

Acting Evolution in cinema: D.W. Griffith and Lillian Gish

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of cinematic acting from its origins in theatrical traditions to the emergence of naturalistic performance styles, focusing on the transformative collaboration between pioneering director D.W. Griffith and actress Lillian Gish. Early cinema (late 19th to early 1920s) relied on exaggerated gestures and melodramatic expressions, shaped by technical limitations, the absence of sound, and stage-acting conventions. Through an analysis of Gish's performances in Griffith's landmark films—An Unseen Enemy (1912), The Birth of a Nation (1915), Intolerance (1916), Broken Blossoms (1919), and Orphans of the Storm (1921)—this paper traces the shift from theatricality to subtlety, underscoring Griffith's innovations in close-ups, montage, and emotional depth. Gish's evolution exemplifies this transition, moving from broad, gestural acting to nuanced, psychologically resonant portrayals that prioritized authenticity. While Griffith and Gish were instrumental in redefining screen performance, the study contextualizes their contributions within broader cinematic developments, including technological advancements, the introduction of sound, evolving audience expectations, and the influence of method acting. Ultimately, the transformation of acting styles reflects cinema's maturation as a distinct art form, balancing individual artistry with medium-specific demands. This research highlights how Griffith and Gish's partnership catalyzed a paradigm shift, bridging early theatrical conventions and modern naturalism, while acknowledging the multifaceted forces that propelled cinema's artistic growth.

Keywords: Cinematic acting evolution, Lillian Gish, D.W. Griffith

Introduction

The course of development and artistic expression within the realm of cinema has undergone a fascinating journey. The cinematic performances we witness today bear little resemblance to the nascent days of this medium. In its infancy, cinema lacked a distinct identity for independent production; instead, it borrowed heavily from existing theatrical techniques. These early film performances, now referred to as "classical performances," were shaped by the prevailing methods of the theater. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 194)

As time progressed, cinema began to forge its own path. Influential figures like Stanislavsky, Meisner, and the proponents of Method Acting left an indelible mark on the art form. Their innovative approaches transformed the way actors approached their roles, emphasizing authenticity, emotional depth, and psychological realism. Today, we see the legacy of these pioneers in the nuanced performances that grace our screens.

The Theatrical Style of Early Cinema Acting

Acting in the early days of cinema, from the late 19th century to the early 1920s, was characterized by a theatrical style that emphasized exaggerated gestures, facial expressions, and a reliance on non-verbal cues to convey the complexities of human characters. This stylized approach was driven by several factors, including:

The absence of sound: Without the aid of spoken language, actors were compelled to employ amplified gestures and facial expressions to convey their characters' emotions, motivations, and intentions. This emphasis on non-verbal communication resulted in a theatrical style that prioritized grandeur over subtlety.

Technical limitations: Early film cameras were rudimentary and cumbersome, with limited mobility and shallow depth of field. This hampered the ability to capture subtle expressions and movements, further encouraging actors to adopt bold and ostentatious acting techniques.

Stage acting influence: Many of the early cinema pioneers were trained in stage acting traditions, which emphasized exaggerated expressions, grand gestures, and heightened emotions. This theatrical influence shaped the acting style of early cinema, favoring broad and overt performances over naturalistic ones.

As a result of these factors, acting in early cinema often appeared stiff and exaggerated. Characters would often strike melodramatic poses and overemphasize their emotions with exaggerated facial expressions and gestures. This style of acting was often referred to as "pantomimic acting" or "grand acting." (Musser 1990, 150-167)

Here are some examples of how acting was different in early cinema:

Exaggerated gestures: Actors would often use their hands and arms to make large, sweeping gestures to convey emotions. This was done because early

cameras were not sensitive enough to capture subtle movements, so actors had to use more obvious gestures to be seen.

Broad facial expressions: Actors would often use their faces to make very large and exaggerated expressions to convey emotions. This was also done because early cameras were not good at capturing subtle changes in facial expressions, so actors had to make their expressions more.

Stilted movements: Actors would often move in a very stiff and artificial way in early cinema. This was because they were trying to avoid obscuring the actors in the frame with the camera

Despite its theatricality, acting in early cinema was also characterized by a great deal of innovation and creativity. Actors were constantly pushing the boundaries of the medium, developing new techniques and approaches to performance. This experimentation helped to pave the way for the more naturalistic acting styles that emerged in later decades. It is indeed remarkable that the end of this era in cinema when it was deeply rooted in the traditions of theatrical performances should be marked by the very individuals who became masters in this field and achieved exceptional success.

