

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Ethereal beauty: the films of Lillian Gish</b>
Author(s)	Steve Gravestock
Source	<i>Cinematheque Ontario/a division of Toronto International Film Festival Group</i>
Date	2005
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	26-29
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Gish, Lillian (1896-1993), Springfield, Ohio, United States
Film Subjects	The Night of the hunter, Laughton, Charles, 1955 The lady and the mouse, Griffith, D. W., 1912 The Scarlet letter, Sjöström, Victor, 1926 Broken blossoms, Griffith, D. W., 1919 True heart Susie, Griffith, D. W., 1919 Annie Laurie, Robertson, John S., 1927 Way down east, Griffith, D. W., 1920 Duel in the sun, Vidor, King, 1946 The cobweb, Minnelli, Vincente, 1955 The wind, Sjöström, Victor, 1928

Orphans of the storm, Griffith, D. W., 1921





# ETHEREAL BEAUTY:

The films of

Lillian Gish

*"The eternal radiance of Lillian Gish shines through everything."* – David Thompson

*Gish "seemed to hold within all the possible ages of a woman."* – Urjo Kareda

Cinematheque Ontario 15P 2005.

One of the true pioneers of silent cinema, Lillian Gish was born in 1893 and was a working actress for almost a century, alternating between screen and stage. She made her theatrical debut, at the age of nine, in 1902. Her screen debut was in D.W. Griffith's *AN UNSEEN ENEMY* in 1912, while her last film role, in Lindsay Anderson's *WHALES OF AUGUST*, was in 1987.

Gish's career was sparked by both accident and necessity. When Lillian was still a child, her mother Mary threw out her alcoholic husband because of his inability to support their family. In order to make ends meet, the women took in boarders; one such boarder had a daughter named Gladys Smith, who made a reasonable living in theatre. The stage wasn't considered suitable for decent young ladies at the time, but, against her will, Mary began acting and eventually her daughters joined her. Movies were out of the question until Lillian and her sister Dorothy saw young Gladys in a one reeler, *LENA AND THE GEESE* (1912). The trio promptly visited her at New York's Biograph studios only to find Gladys had changed her name to Mary Pickford.

Fabled director D.W. Griffith was immediately taken with the two sisters, especially Lillian, and one of the most significant collaborations in film history was born. Along with Griffith and his troupe, Gish helped forge the language and codes of silent cinema, developing an acting style which refined the melodramatic stage acting popular at the time (Gish also worked with David Belasco, the most celebrated writer-director in American theatre – two of his elaborate spectacles were adapted by Puccini), and a more reflective, scaled-down approach which allowed the performers to communicate thoughts and emotions. "In their move beyond the semaphore of mime," writes Charles Affron in his fine biography *Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life*, "Pickford, Gish, and other members of Griffith's

company were alive to the properties of the movies themselves, and to Griffith's belief in new ways of telling stories. . . . In close-up, and without the conventional, hackneyed gestures, the complexity and depth of an actor's thoughts and feelings sometimes became manifest on his or her face."

From the outset, Gish was one of Griffith's favourite actresses, in part because of her skill at playing imperilled women, one of the director's characteristic tropes. Griffith customarily cast Gish in two roles: as an ethereal waif or a proper, determined young woman. Much of this had to do with Gish's distinctive, strangely ageless beauty. Pickford biographer Eileen Whitfield commented, "At sixteen her face, with its large eyes, long neck, tiny mouth, and hint of a double chin, fused her delicate, just-grown beauty with the down-to-earth beauty of a spinster." Gish made thirty-five pictures with Griffith, and she remained his staunch supporter despite the controversy surrounding *BIRTH OF A NATION* (1915). Her fealty was evident in a variety of projects: a TV docudrama about Griffith, based on her memoirs, called "The Birth of the Movies" (1952); an autobiography, *Lillian Gish: The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (1969), which devoted as much or more time to Griffith's life; a travelling lecture series based on her book; and her campaign for a postage stamp in Griffith's honour.

