The Cinema and the Great War

by *Alan Fisher*

In 1914, Europe, the center of the world politically and culturally, lay on the verge of an apocalyptic war, just as film, the newest popular art form, had reached its first maturity. The onset of hostilities was not only to change world political realities but to fix permanently the center of the new medium in North America.

By 1914 the motion picture had passed through the stage of simple photographic representation of reality to a full narrative art capable of telling complex stories with the shot as its syntax enhanced by editing, printed titles, light and sound effects and musical accompaniment. The artistic suffocation of the one-reel film had been broken, and the viability of the feature-length film established. Film was like a two-year old thoroughbred, sprinting ahead, feeling its speed.

In August 1914, as the fighting began, Europe was the center of world film production with distribution led by French, Italian and Danish studios.

In France two companies, Pathe and Gaumont, battled for supremacy. Pathe, named for its founder, dominated the sale and distribution of European film stock and film equipment manufacture which enabled it to dominate distribution and exhibition on the continent. Pathe also outsold American and British films in America by ratios of as high as two to one.[1) (*A History of the Narrative Film,* David Cook, p. 49)

Pathe also popularized the serial format, first introduced in 1908, in which each reel of film would leave the hero or heroine in a danger not resolved until the beginning of the new episode to be shown the following week. They also produced an English language serial, *The Perils of Paulene,* starring Pearl White which was a tremendous hit in the United States despite poor acting and sloppy production values.

It also pioneered the first newsreel, the Pathe Gazette. Gaumont, a minor company, rose to prominence through the work of a single director, Louis Feuillade who upgraded the serial format in the visually-haunting detective serial, *Fantomas*. Feuillade was to con-

tinue making serials through the war with Judex (1917), the most famous.[2] (*Movies of the Silent Years*, ed. by Ann Lloyd, p. 86-7)

Judex is the most accomplished of Feuillade's serials shot in twelve episodes. It was his first to have a sympathetic hero, a young nobleman who is determined to avenge his father's betrayal and death without bloodshed. The actions are shot against bleak, urban settings which have a haunting, sometimes hallucinatory quality. It was admired by intellectuals and also widely popular. It was also to serve as a model for later French filmmakers who admired the detail and poetry of his shots.

Also widely popular on the export market were a series of photographed stage plays distributed by the Societe d'Art in cooperation with Pathe. Although these films were shot at a single camera angle with each shot lasting the length of a scene, they attracted a new culturally-conscious middle class audience to the cinema. They also demonstrated that there was a market for multi-reel films. These productions ceased to be popular in the early years of the war while at the same time the cycle of Italian super-spectacles that had been so popular from 1913-1914 declined with Italy's war-time fortunes.

France's most serious post-war competition was the Danish cinema. The Danish film product was primarily "the sex film".[3] (*The Story of Cinema*, David Shipman, p. 34) These films were hardly pornographic. The standards of the time would not allow love scenes, but these films centered on adult themes of adultery, divorce and fallen women. Denmark produced one superstar, Asta Nielsen, who after a sensational 1910 debut moved to Germany and was the leading actress of the German cinema until 1920. Somewhat androgenous in appearance, she exuded a genuine sensuality that was too strong for Hollywood to import.[4] (*Movies of the Silent Years,* Lloyd, p. 88) Danish films would also influence Swedish filmmakers who by 1914 were beginning to provide films that would be distributed internationally and win critical praise around the world.

The war began with stunning German victories against Russia and with a sweep through Belgium around the French defensive lines that brought the Germans within twenty-five miles of Paris. But the land war quickly settled down into four years of stalemated trench warfare. While the land forces tried repeatedly to dislodge each other from their defensive positions, the German navy blockaded England and France. German submarines then began attacking all vessels which sailed into Allied waters to cut off the flow of war materials. These attacks, particularly the sinking of the unarmed passenger ship Luisitania were to backfire politically and drive America into the war on the Allied side.

