A Drunkard's Reformation (1909)

Tom Gunning

dir. D. W. Griffith; screenplay D. W. Griffith; photography Billy Bitzer. silent, 35mm, black/white, 15 mins. The Biograph Company.

A Drunkard's Reformation is a one-reel film directed by D. W. Griffith for the Biograph Company in 1909. Not only a seminal film in Griffith's career, it marks an essential moment as the new medium of film defined its relation to the theatrical tradition of melodrama. Griffith and his cameraman Billy Bitzer shot the film in three days at Biograph's 14th Street studio in New York City in February and March 1909, and it was released in theaters on April 1 (Cherchi Usai 57). The film shows a young father with a drinking problem who attends a theater with his daughter, where they see a performance of a temperance melodrama. The Biograph's own publicity bulletin issued for the film stressed both the film's moral value and its novel narrative form, »showing as it does a play within a play. It is a sort of triangular in structure, that is to say, the play depicts to the leading actor in the picture the calamitous results of drink, while the whole presents to the spectator the most powerful temperance lesson ever propounded« (*Biograph Bulletin*). This structure constitutes an innovative moment in the evolution of film language, as the central sequence introduces a point-of-view editing pattern, alternating shots of the stage drama with the reaction of the audience. The editing not only conveys a character's point of view but also follows in detail a carefully calibrated psychological transformation as we see the father's emotional reaction to the play.

The film demonstrates how cinema absorbed and transformed stage melodrama by literally cannibalizing a staged performance. The play that the father and daughter attend is *Drink*, an 1879 theatrical adaptation by Charles Reade of Émile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* (1877). Whereas Zola's novel offered a scandalous naturalist exploration of working class poverty, Reade's drama staged Zola's work as pure melodrama, especially by making the character Virginie a conventional villain who maliciously gives the drunkard Coupeau poisoned wine (Mayer qtd. in Cherchi Usai 59). The theme of

the miseries of a drunkard's life had formed a major genre of melodrama throughout the 19th century, convincing reformers suspicious of stage entertainments that theater could serve as a moral force. In 1909, *A Drunkard's Reformation* offered a similar justification for the movies, a new cheap form of entertainment viewed as immoral by many conservative critics (Gunning 151-71).

In his essential critical work, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks describes the thematic core of melodrama as the revelation of a »moral occult« (5-8). Melodrama, Brooks demonstrates, does more than simply portray innocence threatened by villainy. Through deceit, the villain of melodrama tries to subvert moral order by obscuring the true signs of innocence. The denouement of melodrama restores moral order through a public proof of innocence and a clear revelation of the villain's perfidy. Melodrama enacts this moment of moral revelation through a triumphant display of veracious signs. During the 19th century the signs of virtue and vice became increasingly psychological and interiorized, but their public acknowledgement remained the genre's central climax. The context of the restoration of virtue also became increasingly domestic, as melodrama placed its faith in home and family.

The opening and closing of *A Drunkard's Reformation* define the initial threat to domestic harmony and the ultimate restoration of a happy home. The film's first two shots present the interior of a family dining room where mother (played by Linda Arvidson) and daughter (Adele De Garde) await the return of father and husband (Arthur Johnson). The third shot presents the threat, cutting from the family scene to the all-male environment of the saloon where the errant father drinks with cronies, ignoring his family. The missing father and the contrast between the family dining room and the saloon establish the moral imbalance this melodrama will resolve. When the father returns home drunk, his behavior marks him as a potential villain: He scorns the slippers his daughter brings to him, smashes crockery, and threatens wife and child with violence.

This disruption of hearth and home will be reversed in the denouement. In the film's penultimate shot, the husband returns to the dining room and pantomimes a vow to never drink again. Griffith then concludes the film with a strongly pictorial closing shot as the family now cuddles together before a glowing hearth; a striking lighting effect basks them with light and warmth, an image of domestic felicity and moral resolution. What has redeemed this family, reformed the drunkard, and motivated this transformation in imagery? The answer, of course, is the stage melodrama the father attended and its moral lesson.

