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The Blossom and the Bole: Narrative and Visual Spectacle in Early Film Melodrama

by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Labor is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

—“Among School Children,” W. B. Yeats

Efforts to trace both the parentage and defining features of early film melodrama often crystallize around two distinct lines of descent, the dramatic narrative of theatrical performance and the visual spectacle derived from the elaboration of cinematic elements.¹ The first line coincides with arguments for historical teleology, locating the melodrama's specificity in its inheritance of a precisely defined theatrical tradition (for our purposes, the “bole” or “trunk” tradition), while the second is rooted in more material systems of codification that became associated with the genre as a cinematic form (obviously, the “blossom” part of the equation). Often, these tendencies are solidified into opposing categories, the first representing direct filiation from the nineteenth-century stage (in terms of a narrative tradition that designates plot functions, patterns of action, and certain repeated character types, for example), while the second concentrates on the heightened symbolization and visual display resulting from the amplification of visual (and auditory/musical) figures and motifs. However, as suggested by both my title and the stanza of “Among School Children” from which it is derived, the intricate and complex *imbrication* of these two tendencies is at the base of melodrama's specificity. As with all dichotomies, it is the very interconnection of only *apparently* contrasting elements that defines the form and in fact makes the perceived entities inseparable. In one way, then, film melodrama can be seen to achieve its effects from the perpetual dialectic of a performance of its cinematic tropes and the atavistic traces of its historical roots as a form.²

It is no accident that these reversible and intersecting categories of melodramatic definition find their most illustrative common ground in the image of

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the woman; in spite of the more visible contrasts that shape these polarities (say, of narrative history and specular display) there is something constant in the representation of the female figure (codes of lighting, camera work, mise-en-scène, and the equivalence of vision and desire) that at once problematizes any simple opposition and foregrounds the centrality of the woman's image (woman-as-image) in both the structure of melodrama as a form and the process of cinematic representation. When we look to the figure of the woman in two representative films of the late teens and early twenties, we can begin to understand how melodrama emerged as a peculiarly *cinematic* genre and at the same time how the cinema, quite early on, revolved around a particularly sexualized representation of the feminine.

"O Chestnut-tree, Great-rooted Blossomer." Two characteristic film melodramas by D. W. Griffith, *Way Down East* (1920) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), will serve as the basis for discussion, not only for the transcendent performances by Lillian Gish that each film contains, but for the ease with which these films settle into the demonstrated categories, allowing them exemplary status as models of generic-theatrical conventions, in the case of *Way Down East*, and manipulation of cinematic materials, in the case of *Broken Blossoms*.³ But more important in terms of the argument for imbrication that I'm suggesting, it is the figure of Lillian Gish's heroine-victim that serves to unify the contrasting tendencies in an apotheosis of the melodramatic mode: the spectacle of female suffering crystallizes in the melodramatic mainstays of violence, sexuality, and Victorian ideology and binds the theatrical and the cinematic into one singularly compelling form.

We can consider these competing tendencies in another way, but the overlapping relation will remain the same: both *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms*, as specifically cinematic discursive constructions, demonstrate the roots of film language by the manner in which they narrate their fictions. *Way Down East* is an excellent example of Griffith's hallmark crosscutting, for its structure of thematic contrasts is mirrored by a series of narrative alternations that culminate in the celebrated last-minute rescue on the ice floes. *Broken Blossoms*, on the other hand, offers a sustained emphasis on the image itself, an almost non-narrative stasis that defies the linearity of alternation and the sequential force of crosscutting. Again it is a question of emphasis, with the image of the woman providing the common ground. For if we consider the look at the woman's face and body as the mainspring of either film, this gaze is placed in virtual competition with linear narrative elaboration, with frequency alone determining the melodramatic type. While *Way Down East* emphasizes narrative causality in its pervasive crosscutting, *Broken Blossoms* weaves its tale through a concerted and perpetual return to the woman's face. In both films, the spectator's desire (as negotiated through this look at the woman) is repeatedly engaged by the more linear narrative constructions, but while *Way Down East* intersperses its prevalent alternations with close-ups of Gish, *Broken Blossoms* in fact *defines* its

narration through these same close-ups, making the heroine's face into a mode of narration itself.

