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“Expect the Worst:” Modern Life and Sentimental Death in *Just Around the Corner* (Frances Marion, 1921)

Short Title: Expect the Worst

Abstract: The silent film adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s *Just Around The Corner* (1921) by writer-director Frances Marion foregrounds three themes that also feature centrally in the short story: the hardship and struggles of modern work, the difficulties and exigencies of modern love, and the symbolically transformative powers of death. Both film and story negotiate the stylistic, social, economic and cultural contradictions and compromises of American society and Hollywood on the cusp of change. Marion’s dramatization explicitly brings to the fore the tensions between progressive and conservative attitudes towards modernity and stages the conflicting morals of the times from a gendered perspective. As a result, *Just Around the Corner* is both formally and thematically an example of the challenging dialogue between progressive, proto-feminist attitudes developing in the late teens and early twenties (and intrinsic to female artistic practice) and the old-fashioned morality of conservative discourses and the narrative conventions of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking.

Key words: Silent cinema, Hollywood, Twentieth Century American literature, Gender, Modernity

Introduction

William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan Productions, a by-house of the newspaper imperium and founded in 1913 to focus on film production, made *Just Around the Corner* as a silent picture in 1921. The movie was based on a short story published in Cosmopolitan magazine by popular writer Fannie Hurst and was written and directed by Mary Pickford's favorite screenwriter, Frances Marion. The fact that the most important creative forces behind the film were women seems remarkable now but was unexceptional at this juncture in Hollywood history, when many women held authorial and artistic positions. Through its focus on two female protagonists the film's narrative perspective further fixed a strong female orientation.

This essay will argue that through the adoption of a predominantly female perspective, the film proposes a reflection on and critique of the instabilities, insecurities and struggles of modern life in general and modern womanhood in particular during the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet, in its dramaturgical and narrative strategies, reminiscent of Victorian artistic topoi but structured by modern cinematic practices, *Just Around the Corner* also reveals itself as an ambiguous, contradictory text, intent on telling two parallel but conflicting stories. On the one hand the story and the film demonstrate a reliance on older forms and styles (well-used plots like the mother-daughter separation, the use of tableaux staging) while on the other there is the inclusion of new figurations of women (flappers, working girls, New Women) and of a changing social reality. The film dramatizes - 'picturizes' and emphasizes - some of the key contradictions of these social, cultural, institutional transitions within Hollywood and American (urban) society at large. While the film is at times outspoken and

indignant about contemporary gendered social reality, its progressive socio-political discourse is nonetheless mainstreamed by the traditionalism of the adapted text and the requirements of narrative closure (i.e. the implementation of a moral lesson, a conservative coda). The result is a curious mixture of social critique (the hardships and struggles of modern womanhood) and an old-fashioned, romantic yarn with a 'happy ending.' It is striking that *Just Around the Corner*, which is in and of itself a work of female labour that describes and critiques female labour in modern urban society, is ultimately bound by compromise and thus solves its heroine's problems and struggles through marriage.

The title of this article invokes a song from Mel Brooks' Russian pastiche *The Twelve Chairs* (1970), in which the highest echelon of literary merit, Tolstoy, is contrasted with the lowest rung, the writings of Fannie Hurst. I will not engage in a discussion of the often lowly status of particular genres or types of stories associated with women consumers or with the masses, but instead use the phrase -'Hope for the best; expect the worst' ('You could be Tolstoy or Fannie Hurst') - as an apt description of the often meagre life options available to women of a certain class at this particular historical juncture. This was a time when old and new views on life, love, work and death co-existed, influenced and challenged one another.

The essay is divided in three sections in which I will discuss the depiction and (sometimes implicit) evaluation of modern work (i.e. female labour), of love (i.e. maternal and romantic affective relationships) and death (as a social ritual and narrative device of closure and moral reflection) to show how these themes illustrate and complicate the troubled relationship between the urges and

opportunities of modernity and female lived experience. I will first briefly sketch the particularities of the adapted text and place its author and adapter in the context of the institutional, cultural and social circumstances under which the film was produced in the early twenties. Then, I will analyse how the central themes of the adapted text have been re-structured and have gained (or lost) particular prominence in the film adaptation. Frances Marion was aware that in adapting a literary source she would have to create new scenes - the need for 'picturable situations' - that would nonetheless express the 'same feelings' the story did (Lant 649). Some of the picturized situations in *Just Around the Corner* reveal a particular reading of Hurst's story that is rather progressive and socially engaged, and suggests a strong position regarding the subject of female labour. But despite these signs of struggle and indignation, the film generally preserves romantic conventions and melodramatic turns, even doing Hurst one better in its traditional happy ending. The film thus operates between conservative and more progressive discourses and the creative choices lay bare the ideological mechanisms at this moment in the development of American mass culture. Yet, even though the film was made in the early twenties and resonates with contemporary tensions, several of these tensions are still relevant today.

The Woman Writer and the Silent Screen

Just Around the Corner was adapted and directed by a woman filmmaker at a time when film production was moving towards a more streamlined, corporate and industrial business model. This would have the effect of gradually excluding women from authorial positions such as directing (Mahar). For the past three decades, (feminist) film historians and biographers have reported on and have analysed the by now largely forgotten active participation of women in the early, pre-corporate Hollywood of the 1910s. These important rediscoveries of pioneering women have in turn been tempered by more sober reassessments of their actual numbers and influence (Slide) and have been adjusted with analyses of their real, and still substantial, achievements as well as of their swiftly declining influence. Karen Ward Mahar has traced the presence and evolution of women filmmakers in Hollywood and has demonstrated that their numbers in authorial positions (of writing, editing, producing, and directing) diminished as the industry gradually up-scaled, industrialized, and masculinized. She dates this gendering of the industry at about 1922. The Hollywood film industry, together with a rapidly modernizing society with changing mores, tastes and its attendant new or altered dominant cultural forms (Jacobs), was transforming institutionally and aesthetically, which had particular repercussions for creative women. Cosmopolitan Productions, the producing studio, was allied with the vertically integrated Paramount Pictures for distribution and exhibition. Through this cooperation Adolph Zukor (Famous Players-Lasky/Paramount president) continued a strategy that had worked for him before: combining pre-established stars with a pre-sold dramatic or literary property in cinematic

