



D.W. Griffith: Years of Discovery, 1909-1913: Biograph Notes
By Russell Merritt

THOSE AWFUL HATS (JANUARY 1909, 3 MINS.)

Probably the shortest film Griffith ever directed, made as a curtain raiser and intended as a humorous replacement for the usual magic lantern slide "Ladies will kindly remove their hats." Linda Arvidson, Griffith's first wife, plays one of the daughters; Mack Sennett is the fellow in the loud jacket.

THE SEALED ROOM (SEPTEMBER 1909, 11 MINS.)

Griffith's hothouse version of a Balzac short story, with Henry Walthall at his most grandiloquent. At the time he made his adaptation, Griffith was under the spell of the French *film d'art* school with its highly rhetorical treatment of historical subjects. He was particularly impressed by Charles le Bargy's *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise*, the most popular of the highbrow French imports among American audiences. Griffith called Bargy's film "a complete revelation" and told Robert Florey in 1922 it provided his "best memory of the early cinema."

THE REDMAN'S VIEW (DECEMBER 1909, 15 MINS.)

The Biograph Bulletin proudly called this one "rather a new treatment of the Indian story," a film that dramatized the persecution of the Kiowa tribe as the Kiowas are forced to resettle. Stories about Native Americans played a significant part in Griffith's Biograph career: he directed some forty "Indian stories," both in New York and in California to cash in on the growing market for Westerns. The actress playing the beleaguered Minnewanna is unknown, but Owen Moore and James Kirkwood play Silver Eagle and his father. Griffith was never busier than in 1909. He directed over one hundred fifty films that year, averaging two and three Biographs per week.

CORNER IN WHEAT (DECEMBER 1909, 14 MINS.)

Historians charting the origins of the social protest film invariably single out CORNER IN WHEAT as a milestone. It is also a landmark in Griffith's development as a filmmaker. The director used his by-now familiar cross-cutting technique for new, startling effects: to contrast the rich with the poor, the farm with the city, and to dramatize the impact of a stock manipulator's greed on people he never meets. He also skillfully varied the rhythms and the pace of individual scenes to give his narrative extraordinary drive. Griffith's story came from two Frank Norris tales: a chapter from *The Octopus* intertwined with a short story called "A Deal in Wheat." But in transforming it into a film editorial, Griffith also incorporated pictorial compositions based on famous paintings and tableaux vivants taken from his stage days.

THE UNCHANGING SEA (MAY 1910, 14 MINS.)

Inspired by Charles Kingsley's poem "The Three Fishers," this was shot during Griffith's first excursion to California in 1910. The film finds Griffith making one of his occasional efforts at rather heavy-handed allegory, one meant to contrast the "Sea of Life" with the "Sea of Death." Yet, there is startling beauty in the silhouettes of the stoic women on the shore as they wait for their men to return from sea. This is Mary Pickford's first



appearance in this anthology. Soon eclipsing Florence Lawrence as Griffith's leading lady, she became Griffith's first major discovery. "

IN THE BORDER STATES (JUNE 1910, 15 MINS.)
HIS TRUST (JANUARY 1911, 14 MINS.)

From the start, the Civil War fired Griffith's imagination. Griffith averaged two Civil War Biographs per year, and as film historian Scott Simmon has noticed, each of them became an occasion for Griffith to expand his sense of spectacle and build on his formal experiments. Two of the liveliest Civil War films at Biograph, neither *IN THE BORDER STATES* nor *HIS TRUST* reveal the darker aspects of the Southern legends that soon crept into Griffith's later Civil War Biographs — the shameful family secrets, the shuttered mansions, the women in perpetual mourning. The breakthroughs here are a part of Griffith's early, uncomplicated exuberance about the war. Particularly notable are the breathtaking atmospheric effects of *BORDER STATES*, the brisk, exciting pace, and the growing mastery of mood in *HIS TRUST*, the first part of Griffith's first two-reeler. *HIS TRUST* anticipates *The Birth of a Nation* in several ways, especially when it introduces the aristocratic Southern family and then intercuts death on the battlefield with the effects of war on the family back home.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH OUR OLD? (FEBRUARY 1911, 14 MINS.)

One of several impassioned social documentaries Griffith made for Biograph. Although *WHAT SHALL WE DO...* was not as famous as *CORNER IN WHEAT*, directed the year before, Griffith worked with even more controversial material. The film was released in part to help put pressure on the New York legislature to pass a 1911 old age pension bill that had languished in the Senate for months. The print shown here is incomplete, but it represents the longest version extant. The scene depicting the old man's arrest after the burglary, as well as the scene that triggers the burglary attempt (the sight of two wealthy women coddling a puppy, which, the old man perceives, is receiving better care than his wife), are lost.

