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# D. W. GRIFFITH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN NARRATIVE CINEMA

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The first and arguably most significant phase of D. W. Griffith's film directing career began in 1908 and ended in 1913, the years when he was the most important filmmaker at the preeminent film production company in America. That Griffith's tenure at Biograph coincides almost to the year with the tumultuous period of industrial and formal change typically referred to as "the transitional era" is but one of many reasons that historians view the director as central to the period's developments. But what role did Griffith ultimately play in the American film industry's adoption of a storytelling approach that brought together the resources of performance and decor, framing and composition, and, most crucially, editing, in producing thousands of one-reel narratives for a growing audience of moviegoers in the post-nickelodeon marketplace? Some have questioned the tendency to attribute the period's change in narrational strategies to the singular achievements of Griffith, no matter how impressive those achievements may have been. Opposition to understanding Griffith as a key transitional figure derives less from any hesitation about his talent and more from the distinctiveness of his output. The debate focuses on whether we should label Griffith as a representative director of this period: While he may be the era's most celebrated filmmaker, does he actually define that era? Close attention to the formal qualities of Griffith's

Biograph films can certainly help us to assess more precisely his contribution to the developing norms of the transitional period; but beyond such study, we also need to consider his films in relation to those of his competitors. Only then can we establish with any certainty whether Griffith stood apart from the rest of the industry during the Biograph years, or whether he merely realized the aims of the era more proficiently, albeit also more idiosyncratically, than any other filmmaker at this time.

Properly contextualizing Griffith's contribution to the transitional period becomes even more vexed when one factors in the complications that history introduces. Past historical accounts have tended to privilege him to the point of describing him as the "most revered and influential movie creator of his day, and perhaps of all motion picture history" (Jacobs 1968, 95). Aside from erroneously ascribing to Griffith the invention of all manner of formal devices that predated his first film, these histories improperly imagine how film production operated during these years, casting Griffith as the only notable filmmaker in existence, and his work as the sole laboratory of experimentation. If historians tended to inflate Griffith's role as an innovator, they were doubtless influenced by an advertisement that Griffith himself took out in 1913, on the heels of his departure from Biograph. In this ad, published in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, the director boldly proclaimed himself responsible for "revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art," taking credit for a range of stylistic features, from the close-up to crosscutting to the fade-out. Moreover, Griffith actively contributed to the formation of his own authorial legend by asserting his unassailable influence on other filmmakers of the day: The ad argues that all of the innovations that Griffith introduced are "now generally followed by the most advanced producers." With all other companies (and the filmmakers under their hire) relegated to the position of impressionable imitators, Griffith found his reputation for genius reinforced by the accounts historians devised in the subsequent decades, accounts informed more by the recollections of Griffith and his coworkers than a careful and broad-based examination of films from the period.

If Griffith's campaign of self-promotion exerted considerable influence on seminal histories of the development of American narrative cinema, an unforeseeable accident of preservation provided the additional textual evidence needed to uphold the argument for his superiority as a cinematic storyteller. Empire Trust, the primary investor in Biograph at the time Griffith joined the company, preserved virtually all of the nitrate negatives for the films made during the director's tenure there (Bowser 2009, 62–63). Eventually, these films were acquired and preserved by the Museum of Modern Art; this retention of Griffith's filmmaking legacy promoted intensive study of his oeuvre at the same time as it further marginalized the work of his competition, whose films had largely disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

Griffith's status as the preeminent figure of the transitional era has been fortified by commanding works of scholarship devoted exclusively or primarily to his

Biograph period, themselves fueled by the relative ease of access to large swaths of the director's oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> Sustained engagement with his work from these years culminated in the ambitious research initiative entitled *The Griffith Project*, a multivolume publication from the British Film Institute that coincided with the screening of every extant Griffith film at the Giornate del Cinema Muto, in a massive retrospective that spanned a decade. Dozens of early cinema scholars contributed descriptions of the Griffith canon, with seven of the series' 12 volumes devoted to the Biograph period. One can now say with certainty that every film Griffith directed during these years has at this point received some degree of scholarly attention, even the few that have not survived.

In contrast, we still have only piecemeal textual records of the films made at Vitagraph, Lubin, Selig, Kalem, Essanay, Solax, Thanhouser, and a host of other companies, all of which contributed to the changes that mark this endlessly inventive period in American filmmaking. Whereas Griffith's extant films from this period number in the hundreds, those of his peers, when they can be attributed, run in the double digits at best. Not surprisingly, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the work of Biograph's competitors, though investigation of the broader underpinnings of transitional style and narration continues apace. If, ultimately, the survival rate of Griffith's films will always favor the director in any assessment of the transitional period, this lopsided textual record can still prove instructive: In its entirety, the mammoth Biograph oeuvre provides illuminating evidence of how the grueling release schedules of the day affected film production. Viewing Griffith's output in its totality, we might be much more inclined to echo an assessment put forward by Griffith scholar Russell Merritt, who notes that Griffith's aesthetic development was hardly one of "uninterrupted creative evolution [but rather] more erratic: sporadic bursts of experimentation were often followed by periods of backsliding, or weeks and even months of coasting" (1999, 177). If the analysis of Griffith's Biograph period provided in this essay errs on the side of privileging the director's aesthetic high-water marks, acknowledgment of Merritt's insight always underwrites the long view of Griffith's achievement. If we keep in mind that the overall arc of Griffith's time at Biograph embraced convention in equal measure with innovation, and that every impressive experiment was counterbalanced by efforts that did little to challenge developing stylistic or narrational norms, we move closer to separating the working director from the retrospectively created myth.

### Griffith's Move to Biograph: An Industry in Flux

Accounts of Griffith's career before he began making films tend to emphasize his limited success as a playwright and his modest talents as an actor. One wonders how he was able to translate this largely undistinguished résumé into an indisputably impressive career as a novice director of films. One possible

explanation, rooted in the moment Griffith entered the American film industry, suggests itself: Because narrative filmmaking was undergoing a profound shift, and filmmakers now had to tackle more involved stories at the same time that they needed to devise new ways of rendering their stories comprehensible and engaging, no obvious skill set ensured success. Enthusiasm, drive, and a willingness to try untested approaches probably counted as much as any demonstrated facility in directing actors or staging dramatic action. Griffith was fortunate to have the abilities of two veteran cameramen, Arthur Marvin and Billy Bitzer, to rely on when he started making films at Biograph. And, in a medium that often employed the young and inexperienced, Griffith's relative maturity when he assumed the post of director conferred upon him an authority that allowed him to control completely the productions that he oversaw. While the phrase "the right place at the right time" often signals the desperate move of a historian who cannot summon up any convincing causal argument, in this instance invoking it seems justified.

When Griffith arrived at Biograph at the end of 1907, he encountered a company redefining itself at the same time that the American film industry was experiencing its own transformation. Earlier that year, J. J. Kennedy from Empire Trust had taken over Biograph's management, and he appears to have been instrumental in charting the company's aggressive course of action when confronted by legal challenges in 1908. Biograph was subject to mounting pressure to concede control of domestic production to the Edison Film Combine throughout the year. By using a legal decision that found the Warwick camera in violation of the Edison company's camera patent, Edison had coerced most of its domestic competition to join forces as part of a licensed combine. Standing almost alone in opposition to the Edison Film Combine, Biograph pursued its own patent-based suits in the courts, inviting further counterclaims from Edison. Emboldened by its success in turning the tables on Edison, Biograph began issuing licenses to numerous importers in a bid to quickly increase production. Eventually Edison and Biograph would call a truce and pool their patents to create the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), or the Trust, late in 1908.

