

Ruth Mayer

# Unique Doubles: Ornamental Sisters and Dual Roles in the Transitional Era Cinema

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the representation of female family relations—particularly constellations of sisterhood and of mothers and daughters—in US-American films of the 1910s against the backdrop of a larger aesthetics of doubling. It addresses the close interaction of the cinema of the decade with the variety stage and its predilection for synchronized and ornamental arrangements and then moves on to reflect on the cinematic conventions of double acts and dual roles in the context of the star system. It argues that by enacting female relations as disturbing or delightful doubles, the entertainment culture of the 1910s takes issue with the period’s conceptualization of gender and sexuality.

The phenomenon of the star is, in many respects, emblematic of the workings of modern mass culture in its constant alternation between repetition and sensational exaggeration. Star personas may promise a reassuring familiarity, but since they are part of the mass-cultural universe, they are simultaneously subjected to the dynamic of continuous transformation and fictionalization. In the emerging star system, familiar figures never stay stable but are continuously updated, amended, and optimized with alternate and parallel versions, remakes, rewritings, and reinventions.<sup>1</sup>

1 Michael Makropoulos, *Theorie der Massenkultur* (Munich: Fink, 2008), 133; and Ruth Mayer, “Endless Deferral: Theories of Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Affect,”

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The star is ready made *and* unique, and while stardom is no singularly cinematic phenomenon, the cinema at all stages reflected the latently paradoxical implications of this convergence of the standardized and the singular. In this article, I will explore the emergence of the cinematic star system in the 1910s against the backdrop of the broader entertainment industry and its stylized showcasing of performers, celebrities, and sensations. Movie stars epitomize the professionalization of the cinema as an institution and the conventionalization of filmic modes of address and affect management. At the same time, female stars tamper with the ways in which gender and sexuality are inscribed into the protocols of mass culture and contribute to more pervasive social negotiations of diversity and distinction.<sup>2</sup> I argue that family relations—imageries of sisterhood and mother-daughter links—were prominently mobilized for these purposes. Sisters and mother-daughter constellations are enacted in the films of the 1910s as disturbing or delightful doubles, as alternative casts of one mold, and thus represent larger concerns around the mechanical reproduction of individual specificity and the recalcitrance of tradition against progress and change. Their representation dovetails with a pervasive remapping of temporality and modernity in gendered terms.<sup>3</sup> Cinematic juxtapositions of simultaneity and sequence, of stagnation and acceleration, or of linearity and recursion serve to carve out ‘female’ temporalities that deviate from and strain against the larger regimes of space-time regulation unfolding across the social field in the course of technical, scientific, and industrial modernization.<sup>4</sup> By and large, the changing conditions of modernity, especially in their reorganization of public-private relations and labor conditions, caused anxiety and stress. Particularly for white men, however, these changes also came with unprecedented affordances and options for self-invention. Other groups—including women, people of color, and the otherwise marginalized—needed to carve out possibilities and liberties for themselves in the spatiotemporal grid of modernity that competed with and contested the dominant white male model of success.<sup>5</sup> The movies function as an index of these negotiations.

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in *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 36, ed. Winfried Fluck, Rieke Jordan, and Johannes Völz (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2020), 81–102.

- 2 See Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); and Jennifer M. Bean, “Introduction: Stardom in the 1910s,” in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer Bean (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 1–21.
- 3 Rita Felski showed how reconceptualizations of womanhood (particularly of the modern woman) hinged upon temporal ascriptions and associations: *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 145–173.
- 4 See Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918*, 2d. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time, 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 5 See Felski, *Gender of Modernity*; Patricia Murphy, *Time Is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009).

Focusing on the 1910s means exploring a period in which the cinema charted a separate space in a larger culture of entertainment, thereby emancipating itself for good from the compartmentalized aesthetic of the variety stage. This development was regarded as a sign of medial maturation by some critics—a sign that the cinema was coming into its own—while others associated the process with the loss of the very quality that had distinguished the medium to begin with. This latter stance was exemplarily voiced by Gilbert Seldes in 1922, when he lamented a sell-out of mass-cultural entertainment to shallow genteel sensibilities. He specifically attributed this loss of originality to the star system exemplified by the “Gishes and Talmadges and Swansons and other fatalities.”<sup>6</sup> Seldes deplored the uncoupling of the movies from the popular arts and claimed that a new cinematic agenda of respectability that valorized character and personality was about to efface the older aesthetic of “*action*” and “*effect*” that had informed the most potent sites of popular artistic expression: the film serial, the slapstick film, and the burlesque.<sup>7</sup>

Like all nostalgic reminiscences, Seldes’s conjures up an ideal that has more to do with the perceived shortcomings of the present than with the perfections of the past.<sup>8</sup> As Lea Jacobs points out, Seldes’s latently gendered juxtaposition of an anarchic and vigorously masculine vernacular culture of the 1910s with a domesticized and feminized mass culture of the 1920s effaces the fact “that the enthusiasm for the sentimental and pathetic . . . was just as profound an aspect of popular taste as that for slapstick or burlesque.”<sup>9</sup> In any case, it is ironic that two sister pairs—Lillian and Dorothy Gish and Norma and Constance Talmadge—whose careers started in the 1910s, head the list of Seldes’s new character actresses. Sister acts were, after all, very much a phenomenon that the 1910s and the 1920s had in common. For Seldes, however, the phenomenon of the star sisters served to emblemize the standardized star performance of his days.

Indeed, cinematically “there has never been an era for sister acts like the 1920s,” as Jeanine Basinger points out.<sup>10</sup> But at the same time, the cinematic siblings signal the mass-cultural entertainment practices of the past—particularly the variety stage and the one-reel melodrama—whose disappearance Seldes excoriated. These acts’ continuity across the decades indicates the persistence of sentimental affect, which was coded as feminine throughout the transitional era and far beyond. In their evocation of the sister acts that formed a staple piece of the 1910s performance cultures, the cinematic siblings prove to be complicatedly entangled in a longer history and do not, in fact, mark a distinct new phase.

6 Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1957). See also Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.

7 Seldes, *7 Lively Arts*, 279.

8 Michael Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 117–119.

9 Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 17.

10 Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 137.

In what follows, I will explore the shared roots of theatrical and cinematic sister acts and star sisters in order to bring to the fore the aesthetic of doubling that underpinned popular female gender performances of the 1910s across the entertainment scene and mapped alternatives to contemporaneous cultural scripts of heterosexual love and marriage. I will then trace the ways in which cinematic enactments of female family relations were changing in the course of the decade, owing to new performance styles that increasingly emphasized psychological complexity and veracity. However, while a particular pattern of sibling stardom fell out of fashion by the 1920s, the aesthetic of doubling persisted well into that decade. The cinematic representations of mother-daughter relations later in the 1910s, like the sister acts at the beginning of the decade, serve to figure alternative routes for female life stories without expressing blatant resistance to the social status quo.

