

— THE —  
GRIFFITH  
PROJECT

VOLUME 6  
FILMS PRODUCED IN  
1912

GENERAL EDITOR  
Paolo Cherchi Usai

CONTRIBUTORS  
Eileen Bowser  
Ben Brewster  
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Scott Simmon  
Kristin Thompson  
Yuri Tsivian

ASSISTANT EDITOR  
Cynthia Rowell



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA  
BERKELEY





THE GRIFFITH PROJECT

VOLUME 6

FILMS PRODUCED IN 1912

IN MEMORY OF  
JONATHAN DENNIS  
GUARDIAN OF THE TREASURES OF LIGHT  
HE KAITIAKI O NGĀ TAONGA WHITĪĀHUA  
1953–2002

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## FOREWORD

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There is widespread consensus on the view that 1912 is the first “golden year” in the career of D.W. Griffith. Titles such as *The Female of the Species* (DWG Project, #401), *The Masacre* (#418), *The Sands of Dee* (#420), *The Painted Lady* (#433) and *The New York Hat* (#441) are generally regarded as classics of early cinema; frame enlargements of an exterior shot in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (#434) and of the Gish sisters in *An Unseen Enemy* (#426) – reproduced in countless books and journals – have acquired the status of icons of silent film as an art form. However, the canonization process has touched upon a relatively small portion of the sixty-four films produced by Griffith during this period. *A Pueblo Legend* (#421), one of the highest points in the director’s career, has so far received little attention outside the circle of Griffith specialists. Four titles have never been seen by modern audiences; another five are considered lost. No less remarkable is the fact that one third of the best prints available for viewing at the present time are preserved outside the United States (for example, a nitrate print of *Gold and Glitter* [#436] was found in Japan), perhaps an indicator of a wider overseas distribution of Biograph films in 1912.

Be that as it may, there is still a wealth of treasures waiting to be uncovered in this “golden year”. Their reappraisal is one of the aims of this sixth installment in the multi-year research project commissioned by the Pordenone Silent Film Festival in Sacile, involving the analysis of all the films where D.W. Griffith was credited as director, actor, writer, producer and supervisor. As in previous volumes, contributors to *The Griffith Project* were asked to analyze groups of consecutive films, listed here in their shooting order. Please note that, by and large, it is the last day of shooting that determines the chronology and perimeters of each volume. A note on geography: in the absence of any conclusive evidence on the precise shooting location of a film, we have opted for a generic reference to “California” or to the “East Coast” – rather than New York or New Jersey – except where specified.

The primary source for filmographic information on the Biograph period is *D.W. Griffith and the Biograph Company* (Cooper C. Graham, Steven Higgins, Elaine Mancini, João Luiz Vieira. Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1985), by far the best factual source on the subject. We gratefully acknowledge its authors and publisher, with special thanks to Steven Higgins – a longtime friend of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival – who provided invaluable advice on various aspects of the overall project. Contributors to *The Griffith Project* have occasionally added or amended information contained in the Scarecrow filmography. Two titles in particular have been the object of identification work: there is some evidence that *A Father’s Lesson* (DWG Project, #453), hitherto credited to Anthony O’Sullivan, may have been directed by Griffith; a new entry on this title has thus been established (details are provided in Russell Merritt’s note on this film). It has also been proven that *Pirate Gold* (finished in October 1912) – formerly attributed to Griffith – was in fact directed by Wilfred Lucas in Québec City, and has therefore been removed from the list of Griffith’s directorial credits. Additional information on this title can be found in André Gaudreault (ed.), in collaboration with Germain Lacasse and Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan, *Au pays des ennemis du cinéma... Pour une nouvelle histoire des débuts du cinéma au Québec* (Québec: Nuit Blanche éditeur, 1996).

It is worth reminding the reader of the criteria adopted for our inventory of preservation copies. In film, archival sources may be defined as the complex of all the elements held by moving image repositories and museums (regardless of their status as masters or duplicates). Alternatively, they could be identified as the extant preservation material (closest to the original camera negatives) utilized for the making of viewing copies. In the former sense, every film print – including, for instance, a 16mm duplicate of late generation – is considered an archival source. In the latter definition, such a term is used only for the *ur*-elements from which viewing copies are made, such as paper prints, nitrate negatives, positive prints generated at the time of the film's commercial release and re-release, archival negatives struck before the corresponding nitrate print decomposed, or fine grain masters and modern positive prints or negatives if no other material is available.

The second (and admittedly more restrictive) approach has been adopted within the framework of this project. For example, a 35mm paper print, a camera negative, a nitrate 35mm release print with English titles and a nitrate 35mm release print with German titles are listed as separate archival sources of the same film, as it is presumed that all the known preservation material and access copies in existence derive from one or more of these prints. Therefore, a 16mm generated from one of the above elements (such as many Biograph shorts distributed by Blackhawk in the 1970s for non-theatrical use) is not included in the inventory. On the other hand, a 16mm copy derived from a nitrate 35mm print distributed in Spain would be regarded as an archival source as long as the corresponding nitrate print or 16mm reduction negative are no longer extant.

None of these criteria is altogether immune from drawbacks and ambiguities. This is particularly true in relation to the inventory of 1912 Biograph prints attempted here. More copies of dubious archival generation have been found in the course of our search: the popular and critical acclaim enjoyed by several films made by Griffith during the year under scrutiny resulted in a plethora of duplicates in various formats (often with an added soundtrack) and generations, so numerous as to make the above distinction more problematic than ever. A comprehensive and reliable census based on the first method is virtually impossible to achieve, as we will never know exactly how many copies were made from a given source. On the other hand, archives often possess 16mm prints of unknown origin, and their generation cannot be established without a parallel examination of all the other surviving elements. However germane to the endeavor, this kind of comparative analysis requires an effort well beyond the scope of the project. Moreover, the procedure adopted here has the advantage of minimizing the possibility of redundancies, thus providing a preliminary guide for further inquiry in this important area of research. Copies of undetermined or uncertain origin have been included with the other sources, in the hope that future studies will bring conclusive evidence of their identity. It should be stressed – especially in the context of this volume – that the presence of an archival source does not necessarily mean that a corresponding access print is actually available. It is possible, for example, that a film preserved in three different archival sources may be seen only in a copy derived from one of these sources, not always the best, nor the most complete. In other cases, a title that survives in the form of a single archival source may not be currently accessible because no viewing print has been made yet. It is our hope that *The Griffith Project* will generate enough scholarly attention to bring these films to the public view. A list of all the 1912 titles currently available for screening – including their archival source and length – can be found in the catalogue of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, published in conjunction with the 2002 retrospective.

A new source of documentation has been incorporated in the series, a set of continuity sheets deposited by the Biograph Company at the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress between 1912 and 1914. A thorough comparison between these typewritten “scripts”

(normally preceded by plot summaries, also reproduced here) and the few extant release prints of the corresponding films hasn't been attempted yet, nor is it clear at what stage of the production process these continuities were created; we have decided to transcribe them in an appendix, both as *aide-mémoire* and research tools in the process of deciphering or reconstructing those films which survive in the form of original negatives without intertitles. Fragments of paper prints were often attached to the title sheet or to the synopsis page, and the chemical decay of adjacent film fragments – from titles produced by other companies – has sometimes damaged or destroyed portions of the page (lacunae are indicated in the transcripts where appropriate). An asterisk (\*) following the sequence number at the beginning of each entry indicates the titles for which a continuity sheet is available.

