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Carol Dempster in *That Royle Girl* (1925)

The Movies Mr. Griffith & Carol Dempster

Was D. W. Griffith *l'amour fou* of his second leading lady, Carol Dempster? Lillian Gish, step aside.

by John Dorr

Of the 26 feature films directed by D. W. Griffith after **Intolerance** (1916), Carol Dempster was the star of 11, while Lillian Gish was the star of 9. In Lillian Gish's recently published autobiography (which, curiously, is also being accepted as a valid biography of Griffith), there are four brief references to the existence of Carol Dempster. And now, Paul O'Dell, in his **Griffith and the Rise of Hollywood**, has managed to construct a history of Griffith's career without even a single reference to Miss Dempster! How can our contemporary film historians hope to be giving an accurate account of Griffith's career when they systematically ignore half of his output? The purpose of this essay is to give some long needed exposure to Griffith's heretofore neglected films and to the actress through whom Griffith expressed a whole other side to his artistic and personal preoccupations.

The point is not to compare Carol Dempster to Lillian Gish as an actress. Lillian Gish was probably the greatest actress of the silent film medium—a fact few would dispute. On the other hand, Carol Dempster, while rarely acclaimed as such, did develop into a formidable acting talent and, more important, an intriguing screen personality. Her presence on the screen has been as cruelly maligned as that of Marion Davies; and the proof of this point lies in the films themselves. The Griffith-Dempster collaborations are thus in desperate need of revaluation. Prints of all but one of these films **(That Royle Girl)** are known to exist.

But more important than the fact that Carol Dempster's career may have been eclipsed by history is the implication (implicit in the repeated emphasis of the

Griffith-Gish films) that Griffith's career apart from his collaborations with Lillian Gish was one of decline. It is Griffith's reputation that is suffering. His was a complex career on the highest level of artistic quest and accomplishment. Yet the traditional view of Griffith is of a director seriously limited in vision, of a man who stopped developing as an artist with the commercial failure of **Intolerance,** and of a psychology hopelessly retarded in Victorianism and unable to relate to post-World War I America. On the other hand, anyone who has ever seen **Isn't Life Wonderful** (1924) and **The Struggle** (1931) must realize that Griffith never ceased exploring the medium of which he is now termed the "father." It is time for film history to catch up with its first major artist.

The Origins of The Myth

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Regrettably, the villain of the piece is Lillian Gish. As one would expect from an actress, her vision of Griffith's career is more than a little prejudiced by her egocentricity. And, today, she has found that her reconstructed "memories" of the Griffith days are of great public interest. One cannot blame her for romanticizing a collaboration which produced such poetry as **True Heart Susie, A Romance of Happy Valley,** and **The Greatest Question.** Her stories of Griffith are beautiful, but they are stories, memorized, rehearsed, and told again and again by a weaver of beautiful fairy tales.

Nor is it Lillian Gish's fault that those who do claim to be historians accept her stories as history and her critical stance (gleaned from the taste-makers at the Museum of Modern Art) as truth. Ever since Lewis Jacobs (in 1939) referred to the greater body of Griffith's career as characterized by decline, film historians have been haplessly repeating this myth without paying Griffith the courtesy of actually viewing all his films.

It is perhaps important to realize how this attitude toward Griffith's career originated. At the time of the original releases of the films in question, they were **not** well received critically. In the 1920's, Griffith as seen as out-of-touch with the times; and his pictures after **Orphans of the Storm** (1922) were not largely successful from a commercial point-of-view. As in the case of Orson Welles today, Griffith's reputation was saddled by certain myths and prejudices (of both a personal and an artistic nature). He found himself the victim of the expectations that his earlier successes had crystallized in his audiences. The critics endlessly compared each new Griffith production to a previous success, as if Griffith's only interests were in repeating himself. Thus, **Dream Street** (1921) was termed an unsuccessful attempt to recreate **Broken Blossoms** (1919) and **America** (1924) an unsuccessful attempt to "top" the spectacle of **The Birth of a Nation.** It occurred to no one even in the 1920's that Griffith might be attempting something new.

As Griffith was almost universally recognized as the "master," he was always under pressure to prove his title. The public wanted spectacle (which DeMille was always happy to supply); but Griffith, having already created the ultimate in spectacle, was moving on to other things. It should be noted that even a film like **True Heart Susie,** today acclaimed as a masterpiece, was almost immediately forgotten after its initial release because it did not contain the spectacle that was expected of Griffith by his audience. So contemporary opinion was not with Griffith in the 1920's.

But another factor has been working against an unbiased vision of Griffith's career, and this too originated in the 1920's. Here we get into that nasty, but fascinating, underside of art history, the personal side of the story. Lillian Gish had worked with Griffith since 1912 and was firmly established as an integral part of the "Griffith family" – that loyal following of actors, technicians, craftsmen, and artists who had been born through Griffith's genius and who followed him from company to company happy for each new opportunity to be associated with a production of the great man. The nature of Gish's personal relationship to Griffith has been the subject of much conjecture and much silence. Somewhat more is known of Griffith's relationship with Carol Dempster. He was in love with her and obsessed with her; and as this fact became increasingly apparent, Lillian Gish became increasingly interested in becoming an autonomous artist.

Dempster was not popular with the Griffith family. She was anything but reserved. She threw tantrums on the set and, one can believe, used every trick of liberated 1920's feminism to tantalize old D.W. In addition, she was a dancer; and Griffith loved to dance. Through Carol Dempster, Griffith developed his own vision of the "new woman" – perverse, unpredictable, exciting. Griffith saw the 1920's through his association with Dempster. Through Lillian Gish he saw the world that was no more, the misty recollections of uncomplicated heroines and moral stability. By the early 1920's, it was the Dempster world vision that had won a hold on Griffith's affections.

Thus the jealousy of a woman spurned enters the picture. And Lillian Gish was not without influence. Hardly the demure, helpless and frail virgin that our stereotype of the character now implies, Gish had a strength and ambition that was (and is) to be reckoned with. This strength was always rather evident on the screen. In **The Greatest Question** (1919), for instance, one almost feels that the two villains who are threatening Gish are in more physical danger than the innocent girl. Gish is a survivor, and she is with us today to prove that fact. Carol Dempster was never much concerned with her place in history; and today she lives in quiet wealth in La Jolla, oblivious to the past and its distortions.

Mae Marsh (while happily reminiscing over a scene she had stolen from Dempster in **The White Rose**) suggested:

> I think Carol was more of a dancer than she was an actress. I don't think she was a good actress, but you could say she was a dedicated person who studied acting.

Lillian Gish's only critical reference to Dempster was as "ambitious."

Above: Robert Harron and Carol Dempster in *The Girl Who Stayed at Home* (1919).
Below: Eugenie Besserer, Richard Barthelmess and Carol Dempster in *Scarlet Days* (1919)

Whatever the case, when Griffith lost control of his own productions and was too busy being harassed by unsympathetic studio officials (at Paramount) to give Dempster the attention she required, she found a new romantic interest, married him, and unceremoniously retired from acting. Years later when Griffith would screen his old pictures for "family" reunions, it was evidently a favorite sport to make jokes about the Dempster performances. It is the ability (and art) of friends to turn personal losses (Griffith's love for Dempster) into gentle jokes. But it is unfortunate that Griffith's work with Dempster had to be minimized in the process.

In a newspaper article of May 21, 1926, Lillian Gish discussed Griffith's loss of independence and cited his financial plight as the reason she was no longer working with him. She reported how he was then "toiling in commercial chains" and appraised his recent work by stating:

> He is now making potboilers for the mob, and asking himself whether each scene that he produces will please mob taste.
>
> Mr. Griffith was always having to borrow money at high rates of interest in order to carry on. The cinema industry, jealous of his fame, would not finance him. This load of mortage, gradually increasing, finally broke his stand for independence.

Inasmuch as Griffith was, at this time, turning out some of his finest work and, indeed, struggling to finance further work, this kind of post-mortem gossip was not very helpful to his career. This article is on file in the collection of letters and papers which Griffith deposited with the Museum of Modern Art. Attached to the clipping is a note from a well-wisher suggesting that "some of the statements are untrue and ought to be contradicted." But they never were contradicted, and thus began the myth of Griffith's decline.

John Dorr, a graduate student at UCLA, is writing a book on D. W. Griffith.

Life is Not Always What It Seems

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Carol Dempster first came to Griffith's attention as a dancer. As a member of the Ruth St. Denis troupe, she performed exotic dances somewhere in the huge Babylonian set of **Intolerance**. When Griffith started using Dempster for bit parts in his Artcraft series, it was on this point of knowledge (that she was a dancer) that her casting depended. Her early appearances in this capacity have a certain delightful humour to them viewed with the hindsight of the importance she was later to play.

In **Romance of Happy Valley**, she is seen in one shot as a New York girl urging Bobby Harron to abandon his labors and go out dancing. "Come on—we're going stepping!" He refuses. In **True Heart Susie**, she is one of Clarine Seymour's wild and irresponsible friends—always dancing. In the last reel, she supplies the information that releases Harron from a death-bed promise never to remarry. Even in her first featured role in **The Girl Who Stayed at Home**, Dempster is called upon to "display her amateur talents" by entertaining her society friends with an exotic dance.

