

Theatrical Melodrama, Dramatic Film, and the Rise of American Cinema: The Case of Griffith's *Way Down East*

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Abstract: *Way Down East* (1920) was made from a highly successful stage play of the same name, written by Lottie Blair Parker, Joseph R. Grismer, and William A. Brady, which had its premiere at Newport, Rhode Island, on September 3, 1897, and was performed around the United States for more than twenty years. The Parker-Grismer-Brady play came at the end of a century in which the form of melodrama had dominated the American theater—so much so that it spawned several types, such as the rural melodrama of *Way Down East*. The film of *Way Down East* itself represents a landmark in the transition between two worlds: of intensive play structure and extensive film form, of Aristotelian drama and Eisensteinian cinema, of nineteenth-century theater culture and twentieth-century American film. This essay is an analysis of the important differences between the dramatic and cinematic versions of *Way Down East* and an evaluation of the movie in the context of American film history.

Keywords: D. W. Griffith—American film—American theater and drama—melodrama—adaptation

Among the films of D. W. Griffith (1875-1948), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) are the most famous (or infamous in the case of the former picture) and, justly, the most praised for their technical accomplishments. Lower in this group is the status of *Way Down East* (1920), but it is a picture of persistent strength and of exceptional interest in American cultural history. *Way Down East* was made from a highly successful stage play of the same name, written by Lottie Blair Parker, Joseph R. Grismer, and William A. Brady, which had its premiere at Newport, Rhode Island,

on September 3, 1897, and was performed around the United States for more than twenty years. The Parker-Grismer-Brady play came at the end of a century in which the form of melodrama had dominated the American theater—so much so that it spawned several types, such as the rural or “horse-and-buggy” melodrama of *Way Down East*.

Some remarks on nineteenth-century American drama are necessary for context. Serious American drama at this time, at its most ambitious, reached the level of blank-verse, pseudo-Shakespearean tragedy along the lines of George Henry Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855) or large-scale costume melodrama filled with spectacle, like Steele MacKaye's *Paul Kauver* (1887). At its less ambitious, it produced broader melodrama of the cheer-the-hero-hiss-the-villain kind, like *Way Down East* and George Aiken's enormously popular dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Much of American comic drama, for its part, was built on variants of the situation established in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787): the triumph of a supposedly uncivilized American (or Westerner, or Yankee farmer) over sophisticated Englishmen (or Easterners, or city slickers). Among the many plays of this type were Samuel Woodworth's *The Forest Rose* (1825) and J. K. Paulding's *The Lion of the West* (1830).

In the nineteenth century the theater had become a broadly popular light-entertainment form, then, much like television today. It is possible to do artistically ambitious work on American commercial television, but television is not likely to be the first medium to come to the mind of a serious writer—just as the theater was not for the serious writer of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that the American playwrights of this period were without talent, but that, like television writers, they were more likely to be artisans skilled at producing the entertaining effects that audiences wanted, rather than artists looking to illuminate the human condition or challenge received values. The reasons for this general absence of literary depth or quality were many and not restricted to America, for in Britain and on the European continent the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also generally fallow periods for dramatic literature. (In America, as in Europe, a change in the kind of literature being written for the theater began to become apparent in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, as Ibsen in Norway, Chekhov in Russia, and later Shaw in England and O'Neill in the United States rediscovered the theater as a vehicle amenable to ambitious dramatic literature—be it tragic or comic, realistic, naturalistic, expressionist, or symbolist.)

Since the genre of melodrama dominated the nineteenth-century theater, we need to ask now what in fact a melodrama is. The term has often been defined—it is one of the easier dramatic terms to define—but for my purposes I will try to consolidate the definitions offered by the theater scholar Robert B. Heilman, the film historian Ben Singer, and the film critic Linda Williams. Melodrama is a dramatic form using monochromatic characters, relying heavily on sensationalism and sentimentality, or spectacle and pathos (themselves underscored by suspenseful or saccharine musical accompaniment), and usually involving physical danger to the “good” or virtuous protagonist, who is engaged in an external conflict with evil—vice—of one kind or another. According to James Mercer and Martin Shingler, melodrama “always has the ability to provoke strong emotions in audiences, from tears of sorrow and identification, to derisive laughter” (1). The single essential ingredient in this recipe, finally, is earthly justice. A “straight” drama may merely imply justice or may end in irony at the absence of it; in tragedy, justice, if it comes at all, may come in the hereafter (if *it* comes at all). In melodrama, by contrast, justice may be slow but it is sure, and it is always seen to be done—often in a last-minute reversal of the situation at the play’s core.