adaptations. W.R. Hearst, who had first eyeballed United Artists as a distributing partner (but had been rejected), on his part was eager to profit from Zukor's experience and the company's infrastructure, both of which could give his printed story material a successful second life on the screen (Nasaw). *Motion Picture World* commented that the collaboration assured access to 'the works of the greatest authors working today' (cited in Nasaw 280) and of course to the large audiences that read the Hearst-controlled magazines and newspapers.

Frances Marion had been active in the film industry since the mid-1910s, first as an actress and later as a very successful scenario writer. Zukor had worked with Marion on several of the most successful Mary Pickford pictures (*Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, *The Little Princess*) and the type of roles Marion had written for Pickford corresponded with what Hearst had in mind for Cosmopolitan Productions' principal star, Marion Davies (Marion). Since her return from Europe (serving as a war correspondent), Frances Marion had been under contract with Hearst, principally to write films for Marion Davies. The contract of \$2000 per week still offered her the opportunity to accept 'outside projects', such as work for Mary Pickford (for example *Pollyanna* in 1920) or for producer Joseph Schenk, who wanted her to write for his top star Norma Talmadge (Beauchamp 104). By 1920, Marion was something of a star scenario writer (when featured in fan magazines she was given the 'glamorous treatment,' as JoAnne Ruvoli has noted) and judging by her often longstanding collaborations with key stars of the teens and twenties such as Pickford, Davies, Constance and Norma Talmadge and producers such as Zukor, Hearst, and later Irving Thalberg and Samuel Goldwyn, she had a very successful Hollywood career that offered her increasing monetary and creative

comforts, as her directorial opportunities and her remuneration for work for Hearst illustrates (Beauchamp). She would direct her only two films, *The Love Light* and *Just Around the Corner*, in 1921. (She is also credited for co-directing *The Love Flower* with Chester Franklin in 1923.)

Marion's directorial debut was inspired by the first World War and was an original story developed for its star Mary Pickford; her second foray into directing was a simple story by Fannie Hurst, whose stories and books would be the source for many Hollywood adaptations in both the silent and sound era. Both films are very different in scope, ambition and style: *The Love Light* was an expensive star production, shot 'on location' with the cypress coastline of Monterey, California, standing in for Italy (Beauchamp 128), with a large cast and spectacular scenes (a storm and fire at sea). The photography, by Henry Cronjager and Charles Rosher was lush and pictorial, featuring contre-jour shots, foliage-ornamented framing, a picturesque, warm light design, and several glamorous close ups of Mary Pickford's face. *Just Around The Corner* in contrast featured no (Hollywood) stars - Swedish actress Sigrid Holmquist and stage actress Margaret Seddon, although convincing as mother and daughter, were not exactly household names - and was shot on the East Coast. While it features some very vivid location shots of New York covered in snow, most of the action takes place indoors in a cramped tenement apartment or inside sparsely lit public spaces (dance halls, tenement sweatshops, pool saloons). Here, the photography (again by Cronjager) is overall low-key, nocturnal and designed to highlight dramatic detail (faces or small objects).

Fannie Hurst's stories can be labelled sentimental writing, crafted in an accessible style meant to accentuate the topical or spectacular subjects or subplots. Some examples are: tuberculosis in *T.B.* (1915), drug abuse in *The Rise of Susan* (1916), divorce in *The Social Leper* (1917), racial prejudice in *The City of Dim Faces* (1918). She frequently returned to such sentimental themes as sacrifice, patriotism, motherhood, and spiritual love and was characterized as possessing an eye for 'truth in setting and reality in atmosphere' (Ravitz 88-89). Hurst can be seen as a key provider of what Lauren Berlant has termed the 'complaint genre' of female culture, a genre which 'tend[s] to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place' (2) (Berlant includes a full chapter on Hurst's *Imitation of Life* in her book). Several of Hurst's stories that were adapted in the 1920s such as *Humoresque* (1920), *Back Pay* (1922), *The Ninth Commandment* (1923), and *The Untamed Lady* (1926) can easily be connected to this particular genre of complaint (and compliance).

Just Around the Corner is an adaptation of the short story 'Superman,' which was part of a collection of the same name (in full: *Just Around the Corner, Romance and Casserole*) first published in 1914 by Harper and Brothers. The stories in the collection are all about urban workingwomen, whose careers and professional ambitions are either merely distractions on the path towards their true goal, i.e. love and domesticity, or the cause of familial friction. Hurst would return to this theme of a woman's constant struggle between domesticity (or love) and ambition - in her later and very successful *Imitation of Life* (adapted by John Stahl in 1934; again by Douglas Sirk in 1959), which added the

complications of American race politics to the mix. Hurst and Marion, like the sentimental poets and fiction writers before them, used a rhetoric of familiarity, reflecting the supposedly collective experiences of a consciously addressed 'intimate public' (again Lauren Berlant's term), and deliberately strived for 'accessible language, familiar subjects, and conventional form' (Pettit 91). While Marion's complete filmography (she was active as a scenario writer until the early 1940s) is actually generically and tonally quite varied,¹ a significant part of her early oeuvre can be linked to traditional 'feminine' themes (that also characterize the complaint genre) such as self-sacrifice, motherhood, struggles between love, ambition, and self-identification and realisation, and to 'aesthetic activities' such as pathos and the representation of transparent but complex emotions, typical of both melodrama or sentimental practices (Gledhill; Leibovitz). She also adapted the work of several female authors who can be connected to sentimental (or domestic or women's) fiction such as Frances Hodgson Burnett (*The Little Princess*, Neilan 1917), Eleanor Gates (*The Poor Little Rich Girl*, Tourneur 1917), Lucy Maud Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*, William Desmond Taylor 1919), and Eleanor Porter (*Pollyanna*, Powell 1920). Later work includes adaptations of Olive Higgins Prouty (*Stella Dallas*, King 1926), Dorothy Scarborough (*The Wind*, Sjöström 1928) and more Fannie Hurst.