Dempster's first two featured roles were in **The Girl Who Stayed at Home** and **Scarlet Days**, both released in 1919. They were minor Griffith pictures when compared to his "Kentucky Trilogy" **(A Romance of Happy Valley, True Heart Susie**, and **The Greatest Question)** released the same year and featuring a disarming Lillian Gish at her height both as an actress and as a screen presence. Obviously, Griffith was then much more involved with the Gish characters than the Dempster characters; and if this had been as far as the Dempster persona had developed, critics would have had good cause to sigh, "Love is blind," and be a little embarrassed for the old master.

In **The Girl Who Stayed at Home**, Dempster was cast as a Lillian Gish type—sweet, innocent and cloying. She was counterbalanced by bouncy Clarine Seymour who more closely followed the Dorothy Gish prototype. Griffith had often used the device of two heroines, one active and one passive, to embody his two visions of pre-war feminity. Dempster and Seymour were to be the second line counterparts to Lillian and Dorothy.

Since Clarine Seymour was heir apparent to the "Little Disturber" (Dorothy Gish) roles, Carol Dempster was assigned the polar characterization of the quiet, sensitive virgin—a part in which she was neither comfortable nor convincing. Particularly in **The Girl Who Stayed at Home**, it becomes clear that Dempster lacked the innate intelligence and taste that lay behind, and gave credence to, Lillian Gish's embodiments of innocence. Carol Dempster as "innocence" was merely dull.

In **Scarlet Days**, however, Dempster is curiously reminiscent of the kind of heroine that used to populate the comedies of Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. She was innocent, but also rather pleasantly and convincingly mindless—a Southern belle. In Dempster as the heroine and in big, gawky Ralph Graves as the hero, Griffith had strange perversions of the "girl from the East" and the "silent cowboy" stereotypes that already were accepted in silent westerns. Here Griffith plays them for comedy. Later, in **Dream Street**, he again casts Dempster opposite Graves, but plays them for melodrama. Then a decidedly neurotic element enters Griffith's cinema.

But in **Scarlet Days**, innocence has not yet been corrupted by society; and dumb characters can provide happy divertissement. Graves, as the naive strongman, displays ridiculous frontier non-etiquette. When he reads poetry to Dempster, it is as if he were calling the play-by-play of a football game. But she, in turn, is so dense and unsophisticated that she is impressed. Later, hiding in the basement for safety, Dempster laughs stupidly—a nervous perversion of Mae Marsh's famous scene in **The Birth of a Nation**. Sanity in **Scarlet Days** is provided by Richard Barthelmess as a bandit and Clarine Seymour as a Mexican girl.

Both Carol Dempster and Clarine Seymour had their first "solo" vehicles in the First National series of the next year (released in 1920). Clarine Seymour played a Dorothy Gish part in **The Idol Dancer**. But Carol Dempster's role in **The Love Flower** was clearly and uniquely tailored to Carol Dempster. Here, Dempster displays the boyish athletic energy of a Dorothy Gish prototype, but unlike previous Griffith leading ladies, the line between heroine and villainess becomes clouded. If the moral distinctions in the historical pageantry of **The Fall of Babylon** were somewhat unclear, Constance Talmadge's "Mountain Girl" (another Dorothy Gish prototype) was granted the audience's approbation without much question because of her loyalty to Belshazzar. But Carol Dempster's murderous determination to save her father in the more contemporary setting of **The Love Flower** is more difficult to accommodate into the moral system of, say, the Lillian Gish features.

There is often a tension between Griffith's declared morality and that which he actually expresses in his narratives. The opening titles of **The Love Flower** ask "How many crimes committed in the name of love by women are condoned?" The film then relishes Dempster's several attempts at murder and apparently approves of her motivations. She is never punished, as the sinners are so often punished in DeMille's films. Like DeMille, Griffith did not necessarily practice what he preached. But Griffith could be more honest in his intentions and was certainly less self-righteous than DeMille. One is reminded more of King Vidor's studies of feminine evil in **Ruby Gentry** and **Duel in the Sun**. Carol Dempster's innocence is more the tainted and dangerous innocence of Jennifer Jones. Her loves are more passionate than tender.

The Love Flower is the first of a series of films which not only had Carol Dempster in the lead, but which today can be seen as Griffith's conscious attempts to come to creative terms with this often inscrutable woman who had become his private and public obsession. Dempster had a perverse complexity that escaped the average viewer. Yet that perverse complexity was the subject of at least three of Griffith's strangest films: **The Love Flower, Dream Street** and **That Royle Girl**. One is reminded of the Ingrid Bergman-Roberto Rossellini series of cosmic definitions of womanhood in the 1950's—that were similarly misunderstood and dismissed by public and critics alike.

Particularly in **The Love Flower** and **Dream Street**, there is an urgency in the direction, as if Griffith were struggling to find an answer to discover a new moral system in which such as Dempster might be rendered less dangerous. Here she ruled, potentially lethal, yet erotic and demanding. Here Griffith stands in awe of his own creation. There is an air of neurotic anarchy in his treatment of this woman.

The plot of **The Love Flower** concerns a girl who has grown up on a small island with her father, a fugitive from the law. She meets a sailor (Richard Barthelemess) who falls in love with her. But simultaneously, another man arrives on the island to arrest the father. The greater part of the film follows Dempster's various attempts to kill this second intruder.

The film succeeds best in providing a context for Dempster to display her physical prowess in much the same manner as Douglas Fairbanks. We see her diving from a high cliff, swimming underwater (in a low-cut bathing suit), paddling a canoe, performing gymnastics on a rope bridge over a gorge, etc. Griffith uses no process shots or stand-ins for these scenes. He lovingly photographs Dempster against breathtaking seascapes reminiscent of Winslow Homer or in classical compositions reminiscent of Jacques Louis David. Dempster has a startling physical presence and an expressive body. Only when Griffith sets her against a black backdrop for close-up reaction shots do we become aware of the fact that she has yet to master the more subtle facial requisites of the silent actress. These long-held close shots had been Lillian Gish's forte, but Dempster had not yet developed the skills necessary to sustain such inhibiting observation.

The most startling aspect of **The Love Flower** is in its departure from the moral universe of previous Griffith films. Love-hate relationships replace the pure love of pre-war simplicity. If Griffith's earlier heroines had modeled their mannerisms on birds and domesticated animals, here Dempster is a wild animal, a predator. She sinks Barthelmess's boat with a hatchet, drops rocks on the detective, and later tries to drown the detective pretending she is a giant octopus. And Barthelmess has masochistic overtones, laughing with erotic pleasure when Dempster slaps him. He is attracted to her danger much as Sean Connery is attracted to Tippi Hedren in Hitchcock's **Marnie**.

Thus an ambiguity enters Griffith's themes. There is no longer a sense of black and white morality. The heroine is also the villainess. Gone is the moral stability of the Lillian Gish pictures. And thus begins Griffith's exploration of the Dempster psychology.

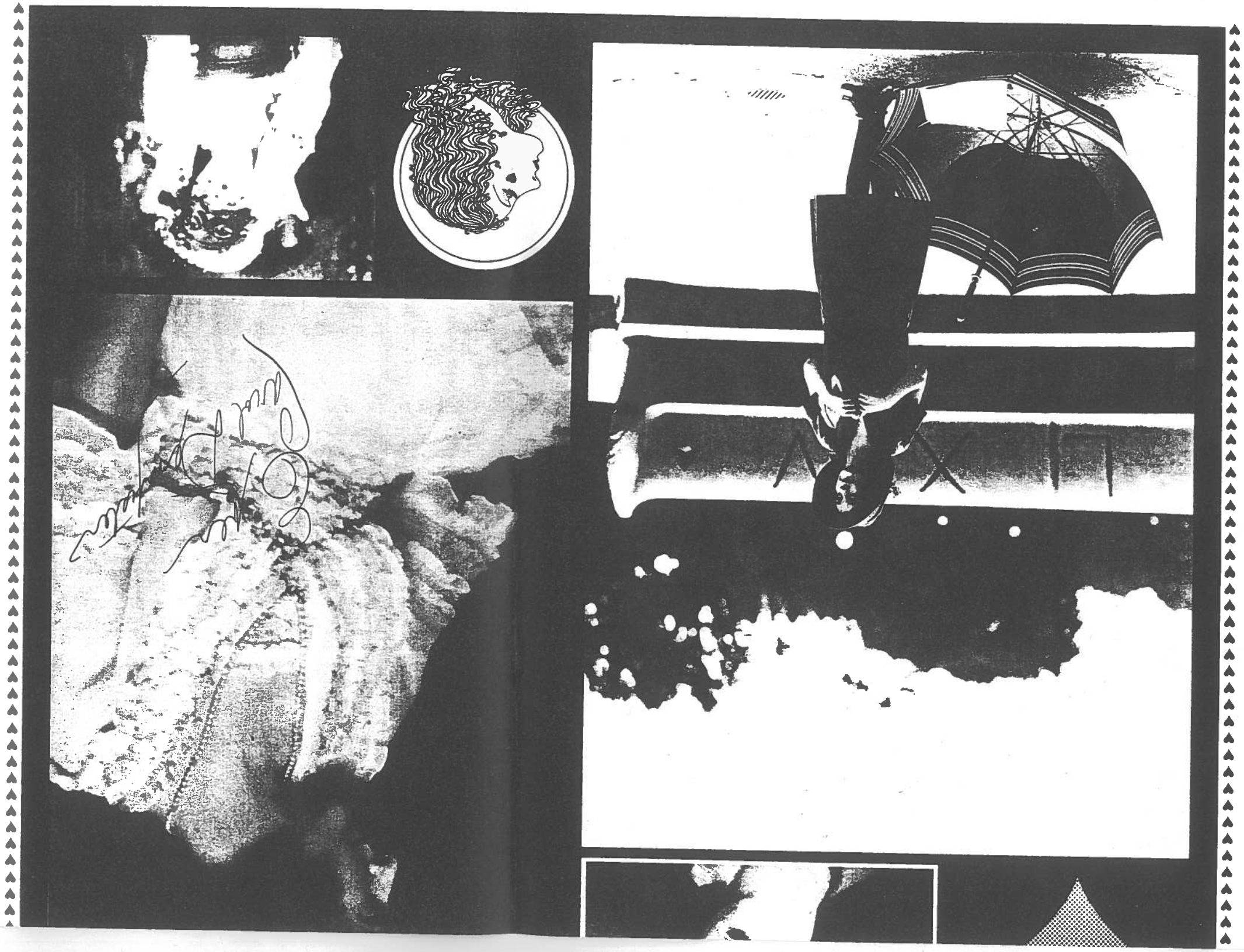
It is now possible to see **Way Down East** (1920) and **Orphans of the Storm** (1921) as traditional pictures made by a director whose creative fantasies were already moving on into new areas. **Way Down East** is the culmination of the moral values of the Kentucky Trilogy, and **Orphans of the Storm** is a throwback to earlier problems of spectacle and narration. They are also Griffith's last two Gish vehicles and were successful in the way that big, safe, traditional, and well-told narratives have always been successful. These films called for the bringing together of all that Griffith had learned in the past. **The Love Flower** and **Dream Street**, however, were expressive excursions into new subject matter and new moral and aesthetic challenges.