Numerous filmmakers and actors played a crucial role in transitioning from the exaggerated and theatrical acting style of early cinema to a more naturalistic and subtle approach. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, chapter 12 and 14)

Here are some of the key figures who contributed to this significant shift:

1. D.W. Griffith (1875-1948): known as the "Father of American Cinema," transformed filmmaking and acting with groundbreaking techniques like the close-up and a more naturalistic style. His films, including *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, remain influential today.
2. Charles Chaplin (1889-1977): Chaplin was a master of physical comedy, using facial expressions and body language to convey emotions without words. His characters, like *The Tramp*, were loved worldwide, showing how powerful non-verbal communication can be in movies.
3. Lillian Gish (1896-1993): Lillian Gish was a silent movie actress who could express a wide range of emotions without saying a word. She was a master of subtle facial expressions and gestures, and her performances were very realistic and believable.
4. Douglas Fairbanks (1883-1939): Douglas Fairbanks was a swashbuckling silent movie star known for his acrobatic stunts, charming personality, and ability to portray daring heroes. He combined athletics and theatrics in his performances, captivating audiences with his larger-than-life persona.
5. Mary Pickford (1892-1979): Mary Pickford was a silent movie star known for her portrayal of relatable and sympathetic female characters. She brought a genuine and emotional depth to her performances, making her a beloved actress of her time.

These figures, along with many others, played a significant role in transforming acting in early cinema from a mode of exaggerated theatricality to a more grounded and emotionally resonant approach. Their innovative techniques and performances laid the foundation for the development of naturalistic acting in the sound era and beyond. In this article, we focus on Griffiths and his impact on the world of acting

D.W. Griffith

D.W. Griffith, a visionary pioneer in the realm of American cinema, stands as a transformative figure who indelibly shaped the art form as we know it today. His groundbreaking techniques, unparalleled storytelling prowess, and audacious cinematic vision transformed cinema into the powerful medium that enthalls audiences worldwide. Through his innovative approach, Griffith revolutionized the way stories were told, emotions were conveyed, and visual narratives were crafted.

At the heart of Griffith's legacy lies his pioneering work in developing and popularizing cinematic techniques that continue to be employed by filmmakers today. These groundbreaking innovations, including breaking down films into shots, altering viewing angles and distances, shifting the focus within a shot, tracking shots, employing close-ups to isolate and emphasize specific subjects, utilizing montage techniques, portraying parallel or intersecting events, incorporating flashbacks and flash-forwards, enhanced storytelling capabilities, enabling filmmakers to create more engaging and immersive experiences for audiences.

Griffith's impact on cinema extended beyond technical innovation to encompass the realm of acting. Recognizing the limitations of theatrical stylization on the silver screen, Griffith revolutionized the approach to acting, emphasizing the importance of naturalism and subtlety. He encouraged his actors to abandon conventional methods and move away from exaggerated, theatrical performances in favor of a more authentic and nuanced portrayal of emotions and characters. This shift in acting style paved the way for a more realistic and believable depiction of human experiences on screen.

Griffith's films were not merely technical marvels; they were also powerful vehicles for social commentary and change. His narratives often delved into societal concerns, exploring themes of poverty, gender roles, and racism. His ability to weave these complex issues into compelling narratives resonated with audiences worldwide and raised awareness of social issues that were often overlooked or marginalized. By addressing these critical issues, Griffith's films served as a powerful medium for social discourse and transformation.

Among Griffith's other notable contributions to cinema was his meticulous attention to detail in set design, costumes, and makeup. This meticulous craftsmanship created visually stunning and immersive environments that complemented his narratives. His expressive use of light and shadow further enhanced the emotional impact of his films, creating a sense of

mood and atmosphere that resonated with audiences. Additionally, Griffith recognized the potential for the motion picture camera to capture intimate and personal moments, utilizing close-ups and other techniques to showcase subtle expressions and emotions. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, chapter 12)

D.W. Griffith's impact of acting

D.W. Griffith's impact on the development of acting in cinema was immense and multifaceted. He made significant contributions through some aspects.

Pioneering Naturalistic Acting: Shift from Theatrical Exaggeration: Early silent films relied heavily on exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, which were derived from theatrical traditions. Griffith, however, recognized the limitations of this approach and sought to create a more realistic and nuanced acting style.

Directing for Emotional Depth: He encouraged his actors to focus on conveying emotions subtly and authentically, drawing from their inner lives rather than relying on external cues.

Close-ups and Micro expressions: Griffith famously utilized close-up shots to capture the subtle nuances of an actor's face, allowing viewers to connect with their emotions on a deeper level.

