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## **“In my time of dying: the premature death of a film classic”**

Darren Tofts

Dateline 3/12/2009 4:45 PM

Email to Ian Haig

Do you have a copy of Chris Welch's book *Peter Grant: the man who Led Zeppelin?*

I'm writing a paper for the Bad film conference on *The Song Remains the Same* and am keen to get hold of that book if possible.

Email from Ian Haig 3/12/2009 5:08 PM

Darren,

You know 'song remains the same' sucks don't you?

This exchange is suggestive of the mordant theme I want to develop in this discussion. A theme about decline and fall, of disgust and loathing associated with a film that, as an impressionable 16 year old, I thought rocked rather than sucked. *The Song Remains the Same* premiered on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1976 at Cinema 1 in New York City. Adorning the walls of the cinema's foyer was the cover art of the double soundtrack album that accompanied the film that very quickly went Platinum. It features a chicly run-down picture theatre that resonates with homely echoes of small town movie houses, vestigial monuments of a nostalgic past of shared social experience. But the nostalgia for the decrepit building and what it once represented is bittersweet, as in the elegiac conclusion of Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 film *The Last Picture Show*. Unknown to the band and its legions of followers throughout the world, that image of ramshackled former glory suggested, in advance, how Led Zeppelin would be judged and how mercilessly run down the film would be by both fans and critics alike. Indeed, if manager Peter Grant had known how swiftly the savagery was to come, he may well have retired to the nearest bar during the interval to escape the onslaught, like Max Bialystock in *The Producers*.

But the truth of the matter is more compelling. Negativity towards the film characterized virtually every moment of its making, an atmosphere of bad vibes generated from within the inner circle of the band and its management and the two hapless directors, Joe Massot and Peter Clifton, who attempted to exercise their craft and at the same time appease the hammer of the gods. At a closed screening of the rushes of Jimmy Page's Crowley-esque fantasy sequence as The Hermit or Old Man of the Mountain, John Bonham's hysterical laughter at Page's hokey make-up and fake beard caused him to vomit up his meal of fish and chips that he had brought into the theatre, much to the hyper-sensitive Page's mortification (Welch, 2003, 122). Prior to its theatrical release and on the verge of the pitch to Warner Brothers for worldwide distribution of the film, Atlantic Records president Ahmet Ertegun fell asleep during a private screening, reducing the imposing Peter Grant to tears. Apparently Ertegun didn't recognize iconic Zeppelin front man Robert Plant in his Arthurian-inspired fantasy sequence, asking on awakening at the end of the film, "Who was that guy on the horse?" (132).

As we shall see, such images of explosive derision and indifference were ciphers of a dysfunction that characterized the entire conception and production of the film. In retrospect, it's no surprise why it was subject to such vicious critical scrutiny. Generically, the film sits awkwardly between a "rockumentary" that details the highs and lows of being on tour and a live concert experience of the biggest rock band in the world at the time, captured on stage at Madison Square Garden in New York (the film was promoted as a "front row seat on Led Zeppelin"). Uneasily woven into this mix of the more familiar attributes of the rock film genre was a series of autobiographical, highly stylized fantasy sequences, of the kind noted previously, designed to explore the personalities and

imaginings of the band members themselves. But unlike previous films that documented famous rock musicians at work (such as the Beatles in Michael Lindsay-Hogg's *Let It Be* [1970] and the Rolling Stones in Jean-Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* [1968]), *The Song Remains the Same* sought to portray the band "in concert and beyond", transforming the four musicians and their manager into larger than life characters, roguish scoundrels straight out of the picaresque tradition: Peter Grant as Capone-esque gangster-hitman protecting his investment from bootleggers and avaricious concert promoters, Robert Plant the bold Knight rescuing a damsel in distress from a fortified tower, John Paul Jones the legendary 18<sup>th</sup> century fictional swashbuckling hero the Scarecrow, riding into the night on horseback with his minions, Jimmy Page as pilgrim climbing a mountain, a symbol of his search for enlightenment through his immersion in the ritual practices of Aleister Crowley's Magick and, finally, John Bonham's more earthy, domestic portrayal of himself as a snooker playing average bloke into high octane drag racing and spending time with the family. But even Bonzo's Everyman could not assuage the critics, for whom the entire foregrounding of the band's personalities in this manner represented a grandiloquence and excess that evidenced Led Zeppelin's disregard for its fans as well as a solipsistic implosion into inflated, narcissistic egotism. But this should have come as no surprise to anyone even vaguely familiar with the band, since their reputation for absolutely tumescent and libertarian self-indulgence preceded them. As Stephen Davis observes in the opening sentence of his book *Hammer of the Gods*, the "maledicta, infamous libels, and annoying rumors concerning Led Zeppelin began to circulate like poisoned blood during the British rock quartet's third tour of America in 1969" [David, 1985, 3]).

