

Musée d'Art Moderne
The American Film, 1896-1955

PLEASE RETURN TO THE
PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd St., New York

February 10, 1955

THE AMERICAN FILM, 1896-1955
By Richard Griffith, Curator
Museum of Modern Art Film Library

The Narrative Film

The film medium, "child of the laboratory and the machine", declared its artistic independence first in the United States. Here, the early films were made by humble men, innocent of literary or theatrical tradition, for an even humbler audience. It was in fact a cameraman-mechanic, Edwin S. Porter, who began the invention of cinematic narrative with Le Vol du rapide (The Great Train Robbery, 1903), and a journeyman actor, D. W. Griffith, who brought it to full maturity in the remarkable series of short films which he made for the American Biograph and Mutoscope Company between 1908 and 1912. Subject at first to French and later to strong Italian influence, these "Griffith Biographs" nevertheless remain the most profoundly original contributions to the development of narrative yet known. In them, the art of the motion picture can be seen in process of creation. Here stage conventions are progressively abandoned, the action broken into shorter scenes, movement is much freer, parallel action is developed through cross-cutting; there is increasing variety of set-ups and camera angles, long and close shots. By the time of Les Mousquetaires de Pig Alley (The Musketeers of Pig Alley, 1912), Griffith set the camera close to his material if he wished intimate detail and withdrew it for broad effects; he then composed his film out of selected lengths of these close shots and long shots. By the time Griffith left Biograph in 1913, the foundations of modern technique had been laid.

Two years later his Naissance d'une nation (Birth of A Nation) astonished the world. This most celebrated of all films revived the passions of the Civil War and created more controversy than any film before or since. It established David Wark Griffith as the pre-eminent master of the motion picture. It still remains the yardstick by which other films are judged, for grandeur of scale, for sweeping emotion, for success.

The next year Griffith created his Intolérance (Intolerance), the formal masterpiece of the movies, which told four stories simultaneously, weaving them together until at the climax they merge and history itself seems to pour like a cataract across the screen. Intolérance is "the only film fugue" and, as such, it entirely failed of public popularity. No one has ever imitated the formal idea upon which this film is based, and Intolérance remains a ruined Colosseum - a quarry from which later builders have taken only what they best could use. Its compositional structure served as the model upon which Soviet theories of film-making have been based; its spectacle has been in the back of every film-maker's mind ever since; and its parallel between epochs ^{has} ~~have~~ irresistibly drawn all serious directors.

After the burst of creative activity which had its climax in 1916, American film-makers devoted themselves to refining the narrative technique of which they were pre-eminently the inventors, and to the production of large numbers of films geared to the mass market. Experiment continued in the commercial studios, but only in concert with the policy just described. Charles Chaplin, the greatest creative figure ever associated with the screen, is almost the sole exception; since 1918 he has produced his films with his own finances and very much as he pleased. A partial exception was Eric von Stroheim, who made his films without regard for the preference of his employers or of the public. Unable to come to terms with boxofficialdom or to resolve the structural problems of his films, he was seldom able to send a picture to the screen as he shot and edited it. His work is unequal, opulent, and instinct with a searing realism which owes as much to the artist's knowledge of the human heart as to his profound understanding of the pitiless penetration of the camera's eye. Even the fragment of his Mc Teague (released as Les Rapaces (Greed, 1924)), remains one of the greatest examples of a cinematography extant.

Under the conditions described above, the most fertile vein which the American film has worked has been that of comedy, especially "low" comedy. Among the several brilliant comedians who, like Chaplin, graduated from the school of

Mack Sennett to stardom in the 'twenties, Buster Keaton developed slap-stick into wry and sometimes metaphysical comment, while Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon charmed a world audience with their revival of the figure of the classic simpleton. Indeed, the global success of the American film resulted from the development of such screen personalities. They answered the day-dreams of countless millions. Among actor-producers who rose to fame by reason of some trait of personality or physique, William S. Hart's "severe yet impassioned figure" dominated a series of admirable films, while Douglas Fairbanks became a world favorite because, like most great entertainers, he did one thing superbly and all the time.

Of European directors imported to the United States, Ernst Lubitsch the German and Victor Seastrom the Swede best adapted themselves to Hollywood conditions, Lubitsch by virtue of his discreetly Americanized version of "continental sophistication." The sincere and hard-working Seastrom found an ally in the Griffith graduate Lillian Gish, and between them they achieved the ultimate in mute eloquence with La Lettre rouge (The Scarlet Letter, 1926) and Le Vent (The Wind, 1928).

