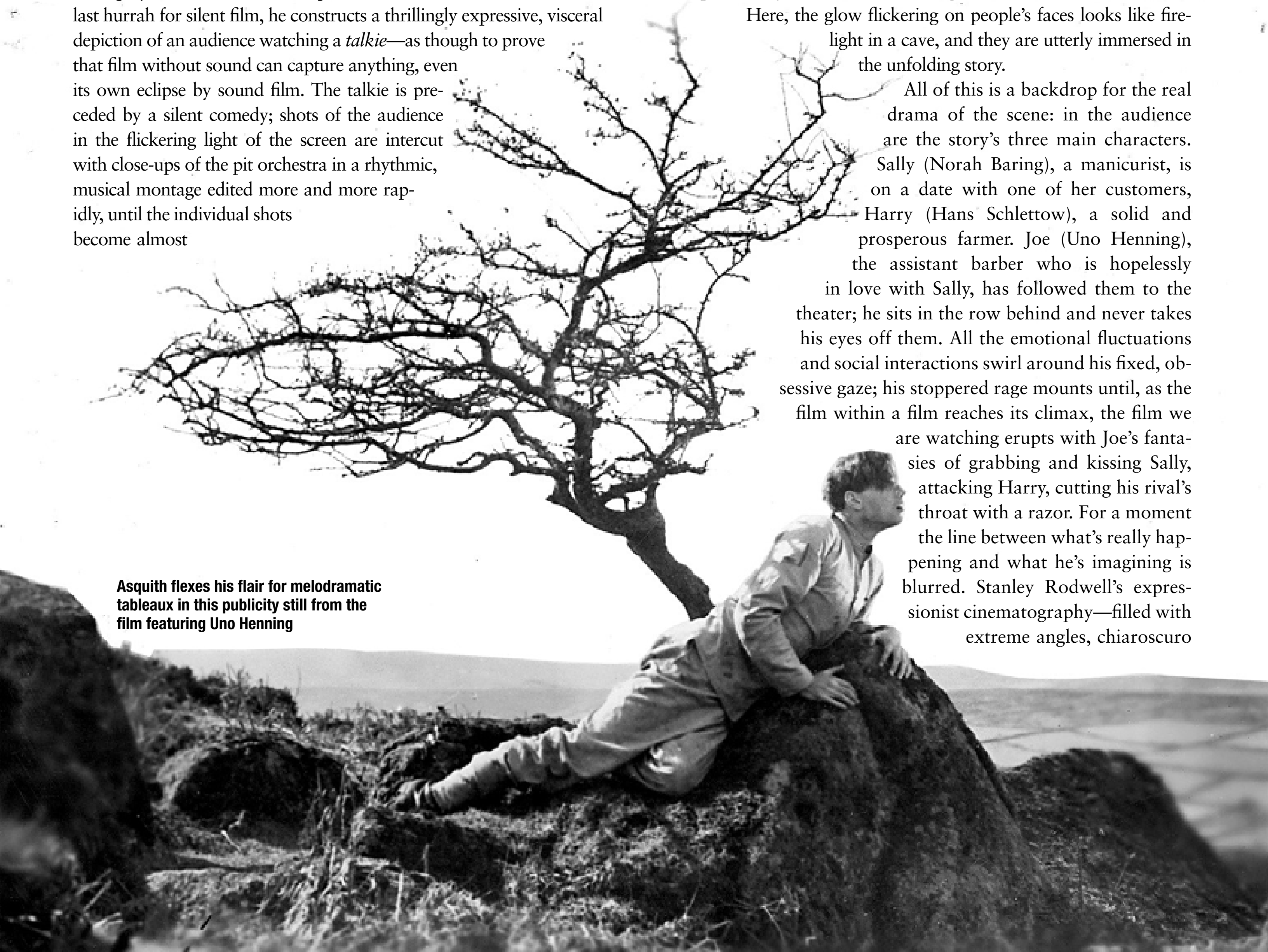
One of the last silent films made in Britain, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* was directed by Anthony Asquith, then still in his twenties. The privileged son of a prime minister, the future director grew up in No. 10 Downing Street and was nicknamed "Puffin" Asquith—a moniker suggesting the kind of upper-class twit who would appear in a P.G. Wodehouse novel. He remains best known as the director of genteel theater adaptations (*Pygmalion, The Winslow Boy, The Importance of Being Earnest*), and his work has been subject to the widespread critical disdain for British cinema as stagey and stodgy. Kino's 2007 release of *A Cottage on Dartmoor* was revelatory, and the BFI has since restored Asquith's second film, *Underground* (1928), which was shown at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival in 2014. Despite his later association with stage adaptations, Asquith had no theater background; he became passionately interested in cinema as a university student and in 1926 joined London's pioneering Film Society, through which he immersed himself in the avant-garde works emerging from Germany and the Soviet Union.

Love triangles form the basis for all three of Asquith's silent features.

Asquith's exuberant cinephilia and intrepid experimentalism are fully on display in the movie theater sequence. In what seems to be an intentional last hurrah for silent film, he constructs a thrillingly expressive, visceral depiction of an audience watching a *talkie*—as though to prove that film without sound can capture anything, even its own eclipse by sound film. The talkie is preceded by a silent comedy; shots of the audience in the flickering light of the screen are intercut with close-ups of the pit orchestra in a rhythmic, musical montage edited more and more rapidly, until the individual shots become almost subliminal. The audience is laughing, relaxed, engaged. Then comes the sound feature: we see the musicians put down their instruments, kill time smoking and playing cards and eating sandwiches until they have to close the show playing "God Save the King." We see a deaf woman bring out her ear trumpet and force her companion to relay what the actors are saying.

