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Journal Article

The Comics: Mack Sennett and the Chaplin Shorts

In 1907, the year that Griffith took his ride on the “El” up to the Edison studios in the Bronx, Mack Sennett took the same ride for the same purpose. Like Griffith, Sennett then wandered from Edison to Biograph to take up a longer residence there. Like Griffith, Sennett later moved from his apprenticeship at Biograph to maturity as an independent producer and director. Sennett even worked for Griffith at Biograph, as director, actor, and writer (he wrote the script for Griffith’s *The Lonely Villa*). In his years with Griffith, Sennett absorbed many lessons on cutting, shooting, and construction. Sennett would later repay his teacher both by adopting his fluid cutting methods and by parodying Griffith’s plots and last-minute rescues. Unlike Griffith, however, Sennett always wanted to make comic films. For years he tried to get Biograph to let him make a comedy about cops. He finally got his chance with his own independent company, Keystone, in 1912.

Krazy Keystones

The marriage that Sennett effected between visual, physical, burlesque comedy and the si-

lent film was one of those happy, inevitable unions. The purely visual film medium was perfectly suited to the purely visual comic gags that Sennett concocted. The popularity of the Lumières’ first comedy, *L’Arroseur arrosé*, foreshadowed the future of the physical gag. Although there were comic films before Sennett—particularly the comic surprises of the trick films and the energy of the chase films—no one before him so forcefully revealed the comic effects of motion, of human bodies and machines and inanimate objects hurtling across the screen and colliding. It may not be coincidence that one of the most famous essays on comedy—Henri Bergson’s *Le Rire* (1900)—was contemporary with the early films. Sennett—and later Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, et cetera—would unknowingly apply the Bergson theories. No theoretical aesthetic ever had the advantage of such concrete and convincing data. The Bergsonian principle that Sennett best demonstrated was that the source of the comic was the conversion of a human being into a machine. We laugh at the mechanical, inelastic motions of a man who fails to alter his responses to suit some change in

the environment: the man who slips on a banana peel but continues walking as if no peel were under him until he inevitably falls. Further, we cannot laugh if we have any real fears for the man's safety; we must view him externally as a kind of imperishable machine rather than as a man who can suffer pain and broken bones and bruises.

This conversion of people into moving objects is at the center of Sennett's comic technique. The characters zip across the screen like mechanical toys, crashing and colliding into bricks, pies, walls, furniture, and one another. Sennett furthers the impression of human machines by undercranking the camera. He saw that by recording the action at only eight to twelve frames per second and then projecting it at sixteen or twenty, the action became so speeded up that the effect became even more artificial, more frantic, and, hence, more comical. In one Sennett film, *A Clever Dummy* (1917), Ben Turpin actually plays a robot. There is rarely a sense of the Sennett characters as people; reflection and feeling are human activities they never experience, and their individuation is strictly by physical type—fat, thin, short, tall, dark, fair, male, female. The use of people as objects rather than as feeling, thinking beings makes them perfectly suited to run into trouble with the other objects and machines in their universe. Whatever terrific collisions they suffer, we know that the injury will be no more serious than a dent in an automobile fender. Although many Sennett characters brandish guns, the audience knows that a bullet is no more lethal than a kick in the pants or a pie in the face. Their automobiles smash into each other at fifty miles an hour, their boats sink, their roller-coaster cars fly off the tracks, they fall down wells, they fall off roofs. Disasters resulting in death in the real world produce only a few dazed moments in the Sennett world (or, for that matter, in the world of the animated cartoon, where a character can be massacred in one shot and fine in the next). No damage is permanent. If we thought these characters were feeling real pain, we couldn't laugh at them.

Like Griffith, Sennett depended heavily on improvisation. A rough plot outline was the basis for staff meetings each week when Sen-

nett, the cast, and the crew would get together to see what zany bits they could inject into the story line. Sennett liked to have an imaginative outside observer, whom he called his "wild card" or "joker," sit in on the staff meetings to toss out the wildest, most farfetched and irrelevant gags he could think up. After a series of gags had been hammered together in the meeting, there was further improvisation in the course of the shooting. Sennett adhered to only one principle of construction: A gag had to begin, develop, and finish itself off within a hundred seconds. Because Sennett cared so little about whole plots—the individual gag was the beginning and end of his cinematic technique—the films are loosely structured, held together only by the pace of the movement within them. The stories seldom go anywhere; they end when the series of gags has been played out. One of the most common Sennett endings is for the clashing characters to end up dazed and exhausted or doused in a pool of water, the ocean, or a well, as in *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, *The Surf Girl*, and *The Masquerader*. When the characters are all wet, the action simply stops.

Sennett films usually conform to one of three structural patterns. In one of the most common, Sennett takes some conventional, almost melodramatic plot—the kind that Griffith often used—and then peppers it with gags wherever he can. The plot merely serves as a kind of string to tie the gags together, or a clothesline on which to hang them. The second kind of Sennett structure is even less plotty and could best be described as "riffing"—taking some place or situation and then running through all the gags that might occur there. The third Sennett structure is more whole than the first two. Sennett had a great taste for parodying both the styles and the themes of other famous directors and pictures. In the parody pictures, Sennett not only used individual gags but shaped the whole film in accordance with the model he was burlesquing.

Sennett's first feature-length film, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914, six reels), is a good example of the formulaic plot that merely strings gags together. The completely conventional story concerns a farm girl who falls prey to the false advances of a city slicker; he wants

her only for her money. She leaves the farm for the evil city, inherits money from an uncle who is presumed dead, gets mixed up with rich city folk, has troubles with her fiancé who has another girlfriend, and finally discovers his duplicity.

Tillie, the farm girl, is played by the enormous Marie Dressler (in her first film role); her city-slicker boyfriend is the small and skinny Chaplin (before he adopted the tramp character exclusively). Sennett plays with the disproportion in their sizes, showing Tillie besting her beau in all sorts of contests in which Charlie winds up with a brick or a stone or a boot hitting him in the head or seat of the pants. The "other woman" in the film is played by Mabel Normand, a coy and subtle comedienne who indulges in her own comic shenanigans as a fake waitress at Tillie's grand ball. Sennett includes a hilarious dance number with the tiny Charlie and the immense Tillie, he adds a hilarious drunken "elephant" sequence when Tillie overindulges in a café, he draws on the incompetent Keystone cops for the final chase, and he throws all the main characters off the Santa Monica pier and into the Pacific Ocean to end the film. The plot becomes irrelevant; the best things in the film are the gratuitous gags, the surprises that Sennett throws in. That which is gratuitous ultimately becomes that which is essential.

Mabel's Dramatic Career (1913) has the same kind of structure. Mabel (Normand), a country gal, and Mack (Sennett), her country swain, are in love. (Sennett acted in his films, too, usually portraying the oafish, sluggish country boy.) Mack's mother objects to the match. The story is further complicated by another woman who arrives from the city and steals Mack's heart away from Mabel. Mack gets his ring back from Mabel, and Mabel slinks sadly off toward the big city. Some unspecified time later, Mack journeys to the city and sees a nickelodeon displaying Mabel's picture. (Many of the early film comedies were about the film business itself.) Mack goes into the theatre to see the show; he sees Mabel attacked by the villain (Ford Sterling) in a typical film melodrama. Mack, who does not realize he is watching a fiction, fails to keep his aesthetic distance. He pulls out his sixshooter and starts firing at the screen, scaring

the shocked customers out of the theatre. Mack also runs out and catches a glimpse of the screen villain at home; naturally, off-screen Ford is a kindly father and husband. But Mack starts shooting again. Someone douses him with a pail of water, and the film just stops once the menace has been soaked.

The Sennett "riffing" films are even more fun; the director does not pay even lip service to story values. These films are structured as a pure series of gags, held together only by pace and by the general locale or situation (the same could be said of an avalanche). Several of the films Chaplin made for Sennett use the riffing structure. In *The Masquerader* (1914), Sennett and Chaplin pull as many gags as they can on the premise that a disruptive actor on a movie set can wreak havoc in a studio. Chaplin plays the actor; the director boots him out; Charlie sneaks back in as a seductive woman; chaos follows until Charlie winds up soaked in a well and the riffing stops. *The Rounders* (1914) riffs on the troubles that two drunks (Chaplin and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, two obviously contrasting physical types) can get into, and on the reactions of their two shrewish wives. *Getting Acquainted* (1914) riffs on the theme of flirtation and mashing in the park.

The Surf Girl (1916) is one of the zaniest of the riffing pictures. The two-reeler takes the beach as its starting point and then runs off every gag it can imagine in a beach setting. Sennett uses the ocean, a swimming pool, a roller coaster, a ferris wheel, a beach-front saloon, dressing rooms for changing into bathing suits, showers, beach cabañas, an amusement park, an aviary, motorboats, whatever. The strong man with the hammer not only rings the gong but sends a fellow surfer flying up the gauge and off into the sea. The swimming pool is a crowded casserole of frantic aquatics—Sennett's undercranked camera makes the pool activities a kind of water ballet turned St. Vitus' dance. An immensely fat man rolls down a slide and into the pool. Everyone in the pool (Sennett uses reverse motion of the camera brilliantly) is vomited out of the water by the impact of the fat man's splash. The two life-guards, courting a young lady, discover that an ostrich has swallowed her locket. They chase and ride the awkward bird until it disgorges the

chain. Another lifeguard, swinging on the rings over the pool, loses his pants; the lady who has been pushing him flies off with the pants into the pool.

This wild mêlée of gags and movement ends with a great anticlimactic joke. The cops hustle all the soaked, brawling surfers into the paddy wagon. As the wagon pulls into the station, the top part strikes the roof of the entrance and separates from the chassis. (Those incompetent cops can't even build the right-sized garage.) The surfer-felons slowly walk away from the cops, using the top part of the paddy wagon as a shell and cover for their retreat. As the dozen or so legs walk off, looking like a huge beetle, the film comes to a halt. Despite its title, there is no surf girl in the picture.

The Sennett parody films are less zany but more whole. Parodying the latest movie hit was a staple of the comic shorts, just as parodying the film hits of the past became a staple of comedy in the 1970s and of comedies, melodramas, and adventure and horror films in the 1980s. Chaplin parodied *Carmen* in 1915, the same year that two serious versions of the story were released; there were parodies of stage and filmed melodrama: for example, Vitagraph's delightful *Goodness Gracious*; both Sennett and Hal Roach parodied hits like *The Iron Horse* (*The Iron Nag*) and *The Covered Wagon* (*The Uncovered Wagon*, *Two Wagons Both Covered*). Some of Sennett's best parodies were of Griffith, not only of his melodramatic stories but also of his famous last-minute rescues. An early parody of Griffith, *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (1913), features a villain (played by Ford Sterling) who ties the young damsel (Mabel Normand) to the railroad tracks and then steals a train for the express purpose of running over her. Her boyfriend, played by Sennett, is flying to the rescue in an automobile. The cops, also alerted to the danger, furiously pump to the rescue on a handcar. Sennett, in the best Griffith tradition, cuts among four locales: Mabel on the tracks, anxious; Ford in the train, gleefully looking forward to squashing Mabel; Mack and Barney in the auto; the cops on the handcar. Sennett pokes fun at Griffith by drawing out this rescue to an impossible length; the train, which we know is not very far from Mabel's bound body, takes forever to get to it,

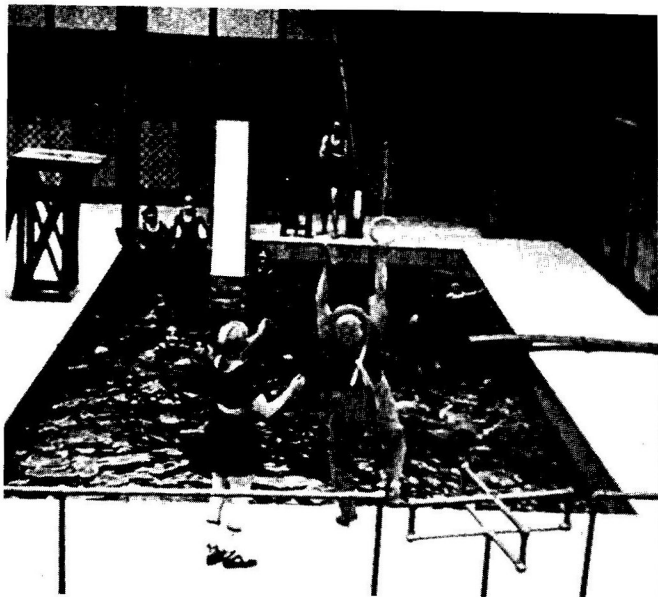


Fig. 5-1

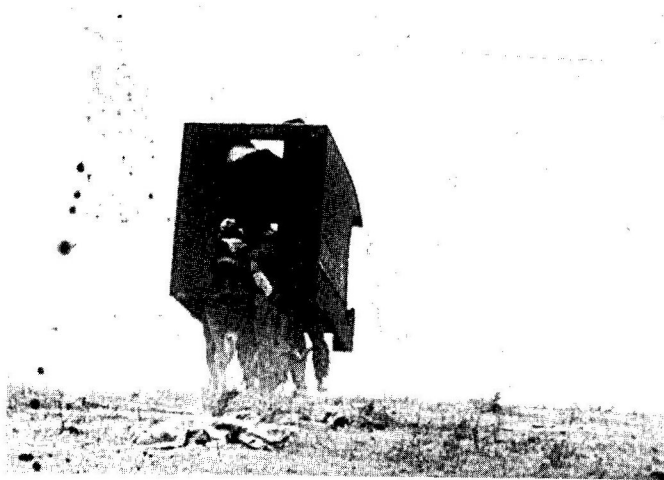


Fig. 5-2

The Surf Girl. Fig. 5-1: fun in the pool; Fig. 5-2: the police wagon as beetle.

just long enough for Mack and the cops to get there in time.