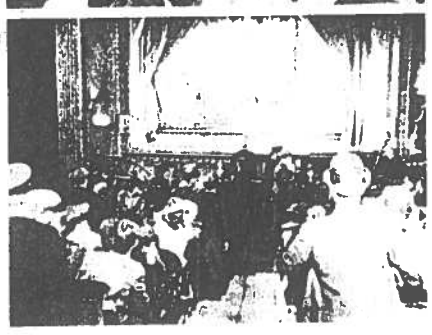
Griffith was no longer interested in spectacle except as a box office guarantee. There is every indication that, on a personal level, his interest in spectacle had died with the financial failure of **Intolerance** (1916). In **Film Form**, Sergei Eisenstein speaks of the "intimate" (as opposed to spectacular) Griffith films and recalls how Griffith had told him, "They were made for myself and were invariably rejected by the exhibitors."

Thus it was not Griffith who was limited in his stories and his outlook; it was the critics who were limited in their vision of Griffith. Herein lies the danger of classifying great directors. One could see **The Birth of a Nation, Way Down East**, and **Orphans of the Storm** and make certain generalizations as to what was "a Griffith picture." But when Griffith made films that did not fit these standards or fulfill these expectations, critics chose to dismiss the works as unsuccessful by their old standards rather than re-examine those standards. Just as all Hawks films are not about professionalism and all Ford films are not westerns, neither were all Griffith films about Lillian Gish and the imminence of rape.

Carol Dempster in *The Love Flower* (1920)

Top left: Ricardo Cortez and Carol Dempster in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926)
Top right: more scenes from *Sorrows of Satan*
Center right: an autographed publicity still.
Center: Dempster in *Dream Street* (1921).
Lower right: Dempster in *The White Rose* (1923)
Lower left: Dempster in *That Royle Girl* (1925)





Dream Street (1921), Griffith's second major vehicle for Carol Dempster, was billed as having been based on two stories by Thomas Burke, author of **Broken Blossoms.** Consequently, it was assumed by contemporary critics that Griffith was trying to repeat the success of his earlier triumph. But this assumption is far from the truth. **Dream Street** is not meant to be poetry, but nightmare.

In **The Love Flower,** Griffith had isolated the Dempster character on an island and observed her free from the moral restraints of society. In **Dream Street,** Griffith places her in the context of a society, but it is a closely controlled dream world society abstracted both from reality and from the 1920's. For Griffith, **Dream Street** is a further step into an almost neurotic expressionism. The violent, erotic, and nightmarish world of **Dream Street,** far from the poetic, idealized world of **Broken Blossoms,** seems a projection of the Dempster character on to the whole world in which she moves. Visually, Griffith retains the conventions of his earlier films. The distortions are not visually externalized (as in German expressionism), but lie in the psychologies of the characters and the eccentricities of the narration.

It should be noted that the entire film is shot on sets. There is none of the naturalism, none of the beautiful exteriors that had graced Griffith's earlier films. Gloomy city streets are effused with fog and darkness—a setting we are later to accept as the standard horror film environment.

For if **Dream Street** belongs to any genre it is the horror film. It is characterized by expressive, unsettling, and extreme melodrama, complete with symbolic personifications of Good and Evil. As the opening titles explain:

> There are two influences in the play—the force of Good, which is merely Conscience, represented by a preacher in the streets (and) the opposing force, Temptation to Evil, which is represented by a violin player—a trickster of the streets.

These two forces never enter into the narrative actively, but drift through the streets exerting unseen influences on the characters. The preacher is pictured standing in the midst of blank-faced listeners with eyes glazed in beatific trances. Says the preacher:

> Life is not always what it seems.
> It's but a thing made out of dreams.
> So make pure and sweet the dreams.

In **Dream Street,** indeed, life is not always what it seems. The personification of evil is a masked violinist. And beneath the violinist's "sensually beautiful mask of evil" lies a monster any horror movie would be proud of. The mask itself is one of flawless youth frozen in perfection like the face of Dorian Gray. When the violinist slowly raises his mask, our anticipation of the horrors beneath is heightened by an outpouring of smoke that turns out to be a cigarette, but which is more indicative of Satan himself. So Evil lies behind beauty! How far we have moved from the simple morality of the Gish films.

The division between good and evil is clear only in these two personifications. The rest is all ambiguity. The characters themselves never seem to understand their own motivations, nor have any control over them. In one scene, a character literally runs from one window out which he can see the violinist to another where he can see the preacher—all in the agony of trying to make a moral decision. One can see that the task of making pure and sweet one's dreams is no easy matter.

In many ways, **Dream Street** is a continuation of the Carol Dempster character from **The Love Flower.** Here she plays Gypsy, who is described in a title as "gentle, brave, and gay, swift and restless as a bird, vivid with an heritage of Southern blood." Again Griffith emphasizes the animal freedom and moral anarchy basic to the character. And, again, she is a dancer—"a member of a minor dancing troupe." Gypsy dances a dance of emotional defiance in reaction to the most threatening scenes in the film. Early in the film, when her father dies, Gypsy dances around his death bed (cf. **Written on the Wind).** Later, she again dances a mocking reply when a policeman informs her that her boyfriend may be a murderer.

But her most violent and ludicrous dance comes on the occasion of a theater fire and an ensuing panic in the audience. Gypsy volunteers to calm the audience by dancing. Griffith intercuts between the chaos in the audience and the chaos of Gypsy's dance. The audience calms down. There is no rational logic to this scene; but there is an abstract, emotional logic of a kind that marks the greatest moments of high melodrama. Close shots of the reality of people being crushed in the audience are intercut with long shots of the unreality of Dempster's dance. By comparison of the two shots, Dempster's movement within the large frame is anarchy, while the riot, in close-up, is defined and confined. Dempster is more out of control than the riot; thus the riot, in contrast, becomes controlled. It is a daring and unsettling scene—unsettling emotionally, like a nightmare, and also unsettling in a moral sense.

In the audience are two brothers (Ralph Graves and Charles Emmett Mack) They applaud Gypsy for her courage. Then, with Gypsy, they form one of the most bizarre menages a trois in film history. Graves, as pointed out earlier, is big and stupid

and demonstrates his love for Gypsy in heavy-handed, bullying ways. She flirts with him in an ambiguous and, at times, surreal courtship. Mack, the younger brother (and an excellent actor), is also in love with Gypsy. But he, in addition to being dim-minded, is also pathologically insane. In the course of the film, he commits a murder, only to be freed at the end after lying to a court that it was self-defense. That he is lying is not indicated in the titles. One only becomes aware of the fact by observing the discrepancies in his flash-back confession compared with the facts as we have seen them earlier in the film.

A happy-ending epilogue has the two brothers and Gypsy dancing off together arm-in-arm, then pictured as a happy household with Gypsy playing with a baby (whose?) Such scenes of familial bliss had closed many previous Griffith films as a sign of peace and idealism regained. Here, the implications are less healthy. Thus the whole film becomes a perversion of earlier Griffith films and situations. The brother is insane and quite capable of killing again, yet we are happy to have him free as he has been set up as a sympathetic character. Griffith is playing with our expectations (and our blind acceptance of conventions) much as Hitchcock would later do. No one is quite what they seem. The final title suggests:

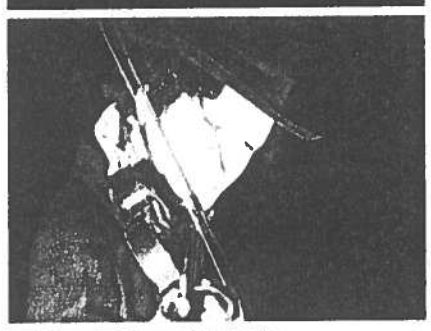
> Sometimes dreams do come true. Not by accident, their dark path emerges into the light. For dreams are of our inner selves, and perhaps all would come true if we but dream aright.