FOR HIS SON (JANUARY 1912, 15 MINS.)

As a moralist Griffith was particularly eager to dramatize the folly of unbridled ambition. Of the many films he made on the subject, this is unquestionably the zaniest. A businessman achieves success by adding just a pinch of cocaine to his new soft drink—"for that tired feeling, Dopokoke"—only to have his son fall into a fatal addiction. Until the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 put a stop to it, Coca-Cola® actually contained cocaine. Charles West, who had made a specialty of venal sons and lovers, plays the unfortunate son. Biograph regular Charles Hill Mailes plays the father.

THE SUNBEAM (FEBRUARY 1912, 15 MINS.)

A vivid refutation to the notion that Griffith couldn't direct comedy. In the hands of a lesser director, child actress Inez Seabury would all but steal the show as the exuberant Sunbeam. Her scenes with Biograph veteran Claire McDowell rank among the comic highlights in Griffith's early career. But the film also reveals a wonderful formal symmetry that creates a true ensemble piece. While the narrative may appear simple, the subtleties of its composition and form are crucial to the film's comic charm. It is also a film marked by an unusually intricate editing pattern. By late 1911, when he directed *THE SUNBEAM*, Griffith



was exploring the effects of rhythmic cross-cutting in scenes far removed from the crowd-pleasing chases and last-minute rescues.

THE GIRL AND HER TRUST (MARCH 1912, 15 MINS.)

Griffith earned his earliest reputation as the master of the last-minute rescue. *THE GIRL AND HER TRUST*, until recently overshadowed by its illustrious predecessor *The Lonedale Operator*, shows how adroitly Griffith could employ the technique of cross-cutting for suspense. To our knowledge, Griffith worked with tracking shots only once before, but no less remarkable than the chase scene is his economy in creating characterization and motivation. Working with a soda bottle, a lunch bag, and a pistol that the heroine rejects, he creates a remarkably full personality for the railroad clerk and her admiring express agent.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES (APRIL 1912, 14 MINS.)

One of the grimmest of all Griffith's Biographs, chronicling the descent of characters into brutishness amidst a harsh, unforgiving environment. The wind-blown desert is turned into a powerful counterpart to Claire MacDowell's insane jealousy. In its use of landscape and the slow, deliberate acting style, *THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES* anticipates films like *Greed* and *The Wind*. Griffith methodically moves his camera closer to the action here, enabling his players to work less with gesture and more with subtle variations of facial expression. As an example of maternal melodrama, the film shows Griffith at his wildest. His faith in the redeeming aspects of mother love struck reviewers even in his own day as excessive. Mary Pickford plays McDowell's sister; Dorothy Bernard is the other woman.

ONE IS BUSINESS, THE OTHER CRIME (APRIL 1912, 15 MINS.)

Another effort, as with *CORNER IN WHEAT*, at dramatizing the effect of corrupt business ethics through principles of contrast and cross-cutting. The film feels less radical because the formal experimentation is less daring and Griffith has eliminated any references to the economic consequences of his businessman's actions. But the film is remarkable for its use of decor and setting to manipulate mood.

AN UNSEEN ENEMY (SEPTEMBER 1912, 15 MINS.)

AN UNSEEN ENEMY marks the debut of Lillian and Dorothy Gish at Biograph, initiating a Griffith-Gish collaboration that lasted almost ten years. The movie shows Griffith in total control of his last-minute rescue formula — to the extent that he permits a hint of parody to brighten the entire adventure. The familiar heroic posturing — the menacing black hand, the brother charging to the rescue, the two victims frightened but resourceful — is gently undercut by characters who can't quite live up to their assigned roles. As a secret menace, the scullery maid is something of a humbug; the younger sister comes within inches of proving herself a heroine, but faints dead away at the crucial moment; and the brother, for all his frantic activity, does not arrive at the nick of time.

THE PAINTED LADY (OCTOBER 1912, 12 MINS.)

One of the most remarkable films Griffith ever made, reminiscent of Henry James' *Washington Square*, which had been turned into a play a few years earlier. In portraying a cloistered daughter's lapse into madness, Blanche Sweet reveals a remarkable poignance.



As usual with Griffith, it is difficult to say just how far sexuality enters into the movie intentionally, since the subject is so censored and disguised, but what remains remarkable is how easily the film can be read as a Freudian parable, the heroine doubling images of her father and lover, acting out sexual frustration with mirrors and pistols.

THE MUSKETEERS OF PIG ALLEY (NOVEMBER 1912, 17 MINS.)