Teddy at the Throttle (1917) parodies not only Griffith's cross-cuts but also his plots. The story is a triangle. The young man (Bobby Vernon)

Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life: Ford Sterling has Mabel Normand tied to the tracks in an exaggerated parody of melodramatic gesture and acting.



Fig. 5-3

drops his true girlfriend for the rich society gal; the young man is being manipulated by the villain (Wallace Beery), who thinks he will make money from the society match. The society gal (large) drags the young man (small) out into an unbelievably intense storm — with winds that blow the clothes off the guests at a fancy ball

when the door opens, with oceans of rain driving down, with pools of mud several feet deep. She is insistent on getting married pronto. The true girl (Gloria Swanson), who has discovered the deception, pursues them. When Gloria is tied to the railroad tracks by the villain, her dog, Teddy, carries a scribbled message (which she miraculously managed to write while tied up) explaining her terrible plight to her boyfriend. Then comes the Griffith cutting: from Gloria tied to the tracks, to the train chugging toward her, to the agent of her rescue (the dog), who finds the boyfriend and leads him back to Gloria. Gloria is, of course, saved just in time, and Teddy continues his canine heroism by treeing the nasty villain.

The Sennett films set a comic standard for zaniness, non sequitur, and physical activity that has served as a model ever since — for, among others, René Clair, Richard Lester, Mel Brooks, Chuck Jones, and the Monty Python troupe. Not as technical a cinematic innovator as Griffith, Sennett still realized that the tricks the camera could play with motion were highly suited to physical comedy. In a sense, Sennett's method took Méliès's stop-action principle one step further by combining rapid physical activity with the camera's tricks.

By as early as 1915 Sennett had become exclusively a producer who no longer directed films personally. In 1916 he scrapped his inde-



Fig. 5-4
Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life: Mack Sennett and Mabel Normand.

pendently funky Keystone Company to begin producing comedies for the giants like First National, Paramount, and Pathé. His films became more expensive and polished, losing much of the improvisational, slap-dash and slap-happy quality of the Keystones that starred Chaplin, Normand, Sterling, Arbuckle, Chester Conklin, and Mack Swain. But Sennett's parody still created hilarious 1920s films that starred the cross-eyed antihero, Ben Turpin, the antithesis of movie glamor and romance. Sennett's devotion to frantic movement, irrational surprises, and impossible nonsense created films that starred Billy Bevan, supported by incredibly agile machines like leaping tin lizzies and flipping airplanes, or by menacingly awesome beasts like wild lions and even a viciously snapping oyster. Although Sennett produced sound shorts, his importance died with the silent film, which was his natural medium. The particular qualities of the Sennett style become most obvious when compared with the completely different method and emphasis of his most distinguished disciple.

Charlie

In 1913, the English stage comedian Charles Chaplin was touring American vaudeville stages with a music-hall act, Fred Karno's English Pantomime Troupe (also called Fred Karno's Speechless Comedians and Fred Karno's London Comedians, a troupe that included Stan Laurel). Either Harry Aitken, who was Griffith's and Sennett's partner, or Adam Kessel, the bookmaker-turned-owner of the Keystone Company, or Mabel Normand and Sennett saw Chaplin's performance as a comic drunk in Karno's *A Night in an English Music Hall*. Keystone offered Chaplin a job, believing Chaplin's gymnastic talents were perfectly suited to Sennett's athletic menagerie. Chaplin wasn't sure he wanted to work in that zoo; he shared the prejudice of many stage performers against working in films, suspecting, with his typical hard-headedness, the impermanence of a novelty that seemed more monkey business than show business. After Chaplin drove Kessel's offer up from \$75 to \$150 a week, including a one-year guarantee, he decided the risk was worth it. He appeared on the Sennett lot in

December of 1913. His first Sennett film was *Making A Living* (1914, directed poorly by Henry Lehrman); Chaplin hated it.

Sennett immediately tried to use Chaplin as one more cog in his factory of human puppets. Sennett capitalized on Chaplin's gymnastic abilities: his ability to fall and stagger and roll and bounce off both people and the floor. Chaplin's smallness was the perfect foil for the fatness of Arbuckle or the hugeness of Dressler. In *The Knockout* (1914, like all Chaplin's Keystone films), Chaplin makes a brief appearance as referee in a boxing match, ducking, sliding, squirming, and falling between the punching pugilists and the ropes. This was Chaplin as pure physical comic. Sennett used the same gymnastic potential in *The Rounders* and *Tango Tangles*, in which Chaplin recreates his drunk act from Karno's troupe.

But tension soon developed between Chaplin and Sennett. Sennett's rapid, pure-motion principle bothered Chaplin, who wanted to add character and individuality to his gymnastics. As early as his second and third Keystone films, *Mabel's Strange Predicament* and *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (the latter shot after *Mabel* but released before it), Chaplin began to evolve the tramp character, borrowing the idea of using a cane and hat from the earlier French film comic, Max Linder, borrowing an old pair of Ford Sterling's shoes (much too big for Charlie's feet) and an old pair of Fatty Arbuckle's oversized pants. He also used a small derby that belonged to Arbuckle's father-in-law, Charles Avery's small jacket, and Mack Swain's false moustache (which he shortened considerably) — all found in the Keystone dressing room. Such individuation was both unwanted and unneeded in Sennett's mechanical world. Sennett neither took the time nor placed the camera close enough to make such characterization count. After only one year with Sennett, the little clown with the bowler hat, baggy pants, reedy cane, and floppy shoes had become one of the most familiar figures and faces in the entire United States. He had also, in April of 1914, become a director. Chaplin directed 19 of the 35 films he acted in at Keystone; in most cases he wrote what he directed. From 1915 on, he wrote and directed and usually edited every one of his films. For the record, the first

Keystone he wrote and directed was *Twenty Minutes of Love*; the second was *Caught in the Rain*. In between those films, Mabel Normand directed *Caught in a Cabaret* (all 1914).

A brief recounting of contractual facts and figures will summarize his meteoric rise to fame, fortune, power, and artistic maturity over the five years between 1913 and 1918. From \$150 a week as a Sennett pawn in 1914, Chaplin signed a one-year contract with the Essanay (S & A) Company of Chicago for ten times the amount of his Keystone contract: \$1,250 per week, plus a \$10,000 bonus upon signing—a total of \$75,000 for 1915. He turned down Sennett's comparatively chintzy 500 percent raise to \$750 a week (Sennett typically lost his stars when he refused to pay them their market value). In 1916, Chaplin signed a contract for yet another ten times the amount of the previous year's agreement—\$10,000 per week plus a \$150,000 bonus, a total of \$670,000 for the year—with the Mutual Corporation (it took him 18 months to fulfill this contract for 12 films). In late 1917 he signed a contract with First National for an even million dollars (at almost the same time that Mary Pickford signed her first million-dollar contract, the first time such fabulous sums entered Hollywood legend). Each of these contractual arrangements brought Chaplin more money and more creative independence—to write, direct, produce, and even own the rights to his films (as he did, beginning in 1918).

Such awesome numbers indicate not only the general expansion of the movie industry (in 1914, Mack Sennett could make an entire one-reel comedy for \$1,000 or less) but also the personal accomplishment of a man who became history's first truly international superstar and the first maker of movies (and comic movies at that) acknowledged as a genius and primary influence by an entire generation of twentieth-century artists and intellectuals.

Temperamentally, Chaplin never could see comedy as Sennett saw it. For Sennett, the comic world was a realm of silly surfaces; for Chaplin, the comic world provided the means to examine the serious world of human needs and societal structures. For Sennett, comedy was an end; for Chaplin, it was a means. Chaplin revealed another dimension of Bergson's



Fig. 5-5



Fig. 5-6

Chaplin's appearance in his first Keystone releases. Fig. 5-5: as an English type with an animatedly dancing cane in Making A Living; Fig. 5-6: in his tramp costume for Kid Auto Races at Venice.

theory of comedy in *Le Rire*—a moral force to correct the mechanical and inelastic constrictions of social norms.

Chaplin's own experience played a tremendous role in shaping his outlook. With his father

and mother separated and his mother battling ill health and insanity, Chaplin spent almost two years of his Dickensian childhood in a workhouse for the poor. The boy in the workhouse quickly perceived the power of wealth and social status. The young Chaplin was an outsider, beyond the embrace of social and material comforts. The screen character he created, Charlie (the French call him Charlot), is also an outsider. He is a tramp, a criminal, an immigrant, a worker—someone excluded from the beautiful life. And yet Charlie yearns desperately for that life. He longs for money, for love, for legitimacy, for social station, for etiquette, for superiority, for recognition. Ironically, Charlie as outsider serves to show both the gleaming attractiveness of the beautiful life for those who don't have it and the false emptiness of the beautiful life for those who do. Chaplin was mature enough as an artist to show the ambivalence of power and wealth, its attractiveness and its emptiness, an ambivalence that Chaplin the man felt when he became rich and powerful.

The Chaplin comic aesthetic was radically different from Sennett's. The cliché is that Chaplin slowed down Sennett's dizzy pace. He did slow it down, but he did so to put something else in. The structures of the films reveal a key shift. If Sennett's films are merely strings of gags, Chaplin's films are structured as three or four beads on a string. Like Sennett's, Chaplin's film structures break into clear and distinct pieces. But where Sennett's pieces are 30 to 90 seconds long, Chaplin's are 5 to 10 minutes long. He exhausts a comic situation or location completely rather than flipping from gag to gag. His classic Essanay film *The Tramp* (1915), in which Chaplin first demonstrates a complete consciousness of his clown persona, breaks into four clear sections: Charlie the tramp protecting the pretty girl from other, meaner tramps; Charlie as farmhand on the girl's farm; Charlie foiling the other tramps' plot to rob the farm; and Charlie losing the girl when her wealthy boyfriend arrives. A later film he made for Mutual—*The Adventurer* (1917), whose plot resembles much of *City Lights*—also breaks into four clear sections: Charlie's escape from the police; Charlie's rescue of the drowning rich man; Charlie's attempt to join the *haut monde*

at the rich man's swank party; and Charlie's second escape from the police when the rich man betrays him, coupled with his expulsion from the house by the pretty rich girl.

The shift in film structure from the gag to the scene demands that each of the sequences be more detailed, richer, fuller; each focuses attention on either the social situation or the conflict of characters and their values within it, rather than on the gags alone. The gags actually define the characters. When Charlie twirls his cane at a fancy party (in *The Count*, 1916) and then accidentally stabs the turkey, which he inadvertently swings above his head, he defines his sociable attempts to be suave and his frustrating lack of success at it. Charlie's sly and jaunty crap shooting and card shuffling when surrounded by big, mean opponents (*The Immigrant*, 1917) show he has guts as well as style. Despite the size of his opponents and the social obstacles, Charlie insists on enjoying the last laugh or the last kick in the pants. His attempts to enjoy the last boot are not only ingenious and funny, they also define his pluck. Though Charlie is comically incompetent at mastering the social graces of the *haut monde*, he consistently makes up for his lack of etiquette with his wiry toughness and his pragmatic cleverness. Chaplin's gags alone define Charlie's ironic synthesis of naïve innocence and pragmatic pluck.

Another dimension of the mature Chaplin tramp is that, despite the toughness, opportunism, and dishonesty that help him survive, he has a kind and generous heart. He demonstrates this trait repeatedly by using a Griffith-like woman who evokes Charlie's milder qualities: blonde, ethereal, and kind, instantly perceiving the redeeming characteristics in the unworldly tramp. From 1915 to 1922 Chaplin used the same actress, Edna Purviance, to portray her.