As much as Edison wished to gain sole control of the domestic marketplace, the company shared certain objectives with Biograph: to expand its production capacity to keep pace with vaulting demand, and to improve the quality of its films while aiming for a reliably comprehensible final product with each release. A more centralized form of production could help to insure the latter, while a monopolistic industry structure was viewed as a way to promote the former. Companies also had to contend with the constant calls for evidence of social uplift in the cinema, spurring manufacturers to develop scenarios that featured more complicated dramatic narratives. By producing serious dramas, the industry hoped that it might placate fears that film exerted a negative influence on its working-class audience; at the same time such films were also designed to appeal to a middle-class audience still largely resistant to the medium. But crafting comprehensible dramatic narratives of a limited running time brought its own problems. Initially, solutions

arose at the level of the exhibitor, as supports to the film text in the form of lecturers and actors voicing parts behind the screen were enlisted to render such films intelligible to their audiences (Musser 1983). But for an industry aiming to expand its output and to manufacture films according to principles of rational management and dependability, solving the problem of comprehension had to take place at the level of production. In short, the solution had to be text-centered. Investing the director function with the power to control the elements that contributed to the telling of a story represented one step in the problem-solving process; looking to the theater for creative talent was another. D. W. Griffith, a refugee from the theatrical world eager to exercise his creative prerogative, even in the degraded arena of film production, arrived at Biograph at an opportune time.

### Storytelling Challenges and Stylistic Strategies

Any filmmaker starting out in 1908 would have found the prospect of directing a dramatic film daunting. Few models existed for crafting a compelling and comprehensible narrative of under 20 minutes. While the theater and the short story might provide material for adaptation and even general principles of narrative construction, nothing could prepare filmmakers of the era for the challenge of how to translate the scenarios they were assigned into short films that audiences could easily grasp and find involving. Up to this point, most early films had expended little effort in establishing temporal relations among shots, nor had they attempted to invest characters with psychological motivations or molded the depicted action to elicit suspense or sympathy. If dramatic material of some complexity were to succeed with audiences, these aims would have to be realized. The central question was how. There is a danger when setting out the situation in these terms that it might be misconstrued as implying that filmmakers were merely trying to "find their way" to the classical system of narration and that they slowly fumbled around until they perfected that system. Clearly, filmmakers did not know what would work until they tried it, and they did not have a firm set of linked objectives in mind as they formulated different experiments in storytelling over the course of the transitional period. Even so, preferred practices did emerge, and effective solutions to key problems often found favor in the trade press; if easily emulated, these quickly spread across the field of production.

As I have outlined elsewhere, filmmakers were guided by certain broad principles, many of them promulgated within the pages of influential trade journals of the day, including *Moving Picture World* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror*. Foremost among these principles was film's obligation to provide a believable fictional world, preserving a sense of verisimilitude while actively soliciting emotional investment from the viewer. As I have noted, audience belief and emotional investment became the twin hallmarks of a commendable film (Keil 2001, 35). Where earlier cinema had traded primarily in the presentation

of visually arresting material, transitional-era films were charged with the responsibility of generating drama from the varied resources of the medium. Whether it be the actors' performances or the sets and the costumes, the distance of the camera from the filmed action or the positioning of the camera, the staging of the action within the confines of the playing space or the arrangement of the shots themselves, filmmakers turned to cinema's formal dimensions to devise ways of rendering their narratives intelligible and emotionally compelling. Eventually, they would settle on selected approaches that became codified and led to the establishment of the classical system of narration, but in 1908, the formal possibilities must have seemed both exciting for their boundlessness and overwhelming in their very indeterminacy.

Though a particularly limited number of films has survived from the key years of 1908–1910, we can say on the basis of what is available for viewing that Griffith proved comparatively adept at discerning how his newly chosen medium might be harnessed for its storytelling potential. If Griffith was not in the vanguard of every new practice that helped usher in a changed approach to narration during this time, he certainly seems to have found the potential in a significant number of important storytelling techniques. Moreover, Griffith continued to develop these techniques in arresting ways over the course of his time at Biograph. Though he was reportedly frustrated by the limitations imposed by the one-reel format near the end of his stint at the company, some of his most accomplished efforts emerged in 1912–1913. And while Griffith has always been acknowledged for his facility with crosscutting, his narrational skills were not limited only to the domain of editing. He experimented with a panoply of devices involving *mise-en-scène* and cinematographic properties, displaying a stylistic range that definitely marks him as one of the period's foremost filmmakers.

Tracing Griffith's accomplishments chronologically invites certain problems, not the least of which is an implicit suggestion that Griffith's style evolved toward a satisfying point of maturation that prepared him for feature filmmaking. But such an approach allows the analyst to link the changes in Griffith's storytelling practices to changes in the industry, while also acknowledging concurrent developments at other companies. Moreover, analyzing Griffith's films in their totality allows us to investigate his style as a system of interlocking devices, in which elements of the *mise-en-scène*, cinematographic properties, and editing work in concert to shape his distinct narrational approach. In tying Griffith's stylistic development to his role in shaping the narrational norms of the transitional period, I am broadening the basic project Tom Gunning established in his landmark work on the director, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*. Concentrating on the formative years of 1908–1909, Gunning shows how the director employed style to create a more psychologically rich vein of characterization, to articulate spatiotemporal relationships among shots, and to adopt a moral perspective on the dramatic action. Collectively, a variety of devices – performance style, shot scale, and crosscutting the most celebrated among them – provided

cinema with an arsenal of storytelling strategies that achieved the desired effect of delivering more complex and engaging stories. Gunning (1991) labels Griffith's distinct approach to storytelling "the narrator system," and argues that the director helped usher in a new order of narrativization distinct from that evident in the previous period. In what follows, I will trace out that narrator system by dividing Griffith's Biograph career into three periods, each lasting approximately two years and each marking a stage of his development as a storyteller.<sup>3</sup> For each period, I will analyze a handful of representative Biograph films, buttressed by invocations of trends evident in films from competing companies. In this way, I hope to show not only how Griffith's approach to narration shifted over time, but also how his efforts related to those of his competitors during the transitional period.

### 1908–1909: Shaping a Story

The first six months of Griffith's time as a director at Biograph found him working on a range of story material, from adaptations of literature and theater (Shakespeare, Molnar, and Jack London, among other sources) to farcical comedy (*A Calamitous Elopement*). He learned how to work within the constraints of studio sets for certain films (*For Love of Gold*), but took full advantage of exteriors for others (*Where the Breakers Roar*). While becoming accustomed to the demands of a punishing production schedule, Griffith began to develop certain strengths, most obviously in the crafting of dramas of imperilment. Films such as *The Fatal Hour*, *The Guerilla*, and *An Awful Moment* gained attention in part for how they deployed editing to create more dynamic action and suspense. But at the same time that Griffith appeared to recognize that the distinct tempos of crosscutting could energize these scenarios of threat and rescue, his conception of screen space underwent a concomitant transformation. One begins to sense a progressive grasp of the potential of the discrete shot that has two obvious outcomes: First, a film becomes not merely an aggregate of completed short scenes, but a product of the interplay among shots; second, the resources of an individual shot, be they graphic, tonal, or expressive, can be exploited and then built upon as a film's narrative progresses.

