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# An **Auteurist** **History** of **Film**

Charles Silver

**MoMA**

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## Director's Foreword

**For over forty years, until his retirement at the end of 2015, the late Charles Silver** nurtured generations of film scholars and artists through his exhibition programs and dedicated shepherding of the Film Study Center at The Museum of Modern Art. Countless publications have benefited from his guidance but none has projected his voice and critical insights as fully as *An Auteurist History of Film*. For five years, from 2009 to 2014, the Museum offered a weekly series of films under that title, curated by Charles. The series was accompanied by a blog, which featured a short essay on each week's film that Charles posted on the Museum's website, at [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org). This book is a revised and enhanced collection of those posts, and offers an inspired, idiosyncratic perspective on cinema by one its most avowed fans.

The series was dedicated to the critic Andrew Sarris, whose *American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968), which many consider the most influential work of film criticism written in the English language, was its initial inspiration. Charles's book expands the scope of Sarris's to include works of "pre-cinema," movies made before 1915, and films made from 1968 to 1980. The prevailing concept, however, remains the same: that a film, despite its collaborative nature, is ultimately the work of a single artist, the director. However indebted to Sarris's auteur theory Charles may have been, his writing is nonacademic and informal and is based on more than six decades of viewing films. His book is not intended as a final say on cinema history but as an individual take on the subject.

Passion is as critical to the work of a curator as are intellectual curiosity and serious scholarship. Charles

always brought an urgent intensity to his work in the Department of Film. His passion over the many years of his career was nurtured by two successive Chief Curators, Mary Lea Bandy and Rajendra Roy. Colleagues within the department, curators outside it, and most of all legions of cinephiles are indebted to his commitment to the Museum, and to the mission of advancing film history that it has pursued since 1935. I hope this book inspires new passions for film, and the ideas for new histories to be written.

—Glenn D. Lowry

DIRECTOR, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

## Acknowledgments

**As my late friend Vito Russo wrote regarding his** seminal *The Celluloid Closet*, “This book put a lot of decent people through hell.” No one suffered more over the five years of my writing the blog posts mostly reproduced here than my supremely patient editor, Jason Persse. I wish to thank him and members of MoMA’s Publications Department: Christopher Hudson, Chul R. Kim, David Frankel, Marc Sapir, and Matthew Pimm; and outside the Museum, this book’s designer, Beverly Joel, and especially its editor, Jessica Loudis. I also, of course, wish to thank my colleagues in the MoMA Department of Film.

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This book is dedicated to Karen and to the memory of two mentors, Mary Lea Bandy and Andrew Sarris.

– Charles Silver



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## **Introduction Charles Silver**

**I've been going to the movies, mostly on my own,** for nearly seventy years. In general, I was a pretty solitary little kid, and there was a theater within easy walking distance in our un-menacing and polluted New Jersey suburb. (Going alone was usually better, since I once took my little sister Karen to see the seltzer bottle-squirting Clarabelle the Clown from the Howdy Doody TV show, and she freaked out.) The weekly program was divided into two double-bills, so if you went to both Saturday and Sunday matinees, you could see four of Hollywood's latest products for, as I recall, fifty cents total. These ranged from Westerns to musicals to what I disparaged as "love stories." I've never been very good at remembering plot details, but I still have a vivid memory of the climactic battle in John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948). I've also never ridden a horse, but I remain a sucker for Westerns.

This was also the period when television began to spread to the masses. Channel 13, now the highly respectable Public Broadcasting System channel, managed to show around half a dozen 1930s B-grade Westerns each day to fill up its schedule. Somewhat forgotten cowboys like Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson, Colonel Tim McCoy, Bob Steele, Buster Crabbe, and many others became heroes to a new generation, to which I belonged. Channel 13 also offered two shows hosted by "Uncle" Fred Sayles: *Junior Frolics* (mostly featuring low-rent 1930s animation) and Friday night wrestling

from Laurel Gardens in Newark, which was also low-rent, but that's another story.

I guess it's fair to say I was hooked early by a medium I didn't recognize at the time as art. I think the only film my school owned was a ratty 16mm print of Ronald Colman in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), which was trotted out from time to time. Gradually, however, I became aware that there were several decades' worth of movies in the world, some of which were not even American. As a teenager, I found myself occasionally taking the bus into New York, sometimes to see the Rangers skate rather futilely in the old Madison Square Garden, and sometimes to visit a place called the Museum of Modern Art, where one could see old movies, including silent ones. MoMA collected films, tried to preserve them – and even took them seriously! As an undergraduate, I took advantage of a service offered by the Museum that allowed scholars to view films for research, a service I would be administering in less than a decade. Films have been a central love of my life, struggle as I might to shake off the addiction. When I became bored studying political science in graduate school, I found myself being drawn back to film. When I finally moved to New York in 1968, in the back of my mind my intention was to somehow wind up in the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art. Eventually, I lucked out.

I confess to being, in spite of everything, an unabashed Romantic. No less an authority than

Wikipedia describes the Romantic movement as having “emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience.” For me, film is the most potent medium for generating such emotion.

There is an artificiality to theatre. Literature is too prone to interruption and distraction. Music and dance have a flow, but their emotional content seems abstract, and I find opera mostly boring. Great painting, sculpture, and photography can be arresting, but there is no follow-up or engagement with the vibrant moving creatures depicted. With apologies to some of my curatorial colleagues, I find new media unworthy of serious consideration in this context. Film has a special capacity to overwhelm, to envelope, to suck the viewer into a fluid experience, which, if done properly, can tap into the most primal feelings. This does not mean that all films have to contain this kind of magic, but most of the very best films do. I can appreciate different kinds of film, but abstract animation, avant-garde or experimental films and most non-narrative works fail to meet my highest standards, whereas works by emotionally gripping auteurs like John Ford, Charlie Chaplin, Jean Renoir, D. W. Griffith, and several others do. The operative word here, I think, is “primal.”

At their core, movies innovate on one of mankind’s oldest pastimes – storytelling. Film meant that storytellers could suddenly create a credible alternative world for their audiences. D. W. Griffith, for all his ignorance and flaws, was the first to understand this. Although his dream of a universal cinematic language was shattered by Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) less than a generation later, Griffith perfected a new art that enabled us “to see” as we never had before, and to be moved by art more viscerally than ever.

Before I arrived at the Museum, I had come under the influence of Andrew Sarris through his weekly column in *The Village Voice* and his monumental book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968*. Sarris was introducing what later became known as “auteur theory” to the Anglophone world, and was personalizing and expanding on it. The theory had first been promulgated by a handful of young critics at the Parisian magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s, and though its intricacies can be convoluted, permit me to elucidate it just a little. The *Cahiers* folks (André Bazin, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, and others) were ostensibly reacting to the French cinema’s “tradition of quality,” which since just before World War II had been churning out craftsman-like but impersonal films. In the service of attacks against these

films, Hollywood was invoked as a model system in which “auteurs” such as John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Raoul Walsh could produce films that were not only commercially viable, but also expressed the distinctive personality of the director. Little attention was paid to the behind-the-scenes workers who did much of the heavy lifting on these Hollywood films, but the theory attained legitimacy by focusing broadly on certain directors whose work contained discernible patterns, themes, values, and a clear visual style, similar to that of a writer or painter. Although I am not disposed towards theory or abstraction, this has always struck me as the most intelligent approach to taking film seriously as art. It is also why the Museum of Modern Art was able to include film in its holdings. I was gratified to recently come across this statement made in 1925 by the founder of our department, Iris Barry: “If a film, of no matter what type, is to be worth while, it must be entirely dominated by the will of one man and one man only – the director.” Barry, ahead of her time as usual, was an auteurist long before the word existed.

Regarding Sarris, although I met him a few times socially, Andy and I were never buddies. In some ways, I think it might have been a burden for him to have inspired a coterie of young cineastes. During his time as film editor for the *Voice*, he published several pieces I wrote. These moments, of course, put me in a kind of ecstasy, though one was mitigated when a bird pooped on my head as I was walking home after picking up a copy of the paper. Many years later, I was gratified to be able to dedicate the series on which this book is based to Andy, and also pleased to hold a memorial screening for him after his death. His lovely wife, Molly Haskell, spoke at the event, and we showed *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) by his favorite director, Max Ophüls.

I am indebted to Rajendra Roy, the Celeste Bartos Chief Curator of the Department of Film at the Museum for proposing the film history screening series and its accompanying blog, and for accepting its basis in auteur theory. The exhibition, originally intended to last two years, ran from September 2009 until September 2014. Though influenced by Sarris’s *The American Cinema*, it differed in that we met auteurs at various stages of their careers, and our series was more inclusive in terms of years covered and geographical scope. All films were drawn from MoMA’s archive, highlighting the collection’s strengths and weaknesses. This was a mixed blessing: We found that many of the greatest films of directors such as, for example, Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg were not in our holdings, and that many of the

films we did have were in poor shape. Via the series, we discovered significant gaps that we hope to rectify, including that our collection contained few holdings from the non-Western world. In spite of this, we included nearly all of the major auteurs in film history, and represented many of them through their best films. It should also be pointed out that MoMA's collection goes beyond the films themselves, and contains many documents, a vast archive of stills, and unique items such as D. W. Griffith's personal papers and business records.

Finally, I want to acknowledge what a rare privilege it was to choose the films and have my writing (mostly reproduced here) posted on the Museum's website, projected onscreen before each film, and eventually gathered into a book. The result, which you have in your hands, is idiosyncratic and occasionally even autobiographical. In my undisciplined way, I have shied away from writing an academic book, and tried to write the kind of book I would want to read. I hope my passion for film compensates for what some

might perceive as a lack of seriousness in my approach. Sixty-eight years of watching movies has left me with a lot of material to work with, and it hasn't been easy to encompass all of it, or be consistent in my evaluations. However, I believe I have remained true to certain basic values when considering a large number of auteurs and their work. Whether a director excels in visual innovation, narrative development, or direction of actors, I have tried to give each his – or occasionally her – due. Writing so idiosyncratically, I sometimes allow my personal values as a humanist and social democrat to come into play. But narrative films, after all, are about something, and politics, history, and values do matter. Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-financed images may have been more grandiose than those in the films of auteurs such as Chaplin, Renoir, or Ford, but the latter were far greater artists. And film, like all other art forms, could never have attained greatness without transcendent artists.

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# Early Cinema

## Eadweard Muybridge and Pre-Cinema

A handful of documentary films in the Museum's collection deal with the long pre-history of cinema. I am not sure what prompted the Naval Photographic Center to undertake *Origins of the Motion Picture* (1956) in the lull between Korea and Vietnam. Whatever the reason, this little film, based on Martin Quigley Jr.'s book *Magic Shadows*, is surprisingly informative in sketching out eight centuries of cinematic invention before cinema in a mere twenty-one minutes. Merritt Crawford was an early twentieth-century scholar who corresponded with many significant nineteenth-century innovators, including Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), a key crossover figure between photography and film. A still photographer, Muybridge discovered that it was possible to create the illusion of motion by shooting a sequence of photos of a horse or man at regular intervals and then projecting them in rapid succession. He lived for nearly a decade into the era of cinema, and although he never technically made a motion picture, he was well aware of what his experiments had facilitated. For serious scholars, the MoMA library holds the Merritt Crawford papers on microfilm, and for those interested in Muybridge, Thom Andersen's 1975 documentary, *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*, admirably explores his subject's contributions.

## Early Auteurs The Lumière Brothers / Thomas Alva Edison / Max Skladanowsky / Robert William Paul / Cecil Hepworth

**The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864-1948) and Auguste (1862-1954)**, are the closest we have to the first auteurs. Their role as "directors" largely consisted of finding a subject that interested them, plunking down their camera (or "cinématographe"), and turning it on. Eventually, virtually all directors dismissed this ultra-simple method as antiquated, but seventy years later, Andy Warhol brought it back to considerable acclaim in some circles. The Lumières' earliest films included depictions of workers leaving a factory at the end of the day, and a notorious film of a speeding train heading directly at the camera – which apparently terrified its unsuspecting audience. By sending film crews around the world to photograph the commonplace and the exotic, the Lumières effectively shrank the globe in ways never before thought possible.

One hundred and twenty years later, one of the things that intrigues me about the Lumière films is the people in them. Some of the middle-aged ones may have shaken Abraham Lincoln's hand; some of the elderly may have seen Napoleon marching through Paris. And yet on film they look and move much as we do, denizens of a world as strange to us as ours would be to them. They

have achieved some level of immortality, and they embody one of the best arguments for film preservation: keeping our past alive.

The role played by Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) in the development of early cinema is more in the realm of mystery than romance, more about profit and litigation than art. Edison's focus on film was peripheral compared to many of his other endeavors, and he mostly left the field to associates like the wealthy independent entrepreneur George Eastman, who invented the 35mm perforated celluloid film still used to this day, and William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, who built Edison's Black Maria studio and "directed" the first films Edison showed in his Kinetoscope peepshow parlors. Edison's actual contributions are disputable, but he claimed the movies as his invention. Eastman, meanwhile, went on to become a major philanthropist and the namesake of The International Museum of Film and Photography in Rochester, and Dickson left Edison to work for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, which was the Edison Studio's main rival at the time. The Wizard of Menlo Park went on to sue everybody not under his control, and he finally left the film industry when antitrust action and the artistic inclinations of others made it no longer lucrative. For those who have never been, the Edison Laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey is well worth a visit, and the Edison Tower now stands atop his original Menlo Park location, also in New Jersey.

Max Skladanowsky (1863–1939) was the German contender for the Lumières' throne. This graduate of Magic Lantern shows (a pre-cinema device for projecting images) went on to invent a cumbersome and unreliable projection system that provided Berliners with their first taste of the movies. These short films were once classified as "Skladanowsky Primitives," and they live up to that moniker.

Robert William Paul (1869–1943) and Cecil Hepworth (1874–1953), key figures in the early days of British cinema, both exemplify how inventors could become directors and eventually auteurs. There were no rules or training for making movies at the time, and so engineers or technicians were able to stumble into the "creative" process. After a flurry of innovative experiments involving refining cameras and inventing various tricks, Paul gave up making movies in 1910. Hepworth, on the other hand, survived until the advent of talkies, making thirty features along the way. His film *Rescued by Rover* (1905) contained plot elements that inspired many subsequent animal-loving directors, and

served D. W. Griffith three years later in his debut film, *The Adventures of Dollie*, about saving a kidnapped baby.

## Edwin S. Porter, America's First Director

**As Charles Musser explains in his documentary about Edwin S. Porter (1870–1941),** Porter was a jack-of-all-trades who accidentally stumbled into being the first director of note in American film. A failed businessman, he began working for Edison in 1900, when "directing" movies was hardly considered a profession. His career lasted until 1916 and included twenty features, mostly co-directed with others. Among these were the now-infamous *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1913) starring James O'Neill (the film adaptation of the play that figured so prominently in the great *Long Day's Journey into Night* by O'Neill's son, Eugene) and the Mary Pickford vehicle *Tess of the Storm Country* (1922). It is doubtful that Porter ever regarded himself as an artist, but his role in the early days of film makes it impossible to totally dismiss him from cinema history.

Much of Porter's output for Edison was derivative of the immensely popular trick films made by Georges Méliès and other directors working in France. These films used primitive special effects to showcase cinema's ability to create alternate realities. What remains of genuine consequence are Porter's "actualities," or simple documentaries, whose subjects ranged from McKinley's assassination to priceless documentation of turn-of-the-century Coney Island, and two films Musser singles out: *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which were acquired by Iris Barry for MoMA's fledgling "film library" in the mid-1930s. The former was ahead of its time in its editing techniques, and the latter anticipated the spectacular Westerns to come, even though Porter and his crew got no further west than the Hudson River. The well-paced narrative flow of *The Great Train Robbery* was atypical for its time, and the film established a model that D. W. Griffith would improve upon five years later.

Griffith himself appears in Porter's *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908), though he was soon to be rescued from such thankless roles by moving behind the camera at Biograph. A stage actor, writer and poet, Griffith did not think much of the primitive movies of the period until he later became a director. As Porter descended into

obscurity, Griffith climbed to the top. There is no record of whether the two had any further relationship, and the index of the D. W. Griffith Papers at MoMA contains no entry for Edwin Stanton Porter.

## Georges Méliès and His Rivals Ferdinand Zecca / Segundo de Chomón / Gaston Velle

I see Georges Méliès (1861-1938) as a link in a continuum that runs from Jules Verne to filmmakers like Walt Disney and Tim Burton. Méliès had been a stage magician, and just as Disney and Burton would later make use of cinema's technical ability to transcend reality, Méliès's films highlighted the new and magical possibilities of the medium. Many of Méliès's films such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) were directly adapted from Verne, and his influence can be found in Méliès's *The Impossible Voyage* (1904), *Tunnelling the Channel* (1907), and *The Conquest of the Pole* (1912), among others. The author made fantasy respectable, and Méliès, more than other early auteurs, benefited from and catered to this audience. Verne lived until 1905, meaning he was very likely aware of Méliès during his heyday. I hope that the younger filmmaker found a way of expressing his gratitude to the older novelist for inspiring some of his best work. Méliès died just a few weeks after Walt Disney released the first of his epic fairy tales, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Before he went on to influence future generations of filmmakers, the Beaux Arts student-turned-magician-turned-director was so successful that he inspired several contemporary imitators. *Excursion to the Moon* (1908), by Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947) and Segundo de Chomón (1871-1929), is clearly a rip-off of Méliès's immensely popular *A Trip to the Moon*. Chomón, an innovator in the fields of special effects and animation, also photographed Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 epic *Cabiria*, which is famous for its fluid camerawork. Gaston Velle (1872-1948) is another significant but nearly forgotten figure in the early history of the cinema. Also a former magician, he labored in the shadows of Méliès and others, making many accomplished films that are often not easy to distinguish from those of his colleagues. As a result, there have been disputes over the attribution of several of his works. (For those with a serious interest in early French cinema, the definitive work in English is Richard Abel's *The Cine Goes to Town*.) In any event, Velle's films

speak silently for themselves, evoking an innocence that would soon be buried in the mud of the Great War. Finally, though he came later, Czech animator/director Karel Zeman was influenced by Méliès, and his feature films *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* (1957) and *Baron Munchhausen* (1962) explicitly evoke the earlier director's style and subject matter.

Méliès's fantastical films also share a sensibility with some American literature of his period, namely L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and Garrett P. Serviss's *Edison's Conquest of Mars*, a guilty pleasure in which the Wizard of Menlo Park kicks Martian butt. He was a man of his time, a director in full command of the cinematic resources available to him. In spite of their energy and imagination, however, Méliès's films eventually wore out his audience's goodwill, and his speculative visions were overtaken by a demand for greater reality. He earned an honorable place in film history, even receiving the Legion of Honor, but ultimately faded away. At the end of his life, Méliès was hawking toys in the Montparnasse train station, a turn memorialized in Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Brian Selznick's illustrated novel *Hugo* (2011). Ever the magician, it's easy to envision Méliès adding a bit of performance and prestidigitation to his routine in order to delight young customers.

## Forgotten Pioneers Ferdinand Zecca / Alice Guy-Blaché / J. Stuart Blackton / Wallace McCutcheon

A great number of films were made in the early twentieth century, and a great number of these have been lost. Though a handful survive, the puzzle of this early period is always going to be incomplete.

Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947) was a rival of Georges Méliès who made similar films. He was a commercially oriented Parisian café performer, and much of his work was "derivative" – which is to say, stolen. Eventually, he found his true calling as head of Pathé, a major French studio.

Alice Guy (1873-1968), or Alice Guy-Blaché, went from being a secretary at Gaumont to becoming the world's first female director in a matter of months. At one point she was, in effect, the production head of that



venerable studio. Founded in 1895, it is the only one from the period that still exists today. Guy emigrated to America with her husband, Herbert Blaché, in 1910, and the couple established their Solax studio in Flushing, Queens soon after. After Solax failed, Guy continued to make films for various studios in the U.S. Following her divorce in 1922, she returned to France only to discover that she had been forgotten. Failing to get work, she spent the rest of her life in relative obscurity, and little is known of her films. She received the Legion of Honor in 1953, and died in Mahwah, New Jersey at age ninety-five.

