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Silent Film Online

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/julie_decesare/21/



ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Silent Film Online

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Composite Score:

★★★★

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Abstract

Alexander Street Press (ASP) has become a leader in providing libraries and institutions access to streaming video and multimedia content. Since 2006, their offerings of online and streaming video databases have grown quickly.¹ Recently, they released Silent Film Online (SFO), a collection of silent films, clips, trailers, and documentaries about filmmaking during the silent film era. ASP pricing is average for this content, and flexible, based on type of institution, budget, and FTE. Annual subscription or one time purchase of perpetual rights are options. Like other ASP online video databases, functionality is high. ASP is currently in beta with a new interface, which will be rolled out permanently spring 2014. This review is based on the new interface² and is highly recommended to institutions with film studies and related programs.

Pricing Options

Pricing for Silent Film Online, as with other products from Alexander Street Press, is flexible and determined by type of purchasing institution (academic, K-12), the institution's FTE, and the size of its materials budget. Silent Film Online list price for annual subscription is \$4,115, with discounts applied for low budgets and low-FTE (scaled as low as \$1,165).³ Alexander Street Press also offers a one-time purchase of perpetual rights. The one-time purchase can range from \$12,500 to \$40,000 based on budget and FTE, with annual access fees ranging from \$125 to \$500. Consortial discounts may be available.⁴

Product Description

Silent Film Online is aimed at scholars and historians in the film studies, history, and communication fields. SFO is curated by Alexander Street Press's editors and ASP's Video Advisory Board to include high-quality silent feature films, serials, and shorts from the 1890s to the 1930s. The Video Advisory Board includes librarians from across the United States and from a range of institutions. These librarians provide feedback on content, usability, functionality, and licensing.⁵ The films in the database come from many of the film industry's pioneers, provide primary source documentation of foundational techniques in filmmaking, and serve as a powerful resource for the study of late nineteenth and early twentieth century history, culture, and attitudes.⁶

Of the more than 500 titles available in Silent Film Online, title highlights include: Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903); F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922); Harry A. Pollard's *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin (1927); D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Intolerance* (1916), *The Birth of A Nation* (1915); Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926); Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927); Robert Weine's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919); Luis Buñuel's *L'Age D'Or* (1930); and assorted or lesser known works from Charles Chaplin, Ernst Lubitsch, Georges Méliès, Victor Sjöström, Erich von Stroheim, Carl T. Dreyer, Cecil B. DeMille, Josef von Sternberg, Lillian Gish, Clara Bow, and others.

Publishers and institutions such as the National Film Registry, Kino, Flicker Alley, PBS, and British Film Institute have contributed content. These licensing partners receive royalties from Alexander Street Press, which aid in the preservation of the physical films. The majority of the content is North American titles. About one-third of the content is international titles, but content editors plan to add more international titles.⁷

There is often a concern that titles will be removed from these collections due to licensing issues. Removal of titles in ASP history has been minimal. ASP always seeks to gain permanent licensing for collections and titles, but there are few times when titles will need to be removed due to licensing or rights constraints. Titles remain for any institutions that have purchased the collection in perpetuity, and subscribers are alerted if titles will be removed from the collection.⁸ Out of over 25,000 throughout the ASP collections, this has only happened a handful of times.⁹ Overall, representation of key titles and people from the silent filmmaking era is apparent.

Critical Evaluation

Overall, the user interface for SFO is intuitive and easy to use. I recommend setting up an account for use of full functionality of the database and the features it offers. On the Silent Film Online database home page, the title of the database is very prominent about the main search box. Immediately above the SFO heading, ASP provides a View Your Collections option to switch between all subscribed/purchased ASP collections. Immediately below the SFO heading is a single box providing the option to select Audio or Video files. It also provides a drop down to select a subject discipline, as well as an option for Advanced Search. When performing a keyword search for "nosferatu," findings are automatically itemized/suggested immediately after a search term is input. For example, the term "nosferatu" returns three results in Title and Series and 18 results in Fulltext/Transcripts search categories. Once entered or the search icon is pressed, 20 results appear.

In the top right-hand corner users can create or access personal accounts. Creating and signing into an account allows users to create playlists, save to a playlist, share playlists, or create and share clips



Silent Film Online Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★★★★ 1/2

Silent Film Online's content is excellent. It is curated to include high quality videos and well known titles, filmmakers, and artists.

User Interface/Searchability: ★★★★★ 1/2

Searching on Silent Film Online is intuitive, with multiple points of access through keyword search, advanced search, and browsing options. Features such as synced transcripts, flexibility of platforms/browsers, sharing, creating clips, and embed options for CMS and LMS systems are available and imperative for streaming video content.

Pricing: ★★★★★

Pricing for Silent Film Online is reasonable and flexible, based on institution FTE, and consortial discounts are available.

Contract Options: ★★★

Contract and licensing is standard.

of the films. User accounts and profiles can be customized by display name and photo.