Marion had recently married when she started filming *Just Around The Corner* but continued to work under her own name and as such she was familiar

¹ Later films such as *The Callahans and the Murphys* (Hill, 1926), *The Big House* (Hill, 1930), *The Secret Six* (Hill, 1931), *The Champ* (Vidor, 1931) deal with more 'masculine' themes such as neighbourhood feuds, prisons, gangsters and boxing and thus testify to the (non-sentimental and more male-oriented) variety of her filmography.

with modern society's ambivalent attitudes toward professional women. More than any other theme in the film, female labour is presented as a complex negotiation between personal integrity, the quest for individuality, and economic necessity on the one hand, and romantic and domestic desires on the other. In the teens and twenties 'modern work' was in the process of being defined and several professional women, who were active in a variety of fields such as journalism, the literary arts, (social) science and social work and Uplift, were actively trying to carve out a definition for modern work that fitted their gendered positions (Sawaya). As far as 'suitable' jobs for women were concerned, there was significant latitude for women as authors, as the writing woman was a phenomenon long established by scores of successful female authors writing in the nineteenth century and before. Also, as Wendy Holliday argues, women were associated with writing because of a 'metonymic proximity' to more traditional female jobs as secretaries and readers (Holliday 130). As a ghost writer for an advice column mastheaded by Mary Pickford, Marion had negotiated the figure of the working woman for conservative audiences by attaching maternal qualities to work outside the home and by stressing (and praising) the professionalism and specialization involved in housework.

Just Around the Corner was filmed in 1920, but released in 1921 after the success of *Humoresque* (Frank Borzage 1920), based on another Hurst story by with strong thematic similarities. Both films focus on maternal suffering and love, economic hardship and family bonds. According to Marion's biographer, Cari Beauchamp, *Humoresque* had been Marion's personal pick and, despite doubts from Hearst and Zukor, became a commercial and critical hit (118). The fact that the picture was produced at all shows that her judgment was valued and

taken into account by the industry. *Photoplay* labelled *Humoresque* 'the forerunner of all 'mother' films' (*Photoplay* Dec, 1921, 57) and exhibitors were advised to 'play up the mother love angle' while also emphasizing its comic relief (*The Film Daily* 1922, 13). *The Film Daily*, on the other hand, collected reviews of the picture from the *Sun* and the *Evening World* which both described it as 'another sob story in the field of the already overworked 'Mother' pictures' and found it effective only if one was '*still sentimental* in the twentieth century' (3, emphasis added). In 1924, a re-release of the film was advertised in the same publication as the 'immortal classic of every mother's heart ...a picture for mothers and daughters' in a special Mother's Day spread (7).

The success of *Humoresque* was a clear incentive for more Hearst adaptations, preferably another mother-daughter yarn, like 'Superman', the source for *Just Around the Corner*. Ma Birdsong's illness and demise in the domestic atmosphere of her happy home provides the story with its central dramatic axis and narrative structure, made up of three acts marked by a shift in location and in the dominant perspective (mother/daughter). Every act opens with a general description of the setting and situation. These descriptions are at times nicely phrased with apt metaphors or clever conceits ('The cancer of the city is loneliness') but occasionally become more flowery or overdrawn ('[loneliness] is a malignant parasite, which eats through the thin walls of hall bedrooms and the thick walls of gold bedrooms, and eats out the hearts it finds there, leaving them black and empty, like untenanted houses.') Throughout the text there are the occasional heartfelt authorial interjections, usually when 'Hurst' (or the narrating voice) comments on a social injustice. Apart from this, the bulk of the text consists of vernacular conversations between the main

characters, Ma Birdsong, her daughter Essie, her son Jimmie, Essie's boyfriend Joe, and the titular 'Superman', whom Essie encounters just around the corner.

The first act opens at the modest home of the Birdsong family, the second act moves us to the public arena (the dance hall and the theatre), and finally we return home to the bedroom of the dying mother. What happens is simple: Ma Birdsong, a widowed mother of two - eighteen-year-old Essie and her younger brother Jimmie - is nearing her end. Her only concern is for the happiness and wellbeing of her children, who are both unmarried and struggling in lowly-paid, menial or (socially) dangerous jobs. Jimmie is a messenger boy even though he has a brain for technical inventions and Essie is an usherette in a theatre, which means she has to work nights. Essie has a boyfriend, Joe, but despite many promises, he has never paid a visit to Ma Birdsong. As her health declines, Ma Birdsong's final wish is to see Essie's future husband and to give the couple her blessing, but Joe coldly refuses (he'd rather go out to play pool). Essie, who finally realizes that she has trusted and loved a vile and mean man, breaks up with Joe. As her mother is nearing her end, Essie roams the streets in search for a man to 'stand in for' Joe and to reassure and appease her dying mother. She bumps into a 'real man' (the 'superman' from the title) who is attentive, understanding and fatherly, and who agrees to pose as her boyfriend. This superman pays his respects to Ma Birdsong, who, in the knowledge that her daughter will be safe in future marriage, declares to be 'ready' and dies peacefully in her bed.