The accompanying disruption of normal transport and distribution systems caused by

the war freed the American film market from foreign competition and created a partial-void within Europe which American films were to fill. But this boon would have been only temporary had the American film not been transforming itself into a superior entertainment and on occasion artistic form.

Within America a single company had by 1915 assumed importance. Triangle was an amalgam of the organizations founded by D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and Thomas Ince. Griffith was at work planning Birth of a Nation,[5] (*A History of the Cinema,* Eric Rhode, p. 57) which at three and a half hours as America's first long-running epic was praised for its innovation and artistry and attacked for its racism.

Despite the growing appetite for feature films, the one and two-reel film did not disappear from the cinema, especially in comedy. They continued to be the mainstay of Sennett's Keystone studios and were to be produced as shorts by other studios into the 1950's when they finally succumbed to competition from TV.

Sennett, who had founded Keystone in 1912, had been an assistant director under Griffith at Biograph. He had studied Griffith's techniques carefully. Ironically the hyperactive, sometimes surrealistic vision he was to introduce to the world was light years away from Griffith's 19th century romanticism. Sennett's comedies featured car chases and pie fights and popularized the word slapstick throughout the world. It's most constant feature became the Keystone Cops who were put through endless chases but hardly ever got their man.

Keaton collected a highly-talented group of acrobatic comedians and talented writers including Mabel Norman, with whom Keaton was in love, Charlie Chaplin, Ben Turpin, Fatty Arbuckle, Frank Capra, Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton, all of whom were to become famous later in their own right.

Sennett's films were produced quickly to meet the enormous demand for his comedies. Keaton, who was given to brainstorming for script ideas in a rooftub bathtub, also scrimped on costs by using the Los Angeles area as an auxiliary for his studio. Crews were sent out to cover fires and parades with such frequency that a reporter compared Keystone to a newspaper office rather than a movie studio. An actual encounter between a film crew accompanying Mabel Norman and police gave birth to the Keystone Cops.

Great care was taken in editing, frequently by Sennett himself who was responsible for many of the more surrealistic touches in his films.

"If most jokes jolt us by their oblique revelation of unconscious motive, then Sennett's have the force of a kick. The assaults of black comedy begin with him and set his

comedians apart from his predecessors. . . Sennett's team could be as alarming as an animal menagerie. . ."[6] (Erie Rhode, *A History of the Cinema,* Penguin Books, 1978, p. 63)

In 1914, Sennett hired British music hall performer Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin had been an admirer of Max Linder, a French vaudevillian who appeared in films as a debonair but accident-prone gentleman. He modelled his screen persona on Linder, but when his first film was indifferently-received, Chaplin developed a new character — a raggedy bum in a bowler hat striking out with a cane and with his feet at anything which displeased him. He made his debut as the Tramp in his second picture *Kid Auto Races at Venice* in which the Little Tramp repeatedly wanders through and disrupts a simulated documentary on auto races. The anti-authoritarianism inherent in the character pleased the lower and lower-middle class who relished the way the Little Tramp fought back most frequently against upper class snobs.[6] (*A History of the Cinema*, Rhode, 1979) In addition to the aggressiveness Chaplin had a pronounced sentimental streak that appealed to traditionalists. Underlying all of this was his superb skills as a mime. Chaplin's skills as a director have been downgraded in recent years, but his skills as a performer have not diminished. In his time he was rivaled in popularity only by Mary Pickford and in a later era by the Beatles.

Chaplin's popularity did not extend to his fellow performers at Keystone who were put off by his arrogance, perfectionism and feuding with studio favorite Mabel Norman. Sennett was on the verge of firing Chaplin when news of high returns for *Kid Auto Races at Venice* reached him. Chaplin's services were not only retained, but Sennett was to star Chaplin in an uncharacteristic feature-length production, *Tillie's Punctured Romance.*

Sennett, always slow to raise salaries, would not keep Chaplin long. In 1915 Chaplin left to make two-reel films at Essenay for a salary of $10,000 a week, and from there he would move on Mutual and then First National for salaries that would eventually climb to the million dollar bracket without restrictions on film length.[7]