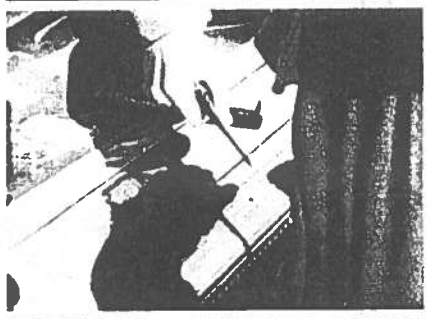
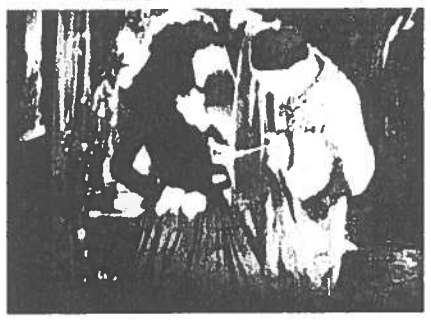
The psychological and metaphysical implications of this film should alter our assumptions about Griffith's intellectual limitations and also the assumed limitations that many historians claim are inherent in the silent film form. Griffith draws characters of psychological complexity without the aid of dialogue, then goes one step further in attempting to visualize the conflicts of their inner selves. In visualizing the world of dreams without resorting to the conventions of visual distortion, Griffith fails only in adequately preparing his audience for this transition into expressionism; and we are forced once again to remember that all art is a play of truth and illusion.

Dream Street was a commercial failure despite the fact that Griffith put all his prestige behind it to present it as a major film. For the New York opening, Griffith even experimented with an early synchronized sound device, only to discard it for other openings. Today, it is still easier for many audiences simply to dismiss the film instead of pursuing the difficulties of its perversity and surrealism. Griffith was tackling the question of the nature of corruption, whereas his previous films had dealt with the nature of innocence.

As in **Broken Blossoms,** there is a Chinese character in **Dream Street** who has designs on the white heroine. Griffith had been applauded for the audacity and beauty with which he had pictured an inter-racial love in **Broken Blossoms.** But here, the Chinese is corrupt, an eerie forerunner of Fu Manchu. A title explains that Sway Wan was once more idealistic, but had fallen on evil ways. Perhaps he is a projection of what might have become of Richard Barthelmess's "Chink." When Sway Wan gets Gypsy into his lecher's den (a perversion of the idyllic bedroom in **Broken Blossoms),** he appears with menacing claw-like hands reminiscent of Murnau's **Nosferatu.** But it is Gypsy's uncaring racism that has provoked (and enticed) Sway Wan; as she treats him with contempt. As was the case with Lillian Gish in **The Greatest Question,** one wonders who is in the greater danger – Gypsy or Sway Wan. Gypsy pulls a knife on him to escape his clutches; and the close-up insert of the concealed weapon is brutally more lethal in its hard realism than the more expressive and exotic medium shots of Sway Wan's fetishism.





Scenes from *Dream Street* (1921).
Above right: Morgan Wallace as The Masked Violinist.
Above left: Edward Peil as Swan Wan lusts after Dempster.

Scenes from *Dream Street* (1921). Opposite page above left and first column: the dance hall sequence.
Opposite page above right:
Charles Emmett Mack and Ralph Graves.

4 *A Note of Humanity*

After **Orphans of the Storm** and Lillian Gish's departure into independent production, Griffith featured Dempster in his next seven films – perhaps less out of personal obsession and more the result of his gradual success in developing Dempster into a viable and versatile screen actress. Griffith had always seemed acutely aware of the potentials and limitations of his actresses. While both Gish and Dempster were simultaneously under contract, they were each featured in films designed uniquely to their capabilities. Dempster could never have played the Gish roles in **Way Down East** or **Orphans of the Storm,** but neither could Gish have played the Dempster roles in **The Love Flower** or **Dream Street.** Dempster's initial deficiencies as an actress were no drawback in these films, but neither was Griffith blind to these deficiencies. After Gish's departure, Dempster was not immediately given a role in which her acting would have to carry a film. In **One Exciting Night, The White Rose,** and **America,** Griffith focused on other elements and other performers, giving Dempster three opportunities to develop her acting skills while safely out of the spotlight.

In **One Exciting Night** (1922), Griffith seems more concerned with the mechanics of a new genre, the murder-mystery thriller, than with the peculiarities of his heroine. The story was written by Griffith himself, and one can imagine his desire simply to have fun with a light-weight subject for a change. As in Hitchcock's chase films, the director excuses himself from seriousness and is allowed to play, freed of the usual demands of credibility. This film enjoys the lowest reputation of any of Griffith's features, although it has one enthusiastic defender in René Clair (in his **Reflections on the Cinema).**

However, there are indications that Griffith is looking beyond the mechanisms of the mystery genre to the metaphysical questions of the mystery of life. Griffith's opening titles for **One Exciting Night,** while florid, do reflect changing philosophies and preoccupations:

> The mystery of Passion; unruly, devouring,
> That has destroyed kingdoms, slain it's millions –
> The mystery of Love, the sweetest of all mysteries,

Below: *One Exciting Night* (1922)

Without which there would be no light, no music –
The mystery of Greed – the mystery of Fear –
In short, the mystery of Life itself,
Which someone has said is even greater than
The mystery of Death.

Indeed, this is Griffith's most chaotic narrative, a tangle of burlesque and suspense which is resolved only in the anarchy of a last reel hurricane. Griffith seems to be purposely complicating his narrative with a conglomeration of plot devices and improbable characters. It is an affirmation of life, embracing confusion over comprehension – which perhaps is the source of René Clair's affection.

Caught up in this confusion (or is she the source of it?) is Carol Dempster as the much-menaced heroine. But Dempster seems to be taken no more seriously than the clutching hands, sliding panels, threatening shadows, and other elements that clutter the story. These are elements reminiscent of many of Griffith's Biograph one-reelers (e.g., **The Lonely Villa**), where Griffith had long ago perfected these plot devices and the narrative vocabulary of suspense via editing. In all, it seems a happy respite from the obsession that motivated **The Love Flower** and **Dream Street**.

In **The White Rose** (1923), Griffith turned to one of his favorite actresses from earlier days, Mae Marsh, for the lead, while Carol Dempster had a subsidiary and more sedate role. In tone, **The White Rose** is calmer and simpler, more aligned with the Kentucky Trilogy than the Dempster perversions. Mae Marsh plays a girl of the old tradition, an orphan, whose conversion to 1920's mannerisms is played first for comedy, then for tragedy, against beautifully composed Louisiana exteriors. Griffith seems to be looking back wistfully to simpler times that are now hopelessly gone. A title reads:

Can you restore the color to the faded rose?
What's done is done.
All your tears will undo no wrong.
All your grief brings back no yesterday.

Dempster plays a moneyed society girl, a bland part, no match for Mae Marsh's delightful "Teazie"; and they appear in only one scene together. At a society ball, however, Griffith does include a scene where the ever elusive Dempster slowly lifts a mask from her face.

Griffith is always being accused of having no business sense, and yet, knowing that spectacles made money, throughout his career he consistently would return to big pictures to pay his bills. His real interests were usually elsewhere. In a letter to Robert Sherwood thanking him for his interest in **The White Rose**, Griffith wrote:

It was not hypnotism, but long and careful work in its making that made **The White Rose** affect you as it did. The story was rehearsed for weeks before a scene was taken. The time generally spent on mobs and big sets was spent in striving to bring out a note of humanity.

The critics rejected Griffith's interest in humanity and accused him of living in the past. Thus, in his next film, **America** (1924), Griffith was back to mobs and big sets and the business of paying bills. Although Carol Dempster again has the female lead, she is not the primary subject of this film – which is more interesting for its scope than its personal drama. Dempster is fully adequate for the part though it has little do with her own personality. As usual, she is more convincing in her active melodramatic scenes than in the more formal love scenes.

But in Griffith's next film, **Isn't Life Wonderful** (1924), Carol Dempster re-emerges as an accomplished actress in a demanding role. Now it is Griffith who is in full control of his actress, with his actress living up fully to his demands. Furthermore, Dempster's character now has the charm that it lacked in earlier films, as if perversion had softened into eccentricity.

Isn't Life Wonderful is one of Griffith's greatest achievements and a landmark film in his career. In the setting of the economic and social chaos of post-war Germany (the conditions which had led to the evolution of abstract expressionism as its national aesthetic correlative), Griffith evokes a poetic realism which looks back neither to the pre-war naivete of the Gish pictures nor to the expressive neurosis of the early Dempster pictures. The context of social realism is predated by such Biograph subjects as **A Corner in Wheat** and by the Modern sequence of **Intolerance**, and itself predates Griffith's last film, **The Struggle**, and, to an extent, Italian Neorealism.