In this latter context, I will be specifically concerned with instances of dual role casting. In the cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, to cast one actor in two roles was a way of making the most of a star and of exhibiting her virtuoso acting skills at the same time. Double characters were frequently used to represent sibling relations—the good and bad twin was a standard theme—but even more often, one actor played both a mother and her daughter, usually in the course of film narratives that involved looped representations of the past and present. Often these films used diegetic inserts, superimpositions, double exposure, and similar structural means to represent memories, fantasies, and other narrative takes on the past. In both instances—through the doubling of performers and the doubling of roles—female identities are represented in terms of similarities and variations, parallel and forking paths, convergence and contrast. This reflects the predilection of the mass-cultural imagination for the narrative patterns of options, choices, varieties, and contingencies, but it does so in a markedly gendered manner. In spite of the strong appeal of the iconic New Woman, the actual and fictional opportunities that offered themselves to modern women were by no means as manifold as the possibilities open to men. Still, female desires and choices did find representation in the mass-cultural narratives of the early twentieth century, even if this articulation deviated from the standard patterns laid out in the contemporary narratives of male self-assertion and self-fashioning.<sup>11</sup>

### **SISTERS I: MULTIPLES AND TWINS.**

The vaudeville and variety stage of the turn of the century was a highly gendered space. In addition to featuring gendered cross-dressing and slapstick skits, the burlesque theaters showcased gender and sexuality in dance revues and individual dance numbers. The dance revue, in particular, gained metonymic status for modernity's culture industry, since

11 On the constructions of modern masculinity in terms of flexibility and choice, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Ruth Mayer, “Daydreams of Society: Class and Gender Performances in the Cinema of the Late 1910s,” in *Hollywood at the Intersection of Race and Identity*, ed. Delia Malia Caparoso Konzett (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 21–38.

it “both exaggerates feminine material excess and disciplines it with the visual language of geometry and engineering,” as Susan Glenn writes of the Ziegfeld Follies.<sup>12</sup> The repercussions of this hyper-organized and tightly coiled entertainment format and the system of Taylorized mass-production with its orchestrated and synchronized work routines are obvious and constituted an apt point of departure for numerous theoretical approaches to mass culture from the 1910s onward, climaxing, arguably, in Siegfried Kracauer’s compelling concept of the “mass ornament” formulated in 1927.<sup>13</sup> While the association of the concerted aesthetic of the revue with the streamlined workings of industrial capitalism may be self-evident, the conclusions drawn from this insight are as variegated as the personalities and disciplines engaged with the phenomenon.

As diverse as the conjunctions of femininity and ornamentality in the first decades of the twentieth century may be, they all present female bodies in intricate and pleasing (or titillating) arrangements. In the United States, there was a strong racial component to this nexus, since ornamentality was associated with Asianness long before the cinema made use of this aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> I will focus on filmic engagements with white female bodies, but the very fact that whiteness is elevated to a defining feature of woman- or girlhood in several of these films may indicate a considerable degree of racial anxiety. The over-exposure of whiteness signals that the filmmakers were very much aware that ornamentality was first defined in close reference to Asian female bodies and Asian things and that this correlation had inscribed itself sharply in the American cultural imagination by the 1910s.<sup>15</sup>

Chorus girls were Black, white, or Asian in the 1910s, but their synchronized performance as “mass ornament” emphasized sameness, not diversity. Glenn cites a review from 1911 in which the professional dancers are described as parts of an automated assembly, “incapable of independent playing . . . , *parts of a whole* and theatrically useless when not surrounded by other *particles!*” and then points to the converse trend to accentuate the sexual non-conformity and moral deviancy of the chorus girl.<sup>16</sup> Chorus girls epitomized both industrial streamlining and individual recalcitrance; they represented robotic doubleness and glamorous eccentricity to a public that often did not even seem to be aware of the contradictory character of this conflation.

Significantly, Theodore Dreiser presents the burlesque stage as the turning point in the spectacular career of his protagonist in his novel *Sister Carrie*

12 Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 177.

13 Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans., ed., and intro. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 74–88; see also Mayer, “Endless Deferral.”

14 See also John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3–24; Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15–44; and Ruth Mayer, “The Glittering Machine of Modernity: The Chinatown in American Silent Film,” *Modernism / modernity* 16, no. 4 (2009): 661–684; and, most recently, Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

15 See also Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 27–58.

16 Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 179.

(1900). Carrie's success is attributed to her talent for adaptation through variation: she fits in by standing out. When performing as a chorus girl, she frowns instead of smiling, and this slight deviation turns her into "the chief feature of the play" beside which "every other feature paled."<sup>17</sup> Seventeen years later, the film *It Happened to Adele* (Van Dyke Brooke, 1917) evokes a similarly productive conjunction of assimilation and divergence during the titular heroine's discovery. Having come to the theater to audition, Adele watches a rehearsal in which the (male) ballet master drills a chorus line and despairs over one dancer who fails to conform. When Adele spontaneously jumps onstage and enters the line, she fits in perfectly but stands out at the same time through her outfit and the fact that she is, at this point in the film, already familiar to the cinematic audience as a character rather than a mere part of an ensemble. This incongruence corresponds to the "paradoxical irony" of a social reality in which chorus girls were perceived as voice- and faceless yet did manage, at times, to use their engagement in the dance troupe as a stepping-stone for individual careers in the performing arts.<sup>18</sup>

The dialectics of standardization and singularity, which ultimately point to the star system at large, is exemplified in the phenomenon of the sister act that manifested across popular entertainment forms at the beginning of the twentieth century. It likely started in the late-nineteenth-century music hall, where "'sister acts' had been a constant for some time."<sup>19</sup> Among the first such sibling troupes were the five Barrison Sisters of the 1890s, who presented song and dance numbers in matching outfits and wigs.<sup>20</sup> By the 1910s, the Cherry Sisters, the Duncan Sisters, the Taliaferro Sisters, the Watson Sisters, and many more had left their mark on the variety stage or were still touring. While not all stage sisters were actual siblings, the Dolly Sisters, arguably the most successful sister act of the 1910s, were a set of identical twins, thereby suggesting not only similarity but also sameness. Rózsika and Janka Deutsch, who performed as Rosie and Jenny Dolly, had immigrated to the United States from Hungary in 1905 and made a business out of performing exoticism and eroticism times two. In 1911, they moved their act from the vaudeville stage to the Ziegfeld Follies and "were instrumental stars and role models for countless sister acts that followed in their wake."<sup>21</sup> From 1915 onward, they also starred separately in films. Once they appeared together in the semi-biographical *The Million Dollar Dollies* (Léonce Perret, 1918).

As the Dolly Sisters moved from stage to screen and back again, so did many other sister acts of the day. Florenz Ziegfeld, in particular, seems to have kept an eye out for interesting young look-alike performers, and while the Ziegfeld Follies operated as a launching pad for many cinematic careers, the theater also starred screen actors who enjoyed the stage's live appeal. Thus, the "Thanhouser Twins," Madeline and Marion Fairbanks, who came

17 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1981), 447.

18 Maya Cantu, *American Cinderellas on the Broadway Musical Stage: Imagining the Working Girl from Irene to Gypsy* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 47–48.

19 Liz Goldwyn, *Pretty Things: The Last Generation of American Burlesque Queens* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 12.

20 Goldwyn, 12.

21 Goldwyn, 12.

to fame in more than fifty films produced by the Thanhouser Film Corporation between 1912 and 1916, regularly headlined in the Ziegfeld Follies and other revue theaters during the late 1910s and 1920s and also performed in vaudeville. The one-reel films that made the twins famous revolve around upper-class family life and include outings in the park, adventures with ponies and pets as well as accidents, most of them harmless. The plots of these films call to mind the popular film serials of the day and veer between melodrama, adventure, romance, and what has been called “second-order seriality,” which comes to the fore through the reoccurring performers or “picture personalities” of the twins. That is, the actresses’ recognizable presence creates a sense of continuity and sequentiality even though they appear as different characters in self-contained stories.<sup>22</sup> The sisters’ successful formula is arguably best exhibited in *Uncle’s Namesakes* (dir. unknown, 1913), in which they play girls who are forced to perform as boys for a rich and eccentric uncle. Through their failure to be convincingly boyish, they accentuate their successful gender performance as cute girls.

Even though the Thanhouser Twins’ appeal of girlish innocence differs markedly from the Dolly Sisters’ vampish and exotic public performances, a contemporary critic’s comment about the latter team applies to the former just as well: “It must be admitted that the chief fascination of the twin Dollies lies not so much in the grace of their dancing, nor in the charm of their personalities, nor in the naiveté of this manner, nor yet the quaintness of their accents—sufficient as are all of these—but rather in the amazing duplicity of Nature.”<sup>23</sup> There is, in other words, something dubious to the phenomenon of the twins, which makes these sister acts reminiscent of the aura of the circus or the nineteenth-century traveling show, which exhibited ‘freaks’ to achieve effects of sensational thrill or surprise.