In terms of subject matter, religious films were popular with early twentieth-century audiences, who perhaps had to rationalize their patronage of this lowly art form with higher aspirations. Two Christ films, Zecca's *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ* (1903) and Guy's *The Life of Christ* (1906), are more reflective of the demands of the period than of either director's talent. Both engage in respectful tableaux that emphasize the static nature of the camerawork and the overly grand gestures of the actors. The use of exteriors helps create a sense of authenticity, and elaborate sets contribute to efforts to create depth of field. (For delicate sensibilities, the scourging of Jesus is a walk in the park compared to Mel Gibson's interpretation.) Méliès-esque special effects such as superimpositions – the process of running film through the camera twice – here become means of expressing the sacred and holy. Audiences probably found both films ambitious and spectacular, and one assumes that many a pastor went to considerable trouble to show them in their churches whenever attendance flagged. A similar phenomenon occurred decades later when non-theatrical distributors like Brandon Films made a mint facilitating screenings of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1966) for God-fearing audiences – in spite of the director's homosexuality and Marxist beliefs.

J. Stuart Blackton (1875-1941) was born in Britain, but as a young man in New York he had a fortuitous meeting with Thomas Edison that encouraged him to go into film. With two other men Blackton formed Vitagraph, a production company headquartered in a glass-enclosed studio in Brooklyn. Vitagraph's output was eclectic, ranging from pseudo-newsreels to animation and even comedy films, which Blackton pioneered a decade before Mack Sennett became known as the king of slapstick comedy. As film historian Ephraim Katz suggests, "Next to Griffith, Blackton was probably the most innovative and creative force in the development of

the motion picture art." His experiments with sound and color film were influential, and he brought culture and respectability to film through literary projects, including a range of Shakespeare adaptations. His *The Life of Moses* (1909) is generally considered the first feature film, though it was released as a five-part serial. As with many filmmakers of the time, Blackton's status as an auteur is hard to evaluate, in part because he had a diverse portfolio that included directing, producing, acting, animating, editing, and serving as an entrepreneur. Albert E. Smith, Blackton's business partner, observed that while some filmmakers worked like artists, "Vitagraph was like a magazine or a newspaper, [which] has a clientele that it must furnish a supply to regularly." Blackton's career ended in 1926, after he sold Vitagraph to Warner Brothers and was forced to retire. To learn more about him, I highly recommend Anthony Slide's book, *The Big V: A History of the Vitagraph Company*.

Vitagraph movies like *Francesca di Rimini* (1910), a lavishly produced thirteenth-century melodrama, and *The Automobile Thieves*, aka *The Bold Bank Robbery* (1910), should be seen as markers of Blackton's place in history rather than as measures of his cinematic talent. *Francesca*, one of Vitagraph's popularized "classics," has all the earmarks of a low-budget Victorian stage production. *The Automobile Thieves*, released seven years after Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, reflects the popularity of crime films at the time with its excessive gunplay and moving-camera chase scene. (It also suggests that the automobile was as novel as movies themselves.) Yet these were minor short films. Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* was already more advanced despite coming out a year earlier, and he would bring more sophistication, credibility, and close-ups to the crime genre – not to mention fewer histrionics – with *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) and *An Unseen Enemy* (1912).

Wallace McCutcheon Jr. (1880-1928) was a stage musical comedy actor and house director of the Biograph production company from 1897 until Griffith took over in 1908. According to former MoMA curator Eileen Bowser, McCutcheon's film *At the Crossroads of Life* (1908) "is of interest chiefly because it shows the primitive state of most filmmaking at the time." The film starred Griffith as a stage-door seducer, and it is likely he drew on his experience as an actor in writing the scenario and (over) playing his role. The film comes alive for a single exterior shot and clearly anticipates how quickly Griffith would transform the medium in the months ahead. Only weeks after acting in *At the Crossroads of Life*, Griffith would cross his personal Rubicon and move behind the camera.

One of Griffith's first films, *Old Isaacs, the Pawnbroker* (1908) was shot on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and featured local Jewish residents. It was unabashed in its use of caricature, and the kinds of stereotypes it depicted would unfortunately remain a staple of cinematic melodrama into the sound era. Though the *mise-en-scène* certainly reflects life's ugliness, there is nevertheless something redemptive about its plot, in which a kindly old Jew comes to the rescue of a little girl.

## D. W. Griffith at Biograph 1908–1914

**Henri Matisse said: "My purpose is to render my emotion... I think only of rendering my emotion."**

Many film history textbooks have cataloged the elements of cinematic grammar and expressiveness that D. W. Griffith (1874–1948) invented or refined during his five years at Biograph while collaborating with cinematographer G. W. "Billy" Bitzer. This seemingly endless list includes close-ups, fades, masking, parallel editing, the moving camera or dolly shot, backlighting, changing camera angles, restraining histrionics through the cultivation of professional film actors, the development of "spectacle," and so on. All of these essentially manipulative techniques, however, served a larger purpose. Griffith's great genius was his intuitive understanding of the inherent power of the movies to render emotion and evoke feeling. No medium, before or since, has so thoroughly facilitated art's capacity to touch that raw nerve, the primal human essence, and Griffith was the first filmmaker to fully grasp and exploit this fact. Fashions and conventions come and go, but, at their best, Griffith's films – like all great art – are deeply felt expressions of what it is like to be human.

The Museum's film collection has preserved several hundred of Griffith's Biograph films, but most are not presently viewable due to lack of funding. (Inroads have been made, however, thanks to a generous bequest from Lillian Gish). MoMA is fortunate to have nearly all of Griffith's films, and so it's possible to study the refinement of his art as almost a daily progression. Griffith essentially revolutionized a medium as no artist has done before. We may with some justification compare his films to prehistoric cave paintings; as historian Richard Brookhiser wrote, "Cro-Magnon man painted magical images on cave walls that seem to move. Now people head into

caves to watch images that actually do move; some of them are magical." Griffith was the first filmmaker to capture the true magic of the moving image, a conjuration that has moved us for more than a century.

## The Scandinavian Connection Urban Gad and Victor Sjöström

**Urban Gad (1879–1947) made a few films in Germany in the 1920s during the golden age of Expressionism, but by 1927 his career had petered out. Though he did anticipate certain trends and was ahead of his time in his use of eroticism onscreen, he was clearly not playing in the same league as F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, G. W. Pabst, Leni Riefenstahl, or Robert Wiene. Gad's most significant contribution to film was the discovery of Asta Nielsen, who he married in 1912. Working in Germany mostly with Gad, "Die Asta" developed a restrained style of film acting comparable to her American counterparts like Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh. (To fully appreciate the achievements of these women, one should check out Sarah Bernhardt's stagey film appearances from this period.) Nielsen performed Strindberg, Ibsen, Wedekind, and a cross-dressing Hamlet, but her most familiar role to museum audiences was in Pabst's *The Joyless Street* (1925), the film that precipitated Greta Garbo's move to America. After appearing in one talkie, *Unmögliche Liebe* in 1932, Asta Nielsen began a retirement that would last forty years (later to be topped by Garbo's half-century "reclusion"). At the age of seventy, however, she undertook a second career as a gifted collagist.**

Victor Sjöström (1879–1960) started his career while D. W. Griffith was still at Biograph, and in certain ways, his films seem more sophisticated and adult than those of his American rival. In many of his best works (*A Man There Was*, 1917; *The Outlaw and His Wife*, 1918; and *The Phantom Carriage*, 1922), Sjöström relied on a very talented actor: himself. This established a precedent for the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim, Orson Welles and others to star in their own movies. It also led to Sjöström's marvelous performance in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Like his fellow Swede, Sjöström's vision of the world was less than cheerful, although his films do have comic moments. (The great Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer surpasses both Bergman and Sjöström in the Scandinavian somberness department.) Sjöström spent his childhood in America,

leading one to wonder: What might his career have been like if he hadn't returned to Sweden in the 1890s, just as films were beginning to take off?

In *Ingeborg Holm* (1913), Sjöström's second film, a widow is sent to the poor house and her children are given to foster families. When the widow's youngest child fails to recognize her, she breaks down and is committed to an insane asylum, where she stays until her oldest son presents her with a photo of herself as a young woman and she regains her wits. Based on a play by Nils Krok, a member of the poverty relief board in the Swedish city of Helsingborg, the film became an unexpected sensation and was deemed an example of "unwholesome cinematography." Sjöström's company tried to get off the hook by saying that the film depicted conditions in rural areas, not Stockholm, and also argued that it was film's social responsibility to "arouse sympathy for the less fortunate members of society." Here Sjöström again anticipated Griffith, who would make similar claims about cinema's potential to change the world. The debate ignited by the film (which proved to be a commercial success) did, indeed, lead to the modernization of poverty relief laws in Sweden.

## Two Danish Innovators Stellan Rye and Benjamin Christensen

**Though *The Student of Prague* (1913) has been called** "the first real auteur film," it appears to have been a collaborative effort between director Stellan Rye (1880-1914), cameraman Guido Seeber, and star Paul Wegener, whom the same critic, Klaus Kreimeir, dubbed "the first modern German film actor." After Rye, a Dane, died fighting for Germany early in World War I, Seeber went on to photograph the 1914 version of *The Golem*, G. W. Pabst's *The Joyless Street* (1925) and *Secrets of a Soul* (1926). Wegener, a Max Reinhardt protégé, acted in, directed, or did both in films including *The Golem*, its more famous 1920 remake, several Ernst Lubitsch films, Rex Ingram's *The Magician* (1926), and numerous films for the Nazis. In 1926, Henrik Galeen also adapted Hanns Heinz Ewers' story *The Student of Prague*, this time casting the great Conrad Veidt as "Der Student." Ewers later became the chronicler of Nazi icon Horst Wessel, and Wegener starred in the 1933 adaptation of Wessel's biography, *One of Many*.

Rye's film was a clear forerunner of German Expressionism, making it all the more sad that he died so young, a tragedy perhaps rivaling Jean Vigo's death at twenty-nine. Although *The Student of Prague* was shot naturalistically in locations throughout the city, Rye's imaginative facility with the camera evoked the legend of Faust, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Edgar Allan Poe. If Rye had lived longer, one wonders whether he might have been forced to choose between his native Denmark and his proto-Nazi compatriots and collaborators.

*The Mysterious X* (1913) was the first film by fellow Dane Benjamin Christensen (1879-1959). Although it wasn't as ingenious as Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) or Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), it had a huge impact on 1913 audiences. Upon its release in America under the title *Sealed Orders*, one critic hailed it as "a revelation in dramatic motion pictures. It sets a new and hitherto but hoped for standard of quality. It emphasizes... the absolute superiority of the screen over the stage and opens up a vista of coming triumphs for the motion picture." None other than fellow Dane Carl Theodor Dreyer called Christensen "a man who knew exactly what he wanted and pursued his goal with unyielding stubbornness... People shrugged him off as a madman. The way things have turned out [as of 1922], it is clear that he was the one in touch with the future."

Before he became a director and starred in *The Mysterious X* and Dreyer's *Mikael* (1924), that "madman" had studied medicine and been an opera singer. In many ways, Christensen can be seen as the Danish counterpart to D. W. Griffith and Victor Sjöström in the early years of the twentieth century. He was a master innovator in the realm of lighting and devised techniques that would be highly influential for German Expressionism. Film historian Ron Mottram admires Christensen's superb editing skills and cites a scene from *The Mysterious X* set in an old mill as "one of the earliest, genuinely sophisticated examples of a scene built from the juxtaposition of its constituent elements." Christensen's better-known masterpiece *Haxan* (*Witchcraft Through the Ages*), which he made in Sweden in 1922, is a must-see, and one of the great Expressionist films.

Filmmaking opportunities in Europe were disappointingly scarce for a director as independently minded as Christensen, and like Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller, he was lured to MGM. This was hardly a director's paradise, but Christensen managed to make six films there in three years. *Mockery*, a 1927 Lon Chaney vehicle, showcases many of the lighting effects he had first used in *The Mysterious X*. In 1929 he returned to Denmark after

a decade of inactivity, made four talkies, and spent his remaining years managing a suburban Copenhagen cinema. One wonders if he read *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, when the magazine was propounding the auteur theory he espoused decades earlier. The year of his death, 1959, was also the year that two of most famous auteurs, François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, began work on their first features.

## D. W. Griffith Leaves Biograph

1914

**1915 marked the publication of poet Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, the first serious attempt in English to come to grips with a medium that had outgrown penny arcades and nickelodeons and was now threatening to appear in venues that could rival cathedrals. Like so many early commentators on the movies, Lindsay struggled to find the language that would do justice to his thoughts. In an indication of the heady atmosphere of the times, Lindsay waxed positively Biblical in his enthusiasm for film, addressing filmmakers directly:**

***All of you who are taking the work as a sacred trust, I bid you God-speed... You will be God's thoroughbreds... It has come then, this new weapon of men, and the face of the whole earth changes. In after centuries its beginning will be indeed remembered. It has come, this new weapon of men, and by faith and a study of the signs we proclaim that it will go on and on in immemorial wonder.***

The previous year, as extraordinary European films like Benjamin Christensen's *The Mysterious X* and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* were arriving on American shores, D. W. Griffith had been tearing at the seams of his constraining Biograph contract. Feature-length films were essentially a new phenomenon, and Griffith, influenced by European imports, wanted to pursue them. Before he did, his early Westerns reached a zenith with the twenty-six minute film *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1914). Griffith had used the plot of the U.S. Cavalry saving settlers from Indians before, but in *Elderbush Gulch* the scale is grander, the photography more brilliant, the execution and editing of the action precise. Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh gave performances that can be seen as rehearsals for the genius they displayed in *The Birth of a Nation* the following year. Griffith, God's thoroughbred *du jour*, had now pushed short film to its farthest limits, and

something had to give. But he still had one more Biograph film to make, and he wanted to make it special.

I was privileged to have known Blanche Sweet, star of *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) and Griffith's final film for Biograph, *Judith of Bethulia* (1914). Blanche was feisty and opinionated. She claimed to have frightened Cecil B. De Mille; she delighted in talking about how wonderful it was to have lived through the 1906 San Francisco earthquake; she worked as a shop girl after her career mostly ended in 1930; she was politically progressive, unlike her successor to Griffith's affections, Lillian Gish. Lindsay was an admirer, composing a poem after seeing her in the 1913 Biograph short, *Oil and Water*: "Solemn are her motions / Stately are her wiles / Filling oafs with wisdom / Saving souls with smiles." In later life, Blanche worked with the Department of Film at MoMA to restore her movies, including the silent version of Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* (1923), an adaptation the playwright greatly admired. Though she was set to do the talkie remake, Greta Garbo got the part instead. When Sweet died, her dear friend Martin Sopocy arranged for the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens to cultivate the Blanche Sweet lilac. Her ashes were quietly sprinkled over the gardens, and lilacs bloom there every spring.

*Judith of Bethulia* was an adventure for all involved since Griffith's company of actors and technicians (nearly all of whom would follow him after he left Biograph) had never made a film nearly as long or spectacular. Griffith assured Blanche, then seventeen, that her great (but short) costar, Henry B. Walthall, would "measure up" as General Holofernes. "Don't worry," Griffith said, "Wally will play him tall." Walthall lived up to this promise – at least, until Blanche decapitated him. The story is from *The Apocrypha*, but Griffith would soon move on to more authentic Biblical sources in *Home Sweet Home* (1914) and *Intolerance* (1916), which fully realized the ambitions laid out in *Judith*. The film was lavish by Griffith's earlier standards, but aside from the restrained intensity of the performances, it still paled in comparison to the Italian imports of the era.

*The Avenging Conscience* reflects Griffith's reverence for Edgar Allan Poe and literature in general. (One of his first shorts was an adaptation of Poe's "The Raven.") Pretentious enough to earn the support of Lindsay and others arguing for film's acceptance as "art," Griffith's fourth independent production – and the immediate predecessor to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – anticipated the psychological leanings of German Expressionism, which would become all the rage five years later. Griffith and cameraman Billy Bitzer

(who later worked at the MoMA Film Library) used all the technical resources at their command, as though beefing up for challenges ahead. In the context of Griffith's career as the quintessential romantic naturalist director, *The Avenging Conscience* remains a commendable oddity, in part because of how it anticipates non-naturalistic lighting effects.

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## Giovanni Pastrone's

### *Cabiria* 1914

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H. G. Wells published *The Time Machine* in 1895, a date that roughly coincided with the birth of cinema. That same year, the Lumière brothers sent out their cadre of globetrotting cameramen, exposing film audiences to the world, with all its exoticism and regional oddities. Film offered new possibilities for capturing reality, and though Wells mastered the speculative, future-oriented tradition of Jules Verne, filmgoers were perhaps even more intrigued by the possibility of traveling back in time and viewing the distant past.

D. W. Griffith had dabbled with history in films such as *In Prehistoric Days* (1913), but the real heavy historical lifting was done by the Italians. In 1912, Enrico Guazzoni stunned the film world with his spectacular adaptation of Henry Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis?* Although the film lacks Griffith's and Sjöström's sophisticated use of close-ups and restrained performances, the sheer wonder it inspired with its depictions of Rome burning, chariot races, massive scenes of extras, and lions eating Christians cannot be overestimated. It was staged entirely on lavish, authentic-looking sets, and it lasted for two hours at a time when thirty-minute movies were the norm. Guazzoni remained active throughout the fascist period, and excerpts from some of his other works are included in *Anthology of Italian Cinema*, a compilation film held in the MoMA collection.

Giovanni Pastrone, aka Piero Fosco (1883-1959), was the most important filmmaker during Italy's dominance of the European film scene in the period prior to World War I, and *Cabiria* marked the high point of his career. As Griffith was later to do with the Babylonian sequence in *Intolerance* (1916), Pastrone painstakingly researched and recreated the look of the Second Punic War. "Compared to the other colossal Italian spectacles of its time," film historian Liam O'Leary said of *Cabiria*, "it had an integrity and sense of purpose." Cinematographer

Segundo de Chomón's use of moving camera was revolutionary, and *Cabiria* achieved a level of prestige and recognition for its artistry that other filmmakers craved. It opened with an eighty-piece orchestra and a seventy-person choir in Turin in April 1914 – barely four months before Europe went up in flames, seemingly intent on following Carthage down the road to oblivion. Aside from the excesses of its performers, *Cabiria* felt like a real glimpse into the past, and led to a deeper understanding of cinema as a virtual time machine. Though Italy would reclaim some of its former glory during the Mussolini era in the spectacles of Carmine Gallone, Alessandro Blasetti, and Mario Camerini, the country did not return to center stage in terms of cinema until after the Second World War. Then, it was the antithesis of sword-and-sandal epics – the nitty-gritty Neorealist masterpieces of Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, and Vittorio De Sica – that commanded attention.

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## D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* 1915

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**I have been struggling with the *Birth of a Nation* for nearly half a century, since the first time I saw it as a teenager. On the one hand, it reaches the highest artistic plateau that film attained in its time, and it is probably, on balance, the most influential movie, in terms of technique, ever. On the other hand, it reeks of the conjugal evils of slavery and lethal white supremacy. How does one reconcile D. W. Griffith's Leonardo-like genius with his sleazy acceptance of a worldview so shameful and repulsive? Can we ever accept the excuse that his adaptation slightly tempered the racism of Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, or that the film nostalgically reflected a Confederate-soaked childhood? How tolerable is this "blind spot" – as Atticus Finch termed racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird* – when it condoned the nineteenth-century Ku Klux Klan and helped start a new one in the twentieth century? And finally, does the film still matter as a social document? I would like to approach these questions by begging your indulgence and recounting my personal journey as it relates to the film. Much of this will lie outside the scope of standard film history and criticism, but this is no ordinary film.**

As a kid my first hero was Jackie Robinson (along with several obscure cowboy stars from B-grade Westerns). As a teenager, I went to Washington, D.C. as

part of an integration march. In high school, I traveled with the basketball team as a statistician, and I always wondered why the two black stars got off the bus on the side of town that none of us would otherwise visit. At Rutgers, I wrote a paper on the school's All-American football player-turned-activist, Paul Robeson, who was at that time unmentionable on campus. As one of the first American Civilization majors, to the delight of my professors, I decided to write my senior honors thesis on *The Birth of a Nation*. (I think the paper is still moldering in the MoMA library.) I was present when Dr. King had his dream. Sick of graduate school in 1964, I signed up for "Freedom Summer," and prepared to register black voters in Mississippi. When three guys were murdered upon arrival, I chickened out. In retrospect, I consider this decision cowardly but wise.