Introducing Modern Cinematic Techniques: The cinematic techniques used by Griffiths also helped him to develop the capabilities of the actors.

Montage and Parallel Editing: Griffith's innovative editing techniques, such as montage and parallel editing, allowed him to create complex narratives and convey emotional depth without relying solely on dialogue.

Cross-cutting: He used cross-cutting to build suspense and tension by alternating between scenes happening simultaneously in different locations.

Use of Lighting: Griffith understood the power of light in creating mood and atmosphere. He used lighting to highlight specific elements of a scene and to emphasize the emotional state of his characters.

Building Star Personalities: In addition to guiding the actors in the film, Griffiths realized the importance of the public image and the extraordinary power of the movie stars in the world of cinema.

Nurturing Talent: Griffith recognized the importance of star power and actively cultivated the careers of talented actors like Lillian Gish and Lionel Barrymore. **Crafting Iconic Roles:** He cast his actors in roles that showcased their unique talents and personalities, helping to build their public image and solidify their place in film history.

Setting Industry Standards: Influencing the Studio System: Griffith's success and innovative techniques paved the way for the development of the Hollywood studio system, which adopted and further refined his approaches to acting and filmmaking.

Inspiring Future Generations: His work continues to influence generations of actors and filmmakers, serving as a testament to the enduring power of his artistic vision.

These are just some of the ways D.W. Griffith helped to develop acting in cinema. His contributions laid the foundation for the modern acting style and continue to inspire and inform actors and filmmakers to this day. (Pearson 1992, chapter 4 & 5)

D.W. Griffith and Lillian Gish

D.W. Griffith, collaborated extensively with a diverse array of actors throughout his illustrious career. Among his most notable partnerships were:

1. **Mary Pickford:** A pioneering actress and a pivotal figure in shaping the Hollywood star system, Pickford shared the screen with Griffith in a remarkable 26 films between 1909 and 1920. Her charismatic presence and exceptional acting skills made her a beloved star and a cornerstone of Griffith's cinematic achievements.
2. **Charlie Chaplin:** A comedic genius and fellow founding member of United Artists, Chaplin worked alongside Griffith on two notable productions: *A Woman of Paris* (1923) and *The Gold Rush* (1925). Chaplin's groundbreaking contributions to both comedy and filmmaking profoundly impacted Griffith's later works, showcasing the dynamic interplay between these two cinematic luminaries.
3. **Douglas Fairbanks:** A dashing swashbuckler and a box-office sensation, Fairbanks graced the silver screen with his athletic prowess and charismatic persona in several of Griffith's adventure films, including the groundbreaking *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the epic *Intolerance* (1916). Griffith's ability to harness Fairbanks's star power further cemented his status as a masterful filmmaker of both dramatic and action-packed narratives.
4. **Blanche Sweet:** Possessing exceptional beauty, intelligence, and emotional depth, Sweet emerged as a leading lady in many of Griffith's films, including the poignant *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) and the compelling melodrama *Judith of Bethulia* (1914). Her nuanced portrayals of complex characters enriched Griffith's cinematic canvas, demonstrating his keen eye for talent and his ability to elevate performances to new heights.
5. **Lillian Gish:** A towering figure in the silent film era, Gish's expressive eyes and unparalleled ability to convey a vast range of emotions made her a muse to Griffith. She starred in some of his most celebrated productions, including the iconic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the poignant *Orphans of Storm* (1921). Griffith and Gish's shared artistic sensibilities resulted in groundbreaking cinematic achievements that continue to resonate with audiences today.

D. W. Griffith, a pioneering filmmaker, forged enduring partnerships with numerous actors throughout his illustrious career. Among these collaborations, his working relationship with Lillian Gish stands out as particularly significant, particularly due to the sheer scope of their partnership. Their collaborative efforts

produced over 40 films, surpassing even the number of films Griffith made with Mary Pickford, another renowned actress of the silent era.

While Blanche Sweet collaborated with Griffith in more films, her involvement did not extend to his most critically acclaimed works, including *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. These landmark films, considered pinnacles of early cinema, showcased Griffith's unparalleled mastery of storytelling and his ability to elevate the acting craft. Additionally, Sweet's collaboration with Griffith spanned a mere five years, from 1909 to 1914, a relatively short period compared to the extended partnership he enjoyed with Gish. Gish's involvement in Griffith's films extended across a more substantial period, spanning an impressive ten years. This extended collaboration provided ample opportunity for Gish to refine her acting skills and develop a deep understanding of Griffith's directorial vision. Furthermore, their partnership coincided with a period of significant evolution in cinematic storytelling, as cinema transitioned from its theatrical roots towards a more naturalistic style of filmmaking.