It seemed, in fact, that they and others had taken the silent film as far as it could go. But from 1896 onward, American film-makers had been striving to add new dimensions to the medium by mechanical as well as esthetic means. The color film was in slow process of development when, in 1927, the successful synchronization of sound and image brought on the talkie revolution. Paradoxically, its first effect was to bring all development to a halt, as the camera and microphone were chained to the sound "stage" and to stage methods. King Vidor freed both at one stroke in the second year of the talkies with his Halleluyah! (Hallelujah!), a film which faced all the esthetic problems raised by sound as few films have since. The next year, Lewis Milestone's A l'Ouest, rien de nouveau (All Quiet on the Western Front) and Josef von Sternberg's Marocco (Morocco) continued to explore the new compound medium, reducing dialogue to a subsidiary narrative function. Thereafter, the rapidly developing

49

sound film resumed such traditions as slapstick, satire, camera trickwork and the super-production. More typical, perhaps, were films like La Dame aux Camélias (Camille), L'Introuvable (The Thin Man), and La Vipère (The Little Foxes), which, through more credible characterizations and more natural if still theatrical dialogue sought to refine the uneasy compromise between film and theatre on which most sound films still rest. More recently, beginning with John Ford's Qu'elle était verte ma vallée (How Green Was My Valley) and culminating in Brackett and Wilder's Poison (The Lost Weekend), another form of narrative has appeared, this time under the influence of the novel, in which the story is told by an invisible narrator who unfolds it little by little in the form of flashbacks. This and all other developments have been recently interrupted by a new mechanical innovation, the anamorphic lens, which enables a gigantic enlargement of the screen and the creation of an illusion of depth and perspective. As with sound, the first effect of the giant screen has been to throw the film back upon its ancient dependence on the stage, but there are already signs, as in William Wellman's Écrit dans le ciel (The High and The Mighty), that the American film will shortly recapture the space, movement, and vitality on which its world appeal depends.

Documentary

It was as an instrument of instruction and persuasion that the motion picture was first admired and feared, and fear and admiration persist in almost equal measure for its later uses as world salesman, propagandist for war and peace, and goad to the unpleasant and unfamiliar task of thinking. All these attempts to manipulate facts in order to manipulate opinions drew inspiration from the work of an American whose chief interest was in the unmanipulated fact itself. If world audiences have found in the films of Robert Flaherty a unique spirit of enquiry, of integrity, and of humanity, these qualities derived from his approach to the camera, fundamental instrument of film-making. His example first found disciples in Europe,

but in the middle 'thirties under his influence there appeared in the United States a flourishing documentary film movement, led by Pare Lorentz, whose La Charrue et les plaines (The Plow That Broke The Plains) and La Rivière (The River), remain milestones of importance almost equal to Flaherty's films. A host of young men followed Lorentz's footsteps in the making of documentaries for government agencies or business corporations. These attained their maximum power and utility in the war and have achieved slower but more deeply-rooted growth in the post-war years, when they have been used chiefly for educational purposes and for the projection of America overseas. American documentary has also exerted increasing influence on the American narrative film. Louis de Rochemont, who conceived and conducted La Marche du Temps (The March of Time) series of films on current events for many years, transplanted many of its techniques to Hollywood and achieved a convincing blend of fiction and fact in several films, of which the most notable is Frontières invisibles (Lost Boundaries).

Experimental Films

In the United States, the experimental impulse has largely been absorbed by the challenge of the commercial studios, where against all probabilities dedicated amateurs are drawn to fight the wavering battle of Hollywood. Since the late 'forties, it has been possible to say that amateur and semi-professional experiment flourishes in the United States: a host of men and women strive to explore the medium at considerable sacrifice and little profit to themselves. The animated film, owing as much to European example as to the still towering and unique figure of Walt Disney, has come into its own. Experiments in the nature of photography itself are beginning to be made, as in Helen Levitt's Dans la rue (In The Street). "Art" films after the continental model proliferate, one of the most popular being Burgess Meredith's and Herbert Matter's Les Oeuvres de Calder (Works of Calder). Surrealist films, "psychological" films, and film poems absorb the energies of painters, poets, novelists, and

simple film-lovers, all made in the shadow and spirit of that cinematic "School of Paris" which Man Ray, René Clair, Fernand Léger, and Jean Cocteau founded in the twenties, and which still dominates the imagination of the young.