Gish's first breakthrough, establishing her as a major presence in cinema, probably came with Griffith's incendiary *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (1919), followed by *WAY DOWN EAST* (1920) and *ORPHANS OF THE STORM* (1921). Though she starred in her share of comedies and romances – see for instance Griffith's *TRUE HEART SUSIE* (1919) – Gish became increasingly identified with tragedy. She left Los Angeles to shoot in Europe briefly in the twenties, which didn't exactly endear her to the Hollywood community. This dislike was exacerbated by a prim image that extended beyond her roles and which, according to Affron, she laboured to maintain.



She was an America Firster and a staunch Republican (a friend of Ron and Nancy), often bemoaning the immorality of her career choice in personal letters to friends. In fact, many found her rather snobbish, a perception heightened by her connection to "intellectuals" like Griffith and even Eugene O'Neill, who once called Lillian the smartest woman he'd ever met. As Eileen Whitfield notes in her biography of Pickford, "both [sisters] . . . were worshipped by the highbrow crowd because of their long association with D.W. Griffith." As Whitfield also notes, she was always considered more an actress than a star.

Gish returned to Hollywood in 1925, signed with MGM, and was given the authority to choose projects and directors. The first film under her new contract was one of her biggest hits, *LA BOHÈME* (1926), for which she hired King Vidor, then the most celebrated director in Hollywood. She would later opt to work with another major silent film director, Swedish émigré Victor Sjöström, for two seminal works: *THE SCARLET LETTER* (1926) and *THE WIND* (1928). In later years, Gish seldom acknowledged any directors from this period other than these three, often downplaying the significance of her other films. (That said, she did lobby hard for honorary Oscars for Abel Gance, Henri Langlois, King Vidor, and MoMA's Film Department – and her foundation ardently supported film preservation.)

When the silent period ended, Gish devoted more and more time to the stage and eventually began working for television. But she never abandoned movies entirely, working with such filmmakers as Vincente Minnelli (*THE COBWEB*, 1955), Charles Laughton (*THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER*, 1955), and Vidor again (*DUEL IN THE SUN*, 1946). Gish was awarded an honorary Oscar in 1971, and an American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award in 1984. She died in 1993.

Though Gish was a principal architect in the development of film acting, what one takes from her finest work is the primal immediacy typical of the apex of silent cinema. More than seven decades later, her most exquisite performances are still decidedly unsettling and – despite Gish's grande dame persona and her Victorian politics – profoundly visceral.

– **Steve Gravestock**

Steve Gravestock is an international programmer and the Associate Director of Canadian Special Projects at the Toronto International Film Festival Group.

Cinémathèque Ontario wishes to thank the following organizations for their assistance in the preparation of this series: MoMA, New York City; UCLA Film and Television Archive (Los Angeles); Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.); George Eastman House (Rochester); La Cinémathèque québécoise (Montreal); MGM/UA Distribution Services (Los Angeles); University of Toronto Audio-Visual Library (Toronto). Film descriptions by Steve Gravestock, unless otherwise noted.

**NB: Silent film run times are approximate.**

## CANADIAN PREMIERE OF NEW 35MM RESTORATION! THE SCARLET LETTER

Director: Victor Sjöström • USA 1926 100 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, Lars Hanson

Not to be missed: a recently completed restoration by the UCLA Film and Television Archive of a film whose greatness has hitherto been compromised by the poor state of extant prints, which were truncated, dupey, splotched. (The one we showed in the Sjöström retrospective last year was mostly beautiful but incomplete; this is far superior.) Now Sjöström's magnificent achievement, featuring Gish in "one of the most beautifully sustained performances in screen history" (Pauline Kael), can be properly appreciated in a print restored from the original camera negative. Gish renders the heroines of *THE WIND* and *THE SCARLET LETTER* with such sensual abandon that it seems inarguable that her best work was not for Griffith but for the Swedish master, whose career she revitalized by selecting him to direct. As Hester Prynne, seduced then traduced in Hawthorne's classic tale of adultery and ostracism in seventeenth-century Boston, Gish offers a performance whose registers of desire and obstinacy, selfless love and unbounded courage rise to heights of intensity that can only be called operatic. Sjöström's mastery of landscape and visual design – his use of windows especially – and his Scandinavian sense of social control, puritanism, and insularity, perfectly capture the novel's interplay of theocratic enclosure and liberating wilderness. – **James Quandt**

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Friday, April 8 6:30 p.m.**

## ARCHIVAL TINTED PRINT!

### BROKEN BLOSSOMS

Director: D.W. Griffith • USA 1919 90 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, Richard Barthelmess