Chaplin's two-reelers for Mutual were among his best. In *The Immigrant* he used closeups and staccato editing to showcase spectacular mime work. In the opening sequence aboard ship Chaplin choreographed his distinctive duck-footed walk to the rolling of the ship. He turned his rolling the dice at a crap game into a parody of a baseball pitcher and shadowboxed in preparation for an imagined fight with a giant waiter to whom he was unable to pay a restaurant bill. The passing of money is used as a running gag: money stolen from a mother was won from a gambler and returned to the mother. The tramp refused a loan in the restaurant from an artist but stole the artist's tip to pay the bill, then borrowed two dollars from him for a marriage license.

Thomas Ince, Griffith and Chaplin's partner, is the least remembered today perhaps largely due to his early death in 1923. Yet, he not only created the prototype for the modern movie studio but established the western as a new genre.

Ince, who had begun as a director for Biograph came into his own when he took over the management of the Santa Ynez Canyon Ranch near Hollywood in 1912. Ince soon ceased directing films himself, yet retained close supervision over all productions shot on the ranch. He carefully controlled budgets and supervised scripts. He frequently wrote shooting instructions in the margins, sometimes with explicit directions that they not be improvised upon.

Ince did not introduce the Western which had existed as early as the 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*. However, the steady stream of films that Ince and his hired directors turned out changed the Western into a cinema staple much as Sennett's shorts had done for the pie fight and the comic chase. By 1916 Ince had introduced a new Western star, William S. Hart. The somber-faced Hart, an ex-Shakespearean actor, played a new kind of character, the good-bad man who in films like *Hells Hinges* and *The Cradle of Courage* was torn by temptation and only with difficulty made the right choice.

The western captured the American imagination. They quickly became part of American mythology, yet despite their melodramatics they had a degree of authenticity that later Westerns would lack. In the real 1910's many participants in the real West were still alive and served as studio consultants. One real-life outlaw, Al Jennings actually directed his own movies for a while. The streets in a Thomas Ince western were choked with dust and filled with shabby, ramshackle buildings. They provided vivid settings for the tests of morality and endurance to which characters like Hart were subjected.

Other films which helped establish the Western were *The Spoilers* directed by Colin Cambell and *The Squaw Men* by Cecil B. DeMille, both directed in 1914.

By 1916, D. W. Griffith had begun a new project for Triangle. Stung by charges that his *Birth of A Nation* had been racist, Griffith planned a new epic which he named *Intolerance*. It was the most ambitious film that had ever been shot and one of the most influential of all times. Griffith presented four separate stories which showed intolerance throughout the ages: the fall of Babylon to Cyrus the Great, the cruficixion of Christ, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and a modern story. The stories were connected by shots of a young woman played by Griffith favorite Lillian Gish rocking a cradle. Griffith planned his film on a scale comparable to modern spectaculars. He hired sixty principal players and 18,000 extras. The Babylonian set covered ten acres and was three hundred

feet high, and his payroll exceeded $20,000 a day. In fourteen months he spent over $2,000, 000 dollars. The finished film ran eight hours. Griffith edited it down to a three-and-a-half hour version for its premiere.

Griffith was even more ambitious artistically, structuring the movie around elaborate crosscutting between his four stories.

"The plots of the four stories are interwoven like movements in a symphony until they converge in a crescendo at the film's climax. Between this quadruple climax, actions occuring in the separate historical pieces are episodically self-contained and are drawn together by the recurrent traditional symbol of the mother and child. . . As the separate stories move toward their conclusions, however, Griffith largely abandons this transitional device and cuts back and forth directly between incomplete climactic actions in the process of unfolding on all four temporal planes. Each cut is rapidly intercut in shots of shorter and shorter duration until their final climaxes conclude with a symbolic montage dissolve into flowered meadows filled with frolicking children."[8] (*A History of the Narrative Film,* Cook, p. 95)