In the historical drama *Their One Love* (Jack Harvey, 1915), which was probably the most ambitious of the Thanhouser Twins’ films, the queerness of the doubled identity manifests in the rendition of a budding romance as a threesome. The Fairbankses play two sisters who love the same young man, a soldier who serves, and is eventually killed, in the Civil War. The film displays their love story as a coming-of-age plot, in which the twins, curiously, do not age. It first depicts the triangle in terms of childish playfulness, then as adolescent crushes, and finally as the mature women’s mourning for their lost love. In the opening scenes, the young man, Jack, is played by a boy, and at the end, he is dead. The Fairbanks twins, however, play the sisters throughout the film. Much is made of the passing of time in this course; each scene starts with an intertitle showing a yearly calendar whose leaves are turned by a hooded figure with a scythe. But temporality in the film is largely a matter of (period) style, at least in respect to the twins’ lives. They grow from children to girls and become old ladies, but they never change.

22 See Frank Kelleter and Kathleen Lookk, “Hollywood Remaking as Second-Order Serialization,” in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 125–147; and Richard Abel, “G. M. Anderson: ‘Broncho Billy’ among the Early ‘Picture Personalities,’” in Bean, *Flickers of Desire*, 41.

23 Margaret Burr in *Theatre Magazine* (1916), quoted in Gary Chapman, *The Delectable Dollies: The Dolly Sisters, Icons of the Jazz Age* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 2006).



The love story in this film evolves like a dance, choreographed by the girls rather than by their boyfriend, who is away most of the time and not really aware of what is happening when he is present. The twins appear on the screen like carefully crafted ornaments, one reverberating the grace of the other. When they embrace after learning of their beloved's death, we do not really need the final scene depicting their old age to understand that they cannot part, because their identity is constituted by their doubleness. The girls are presented as two parts of a whole, as symmetrical decorative items, and in keeping with this arrangement, their subjectivity seems to be conjoined too: they are not so much of one mind but rather of one affective disposition. Each twin is aware of the other's feelings and neither wants to acknowledge her feelings for Jack for fear of hurting the other.

The twins' connectedness is epitomized in the film's middle part, which narrates the young man's leave-taking, contemporaneous experiences of war and the home front, and the sisters' reception of the death notice. When saying his goodbyes, Jack moves back and forth between the sisters. He holds both hands of one girl, disregarding the other, who lurks dejectedly behind his back (see Figure 1). The courted sister notices the other's sadness, though, and prompts the man to turn around, although now she herself becomes the unhappy onlooker.

Jack's change of focus is not caused by the girls' flirtatiousness or his conscious agency but derives from the girls' attention to each other. Later on, both girls are seen writing letters to the front, in which each one lets Jack know that she is aware of his feelings—for the other sister—and wishes them well. They seem to be keenly attuned to each other but incapable of reading the man, who makes no distinction between the two of them. The letter notifying the girls of his death states that he wanted a picture returned to "the dearest friends a boy ever had." The picture shows both girls side by side dressed in white frilly dresses that look like what they wear not only in the scene itself but also in most scenes of the film and actually in many other screen appearances, too. These dresses emanate what Richard Dyer calls the cinematic "angel-glow" of whiteness (see Figures 2 and 3).<sup>24</sup> The *mise-en-abîme* aesthetic of the scene accentuates the privileged, protected, and timeless existence of the girls, which is further emphasized through the preceding crosscutting of action-laden war scenes and images of the quiet female home front. It is unclear from when the picture actually dates, whether it shows the twins as children or young girls, as their looks do not change in the course of the diegesis. But the exact date when the picture was taken is also irrelevant because the girls were, are, and will be always the same (in all senses of the word).

The film accords little agency to the twins, as they really don't *do* anything, ever, and their condition doesn't change from childhood to old age. Nevertheless, the film attributes immense significance to little shifts and nuances of the twins' joint affective disposition, such as longing, disappoint-

24 Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 44–65; see also Kristen Hatch, "Lillian Gish: Clean, and White, and Pure as the Lily," in Bean, *Flickers of Desire*, 69–90.



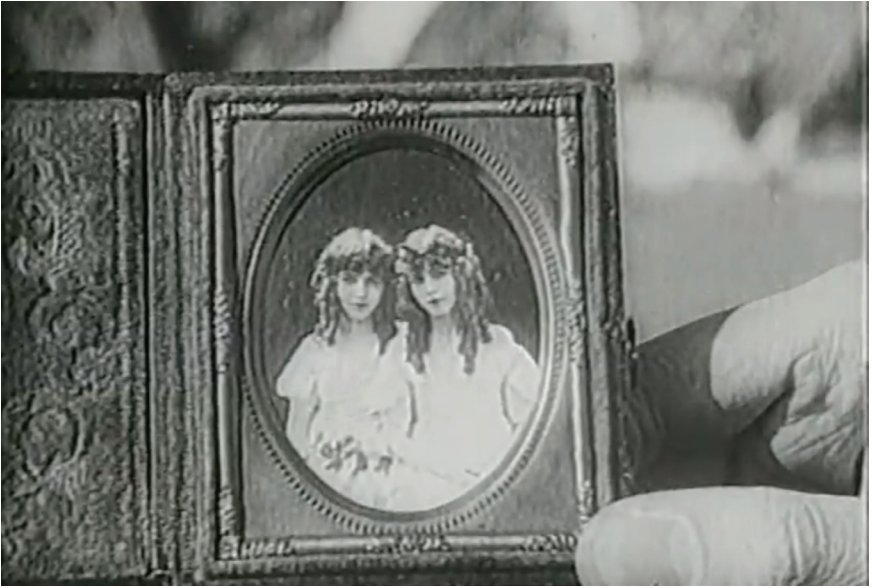


Figure 1. The twins (Madeline and Marion Fairbanks) dancing around the love interest (Robert Wilson) in *Their One Love* (Thanhouser, 1915).

ment, desire, and mourning. In the male world of war “out there,” there seem to be unending possibilities for physical action: going forward or backward, getting up or lying down, charging or retreating. Every one of these actions has repercussions and implications for others, ripple effects that eventually generate war history. In the female world back home, there seem to be precisely two options: getting married or staying single (or rather: choosing the man or the sister). By dying before a choice needs to be made, Jack deprives the girls of even this one decision. Their letters remain unread, their longing unfulfilled, their desire unarticulated. At the same time, however, the twins’ (and their audience’s) affective resonance chamber blows up every little sigh and frown to enormous proportion, rendering it much more important than the bullets and bombs exploding in the war scenes. If the love plot is the only narrative format there is for a girl, the film seems to argue, then it should remain unconcluded as long as possible. *Their One Love* totalizes adolescence and fixes its girlish stars in the state of becoming, arresting the moment before everything changes for good and forever.

### **SISTERS II: STARS.**

The star system did not evolve smoothly and in linear fashion but instead followed a logic of trial and error that was recursive and often erratic. Rob King thus notes a cinematic recuperation of the “framework of Victorian gender



Figures 2 and 3. Cinematic sisterhood mise-en-abîme in *Their One Love* (Thanhouser, 1915).

ideologies” in the course of the 1910s.<sup>25</sup> Female actors and stars were increasingly brought in line with long-standing “notions of separate gendered spheres and essential gender differences,” King argues, and like Seldes, he sees the emerging Hollywood system as a genteel *coup de grâce* to the anarchic aesthetics of slapstick.<sup>26</sup> The patron saint of this ideological recursion was Mary Pickford, whose highly successful performance of “playful girlhood” gained a model function for many other female screen careers of the time. Indeed, Pickford epitomizes the aesthetic of precocity that also characterized the Thanouser Twins’ career.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to bear in mind, however, that ideological backlashes or narrative reboots, as much as they may signal a lost status quo, never really accomplish all-comprising restoration of past conventions. (Indeed, in most of the cases, this may not even be the aim in the first place.) While a slapstick star like Mabel Normand thus strived to tone down her aura of “boisterous physicality” to emulate the star formula of Pickford, Pickford herself modified her sentimental origins and endeavored to “mix slapstick with pathos . . . and traditional femininity with tomboyish charms and liberties.”<sup>28</sup> Doubtlessly, this reorientation affected the practice and aesthetics of slapstick, but it also reshaped the contours of sentimentalism.