When the film was released the music press was particularly scathing of its amateurism and enigmatic bombast, an apparently contradictory yet suggestive characterization of both the

film's checkered production history and the band's Gargantuan, if obscurely expressed egotism. Writing in *Circus* magazine Robert Duncan, for instance, presumed it had been made by "junior college students who had just discovered LSD" (Welch, 2003, 137) and *Rolling Stone* journalist Dave Marsh asserted that far "from being a monument to Zeppelin's stardom *The Song Remains the Same* is a tribute to their rapaciousness and inconsideration... their sense of themselves merits only contempt" (Davis, 1985, 276). With the release of the film in DVD format in 1999 and its subsequent remastered version in 2007, the digitally versatile generation had no less patience for the its self-indulgence than its original theatrical audiences of the late 70s, nor the Sisyphean feats of endurance apparently required to watch it from start to finish. "Nowadays", as one reviewer notes, "you'd need the patience of a saint - or an industrial vat of mind-altering substances - to go the distance" (Twist). Similarly, with head already aching at the prospect of corny fantasy sequences, another announces with indignant pride that he watched the film "with copious use of the fast forward button" (Cavanagh). The general impression from such criticism dished out to the film since 1976 is that there is far too much in it that should never have made it into the public domain. Perhaps this is what Peter Grant had in mind when he remarked that it was "the most expensive home movie ever made" (Welch, 2003, 133). And if that's not condemnation enough, Robert Plant dismissed it as "a load of old bollocks" (Blake, 2007, 76). But for me the ultimate sign of the cultural preterite that *The Song Remains the Same* is destined to be on the receiving end of crippling criticism was the result of a Google search on the film that yielded a story about criticism of the Pakistan Peoples Party. This quintessential piece of inadvertent criticism, in which the Google search string, "on the receiving end of crippling criticism", was published in Newsline Pakistan in May 2008 and was called, quite fittingly, "The Song Remains the Same".

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The concept to make a feature film that captured the energy of a Zeppelin live performance emerged during the band's historic 1973 US tour. Peter Whitehead's and Stanley Dorfman's film of Led Zeppelin's 1970 concert at the Royal Albert Hall dramatically revealed how powerful even on film Led Zeppelin were in performance and had whet many appetites, so expectations were high when American director Joe Massot convinced Peter Grant to engage his services. Apart from the usual challenges associated with any film project, particularly one that involves shooting live footage, Massot's greatest problem was having to deal with Peter Grant and Led Zeppelin. "Problematic" hardly captures the fraught nature of his attempts to engage his employers to co-operate with a project that, by the time filming was to start, they seemed entirely indifferent to. Massot's idea was to shoot the offstage interludes in 16mm and the concert footage in 35mm, to contrast and showcase the spectacle of the performance. He succeeded in capturing footage from three out of five shows in July 1973 at Madison Square Garden in New York in order to select the best performances of each of the 13 songs to create the impression of a complete show. Later in the year he followed the band to England to shoot establishing shots of the band at their respective homes before being sacked by Led Zeppelin's management on the grounds that, in Peter Grant's word, "it wasn't really what we had intended" (Welch, 2003, 122). With the project in complete disarray, Australian director Peter Clifton received the summons from Peter Grant, while in transit to Jamaica to make a film about reggae, to drop everything and salvage the film. His first words to his new employers, having assessed the raw footage shot by Massot, were not encouraging: "We need to re-shoot the show" (Blake, 2007, 75-76). And this is where things really get fucked up.