Griffith's collaborations with Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks resulted in four films, each possessing its own unique merits. However, both Chaplin and Fairbanks are more widely recognized for their independent work, which often deviated from Griffith's directorial style and thematic focus. Their independent endeavors, particularly Chaplin's groundbreaking comedies, established them as groundbreaking figures in their own right, overshadowing their collaborations with Griffith.

In conclusion, D. W. Griffith's collaboration with Lillian Gish stands out as the most compelling case study for examining the evolution of acting styles in cinema. Their extended partnership, spanning a period of transition from theatrically influenced acting to a more naturalistic approach, provides a rich tapestry of insights into the changing landscape of performance in early cinema. Gish's nuanced and expressive performances, carefully guided by Griffith's directorial vision, epitomize the transition from theatrically rooted acting to a more cinematic style that emphasizes naturalism and emotional authenticity. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 194-200)

Lillian Gish

Lillian Gish, an American actress, director, and screenwriter, stands as a towering figure in the annals of cinema history. Her illustrious career spanned seven decades, from her early days on the stage to her final screen appearance in the late 1980s. Renowned for her ethereal beauty and poignant performances, she was affectionately bestowed with the moniker "The First Lady of American Cinema."

Gish's theatrical roots run deep. From a young age, she graced the stage alongside her family's traveling troupe. In 1912, her exceptional talent caught the attention of renowned director D.W. Griffith, leading to her signing with Biograph Studios. Gish swiftly ascended to stardom, becoming one of Griffith's most

trusted collaborators. Their partnership yielded an array of cinematic masterpieces, including the epochal *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the ambitious *Intolerance* (1916), and the poignant *Way Down East* (1920).

Gish's performances were a testament to her refined artistry. She seamlessly conveyed a kaleidoscope of emotions through her subtle expressions, expressive eyes, and graceful body language. Her ability to embody complex characters without the aid of spoken dialogue cemented her status as a pioneer in silent film acting.

As sound films emerged in the 1930s, Gish's career faced new challenges. Yet, her unwavering dedication to her craft enabled her to adapt and thrive. She graced the silver screen in such notable productions as *Duel in the Sun* (1946), the suspenseful thriller *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), and the poignant *The Whales of August* (1987).

Gish's accolades reflect her remarkable contributions to the cinematic landscape. She garnered an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress for her mesmerizing portrayal in *Duel in the Sun* and was bestowed with an Honorary Academy Award in 1971 in recognition of her "contributions to the art of motion pictures." In 1984, she was elevated to the pinnacle of artistic achievement when she received the National Medal of Arts.

Throughout her remarkable journey, Lillian Gish remained an esteemed icon within the realm of cinema. Her artistry, grace, and enduring legacy continue to inspire and captivate audiences worldwide. She stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling and the enduring impact of passionate, dedicated individuals who leave an indelible mark on their chosen fields.

From the 41 films that feature the collaborative work of Gish and Griffith, we selected her first and last films, *An Unseen Enemy* (1912) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), to examine her acting evolution. To provide a more comprehensive representation of her journey, we included the most notable and influential films among these two, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921). These films showcase Gish's remarkable transformation as an actress, reflecting the overall evolution of acting techniques during that era. (Gish and Pinchot 1969, Chapter 4)

An Unseen Enemy 1912

Photoplay: "A very clever little melodrama, full of action and suspense."

An Unseen Enemy is a 1912 American silent crime thriller film directed by D. W. Griffith. It was the first film to star the actresses Lillian Gish and Dorothy Gish. The film is about two sisters who are left orphaned after their father's death. Their housekeeper, who is greedy and dishonest, decides to rob the safe in the house. She enlists the help of an unscrupulous acquaintance to carry out the robbery, and the two of them terrorize the sisters in their own home. The sisters eventually

manage to outsmart the housekeeper and her accomplice, and they are able to recover their stolen money.

The film was well-received by most of the critics and audiences, and it helped to establish the Gish sisters as stars. It is considered to be a classic of silent cinema, and it has been known for its suspenseful plot, its strong performances, and its innovative use of lighting and camerawork.

Lillian Gish's performance in *An Unseen Enemy* (1912) was widely praised for its emotional depth and subtlety. Her ability to convey a range of emotions through her expressive eyes and facial expressions, even without the benefit of spoken dialogue is great. She was particularly effective in portraying the fear and vulnerability of the orphaned sisters, and her performance helped to establish her as one of the most talented actresses of the silent era.