The film largely follows this three-act structure but also stages or enacts several events that are only mentioned implicitly in the story or are referred to as past occurrences (Essie's work and her future happy marriage). It is in these

added scenes that the interests of the adaptor (Marion herself) are foregrounded as they literally *dramatize* the major themes: modern working conditions for women, the confusing, changing social decorum between men and women in romantic interaction and the persistence of domestic romantic fantasy, and the ritual mother/daughter separation through a literal and metaphorical death (an echo of Freud's family romance). We will look at these foregrounded themes in more detail in the following sections.

Modern Work

The unstable and ambiguous position of women entering the public sphere is illustrated by two of the film's three main themes: female labour and romantic and maternal love. As far as the former is concerned, the film explicitly dramatizes the lack of safe, respectable and honest-paying working positions for women. In Hurst's short story, the family's economic situation is sketched only indirectly and Essie is already working night shifts at the theatre when the story opens. Hurst makes clear through a conversation between Ma Birdsong and Jimmie that she strongly disapproves of Essie's job (as usherette) and that she fears that Essie's physical assets - her being 'so sweet and small and cute' - which would be in her favour on the marriage market - could be harmful in the work place. We can gather from further comments made by Ma Birdsong that Essie was *forced* to take the night shift because her previous (presumably more respectable) employment paid insufficiently to support the family. Clearly Essie does not work for 'perks' (to be able to buy make-up or clothes for example) and her contribution to the household is vital.

The hardships that wage-earning women had to endure in a competitive and unprotected environment is foregrounded in Marion's film through the visualization of meagre working conditions and the dramatization of (poor) women's overall powerlessness. These scenes were especially written for the screen adaptation and do not feature in the short story. In fact, the story makes no reference whatsoever to the lowly working conditions that Essie experiences. This dramatization therefore achieves more than just making the implicit explicit; it unequivocally plays out the social commentary and class critique that are part of the story's context but that are not addressed directly by Hurst (i.e.

they are not a part of the plot). Additionally, showing working conditions that large segments of the movie-going audiences were familiar with, may have been a deliberate strategy to include those women perhaps not among Hurst's immediate readership.

At the film's opening, Essie is shown to be working in a basement factory where she produces fake flower ornaments for hats and clothing. An inter-title pointedly comments on the sweatshop's conditions, '*where youth grows old and beauty fades in making flowers for my lady's hat.*' These expository lines explicitly separate the working women from the 'ladies,' whom by definition would not be found in wage-earning circumstances. As Alice Kessler-Harris has explained, the nineteenth century had seen the implementation of a domestic code for upper and middle classes and had given rise to the ideal of the idle and passive 'lady.' This domestic code, indeed only of real significance for the upper classes, valued a woman's spiritual and moral presence over her contribution to the household economy by earning wages (49). Of course, as the inter-title sharply makes clear, these ladies required the invisible hands of wage-earning women (unable to uphold the domestic code themselves) to manufacture their fashions and fads (50, 54).

By placing Essie in the garment industry the film builds on its iconic significance as employment generally reserved for lower-class, ethnically other, or immigrant women. Next to factory work, other typical jobs areas for women were sales – shop girls, mannequins – secretarial work, teaching or domestic service. Some of these jobs – like teaching – precluded marriage (Peiss 1986; Kessler-Harris). The garments themselves, as objects of consumption and as markers of class, can additionally either evoke a particular social status or the

lack thereof. Essie is shown to be concerned with clothes and what they represent: early in the film she refuses to wear a warm but worn-out and unfashionable overcoat despite the low temperatures, and she pathetically attempts a more sophisticated look by wearing a tiny (faux) fur shawl. Her boyfriend Joe, significantly described in an inter-title as an 'advanced dresser' himself, is not impressed and cruelly comments that 'a little hair tonic wouldn't do it [the fur shawl] any harm.' Essie is hurt by his comment but her wardrobe obviously speaks both for her class and her ambition: she may be poor but she has her pride.

This metonymic use of clothing was not uncommon in silent cinema. It had been tried quite successfully in Mary Pickford's *Suds* (John Francis Dillon, 1920), written by Waldemar Young and based on the one-act play *Up o' Me Thumb* by Frederick Fenn and Richard Price. *Suds* simultaneously evoked Thomas Hood's famous and popular poem *The Song of the Shirt* and similar sentimental yarns as well as Griffith's 1909 social problem film of the same title. In *Suds*, a self-proclaimed 'tale of a shirt,' a white starched shirt stands for and points to female labour (the shirt is washed over and over again by female hands), to unattainable social status (it stands for upper class refinery) and to romantic fulfillment and desire (as it quite literally stands in for an absent lover). Similarly, in the even earlier *Shoes* (Lois Weber, 1916), the female protagonist's desire for a new pair of shoes entangled the footwear with questions of sexuality, female drudgery and consumer desire. Coincidentally, the narratives of both *Suds* and *Just Around the Corner* require a man to *pose* as the heroine's lover in order to fulfill social and/or maternal desires: Essie needs her stand-in man to reassure her dying mother of her safe and respectable future; the heroine of *Suds*

needs him to validate her fantasy of love and romance but mostly to make her co-workers stop making fun of her.