Forty-five years later, in September 2009, I finally got to Mississippi. I took a weeklong bus tour, visiting numerous sites of the Vicksburg Campaign. For those of you who are not Civil War buffs (an addiction I owe in part to Griffith's film), Vicksburg was known as the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy." From its bluffs, the rebels controlled traffic on the Mississippi. When Vicksburg finally fell to Grant on July 4, 1863, simultaneous with Lee's retreat from Gettysburg, the South was doomed – although it took another twenty-one months of blood and agony to get to Appomattox.

While I accept that impressions gleaned from stops at strip malls and overnights at industrial-park motels are suspect, I did form impressions that I want to share. What I found disturbing was that my fellow buffs on the bus, all of whom were white, never seemed to broach the subject of what the war had been about. I don't blame this on our guide, the estimable historian Edwin Bearss. The author of a three-thousand-page study of the battle, Bearss had an encyclopedic memory of Vicksburg (especially extraordinary given that he was eighty-six) and could tell you who did what to whom at what time of which day on any given spot on the battlefield. He did point out when the bus passed the town where Emmett Till was murdered, and told us that the black church where we made a pit stop had replaced a structure burned by "night riders" in the 1960s.

We met two descendants of former plantation owners who happily talked about what their ancestors did in the war (one proudly showed off family weaponry), but nobody, myself included, had the effrontery to ask how many slaves they had owned. Mentioning slavery was politically incorrect, and one wonders what our black bus driver made of the whole thing. The final stop

on the tour was the courthouse in Vicksburg, where the victors finally raised the U.S. flag. It turns out that Jefferson Davis, who owned a nearby plantation, began his political career with a speech in the courthouse square. Behind the building was a tiny restful garden overseen by busts of Davis and his wife. In front the courthouse there was a plaque calling Davis "the best equipped, most thoroughly trained, most perfectly poised man who had ever entered the arena of politics in America." This encomium was put forth by Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman*, co-author of *The Birth of a Nation*, and mentor to D. W. Griffith. What I found most disturbing was that this plaque had not been installed in the 1910s or 1920s (the heyday of Dixon and the Klan) but was dated 1997. As recently as two decades ago it was deemed acceptable to venerate Davis and regard Dixon as more authoritative than vile.

So how relevant is the content of *The Birth of a Nation* today? When a congressman screamed out "you lie!" to President Obama (Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* suggested that his tone implied he meant "you lie, boy!") it struck me that he was from the same South Carolina where Dixon enshrined his Klan and Griffith depicted members of the Reconstruction-era legislature as shiftless barefoot blacks. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the villain, played by George Siegmann, is, like President Obama, of mixed race. In the minds of Griffith and Dixon, this makes him preternaturally dangerous, combining alleged white intelligence with assumed black bestiality. There are many reasons why the film should have been dismissed as a racist relic, yet because of Griffith's unprecedentedly skillful artistry, it cannot be ignored. *The Birth of a Nation* remains the pachyderm in the movie palace.

## D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* 1916

**The humdrum life of a film archivist can occasionally** be punctuated by privileged moments. For me, one of these relates to *Intolerance*. Joseph Henabery played Abraham Lincoln in *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and had a small part in the French storyline of *Intolerance*. The year after that film came out, under D. W. Griffith's tutelage, Henabery began a career as a director. Unlike Griffith protégés John Ford, Erich von Stroheim, Raoul Walsh, Allan Dwan, and Marshall Neilan, Henabery never rose above the status of journeyman, although he did get to work with Douglas Fairbanks, Dorothy Gish, and Rudolph Valentino, and made training films for the U.S.



Army Signal Corps. His real legacy, however, lay elsewhere. When Griffith set out to recreate Babylon for *Intolerance*, he took a leaf from the book of *Cabiria* director Giovanni Pastrone and began doing serious research to ensure the authenticity of his recreation. Henabery was assigned to gather photos and drawings of Babylonian buildings and art and to compile them in a scrapbook for Griffith. When Iris Barry acquired Griffith's papers for MoMA, that scrapbook was included. Henabery visited the Museum shortly before his death, and my colleagues and I had the pleasure of looking through his work with him. The Babylonian set and the introductory crane shot that Griffith and cinematographer "Billy" Bitzer devised (with obvious help from Dwan) remain stunning. The movies had offered nothing like it before and seldom have since.

Critic Stuart Klawans designated *Intolerance* as a prime example of what he termed a "film folly" — a movie

*THE CHEAT*. DIRECTED BY CECIL B. DE MILLE. 1915. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 59 MINUTES.

that goes beyond acceptable limits for either its producers or intended audience. *Intolerance*, indeed, was a box office disaster, a fate attributed to its fugue-like structure, which interweaves four apparently unrelated stories. Even its unprecedented level of spectacle seems to work against the viewer's ability to take it all in. It was surely ahead of its time. Yet without its ambitions to push the envelope, we might never have had the great films of the Soviet montage directors, or *Citizen Kane* (1941) with its violations of temporal unity, or Cecil B. De Mille, the Fairbanks spectacles of the 1920s, Ford's *Cavalry Trilogy*, David Lean, Stanley Kubrick, or James Cameron.

To recoup some of his losses, Griffith split *Intolerance* into two shorter films: the Babylonian section

was adapted as *The Fall of Babylon* in 1919, and the modern story became *The Mother and the Law*. The latter film, released that same year, stands on its own as one of the director's major achievements, largely due to the exquisite performance of Mae Marsh. Her greatness in *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, and in Griffith's 1923 film *The White Rose* cannot be overly praised. Marsh remained active in cinema throughout her lifetime, and can be found gracefully stealing scenes in several late Ford films.

Griffith insisted that *Intolerance* was a direct response to progressives' hostility towards *The Birth of a Nation*. He issued a pamphlet, *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America* after the film's failure, which argued that motion pictures were entitled to the same protections against censorship as the printed word. While this issue remains unresolved, it's difficult to sympathize with Griffith's plea for tolerance after making a film as fundamentally intolerant and libelous as *The Birth of a Nation*. Though he was an artistic genius, one finds his argument about as convincing as Leni Riefenstahl's insistence that she acted as a neutral observer while making *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

Although he would soon concentrate mostly on smaller films, Griffith was not yet through with spectacle. *Hearts of the World* (1918), shot during World War I, and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) about the French Revolution, are two of his best works. The latter was filmed at his briefly owned Mamaroneck studio, and in many ways strikes his most satisfactory balance between sweeping epic and emotionally gratifying human drama. This was mostly thanks to the superb Lillian and Dorothy Gish, who star in both films. The sisters were uniquely talented, but Lillian in particular was the greatest actress of the silent screen. His 1924 film *America*, about the American Revolution, was something of a disappointment, but Griffith redeemed himself six years later with his first talkie, *Abraham Lincoln*.

## Griffith's Heirs Thomas Ince and Cecil B. De Mille

**By the end of first decade of the twentieth century there** was a general awareness among film people that D. W. Griffith had brought something new to the discipline and broadened the playing field. Rather than be intimidated, many ambitious young men who aspired to be directors

followed Griffith's lead as they forged their own paths toward success. Thomas Ince (1882-1924) was one of them. He shared Griffith's background as an unsuccessful stage actor who had accidentally stumbled into the medium that would enable him to make his fortune. Unlike Griffith, however, Ince was highly organized and had a strong sense of business. He had twice constructed his own studios, and gradually fudged the lines between directing and producing, as he was seemingly adept at both. The early French critic Louis Delluc made the following distinction between Ince and his hero: "Griffith is cinema's first director. Ince is its first prophet."

Like the Ford brothers, who starred in a number of his films in the 1910s, Ince was from New England. This, however, did not prevent him from having a natural affinity for Westerns, film's most authentically American genre. To solidify his connection to the West, he even bought 20,000 acres of California real estate surrounding his Inceville studio. I find it interesting that all the great silent movie cowboys – Harry Carey, William S. Hart, and Tom Mix – were also born in the Northeast. (Carey and Hart now reside in New York City cemeteries.) It was almost as if the American vision of the West had been waiting for the invention of film.

*Custer's Last Fight* (1912) was made only thirty-six years after the actual event, and in this film Ince strove for an epic quality and almost documentary authenticity. As I wrote in my book, *The Western Film*: "Although Custer is not as heroically dashing as Errol Flynn in *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), Sitting Bull is portrayed as cowardly. The photography and the use of space clearly anticipate [John] Ford's cavalry films... Sitting Bull's career is followed until his death in 1890 with a considerable degree of historical accuracy. We see the monument to Custer at the Little Big Horn, and in a flashback (not unlike the closing shots of Ford's *Fort Apache*), we see Custer alive again, fighting to his glorious death."

On the very next page, I refer to Cecil B. De Mille (1881-1959) as the "Buffalo Bill of movie directors." This is a reference to the broad popular appeal that De Mille sought – and generally achieved – through showmanship and hoopla. Although he started his career with Westerns and intermittently returned to the genre, he had no genuine commitment to them or to their authenticity. He instead was invested in exploiting subjects as divergent as the circus, ancient history, and the Bible, and in mining his material for sensationalism and sex. With rare exceptions such as *King of Kings* (1927), De Mille was a master at creating superficial entertainment with little artistic pretension. A few of his



early films, such as *The Cheat* (1915) and *The Whispering Chorus* (1918), do have an interesting look about them, but De Mille seemed to realize that his gift lay more in spectacle and high production value than in cinematic innovation. *The Cheat* was spectacular in its own way, and helped launch Sessue Hayakawa's ascent to stardom, but it also exploited the taboo sensationalism of racial mixing by presenting a portrait of perversity and corruption. For all his self-proclaimed righteousness and religiosity, nobody ever accused De Mille of having much of a social conscience, especially if there was a buck to be made.

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## Marshall Neilan and King Vidor

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**Marshall "Mickey" Neilan (1891-1958) is an archetypal** example of squandered talent. He managed to cling to a twenty-plus-year directorial career before giving in to the allure of alcohol. (Several of the most talented directors suffered from this problem, but some, such as John Ford, seemed to control it by generally restricting benders to between-film breaks.) Blanche Sweet, who had the "honor" of being married to Neilan, and who acted under him in *The Sporting Venus* (1925), told me a horror story of coming home to her brand-new house and finding Mickey, John Barrymore, and other pals competing to see who could spit the most tobacco onto the ceiling. The "boy wonder" was essentially unemployable for the last twenty years of his life.

*Amarilly of Clothes-line Alley* (1918) is one of several films Neilan made with Mary Pickford, the Canadian who became "America's Sweetheart." Both actress and director began their careers under the tutelage of D. W. Griffith, and Neilan and Pickford's best collaborations resemble some of Griffith's more charming but less ambitious work. Mary may not have been able to plumb the depths of emotion that Lillian Gish or Greta Garbo could, but she was enormously popular with silent-movie audiences, and her fabled marriage to Douglas Fairbanks set a precedent for Hollywood royal couplings that has continued through Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Sadly, Mickey Neilan got left in the dust. His last film appearance was a minor role in Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), and by then he was little more than that.

King Vidor (1894-1982) began his film career as a young boy, photographing hurricanes in his native Galveston, Texas. He went to Hollywood in 1919 to direct cheap independent films, of which *The Jackknife Man* (1919) is the most notable. From 1925 on, Vidor was one of America's leading directors. As early as *The Jackknife Man*, it is evident that Vidor had a special empathy that he was able to convey through images. He also had an experimental streak that makes films like *The Big Parade* (1925), *Hallelujah* (1929), *Street Scene* (1931), *Our Daily Bread* (1934), and several of his later quasi-Gothic romances seem almost avant-garde.

*The Jackknife Man* provided me with one of those rare moments that a film archivist hopes for but almost never experiences. The film is about a young waif, played by Bobby Kelso, who is adopted by an old "primitive" artist, played by Fred Turner. I had been impressed and deeply moved by the film when MoMA acquired it around 1972 for our King Vidor retrospective, my first full-scale curatorial venture. One day, I got a phone call from a gentleman who inquired as to whether we had *The Jackknife Man* and if he could see it. His name was Bobby Kelso. So, some sixty years later, I was able to show him the film he had made as a boy. Vidor and Charlie Chaplin eventually became close friends. I don't know whether Chaplin saw Vidor's film before he made *The Kid* (1921) with Jackie Coogan, but I like to think it possible.

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## Raoul Walsh and Maurice Tourneur

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**The career of Raoul Walsh (1887-1980) represents the** flip side of that of Mickey Neilan. Both were rakish protégés of D. W. Griffith, but Walsh had the self-discipline and instinctive artfulness to manage a fifty-year directorial career. Although he worked in various genres, *Regeneration* (his first important film, made in 1915) speaks to his special facility with "gangster" films and the tragic destinies of their heroes. Three of his best films, *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *High Sierra* (1941), and *White Heat* (1949), also fall into this category. His auteurist personality was not always universally appealing. He had a penchant for sophomoric humor, as exemplified in his two sequels to *What Price Glory?* (1926), his fine adaptation of Laurence Stallings's Broadway hit, which paired Victor McLaglen and Edmund Lowe.



AMARILLY OF CLOTHES-LINE ALLEY. DIRECTED BY MARSHALL NEILAN. 1918. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 67 MINUTES.

Although not as important as John Ford or Howard Hawks, Walsh has an honored place in the history of Westerns. *In Old Arizona* (1928) is the first talkie shot largely on location, and *The Big Trail* (1930) is spectacularly inventive in its use of an experimental widescreen process. Walsh worked productively with everyone from Humphrey Bogart to Mae West, and, of course, he discovered John Wayne. Happy endings were not requisite for Walsh, and he even waxed lyrical over the massacre of Custer in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). Walsh was an archetypal example of a studio director who took all kinds of assignments and

managed to mold them into personal statements. Hollywood filmmaking would have been much poorer without him.

In the 1970s, MoMA held a Walsh retrospective. While I was not its curator, I did have the opportunity to shepherd him around a bit while he was visiting. This was kind of poignant, as he was unwilling to acknowledge that he had gone blind. Walsh was extraordinarily dapper and concerned with his appearance, sporting a trim moustache, a cowboy hat, and riding boots. There was an in-house luncheon attended by, among others, his former star and sometime paramour Gloria Swanson, who came equipped with a parasol and a bag of nuts and berries, determined to avoid the poisonous fare being served to other guests. Ever gallant, Walsh made a point of complimenting Gloria on her appearance. Lest one be inclined to feel sorry for him at his advanced age, his behavior at the Warwick Hotel (once owned by another of his stars, Marion Davies, a gift from William Randolph Hearst) Walsh left no doubt that he hadn't fully succumbed to geriatric manners. His nurse reported that he had tried to pull her into the tub as she was giving him a bath. "Regeneration" has many meanings.

Maurice Tourneur (1876-1961) had what amounted to several careers. After apprenticing to Auguste Rodin, he became an actor, and then entered film in 1911 at an advanced age. He spent World War I working for the Éclair Company and eventually went on to moonlight for a number of other film studios in New Jersey. Many of his early directorial works (such as *The Blue Bird*, 1918) were highly stylized fantasies that were pictorially ahead of their time and indebted to Georges Méliès. Tourneur was also indebted to his gifted designer, Ben Carré, and his editor, Clarence Brown, who became a leading director at MGM. Following a falling-out over his adaptation of Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, Tourneur returned to France in 1926. The films he made in Europe were a bit more conventional. His last silent work was *The Ship of Lost Men* (1929), which starred Marlene Dietrich, although she always insisted she made no films before *The Blue Angel* (1930). He continued to make films under the Vichy government and was active in administering the film industry during that period. His *Volpone*, made in 1941 on the eve of World War II and starring Harry Baur (who would soon die mysteriously after interrogation by the Gestapo), is the only sound film of Tourneur's in the MoMA collection. His son Jacques came to America in the mid-1930s and became a prominent director in the 1940s, having inherited some of his father's flare for visual expressiveness.

## Send in the Clowns

### Mack Sennett / Mabel Normand / Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle

#### First, I should acknowledge my personal prejudice

against slapstick. I believe that Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton rose to the heights of screen comedy by distancing themselves from Mack Sennett, Mabel Normand, and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. The philosophy of "anything for a laugh" – evident in most of Mel Brooks's films and the early works of Woody Allen – seems incongruous to me if we are talking about "Art." I won't even dignify the Three Stooges or Abbott and Costello with a mention. (So, kindly disregard that mention.) Seriously, though, I have always sought out some kind of logical structure, character development, or visual invention when determining the worthiness of a film. This doesn't mean that I am incapable of laughing at silly antics, and I fully acknowledge that some of the greatest moments of Keaton and Chaplin can be painfully unfunny. There is an imaginary line in what's left of my brain that makes me distinguish between entertainment for its own sake and art.

Mack Sennett (1880–1960), another D. W. Griffith disciple, established the Keystone Studio in 1912, and the great clowns flocked to him. It is legitimate to consider him an auteur, although I would not want to risk a custard pie in the face or a sudden de-pantsing by getting too close to him in character. Even when he was only nominally the director, Sennett's films reflect his managerial personality. He remained active through 1935, but I challenge anyone to cite a near-great film that he made. His gift was in providing a haven for ambitious young talent.

Among these talents was Mabel Normand (1894–1930), one of the first women to perch behind the camera, and the cinema's greatest comedienne prior to the rise of the equally lovely Marion Davies. I think it's probably pointless to argue that she had a directorial style or a feminist bent that differed from Sennett, although I know of scholars trying to do just that. As with her compatriot, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Hollywood's overreaction to scandal ruined her career and hastened her death. All of Hollywood was on trial at the time, and in spite of gallant efforts, Normand could not avoid the perception that she was a drug addict.

"Fatty" Arbuckle (1887–1933), had the distinction of mentoring both Chaplin and Keaton in addition to making his own films. As I suggested in 2006 during the Museum's Arbuckle retrospective, Fatty's persona as the "jolly fat man" constrained him from being something more than that, but it also made him lovable to a loyal following during the 1910s. By contrast, the conventionally good-looking Chaplin and Keaton aspired to roles that were more promising, and were ultimately able to transcend slapstick.

## Send in the Cowboys

### John Ford and William S. Hart

At the start of his career, twenty-three-year-old John Ford (1894–1973) embarked on a series of Westerns starring Harry Carey as Cheyenne Harry. Of these, *Straight Shooting* (1917) was the first. Carey was a more natural actor than his rivals, fellow Western stars William S. Hart and Tom Mix, and Cheyenne Harry was a gallant but unglamorous saddle tramp, not unlike the character John Wayne would play four decades later in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). The films salvaged Carey's waning career (he had worked for D. W. Griffith and appeared in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* in 1913), and Ford became the most promising director on the Universal lot.

In technique, acting, and content, *Straight Shooting* shows a strong Griffith influence. Yet many of the compositions are sui generis in their exquisite symmetry and lighting, and compare favorably to Ford's much later work. He was a natural. Reviews of Ford's Universal films frequently commented on their extraordinary photography and use of locations. The plots seemed to resemble Hart's simplistic Westerns, but they lacked his oppressive moralizing and concentrated more on vigorous action.

"Gentlemen: I am enclosing a list of films which I own. In your search for pictures for your library, would they interest you?" With this brief hand-written note, dated January 22, 1936, William S. Hart (1865–1946) offered the fledgling Museum of Modern Art Film Library its first major donation, which included all the actor's surviving film material. (Douglas Fairbanks and Griffith would follow suit.) Six years later, writing to curator Iris Barry from his Horseshoe Ranch, the seventy-two-year-old Hart waxed poetic over the prospect that his films would be preserved for future generations:

“Oh! What a thrill it gives me... Oh! dear lady how high my heart leaps (?) to know that these pictures will always be seen in their simplicity and bigness of nature. Just as they were and just as they are – Those pictures that I gave my very being to breathe the breath of life into, will still live!”