Unfortunately, the elaborate interweaving of the four narratives proved beyond the comprehension of the average viewer. The movie bombed commercially. Griffith, trying to retrieve some of the investment, cut the film and released the Babylonian and modern stories as separate features. Even so he could not recoup his personal $400,000 investment. In a final misfortune when the negative was reassembled some years later, a portion of it was discovered lost.[9] (*A History of the Narrative Film*, Cook, p. 95)

Yet *Intolerance* was to create a sensation in Europe where its revolutionary continuity editing was hailed along with its use of dissolves, irises, masking, widescreen, tracking shots and other cinematic effects. This impact was strongest in the Soviet Union to which a print of *Intolerance* was smuggled in 1919. Exhibited at the Lev Khuleshov film school in Moscow, it was studied so repeatedly that the negative eventually fell apart. Prior to *Intolerance,* the Soviets had developed a brilliant school of documentary filmmaking. Griffith's film helped germinate the Soviet narrative film. His methods were to be refined by the mid-20's into a theory of montage most brilliantly propouned by Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein, whose 1925 *The Battleship Potemkin* is still considered a cinema classic, credited *Intolerance* as a prime influence.

The commercial failure of *Intolerance* did not hurt Griffith's standing as America's leading film director, but it restricted his independence and helped lead to the collapse of Triangle. Griffith, Sennett and Ince would continue to make movies, but the future did not

really belong to them but to the independent film producers who had fought the Patent Trust before the war. These men had begun as theater operators and had first rebelled when the Trust had attempted to levy a two-dollar royalty on each of its films. Since its foundation in 1909, the Trust, composed of those film studios which held patents on essential film-making equipment, had attempted to curtail independent production. Their partial success created a shortage of movies for exhibitors. The more independent distributors like Adolph Zukor, Carl Lamelle and William Fox began to produce and distribute their own films, and Lamelle and Fox especially fought lengthy battles against the Trust in court. Lamelle alone faced over 273 litigations before a court ruling in his favor declared the Trust a monopoly.

Pressure from Trust lawyers and goons had driven the independents from New York to California. Now free to operate, they began to acquire property in Hollywood and to put performers and technicians under exclusive contract. They were soon to establish their own studios. Adolph Zukor, the New York-based distributor of the Film d'Art, joined with Jesse Lasky to establish Famous Players-Lasky which would soon become Paramount.

With Cecil B. DeMille as his leading director, Zukor brought Mary Pickford and William S. Hart under contract with large salaries, although he would lose them in time to higher bidders. His contract disputes with Pickford become legendary. Although she was always to play children and young women, she was a sharp businesswoman and one of the hardest negotiators in Hollywood. Zukor was also to create new stars in Fatty Arbuckle and Douglas Fairbanks. By 1917 the studio was producing 120 films a year, although many were five reelers averaging less than seventy-five minutes.

Zukor also instituted the practice of blockbooking. Exhibitors were forced to rent large numbers of second-rate Paramount films in order to secure the rights to a few hit films. This policy, which years later would be ruled illegal by the courts, would be adopted by the other studios.

In 1919, Zukor was to negotiate a ten-million dollar loan from Wall Street, inaugurating major involvement in filmmaking by the stock exchange and banks. In 1915 Lamelle opened Universal Studios providing the public with a free tour of the studio grounds. The tour proved so popular that Lamelle was for the next few years to continue it as a regular feature of the studio life in which visitors watched films in production. Fox inaugurated 20th Century Fox, and a group of distributors in rebellion against Zukor's distribution policies were to establish Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, soon to be known as MGM.

All of these men shared a common background. They were immigrants to America,

all non-native speakers, almost all Jewish. Many of them had been habadashers, almost none had formal education. But as immigrants, they were in touch with the taste of the largest segment of the film audience; the lower-middle and working classes in both America and Europe. They were marketeer-generals of a product that could be sold anywhere since it relied on pantomime augmented by written titles which could be quickly prepared in the appropriate language. They were to determine the fate of the American movie industry and influence world cinema for the next thirty to forty years.