Gish, in one of her most heralded performances, plays the tormented waif Lucy, whose brutish father takes out his frustrations on her; Richard Barthelmess is the Chinese shopkeeper who rescues Lucy after one of her father's alcohol-fuelled rages. "When Richard Barthelmess first confronts Lillian Gish . . . the subtle exchange of emotions between the two players would defy the art of the greatest novelist" (Andrew Sarris). Considered by some to be an apology for *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, the film is still steeped in Victorian melodrama and condescending stereotypes (Barthelmess is only referred to as "the Yellow Man"). Yet its relentless dramatic drive, intimate scope, and bleak, biting sarcasm probably make it his most modern work, at least to our eyes. In fact, its clumsy sincerity somehow makes it more emotionally devastating. The film's most famous moment – when Gish forces her mouth into a smile – was apparently brought about because she was ill with the flu. The astonishing set design and visual scheme led many critics to believe it was shot on location in London's seedy Limehouse district. "D.W. Griffith's stylized lyric tragedy – a small-scale film that is one of his most poetic, and one of his finest" (Pauline Kael).

preceded by

### AN UNSEEN ENEMY

Director: D.W. Griffith • USA 1912 17 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish

In their first film roles, Gish and her sister Dorothy play orphans terrorized by their scheming maid after she discovers their father left them a sizable amount of money. Griffith allegedly auditioned them by chasing them around the set firing a gun.

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Monday, April 11 6:30 p.m.**

### THE COBWEB

Director: Vincent Minnelli • USA 1955 124 minutes • Cast: Richard Widmark, Lillian Gish

A masterpiece by Minnelli by any measure, and one that can stand with the great fifties melodramas of Kazan, Ray, and Sirk. (Jonathan Rosenbaum recently chose it as one of the one hundred essential films of all time.) Richard Widmark plays the progressive head of a psychiatric clinic whose compassionate theories about patient care and responsibility are severely tested when the selection of new curtains for the library becomes the flash point for several contending parties, each with a different vision of how the clinic should be run. Gloria Grahame is glorious as Widmark's trapped, yearning wife, all bruised loneliness and misplaced sophistication, and Lauren Bacall rivals her as the maternal, artistic soul struggling with a past she cannot suppress. Gish plays the starchily hysterical business director who uses the crisis over the curtains to exert her waning power in the clinic. Charged with strange tension – Widmark has that snarling, glinty mien from *KISS OF DEATH* and *PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET*, which makes him a very odd doctor – and rife with fifties Freudianism, *THE COBWEB* examines the madness of American conformity with both immense tenderness and scalding insight. "One of the best of Minnelli's 50s dramas" (*Time Out Film Guide*). – **James Quandt**

**Monday, April 11 8:45 p.m.**



*Gish*





### THE WIND

Director: Victor Sjöström  
USA 1928 71 minutes silent  
Cast: Lillian Gish, Lars Hanson

"One of cinema's great masterpieces. The lovely Lillian Gish gives her finest performance ever" (Geoff Andrew). *THE WIND* follows Gish's refined, lady-like Letty as she journeys to her cousin's remote homestead in Texas after the last member of her immediate family dies, completely unprepared for the conditions she's about to face. The area is beset by incessant, howling winds, which drive people, especially women, mad; her cousin's wife considers Letty a threat, on every level. (The film was shot in the Mojave Desert where the heat was so bad it stripped the skin off Gish's hand when she tried to open the door to her trailer.) Sjöström provides a sharp gloss on the innocent, kittenish sexuality of Gish's earlier work with Griffith; here, in the cramped, grim shack the family calls home, it has a rather explosive impact. The depiction of whipping winds is as fierce and elemental as anything in silent cinema, or afterwards. Coerced into marriage, Letty slowly begins to lose her grip on reality. According to Gish, the exhibitors forced a happy ending on the filmmakers, but it hardly matters, given the power of what precedes it.