In *Just Around the Corner*, the establishing shots of the actual work place (the flower sweatshop) reveal a dark and gloomy basement packed with withered women of all ages and some small children crouched on the floor. The *mise-en-scène* pays attention to the details: the establishing shot inform us of the dark, crowded and probably dangerous work place, the tired faces of workers are shown in medium shots, hands are shown to be working diligently in close ups (fig. 1). The sweatshop overseer, a scowling, menacing presence, keeps an eye on his workers' productivity. When he notices an older woman, whose fingers are not working as fast as those of the other women, he keeps staring at her in bullying fashion. To distract him, Essie sends the overseer a sweet smile and her evident beauty is enhanced by a bundle of concentrated light coming in through the small street level windows, the only light source in the basement. The overseer promptly forgets about his slow worker, but his gaze – now no longer cross but desiring – will soon prove a clear danger to *her*. Indeed, after he has sent his workers home – 'evading the law' by giving his girls work to finish at home as an inter-title points out - he stalls Essie and tries to make a pass at her. Fortunately, Essie's virtue is 'saved' by her scrawny but gutsy younger brother who has come to pick her up. Essie still loses her job (and two day's pay) in the process. What becomes clear from this scene is that the working place is not just detrimental to women's health and looks; it also endangers their virtue.

A production still published in *Exhibitor's Herald* from December 1921, shows the basement factory with the overseer 'caught' in mid-air while raising his hand as if about to slap Essie. Production stills such as this one were carefully

staged tableaux of frozen meaningful actions that presented the central dramatic scenes of the picture in recognizable and titillating images. This menacing pose and the overseer's overall look (a scowling eye, an imposing physique, a dark-rimmed hat in some shots) fixes him as a recognizable melodramatic villain likely to have shown up in silent melodramas of the 1910s when a woman's virtue was in danger. What is significant here is that the overseer takes his sexual power not from class or economic privilege, as is often the case in melodrama, but from his position as Essie's employer. The work place marked the relatively new social space in which women would have to guard their virtue and moral disposition, two essential female qualities that were almost invariably the highest stakes of the melodramatic plot (Williams; Gledhill). For Marion to create a scene like this in her adaptation is unsurprising seeing it is a melodramatic staple, but the fact that it is placed in the workplace illustrates her understanding of just how confusing this new social space was, a space in which the private-affective and the public-instrumental were merging after more than a century of division. To modern viewers it is obviously a scene depicting sexual harassment, which would only become a matter of public awareness and law enforcement half a century later.

After Essie has lost her job in the garment sweat shop, she has to look for new employment and then lands the job that has her mother worrying in Hurst's story from the start: she becomes an usherette in a theatre. Essie's flapper friend, whose looks (paint, flapper dress) and demeanor connote questionable moral values, fixes her up with her new employment and transforms Essie's innocent looks to fit the theatre life: Essie is dolled up with false lashes, face paint, a *tâche de beauté* and a new hair-do. The makeover foreshadows how this job will

change Essie and how different she will look to respectable society. Her mother's worries – 'it's not the paint, it is where it could lead to,' she exclaims in an inter-title - are connected to a long tradition of linking the theatre or any kind of artistic life to narratives of moral deprivation and seduction. There is a long and familiar list of plots that make this connection: Svengali plots, plots that juxtapose the empty, fast and self-centered public life of the theatre or the arts with the fulfilling domestic and maternal ideal of the private life, literary and cinematic plots centering on theatre-mad or movie-stuck girls who willingly give up their moral and spiritual superiority for fame and success, and many more. Examples of feature films exploring these plots are *A Girl's Folly* (Tourneur 1915), *What's His Name* (DeMille 1914), and *Trilby* (Tourneur 1915), but perhaps the mere fact that these girls leave the maternal home was enough to assume they were courting danger. Of course, seduction of working-class or poor girls in any - public or private - context had been a well-known topos in a variety of cultural texts and discourses (Walkowitz, paraphrased by Kaplan, 89). In fact, it was so prominent that Lea Jacobs notes how these well-worn plots of female seduction, either in film or theatre, would be sneered at in 1920s reviews and cultural criticism (192). Jacobs ties this position to a general 'decline of sentiment' in the American cinema of the Jazz Age, which was brought about by a shift in public taste (also reflected in criticism) gradually moving away from Victorian principles and the genteel repertory, that made audiences expect alterations in type and development of plot, characterisation and acting conventions, or the emergence of new (sub)genres or cycles. While this decline was by no means absolute, connected as it was to differences in class, gender,

geography (city vs. rural areas) and genre, the seduction plot in particular was strongly affected by this trend.

The film further builds on the well-known script of the impressionable working girl succumbing to the temptations of the 'easy' or 'fast' life. This popular dramatic (sub)plot depicted modern girls who become 'kept women' out of material need and consumerist impulses (Balides 183). Jacobs has pointed out that these films had a literary predecessor in the serialized fiction of Laura Jean Libby, who perfected the working-class seduction plot with a more melodramatic dramaturgy (191). Films with revealing titles like *The Easiest Way* (Albert Cappellani, 1917), *The Eternal Grind* (John O'Brien, 1916), *Shoes* (Lois Weber, 1916), *The Cup of Life* (Raymond B. West and Thomas Ince, 1915), *The Golden Chance* (Cecil B. DeMille 1916), all presented wage-earning women who, as a direct result of their presence in a public work space, are confronted with material temptations or unsolicited sexual attentions, or form socially questionable (if at heart innocent given the revelation of the virtuous heroine as a melodramatic staple) attachments with members of the other sex. Characterization and narrative structure in these films usually relied on clear, unambiguous moral schemas, opposing the woman with weak moral values to her stronger counterpart, a juxtaposition that reflects the dichotomy at the heart of the discourse used by reformers and middle-class observers who distinguished between 'respectable' and 'promiscuous,' as Kathy Peiss (1986) has argued. Peiss stresses that these dichotomies are insufficient in their rigid categorisation (the Madonna/whore dichotomy) to understand how sexuality and sexual mores were perceived and handled by working girls themselves. The film offers a more nuanced version: Essie's transgressions of social decorum are framed in such a

way that we are encouraged to understand and empathize with both perspectives: the either/or perspective of the worrisome mother and the more flexible perspective on relationships of her more modern (if at heart cautious and innocent) daughter. The traditional versus the modern point of view are embodied by mother and daughter and as such speak to a potentially mixed and/or divided audience.