*The Griffith Project* would not exist without the generous help of all the individuals and institutions involved in the preservation of Griffith's work. Our special thanks go to Mary Lea Bandy, Anne Morra and Steven Higgins (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), Greg Lukow, Patrick Loughney, Madeline Matz and Mike Mashon (Library of Congress), who are currently in charge of this massive undertaking, initiated several years ago by Iris Barry and Eileen Bowser at MoMA and by the staff of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress. Film preservation is by definition an international effort: several archives outside the United States have restored other Griffith titles, or helped with additional documentation and research. We wish to express our gratitude to Elaine Burrows (National Film and Television Archive, London), Robert Daudelin (Cinémathèque Québécoise), Mark-Paul Meyer, Rommy Albers and Simona Monizza (Filmmuseum, Amsterdam), Eva Orbanz (Film Museum Berlin), Eddie Richmond and Charles Hopkins (UCLA Film and Television Archive), Dan Nissen (Det Danske Filmmuseum), Paulina Fernandez Jurado (Fundación Cinemateca Argentina), Lúcia Lobo (Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro), Michelle Aubert, Eric Le Roy and Jean-Louis Cot (Archives du Film, Bois d'Arcy), Michael Pogorzelski and Fritz Herzog (Academy Film Archive), Edward E. Stratmann, Karen Latham Everson, Caroline Yeager, Chad D. Hunter, Deborah Stoiber, Daniel Wagner, Tim Wagner, and all the staff of the Motion Picture Department at George Eastman House for their generous help in retrieving and sharing information on archival sources. André Gaudreault's entries for this volume have been translated from the French by Timothy Barnard. Last but not least, we are grateful to all the interns and students who contributed to the early stages of preparation of this volume: Jared Case, Kelly Chisholm, Sonia Genaitay, Kelli Hicks, Sungji Oh, Christina Porterfield, Linda Shah (recipient of the 2002 Giornate del Cinema Muto Fellowship and editorial assistant for this volume), Heather Stilin and John Woodard, students of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. My colleagues on the Board of Directors of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival (Davide Turconi, David Robinson, Piera Patat, Livio Jacob, Carlo Montanaro, Piero Colussi, Lorenzo Codelli and Luciano De Giusti) were instrumental in turning the Griffith retrospective into a unique opportunity to reassess the extraordinary contribution of D.W. Griffith to the art of film. Commentaries on the goals and methodological issues raised by *The Griffith Project* before and after the series started in October 1997 can be found in *Griffithiana*, Vol. XXI, Nos. 62–63; May 1998, 4–37; in the French journal *1895*, No. 29, December 1999, 187–88, and in Luca Giuliani (ed.), *The Collegium Papers I* (Gemona: Cineteca del Friuli / Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2001), the inaugural volume of an annual collection of essays and workshop transcripts written or assembled by students participating in the festival.

Paolo Cherchi Usai  
San Culebra del Porco, January 2002

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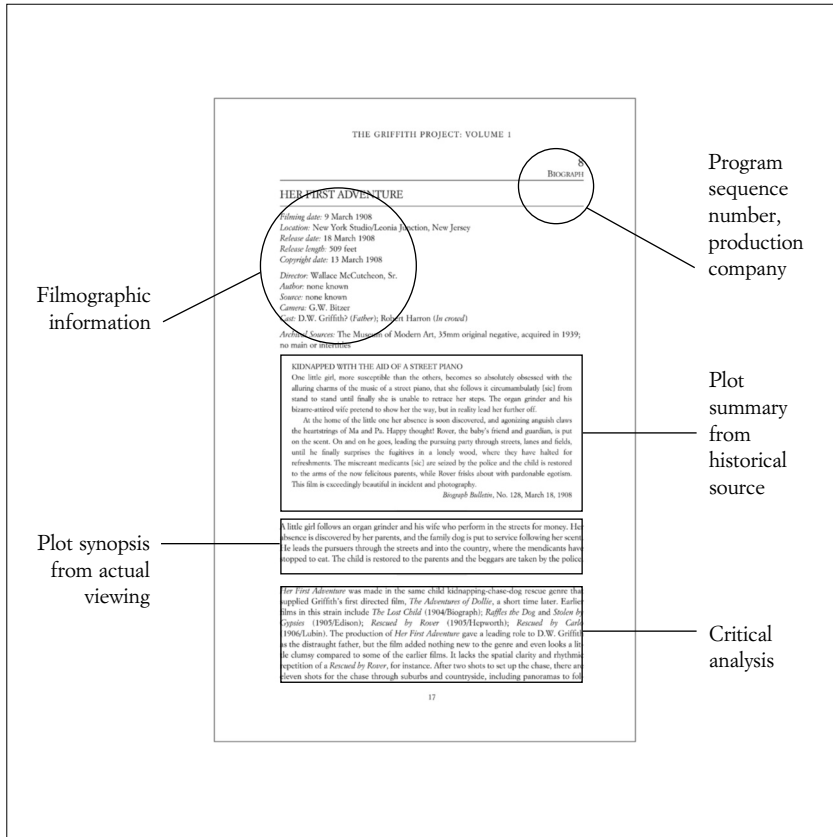
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YURI TSIVIAN is professor of Film at the University of Chicago. Ph.D. in Film Studies from Institute of Theater, Music and Cinema, Leningrad, 1984. Among his books are *Silent Witnesses: Russian Films, 1908-1919* (1989), *Istoricheskaia recepcija kino* (1991), translated as *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception* (1994), and, in collaboration with Yuri Lotman, *Dialogues with the Screen* (1994). His most recent work is the CD-ROM *Immaterial Bodies: Cultural Anatomy of Early Russian Films* (1998).

# NOTE ON LAYOUT



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## THE MENDER OF NETS

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*Filming date:* finished January 1912

*Location:* Santa Monica, California

*Release date:* 15 February 1912; 24 March 1912 (in Britain)

*Release length:* one reel

*Copyright date:* 15 February 1912

*Director:* D.W. Griffith

*Author:* none known

*Source:* none known

*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer

*Cast:* Mary Pickford (*The Little Mender*); Charles H. West (*Tom*); Margaret Lovebridge [Marguerite Marsh] (*Grace*)

*NOTE:* Santa Monica location taken from handwritten notation on the *Biograph Bulletin*.

*Archival Sources:* George Eastman House, 28mm diacetate positive; Library of Congress, 35mm nitrate negative (incomplete?, AFI/Mary Pickford Collection); The Museum of Modern Art, 35mm acetate negative (from National Screen and Sound Archive of Australia 35mm nitrate positive, decomposed); National Film and Television Archive, 35mm acetate negative (printed in 1956 from 35mm nitrate positive, ca. 1920, destroyed)

### IN THE TANGLED MESH OF LIFE'S NETS

The little mender is betrothed to Tom, the fisherman, rejecting the suits of all the others. Tom, however, is weak, and finds that his old infatuation for Grace still haunts him. Grace has sacrificed all for her love for Tom, and when she sees him courting the little mender, she reminds him of his duty towards her. He realizes the strength of this and hints to the little mender that he is not worthy of her. Grace's brother learns of her dishonor and attempts vengeance. A quarrel ensues between the men, and the little mender, ignorant of the cause, attempts to save her sweetheart from the anger of the brother, and her tender appeal turns him for the time from his purpose. The little mender learns, however, the cause and the truth of the other girl's sorrow, and, smothering her own feelings, awakens Tom to his sense of duty, while she returns to mend the nets, solaced by her memories and her old father.

*Biograph Bulletin*, February 15, 1912

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A girl is sitting at a beach mending a fisherman's net. Enter her father bringing more nets, and a little later her boyfriend Tom, bringing a ring. Grace, Tom's old infatuation, feels he has grown cold to her. Next day, Tom returns to the mender: "I, NOT GOOD ENOUGH." Meanwhile, Grace, who is looking for Tom, sees him and the mender together. "YOU CAN'T MARRY ANOTHER - WHAT OF ME?" The situation complicates when Grace's brother learns of his sister's dishonor and attempts vengeance. The little mender, who senses something wrong, borrows her father's binoculars just in time to see Tom threatened by Grace's brother. She follows the latter to his cabin out of which he comes out carrying a gun. "THE NET-MENDER IGNORANT OF THE CAUSE OF THE QUARREL ATTEMPTS TO SAVE HER SWEET-HEART." She comes between Tom and Grace's vengeful brother in the nick of time to save

him from the bullet, but it is also then that she learns the truth about Tom and Grace. Realizing she had unwittingly served as a cause of the painful rupture, the net-mender gently refuses Tom's proposal and leaves, wishing them both a happy life. The last image: we glimpse the little mender sitting at the beach mending the nets.