By implication, then, melodrama is an artistic strategy designed, *and desired*, to reconcile its audience to the way things are. In the nineteenth century its chief aim was to support the economic and moral system—a great deal was made in these plays of the “poor but honest” theme together with its companion, the “rich but exploitative” motif. (Today, melodrama supports different conventional ideas, as in the case of David Mamet’s movie *House of Games* [1987] if not the much earlier film of Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* [1941], which takes place at the same time as *Way Down East* but emphasizes almost exclusively the rapaciousness or acquisitiveness of the “haves.”) Many thousands of farmers saw the play *Way Down East* in the years that it toured the country, and they must have known that this idyllic, Currier-and-Ives version of their lives was a long way from brute fact. Indeed, as David Mayer points out (198), the common source for both play and film of *Way Down East*—and for numerous other American rural melodramas—was a wildly popular lithograph which had enjoyed a long life as the quintessential image of domestic serenity and stability: *The Old Oaken Bucket*, created for Currier and Ives in 1864, and “realized” in our first view in Griffith’s *Way Down East* of the Bartlett farm, seen in long shot as well as in subsequent closer shots that reprise details from the print.

But this fictional, pictorial or cinematic image gave farmers two compensations: escape from the harshness and unpredictability of agricultural reality, and roles in which to imagine themselves outside the theater. As Eric Bentley once put it, "Melodrama is the Naturalism of the dream life" (205).

Nowadays it may be necessary to explain the title of this play/film. "Down East" is an old phrase used to describe the farthest reaches of New England, particularly Maine, which at its tip is considerably east of Boston. The picture tells the entire story chronologically of innocent Anna Moore (including the portion that occurs before the play and is revealed there only through exposition), who lives with her mother "way down east" in the New England village of Belden. When they get into financial difficulties, the country girl goes, at her mother's request, to seek help from their rich and fashionable relatives in Boston, the Tremonts. Mrs. Tremont and her snobbish daughters treat her poorly, but Anna attracts the attention of an unscrupulous playboy named Lennox Sanderson. He has his way by tricking her into a false marriage, which he persuades her to keep secret on the ground that the revelation would anger his father (from whom he derives his support). Back home in her Maine village, Anna obeys until she becomes pregnant, at which time she asks to be publicly recognized as Mrs. Sanderson. The womanizer responds by telling her the truth and then leaving her to cope as best she can.

Some time later, Anna's mother dies, and Anna takes refuge in a rooming house in Belden, where her baby dies soon after its birth. Turned out by her censorious landlady, who suspects that she has no husband, Anna pitifully takes to the road with her few possessions to look for work. She finds a position at the Bartlett farm, near Bartlett village, despite the reservations of Squire Bartlett about hiring someone whose past he and his family do not know. Anna proves her virtue through hard work (how else?), and the squire's son, David, falls in love with her. But when he declares himself, she tells him, without disclosing the reason, that nothing will ever be possible between them. As coincidence would have it (*has* to have it), the "reason"—Lennox Sanderson—lives nearby on a country estate. He soon discovers that Anna is on the Bartlett place and urges her to move on; she tries to obey what the society of her time would have perceived as a male superior, but the Bartletts, who know nothing of the Sanderson matter (though they know him), persuade their "hired girl" to remain.

The plot begins building to its crisis when, some months later, Maria Poole, the Belden landlady, visits Bartlett Village, sees Anna, and tells her

story to the local gossip, Martha Perkins (who, along with a "village eccentric," a "nutty professor," and a "high-spirited gal," forms a kind of gallery of stock comic roles from the nineteenth-century theater). After Martha relays the news to the squire, he goes to Belden to confirm it; when he learns that the story is true, he returns home that night and orders Anna out of his house during a blinding snowstorm. She leaves, but not before denouncing Sanderson, who that very evening is an honored guest at the Bartlett house. Sanderson is thereupon attacked by David Bartlett and shown the door; then David goes out into the storm to find Anna. Hysterical and grief-stricken, she has collapsed on a frozen river just as the ice is beginning to break up in the spring thaw. When David finds her, Anna is being carried downstream on an ice cake toward the falls; yet he manages to follow her from floe to floe and complete his rescue right before she reaches the brink. Himself forgiving, the Squire now begs Anna's forgiveness as well, which she graciously grants; Sanderson offers to marry her authentically but is scornfully refused; and the film of *Way Down East* ends happily with the wedding of David and Anna.