This ongoing cinematic negotiation brings about a pluralization of star images. To this day, the logic of stardom favors clear-cut types, but it also always requires novelty, which is generated most easily from combinations and fusions of the extant figurations. In Pickford’s case, the producers’ effort to maximize the possibilities of the stock images at hand culminated in the later 1910s in the strategy of casting her in dual roles. In 1918 alone, she starred in five films that allowed her to “play her traditional character and a better-looking, better-dressed version of herself.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, the star’s repertoire expands while her recognizability is never endangered. At the same time, such casting allows the star to exhibit her talents, to self-reflexively emphasize the broad range of her acting skills.<sup>30</sup>

Such deviations or adjustments of an established formula are furthered by dual roles, but they are also exemplarily actuated in early star sister careers and in narratives involving sisters. Like the double character that

25 Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 110–146, 230.

26 King, *Fun Factory*, 230. On this development, see also Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Jacobs, *Decline of Sentiment*.

27 King, *Fun Factory*, 229; see also Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 19–50.

28 King, *Fun Factory*, 230; and Anke Brouwers, “If It Worked for Mary: Mary Pickford’s Daily Talks with the Fans,” in *Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives*, ed. Monica Dall’Asta, Victoria Duckett, and Lucia Tralli (Bologna: Università di Bologna, 2013), 200; see also Anke Brouwers, “Mud Pies and Tears: Little Mary’s Funny Side,” in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York: Routledge, 2010), 89–113.

29 Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 34.

30 Claus Tieber, “Mary Pickford—as Written by Frances Marion,” in Dall’Asta, Duckett, and Tralli, *Researching Women*, 227.

teases out differences and plays with similarities, the sister act allows actresses to show identity, in both the sense of self-identity and sameness, in the light of variation. Thus, even when sisters are not depicted as virtual doubles, as in the case of the Thanhouser Twins, their diversity tends to be seen as a matter of degree: older versus younger, darker versus lighter, taller versus smaller. The aesthetics of sameness and similarity is crucial for the depiction of female stardom—and perhaps womanhood more generally—in the 1910s. The Thanhouser Twins' stardom hyperbolizes this logic, but it also seems to be the driving force at the outset of Lillian and Dorothy Gish's cinematic careers, when they appeared as delightful doubles rather than singular stars. Hence, *An Unseen Enemy* (D. W. Griffith, 1912), which introduced the sisters to the screen, attests to the aesthetic legacy of the dance revue and variety sister act through frames and shots that showcase similarity with slight variation and repetition. This trope resonates interestingly with the structural logic of cinematic narration itself, which at around the same time came to rely heavily on the formal principles of repetition and alternation in editing, framing, mise-en-scène, and tinting to allow for orientation and suspense.<sup>31</sup>

As was the custom at the time, the film production company, Biograph, did not identify the performers of *An Unseen Enemy*. The Gishes appeared without credit and as unnamed characters: the “younger” (Dorothy) and the “older” sister (Lillian). The same goes for the third female character of the film: the “Slattern Maid,” played by Grace Henderson. *An Unseen Enemy* fits neatly into the pattern of Griffith's “race-to-rescue” films of the 1910s and before, which have been identified as instrumental in fine-tuning the technique of parallel editing. The narrative enacts an emergency situation—usually a young woman, a mother with children, or, as in *An Unseen Enemy*, a pair of sisters under attack—in a private or at least indoor setting. This situation is crosscut with a rescue operation showcasing the husband, lover, father, brother, or other representative of masculine agency availing himself of an advanced means of transport, such as a train, car, motorbike, or gypsy cart. In all of these films, technologies of communication play a pivotal role, as the victims call for help by means of telephone or telegraph. Most of the films end with the victims' rescue in the nick of time and the punishment of the perpetrators. The most famous of these films is *The Lonedale Operator* (D. W. Griffith, 1911), to which *An Unseen Enemy* is often compared. But in fact *An Unseen Enemy* owes more to *The Lonely Villa* (D. W. Griffith, 1909), in which a father races to rescue a distressed mother and their three white-clad daughters.

In *An Unseen Enemy*, the imperiled persons are two sisters who have just come into an inheritance through the recent death of their father. With the help of a shady companion, the Slattern Maid tries to steal this money from the safe while the older brother and guardian figure is away. Trapped in a room with a phone, the sisters call their brother for help, and he arrives in the nick of time to prevent the maid from running away with the money. At

31 Tom Gunning, “Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith's Biograph Films,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981): 11–25; and Charlie Keil, “Transition through Tension: Stylistic Diversity in the Late Griffith Biographs,” *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 11–25.

its dramatic climax, the film features three sites of action: the room with the safe and the thieves, the adjacent room with the girls, and the world outside, where the brother rushes to the rescue. The interior and exterior spaces are linked by the phone, which the girls use to call their brother. He telephonically overhears part of the action, when the maid shoots her shotgun randomly at the girls through a stovepipe hole in the wall that separates the two interior rooms. In that manner, the classical divide of interior/female and exterior/male is largely maintained. But since the danger emanates from a woman in the house rather than a vile male intruder, the race-to-rescue film's binary of domestic sanctity and public peril is also compromised, as is the juxtaposition of female helplessness and male agency that is often ascribed to it.

As Tom Gunning shows with regard to the *The Lonely Villa*, moreover, the gendered hierarchy attributed to the race-to-rescue film is not as consistent as is often assumed. Researching the history of the race-to-rescue plot, Gunning came across a number of previous films with similar plots and finally a 1901 play by André de Lorde, *Au téléphone (At the Telephone)*, that seems to have served as the films' inspiration. The films are lost, but like the play, they all tell the race-to-rescue plot as a truncated call-for-rescue story with a bad ending. The victims manage to call the absent male authority figure, who then has to helplessly witness their murder on the phone. Gunning surmises that *The Lonely Villa* (and, one could add, *An Unseen Enemy*) responds to this actual "ur-form" of the genre by striving to undo and deny the "nightmare of masculine impotence" that the early narratives foreground while retaining their key component of (momentarily) enforced incapability of action and "telephone panic."<sup>32</sup> *An Unseen Enemy* evinces this narrative logic by displaying the brother's increasingly frantic demeanor on the phone and through a quick cut to the medium shot of his horrified face once the shotgun has been fired (see Figure 4). Depicting the brother's intense affective response momentarily stalls the film's action; he shouts and listens in horror to a second shot while the crosscut scenes depict the girls at medium distance, as they take refuge in a corner of the room to avoid the reach of the gun.

This does not mean, however, that the sisters appear to be in command of their destiny. The film's narration leaves little room for self-controlled agency; instead, as Maggie Hennefeld observes, its pace and trajectory seem to be propelled by the maid's haphazard acting that "evokes something between an epileptic fit and a demonic possession."<sup>33</sup> The sisters, in contrast, appear in a striking symmetry. This symmetry is only further accentuated by the tiny differences in their age, height, or "nerve" that distinguish them from each other. Already in the film's very first scene, the girls form an ornamental arrangement. They wear identical outfits and Gibson Girl curls, and they are shown to the right of the screen, sitting next to each other, as they mourn the death of their father (see Figure 5). When the younger sister looks down dejectedly, the older sister turns to her and lifts her head with one fin-

32 Tom Gunning, "Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 191, 194.

33 Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 161.