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This is one of those Biograph pictures whose closing shot evokes the opening one: in both, the young girl is shown sitting by a beach cabin, mending a fishing net; behind her, one can see a nice rocky hill encircling a Santa Monica cove. Tom Gunning, who has traced similar kinds of closure from the 1909 *The Country Doctor* to this year's *The Inner Circle* and *The Sands of Dee*, connects such "circular structures" with a particular melancholy mood those stories intend to inspire (Gunning 1991, pp. 276–78); this is also true for *The Mender of Nets*, whose last shot – a mirror image of the first – seems to say "What has been will be again" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). To give this resigned wisdom a stronger visual emphasis, *The Mender of Nets* ends with a fade and begins with one, though in the 35mm Museum of Modern Art print that I was able to inspect, the opening fade-in does not start from pitch black. Simply, at the outset, the image is darker and hazier, and it takes around twelve seconds for the opening shot to brighten up as Mary – the little Mender – lifts her eyes from the net on her lap and smiles to herself. Whether or not Griffith intended them this way, the *Moving Picture World* critic mistook this partial fade-in (and its counterpart at the end of the film) for atmospheric phenomena:

This picture's first scene comes forth out of the mist near a little cove. We see, dimly, white breakers coming in from the sea. The scene grows clear and bright and we see the little mender of nets seated at her work between her father's cabin and the beach, the white breakers of the cove serving as background. ... In the last scene she sits again at her work beside the cabin, her father beside her talking with her. The mist closes in and we see the white breakers dimly. (*The Moving Picture World*, March 2, 1912, p. 780)

It is amazing how what we read affects what we see. Like all of us, I know a fade when I see it. When I first watched *The Mender of Nets*, my eyes "knew too much", as it were, to even suspect the fades could have been anything more than just fades; but when I read this 1912 description and watched the film again, my eyes literally *saw* the mist – despite the fact that visually the real mist would take the image into a lighter, not darker shade of gray. If my readers doubt or wish to experience this odd perceptual effect, it is easy to do – DVD and laserdisc versions of *The Mender of Nets* exist.

The *Moving Picture World* account of these two shots eats up a good half of the space set aside for the review, and its subject deserves it: even if Griffith never intended the fades to invoke the mist, the enclosing image is definitely symbolic. First, as it follows from the *Biograph Bulletin* subtitle – "In the tangled mesh of life's nets" – whoever wrote the story wanted us to make a connection between the girl's occupation and her having mended the invisible net of attachments and commitments she had unknowingly disrupted; if in the beginning of the film the shot showing the mender at work merely visualizes what we have just learned from the main title, in the end when this image returns, Griffith expects it to nutshell the entire little drama that had just passed before the viewer's eyes. Secondly – and more importantly for our understanding of Griffith's toolkit of 1912 – a visual bridge exists between what the girl in the story does for living and what she does in life. Shortly before the film comes to the close, we watch the mender reconnect the somewhat reluctant fiancé and the girl he had jilted for her; the bit of business Griffith gives Mary Pickford to perform

this task is nothing short of mending: first, Mary takes Tom's hand into hers and puts it around Grace's shoulder; then, she creates a counter-stitch by putting Grace's arms around Tom. Then, sadly and silently, the little mender of nets steals out of the room to go on with her work by the unchanging sea. Fade out.

"The Biograph Company", continues the *Moving Picture World* reviewer still a little cautiously, "can hardly object to our mention of Little Mary's name; she is the mender of nets." This was, indeed, a new concession in the Biograph policy – news in January 1912 – that the company would allow the players' names to appear in print. An inside witness, Linda Arvidson thus explains why Griffith and the company would eventually give in: "Biograph found it a difficult job sticking to their policy of secrecy. Letters came from fans asking about their favorites; the pretty girl with the curls – the girl with the sad eyes – the man with the lovely smile – the funny little man – and the policeman" (Arvidson, p. 187). Though 1912 was too early for anyone to ask about the funny little man, the link Linda Arvidson makes between Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin makes perfect sense: it is owing to them that in three years hence, the tiny leak that allowed the *Moving Picture World* reviewer to divulge the name of the mender would grow into what Benjamin B. Hampton – another inside witness – has called "The Pickford Revolution" as a result of which "[a]cting, historically one of the most precarious of all professions[,] suddenly found itself among the best paid on earth" (Hampton, pp. 146–69).

Yuri Tsivian

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BIOGRAPH

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 UNDER BURNING SKIES
 

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*Filming date:* finished January 1912*Location:* California*Release date:* 22 February 1912*Release length:* one reel*Copyright date:* 20 February 1912*Director:* D.W. Griffith*Author:* none known*Source:* none known*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer

*Cast:* Wilfred Lucas (*Joe*); Blanche Sweet (*Emily*); W. Christy Cabanne (*Her husband*); Alfred Paget (*His friend*); Kate Toncray (*Mother*); Claire McDowell (*Friend*); Charles H. West (*Bartender*); Charles Hill Mailes, Frank Evans, Charles Gorman (*In bar*); Robert Harron, W.C. Robinson, Edwin August (*On street*); W. Chrystie Miller, Charles Hill Mailes, Robert Harron, Marguerite Marsh (*At farewell party*)

*Archival Sources:* The Museum of Modern Art, 35mm nitrate negative

## A TALE OF THE AMERICAN DESERT

Joe would have been happily married to Little Emily if he could have kept his promise to give up drink. But seemingly it was impossible, and when drunk he became so reckless and dangerous that he had received the name of "The Bad Man of San Fernand." A young man from across the great desert meets Little Emily, and before long she consents to marry him. Joe hears of this, and, his mind inflamed by liquor, he sends a message to the new sweetheart that he will shoot him on sight. Emily, fearful that Joe might carry out his threat, marries the young man at once and they start across the desert for home and safety. Joe hearing of this, vengefully follows. On the desert the ripping of their water-sack has left the young couple without a supply of water, and when Joe overtakes them they are on the verge of dying from thirst. Gloating over his chance for revenge, he refuses their appeals for water and leaves them to die. He cannot, however, forget Little Emily's heartrending appeals, and, his better self awakening to a realization of what he has done, he returns.

*Biograph Bulletin*, February 22, 1912

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Joe takes a drink before his rendezvous with Emily; she says she will marry him if he quits drinking. "FROM NOW ON IT'S WATER FOR ME", says he to his friends in the saloon – an ironic title given the role water plays in the finale. But Joe is too happy about his sweetheart's promise to remember his own. While Joe is celebrating, Emily is introduced to a handsome friend of a friend. Another rendezvous reveals Joe is drunk again; no kiss. The handsome cowboy shows up to be smiled at by Emily and frowned at by Joe. There follows a protracted street gunfight brought to a halt by Emily's courage. Emily marries the handsome one and they hasten to leave the town. Joe vows vengeance. In the desert, the water bag falls from the mule's pack and the water is gone. Before long, Emily is faint from exhaustion, while her husband is desperately trying to dig water using his hands. Enter Joe riding a white horse and flaunting a great flask full of water. But the drunk's heart is bigger than he thought:

after some teasing, he not only gives the newlyweds his water (Emily first), but also leaves them his white horse before returning to the town.

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On 30 July 1911 a large (unsigned) essay appeared in *The New York Times* explaining how Western film dramas were helping the American film industry prevail in the international film market; in fact, it has already prevailed, the author concludes, running perhaps a little ahead of time:

There is one American article of export out of which fortunes are being coined in every corner of the world, and which, under its rightful name, does not appear upon a single steamer's manifest. This is the picturesque – what is bizarre, exciting, and unusual in American life, chiefly scenes of cowboys and Indians. This picturesque, a real, definite commodity of genuine commercial importance, goes with many another moving picture film across the seas ... From Liverpool to Moscow and from Stockholm to Melbourne the patrons eagerly watch the unfolding of every one of the highly colored dramas of the prairies and the mountains. It does not matter if the story is only slightly different from what they have seen before. This is the America that they have long imagined and heard about ... This picturesque that makes such a valuable commodity when it is exported has to be prepared with the greatest care. Just the proper sort of country has to be chosen, in the first place, for a background.

("Exporting an Imaginary America to Make Money: Moving Picture Lovers in Foreign Cities prefer Indian and Cowboy Films to All Others."  
*The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, section 1911).

The "background" the essay is talking about is a period term for a period value: in those years trade-paper reviewers would assess backgrounds on a par with "photographs", "action", or "acting". The *Biograph Bulletin* lists *Under Burning Skies* as "A Tale of the American Desert"; in less lofty language, it is one of Biograph's "desert pictures" – films whose stories were cut to the picturesque background against which they unfold. Griffith began making these in 1910 (*Over Silent Paths* was his first "Story of the American Desert" [DWG Project, #257]), and not unlike its 1911 forerunner *The Last Drop of Water* (another "Story of the Great American Desert" [DWG Project, #350]), our film also taps the background desert for a story of thirst. Ours, however, is not merely a desert film but also a "cowboy picture", for although it ends up on a familiar desert-thirst note, most of its action is structured around a beautiful gunfight that unfolds against the background of a Western town (San Fernando, as the bad guy's nickname allows to suggest), and in a saloon whose background wall is entirely covered with coarse American graffiti (four playing cards, a glass of beer, and a man's head in profile signed "Oklahoma Charlie"). In this sense *Under Burning Skies* is really what *The New York Times* calls a "highly colored drama".