Both films, in fact, articulate issues around the family and the feminine, domesticity and desire, but do so in configurations that allow each film a kind of limit-status in the melodrama category it represents. *Way Down East*, true to its epitomizing function regarding the classical Hollywood model, makes the constitution of the couple both its *raison d'être* and its final goal. From its originary crisis of seduction and abandonment (classic melodrama material in itself) to the resolution of its conflicts in a threefold wedding ceremony, the film seals both the patriarchal social relations that structure its world, and the obligatory female position within the familial order, under the sign of a maternal kiss. *Broken Blossoms*, on the other hand, would seem to be about the *dissolution* of the family, signifying the collapse of the familial in the heroine's death. However, this understanding is only possible from a reading of the narrative actions alone, because, in a particularly perverse strain of the melodramatic, the couple is in fact united in the most ethereal of marriages beyond life. The implied resolution is a fantasy of union, in keeping with the peculiarly ephemeral quality of the film. Thus, rather than consigning its heroine to the resolving role of wife (and presumably mother) as does *Way Down East*, *Broken Blossoms* reifies her victimization (and the impossibility of these roles for her) in images of stunning beauty. In either case it is the female character's suffering that provides the central articulating crisis of the films. The body of the woman becomes the stage across which the melodramatic spectacle is played out.⁴

In a now familiar trope of feminist film theory, in classical narrative fiction film the female character is either subjected to domination by the narrative (and to the Pyrrhic victory of recuperation through marriage) or she is fetishized in the idealized representation of her suffering or passion. Yet if woman's victimization is at the core of both of these films, it serves different defining functions for each. *Way Down East* dramatizes this suffering and then resolves it, making it one plot element among the many that constitute the genre. A form of "structural enracination" occurs, allowing the melodramatic roots and armature to be perceived in the action itself. In *Broken Blossoms* there is very little development or resolution; narrative actions in themselves are only pretexts for the pictorial representation of feeling. There is instead both stasis and suggestive reverberation, as the alternating brutalization and idealization of the woman flourishes across the texture of the film.

"O Body Swayed to Music." Thomas Elsaesser points out that "in its dictionary sense, melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects . . . giving expressive color and chromatic contrast to the storyline by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue."⁵ Insofar as it places music within an essentially narrative context, this definition coincides with the "bole" aspect of my metaphor and is particularly useful in considering *Way Down East*, driven by the mechanics of plot as it is. A look at

a sequence, perhaps the most theatrical of the entire film and certainly closest to its roots on the stage (if posters for the play by Lottie Blair Parker are any indication), will serve as an example. This critical moment also dramatically initiates the most cinematic sequence of the film, and it does so by establishing a series of alternations and contrasts within the context of the traditional proscenium space of the stage.

Squire Bartlett, having just learned of Anna Moore's disgrace (her child out of wedlock), banishes her from the hearth in a classic gesture, unmistakable in its histrionics and quickly recognized in its hyperbole by audiences of both stage and screen. But Griffith, equally mindful of both the popular reservoir of associations from the theater and a developing film audience that was learning to read a story cinematically, was careful to ease the relay between theatrical and cinematic elements. Although there is a continual return to the establishing shot most reminiscent of the stage, in its frontal positioning of the camera and its medium-shot distance, the sequence is articulated by a series of reverse-shot exchanges which cannot fail to capture the immediacy of the moment in the reactions of its characters. Thus in addition to the variation in shot size that comes with such alternation (from medium-shot to close medium-shot to close-up itself), there is a further set of oppositions established between cozy indoors (the family table) and out (the barn, the snow), between domestic peacefulness and brute nature, between light and dark, and, most important, between feminine and masculine. And within this all is the epitomizing close-up of Anna herself, hair framed in the ethereal halo of backlighting, accusing her seducer and asking us, the viewers, to understand her plea.