Figure 4. The brother (Elmer Booth) in telephone panic in *An Unseen Enemy* (Biograph, 1912).



Figure 5. Lillian and Dorothy Gish performing ornamental sisterhood in *An Unseen Enemy* (Biograph, 1912).

ger, so that they are facing each other like in a mirror. When the younger sister shakes her head, the older one echoes the movement; when the younger fixes the ruffles on her dress on her right side with a sweeping motion, the older does the same on the left side of her dress. The scene is almost absurdly choreographed; it resembles a dance to make the most of the sisters' similarity and ethereal beauty. Then the maid enters from the left, and the younger sister's head leans to the right and the older one's to the left, disrupting their previous harmony.

This scene sets the pattern for the entire film, and it also prefigures the film's larger orchestration of synchronicity and opposition, which fully unfolds when, at the height of the dramatic confrontation in the house, the younger sister ventures out from the corner to which the girls have retreated toward the hole with the gun. "The younger sister's nerve," proclaims an intertitle. Throughout the sequence, we see the older sister in the background echoing the movements of the younger, anticipating the scene's dramatic and futile climax, when the younger sister faints before she could possibly accomplish anything. Like the telephone scene, this one aims at a heightening of affect rather than a twist of the plot, so that the synchronized execution of the venture is more important than any possible outcome. Seen in this way, the faint completes rather than aborts the effect. This corresponds with the film's melodramatic urgency and poor continuity management. Reactions routinely precede actions in *An Unseen Enemy*; the girls hold their ears before the gun goes off, they respond to movements in the outer room that have yet to happen, and they dodge the bullets of the maid's gun as if they could see them coming.<sup>34</sup>

Like *Their One Love*, *An Unseen Enemy* enacts the sibling relation as a means of juxtaposing a domestic sphere and a world out there, and while the domestic sphere is under attack in *An Unseen Enemy*, this attack only highlights the aesthetic perfection of the girls' integrity. This is where the film anticipates the workings of the star system without (yet) singling out a star figure. As Jennifer Bean writes about the star figure's genesis and self-propelling dynamics, "[V]iewer desire and representational strategies each produce and disquiet the other in a contagious, spiraling, multimedia phenomenon refracted through ever-mounting palimpsests of texts." The doubled damsel in distress in Griffith's film may well serve as a metonymic configuration of film's capacity to generate and amplify desire, augmenting the affective dynamics between viewers and performers by offering not only one figure of identification but two identical ones.

Like *Their One Love*, *An Unseen Enemy* features only one love interest for two girls, and in this film too the man is quickly removed. This happens in the one scene in the film that does not fit into its spatial opposition of domestic and public life. The scene is set at what looks like the edge of a windy cornfield and takes place right after the brother has been seen off by the girls, leaving on his bike. From the back, a young man enters the scene

34 Lea Jacobs, "An Unseen Enemy," in *The Griffith Project*, vol. 6, *Films Produced in 1912*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: BFI, 2002), 128–131; and Hennefeld, *Specters*, 161–162.



and takes the brother's position between the two girls. "The younger sister's boyish sweetheart about to leave for college" announces an intertitle, and in the next shot, the young man pulls the younger sister from her sibling into the field, where she refuses to kiss him good-bye. This moment of separation is brief, and the girls are reunited immediately afterward, with the older sister drawing the younger one away. At the very end of the film, the kiss will finally be given, since the young man has played a role in rescuing the girls. In that moment, the younger sister stays close to her boyfriend, as the older one retreats with the brother. Before then, however, the two girls are on their own, and projection surfaces for a desire that is not romantically motivated but—very much in keeping with the star system—fueled by the appeal of dramatic glamour. The sisters may be the weakest element in the film's economy of power, but they compensate for the lack of social agency by the intensity of their screen presence, which is reinforced in the double performance.

The emerging star system's fetish of uniqueness strains against such aesthetics of doubling. When Seldes writes about the "Gishes and the Talmadges" in the 1920s, he has distinct screen personalities in mind. Lillian Gish became a star and Dorothy her "poor other," as Basinger puts it.<sup>35</sup> The sisters were cast together in several Griffith films in the next decade, but they performed as sisters only in two other films: the one-reeler *The Lady and the Mouse* (D. W. Griffith, 1913), which does not capitalize on the sibling relation and foregrounds Lillian Gish's part, and *Orphans of the Storm* (D. W. Griffith, 1921), which interestingly seems to return after almost a decade to the ornamental enactment of affectionate sisterhood that marked *An Unseen Enemy*. This film conjoins the sisters in scenarios of intimacy, such as a key scene featuring a passionate kiss on the mouth. These scenes were read as an indication of Griffith's "quasi-incestuous" co-optation of his stars later on, while at the time they were criticized as evidence of the film's dated, Victorian aesthetics.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, the era of ornamental sisterhood was over.

In many respects, *Hearts of the World* (D. W. Griffith, 1918) is much more in tune with the then-dominant trend of emphasizing sisterhood off- rather than on-screen, as a feature of interest for fans rather than as thematic issue or aesthetic contrivance. In the film, the Gishes are cast as contrasting screen personas; Lillian Gish occupies her signature role as the long-suffering waif-mother, and Dorothy plays her vampish counterpiece. In the context of this dramatic feature film, the enactments of sisterhood on-screen deviate from the mechanics of the dance revue in its orchestrated perfection by putting increasing emphasis on "realistic" distinctions and relational interlinkages. In doing so, the sisters on-screen offer modes of identification and recognition to their female audiences as a larger imagined "sisterhood" of spectators

35 Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 137.

36 Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 54–55; see also Karina Longworth, "D. W. Griffith, the Gish Sisters, and the Origin of 'Hollywood Babylon,'" July 2, 2018, in *Fake News: Fact Checking Hollywood Babylon*, episode 1, podcast, <http://www.youstrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2018/6/26/dw-griffith-the-gish-sisters-and-the-origin-of-hollywood-babylon-fake-news-fact-checking-hollywood-babylon-episode-1>; for the contemporary reception of the film, see Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 553.

and fans. The most successful representatives of this trend, which culminated in the 1920s, were Constance and Norma Talmadge, who, “taken together, . . . present[ed] the sum total of the woman’s filmed universe.”<sup>37</sup> Responding to the Talmadges’ success, star couples like the Dolly Sisters and the Thanhouser Twins equally aimed to branch out by specializing in different cinematic sectors and genres in the late 1910s and early 1920s, usually with one sister in the comedic realm and the other in the dramatic.

Thus, the future of the sister act may be best illustrated in *The Lily and the Rose* (Paul Powell, 1915), which pries apart two sister acts and reassembles them, with Lillian Gish as the pristine and innocent Lily and Rószika Dolly as the dark and exotic Rose who steals Lily’s husband. Here, the theme of sisterhood seems to have shifted entirely to the level of the film’s marketing. The older aesthetic of sisterly symmetry surfaces briefly and strikingly early in the film, when Gish’s character is introduced as an orphan raised by two “maiden aunts,” “typical gentlewomen of former days,” as a promotional poster for the film explains. The aged sisters are played for sentimental support and comical effect. In the film’s wedding scene, which exhibits Gish’s stardom through mise-en-scène and framing, the older women appear in the background while two cute little flower girls, dressed in matching outfits, pose correspondingly in the foreground. Thus, ornamental sisterhood reappears briefly as the alternative to the marriage plot that dictates the film’s main course of action. Clearly, these sisters are not the scene’s main attractions but merely decorative additions.