For Chaplin, the woman was not just a sentimental character—although she certainly was that; she was also a metaphor for natural human beauty uncorrupted by social definitions and unburied by material possessions. In film after film Charlie shows his affinity with the naturally good and beautiful spirit by allying with her against those who can do him more material good. In *The Tramp* and *Police* (1916), he



Fig. 5-7
Easy Street: the runt and the giant (Charlie and Eric Campbell).

refuses to ally with fellow robbers and protects Edna instead. In *The Tramp* and *The Immigrant*, he retrieves Edna's stolen money and, without letting her know it, slips it back into her pocket. And yet Chaplin's sense of character and reality is such that after stuffing a whole wad of bills in Edna's pocket, he thinks better of it and takes a few back for himself.

Chaplin's characters also comment on the assumed values of the society that produces such people. The villain in the Mutual Chaplin films is invariably Eric Campbell, a huge brute of a man whose superblack, upturned eyebrows look as though they alone contained enough poison to kill a man Charlie's size. Like Sennett, Chaplin uses physical types for comic effect. Unlike Sennett, the physical type also implies moral, social, and psychological values. Eric Campbell, the heavy, is invariably a member of the film's social in-group; he naturally hates Charlie because Charlie is not a member of that group. Eric is the physical giant in *Easy Street* (1917), a very uneasy street that values physical

toughness alone; Charlie is the contrasting runt. Eric is the waiter in *The Immigrant* who enjoys pommeling those patrons who are only ten cents short of paying the bill; Charlie is the diner without any money. Eric is the lecherous rich man in *The Rink* (1916); Charlie is the poor waiter (but terrific skater!). If the social "ins" are as brutal, as coarse, as empty, as vicious as Eric, then there is some human value in being "out," like Charlie.

Consistent with his social view, Chaplin's cops are very different from Sennett's incompetent and cockeyed loons. Though not precisely what would be called, in the argot of a later generation, "pigs," Chaplin's cops were not very far from it. In *Police*, the cops spend their time leisurely motoring to answer an emergency call for help; they drink tea and fluff their uniforms and show no concern at all for Edna's distress. Ultimately it is Charlie, one of the two robbers, who protects Edna against his own partner. The cops in *The Adventurer* are not as satirical, but they do shoot rifles at the escaping Charlie, and their bullets, unlike those in Sennett comedies, look as though they might hurt somebody. In the First National three-reel film, *A Dog's Life* (1918), the only crimes that the neighborhood cop finds interesting are those committed by a hungry Charlie, desperately seeking something to eat.

The short Chaplin films—like the later features—contain ironic and pointed social commentary in the action as well as in the characters. The comedies treat several controversial themes that we might think the exclusive property of our own generation: drug addiction, poverty, hunger, crime on the streets, homosexuality, religious hypocrisy. In *Police*, Charlie learns that those who want him to go straight only intend to eliminate him as a competitor. He discovers that the preacher who urges him to reform has stolen a man's watch that Charlie considered stealing but didn't because of the preacher's sermon. In *The Immigrant*, Charlie juxtaposes the Statue of Liberty with a cattle boat full of immigrants. As soon as a title announces, "The land of liberty," government officials rope all the immigrants together and start checking their identification tags. Men in uniform are inevitably damned in

the Chaplin shorts, whether the uniform is a policeman's, a fireman's, a government official's, or a banker's.

Aside from *The Immigrant*, *Easy Street* may be the most socially conscious of the early short films. In the opening sequence, Charlie gets uplifted in the Hope Mission, singing hymns and feasting on Edna's pure face. He is so uplifted that he gives back the collection box he has stolen. The inspired Charlie goes off into the world only to discover that it is a vicious place, full of hunger, poverty, thieves, drug addicts, bullies, and rapists; *Easy Street* is not so easy, a jungle world of animals striving to survive. Charlie as a cop in the slums (now an out-cast *because of the uniform*) subdues all the foes of goodness, ironically inspired to perform his heroic deeds by a shot of dope. In the final sequence, the den of thieves has been miraculously transformed into the New Hope Mission; all the thugs, including the ominous Eric Campbell, have dressed in their Sunday suits and Sunday smiles, all of them marching meekly and politely into the mission for their own uplifting.

This contrived, Pollyannaish ending is Chaplin's deliberate way of reducing social optimism to absurdity. The social evils admit of no easy solutions; in fact, they seem to admit of no solutions at all. As Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* put it ten years later with its similarly contrived happy ending, "Victoria's messenger does not come riding often." Chaplin's endings frequently imply this social dimension of false happiness and solution, as in *The Vagabond* and *A Dog's Life*. In *The Bank* (1915) and *Shoulder Arms* (1918), Charlie wakes up only to discover that the happy ending literally was a dream. The other typical Chaplin ending (*The Tramp*, *The Adventurer*), less socially pointed but more poignant than the faked happy ones, shows Charlie losing in the end, shuffling off down the road again after failing to satisfy his longings.

Though the social and moral implications of the Chaplin shorts are striking, Chaplin never deserts the objective tool of comedy for making his points. One of the most brilliant examples is the beginning of *The Bank*. Charlie strides into the bank, goes directly to the safe, twirls the dials of the huge safe, checking his cuff to



Fig. 5-8



Fig. 5-9

Easy Street: Charlie gets uplifted in the mission (Fig. 5-8), feasting on the face of Edna Purviance (Fig. 5-9).

make sure that he remembers the combination, finally opens the door of the safe, steps in, and brings out his mop and pail. Not only does Charlie demonstrate the difference between capital and labor, but he does it in a stunning surprise of our expectations. At the beginning of *The Immigrant*, people are lying about the boat, obviously seasick. The camera cuts to Charlie, leaning over the side of the pitching ship. We expect he is sick like all his fellow passengers. Then he turns around, proudly displaying the fish he has just caught. In *The Tramp*, he enters walking down a dusty road; a car rushes by, spraying him with dust—another contrast of rich and poor. Charlie takes out a brush, whisks himself off, buffs his fingernails, and continues on his way. The spunky tramp is a fastidious gentleman—in himself, a perfect comic contrast. As an integrator of contrasts, of the good-bad, sneaky-brave, poor-rich, lucky and out of luck in all of us, Chaplin's tramp crossed worlds and, through laughter and pathos, brought people and worlds together.

An essential element of Chaplin's comic technique—and that of every other silent comedian—was the ingenious use of objects, something at which Chaplin was a master. Unlike Sennett, Chaplin did not use objects simply as comic weapons (the pie in the face); the object could be either weapon or tool, could define the character using it, could be used in a surprising and unfamiliar way, could foul Charlie up or help him out. If Chaplin's favorite structure was to exhaust a situation of some length before moving on to the next, one way to exhaust a situation was to exhaust all the objects in it. And in exhausting an object, Chaplin frequently transformed it into a completely different thing—not by stopping the camera, as Méliès had, but simply by manipulating the object in a witty and unexpected way. Chaplin, like Méliès, was a kind of magician, but his was a magic without camera tricks.

Chaplin's most famous short film with objects is *One A.M.* (1916). With the exception of a cab driver in the first sequence, Charlie is the only character in the film—except for a roomful of objects. In this film Charlie returns to one of his favorite incarnations, the drunk; the play with objects begins in the first section when the

drunken Charlie, returning from a night on the town, gets tangled with the taxi door and then with the taxi meter. Charlie can't find the key to his front door so he climbs in the window, stepping in a goldfish bowl as he does so. Inside the house he finds the key in his vest pocket. Back out the window he goes (foot in the goldfish bowl again) so that he can enter properly through the door.

In the film's second section—Charlie in the living room—Chaplin uses every piece of inanimate matter with which the set has been decorated. He feels he is being attacked by the tiger rug on the floor. He tries to walk on a circular table toward a bottle of booze and seltzer; the table spins giddily and Charlie walks a treadmill, unable to reach the booze as he spins faster and faster. He tries to walk up the stairs only to discover himself at the bottom again. Second and third tries to ascend end with him rolled up in the rug covering the stairs. He finally succeeds in getting upstairs by climbing a coat-rack.

Then, in the third section—Charlie and the bed—the game with objects culminates in a five-minute duel between the drunken tramp and a Murphy bed, which seems to operate according to its own laws. The bed flips down, flips up, reverses itself, loses its frame, bounces, rises, falls as it pleases. Charlie finally beds down in the bathtub. With the bed, Chaplin has succeeded in bringing an inanimate object to life. Though he excludes living people to play against in *One A.M.*, Chaplin has not excluded living opponents, who draw their breath of life from the power of cinema to record an event over and over again, until the choreographed interaction and movement are perfect. (Chaplin's films were expensive to make because he called for so many retakes.) Chaplin refuses to cut during the final duel with the bed; except for one cut-away, the whole episode is a single long take. The lack of cutting rivets our attention on the two combatants. All consciousness of the cinematic medium disappears.

The Pawnshop (1916) is another short masterpiece of comic objects. Charlie and a rival worker sling baking dough at each other in the kitchen. When the boss walks in, Charlie nonchalantly starts kneading the dough and then



One A.M.: *Charlie and the tiger rug.*

Fig. 5-10

suavely runs it through the wringer of the washing machine. He later tries to dry the dishes by running cups and saucers through the wringer. When he tries to eat one of Edna's doughnuts, it seems a bit heavy to him. He transforms the doughnut into a dumbbell by doing weight-lifting exercises with it and then blithely caps his routine by tossing it in the air to catch on his plate. The dumbbell-doughnut smashes the plate to bits and crashes through to the floor.

Among *The Pawnshop's* other objects are an immense ladder that Charlie uses as a seesaw, a birdcage that he uses as a hatrack, a piece of string that he transforms into a tightrope, and a fishbowl that he mistakes for a chamber pot. But the film's culminating transformation of an object is Charlie's dismembering a clock that a needy customer (Albert Austin) has brought in to pawn. Probing the value of the clock, Charlie's deft part-by-part dissection combines the methods of the jeweler (do its parts seem

real or fake?), the surgeon (is it sound? are its reflexes good?), and the shopper for meat (do the contents smell fresh?) or cloth (how many yards of material does it contain?). After the innards of the clock lie in front of him, Charlie winds its shell, and its parts begin to dance (in typical Chaplin style, he does not use Méliès's stop-action tricks but a magnet to propel the pieces without camera trickery). Then Charlie adopts the method of the gardener, spraying the jittering "bugs" with oil to exterminate them. Finally, he scrapes the clock's mauled contents into the customer's hat and hands the rubble back to him with a shake of the head: Sorry; it won't do.

Charlie's careful dissection and examination of the clock reveal the most remarkable trait of his physical comedy. Despite its confinement to photographing mere physical surfaces (an inevitable consequence of photography itself), Chaplin's comedy was extremely internalized, suggesting the thought and feeling beneath

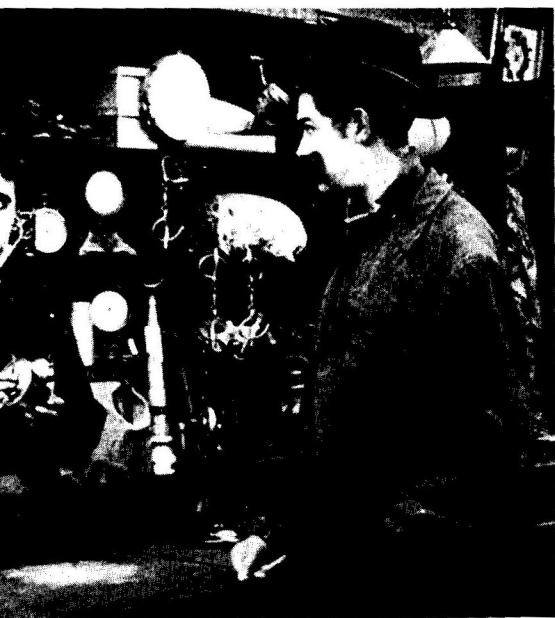


Fig. 5-11



Fig. 5-12

The Pawnshop: the clock as patient (Fig. 5-11) and as jewel (Fig. 5-12). Charlie and Albert Austin.

those visible surfaces. His comedy was also the most sensation-centered of any physical comedian, implying the operations of all the senses (quite an accomplishment in an art apparently confined to the single sense of sight). Charlie perpetually reveals how things smell (either pleasant, the way he sniffs the aroma of a hot dog in the opening scene of *A Dog's Life*, or unpleasant, the way he checks the bottoms of his shoes when he steps into the tiny room packed with children in *Easy Street*); how they taste (the soapy mop and sudsy coffee in *The Bank*); how they sound (the contrast between his violin music and the brass band in the opening sequence of *The Vagabond*); and how they feel to the touch (in *City Lights*, just the touch of the tramp's hand leads the formerly blind flower seller to recognize her benefactor). As the film theorist Rudolph Arnheim pointed out in 1933, Chaplin's inability to manipulate any sensory data other than visual images stimulated his imaginative depiction of all the missing senses.