Following Bernard Beckerman's lead (171) and distinguishing between "plot," which conventionally signifies the sequence of actions or events in a play, and "story," which designates all incidents and activities that occur before, after, and during the play—offstage as well as onstage—I should presently like to examine Griffith's adaptation of dramatic techniques to film and to consider his reasons for telling Anna Moore's story chronologically or episodically as opposed to climactically. Although it is true that much has been written about *Way Down East*'s translation into film, that writing—by Michael Allen, Robert M. Henderson, David Mayer, and Richard Schickel, among others—focuses on the source material or is concerned with the separate roles of Griffith, Parker, Grismer, Brady, and others in its adaptation, not with the finished cinematic product itself. Indeed, Scott Simmon's *The Films of D. W. Griffith* does not even include a chapter on *Way Down East*, or for that matter any extended discussion of the film, while (astonishingly) Tom Gunning's *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* makes no mention of this work whatsoever. My purpose here, by contrast, is to concentrate on Griffith's film adaptation as *adaptation*: its cinematic form, style, aims, and strategies.

The screenplay that Griffith used, the majority of which he himself wrote, is a model of the film adaptation of plays, in the purely technical sense. Much of the formal beauty of play design, as he surely knew, arises from

limitation: the necessity to limit action and to arrange necessary combinations of characters on the stage. The skill with which these matters are handled can be a pleasure in itself, as well as positive enrichment of the drama. But this skill is not essential to the screenplay, which has infinitely greater freedom of physical and temporal movement, can unfold intertwined material into serial form, and can run virtually parallel actions. The contrast can easily be seen if the Parker-Grismer-Brady play script and the movie scenario by Griffith and Anthony Paul Kelly are placed alongside each other.

That movie scenario, it must be remembered, was written during the silent era. (Though "silent," the films of this era did make heavy use of live music during their projection—especially movie melodramas ["melodious" dramas] like *Way Down East*—the same kind of live music that accompanied the original play in the theater, and which was incorporated by Griffith into the soundtrack of the 1931 reissue of the movie.) That is, even if the director had wanted simply to film the play as it stood, he would have been unable to do so without the heavy use of titles. This is because Anna's past is revealed through dialogue in the play, which has a late point of attack and therefore begins when she arrives at Bartlett Village in Maine looking for work—after her baby has died and she has been evicted from Maria Poole's rooming house. It is Lennox Sanderson's discovery of Anna on Squire Bartlett's farm, then, that provokes the drama of the Parker-Grismer-Brady play. Griffith, however, must tell Anna's story long before this occurrence: through pictures (and the discreet use of titles), and beginning with this country girl's visit to Boston.

Beyond the merely descriptive or illustrative images of his narrative, Griffith uses nature to evoke characters' inner states where a drama would use, for instance, the soliloquy; he also uses nature as a silent but expressive character. An example of the latter "use" occurs when Anna is thrown out by her landlady, after her baby's death: there is a lovely long shot of Anna starting down a country road, her few possessions in a box under her arm, and this shot bitterly contrasts the beauty of the countryside with this young woman's sorry state. Indeed, the environment underlines Anna's desolation by seeming to overwhelm her—a tiny figure by contrast who becomes even smaller as she walks away from the camera. Shots of nature are used differently, to endorse a character's feelings, in at least two instances in *Way Down East*. In one, Anna meets with David Bartlett near a waterfall that pours into a gleaming, tranquil river, which reflects the couple's contentment even as the cascade represents the passion surging inside them. Simi-

larly, during the storm sequence there is a powerful congruence between the raging blizzard and Anna's turbulent feelings as she wanders all alone at night.

There is plenty of suspense by the time we get to the snowstorm, but what about early in the film? The sources of tension in the play *Way Down East* are the gradual revelation of Anna's certain secret and the definition of her relationship with Lennox Sanderson. But these tensions disappear in the movie because we follow Anna from her very first meeting with Sanderson, after she has arrived in Boston from rural Maine to visit her wealthy aunt. (One big advantage of the film's method, though, is that Griffith can give Anna the experience of betrayal and loss of her child "onstage," thus making her a differently seen, more sympathetic character by the time she reaches the point of what was her first entrance in the play.) Perhaps believing that an equivalent of dramatic suspense would be necessary to hold the audience's interest in his chronological tale of Anna's ordeal, Griffith creates tension in the first half of the film, before his heroine leaves Boston, through *visual* means in addition to creating literal visual tension.