Of course such potential can only be glimpsed in the Biographs of 1908, many of which are rushed, somewhat perfunctory affairs. And yet one sees in particular moments an attentiveness to the capacities of *mise-en-scène*, whether it be the emphatic diagonals dominating the frame in the opening shot of *Where the Breakers Roar*, the joyous dancing in the background space at the outset of *Call of the Wild*, or the layered staging of the introductory courtroom scene in *An Awful Moment*. The latter instance epitomizes what will become one of Griffith's specialties: The highlighting of discrete bits of business within a crowded composition, both to convey a sense of social interaction and to invite the viewer to engage with the drama about to unfold. As one of the observers of the trial consistently turns back

to a woman behind her, for instance, she reveals her face to us in the process; this act of confiding in her friend creates a focal point at the foreground of the composition at the same time that it evokes verisimilitude, encouraging us to imagine that we are observing action already in progress. Because Griffith created a stock company of skilled actors, those not deployed for principal roles could fill out the ranks of the background players, allowing for particularly rich pools of ancillary action, which the director would come to stage with increasing care.

Griffith's vaunted experiments with cutting in 1908 resulted in prefigurations of more assured work the following year: *The Guerilla* anticipates *The Lonely Villa*'s three-pronged last-minute rescue while the moralizing contrast editing in *Song of the Shirt* prepares for *A Corner in Wheat* (Gunning 1991, 134). But perhaps his most celebrated instance of realizing the narrational potential of editing emerged in *After Many Years*, Griffith's first version of Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*, a film the director later remade in 1911. When a shipwreck separates a husband and wife, leaving the man stranded on a remote island, he and his wife are still connected by strategic cuts. The most striking of these cuts occurs at the moment the husband kisses a locket containing his wife's image, giving way to a shot of his wife reaching out her arms as if welcoming his embrace. Through the agency of the cut, the narration forges a connection that not only intensifies the couple's desire but bespeaks a knowledge that outstrips that belonging to any character. As Tom Gunning succinctly expresses it: "The narrator system affirms [the couple's] gestures of devotion, creating an omniscience that allows this paradoxical embrace" (1991, 113). As Gunning goes on to point out, the fact that the cut interrupts the action of the kiss further underscores the power of editing to signal the presence of a storyteller: By switching from the husband to the wife at a crucial moment, the edit shapes our understanding of their relationship, cementing the bond between the two, but also intensifying our emotional investment in the characters and the strain that the husband's absence creates for both of them. Griffith would continue to find ways to deepen the viewer's connection to character, relying on editing in combination with performance style and other elements within the *mise-en-scène*.

By 1909, Griffith's apprenticeship was largely complete, and his next 12 months at Biograph represent one of his most fruitful periods. Three of the most well-known transitional-era one-reelers were released during this year, including *The Lonely Villa*, *The Country Doctor*, and *A Corner in Wheat*. Tellingly, each of these canonical works reveals a key facet of Griffith the storyteller: the master of the rescue scenario; the sensitive poet of pastoral lyricism; and the socially engaged moralist. What unites them all is their distinct sense of space, articulated both at the level of the shot and in the relationships among shots. Beyond that, each plays a variation on one of Griffith's favored narrative situations – the family structure under siege.

*The Lonely Villa*, in concert with *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), has enshrined Griffith's reputation for perfecting the last-minute rescue. Derived from an

oft-adapted play in the Grand Guignol tradition, André de Lorde's *Au Téléphone*, *The Lonely Villa* employs a familiar situation as the spur for its crosscutting: Left alone in their well-appointed home, a mother and her three daughters face imminent danger from intruders while the father races back to save them. Griffith invests this simple tale with particular urgency by carefully defining the interior spaces of the home so that the viewer clearly understands the distance separating besieged family members from menacing thieves. The systematic layout of the domestic space renders its eventual violation by the intruders both immediately comprehensible and palpably disturbing. Here, more than in any other Biograph to date, Griffith relies on the principle of repetition to reinforce spatial relations. While the taut crosscutting alternating between adjacent spaces represents this principle at its most refined, repeated spaces permeate the film's entire structure. As Gunning has pointed out, *The Lonely Villa* possesses the greatest number of shots of any Biograph film up to this time (52), but only 12 different camera positions, with four of them used only once (1999a, 143). This translates into eight separate camera positions employed across 48 shots, allowing for multiple returns to the same setup. This is an approach that Griffith will employ time and again, insistently returning to established spaces to measure change over time or to reinforce the spatial relationship of one space to another.

Were the editing patterns in *The Lonely Villa* engineered only to articulate proximate spatial relationships, that alone would demonstrate Griffith's growing confidence in molding the integrity of the shot to the transformative qualities of cutting. But *The Lonely Villa* introduces a third strand of action distinct from that unfolding within the home. Once the father has been separated from his family, editing introduces the space he occupies into the circuitry of shots, linking him back to the home through the instrument of the telephone. (His wife calls him to alert him to the danger she and her daughters face.) As Gunning notes, the film expends more cuts on the telephone exchange between husband and wife (seven instances of intercutting) than to the subsequent race to the rescue that the husband undertakes once the robbers cut the phone line (only two instances). Parallel placement of the husband and wife within separate frames, with each standing to the right holding the phone in the left hand, connects them across spaces as surely as the technology of the telephone carries one's voice to the other (1999a, 143). More than one commentator has noted that the telephone operates as both salvation and threat in this scenario, no less so than its formal equivalent, parallel editing. Tying together invaders, victims, and rescuer with one device, Griffith demonstrates the potential of crosscutting for disturbance while also exhibiting its role in resolution. The myriad uses he will devise for editing will only increase during his remaining years at Biograph.

The family comes under threat once more in *The Country Doctor*, but in this instance, death claims the sole child of the titular physician, the ironic outcome of his choice to stay at the home of an ailing young neighbor rather than rush back to his daughter, also felled by illness. Griffith employs parallel editing again in this

film, though less for the purposes of engineering a timely rescue than to derive suspense from the doctor's moral predicament: He must choose between staying to tend a sick stranger and abandoning her to help his own child. The editing possesses distinct narrational force, as the comparison of the two cases of illness points up the impossibility of the doctor's situation. Griffith buttresses the implied parallelism through manipulation of the *mise-en-scène*, positioning each of the sickbeds in similar portions of the frame. This strategy reveals illness as an equalizer – more starkly conveyed through the contrast between the doctor's comfortably bourgeois home and the more Spartan surroundings of the country family's cabin. The doctor's decision to uphold his duty to a patient elicits no cosmic reward, and the narrative comes to a close with the bereaved father clutching his dead child's limp body.