Of course, it is a mistake to think of either **Isn't Life Wonderful** or **The Struggle** strictly in terms of social comment. Social comment was never foremost in Griffith's mind, a fact that has led many people to accuse him of social myopia. If Griffith chose history as his context, it was always for the dramatic potential of history, not the social. In fact, an opening title of **Isn't Life Wonderful** insists that Griffth's theme is the all-conquering power of love and that the setting of post-war Germany was chosen solely to illustrate this theme.

Isn't Life Wonderful is the first of four essentially contemporary pictures in which Griffith moved beyond the dramatic conventions of his own past, yet avoided betraying his own idealistic vision of reality. **Isn't Life Wonderful, Sally of the Sawdust, That Royle Girl,** and **The Sorrows of Satan,** all made during a period in which Griffith was facing burdensome financial and administrative problems as a producer, are perfectly controlled and non-neurotic consolidations of a new vision that had seemed to develop simultaneously with his stabilizing of personal relationships with his leading actress. If **The Love Flower** and **Dream Street** were new beginnings for Griffith, and **One Exciting Night, The White Rose,** and **America** transitional films looking backward to earlier dramatic conventions, the last four Dempster films find Griffith confident and productive in a new phase of his career. Lillian Gish now belonged to a romantic past, while Carol Dempster braved a difficult present.

It would be deceptive to consider **Isn't Life Wonderful** simply as a vehicle for Carol Dempster in the sense that **Way Down East,** for instance, was a vehicle for Gish. Both pictures make great demands upon their actresses, but here Griffith's vision has matured to a point where he is more concerned with universalizing his basic themes than with showcasing the personifications of his personal obsessions. Dempster works only for the good of the picture, receptive to the exacting control of her director in much the same way as Kim Novak and Tippi Hedren were ideally receptive to the direction of Alfred Hitchcock in his more serious later films.

For with **Isn't Life Wonderful,** Griffith has grown beyond the perfected melodramatic narrative with which he had previously thrilled his audiences. This film is a more carefully and deeply felt expression of the kinds of metaphysical truths that had always been at the basis of Griffith's art. As a film of ideas, **Intolerance** had been marred not by the truth of Griffith's intellectual perceptions, but by the depth to which he had developed and expressed these perceptions. His themes in his earlier films had appeared simplistic, as they were exposed only in the surface of his titles and acted out in the pageant of his narrative. Beginning with **Isn't Life Wonderful,** Griffith is actively exploring his themes through the narrative. His vision is less verbalized and more deeply felt. The question of "Isn't life wonderful" is, after all, the essential question of all metaphysics; and here Griffith is putting to a series of difficult tests his faith in the basic optimism of existence. As the post-war depression strikes deeper and deeper into the every day existence of his characters, they return again and again, each time more triumphant in defeat, with their insistent affirmation of the beauty of life: "Oh, isn't life WONDERFUL!"

Given the total insistence of his theme, one must assume that Griffith, at this point in his career, had reached a new plateau of emotional stability such that he could express such an incredible affirmation of life. That he chose the most depressed society in the world at that time as his context is an indication of the depths to which this conviction ran. Personally, he was in the midst of a totally heartbreaking situation. His finances had reached a point where he had had to give up independent production, sell his studios at Mamaroneck, lose the services of the many technicians, artists, and other employees with whom he was used to working, and become a salaried, supervised director for Famous Players – Lasky (Paramount) in New York. Griffith knew all this was coming. He also knew that critically his reputation had deteriorated seriously. Thus, one can see why this desperate affirmation of life must have been vitally felt by Griffith himself (and not mere rhetoric as in **Intolerance**), and why individual courage and bravery would become more important to him than the idealized contemplation that easier times had made possible.

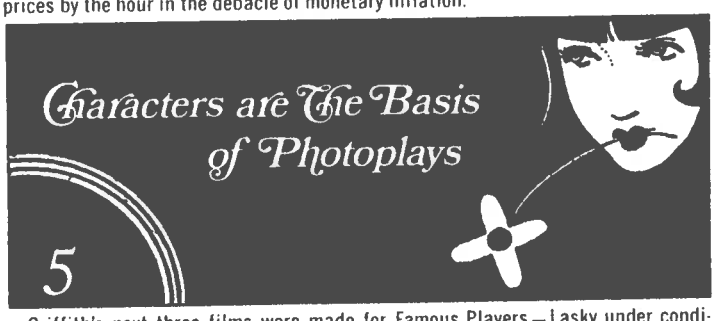
Consequently, we find new maturity and conviction in the character of Carol Dempster. The Dempster of **Dream Street** had been reckless and uncaring, grabbing at life. Lillian Gish had always been somehow more passive, with the strength of old convictions and the virtue of being able to wait – forever if necessary – for the natural power of good to win out. But the quiet virtues of waiting for one's guaranteed reward for an honest life were quickly being made impractical by the insistent realities of post-war life.

Thus we begin to understand what Griffith was seeing in Carol Dempster even as early as 1920. She was a fighter in the best tradition of the active American hero – brave and defiant. Dempster never hesitated to attack that which was in her way. Her films were always full of very unlady-like fight scenes from which she usually emerged victorious. Lillian Gish would have hesitated even to ask an obstacle to move, knowing that eventually it would be dissolved by the essential benevolence of the universe. Gish could be confident as hers was a simpler and more direct pipeline to metaphysical truth; but Dempster, not knowing of her guaranteed salvation, was required to be more brave and more active in opposing the forces that seemed to challenge her.

Gish's challenge was that of unhappiness; Dempster's challenge was that of despair. The pre-war woman had the virtue of feminine receptiveness; the post-war woman, being more a combination of active and receptive tendencies, was more ambiguous and better equipped to challenge the threats of loneliness and angst. She was more self-sufficient. Love, then, became more a partnership of equals than a romantic union of active (male) and passive (female) principles. Thus, we have Dempster standing beside her lover (Neil Hamilton), together pulling their wagonload of potatoes (symbol of their hope) through a forest teaming with potential danger (the social context).

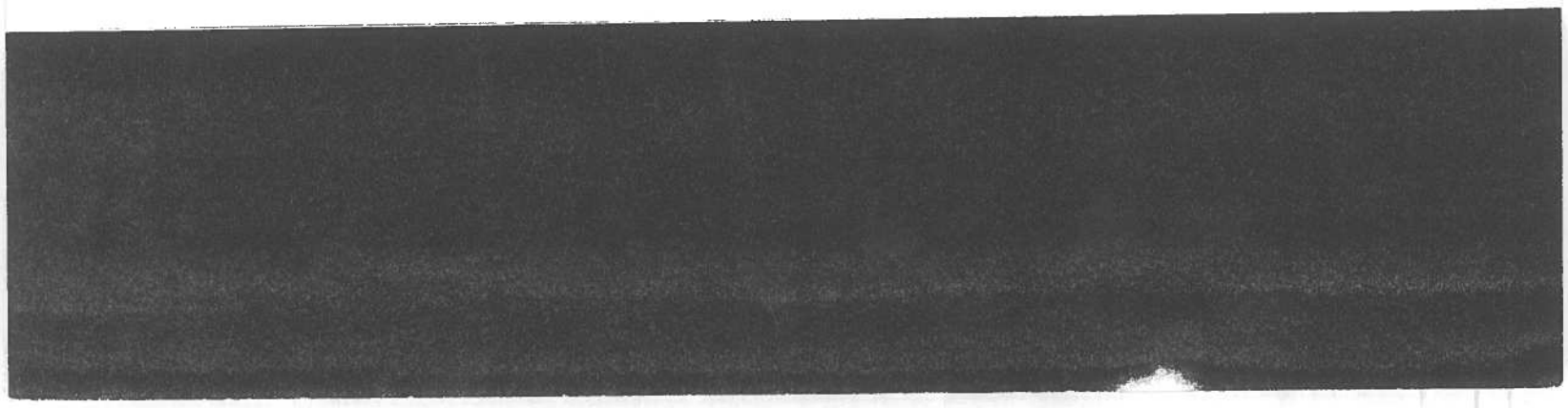
Griffith rarely exploited his staging with his visual technique. This is particularly the case in **Isn't Life Wonderful** where we get the feeling that all drama and comedy is merely observed and never carried too far. There are no big pay-offs to his jokes. We simply observe a humourous situation through the eccentricities of the characters. We watch the professor (Erville Alderson) unsuccessfully trying to nail a tack into the wall or imitating Lupino Lane's amusing dance.