Hurst's story and the film play up the possibility that *Ma Birdsong* may be right: Essie *does* run around with the wrong people while working at the theatre (she meets her callous boyfriend and indifferent girlfriends there) and her participation in the city's nightlife leads her away from her mother's moral compass and her filial duties (she goes to dances, stays out late, and neglects to take care of her sick mother). Yet, the scene at the garment sweatshop had already shown that the dangers for working girls were not exclusive to the theatre.

More ambiguous moral characterizations, such as for example in Marion's later adaptation of Hurst's *Back Pay* (Frank Borzage, 1922) caused critical concern and would set the tone for the gradual complication or transformation of this schema. In *Back Pay* the simplistic good/bad dichotomy is less rigid – the 'heroine' (a kept woman) may desire fancy clothes and is supported by a city man, but both the fallen woman and her lover are complex, one could say, more 'modern' characters (compared to for example the characters in Griffith's 1920 *Way Down East*), with contradictory values and capable of making complex moral decisions. This example illustrates how the working class seduction plot was changing, as Jacobs argues, under comic (for example *Molly O* in 1921 or *It* in 1927) and more naturalistic influences (183).

In *Just Around The Corner* comedy is already employed in just such a way: the moments when Essie is in danger of transgressing (gendered) social norms are bookmarked by lighter scenes or funny business from the actors: little brother Jimmie's big rescue of Essie from her boss is rather clumsy, as is his attempt to retrieve Essie's unpaid wages. Similarly, Joe's attempts to get more out of Essie than just one kiss are not presented as aggressive or assaultive. Instead, Joe and Essie proceed to make light jokes and call it a night. (Below, I will further discuss Essie's virtue in relationship to the film's presentation and treatment of modern romantic love.)

In spite of the irony or indignation in certain inter-titles, the dramatized ('picturized') dangers for women in urban work spaces, and the emphasis on the dignity of the working classes and the respectability of 'work' as such, the narrative ultimately sticks to the source material and confirms the apparently still powerful socio-cultural code that promoted the ideal of domestic harmony. The film ends with an added scene that corroborates the domestic ideal of the hard-working, protective husband who in turn profits from the emotional sustenance and domestic support of his homemaking wife. In this final scene, we find Essie happily married and baking an apple pie. Her previous boyfriend, Joe, who did *not* have a (legal) job and who preferred selling forged theatre tickets or gambling to working, was explicitly tagged as morally suspect because of this fact. As a man, the film argues, it is his duty to work in order to make the domestic ideal possible. The 'second Joe,' the one Essie marries and who is called the 'real man' in the movie's credits (the 'Superman' from Hurst's original title), is a hard and late-working decent man, who behaves fatherly towards Jimmie

and protective towards Essie and who will not have his wife work if he can help it.

Therefore, while critical of actual work conditions and upfront about the economic necessity of wage-earning for certain women, the film confirms the idea that paid labour is still ideally a *temporary* feminine activity and promotes the belief that marriage (to a prosperous, providing husband) will eventually guarantee domestic and female fulfilment. The actual historical tension between the ideal of the domestic code as expressed by the middle classes and reality as experienced by wage-earning women is mirrored by the tension between the film's critical depiction of work as morally and sexually dangerous on the one hand and the narrative structure that upholds the standard on the other. I find this tension symptomatic of a generally more 'muted,' less outspoken, social discourse typical of the early twenties. My phrasing is inspired by and plays to Kay Sloan's description of the social problem films of the Progressive Era of the teens as the 'loud silents,' but I do not mean to imply that there was no space left at all for social commentary or progressive ideas in Hollywood mainstream cinema. I would argue, however, that it became more implied and certainly less prominent. Sharp social commentary was relegated to the status of an undercurrent in most productions, especially when compared to similar productions from the teens.² It has been well documented that during the teens a rhetoric of reform and a plethora of social subjects found their way into a variety of films genres as a result of the influence of progressive voices in cinema and as a conscious effort on the part of the film industry itself to produce respectable

² With the advent of sound, there was a return to films that tackled social problems.

pictures for more respectable audiences (see Sloan; Grieveson; Brownlow 1992). By the twenties this overt moral engagement – now classed as naïve, old-fashioned, unfit for entertainment or worse, *sentimental* – would be mocked and despised by the cultural elite and generally disliked by actual filmmakers. Surely, the moralizing impulse never completely disappeared from Hollywood products and concerns about the moral status of cinema were poured into a self-regulating Production Code as to what could and could not be narrated, verbalized or explicated. If the silents of the teens were indeed ‘loud’ with regard to their moral, social, political engagements and purposes, this progressive and activist discourse became much more soft-spoken in the twenties. Also, Fannie Hurst’s relationship to topical social causes could also be judged as half-hearted (or opportunist) (as indeed they have been), formulated as they were within the confines of melodramatic dramaturgy or sentimental strategies and structures that also characterize Marion’s adaptation.

Who Believes in Modern Love?

Because work is presented as temporary and in the case of women always linked to love and marriage (its institutional representation), I take love to be the second major theme of the film. Romantic, maternal, and filial love are addressed in both the Fannie Hurst story and the Frances Marion film. Maternal and filial love can be taken together because narratively they are treated as part of the same exchange and will be discussed below. I will start with an exploration of the portrayal of romantic love.