The first type is produced when, several times, a scene from life on Squire Bartlett's farm is inserted into or intercut with the action in Boston. Griffith knew he had the problem of establishing the Bartlett home and his male romantic lead before Anna reaches them—about half an hour into the story. (In the play of *Way Down East*, the reverse is true: Anna does not arrive at the Bartlett farm until fairly late in the first act, most of which is spent introducing David Bartlett and his parents as well as some local types.) So he solved the problem with a device deliberately borrowed from the Dickensian novel: he inserts the title "Chapter Two . . . Bartlett Village" and proceeds to give us glimpses of the place and its most prominent family. We do not know that this is where Anna will eventually seek refuge and find salvation through David, but we assume that the director is showing us these scenes for a purpose that will become clear. In fact, the lack of clarity is itself an enticement, and we eagerly anticipate an explanation of the presence of the Bartletts and their farm in the movie.

Literal visual tension is created in the film of *Way Down East* in two ways. Life in the sophisticated city, in Boston, is filled with verticals—tall doorways, spiral staircases, high ceilings—whereas life in simple, bucolic Maine, in the inserted country scenes, is composed mainly of horizontals—the long porch of the Bartlett family house, the flat land, the background action that crosses the screen from right to left (as when the sheriff drives

his horse-drawn wagon up to the farm's gated entrance). In addition to this horizontal-vertical juxtaposition, there is the larger, even more striking one of outdoors against indoors. Almost all the shots of the country in the first half of *Way Down East* take place outside, in the fresh air and sunlight. By contrast, all the shots of the city occur indoors, in darkened, smoke-filled rooms. The atmosphere in Boston is frenetic: there seemingly are round-the-clock parties. The inhabitants of Bartlett village, for their part, are so relaxed that some of them even fall asleep during the day. (This may explain the otherwise curious shot of David in bed on a sunny afternoon, starting suddenly from sleep only when Anna, as yet unknown to him, is entering into the bogus marriage with Sanderson miles away.)

With the aid of such visual tension, Griffith could film the whole of Anna's story, as opposed to solely the plot of the play, and doing that gave him one large advantage: he could make it appear less melodramatic, or, better, he could enhance the *realism* of the melodrama, of its settings and actions—a realism of spectacle toward which the nineteenth-century theater itself had aspired, to a point. (Stage productions of *Way Down East*, for example, placed onstage a sleigh-riding episode, a traveling scene by wagon through the forest to the Bartlett farm, and a "circus" of horses, sheep, and all varieties of agricultural conveyance.) As Ben Singer has argued,

It might appear incongruous that melodrama around the turn of the century was often referred to as "the realistic class of plays." This phrase points to the fact that melodrama immediately conjured up the aspiration toward spectacular diegetic realism. That kind of realism, for which A. Nicholas Vardac proposed the term "Romantic realism," aimed at credible accuracy in the depiction of incredible, extraordinary views. . . . Sensational melodrama was preoccupied with diegetic realism in general, which involved both efforts at verisimilar mise-en-scène and the use of real objects on stage—real horses, real fire engines, real pile drivers, real water, etc. (50)

Thus one of the distinguishing qualities of the film of *Way Down East*, perhaps the most significant factor in permitting it to transcend the limits of its primitive genre, derives from its careful rooting of the characters in their environment. This was a quality that no amount of stage machinery could produce, and it may even be that *Way Down East* represents the culmination of the process, stretching back almost to the beginning of the movies, by which film, possessing a superior technology, finally revealed its theatrical rival obsolete: the triumph of optics over mechanics, let us call it.

Clearly, then, Anna is enmeshed in Manichean circumstances in the movie, but, just as clearly, she passes through them—all of them—and we

see her do so. Although she is victimized by Sanderson on account of her rustic innocence, Anna struggles to make her own destiny: she endures the disgrace (at the time) of giving birth out of wedlock and the grief of her baby's death; then she creates a new life for herself through hard work at Squire Bartlett's farm. Circumstance intervenes again in the persons of her erstwhile seducer and of her former landlady, who, with Martha Perkins' aid, betrays Anna's past to the squire. And again Anna fights against her victimization: she rightly accuses Sanderson of gross deception in front of his neighbors, then defiantly walks out of the farmhouse into the blizzard to end all blizzards.