And so, the Museum has *White Oak* (1921) and several dozen other films by Hart, all pieces cut from a tapestry, the likes of which no longer exist. In spite of his romantic sensibility, Hart’s films strove for authenticity. His passion for realism gives these films credibility, no matter how unlikely their plots or how theatrical the acting. *White Oak* was nominally directed by the journeyman Lambert Hillyer and was photographed by Joseph August, who would begin a fruitful collaborative relationship with Ford four years later, culminating in the great World War II epic *They Were Expendable* (1945). August began working with Hart in 1917. In those days, Hart accepted credit as director, although there was never any doubt even in his later career that he, like Douglas Fairbanks or Buster Keaton, was an auteur. In some instances “nominal” directors were credited in his films, but it was always clear who the real author was. Both Hart and August deserve credit for the extraordinary photography in such films as *Shark Monroe* (which the Museum has beautifully restored) and *The Tiger Man*. The expressionist lighting in these 1918 Westerns clearly anticipates the German experiments of the 1920s.

In his autobiography, *My Life East and West*, Hart writes, “To those who claim superiority of race – the white over the red – I can only say, ‘Arrant drivels.’” Yet his films, and in particular *White Oak*, do have racist overtones. A *New York Times* reviewer found it absurd that Hart singlehandedly defeats the Indians, a moment referred to in a title-card as “brown death.” Hart’s early success, *The Aryan* (1916), climaxed with a renegade white man remaining true to his racial heritage. It is, of course, unfair to ask major film artists of other eras to live up to contemporary standards. (Ford, who killed off a multitude of Indians in his films, lived long enough to try to belatedly compensate with *Sergeant Rutledge*, 1960, and *Cheyenne Autumn*, 1964). Hart’s films have an ineffable beauty to them that links us to our past. Not all of our past is attractive, but it is inescapably ours. Perhaps it is best to think of Bill Hart as a medieval chevalier with an archetypal face and a grand stage manner – D. W. Griffith on a horse – who, true to his own beliefs, rode to the rescue of Westerns and Western civilization.

## Abel Gance’s *J’Accuse* 1919

**Over the course of film history, there have been** directors who chafed at the restrictions the medium seemed bound to. D. W. Griffith established a revolutionary but enduring film grammar and enjoyed enormous success (although his legacy is tainted by the subject matter of films such as *The Birth of a Nation*). This encouraged him to envision the film fugue, and he went on to make *Intolerance* (1916), which was too advanced for its time, too far outside the envelope for audiences to comfortably comprehend. Griffith, however, was wily enough to get over his bitterness and he returned to the kind of narrative that had worked for him before, making most of his best films in the ensuing decade. Similarly, men like Sergei Eisenstein and Orson Welles started their careers in their mid-twenties with a flourish of innovation but became tamer, although no less creative, as time went on. Josef von Sternberg’s flame largely burned out after a decade of highly personal filmmaking, and Erich von Stroheim never quite got the hang of balancing commercial realities with big ideas. Stanley Kubrick’s planet-shaking *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) remains a sort of anomaly in an otherwise creditable but mixed career. A more recent maverick is, of course, James Cameron, whose enormous box office successes with *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009) have made him somewhat immune from restraints.

Perhaps the leading exemplar of thwarted ambition is Abel Gance (1889–1981), an actor-turned-director who began making films in 1911. Some of his early work was in the fantastical tradition of Georges Méliès. After some two dozen films he made *J’Accuse*. This strange but forceful indictment of the folly that led to World War I made Gance into France’s most serious director and emboldened him to consider the limitations and untapped possibilities of the medium. After shooting *La Roue* (1923), Gance visited Griffith in America and then spent the next year re-cutting his film with Griffith’s techniques. The final film ran a reputed eight hours and anticipated the debut of Eisenstein and Soviet montage by two years. Understandably, Gance began to develop the reputation of being part genius, part madman.

His next project, *Napoleon* (1927), was perhaps a peculiar subject for an ardent pacifist. What survives of Gance’s masterpiece is a film that would surely make Griffith or Cameron envious. The director seems to have had unlimited resources. It is a colossal movie, embroidered with startling effects: the frame splits into



*BROKEN BLOSSOMS*. DIRECTED BY D. W. GRIFFITH. 1919. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, 90 MINUTES.

multiple facets, it made use of mobile aerial cameras not unlike those now used for television coverage of sporting events, and there is a famous three-screen climax. Intended as the first of a six-part series, the surviving film is a monument to both Gance's vision and its overextension. The original premiere was at the Paris Opera House, and I had the privilege of being present at the Radio City Music Hall screening in 1981 when the aged and ailing Gance called in from Paris.

At the helm of *Napoleon* Gance had been like a general directing a splendid army on the battlefield. By the 1930s, and with the coming of sound, the director struggled to retain his stature. His 1935 film *Lucrece Borgia* was a success in France, but it seldom rises above being a commercial confection, an Alexander Korda-like spectacle spiced with Cecil B. De Mille salaciousness. The scenes

involving Antonin Artaud's Savanrola and a burning at the stake are evocative of Carl Theodor Dreyer or Eisenstein, and there also seems to be explicit borrowing from Rouben Mamoulian's *Queen Christina* (1933). Gance went on to make a dozen films, including a remake of his silent *J'Accuse*, but none approached his early greatness. Like Griffith, he found that the times and the cinema had grown too small for his particular genius.

## D. W. Griffith on a Smaller Canvas

1919

Although D. W. Griffith's racism was unforgivable, nothing can ever take away the fact that he was the most gifted and creative director of the first thirty years of cinema. Writing about Louis Armstrong in *The New Yorker*, John McWhorter observed that Armstrong's early

78-rpm recordings “were as crucial in creating our modern musical sensibility as D. W. Griffith’s films were in creating the grammar of cinematic narrative.” McWhorter goes on to say that “while performers around [Armstrong] assimilated his innovations, he never really grew.” One might argue that this was also true of Griffith, and not simply because he lost his independence in the final decade of his career due to changing public tastes and his lack of business sense. Griffith never quite developed beyond the nineteenth-century stage melodramas on which he had been weaned. America had changed in ways he had not. However, his greatest gift never failed him, and that was his skill with actors.

*Broken Blossoms* (1919) is Griffith’s great and somber tragedy, his Limehouse *Romeo and Juliet*. The short story it is based on, Thomas Burke’s “The Chink and the Child,” is about a young Chinese man who falls in love with a white girl. The film is narrated primarily from the point of view of the “Yellow Man,” played by Richard Barthelmess, who Griffith romanticizes. With Griffith’s assistance, Lillian Gish fleshed out the fragile, waifish character of Lucy with a myriad of human touches, and the resulting child-goddess is an exquisite creature who shatters all barriers between artifice and reality. As Burke put it, “she was a poem.” We believe in Lucy – and in *Broken Blossoms* – simply because they exist before our eyes. It is all the more extraordinary given that there was little in Griffith’s career (or in anyone else’s) that had laid the groundwork for such soulful poetry. *Broken Blossoms* stands alone as a work of lyric genius in which technique is virtually invisible.

Both Richard Barthelmess and Gish bring to their roles sensitivity commensurate with the style and subject of the film. The brutish excesses of Donald Crisp, who plays Lucy’s father, lend even more grace to the actors’ portrayals. Lucy is such a forlorn creature that she must manipulate her mouth with her fingers to force a smile. The poetic intertitles, largely borrowed from Burke’s text, do not approach the eloquence of her disbelief or her twittering delight at the man’s kindness. Because the film features only three main characters, Gish is allowed to perform with far greater subtlety than in any of her previous roles.

The film’s pace is leisurely, and the midsection is a plotless study of two of the most gifted faces that cinema has given us – and of each studying the other. This cloistered interlude of love will soon be horribly

destroyed, but only after we have had the privilege of seeing how two people alone in a small space can communicate expressively without a single word. This is the essence of silent art, and it is seldom presented more gloriously than in *Broken Blossoms*.

In 1919 Griffith also released a trilogy of small films that, taken as a whole, provide a celluloid record of the imprint that a Kentucky childhood left on his soul. These three works are built around a Gish character that was richly unsophisticated and ornately simple. Never was she more endearing or more sublimely suited to her roles than in these films.

In *A Romance of Happy Valley*, *True Heart Susie*, and *The Greatest Question*, Gish’s little girl manages to be more worldly and wise than Bobby Harron’s young man by adhering to the old-fashioned values in which Griffith believed – but which conflicted with the director’s ambition and lifestyle. Living in Hollywood as the most honored master of the most popular art form in human history was not in harmony with Griffith’s idealization of life back on the farm. These films signify his gnawing realization that he would never be truly comfortable amongst the city slickers who kept the accounts and who gradually came to own slices of his soul. These rural romances represent a yearning after the lost illusions of his youth; they were the secret stories he told himself in the private moments of the night. They are art of a different kind than his epics, more personal testaments to what might have been.

Gish’s acting in these films depends more on gestures than facial expressions, and there is a tender delicacy in her scenes with Harron. Coy kisses mask the ferocity of patient commitment. Humor conceals vulnerability, and love is a lifelong statement that precludes all else. Because it is uncontaminated by plot complexities, *True Heart Susie* is the best of the trio. It is a lyrical ode to simplicity and plainness, and Gish, having the least plain of female faces, persuades us out of our senses. Like all screen magic, it is inimitable and indescribable. I can only suggest that part of the secret may lie in Gish’s ability to play the character simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and with supreme naturalistic precision, something akin to what Marlene Dietrich would later achieve for Josef von Sternberg. *Susie* allows Gish to be comedienne and tragedienne, incorporating both skills into one of the sweetest and most moving performances ever committed to film.

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**1920-1929**

## Erich von Stroheim's Foolish Wives 1922

The name Erich von Stroheim (1885–1957) generally provokes one of two reactions: he is either a great genius done in by imbecilic studio executives, or a self-immolating martyr who succumbed to his own inflated ego. Although the truth obviously lies somewhere in between, I'm not sure exactly where. Stroheim's life and career are wrapped in several overlapping enigmas that further confuse matters. The first is, indeed, the self-created myth of his identity.

Not content to be descended from Jewish merchants, Erich declared himself Austrian nobility and gave the name Erich Oswald Hans Carl Maria von Stroheim upon disembarking from the *Prince Friedrich Wilhelm* at Ellis Island in 1909. Certainly, a professional storyteller can be forgiven a certain degree of fabrication, and his "nobility" became an asset in lending authenticity to his celluloid exposes of European nobles – characters he sometimes played himself, such as in *Foolish Wives*, in which he plays a malevolent seducer and count. "Chutzpah" is, after all, not a four-letter word, even in Yiddish. Yet pseudo-authenticity became a mania, and at one point Erich even insisted that the undergarments of his actors conform to standard-issue Hapsburg attire. What was a studio executive to do? Reading Cari Beauchamp's account of Stroheim's antics on the set of the unfinished *Queen Kelly*, one wonders how he shot any film before the producers stepped in and figuratively ripped it to shreds. *Queen Kelly* was never finished,

but what survived was later released essentially for scholarly purposes.

I find it hard to understand how Stroheim developed his reputation for realism when so many of his characters are, to borrow Andrew Sarris's phrase, "grotesque gargoyles." In *Greed* (1924), for example, many of his hideous men and women seem as if they would be more at home in a *Star Wars* saloon tossing one down with Han Solo and a Wookiee than in pre-earthquake San Francisco. I am also puzzled by arch-humanist Jean Renoir's early enthralment with the director, and particularly with *Foolish Wives*. Renoir made his 1926 version of Zola's *Nana* to honor Stroheim, and, of course, made him the star of *Grand Illusion* (1937). Whatever his virtues (and we'll come to those) Stroheim seems to be operating in a universe parallel to Renoir's.

As Richard Koszarski points out in his excellent *The Man You Loved to Hate: Erich von Stroheim and Hollywood*, the director's debut *Blind Husbands* (1918) burst on the scene like no other first film before *Citizen Kane*. (Stroheim's original title was *The Pinnacle*, and an apocryphal story holds that Universal boss Carl Laemmle changed the name because "there ain't no pinochle in it.") Set in Europe and focused on seduction and the specter of infidelity, the film opened up the screen to more explicit "debauchery" than had been permissible in the pre-war era, and led to a more Europeanized American cinema. Koszarski cogently suggests that "in the work of no other great director are autobiographical elements so crucial, and such elements are stronger than usual in *Blind Husbands*." I'd hold out for Charlie Chaplin, and I question whether Stroheim



tried to be as wicked as the characters he played, even as they shared his penchant for seduction. Scholar Cullen Gallagher has suggested that after all the critical attacks on Stroheim's films, "what remains is a coherent work unified by its global immorality and ritualistically debased virtue, all centered around von Stroheim's strong, nefarious presence that is unmistakable and immutable."

Stroheim never seemed to learn that filmmaking was a medium financed by people much more concerned about making a profit than making art, and time and time again he seemed to flagrantly violate whatever trust was put in him. Eventually, he lost all support, and he spent his last quarter-century acting and sometimes forced to parody his own image.

(We owe thanks to Arthur Lennig for the painstaking work of salvaging as much as could be salvaged of *Foolish Wives*. Art, now a retired professor living in Albany, used to visit the Museum on a regular basis. One of his signature stories is about how a derelict Bela Lugosi, broke and ravaged by addiction, showed up on his doorstep one day in belated response to fan letters he had written the actor decades earlier. Be careful who you admire.)

Nothing written here should be interpreted as an outright dismissal of Stroheim. He may have been the best of those who were tutored directly by D. W. Griffith. He was certainly an auteur: he was innovative, his films betrayed a beauty beneath their frequent squalor; and, as Sarris has suggested, his style anticipated the coming of sound. One wishes he had had more opportunities to make films and could have finished and preserved the films he was able to make. Yet one also wishes he had been a little more shrewd and pragmatic. Greater artists than Stroheim – such as John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Ernst Lubitsch, and Fritz Lang – were able to play the studio game and emerge triumphant. For whatever reason, Erich von Stroheim was not.

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## The Chaplin Revue

**A Dog's Life** 1918 / **Shoulder**

**Arms** 1918 / **The Pilgrim** 1923

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**I've written more about Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977)**

than about any other filmmaker (including in my book *Charles Chaplin: An Appreciation*) and I'm not exactly sure

where to begin now. Certainly, he is the auteur's auteur, having had incredible freedom to visualize on celluloid whatever he dreamed or imagined. This was the lucky consequence of being the most famous artist in the world, which allowed him to purchase his own studio, rehearse endlessly, and show his audience only that which he considered to be up to his standards. The great Jean Renoir said: "the master of masters, the film-maker of film-makers, for me is still Charlie Chaplin." Given the opportunity to meet Chaplin, Renoir rhapsodized, "it was like inviting a devout Christian to meet God in person." René Clair said that even though Chaplin had little direct influence on the cinema, he was so "profoundly original" that without him, "we would not have been altogether the same people we are today." I share many of these feelings.

"Feelings," is, of course, the key word in evaluating Chaplin's art. Clearly, he was a skilled director, always knowing where exactly to place his camera, as cinematographer Néstor Almendros told me. And clearly no other director tackled the great issues of the time – war, mechanization, poverty, fascism, nuclear weapons, McCarthyism, old age – more directly or with greater passion. When all is said, however, the heart of Chaplin's genius was his acting, and he had no genuine rival when it came to intensity or depth of performance. As Andrew Sarris said, Chaplin's face was his *mise-en-scène*. D. W. Griffith could extract superlative performances from actors, and he fully understood film's power to engage its audience emotionally, but not even he could match Chaplin's ability to move us, to involve us completely with experiences and thoughts, and as Clair put it, to be "our friend." As much as Griffith empathized with his actors, that was nothing compared to Chaplin's ability to both direct and star in a film at the same time. He was helped enormously by the fact that he appeared as essentially the same character in all but his last four films. Of those, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), *Limelight* (1952), and *A King in New York* (1957) are as autobiographical as any works by a major director. By the time he stepped out of the Tramp character for good at the end of *The Great Dictator* (1940), our "friend" had become our lifelong companion.

In order to grasp Chaplin's importance, one must see the films. His methodology, technique, theories, whatever, cannot be taught. He was inimitable, and we will never see anyone like him again. His growing command of film can be seen in the shorts that he made in his late twenties for the Keystone, Essanay, and Mutual studios, but it is only in his longer works that we

see him surpassing the stamp of genius. *Shoulder Arms* and *A Dog's Life* mark a turning point. The former is a film as funny as any comedy about that least funny subject: war. In the latter, Charlie mistakes a man's crying for laughter, which seems fitting, as his whole life and career are a commentary on the frail membrane that separates the two.

In *The Pilgrim*, the Tramp is an escaped convict masquerading as a preacher. There is something almost self-deprecating in an extraordinary tracking shot in which a naughty boy knowingly looks at the camera and then throws a banana peel in the path of Charlie and the fat deacon, played by Mack Swain. Of course, both obligingly slip and fall, and it is even funnier for our having anticipated it. However, by making the boy acknowledge the camera and, hence, our presence, Chaplin seems to be telling us that pratfalls are now too easy for him – he must move on to bigger things.

Chaplin famously defied the coming of the talking picture by continuing to make silents a decade into the sound era. However, *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) did have musical soundtracks that Chaplin composed. While his scores might not be up to classical standards, they have become an integral part of these films. They are totally idiosyncratic and, yes, Chaplinesque. Later, he added his music to his earlier work, including his 1959 compilation of three films, *The Chaplin Revue*.

Chaplin withheld his films after his exile to Switzerland in 1953, and their re-release in the early 1960s was a life-changing experience for me.

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## **Buster's Planet**

### **Our Hospitality** 1923 **and**

### **Sherlock, Jr.** 1924

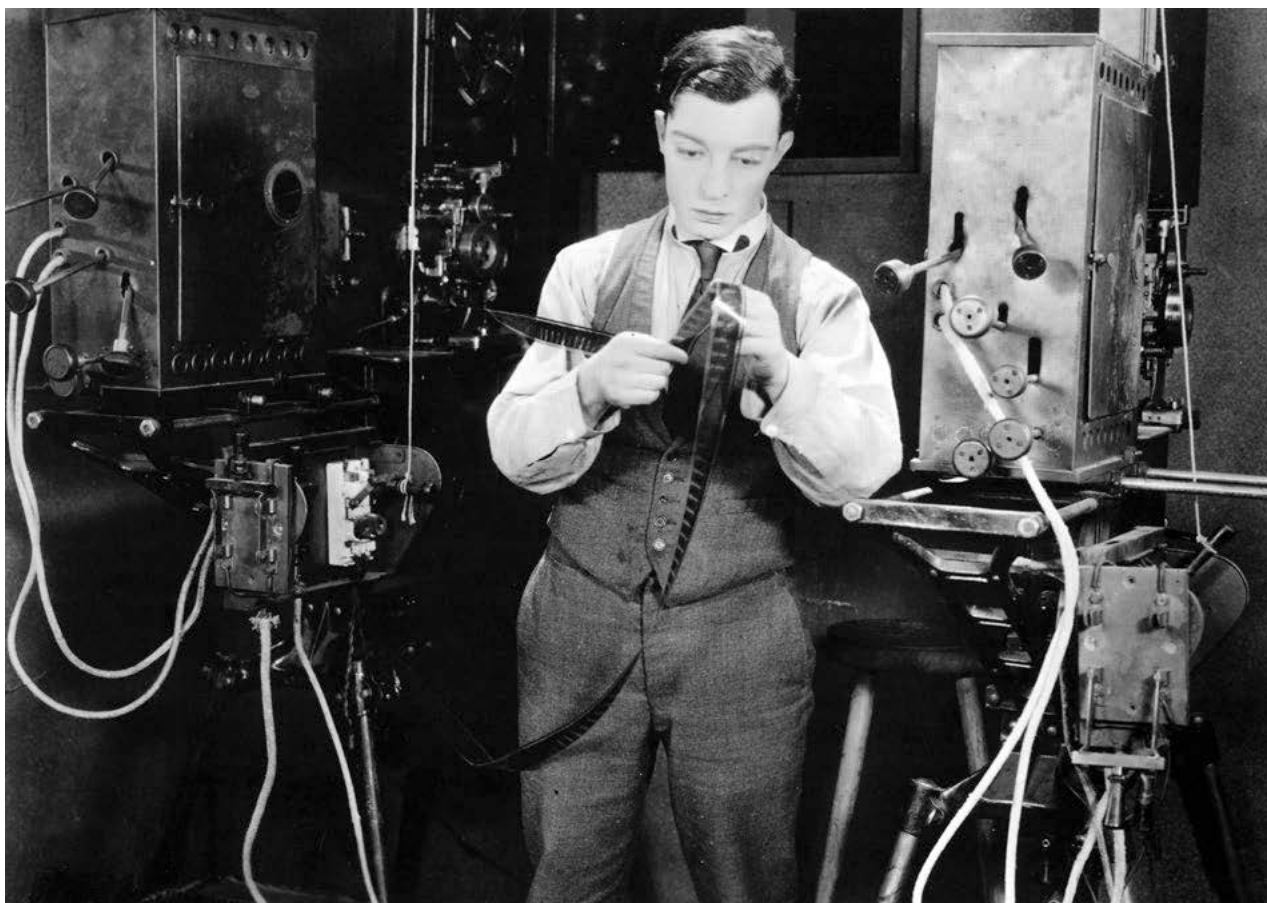
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**Joseph Francis "Buster" Keaton (1895–1966)** began appearing in his family's vaudeville act at the age of three. Charlie Chaplin made his first stage appearance at five. Psychologists have had a field day tracing all kinds of problems in two of the cinema's greatest comedy stars back to their unusual childhoods. The fact may be, however, that they simply loved to perform and make people laugh. Buster, whose nickname has been attributed to Harry Houdini, followed in Chaplin's footsteps and started making films in 1917 under the tutelage of Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle.