The fascination that emanated from the doubling performances of star sisters in the early 1910s does not disappear, however. In the later 1910s, it resurfaces in the depiction of mother-daughter relations. These mother-daughter films make use of narrative and formal registers that differ from the ornamental excess of the earlier sister acts, yet they too conceptualize womanhood in ways that both accentuate and challenge the centrality of heterosexual romance and marriage as its determining features.

## MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS.

The mass ornament, for Kracauer, is the emblematic expression of capitalist modernity. For the Weimar critic, the ornamental arrangements of bodies in spectacles of physical culture and theatrical entertainment are part of a monumental aesthetic configuration that captures the experience of industrial labor “in offices and factories” and closes it off from reflection.<sup>38</sup> But the performative assemblage of the dancers’ bodies need not only signify the aesthetic transfiguration of exploitative social conditions. It can also disclose a subversion of social and economic structures of usefulness, functionality, or development, to the point of rendering the functional and productive system logic moot.<sup>39</sup>

This totalization of aesthetic effects was a key consequence, at least, of the ornamental totalization of girlhood and sisterhood on the stage and

37 Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 140.

38 Kracauer, “Mass Ornament,” 79.

39 See Miriam Hansen’s reading of Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament” essay in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and Mayer, “Endless Deferral.”

screen. Like the larger arrangements of female bodies in the dance revues, star sister couples in the 1910s presented themselves as carefully crafted units whose referential function was becoming increasingly diffuse. Sister acts situated themselves within entertainment culture's, and particularly cinema's, genteel reinvention in the 1910s. Increasingly, the cinema catered to female audiences, and the aesthetic of sisterhood as one of several means to express female desire or discontent implicitly and indirectly. Hence it is often more instructive to pay attention to what is *not* happening in the films of the 1910s than to focus on the concrete action or message of a film. The circulation of affect that is set in motion in the course of female-addressed cinema imbued the filmic experience in the early and transitional era with a sense of "time out." As Miriam Hansen writes:

Mothers for whom family leisure activities usually meant a continuation of housework on different premises could disappear in the darkness of the movie theater for a few hours, with or without children, to vary on Horkheimer and Adorno's notorious phrase, "just as [they] used to gaze out of the window, when there were still homes and the hour after a day's work [*Feierabend*]." The dimness of the theater set the stage for the viewer's surrender to the manipulations of time on screen—the duration of a panorama shot, the thrills of the fast and reverse motion, the simultaneity of parallel editing—at least until filmic temporality became more firmly subordinated to the linear momentum of narrative.<sup>40</sup>

In the enactments of ornamental sisterhood, this sense that the cinema and the experience of watching a film arrest time, and distinguish ordinary time from leisure time, culminates in the construction of a timeless, specifically cinematic impression of eternal girlhood. Where sisters are made out as beautiful doubles, time tends to be put on hold; while much may happen in the course of a film, as *An Unseen Enemy* demonstrates, the larger processes of female development and maturation—marriage and motherhood—are markedly bracketed.

Although this extreme aesthetic condensation of ornamental sisterhood lost its appeal over the course of the 1910s, its core elements did not disappear. Female familial relations continued to be of elementary importance to the cinematic screen, and sisters entered the circuits of repetition and variation that informed the aesthetic of classical Hollywood. But it was mother-daughter relations, with their very own temporal implications, that took over the (melo)dramatic screen from the mid-1910s onward. The sisterly relation in films such as *Their One Love* or *An Unseen Enemy* is marked by accentuated simultaneity. The mother-daughter relation also draws at times on the aesthetic of similarity and synchronicity and its logic of simultaneity,

40 Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 110; see also Ruth Mayer, "Running Late: The Silent Serial, the Cliffhanger, and the Exigencies of Time, 1914–1920," in *The Oxford Handbook of Silent Film*, ed. Charlie Keil and Rob King (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

but it is more obviously fraught with temporal notions of sequence, lineage, legacy, and belatedness. In keeping with this fascination with repetitions and repercussions over time, the melodramas of mother-daughter relations from the 1910s explore themes that ornamental sisterhood tended to bypass, particularly sexual maturation and procreation, or the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

The narrative trajectory of the mother-daughter film is rarely linear, however. Mothers' and daughters' lives tend to be mapped onto each other, as we shall see, and consequently, linear storytelling practices turn into loops and spirals. Repeatedly, the narrative present is complicated by a sudden intrusion of the past. The harmony of mother-daughter correspondences is further disrupted by the classical dramatic markers of fateful disturbance, such as death, disease, intrigue, and marital infidelity—all incidents that separate mother from daughter. Just as often, though, the mother-daughter films of the 1910s figure critical moments in women's lives in terms of career decisions, and here acting careers play a pivotal role. Films of the 1910s typically depict the pursuit of such success critically anyway, but if such ambitions involve the neglect of maternal responsibilities, they are marked as particularly problematical, as mother-daughter stories highlight by enacting fatal decisions in terms of their generational aftereffects and repercussions over time.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in *It Happened to Adele*—which might have been more appropriately titled *It Happened to Adele (and Her Mother before Her)*—the mother's life as a former chorus girl is literally projected onto the daughter's dancing career, such that the mother's experiences of loss and destitution seem to almost become the daughter's story. This happens early in the film, when the mother asks the daughter to dance for her in a park, saying, "[I]t makes me think of my youth—of my past!" That shot is then superimposed on a stage setting so that the mother now watches her younger self performing professionally. The present and the past, the mother's and the daughter's lives, merge into one looped narrative here by means of superimposition.

Linda Williams points out that in the maternal melodrama, one of the most successful narrative genres of classical Hollywood, "the unparalleled closeness of mother to daughter sets up a situation of significant mirroring."<sup>42</sup> In the cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, this mirroring is formally depicted by means of the extensive arsenal of symbolic visuality that includes paintings, photographs, mirrors, and other reflective or transparent surfaces that allow for naturalistic doublings. The films of the transitional era also draw upon such props to enact scenarios of repetition and deviation, but the predominant means of comparing and contrasting characters derive from editing and its spatiotemporal logic. Dissolves, split screens, parallel editing, fades, and especially superimpositions are used to show how characters relate to, resemble, and differ from each other, often in scenarios that visualize memories or fantasies. Portraits come to life and visions hover in the air to signify the past's

41 See Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Stars, Fans, and the Cult of Celebrity* <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780312239626> (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

42 Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 308.

intrusion into the present and the mother's tenacious hold on her daughter.

The most spectacular means of figuring mother-daughter pairs in the transitional period, however, was casting one actor in dual roles. Feature films in which mother and daughter are played by the same actor abounded in the 1910s. They include star vehicles such as *The Dead Secret* starring Marion Leonard (Stanner E. V. Taylor, 1913), *False Colors* starring Lois Weber and Dixie Carr (Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, 1914), *A Mother's Atonement* starring Cleo Madison (Joseph De Grasse, 1915), *The Law of Compensation* starring Norma Talmadge (Joseph A. Golden, 1917), *The Dancer's Peril* starring Alice Brady (Travers Vale, 1917), and *The Cost of Hatred* starring Kathlyn Williams (George Melford, 1917). Like mother-daughter dramas more generally, many of these films revolve around fatal decisions made in the past that come to haunt the daughter in the diegetic present, locking mother and daughter into tight affective loops.

Thus, in *The Law of Compensation*, the title of which already suggests that past and present interact in ways marked by repetition and reciprocity, Talmadge plays the double role of a mother and her grown daughter. The six-reel film is split in two halves; the first introduces the daughter, Ruth, and then tracks her decision to leave her family behind. The second half of the film flashes back to the history of the mother, Flora. Ruth wants to abandon her family for a career on the stage, having been lured by the blatantly treacherous promises of a greedy manager and variety performer. Flora had left, many years before, after being seduced by a family friend, whose desertion of Flora later caused her downfall and death. Ruth was raised by her father together with a dedicated housekeeper.