One of the film's central questions is whether or not Essie will find a suitable husband. Her particular situation as a working girl puts her at a disadvantage and as the scenes in the paper flower factory point out, even places her in acute danger. A marriage, it would seem, is the most likely option to get out of her position as working girl. As with work, however, the search for a good husband is more difficult and precarious than it should be. As I have indicated above, there are some transgressions of the social code, but while the heroine's virtue is indisputable, it does not go undisputed. Essie is shown to be flirting with Joe in a fashion that may have been deemed somewhat 'improper' or 'too loose' according to a strict sense of decorum: they go about town late at night, she accompanies him to fancy cafés and dance halls, and they kiss. To avoid moral condemnation, the script carefully stages Essie's honest if naïve belief that Joe truly loves her and ultimately plans to marry her. Yet, instead of talking about love or making promises of marriage, Joe makes jokes about it (which should have alerted Essie sooner). The narration and *mise-en-scène* demonstrate what Essie fails to see until the end of the film, namely that Joe is deceitful and petty, and not the marrying type. After he tells Essie he can't meet her mother because

of a *'business meeting,'* we (but not Essie) witness him walking into a pool saloon. When quizzed by her mother about her relationship with Joe – *'Don't lie to me, Essie, a mother always knows'* - Essie dutifully promises not to give out any more kisses until she is married. Indeed, the next time Joe attempts a kiss Essie refuses him: *'No, Joe, I can't - I promised ma I wouldn't -- not 'till we're --'*: there can be no doubt about her moral character and good intentions.

The bulk of the interaction between Joe and Essie takes place in the social space of the dance hall, one of the popular areas where young girls of the cities spent their leisure time. As Peiss notes in her important study on female leisure between 1880 and 1920, the dance hall (like the cinema and the theatre) was one of several 'social spaces in which gender relations were 'played out,' where notions of sexuality, courtship, male power, female dependency, and autonomy were expressed and legitimated' (1993: 4). Not just the pleasure-seeking habits of turn of the century women were transformed in these social spaces (Stamp; Rabinovitz), they also served as the space for the renegotiations of the gender relations themselves. Again, the fact that Essie works in a theatre is meaningful, as it is a reminder that Essie has indeed been transformed by these modern circumstances. Additionally, Joe's insistence to go dancing likely stands in for his suppressed sexual designs. The dance contest he wants to take her to takes place in semi-darkness and we can see couples shimmying or pivoting, as their movements 'emphasize bodily contact and the suggestion of sexual intercourse' (Peiss 1993: 59). While the sexual tension and desire are strongly hinted at, the dance does not complicate Essie's position as the story's heroine because Essie has proven herself to be reticent in previous scenes. (Unlike the heroine from Hurst's much more contested *Back Pay*, she never truly crosses a line and

becomes a 'kept girl.')

However, because the dancing keeps Essie from returning to her ailing mother, it is clearly aligned with her domestic ties and responsibilities and with her failure to perform her filial duty.

On all accounts, Essie is blinded by her passion for Joe, and the narrative moves towards her ultimate success at controlling it. She can, as an inter-title nicely points out, finally 'see' again when she witnesses Joe entering the pool hall and all his previous lies and broken promises become clear to her. Earlier she had misinterpreted a purportedly kind act when Joe suddenly bends down to tie her shoelaces. What she failed to see there was that he was hiding from a passing police officer. Essie gets love 'right' when she symbolically falls in love *after* (or in) marriage with the man who initially only 'poses' as her boyfriend. On her deathbed her mother accepts her so-called 'future husband' before they have had the opportunity to fall in love. The coda to the deathbed scene does not show us Essie's romance and flirtation with the 'real man' (whose fakery made him real) but shows her already happily married, and clearly in love. Her husband is the rational choice – the male provider - while the idle Joe represented an unattainable romantic and sexual fantasy.

The second romance in the film is that between the mother and her children, but the only problematic one and the one upon around the main dramatic threads are woven is the mother/daughter unison. As the shots of a hardworking, worrisome Ma Birdsong illustrate, she is unambiguously pegged as the sacrificial and selfless mother, familiar from melodrama and from nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction. The mother's relationship with her daughter is also based on heartbreak and disappointment. In explaining the success of the

previously released *Humoresque*, Kevin Brownlow notes: 'Curiously, the cinema had not paid a great deal of attention to mothers. There had been stories of maternal sacrifice; there had even been stories about abominable mothers. But a film which bombarded the emotions with scenes of maternal heartbreak –with a Jewish mother at that could hardly have been more perfectly timed. The post-war generation was rebelling against its parents, and the story exploited their suppressed sense of guilt while it (briefly) restored their parents' confidence.' (1990: 391). Marion capitalizes on this sensibility: *Just Around the Corner* makes (suppressed) filial guilt a central theme but it also showed how parents' expectations and traditional values are at odds with modern desire and possibilities.

Film historians and cultural critics such as Danuta Walters, Jeanine Basinger and Christine Gledhill (1987) have indicated the overall culturally low status of the woman's picture in general and the mother-daughter drama in particular, and they have found mother-daughter dramas less prominent than mother/son epics. The mother/daughter nexus does have its key texts in the silent era and more significantly these films were not necessarily considered lowly or in bad taste – catering as they did to a most respectable audience, that of women (see Simmon; Neale; Stamp). Walters argues that in much twentieth century popular texts (films, fiction, magazine stories, TV shows) the mother/daughter relationship is 'compressed into the narrow vision of psychology, framing it within the dichotomy of 'bonding' and 'separation' and thus actively constructing a relationship that is inherently conflictual, forcing women apart as well as rendering this prophesy self-fulfilling' (31). E. Ann Kaplan has researched the representation of motherhood in various cultural