Tellingly, the film does not end with this shot, but instead closes with a variation on the opening pan across the surrounding countryside. This forceful camera movement serves multiple narrational functions: First, the atmospheric quality of the pan deepens the emotional tenor of the story's bleak conclusion; second, this shot, empty of characters, asserts the primacy of nature, the final arbiter; third, by mimicking the film's opening shot, a pan moving in the opposite direction, this final camera movement provides symmetry, ending the story as it began. Yet the formal unity scarcely provides release from the pall of death in the previous shot; instead, the rhyming pans measure the loss experienced over the course of the narrative. The opening pan begins by capturing a peaceful haven, identified as the Valley of Stillwater by an accompanying intertitle. The camera movement then gradually sweeps over a pastoral landscape to reveal the doctor's happy family emerging from their home. In the corresponding final pan, the point of departure for the camera movement is the closed door of the house, death having cut short any subsequent familial sojourns. In the words of Tom Gunning, with this evocative pairing of contrasting pans, "Griffith has discovered the power of a cinematic gesture and structure to express emotion, beyond the actor's craft. The camera's narrative role in introducing the film here becomes an emotionally loaded withdrawal from the scene of grief across a landscape which, no longer merely pictorial, resonates with grief and loss" (1999b, 165–166).

Griffith echoes a film's opening in its concluding shot once again in *A Corner in Wheat*, a film released near the end of 1909, and in many ways the culmination of much that he had been developing over the past 18 months. Typically characterized as the crowning achievement of Griffith's early period, *A Corner in Wheat* fuses the director's increasingly authoritative use of editing with his penchant for social protest, resulting in a film that the *New York Dramatic Mirror* labeled "an editorial," doubtless because it weaves together three narrative strands, linked only by broad-based economic causes as opposed to character interaction. *A Corner in Wheat* may stand as Griffith's most abstract employment of editing until the ambitious experiment of *Intolerance*: Cuts draw parallels emphasizing the nature of social relations, most pointedly in the alternation between shots of the Wheat King's

feast and those of the starving masses at the bakery. Griffith's approach to composition mirrors his use of editing, insofar as a number of the shots are self-consciously posed, not only the second and final shots of farmers sowing wheat in their field (modeled after Millet's painting *The Sower*) and the famous tableau of the bread line in the bakery, but also the first shot in the Wheat King's office, where his lackeys stand virtually rooted in place while he issues orders. Other shots are studies in controlled arrangement of complex activity, particularly the mounting frenzy of the trading pit, where one can still distinguish key narrative developments, and the Wheat King's lavish dinner party, featuring one of the deeper interior compositions to be found in an early Biograph single-reeler.

The studied approach to both editing and composition underscores Griffith's pretensions to self-conscious artistry, partly a response to repeated calls for morally uplifting drama during this period, but equally a sign of the director's increasing aesthetic confidence. The pictorialism that marks *A Corner in Wheat*, coupled with its commitment to social commentary, sets this work apart from most of Griffith's films of the period, and certainly from those of his contemporaries. Another notable example of this tendency from 1909 is *Pippa Passes; or, The Song of Conscience*, an adaptation of Browning's poem that uses recurrent images of the titular figure and carefully crafted lighting effects to emulate dawn and the dimming of the day. The film's visual distinctiveness prompted the *New York Times* to compare its lighting effects to "those obtained by the Secessionist Photographers" (quoted in Schickel 1984, 142). Griffith also experimented with lighting effects in *A Drunkard's Reformation*, a temperance drama made in the spring of 1909, and mined the atmospheric effects of location shooting in his moody seashore drama, *Lines of White on a Sullen Sea*. In addition, the latter film employs a fade to render the image of its heroine looking out across the water as a silhouette; the technique also designates a passage of time when followed by an intertitle stating: "Six years later, sick unto death with waiting." As Kristin Thompson points out, the technique "combines an objective passage of time and a subjective suggestion that [her] continued vigil is a sort of suspended existence where the empty sea has overwhelmed her life on land" (1999, 80–81).

Were other filmmakers attempting equally ambitious experiments with style and narration at this time? It is difficult to say with any certainty, given the relatively small number of films that survive from competing companies in the 1908–1909 period. What does become clear, however, is that some companies were experimenting in areas that Griffith did not seem particularly interested in developing. By 1909, Vitagraph, for example, began employing a noticeably closer shot scale by virtue of adopting the "nine-foot line," wherein its actors were positioned nearer to the camera than was the industry norm. At around the same time, Vitagraph also initiated a staging practice of having actors turn their backs to the camera when placed in the foreground, promoting the kind of naturalistic interaction Griffith was pursuing through other means. And while Griffith did exhibit some interest in the capacity of the moving camera, he appears to have been outstripped in this regard by a number of companies, most prominently

Laemmle's Independent Moving Picture Company (IMP) and Lubin. Finally, while Griffith was developing a particular approach to the representation of depicted space that saw him dependably return to the exact camera setup multiple times, other companies altered the camera's perspective on a repeated space. This last divergence between Griffith's preferred practice and tendencies at other companies points to the way in which aspects of the director's narrational approach would become identifiably his own, especially in the later Biograph years.

### 1910–1911: An Increasingly Confident Style

The American industry of 1910 was a considerably changed entity from what Griffith had encountered when he first starting working in films in late 1907. The monopolistic efforts of the MPPC had imposed numerous reforms on the distribution system, including the elimination of duping, the introduction of a regularized release schedule, and higher rental prices. Trust producers benefited from these new policies, primarily in the form of increased revenues; these, in turn, translated into elevated production values as evident in the progressively more well-appointed interior sets and varied costumes on display in Griffith's films. By 1910, as the MPPC attempted to extend its control over distributors by absorbing affiliated exchanges into the Trust-controlled General Film Company, opposition to its policies only increased. Rival companies excluded from the MPPC took advantage of the expanding marketplace and the Independent movement ultimately flourished, matching the Trust in size and even in achievement by the time Griffith left Biograph in 1913. But in 1910, Biograph was securely positioned as an industry leader (along with Vitagraph); Griffith's cameraman, Billy Bitzer, recalled that "the little independent companies would quickly copy anything we did that the public seemed to favor" (1973, 52). If the first phase of Griffith's career at Biograph was foundational, these middle years represented a time of deepening engagement with aspects of style that would further his narrational goals of communicating the psychological dimensions of the stories on-screen while creating increasingly more complex spatiotemporal relationships.

Distinct changes to production practices at Biograph altered the routine established at the company for the previous 18 months: First, an additional unit, headed by former leading man Frank Powell, began turning out its own films, primarily comedies; second, Biograph sent Griffith and 50 other employees to the West Coast to film in California for four months (Olsson 2000, 20). The director took full advantage of the new surroundings, incorporating the varied topography of the region into a wide range of stories, from a revenge drama set in the desert (*Over Silent Paths*) to romance in a garden (*Love Among the Roses*) to a seaside tone poem (*The Unchanging Sea*). *The Unchanging Sea*, a loose adaptation of the Charles Kingsley poem "The Three Fishers," combines aspects of various Biograph films from the previous year: Its setting and scenario of a devoted woman waiting for the return of a man gone to sea recall *Lines of White on a Sullen Sea*; the deliberately