Flora's story is continuously alluded to in the film's first half but also carefully withheld from Ruth and the audience. Yet it is clear that the mother's fate is the blueprint for her daughter's life. Before leaving her father's house to get married, Ruth looks at a framed portrait of Flora. "You are the very image of your mother," proclaims her father, and although we never get to see the picture, we can verify this claim when the flickering image of the mother's face appears in the fireplace, next to Ruth, as a representation of the father's memory. Throughout the film, the daughter is presented from the vantage point of the father as a replica of her absent mother, in a somewhat incestuous figuration. Moreover, her knowledge of the past is monitored by men, specifically her father John (Fred Esmelton), his best friend Frank, and the friend's son Allan (Chester Barnett), who also becomes Ruth's fiancé and husband. When Allan asks John for Ruth's hand early in the film, Ruth has to leave the room so that the men can talk. The camera follows Ruth as she hovers outside, waiting for the men's decision. She rejoins the men as Allan summarizes the conversation: "Yes, sir, my father told me your unhappy story and we both feel that I would be honored in marrying your daughter."

This may appear like a neat exercise in patriarchal power: "Ruth doesn't know and—and she never shall!" proclaims the father. But things become more complicated in the course of the film. It is true that throughout the film, men decide and women either obey or go their own way with disastrous consequences. The father grants his daughter power to access her own money only to withdraw this authority once she tries to use it for her career. The husband

similarly decides that investing in his wife's career as a singer would be futile. In both cases, the decisions are depicted as for the better of the woman. And while Flora's seducer is clearly figured as morally depraved, it is she who suffers the consequences of their aberration, not he. Nevertheless, the order that patriarchy represents here is old and weary like Ruth's father John, whom Esmelton plays as a long-suffering, self-sacrificing grandfather-type from beginning to end. This paragon of dull reliability serves as a mere backdrop for Talmadge's star performance as both mother and daughter. Both her characters exude a brisk determination and raw energy that force their male partners to represent not only patriarchy but also—and more consistently—domesticity. John and Allan, equipped with female support in the guise of a motherly housekeeper and a pretty nanny, respectively, manage to make up for the maternal absences smoothly and flawlessly, despite mourning their spouses' desertion. In both halves of the film, children are seen more often with their fathers and female caretakers than with their mothers. Consequently, the mothers' lives seem marked by insignificance to begin with.

Ruth's letters to her father as well as the film's intertitles reveal that the transition to married life is far from exciting. She seems trapped in endless routines rather than having arrived in a safe haven. She complains about the "dull sameness of household tasks" with which the "months roll by," and she describes her life as "dreadfully monotonous at times and . . . very lonely." That she is looking for a way out through a stage career and not, like her mother before her, a lover seems irrelevant. While narratives of modernity depict male lives as stressful because there are so many options, the mother-daughter film shows that women are stressed out because they have none.<sup>43</sup> In *The Law of Compensation*, by the time Ruth starts her adult life as a wife and mother, it seems that all of the alternatives to married life and motherhood have already been tested out by her mother and proven fruitless. The film's narrative stages this impasse but does not offer a way out. Stylistically, however, it does convey the situation's frustrating lack of resolution.

Like the melodramatic play or sentimental novel, the films of the early twentieth century characterize girls' and women's choices as immensely consequential.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, however, the films of the 1910s underscore the contingent character of choice itself in a manner that goes far beyond the paradigm of seduction. Their heroines' downfalls are not only or primarily caused by fatal mistakes in affairs of the heart but also by many other lures and distractions: false friendships, artistic ambitions, professional dreams, and even the seemingly trivial enticements of consumption or fashion fads, as films like *Mixed Pets* (Alice Guy-Blaché, 1911) or *The New York Hat* (D. W. Griffith, 1912) exemplify early on. Time and again, even slight deviations from the straight path of respectable bourgeois life turn out to have potentially devastating effects.

This logic is interestingly prefigured and fractured in *False Colors*, the

43 On the male family drama, see Ruth Mayer, "Daydreams of Society: Class and Gender Performances in the Cinema of the Late 1910s," in Konzett, *Hollywood*.

44 Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 110–140.

first feature film that Weber produced with her husband Phillips Smalley after they signed with Paramount in 1914. The film displays not one but two instances of mother-daughter doubling, and both are complicatedly entangled or—to allude to one of Weber’s favored visual effects—superimposed. Smalley plays an actor, Lloyd Phillips, who loses his wife in childbirth. In his despair, he abandons his daughter Dixie (Dixie Carr, playing the dual role of daughter and mother in flashbacks and visions) to the care of an indifferent housekeeper, Mrs. Hughes (Adele Farrington). Although Lloyd gives up his career after his wife’s death, his daughter eventually takes to the stage, following in the footsteps of her father and, more importantly, her dead mother. Dixie ends up under the tutelage of Mrs. Moore, a wardrobe assistant in the local theater who admired Lloyd from afar when he was still active and remains his most ardent fan. Mrs. Moore has a daughter, too, Florence (“Flo”), and both characters are played by Weber. Flo marries the housekeeper’s useless son, Bert. Prodded by his ambitious mother, Bert manipulates Flo to pose as Dixie for Lloyd when he decides to make up for the past and reinstitute his daughter as his heiress. Eventually, Flo is found out and leaves in shame. But then Bert dies, and Lloyd discovers his love for Flo. Ultimately, the protagonists are reunited at the opening night of a play starring Dixie, which Lloyd and Flo attend. By now, Mrs. Moore is as dead as Dixie’s mother, while Mrs. Hughes has dropped out of sight. In the end, the mothers, both biological and surrogate, have made room for the daughters.

Shelley Stamp notes the “ghostly” use of cinematic doubling effects through which *False Colors* conjures up and complicates mother-daughter relations and other gendered constellations.<sup>45</sup> Many double-cast mother-daughter films of the period also promoted their technical and narrative sophistication by doubling a star’s appearance in one shot. Such shots either suggest a collapse of past into present (as when *The Law of Compensation* projects the mother’s translucent likeness next to the daughter) or accentuate simultaneity and contingency (as when, in *A Dancer’s Peril*, Alice Brady gets to shake hands with herself in an accidental encounter of mother and daughter). *False Colors*, in contrast, seems less interested in likeness and correspondence than in change. In keeping with conventional cinematic representations of loss, mourning, recollection, and recognition for that era, *False Colors* features several scenes in which Lloyd literally conjures his dead wife by way of memory. She appears looking lovingly at her husband in a hallway, at the seaside, and at a gate, the sites of transition emphasizing her own transitional state. However, in two key scenes that indicate a change in the film’s affective dynamics, this neat interpolation of past and present is significantly troubled. Both take place after Flo has entered Lloyd’s life in the role of his daughter. The first scene shows Lloyd fantasizing about this wife, whose spectral appearance reaches out to him while dissolving into the equally blurred appearance of Flo, who beckons him alluringly. An introductory intertitle announces, “During the year that followed a new vision replaced the old,” an odd gloss on the film’s image politics. A little later, in another point of view