Keaton produced his own shorts between 1920 and 1923, resulting in gems like *One Week* (1920), *The Playhouse*, *The Boat* (both 1921), *Cops*, *The Electric House* (both 1922), and *The Balloonatic* (1923). In these films, he would play the role of the "Great Stone Face," unperturbedly triumphing over a universe in which inanimate objects and natural elements were stacked against him. Keaton's acting fit his roles, yet he never soared to the emotional levels of Chaplin. While Chaplin worshipped his heroines, Keaton comes across as borderline misogynistic. While Chaplin's world is rooted in naturalism, Keaton's has a sense of wonder and magic to it. In these early shorts, his fascination with machines is evident, and particularly with what he considered the most important machine, cinema. Chaplin's films were rarely experimental – the dream sequence in *The Kid* (1921) being an aberration – but Keaton pushed the cinematic envelope from the moment he stepped behind the camera. Defenders of the avant-garde rarely look toward Hollywood, but if they did, they might find him ruling over their pantheon.

Although Keaton made two features before *Our Hospitality* (1923), that was his first sustained masterpiece. A charming evocation of rural antebellum life, the film reveals the twenty-seven-year-old Keaton to already be a mature and gifted director. Up until that point, no other American filmmaker in his twenties had shown the promise displayed by *Our Hospitality* (and *Sherlock, Jr.*, which came out the following year). *The General*, released three years later, is as precise and perfectly made a film as any I can think of. If it were not for the extraordinary athleticism he shows in the film, one might easily forget how young Keaton was.

Orson Welles was later to call movies "ribbons of dreams," and depictions of dreams in film date back to Alice Guy-Blaché, Georges Méliès, and Edwin S. Porter. Dream sequences would play key roles in innumerable Hollywood films, including Hitchcock's 1945 thriller *Spellbound*, which was designed by Salvador Dalí. Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* not only anticipated this, but also laid the groundwork for films as divergent as Harry Hurwitz's *The Projectionist* (1971) and Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). In *Sherlock, Jr.*, Keaton is a conscientious projectionist who falls asleep on the job. As the film progresses, he steps into the screen in a spectacular metaphor for entering the alternate reality of cinema itself. The film poses the question: does art imitate life, or does life imitate art? And what prompted a young unschooled clown from Kansas to raise such questions?



SHERLOCK JR. DIRECTED BY BUSTER KEATON. 1924. USA.  
BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 45 MINUTES.

## The Lubitsch Touch

**Ernst Lubitsch (1892–1947) was more responsible than any other filmmaker for bringing a continental flavor to the largely Anglo-Saxon world of American cinema.** Although Erich von Stroheim preceded him, the Austrian's obsessions were too outré to be fully integrated into the Hollywood sensibility. Lubitsch was also fixated on European subjects and locales, but his broad humanism and sense of comedy resonated with Americans in ways that Stroheim's esoteric naughtiness did not. Stroheim returned to Europe after World War II; Lubitsch died a Hollywood insider.

Lubitsch's journey from his hometown of Berlin took a few atypical turns. Beginning in 1914 he directed himself in several crude comedies that emphasized Jewish stereotypes. Some of his more sophisticated satires (*The Oyster Princess*, *The Doll*, both from 1919; *Romeo and Juliet in the Snow*, 1920) hold up well and reflect Lubitsch's stage training with Max Reinhardt. His

ersatz D. W. Griffith spectacles like *Madame DuBarry* (1919) and *Anna Boleyn* (1920) first gained him notice in America, and Mary Pickford brought him to Hollywood to do the costume drama *Rosita* (1923), which she subsequently tried to destroy. Fortunately, Warner Brothers signed him to a contract that resulted in a series of adult comedy/dramas, of which *The Marriage Circle* (1924) and *So This Is Paris* (1926) are representative.

Charlie Chaplin, during the height of his fame as the Tramp, decided to make a film in which he gave himself only a brief cameo. *A Woman of Paris* (1923) was a serious melodrama about an innocent country girl caught up in romantic intrigues in Paris, and it was praised for its subtlety and sophistication. The film made an enormous impact on Lubitsch. American audiences had seldom experienced stories of marriage and adultery in which women were allowed to operate on a more-or-less level playing field. Prior to this, heroines had been

largely represented as wily yet vulnerable childwomen portrayed by actresses such as Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford, or as unscrupulous vamps. Lubitsch presented the possibility that women were just women, with needs and intellects that corresponded to those of men.

Although *The Marriage Circle* (1924) handles its subject matter with deftness and delicacy, scholar Greg S. Faller has pointed out that there is a superficiality (endemic to the period) in Lubitsch's threat to the status quo. He summarizes it as follows: "An essentially solid relationship is temporarily threatened by a sexual rival. The possibility of infidelity serves as the occasion for the original partners to reassess their relationship... The lovers are left more intimately bound than before." Yet all this is presented with a visual panache that came to be called the "Lubitsch touch."

Of all the great directors, Lubitsch is perhaps the least remembered for imagery. Although he drew upon master studio set-designers to create palatial environments for his human dramas, he had practically no concern for visual effects, landscape, spectacle, or many of the other qualities we often describe as "cinematic." His gifts lay elsewhere. Lubitsch, in league with Maurice Chevalier, rescued the musical from the vulgarities of Al Jolson and the studio-promoting vaudeville reviews that proliferated in the early days of sound. In the 1930s, he was responsible for some of the most enduring romances ever produced, including *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Desire* (a 1936 film produced by Lubitsch and directed with luxuriance by Frank Borzage), *Angel* (1937), *Ninotchka* (1939), and *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940).

## F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* 1924

**Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888-1931) had already** made over a dozen films before *The Last Laugh*, but only *Nosferatu* (1929) made any blip on the international scene. *Nosferatu* was released in America seven years after it came out in Germany, and when it finally opened in the wake of *The Last Laugh*, *Tartuffe* (1925), *Faust* (1926), and *Sunrise* (1927), it received a condescending review in *The New York Times*. But before that, few were prepared for what may be the best film ever made by a German in Germany.

The style of *The Last Laugh* is derived from the *Kammerspiele*, an intimate approach to theater

introduced by the great stage impresario Max Reinhardt, of whom Murnau was a disciple. Reinhardt's theater, which featured chamber dramas about lower middle class life, was dimly lit and the audience was placed close to the stage so actors could perform with greater subtlety. Lotte Eisner, the doyenne of film scholarship of the Weimar era, makes the point that Murnau's achievement lay outside developing the Expressionist techniques that had come to dominate German cinema by 1924. She contends that Murnau's moving camera "is never used decoratively or symbolically," and that each movement "has a precise, clearly-defined aim." (Whatever his rationale, Murnau's long takes and mobile cameras set a standard for future masters such as Kenji Mizoguchi and Max Ophüls, and these techniques were also developed into a counter-theory to the montage theory postulated by Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviets. One of Orson Welles' great achievements was to synthesize these two approaches.) According to Eisner, Murnau's use of "opalescent surfaces streaming with reflections, rain, or light... is an almost impressionistic way of evoking atmosphere." She also suggests that the supposed ponderousness of *The Last Laugh* is a way of lending gravitas and significance to what is, ultimately, a trivial event: the demotion of a doorman to a men's room attendant.

It is all thoroughly German. Although *The Last Laugh* has a tacked on "happy ending," the dominant feeling – as in so much of Murnau's work and in Weimar cinema in general – is one of foreboding. I won't go so far as to credit Siegfried Kracauer's idea, put forth in *From Caligari to Hitler*, that German films of the 1920s and early 1930s show the inevitability of the Nazis, but there was certainly a pervasive pessimism underlying all the frolic that made Berlin the fun capital of Europe during those years. One can find it in the paranoia of Fritz Lang and in the cynicism of G. W. Pabst, and one can certainly find it in the perversity and bestiality of *Nosferatu*.

Murnau was also a closeted homosexual, and although the bohemian Berlin art scene was a relatively safe place at the time, this must have been a psychic burden to anyone born eighty years before the international gay rights movement which arose from the Stonewall revolt.

Due credit must be given to Emil Jannings, who gives (for once) a restrained and moving performance. Jannings later enjoyed a brief Oscar-winning turn in Hollywood, and dragged the Jewish Josef von Sternberg to Berlin to direct him in *The Blue Angel* in 1930. Jannings showed his true colors during the Third Reich, winning high honors from the Nazis for acting in party

propaganda films, becoming a studio head, and ultimately accepting a post as a high-ranking cultural official for the Reich. Banished from the film industry after the war, Jannings experienced some of the humiliation he portrayed so well in *The Last Laugh*. After following *The Last Laugh* with two classical adaptations that also starred Jannings (*Tartuffe* and *Faust*), Murnau went to Hollywood and staged something of a revolution in film style and production.

## Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*

1923–24

**In a sense, there are two Fritz Langs (1890–1976),** for his life, career, and sensibility were split in half by the rise of the Nazis. The German Lang is monumental, existing in the realm of the fantastic, the superhuman, the surreal. The American Lang is naturalistic, existing in a real world inhabited by ordinary earthlings, people with feelings, folks with whom we can identify. The crossover film was Lang's first talkie, *M* (1931), in which a child murderer played by Peter Lorre is accorded a sympathetic hearing. *M* underscored how much Lang's work over the preceding twelve years had been lacking in genuine emotion. This is not to suggest that he ever became a conventional naturalistic director over the course of his honorable and mostly successful American career. He was as much a progenitor of film noir as he was of the expressionism that produced it, and in his later years he adapted Zola, collaborated with Bertolt Brecht in Hollywood, and appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963) – all of which highlight an exceptional career.

Peter Cohen's documentary *The Architecture of Doom* (1989) cites Richard Wagner's opera *Rienzi* as a key influence on Hitler during his formative years, and suggests that the dictator welcomed the destruction of his Reich as a fitting reenactment of the *Götterdämmerung* at the end of Wagner's Ring Cycle. There is no question that the spirit of German nationalism hangs very heavily over Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, a 1924 film composed of *Siegfried's Tod* and *Kriemhild's Rache*, Lang's adaptation of the Ring Cycle. How much the film foreshadowed the rise to power of the Nazis nine years later is debatable. (Thea von Harbou, Lang's writer, wife, and the former wife of Dr. Mabuse actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge, eventually became a full-fledged Nazi after Lang divorced her and went west.) In approaching *Die Nibelungen*, historian

Lotte Eisner focuses primarily on the film's artificial landscapes and stylized architecture. "The veil separating Nordic man from Nature cannot be torn down; so the Germans... construct an artificial Nature," she writes. "The massive architecture in *Die Nibelungen* constitutes an ideal setting for the stature of its epic heroes. Aiming for spectacular effects, Lang brought life to the grandiose rigidity of the architecture with a skillful use of lighting."

Eisner does comment on certain racial implications in the film's depiction of the Huns, but she attributes this more to Harbou than to Lang. The critic Siegfried Kracauer, on the other hand, points out the differences between Wagner's operas and the film, but states that Lang "defined this film as a national document fit to publicize German culture all over the world. His whole statement somewhat anticipated the Goebbels propaganda." Kracauer speaks of "the complete triumph of the ornamental over the human" in *Die Nibelungen*, and makes the claim that the Nazis drew inspiration from Lang's film for the mass rallies in Nuremberg in 1934 that were immortalized in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

Ideology aside, *Die Nibelungen* was the most expensive and emblematic film ever to come out of Universum-Film AG (UFA), the leading German studio between the wars. It was shot entirely indoors at UFA's Neubabelsberg studio – the same wonder of the early film world where a young Alfred Hitchcock visited F. W. Murnau on the set of *The Last Laugh* (1924) and where Josef von Sternberg filmed *The Blue Angel* (1930). Lang went on to film *Metropolis* (1927) and *Woman in the Moon* (1929) there as well. At Neubabelsberg, a multitude of craftsmen seemed to perform miracles, oblivious to the petty realities of budgets. Lang's grandiose film was justification enough for the studio's existence.

## King Vidor's *The Big Parade* 1925

**In his autobiography *A Tree Is a Tree*, King Vidor** recounts the origins of *The Big Parade*. Having made some good but ephemeral films for the fledgling MGM, Vidor told Irving Thalberg, "If I were to work on something that had a chance at long runs... I would put much more effort, and love, into its creation."

If there is anything wrong with *The Big Parade*, it is that Vidor put too much into it. The film is at once a grand epic, an intimate romance, a comedy of camaraderie, and a savage polemic against war. Somehow, Vidor managed



THE BIG PARADE. DIRECTED BY KING VIDOR. 1925. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 151 MINUTES.

to hold all this together and seemingly overnight became the leading “serious” director in America, assuming at thirty-one the mantle that had fallen from D. W. Griffith’s shoulders when the Master was forced to sign a contract with Paramount in 1925. *The Big Parade* still dwarfs virtually every film made about World War I, and it is arguably Vidor’s finest achievement.

For Marxist critics *The Big Parade* was anathema, since as one reviewer wrote, Vidor “centered his comment upon the war in an absurd love affair between a French peasant girl and an American doughboy while men were being blown to bits.” What this writer for *Experimental*

*Cinema* didn’t seem to realize was that for Vidor, as for most people, the impossibility of love under conditions of combat was precisely the point. The tragedy of war is not the interruption of dialectic, but of love and of life.

The greatness of *The Big Parade* lies in its manic romanticism, its total commitment to absurd peasant girls and doughboys, and to individual happiness above all else. As Vidor once said, “war has always been a very human thing.” He reduces war to its human level, to the trivialities that constitute life, such as smoking cigarettes and chewing gum. Only through the director’s painstaking efforts towards verisimilitude are we able to fully appreciate the broader implications of his magnificently painted canvas. He shows us grotesquely tiny men caught in surreal bombardment in night battle scenes; a funereal march through Belleau Wood with bodies falling in cadence; and the *Big Parade* itself, which climaxes with Melisande’s refusal to let go of Jim’s left leg, as if she knew he was soon to lose it for a cause neither of them understood. *The Big Parade* does not have the ideological simplemindedness of classic Soviet films, or even the philosophical consistency of Ernst Lubitsch’s *Broken Lullaby* (*The Man I Killed*) released seven years later, but Jim does cry out with a question as relevant today as it was in 1918: “What the hell do we get out of this war anyway?”

Vidor said of the film: “I wanted it to be the story of a young American who was neither overpatriotic or a pacifist, but who went to war and reacted normally to all the things that happened to him. It would be the story of the average guy... He simply goes along for the ride and tries to make the most of each situation as it happens.” It was Thalberg’s idea to have Vidor collaborate with Laurence Stallings, who was then enjoying the great success of *What Price Glory?* on Broadway. Certainly some of the sardonic dynamics from that play were applied to the trio of compatriots in *The Big Parade*. Most of the scenario was written by Stallings (who had lost a leg at Belleau Wood), with Vidor and Harry Behn while they traveled across the U.S. in a Pullman car. Vidor’s book provides a rich account of his efforts to choreograph the Belleau Wood march as a “ballet of death,” and his experiments with “silent music” to do so. The move toward the front was shot with equal care. Each army unit was set to an different tempo in an attempt to create a “total symphonic effect.” The result is like nothing else in American silent film, save perhaps the rhythmic climaxes of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916).

In the midst of Vidor’s superbly orchestrated panorama, the images one retains are those of tender

moments between actors John Gilbert and Renée Adorée, whose star-crossed careers and lives peaked in this film. In the penultimate sequence, when Jim tells his mother that he loves a girl in France, she replies, “Then you must find her... nothing else matters.” One can’t quite help but feel that in *The Big Parade*, nothing mattered quite so much for King Vidor as these two little people and their absurd love affair. His mind may have been on his metronome, but Vidor’s heart was surely with Jim and Melisande.

## The Trials of Sergei Eisenstein

**Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) is in many ways a special case.** He was undeniably one of the geniuses of early cinema. As a theoretician, he wrote voluminously, and posited a theory of montage (editing), derived from the work of D. W. Griffith, notably *Intolerance* (1916). Eisenstein’s theory of montage, which was centered on juxtaposing short shots to make a point, directly contradicted the German Expressionist approach most successfully promulgated by F. W. Murnau. It was enormously influential to many directors, though it did not always produce satisfying results.

Eisenstein was an early believer in the Bolshevik Revolution and was the great chronicler of the revolution and its antecedents. His *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin* (both 1925), and *October (Ten Days That Shook the World)* (1928) shook the film world in Europe and elsewhere. There was room in the 1920s for a kind of simpleminded political optimism, and nobody captured this spirit more famously than Eisenstein. Even in America, the exploits of the Red Army, Lenin, and Trotsky seemed far more appealing than the smarminess of Warren Harding and the smugness of Calvin Coolidge. Many of the people I most admire (Charlie Chaplin, Paul Robeson, Upton Sinclair) were supportive of the Russian experiment—though mostly from a safe distance.

Auteur theory posits that the genuinely great directors can, in addition to expressing virtues and highlighting talents, use their films to showcase their personalities, their obsessions, and their visions of the world. Sergei Eisenstein was a highly educated cosmopolite, a student of languages (he spoke English, among others) and literature, a sophisticated and intrinsically bourgeois Jew. (He reminds me of his near contemporary, the highly acclaimed writer Isaac Babel, whose firsthand accounts of the glories of the

revolution – and the civil war that followed – did not save him from Stalin’s purges, or from dying in obscurity in a Siberian prison in 1941.)

One cannot imagine Eisenstein spending his life driving a plow or milking a cow as good Soviets do in his ode to the collective farm, *The General Line (Old and New)* (1929). He was far more comfortable on the tennis courts of Hollywood with Charlie Chaplin or Ernst Lubitsch or in Mexico with the available boys. Regarding the former, he had been invited to California by Paramount to work on an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. (The film would eventually be made by Josef von Sternberg, and MoMA has Eisenstein’s script among his papers in our library). Regarding the latter, Upton Sinclair sent Eisenstein south of the border to make the epic *Que Viva Mexico!*, an intended multipart epic on Mexican culture and history, but eventually the puritanical Sinclair’s patience – and his wife’s money – ran out, and Eisenstein succumbed to Stalin’s demand that he return to Moscow. Although he was married, Eisenstein, like Murnau, was homosexual, and reportedly spent much of his time in Mexico pursuing young men. (The Museum has preserved around 120 miles of Eisenstein’s spectacular footage, some of which can be viewed by the public.)

His first venture back in Russia, *Bezhin Meadow* (1937), was suppressed. His next film was a beautiful medieval epic, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), which was intended as a warning to the Nazis that the Russians had dominated Germany before and were quite willing to do it again. (As we know, the warning went unheeded.) His multipart, cryptically anti-Stalinist *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) is a wonderful film, but it totally violates the director’s earlier insistence on montage as the basis of film.

Remarkable as his films are, Eisenstein never had the opportunity for genuine self-expression. As oppressive as Hollywood studios may have been at times, men like John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Howard Hawks were able to game the system. Even George Cukor and Vincente Minnelli used the resources of MGM for their own purposes. Louis B. Mayer didn’t play in the same league as Stalin. Eisenstein must have been under constant stress in Russia for being a thinker, for being gay, and for being an artist, but after his Hollywood experiences, he still thought his career opportunities were better in his homeland. It is a tragedy that Eisenstein’s genius was never applied to more personal and less party-friendly projects. There is little doubt that all this contributed significantly to his fatal heart attack shortly after his fiftieth birthday.