Here are some examples of Lillian Gish's captivating performance in the film, but we must note that she draws upon her stage background in this film. (Schickel 1984, 149)

- When the housekeeper first reveals her plan to rob the safe, Gish's eyes widen in fear and her hands tremble.
- When the housekeeper and her accomplice terrorize the sisters, Gish's face contorts in terror and her voice quivers as she tries to protect her sister.
- In the film's climax, when the sisters outsmart the villains and recover their stolen money, Gish's face lights up with relief and joy.

Gish's performance in *An Unseen Enemy* was a key factor in her early success, and it helped to establish her reputation as a versatile and emotionally resonant actress. Her ability to convey complex emotions without dialogue made her a favorite of silent film audiences, and a favorable actress for D.W. Griffith.

The Birth of a Nation 1915

Roger Ebert: "a technical marvel but morally reprehensible."

The Birth of a Nation is a 1915 silent film directed by D. W. Griffith. It is an epic about the American Civil War and Reconstruction that follows the intertwined stories of two families, the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons. The film is both praised for its groundbreaking technical achievements and criticized for its racist portrayal of African Americans and sympathetic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan.

Lillian Gish's performance in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is iconic and influential in the history of cinema. Her portrayal of Elsie Stoneman, a young woman caught in the turmoil of the Civil War and Reconstruction era, is still astonishing for its emotional depth, grace, and expression.

Gish's ability to convey a wide range of emotions through her facial expressions and body language was particularly remarkable for a silent film actress. She

could convey fear, sadness, joy, and love with just a glance or a gesture, making her character incredibly relatable and sympathetic to audiences.

Another notable aspect of her performance is her expressive physicality. We see her graceful movements and her ability to convey emotions through her body language. For example, in the scene where Elsie is forced to watch her home burn to the ground, Gish's trembling hands and hunched shoulders perfectly captured her character's despair.

It seems that Gish's performance in *The Birth of a Nation* a major factor in the film's success. It helped to establish her as one of the most important actresses of her era, and her work in the film continues to be admired by audiences today. Here are some of the accolades that Lillian Gish received for her performance in *The Birth of a Nation*:

The Photoplay Magazine Award for Best Actress (1915)

The Kinetoscope Review Award for Best Actress (1915)

The Golden Globe Cecil B. DeMille Award for Lifetime Achievement (1985)

The Honorary Academy Award (1971)

This is an example of her impressive performance that can be seen in the film:

- The scene where Elsie is forced to watch her childhood home burn to the ground. Gish's performance here is heartbreaking, as she conveys her character's despair and loss with a combination of facial expressions and body language.
- The scene where Elsie is captured by a group of Ku Klux Klan members. Gish's performance here is both terrified and defiant, as she fights against her captors while also pleading for her life.
- The scene where Elsie is reunited with her father after years of separation. Gish's performance here is full of joy and relief, as she embraces her father and cries tears of happiness.

While Gish's performance in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a landmark in the history of filmmaking, today's audiences may find it somewhat unrealistic. Her acting in certain scenes veers towards excessive sentimentality and an unrealistic portrayal of emotions. Her delivery of certain lines comes across as overly dramatic, potentially distancing the audience from Flora's plight. A closer examination reveals that Gish's performance lacks nuance in some instances. She fails to differentiate sufficiently among Flora's various emotional states, resulting in a portrayal that feels flat and unbelievable. Her tendency to express all of Flora's emotions in a similar manner makes the character less complex and relatable. Moreover, Gish's portrayal of Flora as a passive character seems inconsistent with her inner strength and resilience throughout the film. I believe that Gish fails to adequately convey Flora's unwavering spirit and ability to persevere in the face of adversity.

Regardless of these criticisms, Gish's performance in *The Birth of a Nation* remains a significant achievement in her acting career. Her nuanced and emotionally resonant portrayal of Flora Cameron is undeniable, and her ability to convey a wide range of emotions is truly remarkable.

Intolerance 1916

The New York Times: "a remarkable achievement"

D.W. Griffith's 1916 silent epic, *Intolerance*, delves into the enduring human struggle against intolerance, intertwining four historical narratives to expose its pervasiveness and destructive consequences. Set in ancient Babylon, first-century Judea, 16th-century France, and contemporary times, the film explores the universal nature of intolerance and its capacity to tear societies apart.