45 Shelley Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 55.



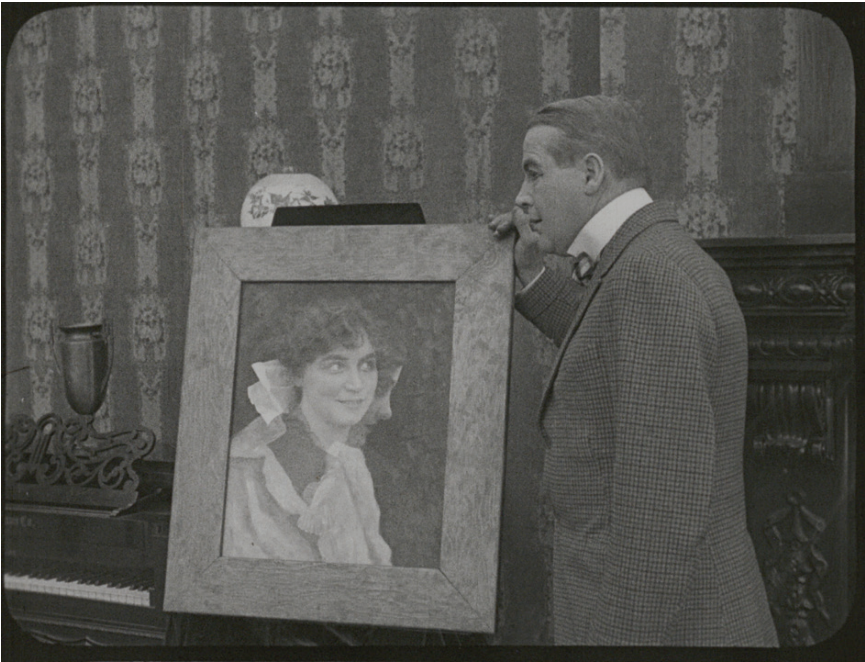


Figure 6. Lois Weber imposed on Dixie Starr in *False Colors* (Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, 1914).

shot signaling Lloyd's perspective, a portrait showing Carr as Floyd's wife in profile is superimposed with a matching shot of Weber's face, which then moves to look directly at her observer, such that "the photo and [Lloyd's] preserved fantasy [are brought] to life," as Stamp puts it.<sup>46</sup> Stamp concludes that "[d]ouble-exposure condenses in one image the overlay of past and present, death and life, mother and (imagined) daughter, former wife and present lover."<sup>47</sup> But condensation is only part of the effect of this technique, which sets images in motion to articulate the volatility of memories and expectations, social roles and familial relations.

Where other family films of the period take great care to distinguish between inner and outer circles—between the core family composed of father, mother, daughter, or sisters and supporting characters such as aunts, housekeepers, nannies, or maids—the social world of *False Colors* is made out as a series of merging, matching, overlapping spheres, in which the center and the margin are constantly redefined. Mrs. Moore, who takes care of both her own daughter and Dixie, is repeatedly seen observing from the wings during pivotal scenes of the film. At times she is the only one fully aware of the complicated network of family relations and identities unfolding around and on the theatrical stage. Her evil counterpart, Mrs. Hughes, also remains largely backstage

<sup>46</sup> Stamp, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Stamp, 55.

but in the know. All of the film's father figures are weak, and all of them are failures. (Flo's father epitomizes this circumstance, as he is confined to a wheelchair and dies of a laughing fit over his wife's unhappiness.) However, the women are not fully in command of the entangled cycles of "performance, impersonation, and substitution" unfolding in the film either.<sup>48</sup>

Yet in their continuous reinvention of their own roles and relations, the women do their best to expand a scope of action that seems severely limited to begin with. There are two daughters in *False Colors*, not just one, and while both of them follow in their mothers' footsteps, the very fact that there are two indicates a complication of the circular logic of confinement that governs contemporaneous mother-daughter films. The two daughters return us, in a way, to the sister theme, as they represent different options next to each other, fanning out in diverging directions as it were rather than in matrilinear arrangement. Flo marries the love of her mother's life, and Dixie becomes a successful actor. Thus, both choose different ways of engaging with the film's central father figure: Flo inserts herself squarely in Lloyd's life, whereas Dixie refuses to be part of it. "You went your way for 19 years. Now I will go mine," she proudly proclaims. An intertitle points to this self-reflexive narrative logic of rearrangement at the film's end: "Let us end as we began—with a 'first night'." This gesture both constitutes a loop—the film begins with a theatrical opening night starring Lloyd and ends with one starring Dixie—and breaks it. In its recursive reference to the beginning, it points to the performative nature of its own narrative and to the continuous possibility of new and different stories taking off from the same stage (or screen) of action, in slight variation, with a different cast. This ending bespeaks a determination to perform storytelling in ways that often almost unnoticeably derail the standard narrative arc from beginning to middle to end. *False Colors* professes to follow its protagonists from their childhood to their adult life, but it really enacts these phases as complicated tangles and nested episodes rather than as consecutive stages or distinct developmental steps. Like other films of the era that relate women's life stories, *False Colors* implements breaks, halts, loops, and repetitions to convey perspectives on female lives that the gendered script of modernity by and large still tended to block or obscure.

#### CODA

Mass culture's most prominent achievement for modern societies may well consist of its staging of the social world as a potentially non-totalizing and pluralistic system of meaning-making. Mass-cultural enactments of the early twentieth century—variety shows, stage melodramas, popular literature, shorts, or feature films—lay out different versions of what is and what could be next to one another, in an open-ended array of options. Similarities and variations determine the operative mode of this dream factory that reaches far beyond the film studio. Both formula fiction and genre film present reality through familiar stories with a twist—stories that are almost the same but

48 Stamp, 54.

not quite—and the exciting or scary recognition that the world as we know it could always be better (or worse) drives a machinery of representation that has been rightfully compared to the mindset of the daydream.<sup>49</sup> Michael Makropoulos adopted Robert Musil’s felicitous formulation of a “sense of possibilities” (*Möglichkeitssinn*) to delineate the changing parameters of mass-cultural (self-)perception in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> In Musil’s understanding, this paradigmatically “modern” sense supplements and completes the human sensorial apparatus, responding to an epistemology of the “what if” and a perceptive acuity for “other lifestyle possibilities than the ones that are currently realized.”<sup>51</sup>

The magisterial modernist novel that maps this new sensitivity of the possible is Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*). This is not the place to enter into an analysis of Musil’s text, but it is interesting to see that the titular hero of Musil’s novel is faced with a panorama of possibilities, while the female characters in the novel more often than not embody these possibilities. This corresponds with the patterns that I here identified in the films of the 1910s, in which women’s choices, in contrast to men’s, are rarely presented as complicated. Most often, the options are neatly arranged in binary constellations: single life or marriage, familial happiness or social isolation, husband or sister, reliable father or fickle mother.

Narratives of modernity enact life in terms of contingency and coincidence, and these conditions affect men and women alike. But while films characterize decision-making as based on circumstantial influences and happenstance for everybody, for women, the consequences tend to be marked as momentous. In this light, it is not all that surprising that the performances of girlhood in early and transitional era films often revolve around characters who choose not to choose and do what the Thanhouser Twins made a career of: nothing. Beautiful, young, happy, passive, they hold onto an eternal limbo *before* decisions must be made. This is, to a large extent, the formula of ornamental sisterhood as I map it in this article. The mother-daughter relations that I then trace less obviously convey such schemes of stalling and halting, but there, too, the conceptual parameters of progress and linear development are rarely embraced wholeheartedly. Instead, female life stories are told in terms of repetitions, repercussions, and temporal loops, as the experiences of mothers come to haunt the daughters. The aesthetic of doubling and slight variations that determine all of these films stands in the way of grandiose gestures of defiance and rebellious rupture. Nevertheless, in their almost obsessive concern with ornamental affective intensity and other modes of non-compliance, recursion, and self-reference, the films carve out all-female spaces as special and aloof, sketching a world apart with its very own rules and conditions of subsistence. These may not be the sites of revolutionary change, but they do reflect critically on the larger narratives of modernity as streamlined progress, incessant novelty, or unending optimization.

49 Siegfried Kracauer, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,” in Levin, *Mass Ornament*, 292; and Mayer, “Daydreams of Society.”

50 Quoted in Makropoulos, *Theorie der Massenkultur*, 36.

51 Makropoulos, 11.

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**Ruth Mayer** is Professor of American Studies at Leibniz University in Hannover, Germany. She is the author of *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Temple University Press, 2014), and she directs a research project on modernity and gender constructions.