

Document Citation

Title	The films: history repeats itself -- with a difference
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The New York hat, Griffith, D. W., 1912 Street angel, Borzage, Frank, 1927

THE FILMS

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF—WITH A DIFFERENCE

A DECADE and a half ago Anita Loos' maiden effort in the infant industry (or art, if you wish) of the motion pictures, called *The New York Hat*, was filmed by the Biograph Company. Under the direction of David Wark Griffith, the then unknown Mary Pickford, and the now famous Lionel Barrymore stalked with awkward gait among ludicrous properties before a flickering camera.

Three weeks ago the story of the innocent young heroine of *The New York Hat*, unjustly maligned by village gossips and unfairly accused of "doings with the pastor" was revived at the 55th Street Playhouse. The pathetic little tale stood out in all its incredibility, unpadding by lengthy close-ups and devious excursions into plot embroidery, unrelieved

by digressions into comedy, and ungarnished by slick photography, elegance of costume and all the other adjuncts of Hollywood technique. In those days, back in 1913, men liked to take their liquor straight, and movie audiences, whether they liked it or not, had to accept the attack on their emotions with even greater directness.

As if to present an object lesson in motion picture sophistication, Fox Films released during the same week, *Street Angel*, directed by Frank Borzage and starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. Street Angel and *The New York Hat* are sisters under the skin, but so much powder and paint has been applied to the one sister that the timid little Biograph child would hardly dare whisper recog-



SCENE FROM STREET ANGEL
William Fox Production

dition. And herein lies the difference between the majority of films today and those fifteen years removed—it is all in the technique. The plot of *Street Angel* is as romantically unreal as that of *The New York Hat*; nor does the greater adeptness at character delineation of the Borzage production more than gloss over the falsity of the script. The love of Angela and Gino, the protagonists of the story, is filmed behind a veil of incredibility as the scenes are filmed behind an actual veil of gauze. Let us, however, forsake the story, let us philosophically accept for the moment at least, the inevitable fact that the puerile love story will for some years to come be the skeleton of most of the films; and let us examine the metamorphosis worked by powder, paint and veil.

Frankly, the lady's appearance is much improved by their addition. She is no longer gauche, awkward and inept, but much at her ease, svelt, and even enticing. One is intrigued by her conversation, her digressions, her apt comments upon the passing scene of life, the apparent glib conversance with the arts and above all by the faint perfume of leisure and the beauty-parlor that only a lavish unconcern for money may secure. One gazes at her graceful figure treading down the marble steps of the moonlit garden with curious admiration and observes her tap Pegasus on the muzzle with a costly silk-brocaded fan. But enough of the metaphor.

Street Angel illustrates the vast strides the cinema has made since the days of Griffith's early endeavors. Photographically it is on a par with *Sunrise*, whose camera effects I praised so highly in a recent review. *Street Angel* is the acme of the photoplay in its limited, literal sense—the celluloid version of a play. Even the hardest, steel-emotion-bound critic is moved to gulp down his sobs with the audience when innocent Angela returns for an hour to her trusting Gino before she is taken by a kind-hearted but sternly dutiful gendarme to the workhouse. It was evidently the director's intention to produce a film in the popular language of the screen that should surpass all previous efforts; and of its kind one must concede it to be of first rank. There is sufficient pictorial beauty for commendation, camera angels are successfully used, scenes are shot with a feeling for compositional balance, and the film, thanks to the gauze curtain, is diffused with a hazy, mezzotint softness that is quite in keeping with the too tender, romantic delicacy of the tale. It is almost inconceivable that Hollywood can turn out more effective pictures of this type. A standard has been set by *Street Angel* that Hollywood is bound to admire and imitate and we may therefore expect for some time to come, de luxe editions of *The New York Hat*, with perhaps the addition of synchronized speech to the end that the silent drama will speak in the accents of the stage and eventually replace it.