## Documentary Expands Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack / Robert Flaherty / Joris Ivens

### Calling Merian C. Cooper (1893-1973) and Ernest B.

Schoedsack (1893-1979) auteurs might seem like fudging things little bit, but I don't think it is. There might not be a single dominant creator, but the bond between them seems so natural in their films as to be almost unique. Furthermore, although they made their collaborative mark in documentary, immediately after *Grass* (1926), the pair began to move away from actualities and towards narrative features.

Both had notable careers before they began working together closely. Schoedsack photographed the Keystone Cops for Mack Sennett, codirected *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) with Irving Pichel, and directed *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) on his own. (Cooper produced the latter two films.) Cooper partnered with John Ford to produce many of the greatest Westerns ever made, from *Fort Apache* (1948) to *The Searchers* (1956), as well as Ford's Oscar-winning comedy *The Quiet Man* (1952). Together, Cooper and Schoedsack moved from making ersatz documentaries such as *Chang* (1927) to fiction films such as the silent version of *Four Feathers* in 1929, and, most notably, *King Kong* in 1933.

Although documentaries had existed since the very beginning of cinema in the actualities of that other famous pair, the Lumière brothers, there was little creative talent in the genre until Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) came along. Flaherty's first two features (*Nanook of the North* in 1922 and *Moana* in 1926) documented the frozen North and the South Seas, but they were also the narrative products of a romantic sensibility, replete with heroes and a semblance of plot. *Grass* (which preceded *Moana* by several months) was different. It offered a spectacular canvas with a multitude of "performers," a throwback to Griffith and De Mille extravaganzas – except this time it was real. These were not Hollywood extras pulling their sheep and goats out of an imaginary Egypt, but authentic Persian tribesman undertaking their treacherous annual migration to find grass for their livestock. The result, in the estimation of Dennis Doros, the head of Milestone Films and the current distributor of *Grass*, is the greatest documentary ever made.

I would be remiss not to mention the contribution

of journalist and one-time spy, Marguerite Harrison, who traveled with Cooper and Schoedsack and raised substantial funding for the project. The trio's extraordinary adventures are recounted in *Grass: Untold Stories* by Bahman Maghsoudlou, and Cooper's life is recounted in detail in *Living Dangerously* by Mark Vaz. Most filmmakers aspire to (and sometimes achieve) a pretty bourgeois existence, but not these two.

Joris Ivens (1898-1989) rivals Flaherty in importance in the development of documentary. *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929) were early attempts to capture the poetic beauty of his native Netherlands. After making a series of similar but longer films, Ivens became political, and following several pro-Bolshevik films in Russia, he returned to the West for his most famous work, *The Spanish Earth* (1937). In spite of his leftist credentials he was employed under the New Deal to make *Power and the Land* (1940). All his life, Ivens was a committed humanitarian, traveling the globe many times over. One of his major works later in life was the six-part *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), a detailed study of post-revolutionary China. It is hard to think of any filmmaker more devoted to both the potential of documentary and the power of cinema to improve the world.

## Buster's Best

**The career of Buster Keaton is one of cinema's glories** and one of its greatest tragedies. If auteurism is measured by a director's ability to portray an alternate personal universe on film, then Keaton ranks as among the best. His vision of a world wherein nature and machinery perpetually challenge human ingenuity and survival is made credible by his precise mastery of the mechanics of his art form and the musculature of his own body – and his ability to establish a link between the two.

As with all works of true genius, there is something ineffable about Keaton's films. While his greatest moments lend themselves to anthologizing as much as those of Sergei Eisenstein or Alfred Hitchcock, Keaton's onscreen presence defies prospective imitators. Thankfully, I've never seen Donald O'Connor in *The Buster Keaton Story* (1957), but I assume Sidney Sheldon's film makes at least a minimal effort to recreate some of Buster's "stunts." No matter how successful those attempts might be, what can't be recreated is his expression (or lack thereof) at key moments. In addition to his other gifts, Keaton was a great actor.





*THE GENERAL*. DIRECTED BY CLYDE BRUCKMAN AND BUSTER KEATON. 1926. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 67 MINUTES.

While both *The General* (1927) and the cyclone sequence in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) are, on one level, hysterically funny, the humor is derived from some very dark material – the most grisly war in American history and a world gone meteorologically mad, respectively. It is amusing to see a train plunging off a bridge into a ravine, but it's also a different level of calamity than slipping on a banana peel. What dark ghosts enabled Buster to find amusement in these events, and why do they bring us delight in addition to awe? I believe the answer lies somewhere in Keaton's pursuit of perfection, his desire to put forth a unique vision, his alcoholism, and his surreal view of the world. His great rival, Charlie Chaplin, would find somber humor in the antics of a misogynistic serial killer in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), and Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy seemed to thrive on the expert application of pain and humiliation.

Keaton's ghosts eventually did him in. Though his marriage to Natalie Talmadge was failing, he still followed her advice and gave up his independence to Nicholas Schenk and MGM in 1928. His decline began with the silent *Spite Marriage* (1929), in which Keaton's ambition and creativity were inhibited by the studio. The advent of talkies and his descent deeper into alcoholism proved a fatal double-whammy, and Keaton became what amounted to a supporting player to Jimmy Durante. Keaton was essentially destroyed by thirty-three. By that age, Chaplin had made nothing more formidable than *The Kid* (1921). What Keaton might have accomplished had he been permitted to make his own films as a mature artist we will never know, and I mourn those lost films.

There were, however, wonderful glimmerings that appeared occasionally throughout the last forty years of Keaton's career as his stoically handsome face wrinkled and crumbled. These include his haunting, weird musical duet with Chaplin in *Limelight* (1952); a touching evocation of his past glory in an episode of *The Twilight Zone* (1961's

“Once Upon a Time”); his role in Samuel Beckett’s *Film* (1965); and *The Railrodder* and *Buster Keaton Rides Again*, both made that same year – all of which can be seen as sad hints at what might have been.

## F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* 1927

After the international success of *The Last Laugh* (1924), the film cognoscenti could legitimately argue that F. W. Murnau should be recognized as the most important filmmaker in the world. D. W. Griffith was then coming off several interesting but unprofitable films and was about to lose some of his independence. Erich von Stroheim was fighting to salvage *Greed* (1924), and Charlie Chaplin had yet to make *The Gold Rush* (1925). Sergei Eisenstein and Josef von Sternberg were still on the horizon. Murnau followed *The Last Laugh* with two more Emil Jannings vehicles, adaptations of Molière’s *Tartuffe* and Goethe’s *Faust*. Both films continued to utilize the vast resources of the UFA studio, and the latter was especially spectacular. Eminent film historian Lotte Eisner wrote that no director had ever “succeeded in conjuring up the supernatural as masterfully” as Murnau did with *Faust*. Hollywood took note.

One studio executive was particularly interested. William Fox, a product of Eastern European Jewry, immigrated with his parents to a Lower East Side tenement when he was nine months old. In 1915, he formed the Fox Film Corporation. Although modestly successful by the mid-1920s – thanks largely to the popularity of cowboy star Tom Mix and a stable of extremely promising young directors like John Ford, Frank Borzage, and Raoul Walsh – Fox still yearned for prestige. UFA and Murnau had buckets of that.

Although shot in California, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, is to a significant extent a UFA production. Carl Mayer, who had written *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) in addition to Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* and *Tartuffe* (1925), wrote the screenplay in Germany, and most of the planning for the film took place there as well. Murnau brought UFA’s pioneering technological innovations to *Sunrise*, and he gave the film a look that revolutionized much of American cinema. His presence on the Fox lot certainly inspired the cadre of in-house directors. John Ford actually shot some of *Four Sons* (1928) on leftover *Sunrise* sets, and by the time his

Oscar-winning *The Informer* (1935) had been released, Ford had assimilated German Expressionism into his own naturalism and was well on his way to becoming perhaps the single greatest American filmmaker. Raoul Walsh was similarly influenced, and Murnau’s mark is apparent in Frank Borzage’s masterful 1928 film *Street Angel*.

Fox charged audiences an absurdly high two dollars to see *Sunrise*, which won an Oscar for its “Artistic Quality of Production.” Janet Gaynor also won the first Oscar for best actress for her role in it and two other films: Borzage’s *Seventh Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1928). George O’Brien, one of Ford’s favorite leading men, was a limited actor, but he gives an intense and more-than-adequate performance in *Sunrise*, and would remain a loyal friend to Murnau until the director’s untimely death.

With its specially constructed city sets – which were ingeniously built to perspective, and fantastically stylized yet still believable – *Sunrise* looks a lot like *The Last Laugh*. Murnau’s moving camera and sensual lighting were unprecedented in American film. Instead of using Karl Freund, his preferred German cameraman, the director relied on Charles Rosher (who specialized in Technicolor musicals and making Mary Pickford look good) and Karl Struss, a distinguished still photographer who later worked for D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Orson Welles. Rosher went on to win an Oscar for his work on *Sunrise*. Hugo Riesenfeld produced the film’s synchronized score, which is so much a part of *Sunrise* that it is hard to imagine the film without it.

Scholar Rodney Farnsworth has suggested that the “human characters in *Sunrise* are secondary to the true protagonist – the camera.” Indeed, the film’s plot is deceptively simple, and its characters, “the Man,” “the Woman,” and “the Vamp” – drawn from Hermann Sudermann’s novel, *The Journey to Tilsit* – are dangerously close to schematic. However, Murnau’s conviction and stylistic mastery reduce this concern to a quibble. Relax and let *Sunrise* take you on a ride through the director’s imagination. Welles called movies “ribbons of dreams.” *Sunrise* is one of the purest ribbons, made by one of the greatest ribbon-makers. Grab hold.

## Early Animation 1907–1928

The art of film animation developed out of a long tradition of newspaper and magazine cartoons in both Europe and the United States. Émile Cohl (1857–1938), a

Frenchman, and Winsor McCay (1871–1934), an American, were politically tinged newspapermen who took advantage of the newly invented concept of stop-motion photography and made early animated films by shooting slightly varied drawings on successive film frames. Although their work now appears primitive beside the technological wizardry of Pixar and others, they must have inspired a sense of wonder and awe in early audiences who had never before seen drawn figures seemingly come to life. In a sense, animation can be seen as an even purer art form than actualities or narrative films, both of which depend on photographed reality rather than images that spring completely from an artist's imagination. McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) set a standard for anthropomorphic movies to come, and his *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) was incredibly complex and sophisticated for its time.

Comic strips like *Mutt and Jeff* and *Felix the Cat* provided an audience for movie cartoonists such as Richard Huemer (1898–1979), who would later join both the Fleischer brothers and Walt Disney, and Otto Messmer (1894–1971) who summed up the period nicely: “Nowadays, kids don't dream about the moon – they know. Then, all was magic. All we had was a pencil and paper. We didn't want to duplicate life; a photo would've done that. Felix was always a cat, but with a boy's wonder about the world. That, and visual tricks, and we had it.” Messmer's Felix preceded Mickey Mouse as a thoughtful and sophisticated cartoon character with human tendencies.

Then, there was Disney (1901–1966). Rising from obscure Kansas City beginnings to become a colossus, “Uncle Walt” branded the American century more indelibly than any other artist in any other medium. Largely dependent on animator Ub Iwerks (1901–1971) and a host of other resident geniuses, Disney parlayed Mickey Mouse, the series *Silly Symphonies*, and his early great features into an unrivalled empire. Disney's reputation as dictatorial tycoon raises many questions about his status as an auteur, but love him or hate him, he clearly dominated – and, in a sense, still dominates – the field of animation.

Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981), working in Germany and later in Britain, was a pioneer in developing silhouette animation and stood out as a woman in a male-dominated field. Her *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) is credited as the first full-length animated feature. Around the same time, Ladislav Starevich (1892–1965), working first in Russia and then in France, established the field of puppet animation, which inspired the work of Willis O'Brien, George Pal, and Ray Harryhausen, and anticipated the contemporary craze for computer animation.

If Disney's commercial supremacy was ever threatened, it was by Viennese-born Max Fleischer (1883–1972) and his brother, Dave (1894–1979). Continuing in the tradition of McCay, Huemer, and Messmer, the Fleischers were based in New York, though they later moved to Miami because of labor problems. The Fleischer Studio was truly the anti-Disney: it created subversive and often raunchy characters like Betty Boop, and questioned the wholesome middle-American values Walt was fond of espousing.

To learn more about early animation, I highly recommend *Remembering Windsor McCay* (1974) and *Osso Messmer and Felix the Cat* (1977), two excellent documentaries by the distinguished scholar, teacher, and animator John Canemaker. The birth of animation resulted in many rich achievements by artists who labored in obscurity and deserve to be remembered. This brief essay only scratches at the surface of their accomplishments, and at the marvel that is the creation of a totally new medium.

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## Frank Borzage's *Street Angel*

1928

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**From the opening shot of *Street Angel*, it is evident** that Frank Borzage (1893–1962) had been enraptured watching F. W. Murnau shoot *Sunrise* the preceding year at the Fox Studio. With an attention to atmospheric light and shadow, the camera prowls elaborate Neapolitan sets in long complicated takes. Borzage had won the first best director Oscar for *Seventh Heaven* in 1927, but he evidently realized that Murnau and his team brought something new to Hollywood, and he never cast off the German director's spell over the next thirty years of his career.

Though less explicitly, later films such as *Moonrise* (1948) also contained many lessons in lighting and camera movement learned at Murnau's knee. Borzage developed his own team of technicians, but many wound up working for Murnau. Cinematographer Ernest Palmer collaborated on several Borzage films, including *Seventh Heaven* and a handful of talkies, but he also photographed Murnau's *Four Devils* (1928) and *City Girl* (1930). Set designer Harry Oliver, similarly, was a Borzage man, but he also designed *City Girl*. It was almost as though these men were Borzage's gifts to his mentor, who had left his UFA support staff back in Germany.

Although *Street Angel's* canvas is smaller than that of *Sunrise*, it is also a tale of a fractured relationship made whole by the redemptive power of love. Borzage's lovers seem obsessed with the purity of their spiritual relationship within a world of apparent depravity. The film's soundtrack contains many variations on "O Sole Mio," which became a huge pop hit in America in 1950, and was rendered in English as "There's No Tomorrow" by Tony Martin, who performed it for over six decades. ("There's no tomorrow, when love is new / There's no tomorrow, when love is true / So kiss me, and hold me tight / There's no tomorrow, there's just tonight.") The song gives *Street Angel* an emotional impetus that would become far more difficult to achieve with the arrival of the spoken word in film. It was left to Josef von Sternberg to find a way to restore "feeling" to American talking cinema, which he did in *Morocco* (1930) by shooting many scenes that relied more on gesture than dialogue. Murnau never made a sound film, and Charlie Chaplin avoided the new technology for over a decade.

Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell worked together on several more Borzage films after *Seventh Heaven*, and also on ones by other directors. She won the first Oscar for best actress for her combined efforts on *Seventh Heaven*, *Sunrise*, and *Street Angel*. Farrell, surely one of the best-looking actors of the period, remained popular in talkies even after *Sunnyside Up* (1929) betrayed his high, squeaky voice. Borzage, a former actor himself, set great store in naturalism and "simplicity" in his actors.

In a sense, *Street Angel* raises interesting questions about the integrity of art itself. Does the virginal portrait Farrell paints of Gaynor become less authentic when he temporarily sees her as less than virginal? Does art lie, and does that matter? When Gaynor asks Farrell at the end of the film to look into her eyes in the hope of reestablishing the ethereal bond of faith between them, the moment highlights one of cinema's transcendent gifts. The great Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer believed that "the eyes are the mirrors of the soul." In his *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), Dreyer established the sincerity and conviction of Joan's faith through the exquisite luminosity of Maria Falconetti's eyes. While Joan burned, in *Street Angel* Farrell begs for forgiveness, recalling George O'Brien in *Sunrise*.

Frank Borzage was Hollywood's most unabashed romantic. The opening titles of *Street Angel* make reference to "souls made great by love." Borzage seemed to believe in this. His whole career can be summed up in the lyrics sung by a crooner in *Moonrise*: "Let's give love a chance."

## Carl Theodor Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc 1928

**Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968) made eight good but unspectacular features between 1919 and 1926.** In the ensuing four decades, he made only six more films – one of which he disowned. Even so, he is always near the top of any informed list of the greatest filmmakers

Dreyer spent much of his life as a journalist, film critic, and manager of a cinema in Denmark. He was not adept at raising funds for his projects or lending them commercial appeal; he appears to have been as somber and uncompromising as his characters. (I once upset one of my curatorial colleagues by suggesting that there might be a tiny bit of tongue-in-cheek humor in his 1932 horror film, *Vampyr*.) *The Passion of Joan of Arc* has been acclaimed for generations, but it was a financial flop, and even I recognize that it is entirely humorless.

First, a disclaimer: while I consider myself spiritually inclined, my inclination is more toward some vague form of pantheism or Romanticism than to formal religion. Frankly, the idea of hearing voices "from God" seems to me like some sort of wacky delusion. To look to a deity as a kind of military adviser, as Joan does, seems no more sensible than following the strategic advice of Groucho Marx as Rufus T. Firefly in Leo McCarey's *Duck Soup* (1933).

Yet despite my reservations and prejudices, *Joan of Arc* is intensely moving and powerful. The reliance on close-ups, the film's most dominant stylistic feature, makes Dreyer's Joan unique and ineffable. Though this was Corsican stage actress Maria Falconetti's only film appearance, she had few rivals in the complexity and depth of her performance. The only performers who come to mind as equals are Lillian Gish and Greta Garbo, both of whom had many years to hone their craft. So we must credit Dreyer (and maybe the Big Guy upstairs) for her inspiration. Truly, this is the kind of magic of which cinema alone is capable. No painting, no statue, no stage performance can generate the kind of pulsating intensity that Falconetti achieves. Her eyes, as Dreyer suggests, do mirror a soul, and they can make an unbeliever quaver. We are given no choice but to believe.

Dreyer subsequently went on to examine vampires and witches before performing the ultimate miracle of bringing the dead back to life in *Ordet* (1955). These were all remarkable films, as was his last, *Gertrud* (1964). However, *Joan of Arc* possessed a special kind of



enchantment (or “realized mysticism,” as Dreyer once called it) that could not be replicated in sound films. Be it simplicity or innocence, something was irrevocably lost in the audio revolution of the late 1920s.

## The French Avant-Garde in the 1920s

**Charles Sheeler was one of the few American artists** who dabbled in film in the 1920s. In Europe, there was much more overlap between film and other visual arts. In Germany, mainstream Expressionist cinema was considered avant-garde, and a handful of artists in Italy embraced surrealism after Mussolini’s rise to power in 1922. Filmmakers in France interacted freely with other visual artists, a dynamic that was particularly unique and clearly benefited the culture. Movie production in France was not dominated either by commerce or by the state,

*ENTR’ACTE*. DIRECTED BY RENÉ CLAIR. 1924. FRANCE. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 22 MINUTES.

which promoted a greater atmosphere of independence and individuality. This state of affairs had positive effects on this side of the Atlantic: it certainly helped Iris Barry, founder of MoMA’s Film Library, to be able to cite dabblers like Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Fernand Léger when appealing to patrons who might not have recognized the high aspirations or legitimacy of film in the works of directors such as Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, or Walt Disney. (It was left to future generations of curators to make cogent arguments for Otto Preminger, Clint Eastwood, and John Waters.)

Paris, the avant-garde capital of Europe, was particularly full of crossover artists. Man Ray (1890–1976) was an expatriate American photographer who made several films, the first and briefest of which being *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923). His films are determinedly non-narrative and poetic, and pointed the way to the

later experimental cinema of Stan Brakhage and a host of others who often worked on the fringes of the Hollywood behemoth. Fernand Léger (1881-1955) made his *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) with Dudley Murphy, an intriguingly enigmatic American who wandered in and out of film history, directing people like Bessie Smith and Paul Robeson along the way. Although Léger shared Buster Keaton's obsession with modern machinery, perhaps the most enduring image in his *Ballet Mécanique* is an homage to Charlie Chaplin. And even though Duchamp (1887-1968) directed only the short *Anémic Cinema* (1926), he made frequent appearances in other films, including René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924). All three of these men used film to expand their artistic practices, but, as far as I'm concerned, they did little or nothing to alter the course of the medium itself.