recurrent imagery designed to mirror the cadences of its source poem resembles the approach of *Pippa Passes*; and the posed, near-frozen compositions bring to mind a similar tendency toward tableau in *A Corner in Wheat*. What renders *The Unchanging Sea* distinctive is its striking economy of means. Of the 30 shots employed, 17 are devoted to just two locales, the exterior of the couple's home and the point on the shore where the wife awaits her husband's return. The two spaces are almost always paired, such that an appearance of the home triggers a recurrence of the shore. The insistent return to these two spaces marks them as touchstones for the film, and indeed, they chart the progression of the wife's narrative as the years pass without her husband having come back to her. The first time we see the spot on the shore that will become exclusively associated with the wife (and the strong bond she feels for her husband), the couple frolics together, running close to the waves before heading back toward the camera. In subsequent shots, we will see the wife go back to the spot, first with other women searching for their men, then through the stages of her daughter's growth, until she is finally reunited with her husband. The constancy of the backdrop matches the steadfast devotion of the wife, even as other aspects of her life change. The fixed perspective used for each shot of the space on the shore reinforces the interweaving of repetition and variation. Thus, when the wife is approached by a suitor in shot number 18, she signals her rejection of him by pointing out to the sea, turning herself toward the waves as she has done several times before. Yet, accompanied by her young daughter, she is no longer alone: The child now gambols near the waves as the husband and wife had done many years before.

Later, when a young man proposes to the grown daughter, the situation mirrors that of the shot featuring the wife's suitor. Now, of course, the child has assumed the place of her mother, as the latter sits impassively, her back to the camera and to the young lovers whose relationship she is unable to see as it blossoms behind her. Griffith trusts that the evocative power of the California seascape will charge this simple tale of a wife's devotion with emotional resonance, but that power also finds its proper channeling through the director's reliance on a system of editing that makes a virtue of repetition.

Repetition and alternation defined not only Griffith's development of editing strategies, but also on occasion his treatment of story material. The later Biograph years are dotted with loose reworkings of earlier films: *After Many Years* begets *Enoch Arden* (1911), *A Drunkard's Reformation* would become *Brutality* (1912), and *Where the Breakers Roar* (1908) leads to *The House of Darkness* (1913). Griffith waited only six months to transform one of his most highly regarded films, *A Corner in Wheat*, into a similarly themed cautionary parable, *The Usurer* (1910). Though the films share no more than a few details, principally a compositional sameness in their depiction of the protagonists' lavish banquets, they tell similar stories of capitalism's devastating effects on the poor and powerless, with retribution coming in the form of suffocation for the rapacious figure responsible for the suffering of others. Unlike the earlier film, *The Usurer* fails to link the moneylender's actions to



5.1 A recurrent atmospheric image from *The Unchanging Sea* (1910).

broader economic patterns and abandons any framing device that would contrast the depredations of the wealthy with the purity of nature.<sup>4</sup>

Still, the localized nature of the moneylender's negative influence lends *The Usurer* a structural leanness that differentiates it from its predecessor. The film breaks down into two sections, equal in duration, with the first contrasting the self-indulgent lifestyle of the title character to the dire circumstances of those who owe him money. As in *A Corner in Wheat*, the alternation between the moneylender's feast and the shots of his victims' suffering creates a causal relationship. But the editing also serves to highlight the gulf separating the respective lifestyles of the usurer and his victims: In the shots of the banquet, Griffith fills the image to its edges, with characters in the foreground, their backs to the camera, seated at a table that stretches to the back recesses of the frame, as celebrants crowd around both sides; conversely, the homes of the indebted appear stripped down even before the usurer's minions carry out the removal of their furnishings. In one particularly striking instance of parallelism, the usurer adorns the neck of his wife with elaborate jewelry, while in the next shot the debt collectors strip the meager belongings from the tabletop of one of the families owing money. Ultimately, the debtors will be totally bereft, left standing alone in their bare rooms.

The first section culminates in a masterful sequence of six shots, which Tom Gunning has pointed to as exemplifying Griffith's ability to combine the "contrast pattern with the practice of suspending the outcome of an action by an edit" (1981, 19). The tail end of the sequence's first shot shows a female debtor (Kate Bruce), standing at the right of the frame, her daughter seated in a chair beside her. With most of the room's furniture now removed, it bears a striking resemblance to the space of the subsequent shot, occupied by the other depicted debtor (Henry B. Walthall). The sparse *mise-en-scène* of the two spaces draws attention to the features that they share – a similarly positioned window, a chair to the left of the door, and a single article of clothing hanging on the wall above the chair. The characters, standing in virtually the same spot in each of their respective shots, render the combination of the two images a graphic match. Yet while Bruce's character raises her arms in a beseeching manner, Walthall's grabs a gun concealed behind his hat: If the woman seems to be pleading for divine intervention, the man has already conceded defeat. At the moment Walthall wields the gun, Griffith cuts back to the usurer's banquet. As the moneylender rises to drink a toast, his positioning in the frame, coupled with his raised arm, transforms the shot into a rhyming complement to its two predecessors. A subsequent cut returns us to Walthall: His act of shooting himself elided by the cut, he now collapses onto the floor. The final shot shows the usurer completing the toast before leaving the banquet room.

As Gunning has pointed out, Griffith's deliberate interruption of Walthall's act of suicide elevates narrational contrast to the level of causality; but beyond that, the edit ties the guilt deriving from the debtor's death to the ignorant moneylender (1981, 19). The associative power of the cut illustrates what an earlier title had already declared, that the usurer drinks "blood-distilled wine." (Conveniently, the cut also displaces a potentially offensive act, thereby avoiding the displeasure of those monitoring the cinema for disturbing imagery.) Later, when the moneylender lies suffocating in his safe, Griffith will draw on a graphic parallel one more time by cutting back to an image of Walthall's outstretched body. The force of the cut in this instance demonstrates how the director employs editing as narrational commentary, passing judgment on the usurer.

The events leading up to the usurer's demise constitute the film's second section, and the emphasis of the editing shifts from contrasting the moneylender and his victims to creating a tight spatial relationship predicated on contiguity. If the first section stressed how the usurer benefited from the pain of others by surrounding him with adoring admirers, the restricted spatial schema of the second part isolates him from all else but his wealth, which proves useless in keeping him from death. Thus, when the Bruce character inadvertently locks the usurer within his own safe, no one realizes he is there, neatly inverting his ignorance of the plight of those he had undone earlier. Cutting back and forth between the adjacent spaces of the moneylender's office and the safe promotes the irony of his predicament – though within arm's reach of his office, the mechanisms he has devised to preserve his wealth insure his destruction. While

Griffith's crosscutting typically serves the last-minute rescue scenario, here it only reinforces the hopelessness of the usurer's situation, demonstrating how the director continued to ring variations on trusted devices.