Lamelle through his initial company IMP had initiated the star system by hiring "the Biograph Girl" Florence Laurence away for a raise of $175 to the unheard of salary of $200 a week. Later he would steal "the Girl with the Curls" Mary Pickford. Lamelle would also be among the first to suffer the effects of the new star system he had created, losing his new talent to higher bidders.

In 1916 Universal produced a version of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* which was praised for its underwater photography. In 1917 it began a series of westerns starring Harry Carey directed by future great John Ford.

Fox's specialty would also be the Western. Fox featured a genuine cowboy, Tom Mix, whose colorful westerns were tremendously popular. By 1916 it was producing fifty films a year.

In 1916 Thomas Ince produced and partially directed *Civilization,* an anti-war movie on a scale approaching Griffith's *Intolerance.* Although less-esteemed than *Intolerance* today, the film was a huge success and helped in the re-election of Woodrow Wilson then running for President on an anti-war platform. Yet public sentiment was soon to turn toward intervention, and Wilson soon after re-election was to lead America into war. By 1917 the first American troops arrived in France.

The film industry threw itself behind the war. It provided facilities for documentary film making. Leading stars like Chaplin and Mary Pickford toured the country to sell war bonds and appeared in propaganda films. In one of these Chaplin was shown braining a German soldier with a huge gavel When Douglas Fairbanks, at the time popular in the role of a brash, fresh-faced young gentleman, tried to enlist, he was rejected by the draft board who told him he was more valuable selling war bonds.

Griffith too was pressed into service. While filming in England, he was asked to make a film about the war. After a tour of the trenches, however, Griffith announced the new war to be unromantic. He returned to Hollywood and shot *Hearts of the World* on a studio backlot.

Griffith film helped create a new star, Erich Von Stroheim whose sadistic German officer electrified audiences. Von Stroheim, who had worked as an assistant director and bit player for Griffith, became known as "the man you loved to hate". Although of Austrian-Jewish heritage, Von Stroheim had a military bearing and claimed a Hapsburg army background. In 1919 he would direct *Blind Husbands* the first of a series of films depicting the decadance of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire which were remarkable not only for artistry but for their extreme attention to detail. In later films he was to paste maple leaves on trees and provide actors playing Hapsburg soldiers with authentic silk underwear.[10)] (*Great Movie Directors,* Ted Sennett, p. 244-45)

By 1918 the American presence at the front began to make itself felt. American and French troops helped to stop a German offensive. The German position, temporarily bolstered by the Russian surrender in 1917, began to strain after years of war and depleted supplies. By 1918 Germany could fight no more and surrendered.

As Europe began to recover, American films now dominated its cinemas. Louis Feuillade, whose medical discharge from the French army had allowed him to remain active as a director during the war, called on the French cinema to recover in a program note for the 1917 premiere of *Judex.*

"After the beginning of the war, the French cinema was to pass through a fatal crisis, whose deplorable results we are experiencing today. Elsewhere in France production was severely curtailed, if not entirely stopped.

The Americans profited by this to launch on our markets a stock of films whose merits it would be unjust and childish to deny. But if our clever competitors, marvellously served by circumstances, have succeeded, thanks to first-class equipment, and a strength of invention that has to be admired, in making real progress in our art, we must nevertheless keep ourselves from concluding that French production is definitively outclassed by the Americans and that we are condemned always to be following after others."[11)] (*Movies of the Silent Years,* Lloyd, p. 86-7)

Except for the films of Feuillade, only in neutral Sweden had filmmakers broken new ground during the war. Victor Sjostrom and Maurice Stiller both established international reputations. Sjostrom, who had begun directing in 1912, his stride in 1917 with *The Outlaw and His Wife,* and would introduce the brooding, metaphysical atmosphere characteristic of late Swedish films.

The Outlaw and His Wife, based on an Icelandic saga, portrays a primitive farming community with Sjostrom playing the main role as the hero whose criminal past catches up

with him. He is forced to flee to the hills with his wife. As their relationship sours over the years, the hero broods over the inability of man to escape his fate. The film's distinctly non-Victorian traditions challenged prevailing cinema standards.