The gunfight action staged in the street and in the saloon is more compelling than the desert finale it precedes. One glance at the *Bulletin* publicity still is enough to say that no matter what its picturesque value, the cactus-and-yucca waste proved a poor stage (too open, too empty) for the final showdown. But in the town Griffith is at his 1912 best. I cannot find a better way to describe what is going on in San Fernando than by relating it to the endless strategic maneuvers that the two groups of gang members undertake before they ultimately burst into shooting in the same year's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*. The mutual stalking in which the two rival cowboys find themselves involved in *Under Burning Skies* is as long (if not longer), as elaborate, and as suspenseful. Here, Griffith makes a brilliant use of the advantage that urban locations have over desert ones: these spaces are segmented

and narrow, with corners to hide behind, and plenty of people around to provide reactions. The bartender (long moustache, bald head) ducks behind the bar each time one of the contenders enters and looks around, their guns drawn; and much like later on in Chaplin's *Easy Street* (1917), the entire busy street of San Fernando becomes instantly empty as soon as one of the duelists turns its way. Those moments, without canceling the suspense, work for comic relief; and I think it is this mixture of comedy and suspense that the *Moving Picture World* reviewer had in mind when he wrote this about the film's action: "It is fresh and human, and has touches, here and there, even when it verges on murder and sudden death, that convince us into laughter – this was heard all over the house" (*The Moving Picture World*, March 9, 1912, p. 866). The sequence ends in a perfectly staged non-resolution: we see Joe cagily nearing a street corner behind which we know his adversary is doing the same – the latter's revolver is slowly emerging from behind the corner wall. Exactly at the moment when the deadly outcome seems inevitable, we see Blanche Sweet's heroine dash into the shot, place herself between the two guns and thus avert the shooting.

Let me finish by quoting another passage from the 1911 *New York Times* article – the one that reported the enormous success of American Western pictures overseas – not so much in order to comment on *Under Burning Skies* as to share a thought *pro domo sua*:

It is wonderful how such a film never fails ... For the American firms engaged in the exporting of the American picturesque the situation is ideal, for London is rapidly becoming the great selling center for films for all sections of Europe, and even Australia and New Zealand. The great demand all over England for the cowboy and Indian films has spurred on the agents for "houses" in other countries to compete for the pick of these ... Spain and Italy, even Russia, the big cities of South America and far-off Oceania tell precisely the same story. Russia, curiously enough, is getting to be a stronghold of moving pictures, and the most insignificant towns and villages, even in remote districts, are being well provided with these amusements. There are reported to be 1,200 electric theatres alone in the Russian Empire. (*The New York Times*, op. cit.)

Russia, indeed, was becoming a huge market; would pictures like *Under Burning Skies* be hugely successful in Russia? Potentially, yes; to give an idea how ready Russians were for movies like this, let me quote from *Speak, Memory*, the autobiographical book by the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov who was thirteen (and living in Russia) at the time when Griffith released *Under Burning Skies*, and much given not only to reading Western stories but even to enacting them in a park:

The Wild West fiction of Captain Mayne Reid (1818–83) translated and simplified, was tremendously popular with Russian children at the beginning of this century, long after his American fame had faded. ... In the summer of 1909 or 1910, [my cousin Yuri von Traubenberg] enthusiastically introduced me into the dramatic possibilities of the Mayne Reid books. He had read them in Russian (being in everything save surname much more Russian than I) and, when looking for a playable plot, was prone to combine them with Fenimore Cooper and his own fiery inventions. I viewed our games with greater detachment and tried to keep to the script. The staging took place generally in the park of Batovo, where the trails were even more tortuous and trappy than those of Vyra. For our mutual manhunts we used spring pistols that ejected, with considerable force, pencil-long sticks (from the brass tips of which we had manfully twisted off the protective rubber suction cups). Later came airguns of various types, which shot wax pallets or small tufted darts, with non-lethal, but often quite painful consequences. In 1912, the impressive mother-of-pearl plated revolver he arrived with was calmly taken away and locked up by my tutor Lenski, but not before we had blown to pieces the shoebox lid (in prelude to the real thing,

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an ace), which we have been holding up by turns at a gentlemanly distance in a green avenue where a duel was rumored to have been fought many dim years ago. (Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* [New York: Vintage Books International, 1989], pp. 195, 197)

A Western picture like *Under Burning Skies* would have been welcomed by all Russian children, I imagine, and might have even supplied some fresh visual details for their games, but 1912 was still too early for that. The Russian market was dominated by Nordisk and Cines, and although I am sure some of the multiple distribution agencies that operated there would have a Biograph picture to offer (I know for sure that two Griffith films from 1913 – *The Lady and the Mouse* and *Judith of Bethulia* – were shown in Russia), I do not believe the American presence was that much felt. It was not before another ten years that desert and prairie backgrounds would become a true rage in my country.

Yuri Tsivian

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BIOGRAPH

## A SIREN OF IMPULSE

*Filming date:* finished January 1912*Location:* California*Release date:* 4 March 1912*Release length:* one reel*Copyright date:* 6 March 1912*Director:* D.W. Griffith*Author:* none known*Source:* none known*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer*Cast:* Dorothy Bernard (*Mariana*); Charles H. West (*Jose?*); Mae Marsh, Marguerite Marsh, Mary Pickford (*Revelers*)*Archival Sources:* The Museum of Modern Art, 35mm nitrate negative

## THE STORY OF IMPETUOUS SPANISH BLOOD

Mariana, the rose of the little Spanish village, being a tantalizing coquette, has the hearts of all the young men agog by her flirtatiousness, until Jose finally wins her heart and hand. Shortly after her marriage, Fiesta Day arrives, and though she desires to attend the dance in the evening, Jose, through jealousy, refuses to allow her to go. At first she is defiant, and dresses to go, but later she decides to respect her husband's command and instead of going, lends her festival dress to her friend, Gloria. As the party leaves, a child enters and solicits Mariana's aid for her sick mother. Jose returning to the house after his temper has cooled, finds his wife absent, and, of course assumes she has gone to the dance. This assumption is strengthened by seeing his erstwhile rival in the distance on the way to the Gardens with Gloria, who, in his wife's attire, he reasonably mistakes for Mariana. A tragedy is narrowly averted by mere chance.

*Biograph Bulletin*, March 4, 1912

Once out of her garden's gate, Mariana makes eyes at any male she passes: a street-sweeper (who is first shocked, then shakes his head) and two young construction workers, who drop their tools and run after her. The more persistent one is Jose, whom she soon marries. Aware of his wife's flirtatious nature, he does not let her leave the house when her old friends drop in to call her to a festival. He even says "no" to a peddler who knocks at the door to offer a piece of lace. Mariana is defiant; Jose rushes out. In the street, he sees the peddler; his heart softens, and he buys his wife the lace. When he returns home, however, and sees her wearing her best dress, he realizes that despite the ban, she has decided to go out with her friends. He rushes out again, now really furious. Meanwhile, her friends come back to pick up Mariana, but as a good wife at heart, she feels she needs to be docile and stay home. She changes back into a homely dress, and lends the best one to a friend. Coincidentally, a neighbor child comes in to ask for Mariana's help with her sick mother. When Jose returns, he finds the house empty. His gun in hand, he is looking for Mariana when he sees her dress and thinks it is she. Fortunately, Jose discovers his mistake. Penitent, he offers Mariana the lace purchased from the peddler. She throws it on the ground, but soon her heart softens and the couple kisses.

This appears to have been a workaday picture for Griffith, for although the *Biograph Bulletin* insists on the Spanish affiliation of the story, no attempt can be traced to distinguish it from Biograph's Mexico pictures; in fact, the sombreros that the male players are wearing come, I assume, from their Mexican wardrobes, and there are a few familiar cactuses here and there. I would not be so sure about saying this had I not noticed that the *Moving Picture World* reviewer made the telltale mistake of calling Dorothy Bernard's Mariana "an impulsive Mexican girl" (*The Moving Picture World*, March 16, 1912, p. 962). I still may be wrong, because in my previous research for *The Griffith Project* (specifically, on *Ramona*), I have come across the word "Spanish" used to describe old California missions, and this may as well be what the *Bulletin* writer had in mind, but the usage is historical. If this is what "Spanish" means here, all the worse for the film; there is nothing that indicates it is a period picture. Griffith would not even take the crew to San Gabriel or Santa Barbara missions as he would for more ambitious Mexican projects. Whatever the word means in this case, the "Spanish" stake was evidently in the story and characters (driven by "Impetuous Spanish Blood", as the *Bulletin* calls it). The main title neatly nutshells the gist of the matter: though the girl often behaves like a siren, don't mistake her for one, for she acts on impulse, and this impulse comes from the heart.