In a sense, Griffith had already prepared his audience for this scene by a whole series of oppositions that structure the text from the beginning: Manichaean dualities that contrast the city and the country, the rich and the poor, jaded immorality and innocent virtue, evil seducer and pure heroine have guided the transition from contextual background to the narrative actions themselves. As the film opens, poor, virtuous Anna Moore sits in her modest country cottage, in which she and her mother constitute the domestic world and the limits of knowledge. Her arrival at the home of her wealthy city cousins plunges her into a milieu of sexual immorality and corruption, where the introduction of masculinity is simultaneous with the greatest cruelty, and the rest of the narrative proceeds from there. The thematic contrasts having been established, from that point on it will be the work of the film to harmonize the opposites through the actions of the characters, amalgamating the divisions into a union. The resolving marriage of hero and heroine will also be the validation of a vibrant, bountiful, social nexus removed from the city but not reduced to the isolation and poverty that opened the film. The country, the maternal, the poor, and the domestic will be mediated, at the film's close, by the organized social life of the farm, the heterosexual, the prosperous, and the communal.

Thus in both its structure and its theme *Way Down East* dramatizes the polarities of good and evil and does so in a way that continually reinforces its line

of descent from popular stage melodrama. The most conventionalized and, for this reason, perhaps the purest family tree of melodrama posits just such an unambiguous duality, with rudimentary moral distinctions represented by character types whose interaction provides the drama. Thus Frank Rahill can summarize regarding the stage: "Primarily concerned with situation and plot, [melodrama] calls upon mimed action . . . and employs a . . . fixed complement of stock characters . . . concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished."⁶ With characteristic economy, Louis Delluc picks up from there, summarizing *Way Down East* in this way: "Griffith describes in his black and white style the story of an unmarried mother, a dead child, and a brave hero."⁷

If mechanics of action and recognizable character types tie this film so closely to its theatrical roots, we must not forget that in *cinematic* melodrama the body of the woman has a particular task to perform. Thus in *Way Down East* familial order is restored, but it is through a crisis both generated and resolved across the eroticized, violated, idealized, and ultimately domesticated body of the woman. It is Anna's body that provokes the crisis and enables the resolution, from the instant she is caught in Lennox Sanderson's desiring and lustful gaze to the moment of her rescue as a fragile, lifeless form. The seduction's resulting pregnancy transforms Anna from girl to woman; the baby's death evokes paroxysms of grief. The solitary vagabond becomes the working helper and then finally defiant mistress of her own fate. But it is ultimately the *near-elimination* of this body altogether that enables the couple to be united and the legitimate cycle of female functions to be restored. In her autobiography Gish delights in describing the torturous production of effects in this final rescue scene: "At one time my face was caked with a crust of ice and snow, and icicles like little spikes formed on my eyelashes, making it difficult to keep my eyes open. Above the howling storm, Mr. Griffith shouted: 'Billy, move in. Get that face. That face—get that face.'"⁸ But it is precisely because her body has been put to such extremes that Gish's suffering heroine can make *Way Down East* a classic of the melodramatic paradigm.

"O Brightening Glance." While it can be said that *Way Down East* exemplifies the melodramatic mode by "identifying good and evil . . . in scenarios of persecuted innocence" (to roughly paraphrase Christine Gledhill),⁹ *Broken Blossoms* takes this one step further, amplifying the latter (persecuted innocence) while assuming the former (good and evil) as givens. Thus where *Way Down East* is Manichaean in its structure, *Broken Blossoms* emphasizes what I would call the textual; it moves us by means of formal, stylistic, and symbolic elements rather than through actions alone. While *Way Down East* presents the stock characters of melodrama reminiscent of its theatrical roots, demonstrating Griffith's specifically cinematic transformation of dramatic material from the tradition of the stage, *Broken Blossoms* raises other, more medium-related questions about melodrama. For example, some theories tend to emphasize