Over twenty shots, Griffith intercuts the stage performance of *Drink* and, crucially, the father's reactions to it. On stage, Coupeau, a young laborer, weds Gervaise after signing a pledge to give up alcohol. The newlyweds have a child and seem happy, but Coupeau's companions persuade him to resume drinking. Drunk, he abuses his wife and child, becoming violent. He is admitted to a hospital with *delirium tremens* and returns home, warned that he must never drink again. A scorned former sweetheart gives him a poisoned bottle of wine. Drinking it, Coupeau succumbs to dementia, attacking his wife and child violently and then dying in convulsions. The acting in this compressed melodrama is intense, violent, and emblematic, with highly expressive gestures, especially during Coupeau's mania and death throes.

In contrast to this intensely mobile action, Johnson's and De Garde's reactions to the play, while expressive and readable, are conveyed primarily by facial and hand gestures, a style of acting arguably more cinematic than the performances presented on

stage. Alternately cutting between stage and audience provides the major means of conveying the film's lesson. This editing articulates *Drink*'s action on stage with the reactions of the father in the audience, thus underscoring the play's effect and significance. The pattern of alternation between stage and auditorium does more than simply convey the presence of an audience watching the performance. By Griffith's careful selection of cutting points, it stresses the stages of the father's reaction to the play, creating one of the very first cinematic sequences of a psychological portrayal. This series of reactions thus provides the essential action of the film, rendering the stages of the drunkard's reformation visible.

Through a combination of expressions, gestures, and intercutting, Griffith shows that the father discovers a parallel between the stage play and his own life. The first such indication is rather anodyne: As Coupeau's family appears on stage with a young daughter, Griffith cuts to the father who nudges his daughter and points at the stage. This cut between stage and audience, bridged by the father's gesture, establishes an essential significance of the film's structure and defines the role of melodrama in the film. To be a spectator, it tells us, means to see analogies, to recognize that a play can mirror one's life. The dynamic meaning of this mirroring is stressed through the successive alternations between stage and spectator, as Johnson repeats this pointing gesture to his daughter. As the play progresses, the father soon becomes bored and restless. However, as on stage Coupeau's cronies persuade him to break his vow and take a drink, the film cuts to Johnson becoming uncomfortable in the audience. In the following shots Johnson looks increasingly disturbed as he witnesses Coupeau getting drunk and violently pushing Gervais to the floor when she comes to bring him home from the tavern. Later in the play when Coupeau returns from the hospital and becomes manic after drinking the poisoned wine, attacking his wife and child, Griffith cuts to Johnson fully alarmed, repeatedly touching his breast to express his identification with the stage action, recognizing his possible future.

The return home of father and daughter after the play displays the impact of the lesson of the melodrama. Standing in their dining room, Johnson performs a pantomime: pointing off (presumably towards the theater), pounding his chest, and then holding up a wine bottle before throwing it to the floor. The pantomime clearly visualizes that he has identified the true villain of his own drama: himself (through pounding his chest) and the demon drink. As the *Biograph Bulletin* indicates, the »triangular« structure of the film demonstrates not only that the melodrama has reformed the film's character, but that the film as a »whole« has the potential to transform the viewers of the film as well. Besides showing how melodrama can teach a moral lesson, *A Drunkard's Reformation* reveals cinema's ability to express the moral occult through its own stylistic means: not only the narrative action and pantomime but also through the portrayal of psychological transformation by means of cinematic point-of-view editing. This film thus establishes a motif that becomes crucial in movie melodramas: The witnessing of a scene whose moral and emotional significance is visually marked through both its stylistic framing (the staged play in *A Drunkard's Reformation*) and its subjective impact. The role of the spectacle as revelation of the moral occult becomes essential to the best film melodramas: from the courtroom revelations in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) to the wedding witnessed by the mother through the window in King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), to the final public funeral march in Douglas Sirk's → *Imitation of Life* (1959). Cinematic style not only stages such moments of melodramatic

significance and transformation but even underscores their impact »triangularly«—to characters, and, by extension, to spectators.

References

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