The artistic quality and character of motion pictures cannot be adequately represented in an exhibition, for a film exists in time, and a "still" photograph from it can no more suggest the whole than a single bar from a piece of music can render the structure of the entire composition. The panels included in this exhibition, therefore, merely indicate some contributions made by the United States to the three types of film discussed above -- narrative, documentary and experimental. Yet, if stills do less than justice to individual films, they can indicate something of the scope of a collection -- in this case, the greatest film collection in the world, that of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library. The purpose of this Library is to collect, preserve and show the artistically and historically significant films produced throughout the world over the past sixty years. It shows these in the Museum's own auditorium and also circulates them at nominal cost to non-profit groups throughout the United States. The post-war activity in experimental film-making has even been attributed by one authority to the Film Library's influence: its "collection of pictures and program notes dealing with the history, art, and traditions of cinema went to hundreds of colleges, universities, museums, film appreciation groups, study groups. These widespread exhibitions as well as the Museum of Modern Art's own showings in their theatre in New York City exerted a major influence in preparing a broader appreciation and production of experimental films" (Lewis Jacobs, Experiment in the Film, London, 1949).

It is hoped to supplement the token representation of the Museum of Modern Art's activity in this field, here merely symbolized by the three panels listed below, by showings of programs of the American film at an auditorium in Paris concurrently with this exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne.

550. Panneau des photographies tirées des film-récits américains, 1903-1922.
551. Panneau des photographies tirées des film-récits américains, 1926-1952.
552. Panneau des photographies tirées des documentaires et des films d'avant-garde américains, 1926-1952.

ANNEX TO : THE AMERICAN FILM

The following are the titles under which the films cited in Richard Griffith's foreword were released in France, or the French translations if not distributed there:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <u>The Great Train Robbery</u> | 1. <u>Le Vol du rapide</u> |
| 2. <u>The Musketeers of Pig Alley</u> | 2. <u>Les Mousquetaires de Pig Alley</u> |
| 3. <u>The Birth of a Nation</u> | 3. <u>La Naissance d'une nation</u> |
| 4. <u>Intolerance</u> | 4. <u>Intolérance</u> |
| 5. <u>Greed</u> | 5. <u>Les Rapaces</u> |
| 6. <u>The Scarlet Letter</u> | 6. <u>La Lettre rouge</u> |
| 7. <u>The Wind</u> | 7. <u>Le Vent</u> |
| 8. <u>Hallelujah!</u> | 8. <u>Halleluyah!</u> |
| 9. <u>All Quiet on the Western Front</u> | 9. <u>A l'Ouest, rien de nouveau</u> |
| 10. <u>Morocco</u> | 10. <u>Marocco</u> |
| 11. <u>Camille</u> | 11. <u>La Dame aux Camélias</u> |
| 12. <u>The Thin Man</u> | 12. <u>L'Introuvable</u> |
| 13. <u>The Little Foxes</u> | 13. <u>La Vipère</u> |
| 14. <u>How Green Was My Valley</u> | 14. <u>Qu'elle était verte ma vallée</u> |
| 15. <u>The Lost Weekend</u> | 15. <u>Poison</u> |
| 16. <u>The High and the Mighty</u> | 16. <u>Ecrit dans le ciel</u> |
| 17. <u>The Plow That Broke the Plains</u> | 17. <u>La Charrue et les plaines</u> |
| 18. <u>The River</u> | 18. <u>La Rivière</u> |
| 19. <u>The March of Time</u> | 19. <u>La Marche du temps</u> |
| 20. <u>Lost Boundaries</u> | 20. <u>Frontières invisibles</u> |
| 21. <u>In the Street</u> | 21. <u>Dans la rue</u> |
| 22. <u>Works of Calder</u> | 22. <u>Les Oeuvres de Calder</u> |

PRINTS

(All works are from the Collections of the Museum of
Modern Art unless otherwise indicated)

II. CONTEMPORARY PRINTMAKING IN THE UNITED STATES

ALBERS Josef

Born in 1888 in Germany. To U.S.A. 1933

154. Ascension. 1942.

Lithograph. 43.9 x 20.8cm. (17 1/4 x 8 3/16 in.)

(Purchase Fund, 1951)

APPLEBAUM Leon

Born in 1924 in Belleville, Illinois

155. Fish Feeding. 1951.

Etching. 24.5 x 67.9cm. (9 5/8 x 26 3/4 in.)

(Purchase Fund, 1955)

BALLINGER R. Maxil

Born in 1914 in Walnut Grove, Missouri

156. The Seven Sacraments. 1952.

Woodcut. 29.4 x 94cm. (11 9/16 x 37 in.)

(Purchase Fund, 1952)

BARNET Will

Born in 1911 in Beverly, Massachusetts

157. Enfant. 1951

Color lithograph. 42.5 x 35.5cm. (16 3/4 x 14 in.)

(~~Museum~~ Purchase Fund, 1952)