As opposed to D. W. Griffith's sharp contrast of idealized goodness and idealized evil, Chaplin examined the inherent contradictions within the definitions of good and evil in bourgeois industrial society. The comic tramp was himself a walking contradiction, a figure who loathed (and feared) the falsity of the established order and who yearned toward the purity of the ideal, but also envied the comforts and rewards of the established society and realized that he had better administer a kick unto others before they kicked unto him. This tension between naïveté and instinctive, tough pragmatism in the Charlie tramp produces the moral ambivalence of the mature Chaplin films: the contrast between societal definitions of paternity and more human ones in *The Kid* (1921, his first feature), the ambivalent contrasts between rich and poor in *City Lights* (1931), and the choice between civilization and nature in *Modern Times* (1936). In his first four years, Chaplin created and developed the character whom he would use to explore the cultural landscape of civilization itself.

Most unlike discussions of Griffith, discussion of Chaplin's contribution to the cinema focuses on what he does *on* film rather than *with* film. Whereas Griffith combined the devices of

cinema into a coherent narrative medium, Chaplin advanced the art by making all consciousness of the cinematic medium disappear so completely that we concentrate on the photographic subject rather than the process. This does not mean (as many have claimed) that Chaplin was “uncinematic,” that he was ignorant of the means of manipulating the cinematic language. Quite the opposite. One indeed manipulates a language skillfully when all consciousness of manipulation disappears and the language serves solely to communicate the subject matter with complete lucidity. Chaplin’s insistence on unobtrusive, middle-distance composition and restrained, seamless editing sustains the spell of his performance by producing his hypnotic magic without sleight-of-hand.

Chaplin’s early films demonstrated not only the magic of a human performance on film, but also the appeal of the performer on the minds of his public. Millions of new fans in America rushed to the novelty shops that sold mechanical dolls and plaster statuettes in the tramp’s image, much as later generations of kiddies have bought Mouseketeer and *Star Wars* paraphernalia. Chaplin was the very first national and international craze generated by the motion picture industry. (The craze that came next would be Chaplin’s only serious rival — Mickey Mouse.) There were popular songs, like “Oh Those Charlie Chaplin Feet,” some of which even crossed the Atlantic to the trenches of France, like “The Moon Shines Bright on Charlie Chaplin.” Chaplin’s face, figure, and icons (bowler, cane, shoes, moustache) became more familiar to more people all over the globe than any previous face and figure in history. Chaplin hobnobbed with the most famous figures of his generation — Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, H. G. Wells, Mahatma Gandhi. George Bernard Shaw proclaimed him the only authentic genius the cinema ever produced. The talented young writers, artists, and composers of his generation all grew up as his ardent fans — James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Hart Crane, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Erik Satie.

If there was a single quality that most struck this generation of admirers, it was Chaplin’s tremendous range, his paradoxical combina-

tions of diametrically opposed human sentiments and reactions. Charlie was a terrific cynic (especially when some preacher came toward him with a sob story), but he could also be touched by their stories (as he is in *Police, Easy Street*, and *The Pawnshop*). He could be tough as nails when he booted an opponent in the butt or bashed an assailant in the face, but he could gaze with rhapsodic rapture on the face of tender female beauty. He could be crude and earthily vulgar (with repeated references to the sounds and smells of the human body’s least polite organic functions) and he could be a romantic poet (his favorite symbol, as it was for Griffith, was the fragile but lovely flower). He was a total outsider to bourgeois middle-class propriety and its institutions, both above it in his gentlemanly disdain and below it in his destitute station. (One can only imagine his horror at the IBM advertising campaign that exploits his image but rejects his view of the world.) But Charlie understood the comforts and bases of those institutions as well as their constrictions. They simply weren’t for the likes of him, who belonged everywhere and nowhere at all on earth.

By 1918, the time of his million-dollar contract with First National, a firm that only distributed and exhibited films, Chaplin had become a totally independent producer and the owner of his own film studio, staffed with associates like his brother (and business manager) Sydney, Rollie Totheroh (his cameraman), Henry Bergman and Chuck Reisner (his assistants), Edna Purviance (his leading lady), and Albert Austin (his deadpan character man). Many of them would never work for anyone else and would remain under contract to Chaplin even when he wasn’t shooting a picture.

With First National, the later phases of his career began — with silent and sound feature films. Like D. W. Griffith, Chaplin made longer and more famous films after his apprenticeship period; and like Griffith, Chaplin’s complex later works reveal the increasing self-consciousness and control of the mature artist. Although these later and longer works were invaluable and unique contributions to film art, Chaplin never exerted a greater cultural influence, both in America and abroad, than in those first four years between 1914 and 1918.

Movie Czars and Movie Stars

Griffith, Sennett, and Chaplin were three of the most important figures of the moving picture's second major period, 1908–1919. The first, 1894–1907, was dominated by Edison (and Dickson and Porter), Lumière, and Méliès. The year 1908, the year Griffith started making pictures, marks one boundary; the start of the 1920s marks the other, beginning a third period that would end with the coming of sound. The 1920s would see Keaton, Gance, Murnau, Dreyer, Eisenstein, and von Stroheim—and, of course, new work by Griffith, Chaplin, and Sennett.

After trailing the art and industries of England and France in the first years of commercial filmmaking, the American film asserted its dominance in the years just preceding World War I and, with the help of that war (and the films of Griffith, Sennett, and Chaplin; the star system; and the beginnings of the studio system), established a commercial supremacy that has never been challenged. The secret of the American rise was both art and industry. The increasing demand of American audiences to see moving pictures, the increasing admissions at the nickelodeons, led, in turn, to greater demands on production and more opportunities to experiment and to invent methods that were

better than the competition's. The art of a Griffith was partially the result of the audience's demand that the Biograph studio turn out two, three, or more reels a week. The necessity of just making films allowed Griffith's imagination to discover ways of making them better. His discoveries, in turn, produced greater popularity and esteem for the movies, and hence further demands for more films and for better films. The success of a Chaplin worked in the same circular way.

World War I came at an opportune time for the American film industry. In 1914, just as the American film imagination had begun to swell, the war came along to kill off the European film industry. The chemicals that produced raw film stock were also the essential ingredients of gunpowder. The European governments, given the choice of guns or movies, made the "obvious" decision. American films, suddenly without any competitors, ruled the screens of America and Europe during the war and just after it. When the film industries of France, Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia finally recovered, their roles in world film production were as fertile, imaginative innovators rather than as equal competitors with the big-dollar doings of Hollywood. By 1918, the

American film had become, as it has remained, the dominant cinema force in the world.

Wealth began pouring into the American film business with the appearance of the nickelodeons in 1905, converting that business into a powerful industry and pushing it to untangle the legal and commercial chaos of its infancy.

In 1910, the war against the Trust was raging as the impish Independents valiantly kept fighting and producing pictures. Ten years later all but one of the original Trust companies had folded, and the leaders of the opposition had themselves become more tyrannical and powerful than their earlier Establishment adversaries. Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Adolph Zukor, Jesse Lasky, Marcus Loew, Samuel Goldfish, Lewis J. Selznick, and Louis B. Mayer were all lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. They were fortunate to be running a studio or buying up theatres at the moment when everyone in America started going to the movies and when everyone abroad went to American movies because there were few others. These men, who became the first movie moguls, had outlasted their Trust competitors—the Motion Picture Patents Company—simply because they rode the crest of the new wave of film merchandising rather than trying to dam it.

The business of the Trust's distributor was to market one-hour programs of short films for the little nickelodeons; the new feature films, lasting up to two hours, were for more genuine and comfortable theatres devoted to and equipped for a full evening's entertainment. To produce fifty-two feature films a year (the equivalent of one film program per week) required a huge permanent staff of actors, writers, directors, and technicians; a major investment in equipment; a complex administrative office for scheduling the shooting and selling the films; and large, comfortable theatres. Zukor, Goldfish, Laemmle, Fox, and some others made the investment; many of the Trust companies could not or did not, certain that the new feature craze was a passing fancy. The fancy never passed; the Trust companies did.

Although the Trust officially lost the public battle in the courts in 1917, it had already lost the war to such opponents as *Queen Elizabeth*,

Traffic in Souls, *Cabiria*, *The Squaw Man*, *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, and *The Birth of a Nation*. The public wanted to see feature films.

Stars Over Hollywood

The years between 1910 and 1920 determined the direction the American film industry would take. By 1915 the film program consisted of a single feature film supplemented by a short or two, the same practice that survives today (with or without the short). A second current practice was born at the same time—the star system. In the healthy days of the Trust, no Biograph actor ever received screen credit. Performers were known either by the names of the characters they played—"Little Mary"—or by the studio—the Biograph Girl. There even seems to have been some doubt in the minds of the earliest patrons about whether they were watching a dramatization or real life. The confusion in the mind of the country boy about fiction or reality in *Mabel's Dramatic Career* may have been quite common a few years earlier.

Biograph opposed giving screen credit for the same short-sighted commercial reasons that it opposed the feature film: Star actors would cost more than anonymous faces on a screen. The reasoning was quite correct. But the Independents reasoned that although a star would cost more, a film with a star would earn more. As with the feature film, the Independents had the stronger argument: To make more it was necessary to spend more. The Independents launched their career by stealing the Biograph Girl in 1910 and featuring her in IMP pictures under her real name—Florence Lawrence. They did the same with "Little Mary" Pickford, King Baggott, Arthur Johnson, and many other formerly anonymous Biograph players. The power of the star system, begun by the Independents, was such that in 1917—only a few years after its inception—two stars, Chaplin and Pickford, were vying with producers and with each other to become the highest paid performers in the business, both of them signing contracts for over \$1,000,000. And every major producer in the industry was trying to sign them and pay them that million.

The movie star, no longer an anonymous character in a film but a human being in his or her own right, instantly seized the imagination of the American public. In 1912, just after audiences started learning their favorites' names, America's first motion picture fan magazine, *Photoplay*, appeared. It and subsequent fan magazines featured pictures, stories, and interviews that made the figure on the screen an even more intimate and personal being for each member of the audience. Producing companies needed publicity departments to sell the stars as well as the pictures to the public. In the middle of the second decade of the century, the exotic and erotic activities of the stars first became items of household gossip. One of the earliest and most impressive of the grand publicity jobs was Fox's packaging of the "lusty, seductive siren," Theda Bara, who made her debut in *A Fool There Was* (1915). Born in Cincinnati as Theodosia Goodman, she was transformed by Fox publicists into an Arabian beauty clad in black who survived less on oxygen and victuals than by wrecking homes and devouring men. She was a mystic semisorceress; her name, they pointed out, bore an anagrammatical relationship to death (Theda) and Arab (Bara); the blood of the Ptolemies flowed in her veins; and her astrological signs matched Cleopatra's. The character she played—a sexual vampire—was abbreviated to vamp, adding a new noun and verb to the English language. More significant than all the drivel of the Bara legend was the fact that the public loved the drivel and swallowed it, obviously because it wanted to. Movie publicists had discovered the ease of selling something the public wanted to buy. And Bara, along with a movie star of a very different type, the cowboy dandy, Tom Mix, established Fox as a major production power—their attractive presences mythified by the studio's publicity mills.

Later film theorists have speculated about the appeal, value, and utility of movie stars, both in American film and American culture. For some critics, movie stars are a commodity of industrial production, another means for the film industry to package and market its products to the public. For others, movie stars are symptomatic of certain ills in American culture

—they are beautiful but shallow, powerful visual presences with little actual ability. Movie actors have frequently been compared unfavorably with stage actors, since film stars often seem to play one role—an on-screen persona very close to their off-screen style—over and over again. Still other critics see this unity and consistency of star personality as the most interesting and powerful accomplishment of movie stars: Movie stars do not so much play characters (as stage actors do); they *are* the characters. The movie star capitalizes on an essential paradox of movies—that they are fictional truths. A movie star is also a fictional truth, a fictional character in a fictional narrative, and yet a real human being with a powerful and familiar persona. As commodity, actor, and persona, the movie star had become a powerful component of American cultural experience by 1915.

The greatest stars of the silent films created their own images and types; the lesser stars merely filled the patterns that the great stars had already sketched. There were imitations of Mary Pickford's spunky, good-hearted, pranksterish little girl with the golden curls. There were sultry sirens in the Theda Bara image, many of them imported from Europe. There were gentle, soulful juveniles—Richard Barthelmess, Charles Ray. There were exotic Latin leading men—Rudolph Valentino, Ramon Novarro. Perhaps even Douglas Fairbanks's conversion from zippy American go-getter to swarthy swashbuckler in the twenties was the result of the influence of this new sexual type. There were lecherous, jaded roués, often from decadent foreign shores—Erich von Stroheim, Owen Moore, Adolphe Menjou. There were stars from the opera, the stage, and even the swimming pool—Geraldine Farrar, Mary Garden, Alla Nazimova, Annette Kellerman. There was the basically pure woman who was inevitably tainted by experience (Lillian Gish); there was the stubborn, sophisticated, and often tragic lady (Gloria Swanson); there was the strong, competent, virile male (Thomas Meighan); there was the serious, tough cowboy with the sad eyes (William S. Hart); there was the fat man (John Bunny, Fatty Arbuckle), and the little man



Fig. 6-1



Fig. 6-2



Fig. 6-3

Early archetypes. Fig. 6-1: the vamp, Theda Bara; Fig. 6-2: the rough good-bad man of the frontier, William S. Hart; Fig. 6-3: the cowboy dandy, Tom Mix.

(Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton), and the everyman (Lou Chaney). The star and not the play became the thing that caught the consciousness of the public. Hollywood also used the star to catch the public's wallet.

The third major development of the American film's second decade was the move west. As early as 1907, production companies—perhaps evading the law or the Patents Company wrecking crews—discovered the felicities of southern California. According to the colorful (if not completely reliable) film historian, Terry Ramsaye, during the Trust War, the independent companies took advantage of California's distance from the Trust headquarters in New York and its closeness to the Mexican border, where the company could quickly flee with its negatives and machines. But gradually the genuine virtues of California struck the filmmakers. The vast, open plains, the dependability of the sun, the nearby mountains and deserts and ocean, all attracted the eyes of men whose art depended on the power of the visual. D. W. Griffith brought his company west in the winters of 1910, 1911, and 1912. *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* were both shot in California.

By 1915 most of the film companies had permanently settled down to business in the Los Angeles suburbs—known colloquially and generically as Hollywood but in fact including such diverse areas of the Los Angeles basin as Culver City, Burbank, and North Hollywood. Real estate speculators, who suddenly discovered that miles of apparently useless land were of great use to the movie men, sold it to them by the tens of thousands of acres, at absurdly reasonable prices. Vast studios, like Thomas Ince's Inceville (which became MGM) and Carl Laemmle's Universal City, with rows of shooting studios, office buildings, storage buildings, back lots (for the outdoor sets), and even vast ranches completely stocked with cattle and horses and other beasts of the field, sprang up near Los Angeles. The founding of the movie capital was the result of three coincidental accidents: weather, topography, and real estate values. Enjoying the harvests of chance, the accidental emperors of the new film world now ruled vast, tangible empires.

The Emperors and Their Rule

The most significant accident in the history of the American film is that this first generation of influential movie producers, those gentlemen who made the concrete decisions about the artistic and moral values worthy of inclusion in films, were themselves deficient in formal education and aesthetic judgment. The first Hollywood producers were not just businessmen; they were, according to their biographers, a very specific breed of businessmen. Most of them were either Jewish immigrants from Germany or Russia or Poland, or the sons of Jewish immigrants. Most of them came to the movies by accident. They sold herring or furs or gloves or second-hand clothes. They jumped from these businesses into running amusement parks and penny arcades just when Edison's Kinetoscope and Biograph's Mutoscope were bringing new life to the novelty business.

There were two reasons Jewish immigrants could thrive in this business, and they were the same reasons that Jews thrived in another contemporary entertainment business—the writing, publishing, and selling of popular music on New York's 28th Street, known colloquially as Tin Pan Alley. First, these were new businesses that had not evolved their structures of corporate control that always tend to keep newcomers out. Second, they were the kinds of risky, "illegitimate" businesses that respectable businessmen and social prejudice always allowed the Jews to run—like the lending of money in Medieval and Renaissance Europe.

When movies left the peep-show box for the screen, these arcade owners converted their stores into nickelodeons. They built more and more of these theatres, which became more and more plush. Soon they began producing films for their theatres, what with the pressures of the Trust and its licensing fees. Such was the series of small steps by which a Goldfish or Zukor or Mayer climbed out of the ghetto and into a multi-million-dollar throne of power over national artistic tastes. It is the same route that later generations of disadvantaged Americans have travelled; for many, the quickest and most glamorous road to the American Dream of fame and fortune is show business (sports, rock music, television, and movies).

It is doubtful that a first generation of producer-aesthete intellectuals would have made better movies (look at the likes of *Queen Elizabeth*); but this first generation of movie men and movie values left a legacy of sacrificing taste for dollars—or equating them—that Hollywood films have never completely shed. And they never really can. The costs of making and distributing a movie demand that it appeal to a great many people. The curse and the glory of a popular art is that it is intended for large audiences over the entire social spectrum. Movie executives, then as now, make guesses (often based more on hope than information) about popular appeal.

By 1915—even as early as 1908—there were three types of movie executives, and the differences among them reveal the structure of the American film industry as a whole. Out in Hollywood, the most famous of the movie moguls were those who controlled the actual production of films; they were the film producers and studio heads whose private lives and personal salaries made the headlines. Back in New York, on the East Coast, were the parent companies, whose executives supervised not the making of films but budgeting the entire operation of the studio, marketing its products, re-investing its revenues, and managing its assets as profitably as possible. Then, scattered throughout the country were the owners of theatres and theatre chains who needed films from the studios and returned to them the revenues that the film companies needed to make more films. The three-tiered structure of the American film industry—production, distribution (or management), and exhibition—evolved in the middle years of the century's second decade.

The most powerful film company of the silent era was Paramount Pictures. Paramount was the child of Adolph Zukor, the final stage in the evolution of his Famous Players in Famous Plays. Zukor, who began by distributing *Queen Elizabeth*, jumped aboard the feature-film wagon at the very beginning—one of the chief reasons for his success. Zukor's Famous Players company initiated three kinds of pictures: Class A (with stage stars and stage properties, the arty films), Class B (with estab-

lished screen players), and Class C (cheap, quick features). Zukor discovered that the Class B films, the ones with Mary Pickford, were far more popular than the high-toned Class A. Zukor dropped the stagy films and made Class Bs exclusively. He soon absorbed Jesse Lasky's Feature Play Company (creating Famous Players-Lasky in 1916), Lewis J. Selznick's Picture Company, Edwin S. Porter's Rex Pictures, Pallas Pictures, and Morosco Pictures; he also absorbed a distributing exchange called Paramount Pictures, which eventually gave its name to the final amalgamation. Zukor bested his competition by buying it out. The huge company then had the power and the money to hire the most popular stars and demand the highest fees from exhibitors who wanted the films of its stars.

Zukor had been working in a steady, octopausal manner, snatching up theatres as well as studios and exchanges. One of Zukor's commercial innovations was the system of block booking. The theatre owner had to agree to buy all of Zukor's products to get any of them. If he wanted Mary Pickford or William S. Hart, he had to buy all fifty-two weekly programs from Paramount. But even block booking, tyrannical as it was, was less efficient than owning the theatres. The studio owner not only had to produce films but had to guarantee that each of them would be shown. What better guarantee than to own the theatres to show them?

Another powerful combine emerged in the mid-twenties: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The monolith was assembled by theatre owner Marcus Loew, who wanted to control the profit from the pictures that he showed in his vast national chain of theatres. In 1924, Loew bought the struggling Metro Picture Company and the struggling Goldwyn Picture Company. Loew then put Louis B. Mayer, another theatre owner recently turned producer, in charge of production at MGM. Mayer brought with him a young assistant, Irving Thalberg, to supervise the shooting of the pictures. (In other words, Mayer was the executive in charge of the production—as opposed to the distribution—arm of the studio, and Thalberg was in charge of the actual activity of film production, planning, approving, and supervising the making of



Fig. 6-4



Fig. 6-5



Fig. 6-6

*A gallery of stars. Fig. 6-4: “Little Mary” Pickford in *The Love Light* (note how the huge sets and furniture make her seem truly little); Fig. 6-5: the demure Lillian Gish with the slickly brilliantined Rod La Rocque; Fig. 6-6: a cool Gloria Swanson.*

all MGM films.) With these individual parts, Loew assembled the most solid film factory in America. Anchored by his chain of classy and genteel theatres, Loew’s MGM studio began to manufacture the kind of classy and genteel films that would perfectly mesh the ambiance of the environment to the tone of the entertainment within it. MGM took over the Goldwyn lot to shoot its films (Goldwyn had earlier taken it over from Ince); that studio then distributed its films to all of the Loew theatres. Loew, like Zukor, had succeeded in creating the kind of vertically integrated empire that Gaumont and Pathé had established twenty years earlier; he controlled all three branches of the theatrical film business: production, distribution, and exhibition.

Understandably, the theatre owner did not enjoy the strong-arm pressures of block booking or the unavailability of those popular films that had been made by the studios for their own theatres. In 1917, a group of theatre owners joined together specifically as an antidote to

Zukor’s commercial poison, calling themselves the First National Exhibitors Circuit. First National, managed by W. W. Hodkinson (himself elbowed out of Paramount by Zukor) and J. D. Williams, intended to diminish the power of the film production companies in filmmaking, just as the film production companies were trying to diminish the independent exhibitor’s. First National contracted with individual stars (Chaplin, for example, and Harry Langdon) to make pictures for their theatres. The star gained independence and financial backing; the theatre owner gained the lucrative products of popular, established stars. The idea was so felicitous that First National was among the three great powers of the 1920s film world.

Yet another new wrinkle was the emergence of the artist as producer. If film producers could turn theatre owners and if theatre owners could turn producers, then artists could also turn producers and work for themselves. In 1919, D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks joined together to form the United Artists Corporation. Each would produce his or her own films (Griffith’s first UA film was *Broken Blossoms*; Chaplin’s was *A Woman of Paris*, 1923), which would then be distributed by the common company, United Artists. United Artists owned neither studio nor theatre; it was exclusively a distributing organization for pictures made elsewhere. However flimsy such an organization seemed compared to the giants like Paramount and First National, the company survived, eventually merging with MGM (in 1981). The idea for United Artists was years ahead of its time, foreshadowing the commercial practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, the major studios themselves are primarily distributors for pictures that have been made by independent producers.

The Hollywood film studios of the 1920s had traveled a long way from Edison’s Black Maria—and even from the glass-walled studio of Méliès; now they made their own light. Vast expanses of land and a complex maze of buildings had replaced the single little tar-paper shack that pirouetted with the sun. The Hollywood studio had become an entertainment factory. The contemporary of one of the most famous innovations in American industry,



Fig. 6-7
The four United Artists after the signing (from a contemporary newsreel): from left, Fairbanks, Griffith, Pickford, and Chaplin.

Henry Ford's assembly line for the manufacture of automobiles, the movie studio manufactured entertainment on an assembly line. Like Ford's plant, the Hollywood studio broke the manufacture of its product into a series of operations, and each cell of the whole organism fulfilled its particular function. There was a specific section for writers in the studio—those who conceived the original story ideas, those who wrote the final scenarios, and even those who created the film's intertitles, a separate and highly developed art of its own. There was a specific section for costuming, one for the construction of sets, and another for the care and maintenance of the increasingly complicated equipment, still another for the shooting of the films, and one for publicizing, marketing, and financing the finished product. The arts of the costumer, the cinematographer, the art director, the electrician, and the writer had become as significant as the contributions of the director and actor.

As the film studio evolved, so did the movie theatre. Almost simultaneous with the birth of the feature film came the huge, plush theatre to glorify the longer films and show them in comfort. The same feature phenomenon that enriched the studios enriched the theatres. The

earlier nickelodeons were small and often dirty; the new feature-length movies left these little stores for huge theatres on Broadway. The first of the new palaces was the Strand, constructed on Broadway in 1914, followed immediately by the Vitagraph (now the multiplex Criterion). The new theatres could accommodate over two thousand patrons, who trod on carpeted floors and relaxed in plush, padded chairs. The manager of the Strand Theatre, Samuel L. Rothafel (né Rothapel), soon went on to buy, build, and conceive huge movie palaces of his own. Roxy (his nickname) opened or salvaged a string of mammoth New York houses: the Rialto, Rivoli, Capitol, Roxy, and the Radio City Music Hall, his finale and *chef d'oeuvre*. Roxy brought the same tone of quasi-gentility to the movie theatre that his colleagues, like Zukor and Mayer, brought to the films themselves. Roxy supplemented the film showing with symphony orchestras, corps de ballets, live variety acts, and, at Radio City, the last survivor of the Roxy era, the legendary Rockettes. Whereas vaudeville had supported the movies in their first years in America, the movies had now begun to support vaudeville.