Stiller, best-remembered for his discovery of Greta Garbo, made uninhibited, sophisticated upper-class comedies before switching to historical romances. Their films were to influence German filmmakers who, partially blockaded since the Battle of Jutland in 1916, had been cut off from other international films.

Filmstock shortages in wartime Germany had severely restricted production although two notable films, *The Golem* and *Homunculus* introduced films about monstrous, artificial life that prefigured the dark-toned post-war cinema.

In an attempt to streamline production, a nationally-subsidized film conglomerate UFA (the Universuim Film Atstiengellschaft) was created by government decree in 1917. All German film companies were ordered to join. As a result at the end of the war the German film industry was established strongly enough to compete with Hollywood.[12)] (*A History of the Narrative Film*, Cook, p. 110-111)

Another ingredient in the German film recovery was the near-total rejection of traditional German values at the end of the war and the adoption of expressionism to the cinema. Expressionism, also popular in the theater and other German arts, had developed in reaction to the naturnalism of the 19th century.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) would export expressionism to the rest of the world. As originally co-scripted by Hans Janowitz, a Czech poet, and Carl Meyer, an Austrian artist, the film sought to attack authoritarianism by portraying a mad hypnotist who dispatched a sleepwalker to kidnap and murder. As finally directed by Robert Wienne, the story was altered so that its young hero, the doctor's accuser in the original, is revealed at the end to be a lunatic in an asylum and Caligari his kindly doctor. In the final version the murders occur only in the lunatic's delusional system.

Despite the inversion of the script's original intensions, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was to have a tremendous impact both in Germany and outside. This response stemmed not only from its story but in its dimly expressive lighting and non-naturalistic painted sets. The effect, to disorient the viewer, was enhanced by non-naturalistic acting.

"When released in Britain in 1922, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was billed as 'Europe's greatest contribution to the motion picture art', and it remains one of the cinemas landmarks. . . It's elements of expressionism in art direction and the plastic, externalized acting style it fostered became distinguishing features of the German cinema until the late

twenties.[13] (*Movies of the Silent Years,* Lloyd, p. 91-2)

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari would also help reinforce growing post-war cynicism and pessimism. This disillusionment was reflected not only in films and the novels of the Lost Generation in Paris, but also in the life styles of returning veterans, in jazz and new dress styles and in abandonment of war-time idealism. These trends were reinforced in the United States when the majority of the population chose to ignore the 1919 Volstead Act forbidding the sale and consumption of alcohol. The demand for illegal alcohol would create a new, insiduous kind of hero, the gangster. Disrespect for authority would add to the prevailing malaise.

Films were quick to portray these new trends. Von Stroheim was soon joined in directing sexual dramas by Cecil B. DeMille. DeMille, who had helped popularize the Westeern for Famous Players-Lasky in 1914, had an aptness for switching genres. He would later direct a series of bedroom farces whose highpoint was its bathing scenes.

In 1919 D. W. Griffith joined with three leading performers, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to form their own studio, United Artists. Chaplin used his new freedom to make longer films, and his first full length feature, *The Kid* (1921) was a tremendous success. Pickford continued to play young girls in ringlets, but Fairbanks, now married to Pickford introduced the swashbuckler in his 1920 *The Mark of Zorro.* His combination of athletic ability with the light-hearted humor of his war-time persona was tremendously popular, and his remaining films would be adventures filled with sword-fights and spectacular stunts.

Only Griffith remained unchanged, although in the immediate postwar years no decline was evident. His 1919 *Broken Blossoms*, a Victorian drama about a waif, played by Lillian Gish, taken in and protected from a brutish father by an immigrant Chinese, was among the best work he had ever done. He followed this in 1920 with another hit, *Way Down East.* But in the postwar era the audience for Griffith's Victorian dramas was receding and would in time bring an end to his career as well as others unable to adjust to the prevailing mood.

As the Roaring Twenties began, the American cinema continued to expand confidently, its control of domestic and international markets secure. The Golden Age of the Silent Cinema, although it would be cut short by the advent of sound, had already begun.

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