melodrama's *stylized* use of cinematic materials rather than its reliance on theatrical conventions (no matter how cinematically transformed). Three phrases typically associated with this line of thinking are: "pure expressivity through mise en scene," "the *sublimation* of dramatic values through more complex forms of symbolization," and "the *formal articulation* of psychic problems."¹⁰ All of these specifically cinematic definitions are at work in *Broken Blossoms*, yielding a high emphasis on visuality and giving symbolic resonance to objects, situations, and configurations—both features central to the definition of film melodrama as an autonomous cinematic form. In addition, the highly visual poetics of *Broken Blossoms* are enhanced by Griffith's attention to tinting in order to amplify the emotional content of the image.¹¹ Robert Lang has called the film "a drama of impossible desires"¹² and it is just this impossibility which finds expression in the amplification of cinematic elements over the specific articulation of narrative events. Lang continues, "The film presents as a dominant value the beautiful, the pictorial, the tableau, the exquisite face, rather than the unfolding and resolution of a narrative."¹³

Indeed, where *Way Down East* amply displays its ties to its dramatic source, *Broken Blossoms* derives its inspiration from a much more varied palette—painting, still photography, lyric poetry. Even its theatrical parentage is rooted in the poetic; a much closer cousin is the Symbolist theater of a Maeterlinck, with its accumulation of atmospheres, evocations, and the production of symbolic effects. Furthermore, like both the poetry and performance of this Symbolist tradition, the film's primary emotional charge is elicited from suggestive patterns that are often purely visual; associative images or metaphoric chains evoke states of mind or feeling. Style itself becomes a character, and one that does not fit easily into the range of conventional melodramatic types. This complicates a strictly historical argument, for the chronologically later film (*Way Down East* in 1920) would seem to be in keeping with its nineteenth-century ancestors, while the film made one year earlier belongs to the anticipation of Modernism (Cubist painting, Imagism, minimalist theater) that Symbolism represents. Another way to consider this poetic inflection of the visual is in the terms defined by Charles Affron: "The patterns of *Broken Blossoms* are primarily those of poetry. . . . [The film] creates a tension between theatrical expectations for the stage and configurations pertinent only to the screen. It offers a field for understanding screen acting at its most specifically formal . . . [exemplifying] the metaphoric factor of screen acting . . . [and its] purely filmic quotient."¹⁴ One final formulation, this time by Lillian Gish, describes the film's suggestive atmospheres and crystallizes the distinction I'm making: "*Broken Blossoms* set a new style with its moody lighting and soft-focus photography . . . and proved that a film didn't have to have a chase or a rescue or a happy ending to hold an audience."¹⁵

Broken Blossoms uses strategies of pictorial and poetic composition to narrate its "tale of love and lovers . . . [and] tears." But, in a characteristic reversal, this story is merely pretext for the evocation of atmospheres which foregrounds

the psychic and symbolic dimensions of the text. In what one critic calls Griffith's most "richly evocative and tightly constructed film," the "dreamlike atmospheric context [and] mood-drenched mise en scene"¹⁶ are the product of a threefold interaction of pictorial traditions, cinematic articulations, and poetic effects. The film's overwhelming ambience of haunting delicacy, the mists and fogs that seem to transform the brute reality of London's Limehouse District into poetry itself, are based on a series of watercolors by English artist George Baker. The battery of cinematographic techniques associated with Impressionism in painting and Symbolism in literature—hazy lighting, soft focus, shallow compositions, and luminous effects—is enhanced by the close-ups of Gish by Hendrik Sartov, her personal photographer. (Sartov also worked on *Way Down East*, but in terms of the point I want to develop, the close-ups are only used at pivotal moments in the later film, while here in *Broken Blossoms* it is Gish's face that structures the entire text. I will return to this.) The result is an orchestration of visual images made to embody psychological states, producing a film that is not so much about individual characters as about emotions, essences, and human realities.