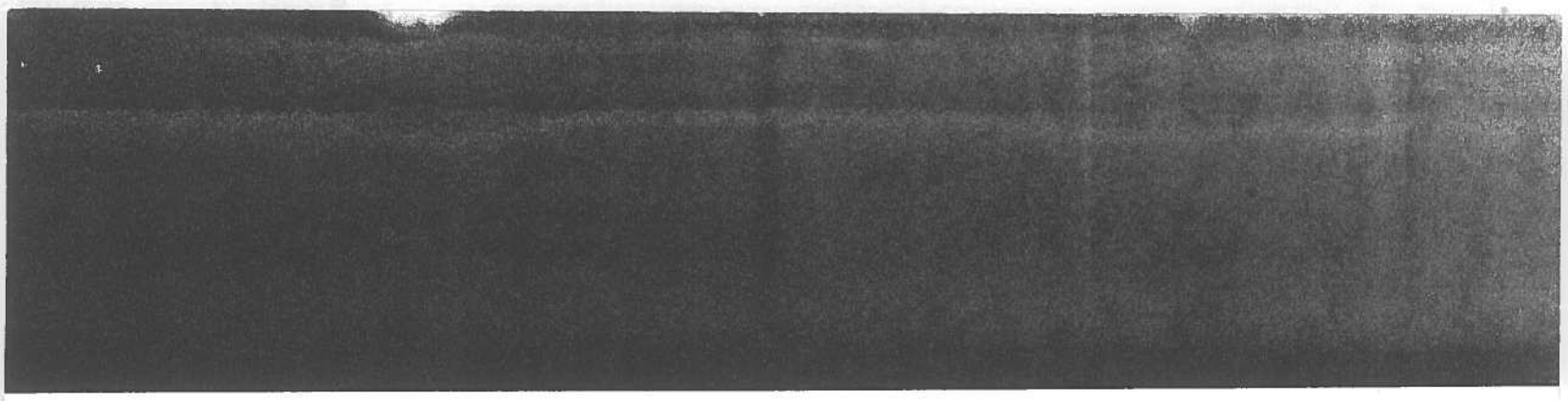
Carol Dempster especially is treated with a restraint that is surprising in the context of her usual activity. For once, she is not called upon to perform an outlandish dance. Always boyishly thin and wiry, here she is convincingly emaciated, conserving her energies to face the facts of poverty. The whole tone of the film is one of carefully repressed emotions. Instead of the quickening tempo of cutting in earlier Griffith suspense sequences, here we have a repressed suspense in the intercutting of an ever-hopeful Dempster waiting in line while the meat shop raises its prices by the hour in the debacle of monetary inflation.

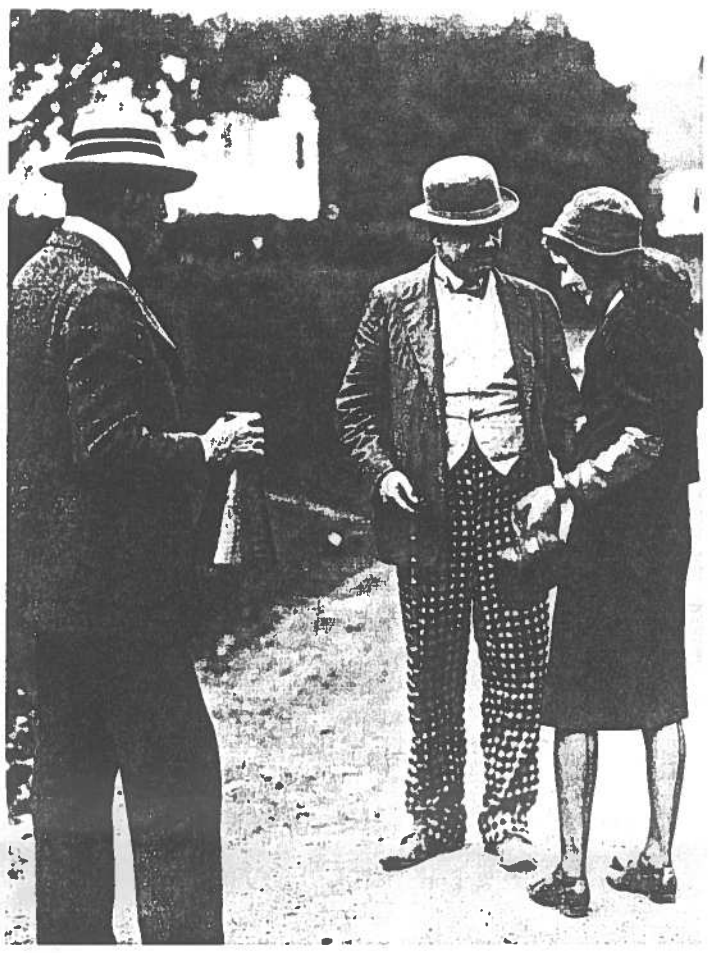


Griffith's next three films were made for Famous Players – Lasky under conditions that must have seemed restrictive after the freedom of independent production. On the other hand, as a salaried director, Griffith was freed of the problems of financing and studio maintenance. These were also his last three films with Carol Dempster. One feels the moral confidence of **Isn't Life Wonderful** carrying over into these films, accompanied by a slight relaxation of narrative control and a return to more intimate themes.

The first of these, **Sally of the Sawdust** (1925), has the casual lack of pretense of Griffith's Kentucky Trilogy. Again, he focuses on the eccentricities of his two main characters, Carol Dempster and W. C. Fields, in a rambling narrative. The only struggle is that against the inertia of social conventions and class distinctions. The film has been criticized for its looseness, but in one sense this is its most modern aspect. Here we have the master story teller relaxing his own conventions and relishing instead the possibility of film portraiture. In this sense, it is one of Griffith's most loving and humanistic films – the logical extension of the point of view that had molded the beauty of **The White Rose.**







Above: D. W. Griffith with W. C. Fields and Carol Dempster in *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925).
Below: Fields and Dempster

Carol Dempster is particularly at home in the character of Sally, and W. C. Fields is the ideal Professor Eustace McGargle. Griffith seems to be relaxing his narrative precisely to let these two personalities come to full expression on the screen. Thus, we are often bowing away from the story line to watch a Fields con game or a silly Dempster dance, or, even more satisfying, a light comic scene where Dempster and Fields play off each other with a naturalistic screen chemistry that was very rare in the silent cinema.

In a telegram of August 31, 1925, Griffith himself remarked:

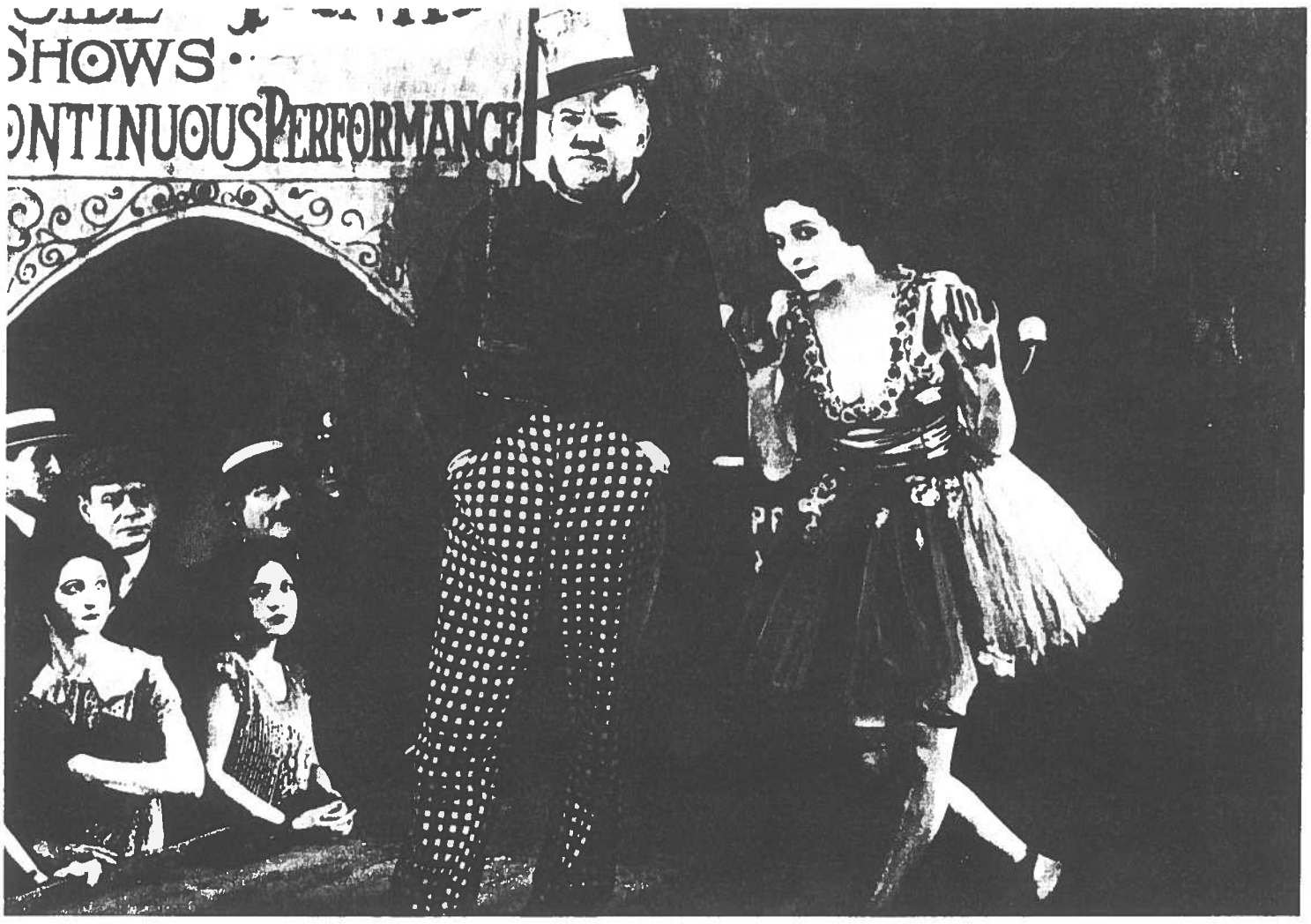
> I like these two lovable fools... almost better than any two I have ever had. If the play has any merit, credit goes to these two: Sally, who throughout all the various phases of emotions sticks to the gamin character of the circus girl and does not drop back, as we generally do in these things, into just straight acting, as is usual forgetting the character and becoming a cinema actress herself doing her usual emotional stunt... and Prof. McGargle, the comic faker and scamp (who) does not reform, but scamps at the end as in the beginning. It is the first time I have been able to do this.