Griffith also returned to familiar narrative material in the series of films he made about the Civil War and its aftermath. Perhaps because the fiftieth anniversary of that war led to widespread commemorative projects, Biograph released its heaviest concentration of films on the subject during the 1910–1911 period. In 1910, the company produced *In the Border States*, *The House with Closed Shutters*, and *The Fugitive*, followed by *His Trust*, *His Trust Fulfilled*, *Swords and Hearts*, and *The Battle* in 1911. As a subject, the Civil War also appealed to Griffith on a number of levels: It touched on his family history, as his father had served for its duration as a Confederate officer; it possessed a long-standing heritage of representation on stage, dependent on the conventions of theatrical melodrama (Mayer 2001, 112); and it permitted a dramatic intertwining of the personal and the epic, of bravery tested on the field of battle and loyalty demonstrated within the walls of the family home. Though each of the Civil War films of 1910–1911 approaches its topic in a distinct fashion, one can still find echoes among them as a body of work, either on the level of recurrent characters and situations (the loyal slave who proves the financial salvation of his masters in *His Trust*, *His Trust Fulfilled*, and *Swords and Hearts*; the plucky heroine who masquerades as a man to aid the cause in *Swords and Hearts* and *The House with Closed Shutters*; the cowardly son who finds himself overwhelmed by battle in *House* and *The Battle*; the home providing refuge for a pursued soldier in *The Fugitive* and *In the Border States*) or on the level of dominant themes (the testing of familial bonds, the strength of maternal love, the preservation of honor).

More than one commentator has noted that Civil War subject matter "brought out [Griffith's] ambitious best" (Simmon 2009, 40), whether it is mining the emotional cost of war's strain on the family – most pointedly expressed in *House* and *The Fugitive* – or staging large-scale action on the battlefield, as he does spectacularly in *House* and *The Battle*. Certainly Griffith's command of large masses of extras, staged legibly in expansive exterior long shots, demonstrates his increased dexterity in rendering wartime combat in epic terms. Skirmishes and chases emerge as dynamic incidents, aided by the director's kinetic editing and sensitivity to the distinct qualities that the locations (most often in New Jersey) afforded. And Griffith's attentiveness to the resources of *mise-en-scène* persist: He stages the Confederate officer's return to his burnt-out family home in *Swords* so that the actor's back remains turned to the camera, using restraint to signal emotional devastation; he has the brave sister in *House* snip off a lock of her hair as a sign of her affection for a suitor about to head off to war, prefiguring her decision to shear off all of her tresses once she elects to impersonate her brother in battle; he uses the fallen son's army jacket as a touchstone for his mother's undying devotion in *The Fugitive*, consecrated in the final shot when she places a strand of lilies of the valley in the coat's pocket. Grace notes such as these offer ample evidence that



Griffith maintained Biograph's reputation as the preeminent American film producer through attention to all of the particulars of storytelling.

But other companies also put effort into enhancing their profiles through stylistic innovation. The sets of chief competitors Edison and Vitagraph rivaled and often surpassed those of Biograph for the detail of their decor elements and the depth achieved. Vitagraph also appears to have been an industry leader in experiments with atmospheric lighting effects, though by 1910–1911 many companies were engaging in the deployment of such techniques as the “open-door shot,” where light pours in from the outside, often illuminating a character standing in the doorway. These lighting effects helped to establish tone or create dramatic emphasis, supplying their own narrational valence. In the realm of performance, Vitagraph became progressively more reliant on what Roberta Pearson (1992) has labeled the “verisimilar” style of acting, where actors rely on muted gesturing, facial reactions, and interaction with props to convey a character's thoughts and emotions. (Biograph was engaged in the pursuit of a similar approach to performance during this time as well.) The deployment of a closer shot scale aided in rendering the verisimilar style more legible, and by 1911, numerous companies began using occasional cut-ins to more closely scaled shots of actors in order to emphasize reactions. Griffith used just such framings to highlight Blanche Sweet's responses in *The Battle*. But the director's experiments with rapid cutting completely outstripped those of his rivals, such that the average number of shots in a 1910 Biograph was more than double that of other companies in 1910 and almost triple the number of its rivals in 1911. The next two years would see Griffith pursue distinct narrational strategies to an even greater degree, at the same time that the American film industry, as a whole, accelerated changes in its general approach to storytelling.

### 1912–1913: Refinement and Reconfiguration

By 1912, the one-reel format had become the entrenched story form for American filmmakers, and many filmmakers demonstrated increased ease with the demands of crafting narratives to fit its duration. For his part, Griffith had now directed hundreds of 1,000-foot films over the previous three and one-half years and the shorts he made during his last 18 months at the company continue to reveal a filmmaker who found new challenges in matching style to narrative. The result is a form of narration that never ceases to surprise. Despite the high caliber of many of the films Griffith would direct from early 1912 until mid-1913, the status of the so-called late Biographs remains a point of dispute among scholars. When I first wrote about these works in the late 1980s, they tended to be disregarded relative to key films from the period of discovery (Keil 1989, 22). Gradually, critical appraisal of this phase in Griffith's time at Biograph has shifted to the point where Paolo Cherchi Usai, general editor of *The Griffith Project*, can declare that there is “widespread consensus on the view that 1912 is the first ‘golden year’ in the career

of D. W. Griffith” (2002, vii), and that “in its first six months, the year 1913 ... appears to be one of the best known in the context of his creative trajectory” (2003, vi). Even so, there are dissenters, including Scott Simmon, who argues that “for all [the] pleasures of the late Biographs, it sometimes seems as though Griffith's great years may have been back in 1910 and 1911, after which comes a certain narrowing of interest, of narrative drive, of ensemble discovery, of verve ... For all the formal sophistication of the late Biographs, Griffith may have had less to say in them” (1993, 60).<sup>5</sup>

Simmon's criticism presupposes that one can separate Griffith's method of representation from the content of his films. But this runs antithetical to the premises built into Gunning's concept of the narrator system. As Gunning says, “If the filmic narrator exists only in the way it highlights and intensifies the story, if it is visible only through its storytelling, we can also say that the story is visible only through the filmic discourse that tells it” (1991, 286). And Griffith's storytelling approach continued to develop during this late period, especially apparent in how he handles performance style, staging of background action, and intra-scene editing, elements that further guide the viewer to perceive the story as though it were emerging directly from the depicted action.<sup>6</sup> However, these tendencies continued to be counterbalanced by more overt narrational moments when the self-consciousness of Griffith's storytelling technique asserted itself.

Many commentators have noted how Griffith showcased his actors in a number of the late Biographs, creating ample opportunity for demonstrations of the verisimilar style of performance. Occasionally this would result in bravura moments, such as those supplied by Claire McDowell in *The Female of the Species* (1912), Lillian Gish in *The Mothering Heart* (1913), or Blanche Sweet in *The Painted Lady* (1913).<sup>7</sup> But the verisimilar style is sufficiently pervasive to inform performances in films not obviously designed to highlight acting. In *The Girl and Her Trust* (1912), for example, a film typically remarked upon for its rapid editing and extensive tracking shots, Dorothy Bernard expresses flirtatiousness and innocence through a series of small-scale gestures involving a bottle of soda pop and a straw. Whether swirling the bottle to create bubbles or touching her fingers to her lips after an erstwhile suitor has foregone her offer of sharing a drink in order to steal a kiss, Bernard sustains a mood of spirited romantic engagement, relying primarily on facial expression and diegetically motivated props.

Griffith also evinces care in having his background players engage in bits of business to create the illusion of a self-contained story world. The range of activities contained in a single busy composition crammed with extras nearly overwhelms the eye. In films such as *Friends* (1912), *One is Business; the Other Crime* (1912), and *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), these compositions are built upon multiple pools of action, channeled along a narrow corridor. In the latter film in particular, Griffith consistently accentuates the depth of such images by telescoping



5.2 A typically dense and deep composition in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912).

the contents of the shot; this approach results in an inverted cone where the action in the foreground spreads out in direct contrast to the more compressed activity in the background.