Roxy decorated the insides of his theatres with the same kinds of flouncing that he used for the film showings. The ushers wore colorful silken uniforms that matched the carpets and walls, consistent with the theatre's architectural motif. The theatre walls offered ornate carvings in stone, brass, and wood; gargoyles stared from the balconies; plaster copies of Greek statues (attired in fig leaves) gazed down from trellised cupolas, bathed in a red or green floodlight. The Roxy of the West Coast, Sid Grauman, paid as much attention to the out-sides of his theatres as Roxy paid to the inside. His Chinese Theatre welcomed the patron with a complex system of pagoda roofs and Oriental carvings—and the cement footprints of the stars; his Egyptian Theatre offered patrons a waterfall and a wishing well as they walked in the door. In the 1950s, *The King and I* opened at the Chinese and *The Ten Commandments* at the Egyptian. The Roxies of the midwest, Balaban and Katz, gave the same grand treatment to the many theatres in their chain, pulling out all the stops for their glorious flagship, The Chicago. Even the smaller neighborhood

theatre imitated the attractions of the movie palaces—electric stars twinkled in their stucco heavens as plaster copies of Greek gods and goddesses stared down from an Olympus decorated as a Spanish hacienda.

The pretentiousness, the tacky splendor of these movie houses today (those that have survived urban renewal and gentrification) seems metaphoric of most of the films they showed on their screens. It is tempting to see the movies' move from the nickelodeon to the movie palace as its move out of the working class and into middle-class respectability. While moviegoing, from its beginnings, had been far more a middle-class pastime in Europe, where much higher ticket prices kept poorer citizens away, American movies mingled with the urban working classes from the start. The social fact, however, is probably not so much that American movies deserted the working classes but that prospering American workers themselves had begun their upward mobility toward more middle-class comforts and attitudes. The movies simply accompanied them.

Morality

The movies have waged a perpetual cold war with the forces of religion and righteousness. In 1896, the moralists denounced the improprieties of *The Irwin-Rice Kiss*. *Fatima* (1897), which depicted the bumps and grinds of a noted cooch dancer of the day, so offended some members of certain communities that exhibitors superimposed broad white stripes across the screen to cover the areas where *Fatima* displayed her most lascivious wares. Without question, the censored version of the film is far more offensive and obscene than the original since the two heavily streaked regions of the frame inform the viewer quite precisely which areas of the body should be considered nasty.

Throughout the nickelodeon era the movies had been criticized as cultivators of iniquity; the theatres had been attacked as unsavory or unsafe. The protests of the moralistic few did not deter the entertainment-minded many from going to the nickelodeons. The parallels between the twentieth-century moralistic controversy over the movies (still continuing today) and the sixteenth-century moralistic contro-



Fig. 6-8



Fig. 6-9

Early film censorship: the 1897 hoochy-coochy dancer Fatima, without and with her censorship stripes.

versy over the Elizabethan theatre (also criticized as a breeder of licentiousness and laziness) are striking. The movie cold war suddenly became a hot one in the early 1920s.

First, the content of films, reflecting the new materialism and moral relativism of the decade, became spicier and more suggestive. The sentimental films of the Griffith era had not disappeared; Griffith's own films, Mary Pickford's,

and pictures like Henry King's *Tol'able David* perpetuated the tradition of innocence, purity, courage, and honor. But alongside these Victorian films were others suggesting that lust was indeed a human emotion, that married couples indulged in extramarital flirtations (at the least), and that the urbane and wealthy and lustful were not inevitably evil and unhappy. The new materialistic audience (who spent as much as two dollars to get into the plush movie palace) enjoyed films that idolized the material as well as the spiritual. The sermonizers intensified their letter-writing and speech-making campaigns with concerted public action. Clergymen and laymen united to form panels and committees that would not exactly censor films, but would advise parishioners and the public about which films to see and which to avoid. Behind the censorship drives of some of these organizations lay a thinly veiled anti-Semitism (a parallel with the subtly anti-Semitic campaigns against the Hollywood "Reds" some thirty years later). The moral deficiencies of the movies were yet another strategem of the Jewish infidels, once again poisoning the wells of a Christian nation. Against such attacks, the moral statements and strictures of the industry's own National Board of Review (its name changed from the National Board of Censorship in 1915 and its power undermined by the busting of the Trust that created it) were inadequate and powerless.

The moral ambiguities of the offerings on the screen were soon accompanied by the scandalous doings of the motion picture people off the screen. In the early twenties, several national scandals rocked the film industry far more severely than had the letters and speeches of the zealots. Hollywood did not just sell pictures to the public; it sold the stars who sold the pictures. Scandal in the life of a star was more serious than any extramarital wink on the screen. In 1920, Mary Pickford, "America's Sweetheart," quietly went to Nevada with her husband, Owen Moore, to get a divorce. Three weeks later "Little Mary" married her male counterpart in innocence and purity, Douglas Fairbanks. The public was not shocked by the divorce alone, since Hollywood divorces had already become old news. But this divorce, followed by the abrupt marriage of these two sup-

posedly healthy, happy, all-American people, was something special. The Pickford-Fairbanks marriage was further complicated by the possibility that the divorce proceeding had been improperly executed ("Little Mary" eventually avoided the stain of bigamy). Though Doug and Mary had done nothing illegal, their illicit premarital romance seemed to contradict their screen purity. The tremendous public interest in this petty domestic affair clearly revealed the new social importance of the film industry and its vulnerability to attack by newspaper headlines.

In 1921, two consecutive Fatty Arbuckle scandals fed the headlines. In July of that year newspapers reported a mysterious Arbuckle party in Massachusetts that had taken place in 1917. The mysterious detail was that the district attorney of a Massachusetts county had received a \$100,000 gift just after the party. The public wondered what the district attorney had discovered that was worth such a sum to keep quiet. Then in September 1921, Arbuckle threw a second party, this one in San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel. The next morning one of Arbuckle's guests, Virginia Rappe, was found dead in her hotel room. A week later Arbuckle gave himself up to the police, was eventually tried for involuntary manslaughter, and, after three trials (the first two ending with hung juries), was finally found not guilty. His innocence in the eyes of the law did not affect his standing in the eyes of the moralists.

The Hollywood producers, acceding to the cries of the preachers, barred the evil Fatty from pictures. The great comedian worked in very few films, usually in small roles (for example, James Cruze's bitter 1923 satire, *Hollywood*), although he continued to direct comic shorts under the assumed (and sarcastic) name of Will B. Good! The moguls threw Arbuckle to the moralists, hoping to still the hissing tongues; the money men back East preferred a safe surrender to a possibly unsettling and certainly unprofitable confrontation. Some thirty years later the film industry made an identical choice when it refused to defend "the Hollywood Ten" against the red-baiters and then instituted its blacklist.

In 1922, "handsome" Wallace Reid died suddenly and mysteriously, generating a post-

humorous scandal when the newspapers discovered he had used drugs. Early in the same year, a minor director, William Desmond Taylor, was found dead in his apartment, another scandal with a vague mixture of sex, murder, and drugs. The Taylor murder hurt the careers of Mabel Normand, the pretty comedienne, and Mary Miles Minter, a little-girl imitation of Mary Pickford, who were both friends of the director. The press, satisfying the hunger of its readers, turned these friendships into something salacious. There was no defense against vague rumor and veiled innuendo. Two more careers were thrown to the yapping dogs to keep them quiet.

Such notoriety brought the film business to

the attention of the United States Congress and to the edge of federal censorship—the last thing any producer wanted. The industry decided once again to clean its own house, to serve as its own censorship body. Recalling the success of the baseball owners at finding a moralistic commissioner, the esteemed Judge Landis, to cleanse the “Black Sox” scandals, the film producers sought their own respected commissioner. In 1922, they found Will H. Hays, President Harding’s campaign manager, postmaster general of the United States, Presbyterian elder, and Republican. Hays became president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), an organization supported and financed by all the major



*Moguls and Morals—*from left: Irving Thalberg, Louis B. Mayer, Will Hays, and Harry Rapf on the MGM lot.

Fig. 6-10

film companies in America. It became known colloquially as the Hays Office, and he headed it for over twenty years. In 1945, the MPPDA became the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), and Hays was succeeded by Eric Johnston, who headed the MPAA until 1966, when Jack Valenti became president. Rather than taking concrete censorship actions, the Hays Office sought to counter bad publicity with good, to keep the press from magnifying its tales of Hollywood debauches, to regularize business procedures, and to encourage producers to submit their films voluntarily for prerelease examination. The loose, informal advising of the Hays Office in the twenties was another in a series of successful Hollywood attempts to keep films out of the hands of government censors, a strategy that would be duplicated by the enforcement of the much less loose and informal Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s and the MPAA Rating System that was set up in 1968 and is still in force.

Films and Filmmakers, 1910–1928

The ever-increasing problem of the American film director was how to make an individualized, special film in a factory system geared toward standardization and mass production. The Griffith era of anarchy and improvisation was rapidly passing, even as Griffith himself went to work for Zukor. For a director to assemble his own company and begin production without a shooting script and production schedule became unthinkable. Rather than being the artistic creator of his own films, the director was more and more expected to be the mechanic who hammered together the machine that others, the producer and writer, had earlier designed. Griffith himself noted with dismay the widening gap between producer and director, between the business of making a film and the art of making a film. Each film, rather than being an important work in itself, became only one unit of the studio's yearly output. Though the films had gotten longer and the film business more complex, studio owners considered only the total yearly product, exactly as they did in the Patents Company days

of the one-reeler. This industrialization of the film business is most relevant to the career of Thomas Ince, Griffith's contemporary and one of the most interesting American producers and directors of noncomic films before 1919.

Ince's films are almost the paradigmatic opposites of Griffith's. Whereas Griffith's technique aimed at developing the characters, their emotions, and the metaphoric implications of the action, Ince concentrated ruthlessly on the narrative flow. Ince was as avid a film editor as Griffith, but whereas Griffith cut to develop rhythm, emotion, and ideas, Ince cut to keep the story moving. Griffith's interest was primarily in why the characters did something and what that implied symbolically; Ince's focused almost exclusively on what they did. Ince's pretentiously symbolic *Civilization* (1916) is an obvious exception. However, more typical of Ince is a film like *The Coward* (1915), a Civil War story that avoids all the symbolic freight of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to concentrate exclusively on one young man's earning his "red badge of courage." The titles of the films (the specificity of Ince's, abstractness of Griffith's) are indicative.

The openness and movement that Griffith used for battle scenes and chases were the bases of Ince's films: the stagecoach sweeping down a mountain trail flanked by mountains and plains and sagebrush, the Indians pursuing, the posse galloping across the prairies, the Indians' circle of death as they revolve about the isolated victims, the dust and smoke and powder of the gun battle (a brilliant translation of sound into visual imagery), the dust of the horses' hooves, the silhouettes of the tribe of Apaches on the mesa awaiting the moment to join the attack. One of the most common (and beautiful) Ince images is smoke—the swirling, enveloping movement of gunpowder or dust, shot through refractive beams of light. The producer Ince's most able director of these early westerns was Francis Ford, whose crisp, deep-focus shots established the photographic conventions of the western. Ince's productions also popularized one of the western's most enduring character types, the good–bad man—embodied by William S. Hart. A little too tough, stubborn and ornery, sometimes even on the wrong side

of the law, he could always be depended on to do the right thing in a crunch.

Contemporary with the nostalgic painting and sculpture of Frederick Remington and the pulp stories of Zane Grey, these Ince and Ford films depict a western frontier that was already disappearing under the tracks and ties of civilization (just as movies themselves had invaded the West and were the most likely place for the old cowhands to find employment). Ince, Ford, and Hart would later pass on these legacies—the power of movement within vast western vistas and the dignity of the good-bad men who inhabit these spaces—to their successors: Ford's younger brother, John, as well as Howard Hawks, Sam Peckinpah, and many others.

As a supervisor of production, in effect a producer, Ince could keep his finger on several different film projects at the same time. Although it was a split that Griffith found distasteful, many of the current generation of directors (Steven Spielberg, for example) have, like Ince and Sennett, alternated between directing and producing. Unlike Griffith, Ince insisted on a detailed shooting script, which he eventually approved and stamped "Shoot as is." The Ince director then went about the business of constructing from the producer's blueprint. Ince supplemented the shooting script with a detailed production breakdown and schedule, making sure that all people and animals and equipment went to the right place at the right time for the fewest number of hours. If Griffith was the cinema's first real director, Ince was its first important producer, instituting the system that divided the artistic responsibility for a film between two people—or camps. Ince showed the future studio heads how to run a studio.

Ironically, Ince's career waned in the studio era itself. He was the hardest hit by the failure of the Triangle Film Corporation, which depended on his films and his Culver City studio. In 1915, the president of the Mutual Film Corporation, Harry Aitken, was ousted by his partner, John R. Freuler, in a power struggle. Aitken, who personally owned the Mutual contracts of Griffith, Sennett, and Ince, took the three with him to build the Triangle Film Cor-

poration, with the three important directors as the tips of the triangle. But Griffith produced several weak program pictures, and Sennett's and Ince's drawing powers were feebler than they had been. The triangle collapsed in 1919. Ince, the movie man of system and efficiency, died mysteriously (on William Randolph Hearst's yacht) in 1924, just when the era of system and efficiency had officially arrived with the Mayer-Thalberg rule at MGM, which stood on Ince's old lot.