This stylized "blossoming" of cinematic language—to continue my structuring metaphor—is equally apparent in the film's economy of poetic means. Based on a short story in Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights*, its narrative action can be summarized in one sentence: A Chinese man loves a young English girl whose brutal father beats her to death; he kills the father, then kills himself. Compare this exceedingly simple narrative structure to the numerous crises, reversals, and complications (typical of the popular melodrama) that structure *Way Down East*. Alternation, the motor of narrative actions in *Way Down East*, is here subsumed by the priorities of poetic evocation, the creation of modes of feeling. According to Christian Metz's paradigm for narrative organization, *Way Down East* is mainly structured by chronological series, what he would call the "alternate syntagma" (the narrative crosscutting that Griffith is known for).¹⁷ On the other hand, *Broken Blossoms* is largely shaped by the *non*narrative, achronological organization of the "parallel syntagma." This is a *conceptual* form, putting into alternating relation two motifs or ideas to produce symbolic or thematic parallels or contrasts.

Alternation thus structures the *meaning*—rather than the actions—of the film, if only by means of a reference point established at the film's beginning and end. The peacefulness of China is put into implied contrast with the brutality of London through the opening and closing sequences, creating a parallel conception that implicitly structures the film. Here the contrasts between beauty and ugliness, serenity and violence, love and hatred are presented in terms of characters whose allegorical names (Lucy, The Girl; The Yellow Man; Battling Burrows) universalize this struggle. As Léon Moussinac puts it, "In this way, brutality and crime are made more meaningful when faced with the harmonious beauty of love and dreams."¹⁸ Furthermore, while the alternating series in *Way Down East* build to a crescendo in the final breathtaking moments

of the rescue, the rhythms of *Broken Blossoms* make rescue an impossibility. The Chinese Man arrives too late, leaving revenge and suicide the only options, a sublimated "marriage" whose only resolution is tragic and aesthetic.

Another feature of *Broken Blossoms*'s textuality is its concerted emphasis on the visual, demonstrated not only by its specific atmospheric "look" but, more important, by the fact that the film is primarily narrated through an exchange of glances, placing every action in its slim plot in the register of the gaze. From the moment the main players are introduced in the opening credits, visuality inaugurates the text. Evil Eye and The Spying One, named only in terms of their single function of surveillance, establish and negotiate what action there is. While it is The Spying One who, later in the film, discovers Lucy in The Chinese Man's chambers and precipitates her murder by telling Burrows what he saw, it is Evil Eye who sets everything in place by establishing desire in visual terms. It is in an early sequence, gracefully articulated through a sustained relay of silent looks, that we learn of The Chinese Man's love. ("The Yellow Man watched Lucy often. The beauty which all Limehouse missed smote him to the heart.") Lucy looks longingly at a doll in the window of his shop, and he looks longingly at her. And always present witnessing this scene is Evil Eye. No intertitles are needed in this eloquent exchange, whose unity is broken only by the interruption of a single shot of Burrows at a bar (an allusive economy called for by the structuring parallels just discussed). In this powerful establishing sequence, the frames of the shop window both separate and connect this impossible couple and delineate the space of their desire.

But lest we forget, it is the image of the woman-girl (for the twenty-six-year-old Gish played a fifteen-year-old child) around which the film's meanings circulate, and here it will be best to consider one sequence in particular, thought of by many as the heart of the film in its lyric intensity and transcendent beauty. The film in fact structures a relation in which Lucy, as desired object, is the stake in a struggle between two conflicting worlds of men—two modes of masculine behavior—and most of its sequences portray her either being beaten or adored. Suffering body or object of adulation, the figure of the feminine is what motivates the textual process. In this sequence The Chinese Man finds Lucy in a heap (not unlike the "bundle of rags" thrust to Burrows in Lucy's infancy) and transforms his room into a temple where she is worshiped as a goddess. The sequence radiates a sublime luminosity; its internal consistency and continuity, its attenuated rhythms and epiphanic status remove it from the threat of violence that might otherwise be suggested by crosscutting. This integrity isolates the moment, idealizing the sequence in an articulation of poetry, love, spirituality, transcendence, peace, and light. From its more obvious signifiers (the lines of poetry in the intertitles, the floral references of its central metaphor) to its more oblique (the circulation of figures that link this sequence to its predecessor at the shop: doll, flower, window/mirror, and desiring gaze), to the materials of its construction (ethereal, chiaroscuro lighting, gestures of

pantomime, expressive close-ups), the sequence is an apotheosis of religious and sexual ecstasy, the ineffable inscribed.