Paris played the role of hospitable host to refugees and expatriates from all over, including many filmmakers uprooted by the Bolshevik Revolution. This group included Ladislav Starevich (1882-1965), Dimitri Kirsanov (1899-1957), and Eugene Deslaw (1898-1966). (Starevich was, for a time, affiliated with Albatros Films, a Paris-based company run by Russian émigrés that specialized mostly in narrative features, including several starring Ivan Mozzhukhin.) Deslaw shared Léger's fascination with the movement and textures of machines, and his first film, *La Marche des Machines* (1928), is an exercise in rhythmic choreography, similar in some ways to Joris Ivens's *The Bridge* from that same year. Deslaw gradually moved toward more conventional documentaries but never became a major figure in the field.

Germaine Dulac (1882-1942) was part of a feminist movement in French cinema that stretches from Alice Guy-Blaché to Agnès Varda. Her film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) was written by Antonin Artaud and explored sexuality in a manner far removed from Hollywood, even though Dulac was influenced by American films and was for a short time a pupil of D. W. Griffith. Like Griffith, she sought purity in images, and her work was inhibited by the introduction of sound. Dulac wound up her career as Guy-Blaché had started hers four decades earlier – working in the offices of the Gaumont studio. Considered to be the inspiration and “heart” of the French avant-garde in the 1920s, she occupies a status similar to that of Maya Deren in the U.S.

Three directors from this period moved from the avant-garde into mainstream cinema: Jean Renoir (1894-1979), René Clair (1898-1981), and Luis Buñuel (1900-1983). *Charleston* (1927), one of Renoir's more experimental films, starred the director's then-wife

Catherine Hessling, who had modeled for Jean's father, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, as a teenager. Though the film feels like a home movie, for Jean, who would become possibly the greatest of all filmmakers, it seemed to be his way of saying, “I can do avant-garde, too.” Clair had been immersed in the Dadaist art scene, and *Entr'acte* was initially made to be shown at intermission during a ballet by Francis Picabia featuring music by Erik Satie. Both men appear in the film, as do Man Ray and Duchamp. Clair made several absurdist, charming, and genuinely experimental films before becoming the most successful director of the early sound period in France.

Buñuel and his Spanish compadre Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) were both men of destiny, although they took very different paths after their sojourns in Paris. Through their collaboration on *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and the feature-length *L'Âge d'Or* (1930), the pair brought the shock-value of Surrealism to the screen. *L'Âge d'Or* ultimately led to a falling out between them. Even though Dalí became dismissive of cinema, it didn't prevent him from wandering back to the movies later in his career, most notably for the dream sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). Buñuel followed a brief tenure at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1940s with a failed attempt to direct in Hollywood. He later enjoyed a distinguished directorial career in Mexico before making a triumphant return to Europe in the 1960s where, ever loyal to his roots, he released half a dozen Surrealist masterpieces.

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## Vsevolod I. Pudovkin's Storm Over Asia 1928

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**Vsevolod Illarionovich Pudovkin (1893-1953) was,** like Sergei Eisenstein, a pupil of Lev Kuleshov, and all three were heavily influenced by D. W. Griffith's work and masterful approach to editing. All three also wrote copiously on film theory, finding intellectual justification for the choices they made in their movies. Few early American filmmakers made much effort to convey their thought processes, and most seemed happy to create the impression that they worked on the basis of intuition. When Peter Bogdanovich asked John Ford how he made a particular shot, Ford replied soberly, “with a camera.”

Of course, Alfred Hitchcock did submit to François Truffaut's book-length interview, and King Vidor wrote a book, *King Vidor on Filmmaking*, to try to explain

his methods. Neither of these, however, quite matched the portentous tomes that Pudovkin and Eisenstein published. I do think, however, that their montage theories were more amenable to intellectual codification than certain subtleties in Ford's work are. For instance, Ford was a master at creating poignancy by using the same actor in multiple films, which helped the audience recall the actor's appearances in previous movies. There is some discussion of technique and style in Josef von Sternberg's charming autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, but the greatness of films such as *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935) have as much to do with the unique alchemy of Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich and the "baggage" they carried as anything else. Such things are inimitable, and hardly grist for Film Directing 101 textbooks.

But back to Pudovkin: His first released film was the short comedy *Chess Fever* (1925), and by the time it came out he was already hard at work on his documentary, *The Mechanics of the Brain* (1926). His real breakthrough came the following year with his adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, a story of a mother-son relationship caught up in the sweep of Russia's abortive 1905 revolution. Here, he established his fundamental differences from Eisenstein, whose revolutionary zeal would not permit him to traffic in much sentimentality or emotion. Pudovkin was no less a supporter of the Revolution, but he was aware that a collective was made up of individuals, and that audiences who were attracted to a Charlie Chaplin or Lillian Gish might want to identify with a character or personality instead of just a cause. In this observation, he seemed particularly astute about the ultimate power of the movies.

If Eisenstein was the pre-eminent Soviet propagandist, Pudovkin and his Ukrainian contemporary Alexander Dovzhenko were the epic visual poets of the regime. Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia* is a spectacle that was more or less unprecedented in world cinema. Scenes in which masses are filmed with a moving camera and subjected to his theories of editing certainly rival similar moments in Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), yet they possess a contemporaneity that Griffith's faux-Babylonians could not match. Pudovkin was recreating the recent history of Russia and its fringe republics, and he believed in the cause of the revolution as Ford believed in America's destiny. Whether Pudovkin had seen *Napoleon*, a film made two years earlier by another Griffith disciple, Abel Gance, both works share a soaring epic quality, and both focus on an unlikely hero who grows to

greatness before our eyes. With the coming of sound and Stalinism, Pudovkin never again rose to quite the same heights, but he retains an honorable place in the history of film and film literature.

## Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus*

1928

**With the possible exception of his 1952 film *Limelight*,** Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus* is the most personal and self-revelatory film ever made by a major director. Chaplin made more than seventy shorts between 1914 and 1923, passing through several studios before establishing his own. *A Woman of Paris* (1923) won him great admiration from critics, even though he only had a fleeting onscreen appearance. *The Kid* (1921) and *The Gold Rush* (1925) earned him worldwide adulation and lots of money. By 1925, he had become the most recognizable and beloved living person in the history of the world. The cult of celebrity that has so dominated most of the past century, as my friend Jonathan Goldman argues in his writings on Chaplin, largely started with the Tramp. Chaplin, through a combination of courage and solipsism, used his celebrity to explore in his work his innermost feelings, and he used his genius to compel his audience to share them.

Since Chaplin was in total control of his films, and since he was the most gifted of actors, he came as close as one could with a camera to the solitary act of scratching a pen on a blank page. What he did, in essence, was use the whole mechanical apparatus of his movie studio to say, in the manner of a diarist: "This is my life; these are my feelings; this is me." He offered up that most intimate of gifts: himself.

Lest this all sound a bit too serious, it should be pointed out that *The Circus* is one of the funniest comedies ever made. The tightrope-walking sequence is maybe the most riotous scene in any movie. Several primal fears are confronted simultaneously as Charlie struggles to maintain his balance at a great height, with his pants falling down, and furry beasts biting his nose and sticking their tails in his mouth. Chaplin makes us laugh hysterically at the extremes of human desperation and fear, and by extension, at our own endless scramble for survival.

As he was to do again in *Limelight*, in *The Circus* Chaplin explicitly explores the nature of comedy itself.

Playing the part of a clown in a circus, the Tramp is unable to be anything but inadvertently funny, unlike Chaplin, who achieved his unparalleled results only through conscious and painstaking efforts. The circus, the music hall, and the tradition of clowning produced Chaplin, but the naturalistic possibilities of cinema allowed him to develop the comedy of a character through audience familiarity and love. Ultimately, his achievements led to an enduring legacy of “reality”-based movie comedies and (mostly debased) television situation comedies. Chaplin rejected being compartmentalized as a clown in favor of being seen as a fully rounded person who happened to be funny. He also acknowledged that, through the movies, he had almost single-handedly wrought a great change in probably the oldest and most-valued means of communication: making people laugh.

The unfortunate fact about *The Circus* is that Chaplin's failed romantic life had made him sad. Robert Florey, a director and later an assistant to Chaplin, wrote about a chance encounter at the time: “I cannot express what melancholy overwhelmed me in recognizing the total solitude of the most popular man in the world.” Chaplin's artful declaration of this solitude in *The Circus* was to become an existential landmark in the history of the movies. When the bareback rider the Tramp is in love with (Merna Kennedy) runs away from her evil circus-owner father, the Tramp makes the supreme romantic gesture of engineering her hasty marriage to the tightrope walker, personally providing a ring and showering them with rice at the wedding. Two years later, in Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*, Adolphe Menjou would similarly sacrifice himself to facilitate the reunion of Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper, explaining to embarrassed friends, “You see, I love her. I'd do anything to make her happy.” In *The Circus*, Chaplin is publicly recognizing his own failed attempts at union and conceding his apparent inability to provide anyone with what will “make her happy.”

The devastating ending of the film finds the Tramp sitting on a box in the center of what had been the ring. The wagons carrying Merna and her new husband have pulled out, leaving him entirely alone. Charlie picks up the tattered paper star through which Merna had ridden, crumbles this symbolic remnant of his hopes and fame, and kicks it backward. Then the solitary figure, the movies' most famous silhouette, inimitably walks away from the camera into a dawn-lit desolate landscape. It is the most forlorn and hopeless image in all Chaplin's work – indeed, in all of cinema.

## Josef von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* 1928

**Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969) divided his childhood** between his native Vienna and Queens, New York. Before going to Hollywood in the mid-1920s, he learned the rudiments of filmmaking at studios in Ft. Lee, and in the Army Signal Corps during the Great War. His first film, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), was amazingly accomplished, especially considering its miniscule budget. It was, in essence, an independent film, an almost unique specimen for its time. Only the good fortune of capturing the eyes of Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin brought Sternberg out of obscurity and to the attention of the studios. Of his nine silent films, only four survive. Apart from *Salvation Hunters*, these other works – *Underworld*, *The Last Command* (both 1928), and *The Docks of New York* – are so good that one must conclude that Sternberg's career, perhaps more than that of any other director, suffers from the blight on film history I have come to think of as lost-film syndrome.

In a pattern set by *The Salvation Hunters*, his films deal with complex and painful romantic relationships shot in a stylized manner. While Erich von Stroheim made a false claim to realism, Sternberg was often apologetic for too closely approximating reality. By the end of his first decade as a director (far and away his most productive period), Sternberg could certainly be considered cinema's greatest romantic artist, rivaled only later by Max Ophüls.

As a studio director, he had to pay some lip service to genre. *Underworld* was the first gangster movie, and it was an enormous commercial success – even without the audible machine guns and police sirens that Warner Brothers would soon bring to the genre. *The Last Command* was an inside-Hollywood film, depicting a former Czarist Russian general turned Hollywood extra who is brought out of obscurity to command a faux-army before the cameras, with fatal consequences. (It was partially for this film that Emil Jannings won the first Oscar for best actor, while Sternberg's film shared the best picture award with William Wellman's 1927 film *Wings*.)

*The Docks of New York* is Sternberg's first surviving full-scale collaboration with screenwriter Jules Furthman. (Furthman adapted *Underworld* and co-wrote the now lost *The Dragnet* with his brother Charles.) The writer went on to collaborate on six more of Sternberg's (mostly) finest films, while also beginning another



symbiotic relationship with Howard Hawks. Although I would certainly argue for the primacy of the director over the writer, there are instances in which the writer is so intrinsically in synch with the director's vision that individual contributions cannot be easily distinguished. It should be said, too, that Furthman's work with other directors did not measure up to his films with these two giants.

*The Docks of New York* is probably the last genuinely great silent film made in Hollywood, save for Chaplin's against-the-grain masterpieces of the 1930s. It largely established the themes and style (camera movement, lyrical lighting effects, etc.) that I believe helped make Sternberg the most important American director of the early-sound period. Betty Compson's performance anticipates in manner and gesture that of Marlene Dietrich in her films under Sternberg's direction. The sound films, of course, are better able to showcase Dietrich's emotional equipoise and sophisticated mastery of ironic ambiguity as she deals with her gentlemen, despite their relatively sparse and often clipped dialogue. The result is a combination of deeply felt emotional maturity and raw passion not previously seen on the American screen.

## Victor Sjöström's *The Wind* 1928

Victor Sjöström (Seastrom in his MGM years) was instrumental in demonstrating cinema's potential, both through his Swedish films and during his Hollywood period. *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) introduced a sustained psychological intensity not previously seen in the movies. His work from 1917 until his departure for Hollywood in 1923 (which included *A Man There Was* in 1917, *The Outlaw and his Wife* in 1918, *The Phantom Carriage* in 1921, and numerous adaptations of Selma Lagerlof novels) place him in the first rank of silent directors, and he pioneered the pitfalls of directing himself as an actor before Charlie Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim, or Buster Keaton did. Several of his nine Hollywood films no longer survive, although the two Lillian Gish vehicles, *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) and *The Wind* (1928) remain, and luckily appear to be the best of the lot. He returned to Europe in 1928, directed only two talkies, and continued to act in Swedish films until delivering his final bravura performance for Ingmar Bergman in *Wild Strawberries* (1957) at the age of seventy-eight.

During his brief time in Hollywood, he presided over a small MGM-based expatriate Swedish colony that included Mauritz Stiller (Sjöström's Finnish-born erstwhile compatriot at Stockholm's Svenska-Bio Studio), Greta Garbo (a Stiller discovery who Sjöström directed in the mostly lost 1928 film *The Divine Woman*), Lars Hanson, and a girl from Springfield, Ohio named Lillian Gish. Gish allegedly chose Sjöström to direct *The Scarlet Letter* since his Scandinavian background seemed to parallel that of the austere New Englander Nathaniel Hawthorne. Garbo was drawn to Gish by the way she tenderly commiserated over the death of Greta's sister back in Sweden. (Gish was close professionally and personally to her younger sister, Dorothy.) I find it pleasing to think of these two – the greatest of silent actresses – as friends and ultimately neighbors for several decades in the vicinity of Sutton Place in New York City.

In my book, *The Western Film*, I wrote:

*The silent film form itself was about to become extinct, and perhaps its greatest "Western" came just before the end. The quotes are necessary because... The Wind is more a psychological study that just happened to be set in the West. Yet it contains elements central to so many Westerns... human isolation in a vast landscape, the alienation of the woman in Western society, and the brutal indifference of nature. The Wind is perhaps the purest expression of a rare form, a woman's fantasy of life in the West, in a genre dominated almost exclusively by male fantasies.*

There have been many great sound films since Al Jolson killed the silents. Yet, as Norma Desmond says in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), they had faces then. Gish's pouting mouth, her perfect little nose, and the eyes that could see into eternity were modeling clay that could be wrought into a myriad of voiceless women who had lived and loved and endured since the beginning of time. After scarcely three decades this priceless art was no longer wanted. By the time she made *The Wind*, Gish had achieved precision in her expressions and gestures. Her disgust at Lars Hanson's forced kiss, her consuming fear of the wind, her horror when Montagu Love appears to rise from the dead, her tender acceptance of Hanson's love following her ordeal – all are achieved with apparently effortless grace. It is as though she is crying out in her most ladylike manner: "Look at this! How can you forsake something this sublime?"

## G. W. Pabst's Pandora's Box 1928

*What counts is the image. So I would still claim that the creator of the film is much more the director than the author of the scenario or the actors.* – G. W. Pabst

Georg Wilhelm Pabst (1885–1967) was the third member of the great Weimar directorial triumvirate, along with F. W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. In some ways he was the most elusive and mysterious of the three. Murnau was haunted by whatever demons went along with being homosexual in an uncongenial era. Pabst's fellow Austrian, Lang, seemed to flirt with fascism – his intellectual instincts were Teutonic, his wife was a Nazi, and he was offered control of the Reich's film industry – but he ultimately went west and wound up in Hollywood where he became a practicing democrat. (Reports of his tyrannical relations with coworkers, however, would probably disqualify him from canonization.) Pabst was a horse of a different color altogether, or, perhaps more correctly, several different colors. While Lang could only imagine New York for *Metropolis* (1927), Pabst spent a few youthful years in the city. He came to film directing rather late in 1923, but he had made several successful movies – *The Treasure* in 1923, *The Joyless Street* in 1925, *Secrets of a Soul* in 1926, *The Love of Jeanne Ney* in 1927 – before *Pandora's Box* in 1928.

Then, a kind of intellectual wanderlust set in. He made *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (1929), starring Leni Riefenstahl. He seemed to tack to the left with the anti-war *Westfront 1918* (1930), an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, and the pro-proletariat *Kameradschaft* (1931). When the Nazis came to power, Pabst, like Lang, went to France and then briefly to America, where he made *A Modern Hero* (1934). After that, he returned to France and traveled to Germany at the outbreak of World War II, where he made two films under the Nazis. Following the war, he seemed to atone with several anti-Nazi films. As critic Lotte Eisner said, “he is full of contradictions.” Will the real G. W. Pabst please stand up? At least we know he seems to have been a much nicer guy and more gracious colleague than Lang.

*Pandora's Box* was adapted from two plays by Frank Wedekind, and it made the American Louise Brooks briefly into an international star. The film is one of exceptional and hypnotic strangeness. Pabst captures much of the erotic zeitgeist of Weimar Germany through the various relationships of a showgirl before her murder

at the hands of Jack the Ripper in London. The director had been on the brink of signing the little-known but more knowing Marlene Dietrich to play Lulu, but opted at the last moment for the more innocent looking and younger Brooks. (Dietrich would have sweet revenge a year later when she landed the part of Lola in Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* and signed a long-term contract with Paramount, the very studio Brooks had ditched for Pabst.) The film is less conventionally expressionistic and melodramatic and is more fluid than Pabst's earlier work. Where Murnau is a poet and Lang a mythologist, Pabst is mostly concerned with contemporary slants on psychology and sexuality. Taken in this sense, the film was extremely modern and remains so, but the audiences of 1928 were not ready for its boldness and frankness, even in few-holds-barred Weimar Berlin. Interestingly, the film's production coincided with Erich von Stroheim's madly unsuccessful attempt to complete a similarly erotic story with Gloria Swanson, *Queen Kelly* (1929).

In her wonderful and intelligent book, *Lulu in Hollywood*, Brooks praises Pabst for his willingness to confront reality, “his truthful picture of this world of pleasure.” (She was to make one additional picture with him, *Diary of a Lost Girl*, in 1929.) He seems to have recognized a unique vitality in her, or as she once said, “It was clever of Pabst to know... that I possessed the tramp essence of Lulu.” The great Jean Renoir wrote that Pabst “knows how, better than anyone else, to direct actors. His characters emerge like his own children, created from fragments of his own heart and mind.” If scholar Russell Merritt is correct in calling Brooks's Lulu a “narcissistic chameleon,” this may help us understand Pabst's own chameleon-like qualities.

## Dziga Vertov's The Man with a Movie Camera 1929

**Dziga Vertov (1896–1954) presents some unusual** problems for inclusion in this book. If we define an auteur as a filmmaker who places the stamp of personality and vision on all their work, the presumption is that the filmmaker has a distinctive way of looking at the world. While no one could possibly disagree with the fact that from a technical standpoint, Vertov was a great innovator and expander of the medium – a rival to D. W. Griffith, F. W. Murnau, Sergei Eisenstein, and Alfred Hitchcock –

we don't know much about who he really was. What we do know is that he was born Denis Arkadievitich Kaufman in what is now Poland (then part of the Czarist empire) and was the elder brother of two other distinguished filmmakers, Mikhail, a cameraman on several Vertov films and later a director, and Boris Kaufman, who was a cinematographer for Jean Vigo, Abel Gance, Elia Kazan, and Sidney Lumet.