Although usually favorable to the Biograph Company, this time I feel the *Moving Picture World* reviewer disliked this picture; he (or she) tactfully changes the subject from *The Siren of Impulse* to the movie made a year before:

Early last summer, the Biograph Company released a very excellent picture, *The New Dress*. This release has much of the same quality. It is true that the former had, in some ways, a more significant incident to relate and was more universal in its humanity. It also was more distinctly national in its ancillary happenings, in its atmosphere. This picture, however, has many good points to commend it, points that are found in both. It is not quite so successful a picture; but it invites comparison. They belong together. (Ibid.)

Interestingly, there is little in common between the two films save the crucial role allotted to a dress in both stories (otherwise quite different) and the problematic "Mexican" identity of our Spanish lady; the only thing in common is that *The New Dress*, as Lea Jacobs observes in her comment, "exploited the local color available to the Biograph company during their second trip to California" (DWG Project, #338), and so does, of course, *The Siren of Impulse* by displaying its non-descript Hispanic passions. To add, for fairness: neither Jacobs nor I were particularly impressed by *The New Dress*, either; and the dress in my film is more beautiful than the dress in hers.

Two more comments with regards to the mixed *Moving Picture World* review of *The Siren of Impulse*. First, the reviewer writes: "The picture's fine quality comes from the acting which, in many of its scenes, is quite up to Biograph standards" (Ibid.). I hope he or she means Dorothy Bernard, and not the player of Jose, whose name I do not know and do not wish I did. The fact that Griffith would let an actor to ham up "Spanish blood" so shamelessly can only speak to the fact that he did not particularly care for the film. More that once in the span of the picture, the player of Jose thinks he needs to explain to the viewer what his character intends to do to his wife: at the first pang of jealousy, he points with his finger off screen (where she is), then points to his own chest, and drives the index finger of the other hand across his throat; as his jealousy hardens, Jose shows (rather literally) how he will tear her heart out of her breast; and when he observes his wife (which is not her, of course, but

a girl wearing her dress) embracing another man he returns to his house, takes a gun, points at it with his finger and looks toward the camera seeking our complicity. Is this what you call “up to Biograph standards”?

Secondly, the *Moving Picture World* praises the camera work: “The photographs, some of them more especially, are unusually commendable” (Ibid.). It is never easy to say whether what a reviewer commends in such cases is cinematography or direction (as those things interpenetrate in actual life), but if our reviewer commends some bold camera positions, I could not agree more. I particularly enjoyed two very long shots not quite of the same range as Griffith’s famous “distant views”, but close to it, chosen visibly to experiment with distance between the camera and the players. Normally, Griffith’s “distant views” appear when an upper overview is needed to observe a battle or a massacre (*In Old Kentucky* [1909]; *Ramona* [1910]; *Iola’s Promise* [1912]), but here, distance becomes instrumental in staging jealousy and romance. In one case the distance (the shot is taken from Jose’s point of view, his back visible in the foreground) explains how he could have mistaken a different girl for his wife: she is so far away that the dress is about all Jose would be able to recognize. The other shot, from earlier on in the story, is even more remarkable since here the distance is not motivated by “credible story” considerations; in fact, the length of this shot is chosen “against the type”, to borrow the expression from actors’ craft. This is the scene in which Mariana agrees to become Jose’s wife. In previous shots the little coquette had been teasing Jose by now running away from him, then waiting for him to approach. They stop in a forest, in the middle of a wide clearing. The camera keeps them at a distance, which allows Griffith to keep a considerable distance between the lovers, because although they are not running any more, they go on with this proximity game: Jose makes a step towards her, she steps back, etc. After some time, we see him lift his hands and call her passionately. A moment of hesitation – internal struggle – on her part, and we watch Mariana slowly approaching her future husband to succumb to his embrace. This “distant view” of romance, instead of a closer view that suggests itself for intimate scenes, is truly unusual.

Yuri Tsivian

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## IOLA'S PROMISE

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*Filming date:* finished January 1912

*Location:* California

*Release date:* 14 March 1912; 28 April 1912 (in Britain); reissued by Biograph,  
4 September 1916

*Release length:* 1056 feet; 1312 feet for the 1916 re-release

*Copyright date:* 11 March 1912

*Director:* D.W. Griffith

*Author:* Belle Taylor

*Source:* none known

*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer

*Cast:* Mary Pickford (*Iola*); Alfred Paget (*Jack Harper*); Frank Evans (*His partner*); Dorothy Bernard (*Jack's sweetheart*); Frank Opperman, Kate Toncray (*Her parents*); William Carroll, Henry Lehrman?, Charles Hill Mailes (*Mexican cutthroats*); William J. Butler, Antonio Moreno, Charles Gorman, Kate Bruce (*Indians*); J. Jiquel Lanoe (*Medicine man*); Charles H. West, Charles Hill Mailes, Harry Hyde, Robert Harron (*Settlers*)

*Archival Sources:* Library of Congress, 35mm nitrate negative (AFI/Mary Pickford Collection); two 35mm nitrate positives (reissue prints, AFI/Mary Pickford Collection); 35mm nitrate positive (incomplete, Kemp Niver Collection); 35mm paper print; National Film and Television Archive, 35mm acetate negative (from 35mm nitrate positive, returned to donor); UCLA Film and Television Archive, 16mm acetate positive (generation undetermined, Stanford Theatre Collection)

### HOW THE LITTLE INDIAN MAIDEN PAID HER DEBT OF GRATITUDE

Iola, the little Indian girl, is held captive by a gang of cutthroats, from whose clutches and abuse she is rescued by Jack Harper, a prospector. She is truly grateful to Jack, for she regards him as something different from the white people she has seen. Jack's sweetheart and her father are parties of a wagon train headed for his place, and as luck has been against him, he is somewhat gloomy. Iola learns the reason, and promises to help him find gold. He is amused at this and says "Will you?" "Yes." "Cross your heart?" This Cross-your-heart action mystifies the little Indian. She thinks it is a sort of tribe insignia and tells her people that "Cross-heart" people are all right. Iola surely pays her debt of gratitude, not only in finding gold, but in giving her life to protect Jack's sweetheart from her own people, who are embittered against all whites.

*Biograph Bulletin*, March 14, 1912

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In their hideout, with a cave serving as a background, two cutthroats have a fight over to whom the captive Indian girl Iola belongs; she is prepared for the worst when Harper, a good-hearted prospector, discovers and saves her. He carries her to his cabin and offers her food; Iola is soon not afraid of white people any more and shows her savior signs of affection. But, as we learn from a letter he receives in an unexplained way, Harper's heart belongs to his sweetheart who, accompanied by her father, is presently riding a prairie wagon that is taking to her fiancé's cabin. Harper leads Iola back to her native village, telling her she could repay

him by helping find pieces of gold; jokingly, he teaches her to do a “cross-my-heart” gesture, which Iola takes for white man’s tribal sign. Back in the village, Iola tells her folks she had been rescued by a “cross-my-heart” man, but her appeal for tolerance falls on deaf ears. Worse, as the faithful Iola sets out to the woods in search of gold-tinted stones, one of her tribesmen hears the noise of the approaching wagon carrying Harper’s sweetheart; the village Indians ride off to attack it. Harper and other prospectors rush to the rescue, but are too far away to arrive on time. Meanwhile, his fiancée’s father and the other men in the wagon answer with fire, but the Indian circle is closing. The triumphant tribe decides to burn the captive whites on a stake. Iola sees the whites tied to a tree; she approaches the captives and persuades Harper’s sweetheart to exchange clothes with her. The trick works. As Iola, wearing the white girl’s hat and overcoat, runs away pretending to escape, the Indians shoot her; she falls, but before she dies (in the arms of the saddened Harper and his deeply touched fiancée) she manages to notice a little yellow stone exactly like she had promised Harper to find.

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The Library of Congress 16mm copy of *Iola’s Promise* available to me at the time of writing has what Paolo Cherchi Usai has termed an “internal history” (Cherchi Usai, 2000, p. 147). This is an undated re-release copy; my first thought was that it was the 1916 release; fortunately, I asked Russell Merritt who told me that in 1920, Nathan Hirsh bought a selection of Pickford Biographs, retitled them, and distributed them through Aywon Film in the early 1920s. My print is clearly from this group, and before I turn to the film itself, let me briefly comment on what the re-editors in the 1920s changed in the original release print to make it look less antiquated. First, the credits. At the time when *Iola’s Promise* was made, the Biograph Company had just (reluctantly) agreed that “Little Mary’s name” be mentioned in press (for more details, see *The Mender of Nets*, DWG Project, #393), but they would not allow it to appear in the credit sequence. In 1915 – the year that Benjamin Hampton has called “The Pickford Revolution” – not only the star’s salary changed, but also the whole way of thinking about people in pictures: Pickford was no longer “the girl of this picture” – rather, the opposite was true. The curve of Pickford’s fame explains why *Iola’s Promise* was re-released in 1916 and reclaimed again in 1920. The opening title of the 1920s version is “NATHAN HIRSH PRESENTS MARY PICKFORD’S IOLA’S PROMISE” and comes up before “Directed by D.W. Griffith” – an ironic justice, given the latter’s role in suppressing Pickford’s name till 1912, to believe Linda Arvidson’s memoirs (p. 187).