The films of Douglas Fairbanks also reveal the changing values of Hollywood. Fairbanks broke into films with Griffith at Triangle; the young actor was so athletic, so bouncy, so perpetually in motion, that Griffith gave up on him and suggested he go see Mr. Sennett. Triangle eventually let Fairbanks go his own way, pairing him with writer Anita Loos, her director-husband, John Emerson, and cameraman Victor Fleming. Between 1915 and 1920, the group produced a series of breezy, parodic, energetic comedies that combined the star's athleticism, energy, and sincerity with the writer's and director's wit and style. The early Fairbanks films—like the utterly outrageous *The Mystery of the Leaping Fish* (1916)—are refreshing surprises. They are parodies that make fun of a personality trait (American snobbishness, the fascination with royalty, the hunger for publicity, the ambition to achieve the impossible) or a genre of films (the western, the mystery, the melodrama). Doug is the center of the parody, the magnified version of whatever the film is satirizing. But Doug, because of his naïveté and enthusiasm, because of his obvious love of life and people, always succeeds in engaging our sympathies at the same time that we may be laughing at him. Loos and Emerson took advantage of the way that Doug overdid everything; they made a virtue of overdoing. And Doug's athleticism, his physical exhilaration, his constant movement, become a delight to watch. Doug's acting technique seemed to center around such questions as: why enter a room through a door when you can jump in through the window? why walk up a flight of stairs when you can swing upstairs on a lighting fixture, or vault through a hole in the downstairs ceiling?

One of the key contrasts in his early films is between the dull, routine, banal life Doug must live in conventional society and the imaginative, free, vigorous life he wants to live. Fairbanks was the foe of the dull and regimented; the row upon row of similar desks in the button factory of *Reaching for the Moon* (1917) was an image of everything he hated. The physical emphasis of Doug's talent also led the star to value the source of the physical, the body. Doug supplemented his on-screen cleanliness with magazine articles lauding the healthy life and disparaging the unhealthy lures of drink, tobacco, and gluttony.

The later Fairbanks films of the twenties—*The Mark of Zorro* (1920, where he leads a real, not imaginary, double life), *Robin Hood* (1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), and *The Black Pirate* (1926, shot in two-strip Technicolor)—make quite a contrast with these earlier, breezy ones. Doug is still a great athlete; he still has his smile and energy. But he is no longer a contemporary American trying to strike a blend between his own imaginative impulses and the conventions of society. Doug has been transported to far-away, romantic lands of long ago. He is free to perform exotic deeds, and although he is usually some kind of thief, he is not, paradoxically, dishonest. In addition to sparking his daring exploits, the faroff themes and places allow Doug to become an explicit sex symbol, gliding through most of the films without his shirt, with limbs clearly defined by a pair of tights or slightly exposed by the scanty cloth that teasingly covers his middle.

No two directors more clearly show the problems of the filmmaker in the 1920s than Erich von Stroheim and Cecil B. DeMille. As were Griffith and Ince a few years earlier, the two are almost paradigms for the whole industry. Von Stroheim (he added the “von” himself and may be referred to as Stroheim or as von Stroheim; the same is true of Josef von Sternberg, except that his “von” was added by a producer) gave the public what he wanted, DeMille gave it what he thought it wanted. Von Stroheim was a ruthless realist committed to his art and his vision; DeMille was willing to throw in any faddish or striking hokum. Von Stroheim's greatest tools were close observation and detail, DeMille's were size and splash. De-

Mille was a big producer; von Stroheim's tragedy was that he had to depend on producers. Von Stroheim's films, despite their adult themes, were controlled by the director's taste and intelligence; DeMille's films had everything but taste and intelligence.

Both DeMille and von Stroheim served several apprentice years before emerging as major directors. DeMille shot his first film, *The Squaw Man* (1914), for Jesse Lasky's Feature Play Company in 1913; it was the first feature-length western shot in Hollywood. The Lasky company was formed by Lasky, DeMille, and Samuel Goldfish in 1913; in 1916 it merged with Zukor's company, Famous Players (founded 1912), to become Famous Players-Lasky. (In 1922, Goldfish left to form a new company with Edgar Selwyn; “Gold” + “wyn” became Goldwyn, and Goldfish soon named himself after the studio. With Goldfish gone, Zukor consolidated Famous Players-Lasky and several other companies into Paramount, for which DeMille directed most of his films.) DeMille began keeping track of national trends and tastes. Von Stroheim began as a studio adviser on European military details and an assistant to (and player for) Griffith, then began playing vicious “Huns” (dubbed “the man you love to hate”), and finally, in 1919, persuaded Carl Laemmle to let him write, direct, and perform in his own films.

The two films that most clearly reveal the differences in the two men are DeMille's *Male and Female* and von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands*. Both were released in 1919; both capitalized on the new audience interest in sexual amours and the doings of the rich. Both suggested the importance of sex in human relationships. There the similarities stop. *Male and Female* is a lavish, pretentious, and inconsistent examination of the class question, which seems to suggest both that masters may marry their servants and that masters may not marry their servants. Although some of the film's confusion stems from the J. M. Barrie play DeMille was adapting, *The Admirable Crichton* (to be adapted again by Lina Wertmüller in 1975 as *Swept Away* . . .), the most dazzling stupidities are DeMille's “additions.” For example, the film begins with a sequence that does not exist in the original play, a series of shots of oceans and



Fig. 6-11

*The Americano gone exotic—Douglas Fairbanks in **The Thief of Bagdad**.*

the Grand Canyon, followed by a biblical quote, “God created man in his own image.” Both the quotation and this whole Creation sequence are irrelevant to anything that follows in the film. The stentorian seriousness of the DeMille beginning—the implication that the film one was about to see was Very Significant Art and might even come directly from God—was a consistent DeMille trait that continued into the sound era. Much of DeMille’s work

uses the Bible to dignify its distinctly lay interests.

DeMille then plunges into the affairs of a contemporary British household, spending most of his time showing the elegance of Gloria Swanson taking a bath (scented with rose water), the water temperature being checked carefully by her maid, Gloria striding carefully and sliding gently into the sunken tub. One of DeMille’s titles asks why shouldn’t the

bathroom express as much elegance as anything else in life, and his even asking such a question is at the heart of what is empty about the film (although DeMille's materialistic Jazz-Age audiences must surely have been delighted to see the answer). Meanwhile, DeMille contrasts the high-falutin' ways of Lady Mary (Gloria), who rejects a piece of toast because it is too soft, with the simple ways of Tweeny, her maid. Simple Tweeny is in love with the butler, Crichton (Thomas Meighan). But, alas, he is not simple; he loves Lady Mary; he reads aloud poetry that Tweeny cannot understand but Lady Mary can.

Then the whole family takes a yachting trip and runs aground. A title tells us that they have sailed into "uncharted seas," but we recognize Catalina. Now that the group must survive on a desert isle, DeMille can add yet another locale and style of decor to the film. Having already filmed the Creation and a chic English drawing-room comedy, he can go about filming a kind of Swiss Family Robinson. On the island, it turns out that he who is lower class in one society is upper class in another. Crichton, the butler, becomes the king of the group and they become his servants, simply because he is competent and fit to survive, while they are all numbskulls trying to play at being posh in the wilderness. The only unaltered element is that Crichton still loves Mary (now no longer a Lady), and she discovers that she loves him. One night, fearing for her safety, Crichton follows her to the haunt of the lions where he slays a beast that is about to attack her. The male and female vow their love. And now DeMille throws in the kitchen sink.

There is an instantaneous and unmotivated cut to some Oriental dream kingdom, presumably Babylon (the scene does not exist, of course, in Barrie's play). The motivation for the shift is the line of poetry that Crichton and Mary have read in the film (Barrie uses the line just once, but DeMille repeats it several times so you don't miss it), "If I were a king of Babylon. . . ." DeMille is not one to leave his ifs iffy. In this Babylon sequence, Crichton is indeed king, and Mary, a title informs us, is a Christian slave. The fact that Babylon had evaporated hundreds of years before Christ

does not offend DeMille's sense of history. Despite the irrelevance of the shift, DeMille can trade in the cave man, leopard skin costumes of the island sequence for the lavish, gaudy silks and satins of Hollywood's version of Babylon.

The film is clearly one of the bastard progeny of *Intolerance* in its combination of different epochs in a single film. But in *Male and Female*, the diversity is pointless and pretentious, and the moralizing is hypocritical. Such moral spinelessness became a staple of DeMille's career. His racy films (like *Why Change Your Wife?*, 1920, and *Forbidden Fruit*, 1922) flirt with naughtiness and sell conventionality; his religious films flirt with righteousness and sell lewdness. In both versions of *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956), DeMille was more interested in the splashy sinful doings around the golden calf than in the righteous thunder and lightning on the mountain.

Von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* is a far less complicated story than *Male and Female*. A doctor and his wife travel to the Alps; he pays her insufficient sexual attention. A German military officer (played by von Stroheim) sees the young wife and desires her; she cannot stop herself from desiring him, for she has no other outlet for her desires. The husband's blindness finally clears up; on a climactic hiking trip, the two males confront each other on the pinnacle, and the lecherous rival perishes, more a victim of the mountains and of fate than of the husband. The power of the film lies in von Stroheim's reduction of the quantity of incidents (quantity was DeMille's credo) in order to develop the quality, the feeling, the texture of the incidents he includes. Von Stroheim was such a master of *mise-en-scène* (see definition below) that his films remain powerful even if they were recut (actually, massacred) by lesser talents after having been taken out of von Stroheim's hands; we can still see what's *in the shot* and respond to that. Details develop the film's emotional dynamics: the calm husband's pipe; the wife's provocative ankles and shoes; the German's handling of his monocle and his careful primping with brush, comb, and vaporizer of cologne to make himself sexually attractive; the soulful tune that Margaret (the wife) plays on the piano, joined by von Steuben (the German) on

the violin, which shows both her loneliness and her desire (we need no sound to hear the kind of tune the two are playing).

Von Stroheim's attention to detail inevitably allows him the luxury and subtlety of understatement. Several of the seduction scenes between von Steuben and Margaret take place in rooms, or hallways, or fields where a cross can distantly but clearly be seen in the background; von Stroheim never cuts to a close-up of the cross. The one way to turn subtle symbolism into overstated twaddle would have been to force us to read the crosses symbolically. Von Stroheim, a mature artist, knows the power of allusion and understatement.

The director's technique owes its greatest debt to his first master, Griffith. Like Griffith, his two principal tools are editing (montage) and the creation of atmosphere (*mise-en-scène*: what is provided and arranged within a shot; what is made to be the scene, or put into it as a photographable element). Von Stroheim's care with sets, lighting, costumes, and decor is so meticulous in creating his seamy world that you can almost smell it. In *Blind Husbands*, the details of the inn courtyard, of the dining room with its posters and crockery, of the individual bedrooms (so important to the film's plot), of the fog and mist on the pinnacle, all contribute to the tone of the film and the power of each scene.

Von Stroheim's care extended to his editing of the films, further developing Griffith's devices of the cross-cut (to show parallel events in different places at the same time) and the subjective cut (to show the mental projection of a character: what is in his or her mind's eye at a particular moment). In *Blind Husbands*, von Stroheim's cross-cutting develops both tension and irony. For example, he shows the doctor delivering a baby at the same time that von Steuben courts his wife, obviously trying to perform the act that produces babies. The most striking subjective cut in *Blind Husbands* comes just after the husband has discovered the Prussian's designs on his wife. Von Stroheim suddenly cuts to a menacing, spot-lit head of the German looming out of the darkness until it fills the frame; it leers grotesquely and points an accusing finger at the doctor.

The grotesque, the ugly, and the psychologically disturbed are dominant motifs in his work. André Bazin described von Stroheim's "one simple rule for direction": "Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and ugliness." Von Stroheim's films are populated with physical cripples and mental defectives (whose like the screen would not see until Tod Browning's *Freaks* and Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*—both 1932 and both banned), but even beneath the surfaces of his more elegant characters—their polished manners, white gloves, and spray perfume—there is animal rapacity, viciousness, obsessive desire, and the brutal will to power. In von Stroheim's Naturalistic worldview, heredity, instinct, psychopathology, environment, and economics determine behavior, which he observes with the sharp eye of a realist—but a realist to whom all the resources of Expressionism are available. That may sound paradoxical, but it is exact.

In *Foolish Wives* (1921, which Universal hyped as "the first million dollar picture" and cut from just over 21 to just over 14 reels before releasing it in 1922; now only 7½ reels survive), a fake Russian Count (von Stroheim) attempts to rape a helpless, mentally retarded young woman. At the end of the film, her father kills the "Count" and dumps his body into the sewer so it can be swept out to sea with the other garbage.