“None of the material... actually created sequences”, Clifton advised Peter Grant (Welch, 2003, 126). Problems of continuity in terms of cutaways and establishing shots were compounded by gaps and missing verses in particular songs (there was no complete version of the climactic Whole Lotta Love for instance). And despite Joe Massot’s explicit instructions, John Paul Jones neglected to wear the same clothes on each of the nights that were to be filmed. Clifton’s solution was to suggest the ultimate imposture when it comes to live concert footage: re-stage the entire Madison Square Garden set at Shepperton Studios in Surrey and film it in its totality. Now let’s just pause for a moment. We’re talking about a band that observed strict principles of integrity to preserve the purity of their music. They never gave interviews nor advertised their concert dates and had resisted frequent offers to appear on Top of the Pops on the grounds that they would have to mime to their own songs. Now here they are in 1974, at the height of their powers and on the verge of releasing their monumental *Physical Graffiti* double album, acquiescing to Clifton’s suggestion that the only way to save *The Song Remains the Same* is to play along to pre-recorded songs from the New York gigs in a fabulatory performance of a consistent and complete concert; what music journalist Cameron Crowe would refer to as the “total event” in his liner notes to the film’s soundtrack LP. Clifton attempted to sell this act of creative deceit to the band: “If you are prepared to take the bits of Madison Square Garden including a couple of incredible action shots, I’ll play you the soundtracks, project the bits on a huge screen in front of you and we’ll put the cameras between you and the screen. When the shots come on, the soundtrack will be right, you’ll play along and I’ll shoot again” (128).

So in secrecy worthy of a le Carré novel, Led Zeppelin played alongside their filmic avatars as the ultimate cover band. Only coming to light in recent years, this is surely the most closely guarded fraud of the twentieth century, with the possible exception of the television

coverage of the landing on the Moon in 1969 and the Zapruder film of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In a recent interview in *Uncut* magazine, Jimmy Page fessed up that “I’m sort of miming at Shepperton to what I’d played at Madison Square Garden, but of course, although I’ve got a rough approximation of what I was playing from night to night, it’s not exact. So the film that came out in the 70s is a bit warts-and-all” (Cavanaugh, 2008, 50). However when you watch the film there is a curious sequence in the Theremin interlude in *Whole Lotta Love* that features mirror images of both Page and Plant as if they are copying themselves. Who knows if this is simply a happy accident or an embedded clue for hermeneutic posterity, akin to the myriad leitmotifs and enigmas that James Joyce wove into the deeply nuanced textuality of *Ulysses*; a formalist sublime that the author himself asserted was designed to “keep the Professors busy for centuries”.

Sixteen years after Zeppelin performed to Zeppelin, Milli Vanilli were forced to return their Best New Artist Grammy for lip-synching to themselves the year before. One wonders what Jorge Luis Borges, the grand master of the hyperreal, would have made of Zeppelin’s charade, for surely it would have been for him the most sublime inversion of his notion of exactitude in science, whereby the territory would now completely cover the map. Kathleen Carroll, reviewing the film in the *New York Daily News*, was clearly not fooled by the deception, referring to the film as “a hopelessly pretentious piece of trash... in what is laughably called a performance” (Carroll, 2007). The manufacturing of illusion within the film also extended beyond the on-stage performances. The dramatic sequence of the band disembarking from their jet straight into a police escorted convoy of Limos, that whisks them to Madison Square Garden, was filmed in Pittsburgh the week before. And if all that fakery was not enough, it was once again the bassist, for the nth time in the history of rock, who was the odd man out and threatened to blow the conceit. John Paul Jones had recently

cut his hair and was forced to wear a wig to resemble the way he looked a year ago. If you watch *Whole Lotta Love* closely you can see the rug in all its glory. How do the lyrics go again? Something about “baby, I’m not foolin”?”