The new editors/titlers (credited as M.G. Cohn and L.F. Natteford) did a couple of other things to bring the four-year-old Biograph film up to the quality standards of the 1920s. The original print length has been increased by more than 200 feet (the original footage is not too certain: though the 1912 *Bioscope* mentions 1,056 feet, Kemp R. Niver’s filmography records 995 feet [Niver, p. 196]) and split into two parts, presumably offered in two reels (in the middle of the available reel there are two titles, announcing the end of Part One and the beginning of Part Two). There is no new film footage, of course, but the story is padded with new (art) intertitles. What Cohn and Natteford did to the film was to: a) give more colorful names to male characters (calling the 1912 Jack Harper “‘Big Bill’ Kenyon” and his previously anonymous co-prospector “Uncle Joe” Hines); b) give new colorful wordings to the usual matter-of-fact style of Biograph narrative titles (and there is also a quote from *The Book of Ruth* used as an epigraph to the story which I wonder if the 1912 release ever had); c) add longish dialogue titles. To splice those in at the “points of speech” – that is, where dialogue titles belonged according to the later practice – they had to split some originally continuous shots (which is all I believe the re-editing part amounts to). The re-release version recalls what art historians tell us they have to face as they deal with many an old master

paintings: a layer of later improvements on the original objects which is a historical artifact too valuable to be physically removed; but if we keep those in mind, below this layer there we will find a fine 1912 Griffith (not yet a “Pickford”) picture.

On the other hand, here Mary Pickford already *is* the center of gravity – at times, *Iola’s Promise* seems less like a film in which the player serves the story (the usual Biograph ethos), than the one in which the story plays up to the star, as would often be the case with Pickford’s future pictures. One phrase in the *Moving Picture World* review of *Iola’s Promise* could be applied to Pickford star-vehicles of later years: “The plot, though very interesting, does not rise very far above commonplace; yet the acting and business show careful, painstaking thought and artistic ability” (April 6, 1912, p. 40). There is also a symptom of this in Griffith giving her a protracted multi-shot end sequence in which we see Iola shot: she falls, then (in the next shot) her fall continues down the hill; she keeps sliding down even after a brief cutaway to the battle; then, we see Iola struggling up; as she succeeds, she discovers a gold nugget her hand had clasped as she was clutching the ground; before she dies she gives it to the man she loves. This is a typical star routine – an extended solo death scene the likes of which this very year the stage star Sara Bernhardt would try to import into film. The whole scene is wonderfully directed, and I am not sure I know what the *Moving Picture World* reviewer had in mind when he or she wrote: “The ending (just a few feet) decidedly falls down, but it comes too late to spoil the picture” (Ibid.)

Indian girls was one of Pickford’s specialties (see her 1910 *Ramona*) partly because (claims Mrs. Griffith) “David thought Mary had a good face for Indians on account of her high cheek bones . . . A smear of brown grease paint over her fair face and a wig of coarse straight black hair made a picturesque little Indian girl of ‘our Mary’” (Arvidson, p. 168). As to Mary herself (writes her biographer Scott Eyman), “[s]he did not enjoy playing Indians, because it meant you had to get up an hour early, at 5:00 A.M., and rub in a make-up of clay mixed with water, put on a horse-hair wig, alligator necklaces, a heavy, beaded horsehide gown, and then stay out in the sun all day long” (Eyman, p. 50). (This may be true for her other Indian parts, but Pickford’s Iola is not overdressed; in one scene alone with Harper she even sports a bare shoulder.)

Exotic costumes and settings were believed to be the principal asset of “Western and Indian pictures” – let me quote a passage from *The New York Times* (1911; this is an article on Western pictures overseas which I further discuss in my comment on *Under Burning Skies* – see DWG Project, #394):

Europe, Asia, Africa, and all the Australias [*sic*] believed in the existence of the cowboy of romance, of the “deadwood Dick,” the “Alkali Ike,” “Deerfoot,” and “Uncas,” the “big, heap chief,” the prairie wagon, the beautiful young white girl carried off by a masterful, lank savage, the squaw, the papoose, the Indian village, and perhaps, the detachment of United States troops arriving just in time. Nothing easier. They should have them.

(“Exporting an Imaginary America to Make Money: Moving Picture Lovers in Foreign Cities prefer Indian and Cowboy Films to All Others.”  
*The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, section 1911).

Many of these properties – the article calls them “backgrounds”, the term frequently encountered in the trade press as well – are found in *Iola’s Promise*; the *Moving Picture World* review of the film points out that its “very backgrounds seem alive and full of atmosphere”. This is most evident in the Indian village scenes, for instance, directed with the flare for livid crowd scenes noticeable in a number of Griffith’s other 1912 Biographs. Aside from conventional huts, feathers, and “Indian” gestures, there is also a comic touch: the chief of the

tribe (or its medicine man) proudly wears a top hat, a trace of his previous trade – or raid – contacts with some rich white man.

In a different (more photographic than directorial) sense, “full of atmosphere” could also refer to Griffith’s manner of using smoke and dust as a natural screen to make shootings and chases more expressive – another technique much used in his 1912 shorts, to recall the showdown scene of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, for one example. To quote Kemp R. Niver’s reading of one of such moment in *Iola’s Promise*: “Griffith arranged to have a rifle fired upwind at the precise [moment] that he wanted the smoke to obliterate the scene for ten to twenty frames, just as today we use a fade to black from one scene to another to indicate an interval. When the smoke cleared, a completely different scene appeared on the screen” (Niver, p. 167). There are, indeed, various ways in which we sense that fades and nature (or discourse and diegesis, to use the theory language) tend to slip one into the other in Griffith’s 1912 films, if we compare Niver’s observation with its opposite in *The Mender of Nets*.

Like *Ramona* (that 1910 picture with Pickford cast as an Indian girl), *Iola’s Promise* includes a “distant view” on a massacre (though there the whites raid an Indian village, while here an Indian tribe raids a white man’s wagon). The shot is both horrifying and beautiful: we watch the raid from almost directly above, so that the circle of horsed Indians spinning around its target – the wagon they are shooting at – appears to be geometrically perfect. One difference between the *Ramona* “distant view” and this one is that here we see no one standing in that foreground watching the event; evidently, in 1912 Griffith did not think he needed any story motivation for a high-angle extreme long shot to appear credible.

Yuri Tsivian

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 THE GODDESS OF SAGEBRUSH GULCH
 

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*Filming date:* finished ca. January 1912

*Location:* California

*Release date:* 25 March 1912; reissued by Biograph, 30 October 1916

*Release length:* one reel

*Copyright date:* 23 March 1912

*Director:* D.W. Griffith

*Author:* none known

*Source:* none known

*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer

*Cast:* Blanche Sweet (*The Goddess*); Charles H. West (*Blue-Grass Pete*); Dorothy Bernard (*The sister*); Harry Hyde (*Prospector*); Charles Hill Mailes, W. Christy Cabanne, William Carroll (*Villains*); Alfred Paget, Charles Gorman, W.C. Robinson, Frank Opperman, Frank Evans (*Cowboys*); W. Chrystie Miller (*Old man*)

*Archival Sources:* Cinémathèque Québécoise, 16mm acetate positive (generation undetermined); Library of Congress, 35mm paper print; The Museum of Modern Art, 35mm nitrate negative; National Film and Television Archive, 35mm nitrate positive (tinted)

#### A STORY OF THE GOLDEN WEST

The Goddess, the prettiest and best natured girl that ever graced that little mining town, meets the tenderfoot prospector and leaves him another worshipper of her. His chances, however, are slim for Blue-grass Pete has won her affections, he having at an opportune moment saved her from the fangs of a snake which was about to attack her. Pete, however, is weak and is fascinated by the Goddess' sister, who visits her. He later gives the sister his savings to keep. The Goddess, heartbroken over the loss of her sweetheart, is now sure they will be married and determines to leave. Pete's pal, knowing of the girl having the savings, plans to steal them. The Goddess overhears the plot, but her sorrow having left her in a vengeful spirit, she makes no effort to secure aid. Later her better nature asserts itself, and securing aid, she and the miners arrive in time to save her sister from a horrible death, for Pete's pal had been recognized by the girl and had tied her to a post in the cabin. He and his companions had then made a hasty departure, forgetting a lighted cigarette which had fired the cabin, leaving the girl helpless amidst the raging flames.