Vertov was essentially a crusader against the idea of filmmaker as artist, and he believed that the filmmaker was more like a machine – a conduit for capturing and shaping reality. This appealed to Lenin, and so Vertov produced a series of *Kino-Pravda* (Cinema-Truth) “newsreels” in the early 1920s. But however sincere he may have been, Vertov still relied on the manipulative tricks of the movies. While Georges Méliès sought magical entertainment and Griffith authentic human emotion, Vertov applied his skills to the service of the Bolshevik Revolution.

According to historian Erik Barnouw, ‘Denis Kaufman’ suggests in Russian a kind of perpetually spinning top, or in human terms, a whirling dervish. This seems quite appropriate for the energy level of Vertov’s most famous film. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is generally considered his masterpiece, and to some it is a high-water mark of cinematic imagination and purity. Although Eisenstein called the film “unmotivated camera mischief,” it is unquestionably dazzling. Even so, I find it as much of a dead-end as some of Eugene O’Neill’s most ambitious experiments from that same period, such as *Strange Interlude*, which features spoken thoughts. I am left impressed but wondering, Where does all this innovation lead? Is it eye-candy or spinach? One thing it does not seem to be is emotionally affecting. Who is this man with a camera whose shadow we see and who tells us, “I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.” Critic Sharon Lee put her finger on Vertov’s limitations when she claimed, “he has shown us reality; he has expanded our vision of life, but it is a reality that only exists on film.”

With the advent of sound, Vertov became more political, making *Enthusiasm* in 1933 and *Three Songs of Lenin* in 1934. His apprentice, the American scholar Jay Leyda (later on staff at the MoMA film library, and then a film professor at NYU) saw these as Vertov’s most personal and successful films. Leyda believed that sound allowed Vertov to realize his childhood dream of marrying cinema with poetry, and “of making an art of the sights and sounds of the world around him, arranging harmonies and dissonances out of these realities.”



MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA. DIRECTED BY DZIGA VERTOV. 1929. SOVIET UNION. BLACK AND WHITE, SILENT, 68 MINUTES.

As was the case with so many of his contemporaries, Vertov gradually ran afoul of Stalin, and his career dissipated. However, for good or ill, he had an enormous influence on documentary and on other filmmakers both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Thanks to him we can celebrate the rationality of Jean Rouch and Frederick Wiseman, and perhaps we can also lament the inanity of television news.

## Alexander Dovzhenko's Rural Trilogy 1929–1932

The third member of the triumvirate of great silent Soviet narrative directors is Alexander Dovzhenko (1894–1956). Unlike Sergei Eisenstein and V.I. Pudovkin,

Dovzhenko was Ukrainian and worked mostly in Odessa and Kiev, which allowed him slightly more freedom as he wasn't constantly under Stalin's nose in Moscow. Like his esteemed contemporaries, he left behind extensive writings on cinema. His concern for peasants, a group that included his illiterate father, led him away from urban settings and towards promoting a lyrical and poetic depiction of nature. His great rural trilogy, made up of *Zvenigora* in 1928, *Arsenal* in 1929, and *Zemlya* in 1930, move beyond immediate political concerns and into a personal and emotional realm. In these films, feeling triumphs over agitprop.

*Arsenal* is, first and foremost, a war picture dealing with the civil strife that followed the overthrow of the czar. In keeping with his conception of cinema as a form of poetry, Dovzhenko developed a unique style replete with symbols, metaphors, and poetic intertitles that was somewhat removed from the conventions of cinematic narrative – even those pioneered by other Soviet filmmakers. The screenwriter John Howard Lawson, a member of the Hollywood Ten, said that “no film artist has ever surpassed Dovzhenko in establishing an intimate human connection between images that have no plot relationship.” (Lawson went to prison in 1948 for refusing to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities during its Hollywood witchhunt. He made several films before and during World War II that would later be viewed as pro-Communist propaganda, even though one of them had previously earned him an Oscar nomination.)

Dovzhenko was no stranger to persevering against a rising tide of bitter disappointment, a condition familiar to those who carried the Soviet banner. He was only able to make a few sound films before finally succumbing to the heart ailment that had kept him out of World War I. Of those, *Ivan* (1932), *Aerograd* (1935) and *Shchors* (1939) can certainly be viewed as major achievements, even if they were not up to the standards of *Arsenal* and *Zemlya*. The beauty of his films belies his lament: “I often think of how my life has been wasted.” When my friend Sonia Volochova died in 1980, I included a Dovzhenko clip among the films shown at her private memorial at the Museum. Sonia, a refugee from the Revolution, was neither a peasant nor a Bolshevik, but she had a great passion for and encyclopedic knowledge of Soviet film. We never discussed it specifically, but I suspect that Dovzhenko would have been her ideal, someone for whom politics was secondary to art and life.

## King Vidor's Hallelujah 1929

**1894 was a uniquely auspicious year for the movies.**

Not only is that when film history as we have come to know it began, but it was the year in which three of the medium's greatest directors were born: Jean Renoir, John Ford, and Josef von Sternberg. King Vidor was also born in 1894, and while he may not have achieved quite the unity of vision of the other three, he came close. After his *The Big Parade* (1925) put MGM on the map, he made five more silent films including *La Bohème* in 1926 (Lillian Gish's best vehicle apart from her performances for D. W. Griffith and Victor Sjöström), two brilliant comedies starring the scintillating Marion Davies (*The Patsy* and *Show People*, both in 1928), and *The Crowd* (1928), one of the crown jewels of the period. The ever-ambitious Vidor was then ready for sound.

*Hallelujah* was shot in Tennessee and Arkansas, far from the prying eyes of studio executives and the interference of newly venerated sound engineers. Thanks to the distance, Vidor was relatively free to experiment with what was essentially a new medium. (Judging by the limitations of the next several films that Vidor made while back on the lot at MGM, it is likely that much of the adventuresome quality of *Hallelujah* would have been lost if it had been made under the nose of Irving Thalberg.) Visually, *Hallelujah* is as striking as any of Vidor's silent films. Since many sequences were shot silent with sound added afterward, the director was able to retain the fluidity of camera movement so evident in *The Crowd*. Vidor's lovely soft-focus images of life in the cotton fields, his spectacular staging of a mass baptism, the brilliant expressionism of a church meeting and a climactic chase through a swamp are unparalleled in early sound film. His imaginative use of sound, ranging from off-screen voices to moving musical numbers, is equally unique. It could be argued that *Hallelujah* is in its way as important to the development of talkies as *The Birth of a Nation* was to silent film fourteen years earlier. Unfortunately, the parallels between the two films don't stop there.

Vidor, a proud Texan, carried much of the baggage of his Southern upbringing. On one level, *Hallelujah* clearly reinforces the stereotype of blacks as childishly simple, lecherously promiscuous, fanatically superstitious, and shiftless. This was, of course, not unusual in American films; even the great Paul Robeson had to shuffle a bit in James Whale's *Showboat* (1936). Chick, the mulatto temptress in *Hallelujah* (or “yellow



hussy,” as Zeke’s mother calls her) would later reappear as the Lena Horne character in Vincente Minnelli’s “sophisticated” debut, *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Though Vidor could never be accused of displaying the overt racial venom exhibited by Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation*, it’s still hard to give *Hallelujah* the benefit of the doubt after seeing his 1935 film *So Red the Rose*.

The director himself links the two films by opening *So Red the Rose* with cotton field footage of the Johnson family from *Hallelujah*. Daniel Haynes, who played the sharecropper Zeke in *Hallelujah*, reappears as a loyal slave who puts down a slave rebellion after the Emancipation Proclamation. In this role, he converts blacks back into the happy singers they were before they became uppity and began to think of themselves as men rather than chattel.

Is there, then, a defense for *Hallelujah* beyond its aesthetic importance? I think there is, and I think it lies in Vidor’s personality as we know it from his films. (Full

*HALLELUJAH*. DIRECTED BY KING VIDOR. 1929. USA. BLACK AND WHITE, 109 MINUTES.

disclosure: In the few hours I was privileged to spend with him in 1972, I found Vidor modest and utterly charming.) Remembering that Vidor made *Hallelujah* in 1929 may provide grounds for understanding, if not approval. He did grow up in the South and he did, indeed, have preconceptions about blacks. He tried to render these lovingly in what he sincerely deemed to be an honest and affectionate film. Given his naiveté, his lack of malice, and his trust in his own fairness – as well as his almost mystical fervor – *Hallelujah* can and should be accepted as the remarkable achievement it is. Perhaps we can best gauge Vidor’s purity of intent through the words of Zeke’s song: “I can’t go wrong, I must go right / I’ll find my way ‘cause a guiding light / will be shining at the end of the road.”

## Frank Borzage's *They Had to See Paris* 1929

Will Rogers made a number of silent films, mostly in the early 1920s. *They Had to See Paris* was the first sound film he starred in. In it, we see a performer with the rare gifts of spontaneity and presence whose persona is already fully developed and almost perfectly suited to the new medium. Through the sheer force of his personality, Rogers transcends the staginess of this early talkie. Something is always happening on his face and behind it, and in the infrequent moments when Rogers's impromptu wit fails, his absolute charm succeeds.

This kind of naturalistic "acting" was to reach its zenith a third of a century later in the famous long take of James Stewart sitting beside a river in John Ford's *Two Rode Together* (1961). Will Rogers in *They Had to See Paris* is the prototypical American character of the sound era, soon to be followed by such outstanding personalities as Stewart, Gary Cooper, and John Wayne. In the film, Rogers, playing an uncouth Oklahoman who struck it rich in oil, is dragged to Paris by his social-climbing wife, and finally embarrasses her sufficiently to permit their return to Oklahoma. The assertion of provincial, pragmatic American values in *They Had to See Paris* was to be echoed throughout the films of Ford, Howard Hawks, King Vidor, Frank Capra, and other major American directors.

Frank Borzage was more at home in the realm of near-manic romance, and his Paris lacks the sparkle he captured in such masterpieces as *Seventh Heaven* (1927) and *History Is Made at Night* (1937). Given Borzage's inclinations, it is not surprising that the film's most pricelessly charming scenes feature Rogers and Fifi D'Orsay, as the comedian innocently yet knowingly indulges in the smalltown American fantasy of, as Edgar Kennedy puts it, "*parlez-vousing*" the French. Their duet "I Could Do It for You" is almost good enough to redeem all the bad 1929 musicals that survived. Miss D'Orsay was to reappear in a similar role in the other Borzage/Rogers film, *Young As You Feel*, in 1932.

Though *They Had to See Paris* may seem peripheral to Borzage's overall career, his work with Rogers contributed to the development of the screen personality that Rogers would use in his following seventeen films, and should not be ignored. Will Rogers is one of the American cinema's great treasures, and we should be especially grateful that this seminal film was preserved just before nitrate deterioration took its irreversible toll.

## Rouben Mamoulian's *Applause* 1929

Rouben Mamoulian (1898-1987) showed potential as a film director for five years before he limped into a disappointing second act and then virtually disappeared. Born in then-Soviet Georgia to Armenian parents, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1923. He was a promising newcomer like George Cukor – another of the many imports from the Broadway stage around the advent of sound technology – but unlike Cukor, whose career lasted more than a half-century, Mamoulian never quite figured out how to survive and thrive within the Hollywood system. The great success of his 1927 Broadway production of *Porgy* in New York made him and everyone else think he was notably inventive, but his cinematic gifts proved limited and transitory.

*Applause* was filmed mostly in Paramount's Astoria studio (now the home of the American Museum of the Moving Image) and having Manhattan just across the river afforded Mamoulian the opportunity to exploit the sights and especially the sounds of the city as nobody had done before. Much of his innovation came from capturing the ambient noise of New York streets and subways – banal to us residents who tend to disregard them, but no doubt fascinating to folks outside the city. There is a genuine fluidity to Mamoulian's camerawork, but unlike F. W. Murnau or later practitioners Kenji Mizoguchi and Max Ophüls, the camera movement often seems to serve no artistic purpose other than to assert the supremacy of the image over the tyrannical sound engineers of the era. Mamoulian also, like many directors of the time, pays lip service to Eisensteinian montage in an early scene in which Helen Morgan steps off the chorus line and has a baby. Ultimately, *Applause* was probably the best of the countless backstage musicals made in the era that Al Jolson wrought, which is to say it was tawdry but tongue-in-cheek. It would not have been too surprising if all the women in the chorus line had also been pregnant.

At the heart of *Applause* is a deeply felt performance by the great Helen Morgan, then only twenty-eight. Mostly a cabaret singer, Morgan would go on to play the mixed-race Julie in James Whale's *Show Boat* (1936) before succumbing to youthful alcoholism. Her performance in *Applause* may seem a little overwrought, but there were no introductory courses on how to play this kind of role in a talking picture. She is torn

between the demands of sexual vulnerability and motherhood in a no woman's land, turf later trod by Greta Garbo in *Anna Karenina* (1935) and Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas* (1937).

Mamoulian was a hot commodity for a while, releasing a run of successful films that culminated in *Queen Christina* (1933) with its iconic Garbo performance. He tried to do something similar that same year with Marlene Dietrich (then on a break from Josef von Sternberg) with *Song of Songs*, but that fell flat, as did most of the rest of Mamoulian's career. He completed only one film after turning fifty in 1948, but his star rose again on Broadway, where he directed original productions of *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and *Lost in the Stars*. Despite his changing fortunes, no one survived the Hollywood wars with more success.

## Ernst Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* 1929

Ernst Lubitsch followed up *The Marriage Circle* (1924) with eight more silent films, only five of which survived. Because of his ability to draw out subtle performances from actors, by 1929 he was likely seen as one of the then-prominent directors who could succeed with sound. With *The Love Parade*, Lubitsch did not disappoint.

The Hollywood musical, which originated with Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) quickly led to two genres: backstage melodramas (of which Rouben Mamoulian's 1929 *Applause* was one of the best) and studio reviews (filmed vaudeville showcases highlighting some of the talent – and “talent” – then under contract to a given studio). Lubitsch went in a different direction. With his roots in Europe and operetta, he made five films in five years – *The Love Parade* (1929), *Monte Carlo* (1930), *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931), *One Hour With You* (1932), and *The Merry Widow* (1934) – that together were the greatest sustained effort in the genre, at least until producer Arthur Freed's tenure at MGM a generation later.

Most of Lubitsch's films starred an itinerant French actor/singer/charmer named Maurice Chevalier. Chevalier had dabbled in film since 1908, but he was primarily known for his work on the musical stage in France, and was the partner of Folies-Bergère star Mistinguett, both on stage and in bed. Paired with Chevalier in *The Love Parade* was an American chorus

girl turned operetta star, Jeanette MacDonald. The two would go on to make two other Lubitsch musicals together as well as Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* in 1932, and they were to the early musical what James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson were to the embryonic gangster genre. The Lubitschean musical represented a new form unto itself, owing something to stage operettas, but with the director's unique flavor. Supplementing the cast of *The Love Parade* were character actors Lillian Roth (of *I'll Cry Tomorrow* fame), Eugene Pallette (whose girth and booming voice would grace many great comedies to come) and Lupino Lane (erstwhile silent clown and uncle of Ida Lupino).

Despite having few cinematic reference points at his command, Lubitsch developed a penchant for finding obscure vehicles to adapt. Most Americans were unfamiliar with stageworks, which opened up a whole field for Lubitsch to draw on. For *The Love Parade* he turned to the book *Le Prince Consort*, a decade-old fantasy by Léon Xanrof and Jules Chancel. Thanks to Lubitsch's wit and Chevalier's charm, Xanrof and Chancel's silly Sylvania plot was elevated into something that was scintillating and entirely new to movie audiences. The director quickly learned how to integrate musical numbers into his plots to keep the magic moving seamlessly. Films like *The Love Parade* would soon provide fodder for parodies like Leo McCarey's 1933 Marx Brothers vehicle *Duck Soup*, but Lubitsch was canny enough to know that his schmaltz was understood and accepted by audiences for what it was. Sound would continue to push films toward naturalism, but in 1929 there was still room for flights of fancy.

*The Love Parade* was nominated for the Best Picture Oscar but lost to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Lubitsch lost to the Best Director statuette to Lewis Milestone. He was not nominated again until 1943 for *Heaven Can Wait* – another fantasy, this time without songs. Apparently, his interests were deemed lacking in gravitas. To counter this perception, and out of genuine conviction, Lubitsch made the antiwar film *The Man I Killed* (*Broken Lullaby*) in 1932.

*The New York Times* recently published a colloquy with the young writer Sam Wasson in which he praised the director for his unique humor and sense of timing. Reflecting on Lubitsch, Wasson remarked, “there will never, ever, ever be another. Ever. A guy like that comes around once in a universe.”

## Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* 1929

**Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) is the leading example** of a commercially successful film director who never lost his taste for innovation and experimentation. During the transition to sound, Hitchcock took the opportunity, mid-production, to convert his thriller *Blackmail* into a talkie. Still, Sir Alfred must have been anathema to those on the avant-garde fringes of film who over the course of their entire careers were never able to attract the audiences that *Psycho* (1960) or *The Birds* (1963) could in a single day. His body of work remains extremely personal and unified in its vision of a precarious universe.

No other major director so relished sharing his methodology and insights. Hitchcock's book-length colloquy with François Truffaut and his frequent television interviews are testaments to how seriously he took his profession and how conscious he was of his own artistry. A John Ford shoot was like an extended family vacation that frequently – and seemingly on accident – would produce a golden masterpiece. An Orson Welles shoot was like a rollercoaster ride; he would earn a few bucks acting in an inferior film and then summon his far-flung cast and crew to some obscure location to shoot scenes while the money lasted. With Hitchcock, virtually everything was planned and storyboarded in advance. Hitchcock considered this the real creative process; the actual filming bordered on boring routine, and he disliked contending with actors (or “cattle,” as he once called them). One of the most amazing things about Sir Alfred was that he got some of the best performances out of many of the cinema's greatest actors, including Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, James Stewart, and Anthony Perkins, even though he must have found the process distasteful.

Hitchcock's several youthful years in Germany appear crucial to his development. He was exposed to the working methods of F. W. Murnau (then filming *The Last Laugh*, which would be released in 1924) and savored the sophisticated technical facilities at the UFA Studio. Much of Hitchcock's mature work is stylistically in synch with the lighting, camera movement, and overall style of the films that were being produced in Germany during his tenure there. Since the release of Robin Wood's book-length study of Hitchcock in 1965, there has been little doubt that Hitchcock's American films are far

superior to his pre-1940 British ones. However, Hitch's basic themes and obsessions were already present in the latter, ready to be fleshed out by his growing maturity and the greater technical capabilities of American studios. Of his ten silent films, *The Lodger* (1926) remains the most interesting, and thematically and stylistically anticipates much of his later work. When sound finally came to Britain in 1929, Hitchcock was primed to test and be tested by the new medium.

As he explained to Truffaut, the wily Hitchcock expected that the producers would eventually want to release *Blackmail* as a talkie even though it was shot silent. “We utilized the techniques of talkies, but without sound. Then, when the picture was completed, I raised objections... and they gave me carte blanche to shoot some of the scenes over.” Hitchcock incorporated a number of sound experiments in the film – though really, it was all still experimental then – and toyed with other innovative methods as well. Because star Anny Ondra was German and dubbing had not yet been invented, an English actress had to read her lines from just out of camera range. For a sequence set in the British Museum, he used Eugen Schüfftan's mirror effect, which he had observed at UFA when Schüfftan was doing special effects for Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924). This process entailed having actors perform in front of miniature backgrounds that were later enlarged.

Though *Blackmail* only touches on key Hitchcockian themes such as moral ambiguity and transference of guilt, it does mark the first time that the director uses an iconic monument (in this case, the British Museum) as a playing field for indulging his fantasies. (In *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*, Steven Jacobs has some interesting things to say about how the director liked to use the civilized setting of museums to heighten the sense of chaos experienced by his protagonists.) Ultimately, both silent and sound versions of *Blackmail* were released, and the latter revolutionized the British film industry during this transitional period.

Following the success of *Blackmail*, Hitchcock's immediate output was mostly an uneasy mixture of musicals, filmed stage plays, and absurdities. *Murder* (1930) is particularly interesting in how it hints at the Hitchcockian perversity to come, while *Number 17* (1932) strikes one as a dose of James Whale on a bad day. By the mid-1930s, however, Hitchcock had found the path he would tread to fame, fortune, and artistic triumph over the next four decades.



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**1930-1939**

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