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Tuesday, April 12 6:30 p.m.**



### THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Director: Charles Laughton  
USA 1955 93 minutes  
Cast: Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, Lillian Gish

"One of the most frightening movies ever made" (Pauline Kael), *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER* stars Robert Mitchum in perhaps the most memorable appearance of his lengthy and substantial career. He plays a psychopathic preacher/ex-con with "love" and "hate" tattooed across his knuckles. He's on the trail of his dead cell-mate's wife (Shelley Winters), believing she has the proceeds from a bank job her husband committed. He charms her and they're soon married, but it's actually her children who know the whereabouts of the loot. Unlike their mother, they're instantly suspicious of him. Written by James Agee, the film suffuses everything from German Expressionism to American silent cinema to the Old Testament. Fittingly, Gish plays the children's saviour; a model of rectitude, she's the only adult not taken in by Mitchum's preacher. "Gish... assumed the face of a long-gone America, one that she knew well, remembered vividly, believed in" (Charles Affron). A box office disaster, this was, unfortunately, Laughton's only effort as a director.

**Thursday, April 14 8:45 p.m.**



### DUEL IN THE SUN

Director: King Vidor  
USA 1947 138 minutes  
Cast: Gregory Peck, Lillian Gish

A legendary, decidedly campy Technicolor western, as florid as any silent melodrama, *DUEL IN THE SUN* stars Gregory Peck and Joseph Cotten as two brothers battling over a half-breed vixen played by Jennifer Jones. Lionel Barrymore is the patriarch whose empire is collapsing around him. Gish plays his wife, ostensibly a model of propriety. (At least, she's the only character not rending her garments in fits of passion in every other scene.) The ferociously operatic conclusion was extremely influential, with echoes of it showing up in the most unlikely places. Producer David O. Selznick was apparently determined to one-up *GONE WITH THE WIND* and went through several directors and cinematographers. "Luridly beautiful, with stunning passages... it has rare power and a great supporting cast" (Tom Milne). Gish earned her first and only Oscar nomination for her performance.

**Friday, April 22 8:30 p.m.**

### ANNIE LAURIE

Director: John S. Robertson  
USA 1927 91 minutes silent  
Cast: Lillian Gish, Norman Kerry

Gish plays the eponymous character, caught between two feuding Highland clans, the Campbells and the MacDonalds. Despite her refined upbringing, Annie is instantly attracted to Ian MacDonald, but she's unwilling to acknowledge either her feelings or her desire for him. Reportedly the film was intended to revamp Gish's frail, ethereal image and turn her into a more sensual figure. Long thought lost, *ANNIE LAURIE* was a financial failure and effectively ended Gish's time at MGM, despite its lush production, stirring narrative, and hair-raising finale, which featured Annie charging up a hill to light a warning signal. "Gish, fleeing up a mountain like a frightened bird to light the beacon, pursued by gun shots from a guard, drew a storm of applause" (*Variety*).

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Wednesday, April 13 8:45 p.m.**

### LA BOHÈME

Director: King Vidor • USA 1926 101 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, John Gilbert

Gish's first film for MGM upon her return to Hollywood in 1925, *LA BOHÈME* was hand-picked by her and tailored to her gifts. She hired King Vidor, whose last film, *THE BIG PARADE*, had made him one of the most important directors at the time. She even selected the film stock. Based on Puccini's opera and its source, the Henri Murger novel, the film was a huge success and brought none other than Louis B. Mayer to tears. Gish plays Mimi, the ill-fated 1830s Paris bohemian. The film afforded Gish the opportunity to suffer magnificently. New York critics in particular loved *LA BOHÈME*, and considered it a breakthrough in terms of Gish's choice of character. "There is the light of a clear purpose at last in the eyes of this star, so often hitherto a passive madonna of the studios" (*The New York Times*). The costumes were by famed designer Erté, though Gish refused to wear them because she felt they were too stiff and inauthentic.

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Wednesday, April 20 8:30 p.m.**





# CINEMATHEQUE ONTARIO LECTURE AND SCREENING

## TOM GUNNING ON LILLIAN GISH



Lillian Gish literally embodied the ideal of the silent actress: a body expressive of the range of emotions, and a face whose illumination not only conveyed feeling but a nearly transcendent quality of passion and grace. Her work with D.W. Griffith marked a process not only of the development of a young actress, but of the discovery and exploration of the primal relation between actor and camera. In this process there is no question that Gish led Griffith to discoveries as much as she learned from him. The films they made together capture one of the truly great artistic collaborations of the art of film and of the twentieth century. Funny, tender, furious, suffering – Gish took the cultural givens of Victorian femininity and broadened both their meaning and their expression. – **Tom Gunning**

Tom Gunning is Edwin A. and Betty L. Bergman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Art History and the Committee on Cinema and Media at the University of Chicago. He is author of *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (1991, University of Illinois Press) and *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (2000, bfi Publishing), as well as numerous articles on early cinema and the avant-garde. Tom Gunning's lecture will be approximately 50 minutes.