*Biograph Bulletin*, March 25, 1912

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Though admired by many in the mining town in which she lives, the Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch falls in love with Blue-Grass Pete after he saves her from an attacking snake. All is well until her sister arrives on a visit and Pete's attention turns to this new woman from the city. Pete entrusts his savings with the sister, but a thief learns of this arrangement and plans to steal the money from the Goddess's cabin where Pete has hidden it. By now, the heartbroken Goddess has decided to leave the town, but as she departs, she comes upon the thief and his gang and overhears their plot. At first, she elects to allow the plan to go forward out of revenge, but thinks better of it and enlists the help of her admirers. Meanwhile, her sis-

ter has been beset upon by the robbers, who tie her up and then accidentally leave behind a smoking cigarette, which sets the cabin ablaze. Due to the Goddess's efforts, the sister is saved and the gang foiled. Pete remains with the sister, but a newly arrived prospector emerges as a possible beau for the Goddess.

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In the grouping of late 1911 films I wrote about for Volume 5 of *The Griffith Project*, the emphasis was on male weakness, epitomised by the title *Saved from Himself*. In this quintet of early 1912 Biographs, the focus has switched to women under pressure, though only occasionally do the female protagonists evince the moral frailty the male characters had demonstrated so consistently in films made just a few months earlier. The sisters struggling alone in the desert in *The Female of the Species* certainly falter in the face of rather imposing adversity, and Mary Pickford's character in *Fate's Interception* plots to have her boyfriend murdered when he leaves her for the demands of business (a decision she quickly regrets), but otherwise, the women in my group of entries for this volume are a fairly upstanding bunch. Not surprisingly, the more virtuous they prove to be, the more readily they are victimised: a wrongly suspected innocent suffers the wrath of the beleaguered sisters in *The Female of the Species*; the virtuous wife of a jealous landowner is threatened with death in *The Punishment*; and thieves bedevil the eponymous female telegrapher in *The Girl and Her Trust*. The heroine of *The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch* occupies a moral middle ground: Blanche Sweet is not the paragon of rectitude she will prove to be in *The Punishment*, but she doesn't descend to the depths of near-murderous rage Mary Pickford will experience in *Fate's Interception* either. Accordingly, she is neither the victim nor the oppressor; instead, she struggles with an apparently low-stakes ethical dilemma: should she alert her sister and ex-boyfriend (Blue-Grass Pete) to the news that thieves mean to rob them of his fortune? (Her judgment is clouded by the sorrow and jealousy she feels after he has jilted her for her more glamorous sister.) In electing to keep the information from the couple, the Goddess unwittingly allows her sister to become prey to a much greater danger when a cigarette butt from one of the thieves sets afire the cabin in which the sister is trapped.

*The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch* represents Griffith at his least moralistic: not only does the Goddess not know of the actual danger her sister faces, apparently her sister does not mean to lure the Goddess's boyfriend away either. Even the robbers lack culpability – they leave behind the lethal cigarette accidentally, though one of the robbers has reason to silence the sister, who recognises him as Pete's friend. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* critic refused to see this as artistic restraint in the portrayal of villainy, offering an alternative explanation: "Now this reviewer will bet a cookie, without knowing a thing about it, that this cigarette absurdity is a result of some restriction of the censorship half-wits. Probably the original story had the robbers set fire to the house, leaving the girl inside, but such an act in a picture, according to the infantile reasoning of the censorship sisters, would influence 20,000,000 picture spectators to hurry out and commit murder and arson" (April 3, 1912, p. 28).

Of course, the rationale for the sister's endangerment remains secondary to its execution and one must credit Griffith for still being able to devise situations where the spectator's emotional investment in the struggle of the rescuer informs the act of rescue. But because viewer knowledge supersedes that of the rescuing party in *The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch*, the emphasis switches from sharing the desperation to reach the victim in time to anxiety over whether the Goddess will elect to try to save her sister at all. In effect, the Goddess's ignorance of her sister's plight is crucial to the narrational strategy Griffith employs. Her decision to foil the thieves springs directly from guilt at acting selfishly: only the audience

knows of the greater danger until the moment the sister is saved. Thus, when the Goddess finally rushes to right a relatively minor moral transgression – initially, she seemed willing to permit the robbery to go forward – the viewer urges her on, aware her sister’s life depends upon the Goddess’s success.

If Griffith’s decision to limit the Goddess’s knowledge produces a slightly less charged rescue sequence, it permits greater emphasis on her moral dilemma, putting significant demands on his lead actress, Blanche Sweet. Leading up to the moment when she realises she must save her sister, Sweet has several scenes collectively designed to showcase a range of reactions and she employs the developing verisimilar performance style that had defined her breakthrough performances of 1911 in films such as *The Eternal Mother* and *The Long Road*. (Most telling is the moment when she flings her sister’s elaborate hat across the room in a rage, after discovering Pete has abandoned her for her more glamorous sibling. Griffith’s penchant for using an apt prop in these moments renders such actions more than just dramatic flourishes – a meaning-laden object can imbue the performance with a wealth of unspoken associations. Here the Goddess’s pent-up resentment of her sister’s urban sophistication surfaces in a seemingly spontaneous gesture directed toward her finery.) One can sense Griffith’s confidence in Sweet by examining the way he films the scene of her overhearing the crooks’s plan. He places her in a separate shot, framed with uncharacteristic closeness in a medium scale, so that the play of emotions, ranging from shock to unsettling delight, can register on her face. Griffith had used a similar approach for filming reaction shots of Sweet in 1911’s *The Battle*, but here the technique results in greater intensity, due in part to the actress’s steadily expanding range. Though *The Painted Lady* is still months away, one can see *The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch* as training for the rigours of that emotionally complex role.

Ultimately, however, *The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch* is a vehicle unworthy of its lead performer. It seems hastily conceived, with too many plot elements introduced in rapid succession (Pete, the sister, and the convenient but clumsily provided fallback love interest, the prospector, all make their initial appearances within a two-minute span). Moreover, the film’s last-minute rescue is one of Griffith’s sloppier efforts, full of flame and rushing figures, but lacking the precisely timed effects of contrast and tension his more compelling versions afford. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* reviewer found the film altogether too exhausting, signalling a growing trade press disenchantment with the accelerated pace of late-era Biograph one-reelers:

No matter how great and unapproachable a picture producer may be, he cannot afford to always strain after the sensational in an external endeavour to outdo himself, and that is what this picture appears to be. Life isn’t one constant crescendo of strenuous rush and turmoil[,] and drama, to have its most commanding effect in representing life, must have its proper means of repose. The soft pedal once in a while gives contrast even in the most robust music. It makes the crash sound louder when it does come. But with all the crash and no soft pedal – all tense energy and no repose, one must get into a fever of hysterics to be in sympathy with the artist. (April 3, 1912, p. 28)

If the cutting rate of *The Goddess of Sagebrush Gulch* raised the temperature of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* critic, Griffith’s next release, *The Girl and Her Trust*, should have brought him to a full boil.

Charlie Keil

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BIOGRAPH

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 THE GIRL AND HER TRUST
 

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*Filming date:* finished ca. January–February 1912

*Location:* California

*Release date:* 28 March 1912; reissued by Biograph, 17 September 1915

*Release length:* 998 feet

*Copyright date:* 28 March 1912

*Director:* D.W. Griffith

*Script:* George Hennessy [“The Silent Call”]

*Source:* *The Lonedale Operator*, released by Biograph, 23 March 1911

*Camera:* G.W. Bitzer

*Cast:* Dorothy Bernard (*Grace*); Wilfred Lucas (*Jack*); Alfred Paget, Charles Hill Mailes (*Tramps*); Charles H. West (*Telegrapher*); Robert Harron (*His companion*); W.C. Robinson (*Simple suitor*); W. Christy Cabanne (*Baggage handler*); William Carroll (*Engineer*); Charles Gorman (*Next to train*)

*Archival Sources:* Library of Congress, 35mm paper print; The Museum of Modern Art, 35mm nitrate negative; National Film and Television Archive, 35mm nitrate positive; UCLA Film and Television Archive, 16mm acetate positive (generation undetermined)

## SHE RISKS HER LIFE FOR IT

Grace, the operator at Hillville, is apprised of the fact that train No.7 will bring to her office \$2,000, consigned to the Simpson Construction Company. Jack, the station agent, offers to let her have his pistol, while he is away to lunch, but she scorns this, exclaiming “Danger? Why nothing ever happens in this slow place.” However, when the train arrives and the money is placed in the strong box, he again prevails upon her to take the pistol, but without success. Two tramps, who have come in on the bumpers, see the bag placed in the box, and regard this their great opportunity. Waiting until Jack has gone, they break in and make for the box. It is locked and they must have the key, so they try to get to the girl, who has locked herself in her office. This failing, they load the box on a handcar to take it away to blow it open. The girl, meanwhile, has telegraphed for aid, and realizing the tramps’ design, rushes out and throws herself in front of the handcar. The tramps drag her aboard and are off. They are soon pursued by an engine from the next station ahead, and here occurs, without exception, the most thrilling pursuit ever depicted.