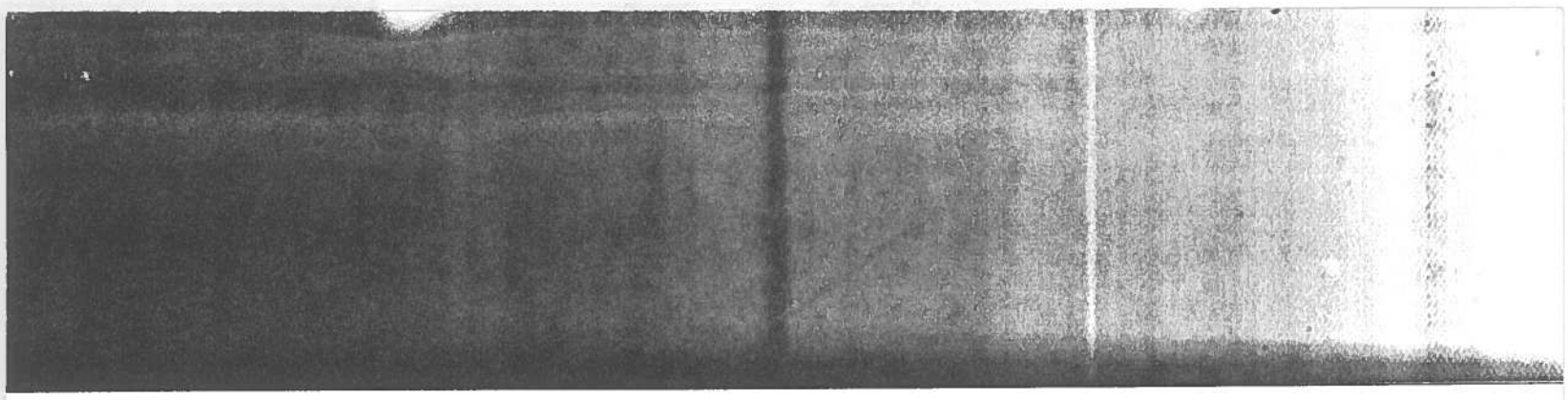
This is Griffith's only true comedy. In style, it seems to develop from his attitude toward the comedy bits in **Isn't Life Wonderful.** It is a comedy of observation, the humour growing from the eccentricities of the characters. Again, this is very rare among silent films where vaudeville slapstick and elaborate sight gags were more often the rule. Griffith never had much of a taste for broad comedy, and his previous use of comic relief could seem awkward and was usually confined to specific comedy types who were otherwise extraneous to his narrative. In **Sally of the Sawdust,** however, one is reminded more of the comedies of George Cukor or Howard Hawks. One feels less the active imposition of the director's ego and more a receptive influence open to the expression of the actors themselves.

W. C. Fields, of course, is precisely the W. C. Fields we know from his sound films. The personalities of Griffith and Fields evidently accommodated each other without conflict. Fields also had a minor role in **That Royle Girl.** In a letter to Griffith dated October 31, 1925, Fields wrote:

> I want the world and nit wits alike to know that my success with **Sally** was due entirely to you, and as there is no other way of showing my appreciation, I broadcast this fact at every opportunity.

Again, the eye-opening surprise is how perfectly Carol Dempster plays in service to the character of Sally. One can read the overtones of surprised pleasure in Griffith's own statement where he comments on the "usual" problems of falling out of character back into self-conscious acting. But Dempster turns out to be an expert comedienne, and one regrets that she had so few opportunities to exercise these talents. Sally is a child of the circus moving into the problems of nascent womanhood. The men are beginning to bother her; and her usual physical defenses (she is fully capable of beating up most of her hapless suitors) are becoming inappropriate. The role of circus girl is ideally suited to Dempster. She is afforded ample opportunities to exercise her silly dances, ample opportunities to kick and fight her way out of dangerous circumstances, and ample opportunities to express that special beauty that is so endearing in the quiet moments of otherwise active children.





Griffith has finally brought Dempster's full potential into play. He has trained her as a highly skilled actress (**Isn't Life Wonderful**), then found the perfect character (Sally) to bring her out as a screen personality. Having arrived at this point, one regrets all the more the apparent loss to history of Griffith's next film, **That Royle Girl** (1926). It can be speculated that here Griffith took his vision of Dempster one step further, generalizing the character of this actress-personality into his definitive portrait of the new woman of the 1920's – the jazz baby.

Contemporary reviews of **That Royle Girl** have emphasized, as they had with **Sally of the Sawdust**, the episodic looseness of the narrative. Indeed, it was an adaptation of a serial; and the original script was not to Griffith's liking in terms of story line and development.

Set in Chicago, the story concerned the struggle toward success of Daisy Royle (Dempster), a young girl who emulates Abraham Lincoln. She is first seen as an adventurous newsgirl, the daughter of a drunkard (W. C. Fields). Later, she works in a dressmaking establishment where her appearance wins her a job as a fashion model. She subsequently becomes a dancer, disguised so that she can obtain information regarding a murder of which her friend, a young jazz musician, has been accused. After a long courtroom scene and several narrow escapes, Daisy proves his innocence. The final scene involves a tornado that flattens an entire town, but unites Daisy with her new idol, a district attorney.

Given a story not to his interests, but being pleased with the emergence of Carol Dempster as an actress, one can imagine that Griffith chose to create a showcase for his star instead of simply turning out the fast-paced action melodrama that Paramount was hoping for. Griffith was again predating the genre of the personality film that was not to come into full flower until the early thirties with the advent of sound. Then it would not be the plot that mattered. Everyone knew the tired old plots. What mattered was the overpowering screen presence of an actor or actress with whom the audience was afforded intimate contact.

If we can believe his own statements in the press releases of that period, Griffith was both individualizing and universalizing the Dempster character. In the New York **Herald Tribune** of January 10, 1926, Griffith described his character in **That Royle Girl** as "as sophisticated young schemer trying, by her wit and charm, to lift herself out of poverty into the life of fashionable clothes." Then, generalizing, he added:

> The girl of today is not a thing of sharp blacks and whites. You cannot say she is bad and let it go at that. She is wise and foolish, innocent and sophisticated, moral and immoral, tender and hard – she is everything that life around her is.

Here Griffith is again tipping his hat as to the nature of his own metaphysical vision. Everything is seen as dualities. Good coexists with evil; innocence is united with corruption. Gone are the value judgments that used to fill his earlier works with sermonizing. Griffith is not disillusioned with the world of the 1920's, but accepting.

A letter to Griffith from one of his associates (Albert Gray, October 25, 1925) suggested that Griffith should delete some of the close-ups of Carol Dempster that evidently filled **That Royle Girl**:

> While each and every one is very beautiful, and as I said before, she does wonderful work, the best of her career, at the same time too many close-ups are going to harm her and also hold up the story.

It is clear that even Griffith's closest advisors have no idea what he is attempting. Can you imagine telling Rossellini to use fewer close-ups of Ingrid Bergman in **Europe '51** or von Sternberg to speed up his story instead of lingering on Marlene Dietrich? Carol Dempster was surely no less an enigma for Griffith; and Griffith was, after all, one of the all-time great directors of women.

In a press book article titled "Characters Are the Basis of Photoplays," Griffith outlined his new approach to plot and character. Consider the significance of these statements from the director who has been canonized for his development of narrative technique and then termed "old-fashioned" and "in decline" when he chose to move beyond this approach to storytelling to a more modern approach:

> My experience as a motion picture director has convinced me that characters are the basis of photoplays. Stories are secondary. I don't think it is possible to construct a new plot. Literature has exhausted every conceivable situation. Themes vary, but the elements of interest are all bound up in characters.
>
> The author (of a screenplay) furnishes the idea; he deserves credit for it. But the job of the motion picture director is to try to develop it pictorially by means of its chief characters. The process of reproducing them pictures could not have been completely outlined in advance. I meet my problems as I proceed. I live with my people; they help me in working out details.

Critics of this period in Griffith's work picture him as an unhappy man, creatively lost, and desperately trying to grind out potboilers that would make money. It should be clear, however, that whatever other problems he was facing, Griffith saw clearly what he was doing as a director. Furthermore, he was excited by the new potentials of his vision.