Because we witnessed Anna's strength and bravery after she was deserted by Sanderson and were not simply told about them, we find those qualities in her here at the end more believable. Because we witnessed Anna's journey from the Maine countryside to Boston, then from there back to Maine and on to Squire Bartlett's farm, we are more willing to view her final foray into the snow as possible escape rather than probable death. In the play of *Way Down East*, we only hear of Anna's incredible rescue; in the film, we see it happen, seemingly without gimmick, and her rescue thus becomes credible. After this, her forgiveness by Squire Bartlett (because she was tricked into immorality) and marriage to David can be only anticlimax, whereas, in the play, they are meant to be epiphany.

I do not mean to imply that Griffith increases the literary value of the Parker-Grismer-Brady script by expanding it in time and space. *Way Down East* is still a melodrama. What he accomplishes, however, in adapting the play to the screen is to point up significant differences between the two forms—the obvious ones and the not so obvious. One obvious difference—made so partly because of Griffith's pioneering work—is not only that the theater is more verbal and the cinema more visual, but also that film is a narrative art form that tells stories through the mediation of the camera, which can provide the viewer with multiple perspectives through a variety of shots. It was Griffith who discovered that the content of a scene—the intensity of its drama and the degree of its emotion—not its location, should determine the correct placement (including angle) of the camera and the correct moment to cut from one perspective to another. He made shots such as the full shot, the medium shot, the close-up, and the long shot standard and combined them into sequential wholes to produce narrative clarity, power, and meaning. Furthermore, Griffith discovered at the same time the power of two moving-camera shots: the pan and the traveling shot,

each of which produces a magnified sensation of physical movement; the usefulness of the technique called parallel editing or cross-cutting, which could show the relationship between two or more independent actions; and he discovered the subtlety of tonal lighting, which, together with his use of natural light sources, replaced the flat stage lighting that emphasized the painted scenery of other directors' films.

The remarkable fusion of these new film elements and old theater heritage is why *Way Down East* is still effective today and why it is historically important. In a word, we see Griffith using sheerly cinematic language to fulfill the drama of his script. As Anna stands before the Tremonts' towering double doors in Boston, for example, she is photographed in a diminishing high-angle shot. When Lennox Sanderson is later introduced, there is a quick succession of cuts (close-ups and medium shots), so that his first appearance sparkles prismatically—and dangerously. When he and Anna meet, we see him over her shoulder before we see them together, as Griffith uses film's power to shift the audience and thus increase the feeling of encounter between these two. As the camera comes in for close-ups of Anna and her baby's birth-and-death room, Griffith vignettes her against a black background to underscore the icon effect. As she arrives at the Bartlett gate on foot not long afterwards, he intercuts a shot of Sanderson on horseback, at his estate nearby, thereby commenting sardonically and simultaneously knitting his plot. When the spinster Martha Perkins discovers the facts of Anna's past and hurries to spread the gossip, we get one of the few tracking shots in *Way Down East*: the camera trundles eagerly ahead of her on the snowy path, and its very motion—Martha's motion toward the Bartlett home—becomes part of the idea of the scene.

But *Way Down East* does more than fuse the "grammar and rhetoric" of film with the vocabulary of theater in this way. It also points out the difference in artistic structure and philosophical assumption between the drama and the cinema. The paradigm of dramatic structure in the West up to Ibsen in the late nineteenth century, with the exception of Shakespeare and his coevals, had been intensive or Aristotelian—a form in which, philosophically speaking, the protagonist is caught in a highly contracted situation, his end foretold before the plot begins and his range of choice therefore increasingly reduced, for the plot in this case is enmeshed in the toils of a story with a long as well as a weighty past. Film form is by its very nature extensive, for the camera can easily extend itself over time and space as it covers the whole of the story, in this way militating against highly com-

pressed circumstances and always leaving possibilities or alternatives open for the characters, insofar as action is concerned. (Shakespeare's plays are often called "cinematic" precisely because their own structure is extensive.)