*Biograph Bulletin*, March 28, 1912

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After a shipment of \$2,000.00 has been entrusted to her care at the railroad station where she works, Grace, the telegraph operator, finds herself set upon by tramps intent on stealing the money. She attempts to telegraph for help, but eventually the thieves cut the wires and then abscond with the locked strong box containing the funds. Grace pursues them and finds herself trapped on the handcar the robbers are using to make off with the money. Meanwhile, Grace’s message has prompted railroad personnel at another station to send an engine off in pursuit of the tramps. After a chase, the engine finally overcomes the handcar, and Grace and the money are saved.

Even if it were not a remake of *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), one of Griffith's most celebrated last-minute rescue films, *The Girl and Her Trust* would deserve special attention: first, it offers extensive tracking shots, a novelty for both Griffith at Biograph and filmmakers at most other companies at this time; second, it features the largest number of shots of any Griffith one-reeler, and, to my knowledge, of any 1000-foot American film made prior to 1914. These facts should not be divorced from the source material, as reliance on a railway setting promotes the preponderance of tracking shots, and *The Lonedale Operator* had already exceeded the cutting rate norm of 1911 to a substantial degree. Griffith must have realised that to mount this scenario again would require an even more intensified pace of alternation: what becomes especially interesting in a consideration of *The Girl and Her Trust* is how he refashions the material to not only expand the possibilities for involved editing patterns but also to invest the central romance with more resonance.

When comparing the two versions, what becomes immediately apparent is how Griffith has extended the action involving the thieves to move them (and Grace, the telegrapher) back outside the station after the initial robbery attempt, thereby involving a chase *on* the rails, not merely the rescuer arriving via train tracks, as in *The Lonedale Operator*. This alters the situation of the earlier film considerably. Whereas in the original the operator was trapped in the station, warding off the approach of the burglars, in *The Girl and Her Trust*, she drives them away successfully, causing them to use a handcar to escape with the money. This results in the operator confronting the thieves and eventually being taken upon the pursued vehicle, so that any effort to rescue the money will result in her salvation as well. (More than one commentator has remarked upon this conflation of the telegrapher's honour and the funds, a point I will return to later.) *The Lonedale Operator* begins with the operator on her way to work, meeting her erstwhile suitor, then leaving him behind to go inside the station, where she will remain for the balance of the film; *The Girl and Her Trust*, on the other hand, starts with the telegrapher already in the station, along with her suitor, who then departs, as will the operator when she elects to pursue the robbers. By reversing the flow of action in the latter film, Griffith expands the possibilities for increased kineticism: if *The Lonedale Operator* builds on the situation of films like *The Lonely Villa* (1909) by restricting the scope of a central interior action, then *The Girl and Her Trust* demonstrates how action can burst out from previously established spatial constraints and capitalise on a principle of ever-expanding movement. In fact, as Joyce Jesionowski has pointed out, 1912-era Biograph films tend to incorporate "two movements, which can generally be characterized by the spatial opposition closed:open and the narrative opposition siege:chase" (Jesionowski, 1987, p. 121).

By moving the action outside the station at a certain point, Griffith provides two climaxes for his remake where the original only featured one. In this portion of the film that most closely resembles *The Lonedale Operator*, the presence of the thieves poses a threat to the telegrapher, forcing her to defend herself. This culminates in her resourceful staging of a fake gunshot, which she affects by driving a bullet through a keyhole with scissors and a hammer. As Tom Gunning has pointed out, the depiction of this ruse "simply expands the motive for earlier close-ups – the enlargement of a narratively small detail – into a sequence. However, the close-ups no longer enlarge a single object such as Blanche Sweet's much more pragmatic monkey wrench, used for the same purpose in *The Lonedale Operator*, but portray a process. Because the process is so bizarre, its various stages need to be detailed in order to be understood. It becomes an analytical sequence, with almost seamless cutting on action from shot to shot, prefiguring later classical continuity" (Gunning, 1991, p. 265).

If this novelty sequence represents an elaboration of Griffith's earlier use of the explana-

tory cut-in (a device still concurrently employed in *Fate's Interception*), the second climax – the extended pursuit of the handcar by the train – similarly alters the conventional set-up of the last-minute rescue. In most of these pursuits, the agent of rescue rushes toward a fixed point, propelled by a temporal pressure, but certain of the location of the endangered party (a certainty shared by the spectator). In effect, these forms of the last-minute rescue allowed Griffith to establish a coherent geography when he combined easily identifiable salient aspects of the *mise-en-scène* and editing to emphasise directional consistency. Once Dorothy Bernard climbs onto the handcar in *The Girl and Her Trust*, a stable site for the rescue is abandoned: now, not only do the rescuers move through extensive exterior spaces, so do the pursued/victimised. Manipulating two mobile lines of narrative action requires considerably more ingenuity in the staging and alternating of the spaces involved, as the demands placed upon spectatorial comprehension increase in relation to the terrain covered.

Joyce Jesionowski has supplied a painstaking and intelligently framed analysis of the train pursuit, wherein she observes that “Griffith forms a relationship between the handcar and the train ... by matching their directions in alternating shots and matching their graphic sizes” (Jesionowski, 1987, p. 47). She concludes that “the film is a perfect example of Griffith’s use of varying subject-to-camera relationships in his Biograph period. Although there is a range of shots in this sequence, the spaces themselves are generally still discrete, and the variety of the shots is used to express the tensions of the relationship between the contending forces in the chase as a structure” (Jesionowski, 1987, p. 52). By 1912, Griffith’s decision to tackle the daunting logistical demands of a rescue involving two moving vehicles reflects his faith in the resources of editing to produce excitement and rhythm without sacrificing viewer understanding. The self-assurance of *The Girl and Her Trust* appears to have won over a trade press that had begun to question Biograph’s devotion to “rapidly alternating scenes”. *The Moving Picture World* declared the film superior to *The Lonedale Operator*, while *The New York Dramatic Mirror* took a cue from the *Biograph Bulletin*’s description by employing the adjective “thrilling” (not once but twice!) in its assessment of the film’s “exciting” chase: “The old story of the girl operator at the station, while thugs make an attack upon a consignment of money is given novel and thrilling treatment again, especially in the exceptional manner in which the suspense is managed, and the race between engine and hand car at the end” (April 3, 1912, p. 30).

However, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* critic also noted that Griffith’s skill was not restricted to his control of editing, when he extended praise to the performances: “For such a story the picture is managed with rare skill and not only is a series of thrilling events accumulating in rapid succession, but the human element has been permitted to enter by correct and natural interpretation on the part of the players” (Ibid.). Probably most impressive is the acting of Dorothy Bernard, who displays considerable comic ingenuity in her opening scenes as Grace, particularly when interacting with the humorously under-emotive W.C. Robinson as an unsuccessful suitor. While Robinson’s performance style is deliberately mannered, all slackness of jaw, near-catatonic movements and closed eyes, Bernard’s responses are delightfully loose, contributing to the impression of “natural” behaviour that companies like Biograph and Vitagraph were actively promoting as a basis for characterisation. Most noticeable is the muted nature of most of Bernard’s actions: her arms move very little because of the bottle and straw she holds while discouraging Robinson’s interest. Griffith’s facility with props as a way of developing performances that enhance a “diegetic effect” has been much remarked upon, but even so, the bit of business involving Bernard and the drink must be one of the director’s most inspired throwaway moments. Handed the bottle of soda pop and then a straw by the hapless suitor, she sips enthusiastically while he stands by helplessly, hoping for an invitation to share (actually, it’s difficult to ascertain exactly what his