“How Can We Know the Dancer from the Dance?” More than any other film genre, the melodrama is defined by its use of cinematic materials (“*pure expressivity* through mise en scene”) rather than by generic conventions based on action. (These conventions, for example, in the western, would include specific location and historical period, stock characters such as the cowboy hero and lawless villain, plot motifs such as the gunfight, structured oppositions such as the garden and the wilderness, and so forth.) A specifically generic definition of melodrama in this mode would involve theatrical conventions—for example, domestic location, familial conflict, the stock types of brave hero, evil villain, and suffering heroine, the struggle of good and evil, and plot motifs such as kidnap or seduction. However, as we have seen, in *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms*, both highly condensed and crystallizing examples of film melodrama in its purest form, the use of cinematic materials and specific genre conventions alternates repeatedly, making these separate categories blend into one another at every turn. Thus (to return to Elsaesser), the “shift from the linear externalization of action to more complex forms of symbolization” that defines film melodrama is not so much a teleology as a movement of oscillation.

Certainly, there are still grounds for locating these films securely in the contrasting categories I outlined at the beginning of this article. One has only to compare the titles: *Way Down East*, with its directional quality and regional specificity (the title refers to parts of Maine east of Boston), sets the scene, locating the drama with realist precision and designating the space of the action with particularity. *Broken Blossoms*, compressed as a haiku, is the metaphoric evocation of the struggle between violence and delicate beauty at the source of the film’s poetry. This title returns in both words and images throughout the text, and, refusing the realism of *Way Down East* (which abandons its title as soon as the action starts), suggests the circulation of figures that defines the film.

A comparison of the endings yields similar results. Two kinds of circularity obtain: *Way Down East* both opens and closes on a domestic scene, but it does not exactly end where it began. The movement is rather from the familial (or maternal) to the conjugal (the marriage), defining the trajectory of the classical Hollywood cinema and infusing the site of the hearth with patriarchal law. However, *Broken Blossoms* does end precisely where it began, in the prologue and conclusion of an image of tranquility: ships gliding through a misty Asian harbor. Circularity replaces narrative progression, as the poetic evocation of a mysterious and inexpressible Baudelairean “beyond” thus surrounds the film in a frame of exoticism, sublimation, and desire.

A third point of comparison concerns Lillian Gish’s character in both films, two strikingly similar moments whose context defines the difference of each. In *Way Down East*, Anna Moore baptizes her dying baby by kissing its little hand;

in *Broken Blossoms*, Lucy repeats the gesture, only this time with a doll that The Chinese Man has given her. The framing, beatific lighting, and tender gesture are the same, but the function of each is firmly rooted in the strategies of the different films. In the first it is a narrative moment, one of heightened pathos to be sure, but one that fits within the paradigm of narrative actions that structure the film. In the latter it is a signifier of both longing and impossibility, describing not so much an event or an action as suggesting an emotional state. Rich with a complex of meanings, the gesture bears the burden of symbolizing what can only be alluded to by indirection.

However, it is equally true that these films can be considered powerful examples of tendencies quite the opposite of what I'm suggesting they represent. For example, I have argued that *Way Down East*'s affinities with the theater are much stronger than those of *Broken Blossoms*, whose strategies of poetic evocation make use of specifically cinematic techniques. But descriptions of the theatricality of *Broken Blossoms* abound; its enclosed space, its stagelike street, its minimal cast, its economy of sets and limited scope are all cited in support. Likewise, its adherence to the classical unities of time, place, and action reinforce arguments about the dramatic nature of the film. On the other hand, *Way Down East* is often described as an exemplary illustration of cinematic language, its series of alternations denoting specificity of organization in purely filmic terms. More obvious, of course, is its use of natural locations, its incorporation of reality into the narrative texture, as best exemplified by its climactic articulation of Mamaroneck, Vermont, and Niagara Falls in the dramatic rescue on the ice floes.