The home screen of Silent Film Online provides a hyperlinked carousel of images to advertise pertinent films, as well as listings of new or recently added titles. All categories are represented on the home screen, as well as through the Advanced Search portal. Category facets for browsing appear along the left of the screen. Browse categories include genre, decade, content type, director/ producer, actor, publisher, date published/released, and language of edition. All categories can be minimized or maximized to adjust the user's screen. The date published/released facet provides a visual representation of years represented and how many items were published that year in a bar graph. Users can start with a broad search, then narrow down by using the category facets OR users can begin their search on the Advanced Search screen and only use search terms in the appropriate categories. Both ways provide flexibility for the users.

The Advanced Search portal allows users to select primary languages, as well as search for words in the full-text or transcript, in the title and series, the director or producer, the actor, the score composer, accolades or awards, country of origin, genre, subject, and/or publisher. There are also options to browse for specific terms to aid the user. Users can also limit the advanced search to a specific collection, like Silent Film Online or by content type. Content type includes animation, documentary, or performance. It also allows for options of the language of the edition and the date the film was published or released.

The genre portal provides many different genres of silent film and the filmmakers. Genres included in the database categories and subject headings include documentary, comedy, drama, fantasy, romance, adventure, crime, animation, slapstick comedy, horror, mystery, and many others. I include these genres to show examples on how granular the database is in allocating specific genres to content in Silent Film Online. These are all key genres in film research and history.

Once in a video, synced transcripts and captions aid in accessibility issues and allow users to perform keyword searching and navigation throughout the video. While the majority of the content is of silent feature films, there are several documentaries about artists and film-making included in this database. Available transcripts and captions are useful for anyone doing research about the filmmakers, the film's content, and specific actors.

Users who have set up individual accounts can create clips and playlists. The online video player has edit functions to modify film clips based on time code or placement within the synced transcript. The player allows users to share content via learning management systems (Moodle, Sakai, Blackboard, etc.) and other content management systems (like LibGuides) by the use of permalinks and embed code. Users can also save a library or playlist of favorite or frequently used titles, share that playlist with others via e-mail, and create or export citations. Alexander Street Press also offers best practices tutorials for embedding media into a variety of learning management systems.¹⁰ ASP also offers a series of YouTube videos for instructions.¹¹ Viewing on mobile devices is supported.

The Silent Film Online video player interface uses both Flash and JavaScript. ASP recommends having both of these up-to-date and

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available on users' browsers.¹² For the video player, Alexander Street uses JWPlayer. JWPlayer automatically determines the most appropriate streaming bitrate for a user based on their available bandwidth.¹³ This allows for optimum streaming based on network quality and allows for fewer frame drops. Unlike the past interface, users can no longer select the bitrate of their streaming, the player always tries to provide the highest quality file at all times. The platform is optimized to operate with the following browsers and plugins: for Windows, Microsoft Internet Explorer 7.0 or higher, Firefox 3.0 or higher, and Google Chrome 1.0 or higher; for Mac OS X, Safari 1.0 or higher, Firefox 3.0 or higher, and Google Chrome 1.0 or higher.¹⁴ More details about the technical requirements can be found on the ASP Help Page <<http://search.alexanderstreet.com/help>>.

Overall, I highly recommend silent film online for North American libraries or institutions that offer film studies, film history, or film theory curriculum.

Contract Provisions

The contract for Alexander Street Press Silent Film Online is standard. Database content can only be used in ways that are consistent with U.S. Fair Use doctrine and international law, and that content should only be used for research, education, or other noncommercial purposes. User access to streaming video recordings are available via the customer's network via IP range, password, and through a proxy server. An institution's walk-in users are allowed access to the database content. Customers cannot allow users to download the streaming videos or make copies. A sample license is available on the ASP Web site.¹⁵ MARC records are available. ASP also provides records for Discovery Services (EBSCO, OCLC WorldCat Local, Summon, and ExLibris). Silent Film Online is currently not available outside of North America.

Authentication

Database access is authenticated using IP address, user name/password, referring URL, or EZ Proxy.

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Related TCA Reviews

The Charleston Advisor has several other reviews of ASP video products:

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About the Author

Julie A. DeCesare is Assistant Professor and Head of Education & Research at Providence College Phillips Memorial Library. Previously, she was Digital Media Reference Librarian/Film Studies Bibliographer at Boston College where she managed the Media Center and its collection of 20,000+ analog and digital media materials. Since 2008, she has been teaching in the Marlboro College Educational Technology Graduate Program in Brattleboro, VT. The blended course, "Digital Research Technologies," helps educational technologists, librarians, teachers, and instructional designers utilize the Web and multimodal resources for teaching, learning, and research. She holds an MLIS from Simmons College and a BA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her core research interest is multimedia, multimedia search, and its use in teaching, learning, and research. ■