The quote from Ecclesiastes that prefaces Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations* may well be a fitting epitaph for *The Song Remains the Same*: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth— it is the truth which conceals that there is none” (Baudrillard, 1983, 1). But it is also apposite to Jimmy Page’s remastered edition of the film in surround sound that was released in November 2007. A variation on the Director’s cut genre of DVD, this version of the film was especially notable for the high quality of its sound and the surround sound mix was designed to generate a greater sense of immersive presence for the home theatre experience. In fact this version of the film is the first time in its history that the soundtrack and the images were correctly synched (Blake, 2007, 76). It was this achievement of situating the listener in the crowd at the concert, “from the ultimate vantage point”, that Cameron Crowe argued was the singular experience of the original vinyl LP. The irony of Page’s surround sound mix of course is that rather than heightening an actual authentic sound recording of the event to deepen the sensation of being there, all the “Pro Tools jiggery-pokery” as one critic has described it (Cavanaugh) merely betrays the absence of a sonic experience of the concert that contemporary audiences never actually heard. 2009 audiences will also be treated to a blooper absent in the original theatrical release, which confirms the circulation in culture of a *Song Remains the Same* viral meme, programmed to ensure that the film continues to attract criticism. In the opening fantasy sequence of the film, Peter Grant’s gangster side-kick (played by tour manager and real-life thug Richard Cole) emerges from the door of Grant’s 17<sup>th</sup> century manor house as a 1920’s

gangster complete with Tommy gun. In the 2007 remix, he enters twice, thanks to an artefact in the video editing process. The hits just keep coming.

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What do we conclude from the jaundiced history of *The Song Remains the Same*? It is clear that rather than some hideous chimera that should never have been made, the film and the story of its making is, in fact, archetypal filmmaking. The history of cinema is the history of overcoming circumstance. From a cybernetic point of view, the final film that is eventually screened is not a successful culmination of shooting, editing and post-production schedule. It is a measure of the degree to which entropy or error has been avoided or at the very least minimized during the entire production process. That is, to appropriate Norbert Wiener's definition of feedback, the completion of a motion picture "proceeds in such a way that we may say roughly that the amount by which (the film) is not yet (complete) is decreased at each stage" (Wiener, 1965, 7). The relentless re-shoots, inclement conditions on location, actors forgetting lines or failing to show up, boom mics entering the frame and countless other mishaps that thwart directors all constitute the fragile process that is filmmaking.

Problems of continuity, to take just one of the charges leveled against the film, are the film editor's worst nightmare. Think, for instance, of the hiatus during the making of *Eraserhead* while David Lynch scurried for funding to complete the film. There is a moment three quarters of the way through when the resumption of production is awkwardly signified in a slightly different grading in the film stock and a less elevated bouffant hair style on Jack Nance. But a film like *Eraserhead* can sustain such a rupture. In Heaven, after all, everything is fine. Ridley Scott faced a more dramatic dilemma when one of his lead actors

died during the making of *Gladiator*. Scott and his team went to considerable lengths to sustain the life and death of Oliver Reed's character, the charismatic Proximo and thereby satisfy the pitiless demands of continuity. Drawing on every trick in both the analogue and digital toolbox, from stand-ins and important sound bites from outtakes, to CGI masking of Reed's face on a body double, Proximo's presence in the film was assured. And of course the opposite is true and in all fairness should be noted, when moments of happenstance and serendipity court the cinematographer and create an unexpected moment of visual magic, thereby redressing Newton's celebrated second Law of thermodynamics. Think of the celebrated moment towards the end of Richard Brooks' 1967 film adaption of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. In a deeply lyrical and elegiac image, tears appear to wash down Robert Blake's face as he stands by the window watching the rain, talking of his despised father's "hopeless dreams" while awaiting execution. Here is the counter-cybernetic turn in cinema, then, when the cinematographer should most definitely embrace the accident.

From the example of the talismanic avatar of Proximo we can extrapolate that Reed's post-mortem simulacrum in *Gladiator* is a corollary of Led Zeppelin's re-staging of the Madison Square Garden performance at Shepperton Studios. It testifies to the improvisation of the *bricoleur* who must make do with whatever is at hand. Rather than an embarrassment in the name of some mealy-mouthed, holier-than-thou authenticity, it is cinema in its purest sense, the supplement that stands in for an absent presence.