In adapting *Way Down East* to film, Griffith essentially dropped the intensive structure in which Anna Moore had been trapped (only to be miraculously-cum-melodramatically rescued from it at the last minute by David Bartlett) into an extensive one, with favorable or liberating results for the melodrama as well as for the character of Anna. What Griffith seems to have been discovering, along with his audience, was that film not only satisfies a craving for the replication or redemption of physical reality, but also for freedom—from the restrictions of time and place, from the limitations of language, and *from the past*. Action in film is thus more of a journey in the present than a confrontation based on the past—the one filled with possibility or promise, the other with fatalism or foreboding. And if stage melodrama, in which villainy is punished and virtue rewarded, was a last-second escape from the past, melodramatic film is an extended departure from it.

As Frank Rahill, David Grimsted, and James Smith all make clear, stage melodrama provided its audiences in the nineteenth century with momentary relief from a world in which man felt himself a prisoner of his past, possibly of his own origins, and where justice was most often *not* done. The myth of such melodrama was that of spiritual redemption by bourgeois standards. Hence Anna is a secular saint, truly good, suffering for the sins and blindness of her fellows, finally undergoing an agony that reveals her purity. She is betrayed in her trust, she goes through travail, she labors in humility, she declines the happiness of David's love because she is unworthy, and she shows that death holds no terror for her. At last she achieves, with David, a kind of heaven on earth—one that is shared, moreover, by two other couples from the film's comic subplot, which had served merely as comic relief but now joins the main plot in the finale's happy, harmonious union.

To extend the analogy, the God in the story is the Squire—the owner of the Eden. It is he who at first is about to expel Anna from the Garden, who finds the largesse in his heart to let her remain on trust, and who at last provides the crucial forgiveness—because when she sinned, she did not know it; she thought she was behaving rightly. Not only is Anna forgiven, but when she marries David she wears white, her virginity restored by dispensation of the Squire. Here then, in capsule, is sainthood founded

on respectability, which was possibly the chief criterion for social survival in the nineteenth century.

But not in the twentieth, and certainly not in the twenty-first century. Yet Griffith appears to have had a sense of the continuing function of melodrama in a bourgeois, mock-egalitarian society. He also must have had some sense of the pluralistic nature of the public at any given time, the perception that new, even avant-garde, interests can coexist with old, traditional ones. (For instance, I don't think he would have been surprised that, during the 1969–1970 movie season, *Easy Rider* and *Airport* were successes simultaneously.) So in 1920, the same year that O'Neill wrote *Beyond the Horizon*, in which Stravinsky and Satie were already known composers, when Picasso and Matisse themselves were known painters, and two years after the end of a world war that had altered certain traditions and beliefs forever, Griffith paid \$182,000—much more than the entire cost of his *Birth of a Nation*—for the screen rights to a twenty-three-year-old rural melodrama.

Before making his first of many short films in 1908, Griffith himself had had plenty of experience in the theater, a theater that was full of plays like the one by Parker, Grismer, and Brady: he had begun acting in 1897 (the same year, to repeat, in which *Way Down East* was first produced on stage), at the age of twenty-two, with a stock company in his native Kentucky, had struggled in a number of other stock and road companies, then had written a melodrama that was produced, unsuccessfully, in Washington, D.C., in 1907. Out of this experience, evidently, came the conviction that he knew how to make *Way Down East* “work” and that the postwar public had not shed all its old affinities. And apparently he also understood how film was taking over the form and function of melodrama from the theater, expanding it in the directions toward which it had been moving.

One of those directions included the theater's wishful embrace of cinematic form, not only because of that form's photographic realism, but also because, by its very (expansive) nature, film reflected for melodramatically conditioned spectators in the early twentieth century the belief that the world was a place in which man could leave the past behind and create his own future, where earthly justice for past wrongs would become a moot point—to be left in the past. *Way Down East*, then, represents a landmark in the transition between two worlds: of an intensive play structure and an extensive cinematic one, of Aristotelian drama and Eisensteinian film, of nineteenth-century theater culture and twentieth-century movie entertainment. It is as if, in shooting *Way Down East* after the seminal *Birth of a*

Nation and *Intolerance* and late in the historical process that saw film make over theatrical melodrama, Griffith were going back to mark simultaneously his own beginnings on the nineteenth-century stage and his movement into cinema in 1908, when, out of theater work, he took a job with the Biograph Company of New York—one that would eventually enable him to make film history.

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