Intolerance's ambitious scope and exploration of timeless themes have cemented its place as a cinematic landmark. The film's enduring legacy lies in its ability to spark reflection on the human capacity for intolerance and the enduring power of compassion to bridge divides.

Lillian Gish's performance in *Intolerance* (1916) by D.W. Griffith was met with critical acclaim, with many reviewers praising her ability to convey a wide range of emotions through her facial expressions, gestures, and bodily movements. Gish's performance was particularly praised for its subtlety and emotional depth.

The *New York Times* called Gish's performance "simply magnificent," praising her "power of expression in the face of pathos."

The *New York Herald* wrote that Gish's performance was "the most remarkable of her career," praising her "emotional range and her ability to communicate deep emotion."

Lillian Gish's acting in this film blows me away. It's like she's mastered the art of conveying deep emotions while still delivering a top-notch performance. I'm so impressed with her ability to balance her deep emotions and her acting.

Here are some of the specific qualities of Gish's performance that are notable:

- Her expressive eyes: Gish's eyes were often described as "windows to her soul," and she was able to convey a wide range of emotions through her facial expressions.
- Her subtle gestures: Gish's gestures were always precise and meaningful, and she was able to use them to communicate complex emotions without the aid of spoken words.
- Her ability to convey deep emotion: Gish was able to convey a wide range of emotions, from joy and love to sorrow and despair, with a depth and realism that was unmatched by other actresses of her time.

Gish's performance in *Intolerance* (1916) is a testament to her remarkable skill as a silent film actress. While Gish is credited in the film, her actual

screen time is relatively limited. She primarily appears as the Mother Rocking the Cradle, a recurring figure symbolizing eternal motherhood and the interconnectedness of human stories across time and cultures. Gish's performance in this role is primarily non-verbal and expressionistic. She conveys emotions and themes through facial expressions, gestures, and body language, rather than spoken dialogue. This emphasizes the symbolic nature of the character and the universality of the message.

Lillian Gish's acting in *Intolerance* is challenging to categorize. It's not a traditional lead role with extensive dialogue and character development. However, her limited screen time as the Mother Rocking the Cradle carries significant symbolic weight and contributes to the film's overall message.

Gish's performance remains a significant achievement in silent film acting. Her ability to connect with audiences through her expressiveness and emotional depth cemented her status as a pioneer of silent cinema.

Broken Blossoms 1919

The New Yorker: "A masterpiece of silent cinema."

Broken Blossoms is a 1919 American silent drama film directed by D.W. Griffith. The film is set in London's Limehouse district and stars Lillian Gish as Lucy Burrows, a young girl who is abused by her drunken father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). Lucy is befriended by Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), a gentle Chinese man who falls in love with her.

The film is a tragic love story that explores the themes of kindness, tolerance, and the power of love to overcome adversity. It was nominated for three Academy Awards, including Best Actress for Lillian Gish, and was praised for its cinematography and its portrayal of the Chinese character of Cheng Huan.

Lillian Gish's performance in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is widely considered to be one of her greatest, and for good reason. She delivers a heartbreaking and nuanced portrayal of Lucy Burrows, a young girl trapped in a life of abuse and despair. Gish's ability to convey a wide range of emotions through her facial expressions, gestures, and body language is extraordinary, and she makes Lucy feel like a real, vulnerable person.

Gish's performance is particularly notable in the scenes where she interacts with Richard Barthelmess's Cheng Huan. The two actors create a palpable chemistry, and their scenes together are some of the most moving in the film. Gish's eyes, in particular, are expressive in a way that is almost impossible to describe; they convey a depth of emotion that is simply stunning.

Critics were unanimous in their praise of Gish's performance. The *New York Times* called it "a masterpiece of silent acting," while *Variety* said that she "gives a performance that is truly great, one that will never be forgotten."

Here are some specific examples of considerable Gish's performance:

The New York Times: "Gish is magnificent ... her acting is a triumph."

Variety: "Gish is a revelation ... her acting is heartbreaking."

The New Yorker: "Gish is superb ... she makes Lucy a real person."