At no time do we see the screen: through this entire sequence, we watch the movies as they are reflected in the faces of the audience. (A recorded sound-track, now lost, would have accompanied this scene.) At first they appear uncomfortable and unsure of how to react to the talkie: they are self-conscious about making noise, they lean forward and concentrate to follow the action. It seems that what they are watching is some kind of thriller: they grow increasingly absorbed and tense; a frightened woman hides her face against her date's shoulder; the suspense builds to a climax and then subsides. A love scene evidently follows: couples snuggle closer, young boys exchange uneasy glances, a solitary woman looks sad. The effect is simple, yet it forcefully conveys the mesmeric power of film, how it commandeers the pulse rate and emotions of the audience—or how it did once, before the distractions of texting and the spread of a perennially adolescent, snickering detachment from melodrama. Here, the glow flickering on people's faces looks like firelight in a cave, and they are utterly immersed in the unfolding story.

All of this is a backdrop for the real drama of the scene: in the audience are the story's three main characters. Sally (Norah Baring), a manicurist, is on a date with one of her customers, Harry (Hans Schlettow), a solid and prosperous farmer. Joe (Uno Henning), the assistant barber who is hopelessly in love with Sally, has followed them to the theater; he sits in the row behind and never takes his eyes off them. All the emotional fluctuations and social interactions swirl around his fixed, obsessive gaze; his stoppered rage mounts until, as the film within a film reaches its climax, the film we are watching erupts with Joe's fantasies of grabbing and kissing Sally, attacking Harry, cutting his rival's throat with a razor. For a moment the line between what's really happening and what he's imagining is blurred. Stanley Rodwell's expressionist cinematography—filled with extreme angles, chiaroscuro



Asquith flexes his flair for melodramatic tableaux in this publicity still from the film featuring Uno Henning

Asquith's crew films the fateful entrance into the barbershop of Harry, the farmer (Hans Schlettow), who's to be Joe's rival in love

lighting, huge off-center close-ups, and subjective shots—is all in the service of forcing us inside Joe's tortured psyche.

Love triangles form the basis for all three of Asquith's silent features. The dark themes of betrayal and sexual jealousy shadow even the charming comedy *Shooting Stars* (1928), and deepen in *Underground*, which moves from light humor to violent melodrama. *A Cottage on Dartmoor* is suffused with angst and a mood of dread, established in the gorgeous, ominous opening sequence. A bare tree looms against a sky of threatening storm clouds. A man in prison clothes drops suddenly into the frame, running across the bleak moorlands, through the smoke of peat fires at dusk. His flight is intercut with scenes of a woman bathing her baby, alone in a cottage lit by one low lamp; stark shots of the prison where the escape is discovered are juxtaposed with the baby crying behind the bars of his crib. Without a single intertitle, this prologue sets up a gripping drama. When the convict emerges from the shadows, his eyes glittering like knives, and the woman recognizes him, the film abruptly shifts into a long flashback that lays out their history, while the suspended threat of the opening hangs over every scene.

The woman is Sally; the convict is Joe. In flashbacks we see them in the quotidian setting of a barbershop, where they spend their days trimming hair and buffing nails. They are very ordinary working-class Londoners. When Sally takes pity on her lovesick co-worker, she invites him to have dinner at her boarding house, where old ladies gossip about them and they sit in a Victorian parlor decorated with flowers under glass bells and engravings of Robert Burns. But even in this staid setting, there is something unnerving about Joe; his yearning for Sally is too extreme, and his expression when they are interrupted by a fellow lodger is frighteningly vicious. He seethes as Harry, the Dartmoor farmer, comes into the shop every day to see Sally. After she accepts Harry's marriage proposal, Joe snaps while shaving his rival, holding a straight razor to his throat and threatening to kill him. What happens next is crucially ambiguous: it is only when Sally leaps into the fray that Harry gets slashed. But although he survives, Joe is sent to prison—after Sally accuses him of attempted murder—first vowing to return and kill the pair of them.

So back to the present, as Joe menaces Sally. But the dynamics have changed because our sympathy is now with Joe, who despite his violence is always more sad and pathetic than scary. Even Sally feels this: whether out of guilt or merely pity, she hides him when the police come and convinces her husband to help him escape. "Are you happy?" Joe asks Sally as they huddle in an upstairs bedroom. She answers, "Very," but with a long pause beforehand and an expression that suggests the opposite. Her feelings and motives remain ambiguous: it's rather difficult to believe she really loves the stout, jolly farmer who has given her a good home, while there is some kind of intense feeling in her scenes with Joe—due largely to the riveting performance of Uno Henning, whose repressed passion is painful to watch.

1929 was the year of yearning for this Swedish actor, who also co-starred with Marlene Dietrich in Curtis Bernhardt's German film *The Woman Men Yearn For* (the subject of an earlier Silent Noir column by Eddie Muller - NOIR CITY e-mag Spring 2014). *A Cottage on Dartmoor* was Henning's only British film—also the case with Hans Schlettow, whose prolific German career included the darkly glittering "street film" *Asphalt* (1929)and Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922). Only Norah Baring was actually English; she had appeared as the lovelorn seamstress Kate in *Underground*, and is best remembered for her role in the early Hitchcock talkie *Murder!* (1930). Baring is a charming, sensitive actress, but no Marlene Dietrich. That Sally is so ordinary gives a tragic realism to the story, especially to the somber, poetic ending, which movingly portrays death as the only release from a hopeless love. Obsession is a theme central to noir and perhaps to cinema, rooted in the literally captivating power of an image. It is much harder to break out of than a prison cell. ■