Thus *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms* are themselves both dancer and dance, to recall the original analogy with Yeats. On the one hand we can say that with its conventions of narrative organization from the stage, *Way Down East*, as the dancer, is performing an inherited theatrical tradition, while *Broken Blossoms* provides, through its poetic structure, the cinematic equivalent of the dance. However, the reverse is also true: *Way Down East* is the cinematic elaboration of the dance itself, while *Broken Blossoms* is the dancer/performer of a textuality all its own. It is no accident that what explains this reversibility (and is also central to melodrama's definition) is the figure of the woman. To illustrate, let's return to the shared image of mother-and-child and "mother-and-child" discussed above.

While these moments serve different functions in each film, their representations of the heroine are amazingly alike. Both idealize the woman through cinematic techniques, either as an icon of maternal suffering or a vision of ethereal bliss. Each close-up takes advantage of the heightened emotionalism of the moment, engaging our desire via circuits of the gaze. In each instance the narrative elaboration, whether through specific actions or suggestive effects, merely provides the background, alibi, or pretext for the intensification of vision provided by these shots. What crystallizes here is the spectacle of femininity, the point of intersection for the divergent melodramatic modes.

But it is important to remember that it is not desire for the specific woman per se (Anna Moore or Lucy) that constitutes this spectacle. It is the context of the scopophilic production of pleasure that gives these images their force. In the theory of the cinematic apparatus (I have argued elsewhere)¹⁹ it is the woman's image that both produces and maintains the spectator's pleasure. Cinema, as a fantasmatic production mobilizing primary processes of the dream, constitutes the woman's image as the lost object of desire, perpetually offered to the male spectator-consumer in a regime of fascination. As desire itself will always exist in the register of fantasy, the woman's image, as a *symbolic* structure, will always embody an element of its own impossibility. It is the *fantasmatic* quality of these images, marked by loss as they are, that gives them paradigmatic status in the psychic operations of the text.

There is something ephemeral, impossible, out of reach in the woman's image, and each film uses this according to its own needs. *Way Down East* uses the close-up most often in situations marked by loss (the dying baby, the near-fatal collapse on the ice) but surrounds it with narrative actions related to the stage tradition. *Broken Blossoms* requires no such context for its close-ups; the entire film is about just such an impossibility, with the close-ups serving as crystallizing moments. In each case, these shots of the suffering woman dramatize the impossibility of desire. In this way (to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek), these shots connecting the woman and absence are not about an object that is lost but about an object whose presence itself embodies loss.²⁰

One more point about this association of the woman's image and the fantasmatic needs to be made. When desire is linked to the image of the woman, it is not in terms of the commonsense notion of desiring a particular person, any more than "fantasy" is about a specific sexual fantasy. Rather, the terms involve processes linked to unconscious wishes, symbolic structures embodying an element of their own impossibility. A fantasy of the breast is not a yearning for the actual bodily part but a yearning for what it represents, what it symbolizes. As an image, a symbolic construction whose meaning is forged in the unconscious, the image of the woman belongs to a repertoire of psychic structures that exist in a dimension of fantasy, irreducible to the lived experience of an individual and partaking of a generalized cultural wish.²¹ It is in this—fantasmatic—sense that the woman's image is so crucial to the cinematic production of melodrama. For in both *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms*, when these images *transcend* their narrative function and become images of fantasmatic desire, they take on the central and cultural role that exceeds mere fictions of genre.