Here are some specific examples of Lillian Gish's excellent acting in *Broken Blossoms* (1919)

- The "closet scene": In this pivotal scene, Lucy seeks refuge from her abusive father in Cheng Huan's room. Gish's performance is heartbreaking as she conveys Lucy's fear, desperation, and longing for love through her expressive eyes, trembling lips, and hunched posture.
- The "flower scene": When Cheng Huan presents Lucy with a bouquet of flowers, Gish's subtle reaction is a masterclass in silent acting. Her eyes widen, her lips curl into a faint smile, and her shoulders relax, suggesting a mix of surprise, gratitude, and a glimmer of hope.
- The "last embrace": In the film's tragic climax, Lucy's final embrace with Cheng Huan is a poignant display of Gish's ability to convey deep emotion without dialogue. Her tears well up in her eyes, her lips quiver, and her arms cling tightly to Cheng Huan, conveying the depth of their love and the despair of their circumstances.
- The "death scene": Lucy's final moments, as she succumbs to her father's beating, are a tour-de-force of silent acting. Gish's eyes glaze over, her body crumples to the ground, and her last breath is a whisper of pain and longing. Her performance is a haunting reminder of the tragic consequences of abuse and the enduring power of love.

Lillian Gish's portrayal of Lucy Burrows in the 1919 silent film *Broken Blossoms* is undeniably captivating, showcasing her prowess in conveying a wide spectrum of emotions through her facial expressions, gestures, and physicality. However, upon closer examination, certain aspects of her performance reveal potential shortcomings.

Gish's depiction of Lucy borders on excessive sentimentality and melodrama, relying heavily on tear-jerking expressions that lack subtlety and nuance. Her movements, while graceful and expressive, sometimes veer towards exaggeration and artificiality, diminishing the authenticity of her portrayal. This lack of subtlety fails to effectively convey Lucy's inherent vulnerability and fragility.

Moreover, a larger issue arises regarding the suitability of Gish's physical appearance for the role of Lucy Burrows. Her porcelain complexion, delicate features, and ethereal beauty seem incongruous with the character's working-class background and the hardships she experiences. This contrast between the actress's refined appearance and the character's

grittier circumstances may challenge the audience's immersion in the narrative.

In conclusion, while Gish's performance undoubtedly highlights her acting virtuosity, it also exhibits instances of excessive sentimentality, exaggerated physicality, and a questionable fit between her appearance and the character's background. These aspects may detract from the overall authenticity and impact of her portrayal.

Orphans of the Storm 1921

Jean Cocteau: "A cinematic triumph"

Orphans of the Storm is a 1921 silent drama film by D. W. Griffith set in late-18th-century France, before and during the French Revolution. The film follows two orphaned sisters, Henriette and Louise, as they navigate the tumultuous political and social landscape of Paris.

Henriette, the elder sister, is protective of her sightless sibling, Louise. When they arrive in Paris, Henriette is abducted by a wealthy man, leaving Louise alone and vulnerable. As the revolution intensifies, both sisters face a series of trials, including hunger, poverty, and violence.

Throughout the film, the sisters' bond remains strong, providing them with strength and hope. They experience both kindness and cruelty, love and loss, but their love for each other never wavers.

The film was known for its portrayal of the French Revolution and its impact on ordinary citizens. It was also praised for its groundbreaking cinematography and masterful storytelling. However, it has also been criticized for its melodramatic tone and its portrayal of the poor.

Lillian Gish's performance in *Orphans of the Storm* is widely considered one of her most iconic and moving performances. She plays the role of Henriette, the elder sister who is protective of her sightless sibling, Louise. Gish's performance is grounded in a sense of realism and authenticity that is rare in silent cinema. She conveys Henriette's strength and vulnerability with subtlety and nuance, making her one of the most sympathetic and memorable characters in the film.

Gish's physical acting is also remarkable. She uses her body and facial expressions to convey a wide range of emotions, from joy and tenderness to fear and sorrow. Her performance is both understated and powerful, and it helps to make *Orphans of the Storm* a truly unforgettable film.

Here are some specific examples of Gish's performance that are particularly noteworthy:

- In the scene where Henriette is abducted, Gish's face registers a mixture of fear, shock, and disbelief. She is able to convey the utter despair of a woman who has lost everything in a matter of moments.
- In the scene where Louise is forced to dance for the pleasure of the crowd, Gish's performance is both heartbreaking and defiant. She shows the audience the inner strength of a woman who will

do anything to protect her sister, even if it means humiliating herself.

- In the scene where Henriette is reunited with Louise, Gish's joy is palpable. She throws her arms around her sister and sobs tears of relief. This is a moment of pure happiness and tenderness that is a testament to the enduring power of sisterhood.

While Lillian Gish performance in this film was widely praised, she was also criticized by more serious critics for her latest performance, a sign of the changing expectations of future critics and audiences.

New Yorker: "Gish's performance is a bit too theatrical for my taste. She needs to be more understated and subtle in her approach.