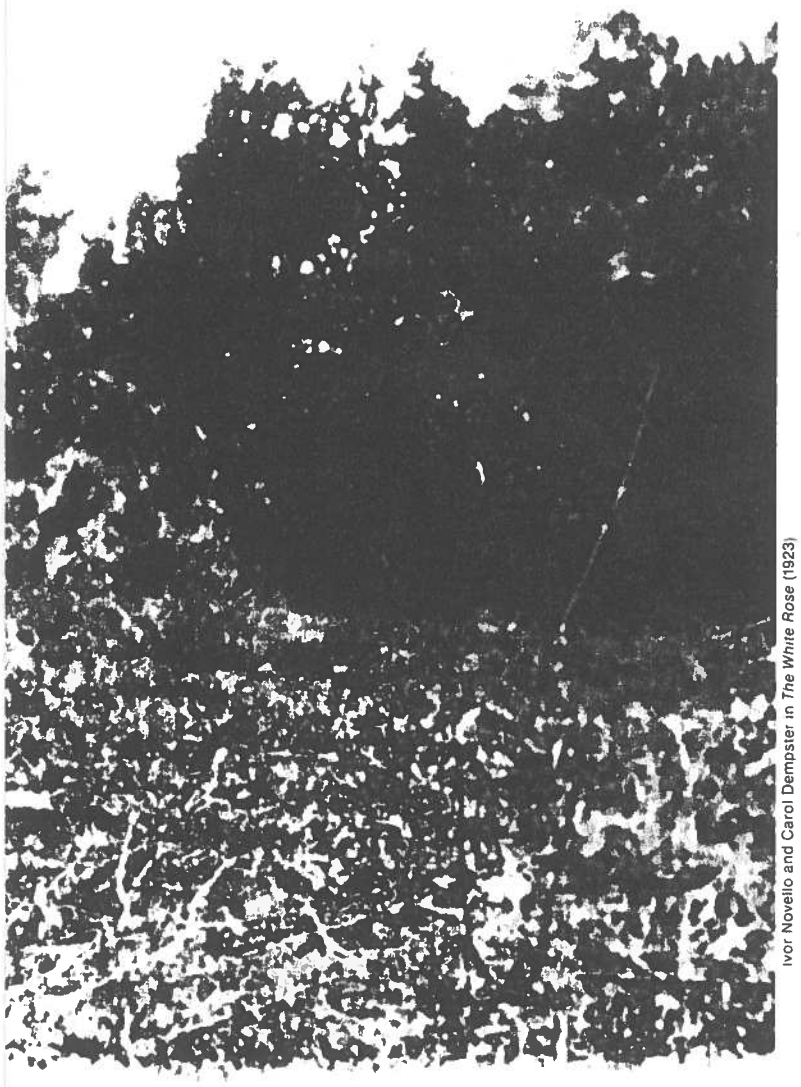
Discussing the character of Daisy Royle, Griffith gives us some hints as to what effect Carol Dempster has had on his own growth. Wrote Griffith:

> The theme of **That Royle Girl** worked itself out in my mind as the conflict between stern justice, as typified by the district attorney, and human nature, as typified by Daisy Royle. Her conversation with the statue of Lincoln is symbolic of her faith in a kindly power that will guide things aright; her loyalty to the weak, egotistic jazz leader has a sacrificial quality, and her love for the district attorney is deep and fine. It conquers the austere spirit that would reform the world single-handed.

Was not Griffith himself an "austere spirit" who, with **Intolerance, Hearts of the World**, and **Way Down East** was out to reform the world? And is it not Carol Dempster, as a personification of human nature, a union of yin and yang, morality and immorality, wisdom and foolishness, that has led him to this more humanistic vision of reality?

Stella Block (in **The Arts**, January 1928) provided an interesting contemporary interpretation of this Griffith's closest collaboration with Carol Dempster:

> **That Royle Girl** is a theme and variations – a thousand disconnected and exhuberant idealizations of one woman. On the face of it, the picture is pure melodrama with a smattering of comedy; but underneath the dramatic tumult and the incongruous farce, there is unfolded one perfect, perverse, inscrutable human character.



Ivor Novello and Carol Dempster in *The White Rose* (1923)

6 *Another Ending, Another Beginning*

Griffith's last film with Carol Dempster was **The Sorrows of Satan** (1926). It was also his last film for Famous Players—Lasky with whom working relations had become impossible. Griffith had been hesitant to undertake this particular project as he considered the source, Marie Corelli's novel, to be "atrociously written" (letter: 1926), and was intrigued only by certain ideas in it. The project had evidently been prepared by DeMille, then shelved, before Griffith was encouraged to make it. The version finally released was not as Griffith desired it to be.

Carlos Clarens refers to **The Sorrows of Satan** as a horror film, although it certainly belongs to this genre less than **Dream Street**. In tone, **The Sorrows of Satan** is less expressionistic and more a humanistic love story with allegorical (and metaphysical) overtones. (Cf. Mitchell Leisen's **Death Takes a Holiday**.) Satan is Adolphe Menjou at his most suave. Far from being the incarnation of pure evil, as in **Dream Street**, Satan is himself caught in the mechanism which requires him to tempt mortals away from salvation. However, whenever anyone resists temptation, Satan himself moves closer to redemption; and Menjou smiles when, in the course of the film, Mavis Claire (Dempster) resists him. But it is a sad, longing smile. Satan has a sad resignation to his task; and again we sense Griffith's ambivalance toward questions of good and evil.

What seems to hold Griffith's interest more is the basic love story between Carol Dempster and Ricardo Cortez. They are introduced as two struggling writers sharing the small joys of poverty together. There is much the same attitude here toward the test of poverty as in **Isn't Life Wonderful**, except that Cortez does not have the strength of character to resist temptation. (It is of interest that the male characters are always the weaker willed in Griffith's films.)

The source of Cortez's frustration as an unsuccessful writer of reviews is (as a title explains) that "he condemns books that everyone else likes and likes books that no one else likes." When he sells his soul to the devil, he has no trouble getting his work published. One wonders if Griffith isn't suggesting that all successful reviewers are perhaps in league with the devil—which might explain why they were so rarely kind to his films during this period.

Griffith plays a great deal with light and shadow in this film and has added some expressive camera angles to his visual vocabulary. Some of these additions to his style may be through the influence of certain German films that were then finding a vogue in Hollywood, but Griffith's use of these elements is original and consistent with his own development. Characters repeatedly walk from darkness into light, and scenes are staged with huge shadows looming up symbolically behind the characters. Satan's nature is indicated merely by lowering the source of illumination on Menjou's face. In most instances, these light changes are fully motivated by the narrative, such that Griffith's expressionism is never abstracted. Thus Griffith avoids abstract neurotic terrors and makes his point that both the source and the solution of all problems lies with the characters themselves.

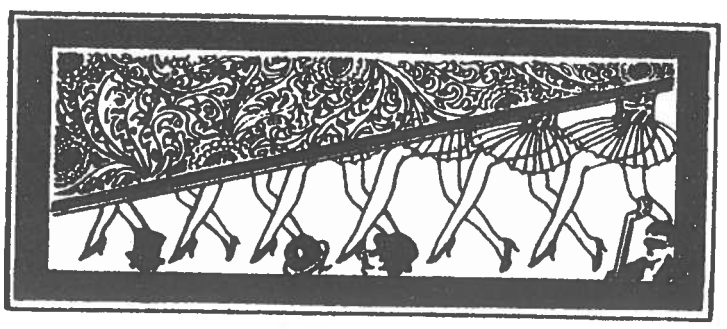
Dempster again shows herself as a formidable acting talent and provides the only moral stability in the film. Her love scenes with Cortez have an element of eroticism that is to grow in Griffith's next pictures. The story line is reminiscent of **True Heart Susie** with Griffith cutting between the maya of Cortez's seduction into the world of the exotic, cut with the more permanent virtues of Dempster's faithfulness. **The Sorrows of Satan** is essentially a sophisticated **True Heart Susie**, with repeated parallels to this earlier film throughout the narrative. Suddenly we become aware of those elements common to all Griffith films and all Griffith heroines; and we realize that Griffith has come full circle with Carol Dempster. He had followed the mystique of a new woman, allowing her to lead him into apparently new preoccupations, only to find that ultimately these preoccupations were only new expressions of universal tendencies.

Griffith had planned a fourth Paramount film with Dempster (**The White Slave**), but this project was abandoned when Griffith and Paramount terminated their contract. It was during this period that Dempster left Griffith and married another man, subsequently retiring from motion pictures.

Trying to avoid another situation like that at Paramount, Griffith was not immediately able to finance another film. His prestige had been further damaged by bad publicity over the rupture with Paramount, and he finally had to sign a similarly compromising contract with Joseph Schenck of United Artists. This contract brought Griffith back to Hollywood in an age when studio executives were systematically trying to convert the film art into the film industry. Griffith's experiences in Hollywood, where he had not worked since 1919, were extremely difficult. His next two films, **Drums of Love** and **The Battle of the Sexes**, are, correspondingly, his most erotic film and his most perverse film. It is as if Griffith had entered a new period of transition like that which had led to the triumph of **Isn't Life Wonderful**.

Thus one is reminded of the cyclical nature of one's awareness of metaphysical truth. The re-entry of neurosis and confusion into Griffith's films during this difficult period is the inevitable forgetting that life is indeed wonderful. But the forgetting is all part of the process; and it is precisely the depths to which we sometimes sink that make possible the heights to which we later rise when we again remember that life **is** wonderful. Thus we get the incredible emotional height of Griffith's last film **The Struggle**, when Griffith can again gloriously proclaim his affirmation of life.

One of the female leads of **The Struggle** was Evelyn Baldwin, who subsequently became Mrs. D. W. Griffith. Those who closely observe Evelyn Baldwin's manner and mannerisms will be struck by her uncanny resemblance to Carol Dempster. Or am I being unfair? Isn't that the same thing people said about Carol Dempster's first films, comparing her to Lillian Gish...? ★



Scenes from *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926). Below: Adolphe Menjou