

# Instant Life

*A film replica by Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy and Andrew Kim*



Ludwig Faces produced, directed, shot and edited the film *Instant Life* (1941).<sup>1</sup> On the occasions when he screened the film for an audience, he stated, vehemently, that the film should be understood, principally, as a solution to the problem of moving picture spectatorship.<sup>2</sup>

After each screening of his film, Faces would hand out a small sheet of colored paper to every member of the audience. On each sheet there was a typewritten riddle. He did not provide an answer to the riddle, nor did he ask for one. Descriptions of the evening's events come from three filmmakers who were present for three separate screenings.<sup>3</sup> Not long after attending the third screening, they began to call themselves *The Unholy Three*.<sup>4</sup>

Upon leaving the back room of the laundromat that had served as the evening's cinema on their third and last viewing, *The Unholy Three* decided that they had to put aside all of their

other projects and dedicate their time solely to cracking the riddle. After a few months they felt they had arrived at an answer. They did not reveal their answer to anyone.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after, in the fall of 1979, they began production on a film, also titled *Instant Life*. Their film, which was originally conceived as a shot-for-shot remake of Faces' film, eventually became three separate shot-for-shot remakes of *Instant Life* (1941).<sup>6</sup> Upon completing the three versions, they decided that all three should be shown sequentially as a single film.

Their *Instant Life* (1981) was never screened for an audience. *The Unholy Three* spent years trying to track down Ludwig Faces. They wanted him to see the film first. Their plan, as they imagined it, entailed the following: Faces proclaiming his absolute disapproval of their version, their refusal to destroy the film against threats of legal action, a drawn-out public battle over their

right to show the film, demand from passionate cinephiles to see both films together, followed by bootleg screenings – with some of said bootleg versions provided by the filmmakers themselves – attended by sympathetic and daring parties.

None of these scenarios came to pass. Clearly, *The Unholy Three* overestimated Faces' notoriety as well as their own ability and/or commitment to tracking down a person steadfast on remaining unfound.

We found a VHS bootleg of horrendous quality at a flea market in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles in 2014.<sup>7</sup> The film was recorded halfway through the end credits of the 1937 version of the film *A Star is Born*.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, we decided to remake this version of *Instant Life*. We were never able to find a copy of the original *Instant Life*,<sup>9</sup> nor did we find a credible solution to the riddle.

<sup>1</sup> He also composed and performed the musical accompaniment.

<sup>2</sup> We are certain of the occurrence of three screenings. Additional screenings probably took place but we have no testimony or documentation that could corroborate them.

<sup>3</sup> These descriptions can be found in *Photophobia* (issue 1, October 1979), a pamphlet dedicated to film culture that they were self-publishing at the time. Although they had not yet made any films at the time of their encounter with Faces, they still considered themselves to be filmmakers. Anecdotal evidence for this claim can be found in the screenplays/manifestos that make up a large part of *Photophobia's* content.

<sup>4</sup> Their collective name – perhaps familiar to those acquainted with the era of silent and early sound film in North America – was taken from the title of two films, both of which starred Lon Chaney. The first film, *The Unholy Three* (1925), was a silent film directed by Todd

Browning. It starred Lon Chaney as Echo the ventriloquist. Echo is the ringleader of a gang of con artists that goes by the name *The Unholy Three*. The other two members of the gang are Tweedledee, the dwarf, played by Harry Earles and Hercules, the strongman, played by Victor McLaglen. Mae Busch played Echo's girlfriend, Rosie O'Grady. The second *Unholy Three* (1930) was a remake of the first film, directed by Jack Conway. In this talkie, both Lon Chaney and Harry Earles reprised their roles as Echo and Tweedledee. Victor McLaglen's character was played by Ivan Linow and Mae Busch's character by Lila Lee. We leave to the reader the task of watching the films side by side and comparing their technical and creative qualities. What's important to this story is the fact that our *Unholy Three* were adamant about having taken their name from the 1925 version and not the 1930 version. We can't say with certainty why our *Unholy Three* wanted to make such emphasis but we do know that Ludwig Faces claimed to be a distant cousin of Todd Browning, the

director of the first *The Unholy Three*, and that he mentioned this supposed fact at every one of his film's screenings.

<sup>5</sup> They did declare that they had cracked the riddle in *Photophobia*, issue 2, December 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Although their versions differ considerably from the original *Instant Life* (1941), they did preserve the same shooting locations. Most importantly, Searles lake in Trona, California. Since 1941, on every second weekend in October, the Searles Lake Gem and Mineral Society hosts the Gem-O-Rama mineral and gem show. The popular event consists of mineral collecting field trips for rock enthusiasts inside an active mineral mine on the Searles lakebed. According to the *Unholy Three*, Ludwig Faces shot part of his film at the inaugural edition. Following his cinematic traces, both them and us partook in subsequent editions of the gem extravaganza.

<sup>7</sup> Along with all six issues of *Photophobia*.

<sup>8</sup> Coincidentally, Jack Conway, the director of the 1930 version of *The Unholy Three*, appears

credited on numerous websites as co-director of the 1937 version of *A Star is Born*, even though he is not credited in the film itself. It appears that this credit resulted from the fact that Conway temporarily replaced the film's credited director William Wellman while he battled severe influenza during the shoot. The film's producer, David O. Selznick, appointed Conway, who was an MGM contract director, along with Victor Fleming, to take over in the interim. Meanwhile, only Conway appears to have been widely recognized online for his contributions with hardly any mention of Fleming's involvement. The only mention we found of both Conway's and Fleming's participation due to Wellman's flu was in the book, *A Star is Born: Judy Garland and the Film that Got Away* by Lorna Luft and Jeffrey Vance.

<sup>9</sup> Nor a more decent copy of *Instant Life* (1981).