The illusion of a consistent and persistent world in this film, in any film, is one of the greatest sleights of hand ever invented in the name of technology. As Jean-Luc Godard reminds us, cinema is "the most beautiful fraud in the world". When Peter Clifton took over from Joe Massot he inherited a mess of footage from different venues in different formats,

including considerable material shot with hand-held cameras using 400 foot rolls of stock that limited each take to three minutes (Welch, 2003, 134). The film creates the impression of an event that unfolds in diegetic time, from the band members' regrouping in America from their homes in England, to the dramatic, police escorted Limo drive from the airport to the concert venue and the aftermath as they are whisked away once again to their awaiting personal jet, the Starship, to take them to the next city. To do so it cobbles together footage from a previous concert at Baltimore the week before, establishing shots taken both before and after the depicted Madison Square Garden concert, as well as carefully spliced footage of particular songs actually filmed on different nights. Sure, if you look closely you can see that Jimmy Page is dressed differently at different moments in Rock 'n Roll. But montage is a wonderful thing and within the rock film genre has an amazing ability to fool the eye. One particularly hostile reviewer writing in the New York Times was beguiled by its spell into believing that when Peter Grant is bawling out a concert promoter behind the scenes it is indeed happening at Madison Square Garden, none the wiser to the fact that it was actually filmed at the Baltimore Civic Centre (Eder, 1976). And while we're on it, I'm sorry to spoil the party but the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was not filmed in Middle Earth. The making of *The Song Remains the Same* cautions us to avoid the mistake that the digital age has continuously perpetuated in some of its rhetoric that non-linear editing came into being with Premiere and Pro-Tools.

It is a miracle that *The Song Remains the Same* was made at all. It's problematic and often vitriolic realization from initial conception in 1973 to theatrical release in 1976 is the grand narrative of the cinematic apparatus, the structural *récit du cinema*. And if you think that characters such as Cecil B. DeMille, Orson Welles or Dino De Laurentiis are the archetypal big bad boys of Hollywood cinema, think again. Joe Massot and Peter Clifton should go

down in the history of film as martyrs to the cause, if only for having to deal with Peter Grant. As Chris Welch described him in his biography of the former wrestler and bouncer simply known as “G”, Grant was a “towering, six-foot, 18-stone, moustachioed giant, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Genghis Khan of the rock world, who would brook no opposition. His favourite weapon was alarmingly abusive language delivered with machine-gun like precision that rendered an argument futile” (Welch, 2003, 7).

Imposture, as I have been revealing, frequently conceals the truth, or, indeed, the absence of truth. But don’t think for a minute that I have been adding my voice to the rancorous chorus of *Song Remains the Same* bashers. I’ve no doubt that the film is flawed in many ways, but it is those very flaws that require us to look at it in a less judgmental light. It is, in advance of the great auteur’s 1988 masterpiece, the *Histoire(s) du Cinema*. *The Song Remains the Same* testifies to Godard’s notion of cinema as becoming, or “which might have been”. This notion of cinema as an ideal, a process of self-realisation, is captured in an early scene in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), when the character of Jeanne rushes to meet her fiancé at a train station. She is unnerved to find that their personal reunion is being captured on film, Tom being a disciple of the *nouvelle vague*. The dialogue goes something like this:

- Watch out!
- Have they taken us for someone else?

We're in a film. We're in a film.

If I kiss you, it might be cinema.

If I stroke your hair, it might be cinema.

Tom's theory of filmmaking is also suggestive of the found or potential concept of theatre as theorized and practiced by British director Peter Brook: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook, 1968, 11). The emergence of "which might have been" both in experimental theatre and the French New Wave are analogues of the serial making of *The Song Remains the Same*; a process that began in 1973 and, given Jimmy Page's inability to leave the film alone, continues today.

I stand before you here today, then, to retrieve *The Song Remains the Same* from the unforgiving dustbin of history. *The Song Remains the Same* is a bad film that no-one likes, but it might yet be cinema.

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