Foolish Wives made von Stroheim world famous. When Jean Renoir saw it, he decided to make movies instead of ceramics. Like *Blind Husbands* and *The Devil's Pass Key* (1920, now lost), and even his later *The Merry Widow* (1925), *Foolish Wives* was extremely popular with audiences who appreciated its careful examination of bedroom tensions. The haughty independence of its director was less popular with the heads of studios and their flunkies. Erich von Stroheim was a completist, a perfectionist, an idealist who took film and its possibilities absolutely seriously; he was forced to work with executives (much like those who run Hollywood today) who maintained that they had an instinct for show business and knew better than anyone else what made a good picture—or had experience with budgets and could recognize an



Fig. 6-12



Fig. 6-13

Foolish Wives: Erich von Stroheim (as the bogus Russian Count) defines his murderousness on the pistol range (Fig. 6-12); then he sets his sexual sights on a mentally retarded young woman (Fig. 6-13).

advisable investment. Most of them regarded von Stroheim as an egomaniac whose projects always needed to be brought under control. Irving Thalberg, who was to become MGM's most creative production executive before his early death, hated von Stroheim as much as his

work. When Thalberg was Carl Laemmle's assistant at Universal, he removed von Stroheim from *Merry-Go-Round* (1922) in the middle of shooting, firing him for his "inefficient" (that is, perfectionistic and uncompromising) production methods, his wasteful expenditures on "invisible" details (which were actually quite visible in the convincing realism and texture of the film), and his insubordination (von Stroheim said they often "crossed swords"). At MGM, Thalberg would get the chance to fire von Stroheim again—and beyond that, to destroy his greatest work, in one of film history's true horror stories, the re-editing of *Greed* (1924).

Von Stroheim had long wanted to film a complete novel, and the one he chose—by Frank Norris, a writer he knew Griffith admired, for his story "A Deal in Wheat" had been the basis of *A Corner in Wheat*—was *McTeague, A Story of San Francisco* (1899). In 1922 he interested Samuel Goldwyn in backing the project and was hired by the Goldwyn Company, whose slogan was "the author and the play are the thing."

McTeague attracted von Stroheim for many reasons. It was uncompromisingly realistic, psychologically intriguing, and structured like a greased slide to Hell. Norris's view of the human dog matched that of von Stroheim, who consistently depicted human behavior in animal terms. Like von Stroheim, Norris was a realist (to be specific, a Naturalist in the tradition of Emile Zola) with a taste for the pathological. Many of von Stroheim's films and Norris's novels are about people who fall victim to traps they have set for themselves without knowing it, people whose very lives are traps. Further, the novel's family of German immigrants roughly paralleled von Stroheim's own heritage (he was born in Vienna, the son of a Jewish hatter from Prussia), and the novel's familiar San Francisco and Oakland settings appealed to a man who had lived there before going to Hollywood. He did not, as it is often said, set out to film *McTeague* page by page; his script includes most of the novel but changes and adds a great deal, and where the novel was entirely realistic, the film was that and more. Shot entirely on location—that is, without a single studio set—in an era of studio shooting, it was

also an experiment in Expressionism; it observed behavior from the outside, as tightly and scrupulously as the job has ever been done, but it also dipped into the mind and displayed its contents.

With cast and crew (the cinematographers were Ben F. Reynolds and William H. Daniels), von Stroheim went to San Francisco to shoot on the very streets named in the novel, and even to Death Valley (in the summer!) to obtain absolutely authentic details. One of the stars, Jean Hersholt, had to be hospitalized after the grueling takes in Death Valley. The film took seven months to shoot and cost \$470,000; then von Stroheim edited it for months.

The original version of *McTeague*—pre-viewed to two journalists, who wrote about what they saw, and one director—ran forty-two reels, a mere nine hours at 20 frames per second (in the teens and 1920s, silent speed varied from 16 to 24 fps, depending on the year and the camera operator; 16, 18, and 20 fps were common speeds). That first audience felt they had seen the greatest movie ever made or likely to be made. Von Stroheim himself shortened the film to twenty-four reels (just over five hours, considered the “director’s version”), to be shown in two parts, with a dinner break after the wedding sequence. His friend at Metro, Rex Ingram (who had been the third member of that first audience), cut the film to eighteen reels and forbade von Stroheim to let anyone take another foot out of it. By this time the Maria/Zerkow and Baker/Grannis stories, to be discussed below, had been trimmed drastically but not deleted, and the film was still in two parts.

Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, the Goldwyn Company—without Goldwyn, who had been forced out by his partners but who soon founded Samuel Goldwyn Productions entirely on his own—merged in 1924 with Metro Pictures (which was owned by Marcus Loew of Loew’s Inc., the man who arranged the merger) and with Louis B. Mayer Productions, forming Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Mayer hired Thalberg away from Universal and put him directly in charge of production. All this made *McTeague* an MGM property and put von Stroheim at Thalberg’s mercy, which was not a good place to be. Fully backed up by Mayer, Thalberg

turned the film over to the MGM story and editing departments; under the loose supervision of June Mathis, a hack cutter and title-writer named Joseph W. Farnham—who had not read the book or the script—completed the hatchet job. What was left of a long, tight masterpiece was a mess; von Stroheim said the cutter had nothing on his mind but a hat. *McTeague* was retitled *Greed* and made to open with a bad poem about gold. The nearly three-hour prologue was cut to less than five minutes. Mathis and/or Farnham wrote idiotic intertitles to patch up some of the glaring holes that had been created in the story’s continuity and in the characters’ motivations. In addition, many scenes were shuffled out of order, and three Expressionist shots—out of all those sequences, many of which had presented the dreams and hallucinations of a crazy junkman, obsessed with discovering a 100-plate service of solid gold, but some of which had used grotesque shadows and figures to convey the violence and madness of the waking world—were randomly cut into the realistic footage as “symbolic” commentary on the greed of the characters. *Greed* was released at ten reels (2¼ hours with no intermission—in some cases, after all this cutting, on a double bill!), no copies of the earlier versions were made, and except for the ten reels used in *Greed*, the negative was destroyed along with all the outtakes so that the silver might be retrieved from the celluloid.

The *Greed* that exists (the release version) must therefore be judged on the strength of its parts rather than as a whole. For one who hasn’t read Norris’s novel, the film’s narrative (certainly its details) is almost incomprehensible. The concrete process of the dissolution of the relationship between the dentist, John McTeague (Mac), and his wife, Trina Sieppe, makes no sense in the film, for in the novel Norris carefully charts it by moving the couple to shabbier and shabbier living quarters—a practice followed in von Stroheim’s script (which was faithful to the novel but not afraid to add a feature-length prologue, a funeral at a wedding, or a second pet bird). Each degradation in their physical surroundings implies or contributes to their bodily, emotional, moral, and psychological degradation. But in *Greed*, although we may notice that the walls of the



Fig. 6-14

On location: Gibson Gowland (left) and ZaSu Pitts in *Greed*.

McTeague household change as the film progresses, we never know exactly when, why, and where the couple has moved, or how the delicate Trina became so rough and sloppy. Although in one shot we may notice that Trina's bandaged hand is lacking several fingers, we never learn from the film that she lost them because they became infected as a result of her husband's biting them. The dissolution from happy marriage to vicious, insane combat—which is, both psychologically and economically, the meticulously observed subject of at least half of the novel (and of the screenplay)—barely exists in the film.

Another reason this sense of gradual, inevitable dissolution is lost is that the ten-reel version had to do without two other "love" relationships in the novel that undoubtedly seemed superfluous to a hack writer and cutter but that are really essential. The relationship between Trina (ZaSu Pitts, in one of the silent screen's greatest performances) and Mac (Gibson Gowland) is bounded, on the one hand, by old Grannis and Miss Baker, a couple of timid old folks who carry on a pure, genteel, unphysical love affair, and, on the other, by Zerkow (the junkman) and Maria Macapa, two slovenly human beasts whose "love" is based

on Zerkow's almost sexual pleasure in listening to the equally insane Maria's story of her hoard of gold. Maria remains in the released film only long enough to sell Trina the fateful lottery ticket; Zerkow is deleted entirely. All that remains of their "love story" are a few shots of skeletal, photographically distorted arms playing with distorted treasures; taken out of the Maria-Zerkow context and applied to Trina, these shots seem irrelevant and pretentious. In the novel, we understand the original love of Mac and Trina, together with their originally rational view of money, as a median between the sexual timidity and parsimony of the old folks and the crazed passion of the gold lovers. Trina begins as Miss Baker's close friend, somewhat repulsed by Maria's crudeness, and gradually drifts into becoming Maria's confidante. Mac and Trina even move into the squalid hovel where Zerkow and Maria lived (and which became vacant when Zerkow cut Maria's throat). Without the two poles of these other couples, *Greed* has no barometer to measure the direction and degree of decay in the central couple; it is a triptych missing its outer panels.

Despite the incoherence of *Greed* as a whole, many of the sequences are visual and dramatic marvels, and the *mise-en-scène* survives within the surviving shots. The wedding ceremony is a mixture of the comic and the somber: a delightful parody of wedding customs that is overshadowed by the sight of a funeral cortege through an open window (a great use of deep focus and a clear premonition of the direction the marriage will take). The scene in which Trina realizes that she is alone—with no one to protect her except the stranger who is her animal-sensual husband—is a touching examination of her feelings. The mad scene that climaxes her perverse confusion of money and sex, where she lies naked in bed with her gold, is both daring and terrifying as well as cinematically unprecedented. Von Stroheim's use of animal symbolism, particularly his likening the envious Marcus Schouler (Jean Hersholt) to the sneaky cat that constantly prowls about the cage of McTeague's more complexly symbolic birds, is quite effective. And most awesome visually are the endless wastes of Death Valley—a seeming infinity of caked sand and dust under

a pitiless, dead sky—the ultimate stopping place on a journey in which a dead metal seems the only goal worth pursuing.

That same vision dominates even the fluffy trifle that Thalberg assigned von Stroheim after *Greed*. *The Merry Widow* (1925) was a safe property, a Viennese operetta that Thalberg was sure von Stroheim could not destroy. Von Stroheim apparently did not destroy it; the film was one of his greatest commercial successes. But von Stroheim, in adapting this operetta fairy tale, devotes a disproportionate amount of attention to the widow's first husband (before she became a widow) rather than her resulting merry widowhood. The husband is a deformed cripple (von Stroheim accentuates the deformity) with a very obvious sexual fetish; he is attracted to healthy feet—a theme that von Stroheim develops with pointed cutting. Worse, he is so excited on his wedding night that he collapses and dies on top of his bride, worn out from dragging his gnarled body up to the bed of love. Von Stroheim's handling of this unsavory relationship is not exactly operetta fare. Another brilliant stroke is his depiction of the mental attitudes of the widow's three suitors. All three come to watch her perform at the theatre; all three stare at her through opera glasses. Then von Stroheim cuts to the object of their stares: the cripple watches her feet; the lecherous suitor watches her groin; the young hero watches her face. Such naturalistic touches turned Franz Lehár's operetta into a salacious parody of an operetta.

Because his production methods seemed extravagant, because he seemed mean and tyrannical, unwholesome and unpleasant, Erich von Stroheim was very easy to fire, even if his films made money. *The Merry Widow* was his last film for MGM and MGM's first big hit. He went to work for Zukor and had as little success with him as with Thalberg. After two very interesting projects of 1926–1929, *The Wedding March* (which starred von Stroheim, ZaSu Pitts, and Fay Wray; began as a production for Pat Powers's independent company, Celebrity Pictures; became a Paramount picture when Zukor bought Powers out; and was drastically cut before its 1928 release—although we now have the benefit of von Stroheim's 1957 recut of the first half of what was to have been a two-part



Fig. 6-15

The wedding scene of Greed, with the funeral procession outside on the street below.

film) and *Queen Kelly* (produced by Gloria Swanson, who fired him too), Erich von Stroheim directed only one other film, *Walking Down Broadway* (1932, released 1933 as *Hello Sister!* after much tampering and reshooting by others). For the next twenty-five years von Stroheim continued acting in films—one of the many ways his career anticipates that of Orson Welles—most memorably as von Rauffenstein in *Grand Illusion* (directed by Renoir, whose entire career and aesthetic he had decisively influenced) and as Max, the chauffeur and former movie director, in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). The irony of this late film was not only that von Stroheim played a character whose career echoed his own (the filmclips Norma Desmond screens in the movie are from his own *Queen Kelly*), but also that he played the devoted servant of Gloria Swanson, who was with him at the stormy end of his Hollywood road.

Another interesting and important descendant of Griffith's methods was Henry King's *Tol'able David*. The Soviet director V. I. Pudovkin found King's use of cutting to build a scene as instructive and effective as Griffith's. *Tol'able David* (1921) is a very powerful film in which King, the student of Griffith