If compositions such as these tend to create a ricocheting effect, amplified by the host of unreciprocated glances cast by so many characters massed together yet engaged in diverse activities, Griffith's increasingly refined editing strategies aim for spatial analysis and spectatorial guidance. One notes more instances of intrascene editing, which contributes to the high shot counts of films such as *The Girl and Her Trust* and *The Lady and the Mouse* (1913), both of which feature extended sequences of intricate actions, analyzed by a breakdown of space into more legible sectors. But Griffith would also gravitate toward cut-ins to isolate reactions, such as the numerous shots of Mary Pickford on the staircase in *Friends*. (Obviously, the employment of a closer shot scale also insured that the verisimilar performance style would register its effects more readily.) In fact, analytical editing represents one aspect of narrational development in which one can see Griffith still experimenting with options. In *The Burglar's Dilemma* (1912), for example, when the director wishes to register the moral struggle Henry Walthall's character undergoes, he first frames Walthall, positioned in the shot's mid-ground, in the exact space opened up between the shoulders of the two actors standing closer to

the camera. Later, during the same scene, Griffith will opt for separate shots of Walthall instead. Where the first option presents us with Walthall's struggle as a function of the men flanking him (one is the burglar whom Walthall has falsely accused of a crime that he himself has committed; the other a detective), the second registers his dilemma through performance all the more clearly.

One could argue that the second option seems more "natural" to contemporary eyes, in part because the compositional manipulation required for the first option shows marks of an intrusive storyteller. At this point in the development of Griffith's narrator system, such moments of narrational intervention are still fairly easy to identify. One thinks of the deliberate and startling moves of characters toward the camera in both *The House of Darkness* and *Musketeers*, the carefully composed shots that privilege mood over transmission of narrative information in *House* and *The Sands of Dee* (1912), or the overt parallelism of the opening of *One is Business*. If the aim of classical narration is to suppress narrational self-consciousness in order to encourage the sense that the story is telling itself, Griffith never embraced such an approach, even if his films exhibit a narrational dexterity. As I have expressed elsewhere, to fully understand Griffith as an exemplary transitional director, one must take into account his significant contributions to the period's developments while also acknowledging how idiosyncratic some of those contributions are. Only during the transitional period could a director as distinctive as Griffith still be as pertinent (Keil 2008, 4).

As one final demonstration of the distinctiveness of Griffith's narrational range during the late Biograph period, I will offer a somewhat more extended analysis of a significant film from 1913, *Death's Marathon*.<sup>8</sup> The film is notable for featuring an unsuccessful last-minute rescue, with the inevitability of its failure signaled by the suggestive title, which fuses the stasis of mortality and the endurance of a race, just as the film's centerpiece of parallel editing arrests the rapidity of the intercutting with lingering shots of death and its aftermath. By 1913, Griffith had proved sufficiently adept at the various permutations of the last-minute rescue that setting himself the task of thwarting its expected outcome became the ultimate version of reworking this familiar device.

The fatalism of the title casts a pall over the entirety of the last-minute rescue, which employs roughly half of the film's shots and takes up one-third of its running time. (Its shot total of 112 is just a few shy of the highest for a Griffith single-reeler produced this year.) Perhaps because the rescue's outcome is preordained, Griffith devotes no time to tracing out in advance the route that the erstwhile rescuer (Walter Miller) will use when speeding toward the office where his partner (Henry Walthall) is threatening to kill himself. By this time viewers may have become accustomed to understanding that each successive shot of the rescuer's car should be read as bringing it progressively closer to its intended destination, but more to the point, the refusal to underscore increasing proximity reinforces the futility of the rescue attempt. Ironically, when Miller finally reaches his destination (in a shot whose *mise-en-scène* does confirm the locale as the

exterior of the office building), it is already too late. While I am not ruling out the possibility that Griffith designed the sequence to encourage suspense, the suspense comes cloaked in the dread of inevitability. Rather than having the viewer speculate whether the agent of salvation will arrive in time to prevent wrongdoing, Griffith employed his standard battery of rapid cuts and precise alternation of specified spaces to keep the spectator guessing about when death will finally intervene to thwart the efforts of the rescuer.

As Tom Gunning has pointed out, placing a threatened suicide at the center of the film's last-minute rescue converts the terms of the rescue's representation (2003, 63). Unlike the standard version, where the rescue line of action speeds toward the space of the imperiled party, even as the forces of imperilment move ever closer, here victim and assailant reside within the same space (and, indeed, the same body). The retardatory function of editing within the rescue scenario, where delay proves essential for the perpetuation of suspense and where interruption renders the ultimate act of salvation all the more gratifying, becomes almost sadistically obvious in *Death's Marathon*. All that stands between the suicide and death are the delaying tactics of his wife (Blanche Sweet) on the other end of the phone. Griffith cuts methodically between shots of the two parties, alternating between closely scaled shots of Walthall, who never moves from his seated position at his desk, and Sweet, framed at a slightly greater distance from the camera, and allowed one moment of mobility when she runs off to another room to enlist the persuasive powers of the couple's baby. (Such is the pessimism of *Death's Marathon* that even the innocence of an infant cannot dissuade the suicide from pursuing self-destruction.) The intense spatial restriction of this series of alternating shots is interrupted only by the methodical insertion of shots detailing Miller's progress. As we might expect, the speed and movement embodied in these shots of Miller's automobile rushing from one side of the screen to the other stand in direct contrast to the largely static and intimate shots of the couple linked by the telephone. But near metronomic timing of these interjections proves to be their most distinctive feature. Once the spatial coordinates for the husband and wife are fixed, six shots are devoted to Miller in his car, from the moment that he arrives at the couple's home to the moment when he finally reaches the office, and the intervals separating each of their appearances create a remarkably symmetrical pattern: nine shots (50 seconds), two shots (10 seconds), nine shots (51 seconds), nine shots (34 seconds), five shots (31 seconds). Recurring with such predictability, these shots of Miller's ride to the rescue assume an inevitability that renders the fruitlessness of his attempt all the more poignant. Never has a rescue been presented with such machine-like precision yet failed so abysmally.

The shots of the rescue attempt also operate as strategically positioned structuring devices, carving the interaction of husband and wife into discrete narrative segments. Gunning's analysis carefully details this justly celebrated aspect of the film, reminding us that the extended telephone conversation relies on the strength of the performances of Walthall and Sweet, despite the brevity of most of

the shots (2003, 64–65). If attention has properly focused on the bravura depiction of resignation and barely controlled mania conveyed by the former – and Roberta Pearson provides a concise account of its power – Sweet's achievement emerges as no less remarkable (1992, 110–111). Particularly striking is the moment of Walthall's actual death, registered by Sweet's reaction rather than depiction of the shooting itself. Unlike Walthall, who uses the gun throughout as a prop to telegraph the fluctuations in his emotions, Sweet is left largely to her own devices. The horror of Walthall's death is played out on her face. Up until this point, the give-and-take of action and reaction has sustained the wife's ploy of keeping her husband on the line, while also motivating the constant alternation of shots between the two parties. Seeing the husband's death performed through the wife's reactions simultaneously registers the chill of recognition that she is now alone. The intensity of Sweet's focused performance conveys the finality of her husband's decision, as does the extended duration of the two shots devoted to her expression of shock and grief, both noticeably longer than any of the shots leading up to this moment. The phone line no longer connects her to her spouse, nor does it hold forth the prospect of his salvation. When Miller finally picks up the receiver and confirms the obvious, we might be tempted to read the succession of shots as laying the groundwork for the creation of a new couple, as Miller assumes the husband's role. But Griffith tempers this impression by sustaining the action past the moment the phone call ends, to include a shot of Sweet stumbling aimlessly to the adjoining room, only to collapse. With this image of physical and emotional exhaustion ends the most unorthodox last-minute rescue that Griffith would ever film.