For modern audiences, Lillian Gish's portrayal of Henriette Girard in the 1921 silent film appear restrained and lacking the emotional depth that a character living through the turmoil of the French Revolution would exhibit. Henriette, a young woman caught in the midst of political upheaval, should have been portrayed with more passion and expressiveness, capturing the raw emotions of her situation. Instead, Gish's performance comes across as overly melodramatic, with moments of overacting that diminish the realism of the character's portrayal. There is a disconnect between the intensity of the emotions conveyed and the grounded reality of the setting.

Despite all these criticisms, if we pay attention to the period of the film, Lillian Gish's performance in *Orphans of the Storm* is a masterclass in silent acting. She gives a deeply moving and memorable performance that has earned her a place among the greatest actresses of all time.

Conclusion

If we carefully examine the collaboration between Gish and Griffiths, we'll notice that Gish's performances at the beginning of their partnership exhibited a slightly higher degree of theatricality and exaggeration. As the collaboration progressed, there is a noticeable shift away from these exaggerated mannerisms. Instead, Gish's performances evolved towards a more nuanced and emotionally charged style.

While this article primarily focuses on Gish's early acting career, particularly her collaborations with D.W. Griffith, she continued to explore various phases of acting throughout her illustrious career. These phases are briefly summarized below:

Early Silent Films (1912-1920): Gish's early performances relied on delicate expressions, gestures, and silences to convey emotions. Her portrayals immersed audiences in the characters she embodied.

Transitional Period (1921-1929): As silent films gave way to sound, Gish's acting evolved, adding realism and depth to her portrayals. Dialogue became an integral part of her nuanced performances, enhancing the emotional impact of her roles.

Sound Era (1930-1987): Gish's transition into the sound era involved adapting to dialogue while

retaining her nonverbal communication skills. She demonstrated adaptability and versatility in her performances.

Later Years (1980s-1990s): Gish's later performances were marked by her ability to convey profound emotions despite declining mobility. Her final film, *The Whales of August* (1987), cemented her status as a cinematic legend. (Pearson 1992, chapter 3 & 4)

While diving deep into Lillian Gish's entire acting career would give us a broader understanding of acting's evolution, it seems like these changes were inevitable anyway. Gish and Griffith's roles in this transformative era are undeniable, but it's not entirely fair to credit them solely for these changes. Maybe they were just in the right place at the right time in cinema history. In fact, it was cinema itself that was undergoing a transformation. This transformation was driven by a confluence of factors:

1. **Evolving Cinematographic Realities:** Early cinema was constrained by the limitations of static cameras, long takes, and rudimentary projection systems. To ensure their performances were visible and comprehensible to audiences, actors adopted an exaggerated style characterized by large gestures, overt facial expressions, and melodramatic delivery. These theatrical techniques compensated for the lack of close-ups and the challenges of capturing subtle nuances on early film stock. (Pearson 1992, 69-70)
2. **Shifting Audience Expectations:** As cinema matured and audiences gained familiarity with the medium, their preferences evolved. The theatricality of early cinema gradually gave way to a demand for more authentic and relatable performances. Directors and actors sought to capture the complexities of human emotions and motivations through more natural and understated. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, Chapter 15 and 27)
3. **The Advent of Sound and the Power of Dialogue:** The introduction of sound in the 1920s ushered in a new era of filmmaking, dramatically impacting acting techniques. The ability to convey emotions and motivations through spoken dialogue reduced the reliance on exaggerated physical gestures. As a result, actors could focus on subtler nuances of expression, voice, and movement. (Crafton 1999, chapter 6)
4. **The Flourishing of Acting Methodologies:** The development of acting methodologies throughout the 20th century further fueled the shift towards naturalism. Influenced by psychological realism and Stanislavski's method acting, actors delved into the inner lives of their characters, drawing from their own experiences and emotions to create deeply convincing performances. (Brayshaw 1996, chapter 3)
5. **Distinction from Stage Acting:** Early cinema drew heavily from theatrical acting styles, but as the medium matured, a clear distinction emerged. Film acting evolved its own unique approach, emphasizing the power of close-ups to capture

subtle details and nuances that would be lost on a stage. Naturalism and subtlety became hallmarks of cinematic performances. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 196 to 202)

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In conclusion, the transformation of acting styles in cinema reflects the medium's growth and adaptation to technological advancements, evolving audience expectations, and the emergence of more nuanced acting methodologies. While early cinema embraced theatricality to compensate for technical constraints, later periods embraced naturalism and subtlety, capturing the essence of human emotions and motivations in a way that resonated deeply with audiences. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of cinema and its ability to reflect the changing tastes and sensibilities of its viewers.

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