Arguably Griffith's finest Biograph, certainly a landmark in the development of the gangster film. It is also Griffith's most tightly knit narrative and his most vivid depiction of New York's underworld. The exteriors were shot on West 12th Street in Manhattan, and local hoods were recruited to play some of the gangster roles. Despite the rapid pace of narrative, there is a remarkably graceful, almost ethereal quality about the film as Griffith carefully orchestrates the movements of characters through streets, alleys, and bars.

THE NEW YORK HAT (DECEMBER 1912, 16 MINS.)

One of Griffith's most famous Biographs, written by a young Anita Loos, later to become famous as a screenwriter for Douglas Fairbanks, author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and flapper extraordinaire. This was Pickford's last Biograph and Lionel Barrymore's first as a leading man. Pickford's virtuoso performance, working with the hat, ribbon, mirrors, and the like to reveal her inner thoughts, anticipate the work of another Griffith master — Lillian Gish — who brought this technique to new heights in *Broken Blossoms*.

THE BURGLAR'S DILEMMA (DECEMBER 1912, 15 MINS.)

An exciting crime story, with the finale taken from headline stories about the work of New York police. The New York police department was in the spotlight after the gangland slaying of Herman Rosenthal. A point of interest: Bobby Harron's interrogation by Alfred Paget and John Dillon was Griffith's version of the widely publicized third degree.

THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS (MAY 1913, 17 MINS.)

Toward the end of Griffith's Biograph career, trade reviewers noticed a new tone in Griffith's work. "Somber, melancholy Biograph should adopt a tombstone as its trademark," wrote Film Reports. As Griffith became more adroit in exploring themes of suicide, depression, and insanity, commentators became concerned. THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS was considered one of his darkest films. The striking opening shots show patients in an insane asylum encased in separate worlds, their madness deliberately counterpoised to the beauty of the grove of trees around them. For Griffith (beginning with *Where the Breakers Roar* in 1908), madness seems to represent a primal chaos which threatens the security of the everyday world. The idea of music returning characters to their senses recurs throughout Griffith's career, but nowhere more affectingly than here. The film is also of interest as marking the first use of a flashback structure in Griffith's work.

DEATH'S MARATHON (JUNE 1913, 15 MINS.)

DEATH'S MARATHON shows another last-minute rescue attempt, but one with a singular difference. Henry Walthall plays the husband who can't hold on to money. The original *Moving Picture World* review thought that his suicide effort would have appeared more convincing if someone had remembered to put bullets in the Biograph pistol.



THE MOTHERING HEART (JUNE 1913, 23 MINS.)

From the start, critics recognized THE MOTHERING HEART as a major tour de force. In interviews, Griffith himself generally called it one of his two best Biographs (THE BATTLE AT ELDERBUSH GULCH was the other). It boasted the most expensive scenes Griffith had directed up to that time (the restaurant set, by his account, cost \$1,800). But, of course, what everyone remembered was Lillian Gish's performance. A year earlier, Griffith had begun experimenting with his best actresses — Blanche Sweet, Mary Pickford, and Mae Marsh — in an effort to protract a character's emotional response when confronted with a traumatic event.

Lillian Gish's climactic scenes in her mother's house are one result: a brilliantly concentrated portrait of a young mother shattered by the loss of her baby. Each expression makes its individual point, as she builds from a feeling of helplessness, anger, remorse, to an almost whimpering desire for revenge. At the final moment, she walks out into the back yard, picks up a stick, and with all the strength left her, slaughters a rose bush. It is, to use James Agee's term, an unkillable moment.

THE BATTLE AT ELDERBUSH GULCH (MARCH 1914, 29 MINS.)

Griffith took more time and care in completing his late Biographs as he became interested in moving into features and took increasingly longer screen time to develop mood and character. THE BATTLE AT ELDERBUSH GULCH, Griffith's penultimate Biograph, shows where he's headed. Shot in California's San Fernando Valley, it was unmistakably his most spectacular Biograph Western. He built an entire Western town for a backdrop and recruited an unprecedented number of extras for his cavalry and Indian scenes. The film makes an interesting contrast with THE REDMAN'S VIEW, filmed only four years earlier. With BATTLE, Griffith was working entirely within the mythic formulas of the genre: the gradually escalating dispute between the Indians and the whites, the settlers under attack from the warring tribe, the last bullet saved to spare the heroine from rape, and the timely arrival of cavalry troops, this time led by Henry Walthall looking taller than ever. The conservative Biograph management, furious at Griffith's cost overruns, refused to release the completed picture until months after Griffith had severed relations with the company in late 1913.

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