If *Death's Marathon* provided us with nothing else than this shockingly downbeat challenge to the last-minute rescue's conventions, it would warrant attention. But the latter half also gains power from the way Griffith initiates numerous parallels and image patterns in the early sections that then resonate throughout the rest of the film. The film's fascination with floral imagery and smoking, initiated in the opening sequences of courtship, persists throughout. While Walthall's penchant for smoking conveys his self-confidence, Miller's appropriating the same habit only underscores his loneliness. Griffith compounds this impression by placing the shot of Miller shown smoking alone at the gentlemen's club directly after the sole sequence devoted to portraying Sweet and Walthall's brief period of domestic bliss. Later, when a delivery boy grabs a puff of a cigarette, exhaling emphatically before completing his errand in the adjoining office (and then picking up the temporarily abandoned butt before exiting the offices altogether), it seems little more than an incidental bit of business given to Bobby Harron to inject a walk-on role with some interest. But the message Harron delivers leads Miller to discover that Walthall has embezzled invested funds to support his gambling. And the blast of smoke emitted by his cigarette will later be reproduced by the gun that takes Walthall's life, as the cockiness that Walthall displayed earlier proves his undoing. The meanings generated by such imagery twist and turn as the film's tone darkens and the characters find that they can neither control nor predict what life has in

store for them. Accordingly, flowers, so closely associated with Sweet as a natural outgrowth of love at the outset, come to signify a failed marriage, and the various bouquets appointing the home she and Walthall share eventually stand as a mockery of their past happiness. By the film's final shot, the slate is wiped clean, with Sweet (in a composition reminiscent of the fourth shot that introduced her) clad in widow's weeds, and all flowers in her home removed. The bittersweet tone of the film's conclusion arises from Miller's final gesture. He brings her a bouquet of roses and then leaves. Though her half-smile suggests the possibility of a new life, it could equally imply a rueful recognition of her changed status.

*Death's Marathon* is a film all but bursting with directorial inventiveness. It becomes even more suggestive when viewed in combination with *The Mothering Heart*, the Biograph film likely produced directly afterward, as the later film rings variations on the former. Both films feature wives neglected by husbands lured away from the home; both employ floral imagery to convey the failing fortunes of the marriage; both employ infants at critical junctures in attempts to strengthen the weakened bonds between husband and wife. But viewing the films in combination is also instructive because it shows us that, by 1913, Griffith was not only toying with his own formulae but borrowing from trends developing around him. Experimenting with the depiction of subjective states, exploring the depth of sets with extensive background space, exploiting the emotional and visual potential of offscreen space, arranging characters around tables so that some have their backs to the camera, showing characters reflected in mirrors – one finds Griffith trying out all of these approaches, though none is strongly associated with his filmmaking style at this time. As the pressure increased to find ways to render narratives that were psychologically dense and emotionally compelling, that were visually resonant and narrationally inventive, Griffith employed an array of approaches to provide solutions to the problems posed by his chosen scenario. In this he differs little from other filmmakers of the period, though few would experiment so insistently in a single film. In my first published essay on Griffith (and on transitional cinema), I identified a productive tension between the demands of style and narrative as the salient trait of the late Griffith-era Biographs (Keil 1989). I see little reason to amend that assessment now, some 20 years later, except to add that in Griffith the tension often seems even more palpable and the works emerging out of that tension the most satisfying the period has to offer. Griffith's Biograph films offer no evidence that we should bracket him off from central tendencies of transitional-era production, but they do force us to continue rethinking its conceptual boundaries.

## Notes

- 1 Even so, one can overstate the availability of the Griffith Biograph oeuvre. Near-total preservation has not translated into the availability of all titles as viewable prints. (For one account of the archival status of many of Griffith's films from this period, see Usai 2001, vii.)

- 2 Primary among these would be Jesionowski 1987, Gunning 1991, Pearson 1992, and Simmon 1993.
- 3 I have assigned dates to films based on the time of their release rather than when they were made. Typically, only a few months separated the time of production from the time of release.
- 4 The analysis of *The Usurer* is an edited and revised version of the one that appears in Keil 2000, 153–156.
- 5 Russell Merritt disagrees, saying “as Griffith became more self-assured, his best narratives had become simpler and less moralistic, with undertones more intricate than ever” (2002, 160).
- 6 As Kristin Thompson has said of transitional narration generally, it “found ways of motivating the telling process so that it seemed for the most part to come from within the action of the scene” (1997, 432).
- 7 Aside from Pearson's book-length study (1992), Russell Merritt's influential essay on *The Painted Lady* (1976) provides an exacting analysis of late-era Biograph performance style.
- 8 The analysis of *Death's Marathon* is an edited and revised version of the one that appears as part of Keil 2008, 5–9.

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## 6

## PINK-SLIPPED

What Happened to the Women  
in the Silent Film Industry?

Jane M. Gaines

"Why did she ever leave the pictures!" laments Epes Winthrop Sargent upon seeing a photograph of actress Gene Gauntier. Quoted in the introduction to Gauntier's 1928 memoir "Blazing the Trail," Sargent cries out on behalf of a generation of audiences ("Gene Gauntier Again" 1928, 4). Four years earlier, in the same vein, a *Photoplay* article titled "Unwept, Unhonored, and Unfilmed" bemoans the disappearance of Gauntier as well as of Marion Leonard, Florence Lawrence, Florence Turner, Cleo Madison, Flora Finch, and Helen Holmes. Such a complaint is nothing new to motion picture historiography. "Unwept," in the best fan magazine tradition, is nostalgia for the forgotten glory of the fading actress and today it could be easily dismissed as nothing more. But buried within the 1924 article are motion picture industry history details seldom found in fan magazine puff pieces. And, as intriguing for film scholars, outbursts of feeling from the women *Photoplay* interviewed suggest another story, one for a new feminist film moment.

Deep within the article we find evidence that these women put their names behind independent companies in the first decade of the new industry. We learn, for instance, that in 1913 Florence Turner left the Vitagraph Company to form her own company, Turner Films, Inc., in London (Smith 1924, 65). Further we read that in December 1912, Gene Gauntier, along with director Sidney Olcott and her husband Jack Clark, left the Kalem Company and started the independent Gene Gauntier Feature Players Company (Smith 1924, 102).<sup>1</sup> In the same article we are told that Florence Lawrence headed the Victor Company and that Helen Holmes was associated with the Signal Film Company (Smith 1924, 103–104).

Over 90 years later, new feminist scholarship tells us what *Photoplay* did not tell fans in 1924. What *Photoplay* doesn't say is that Lawrence started the Victor