### TRUE HEART SUSIE

Director: D.W. Griffith • USA 1919 71 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, Robert Harron

One of Griffith's loveliest, but lesser-known bucolic romances, *TRUE HEART SUSIE* stars Gish as a young woman determined to put her boyfriend through college. She sells her cow to pay his tuition, and he proceeds to marry Betty, a decidedly more modern girl. Biographer Charles Affron argues that the scenario reflects Gish's unusual relationship with Griffith. Gish's performance has been much admired recently, principally because "she reduces theatrical pantomime to its most microscopic form, displaying a stream of emotions, conjoining her emotions so gracefully and inventively that we hardly notice how various they are" (James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*). Notice how ably Gish captures the range of Susie's emotions when she discovers her boyfriend's latest flame.

preceded by

### THE LADY AND THE MOUSE

Director: D.W. Griffith • USA 1913 17 minutes silent • Cast: Lillian Gish, Lionel Barrymore

Gish plays an earnest, industrious young woman determined to save the family farm from a mortgage foreclosure. Griffith telegraphs her essential virtue by having her apologize to a mouse after she nearly drowns it.

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Saturday, April 23 6:30 p.m.**

Single tickets are \$10.25 (including GST) for Cinematheque Ontario members and \$15.50 for non-members. Purchase a subscription to the Cinematheque Ontario Lecture Series and secure your seat at ten events between March and December 2005. Members can subscribe for \$92.00; non-members for \$142.00.



### ORPHANS OF THE STORM

Director: D.W. Griffith  
USA 1921 120 minutes silent  
Cast: Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish

Griffith's take on the French Revolution stars the Gishes as orphans caught in the maelstrom. Lillian plays the daughter of poor but honest peasants; Dorothy is her adopted sister Louise, the child of an aristocratic young woman and a commoner, left on the doorstep of an orphanage by her enraged grandfather. The film shuttles between the indignities heaped on the sisters when they visit Paris to treat Louise's blindness, the outrageous excesses of the upper classes (a party features scantily clad women in a fountain filled with wine), and the increasingly restless peasants led by the heroic Danton and, as the inter-titles have it, "pussy-footing" Robespierre. The film's epic scope recalls *INTOLERANCE*, but the performances, particularly those of the Gishes, lift *ORPHANS OF THE STORM* to a whole other level. "Those who saw it as children never forgot the sequence in which Lillian hears the voice of her long-lost blind sister. . . . Griffith sequences like this go beyond heart-wringing into some arena of theatrical sublimity" (Pauline Kael).

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Sunday, April 24 1:00 p.m.**

### WAY DOWN EAST

Director: D.W. Griffith  
USA 1920 164 minutes silent  
Cast: Lillian Gish, Richard Barthelmess

Many thought Griffith had lost his box office knack when he decided to translate this play to the screen. Even in 1920, it was considered dated – and it didn't help that he paid \$75,000 for the rights. Instead, it turned out to be one of his most influential works. Gish, in a "virtuoso performance" (Tony Rayns, *Time Out*), stars as Anna, a country innocent who is tricked into a sham marriage and abandoned with child. *WAY DOWN EAST* features one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in all of silent cinema – Anna refusing to give up her dead baby – and one of the most legendary set-pieces. Banished by the puritanical Bartlett family after they find out about her past, she ventures forth in a raging blizzard, winding up on an ice floe heading towards certain death. Gish probably never looked more exquisite than in this film, especially in the finale, with her long pre-Raphaelite hair dangling in the icy river. Though *WAY DOWN EAST* is unquestionably (even risibly) Victorian in sensibility, its peculiar, indelible moments of beauty and its melodramatic grandeur far outweigh its faults.

*Presented with live piano accompaniment by William O'Meara.*

**Tuesday, April 26 6:30 p.m.**