At its roots, cinematic melodrama is a complex interaction of plot complications and visual display, of discursive structure and poetic form. As we have seen, *Way Down East* and *Broken Blossoms* at once establish these polarities and yet render any idea of contrasting oppositions highly problematic. In these exemplary films, the different textual processes of narrative action and visual spectacle are often indistinguishable. Moreover, the elusive and crucial defining

presence of the female image makes both this reversibility, and the cinema itself, hinge on sexual difference.

It is not surprising that Yeats's dancer, though not specifically gendered, suggests a woman (the metaphor makes us envision a female performer). And it is particularly apt that the poet uses the image of a performing woman to describe the intersecting duality of the artistic process. For our purposes, this can serve as an illustration of the way in which sexual difference (while not always figured in specific characters) provides the ground for representation itself. Like sexual difference in the cinema, it is the mainspring of the machine, the impelling cause that makes everything work. To assert this is not to speak of actual women themselves, but of woman as a symbolizing force: The very fact of symbolization proceeds from sexual difference itself. Taking our cues, then, from Yeats's metaphor and all that it implies, where early film melodrama is concerned, how *can* we know the dancer from the dance?

Notes

1. This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the Conference on Melodrama (Stage, Picture, Screen) organized by the Research Division of the British Film Institute in London, July 1992. For various suggestions and insights I would like to thank Tom Gunning and Joel Lewis.
2. I am, of course, schematizing for purposes of this argument. Tom Gunning points out that while a contrast can be drawn between films that relate more specifically to the theatrical tradition of popular melodrama and those that rely on an intensity of certain visual effects, this does not necessarily imply that the latter are more *inherently* cinematic. Thus within the theatrical melodrama itself one finds both the narrative mode (plot mechanics and character types) and the spectacular mode (visual staging and specific effects), while the more "cinematic" strand of melodrama can have precise theatrical antecedents. For Gunning it is not an opposition between theatrical and cinematic melodrama but rather between different aspects of melodrama, both of which are already found in the theatrical tradition. In this essay, however, my interest in adhering to the controlling metaphor of Yeats's poem requires an initiating polarity that becomes more dialectically complex as the argument progresses.
3. Both films have just been released by Kino Video in newly remastered VHS prints that include retinting and original orchestral accompaniments.
4. A number of articles provide useful considerations of these two films, among them (on *Way Down East*) Virginia Wright Wexman, "Suffering and Suffrage: Birth, the Female Body, and Women's Choices," *Velvet Light Trap* 29 (Spring 1992): 53–65, which is a chapter of her exciting new book, *Creating the Couple* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Sarah Kozloff, "Where Wessex Meets New England," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1985): 35–41, which augments the film's well-known theatrical origin with evidence of Griffith's interest in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; (on *Broken Blossoms*) Julia Lesage, "Artful Racism, Artful Rape," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 235–254, where she outlines the anatomy of patriarchal violence, and Vance Kepley, "Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* and the Problem of Historical Specificity," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 37–47, which traces how factors external to the film itself determined its reception as an "art film."
5. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 50.

6. Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), xiv.
7. Quoted in Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 412.
8. Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1969), 233.
9. Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 32.
10. All of these come from Elsaesser, "Tales."
11. Visuality was also foregrounded by elements of spectacle designed by Griffith for the film's road show: the screen was bathed in a blue light and the projection was preceded by a pantomime ballet between a maiden and Fate. Details of this are on file at the Museum of Modern Art and are summarized in Arthur Lenning, "Broken Blossoms: D. W. Griffith and the Making of an Unconventional Masterpiece," *Film Journal* 1, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1972). Thanks to Tom Gunning for pointing this out.
12. Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 91.
13. Ibid.
14. Charles Affron, *Star Acting* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 12.
15. Gish, *The Movies*, 222.
16. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1990), 103.
17. Christian Metz, "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 108-146.
18. Quoted in Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films*, 43.
19. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990). In particular, see the introduction.
20. Slavoj Žižek, lecture at the Graduate Center, CUNY, New York City, March 1992.
21. See the entry on "Phantasy" in J. Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973).