texts from the nineteenth century (mainly literature and plays) and twentieth century Hollywood films, and posits a direct relation between both (59). Kaplan identifies 'complicit' as well as 'resisting' texts, i.e. those films or texts that either comply with patriarchal and compressive structures or those that subvert or tweak conservative structures (59, 60). Like *Her Awakening* (Griffith 1911), a key film in the development of Griffith's Biograph women's pictures and an important model for the mother-daughter weepie (and the later *Stella Dallas* by King from 1926), *Just Around the Corner* is a 'complicit' narrative of inescapable female separation within a capitalist and patriarchal society. In the American mother-daughter separation drama (a variant on European Ur-versions such as Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, as Kaplan argues) the class society of the Old World is replaced by a hierarchical structure based on gender, merit and work ethic, but also education and privilege. In *Her Awakening*, a man of means courts Mabel Normand, a poor working girl. She is ashamed of her poor background and especially of her old, scruffy mother, and so she hides her mother from her beau. Just before her mother dies after a tragic accident, the young girl realizes her filial affection and duties and reconciles with her mother. Her young lover turns out not to object to her humble origins, so her personal and social transformation is complete. In his analysis of *Her Awakening*, Scott Simmon contends that 'as a psycho-sexual parable it may be the story of a daughter's *necessary awakening*, a story of the *necessary death* of her mother before the daughter can move on to another life' (82, emphasis added). The similarities with *Just Around The Corner* are remarkable: while Essie is not exactly ashamed of her mother, she is self-conscious about her working-class identity, about the family's poverty and she is eager to escape her mother's overbearing concern.

Her initial lover and her mother also never meet and Ma Birdsong must die in order for Essie to move towards a grown-up independent (and socially better) life. Both films are examples of what Kaplan calls the 'pre-Oedipal pattern,' where an outside force, rather than an internal (psychological, sexual) one is threatening to disrupt a family (97).

Ma Birdsong's sacrifice is not connected to sexual transgression (as the European model would have it, where sexually transgressive mothers are the cause of their own ostracism) but it is 'necessary,' facilitating the 'natural' redistribution of social roles that her own removal makes possible. The ultimate sacrifice is her abnegation of the self, adhering to the rule that there can be only one woman in a household. As Essie *becomes* her mother through marriage, Ma Birdsong has played her part and maternal love is again hinged on self-sacrifice and/or self-abnegation. The mother-daughter separation plot is thus played out and accepted.

Sentimental Death

In addition to their strong interest in the challenges of modern life, both story and film encourage a reflection on death and death rituals. In fact, the plot's structure pushes us towards the prolonged deathbed scene in which the narrative threads and emotional stakes of the story are resolved. This final, 'necessary' maternal deathbed scene summarizes the film's ethics and completes Essie's transformation. The distribution of new social positions (from spinster to wife, from child to adult) hinges upon this moment that confirms that female experience and expectations are patterned against a logic of replacement and repetition: as Ma Birdsong passes on, Essie takes her place, just like her daughter will after her.

I label this representation of death in both story and film 'sentimental' because it appears to be based on affective, visual and narrative formal schemas established across the different arts but especially prominent in nineteenth century Victorian literature and theatre, and in sentimental prose and poetry. Additionally, we can see how it narratively accommodates the distinctly nineteenth century *modus vivendi* of the separate worlds for men and women symbolized by the male provider and his homemaking wife. More than just an occasion for intense emotional display and elicitation - as scenes of separation are an effective and oft-used narrative context for strong sentimental responses (Tan & Frijda) - the death of Ma Birdsong is necessary in order for Essie to step into her mother's place and to make the narrative move towards closure. Ma Birdsong's deathbed scene also resonates more broadly with the semantic and social/pragmatic function of death in nineteenth century culture.

Michael Wheeler has argued that the whole of Victorian culture was steeped in death imagery and that it displayed an 'obsessive interest' in death rituals and procedures (28). In a similar vein, Ann Douglas has noted 'a fascination with death and mourning' in American literature of the nineteenth century (200). American literature preoccupied with death ranged from advice literature to consolatory poems, memoirs, hymns and prayer guidebooks. Their authorship was predominantly clerical and feminine and Douglas taxes their intentions as principally self-serving: a reversal of the power structures was one way to fix the power imbalance they experienced and thus women and clergymen alike praised the insignificant, the domestic, and the dead over the important, the public, and the living. Referencing poet Alicia Ostriker, another explanation for this 'morbid' fascination could be found in the simple reality that 'it was women, not men, who tended sickbeds and laid out the dead' (34). Being close to people dying was a part of a woman's life, and so they wrote about it frequently and from direct experience. For most nineteenth century readers, likewise, the confrontation with a perpetually high mortality rate encouraged a strong interest in and identification with death, loss, and mourning.

There also was a practical side to the interest in narratives about death: they were instructive about social mores and expectations and 'helpful' in offering some kind of foreknowledge of and preparation for the absolute unknowable (Holubetz). Elisabeth Bronfen has described how the times distinguished between 'good' and 'bad' deaths and many fictional examples presented in a ritualized and systematized fashion how to die a 'good death.' As death represented 'the removal of a social being from society' which led to an imbalance in existing social relations, it called forth 'a ritualization of the

deathbed scene' to restore the balance (77-78). In literature, Holubetz notes a preference for either the very sinful or the innocent moribund because they offered deaths at once most spectacular and edifying. In most of the dramatized deathbed scenes in nineteenth century literature the iconography is strikingly similar in internal structure, formal representation and function, so it is fair to speak, as Bronfen does, of 'models' for the representation of death which were made up of 'stereotyped patterns and characteristic emotional poses' (Holubetz 14). These poses and models for 'good deaths' were not just described in letters, tracts or diaries, they were also depicted in genre paintings or illustrations, often romanticizing deaths, such as Henry Peach Robinson's popular *Fading Away* from 1858 (Jalland 1996), and they were a standard part of the repertory of nineteenth century theatrical practice as many sentimental or Victorian plays featured death scenes.

This array of available death imagery, representations and descriptions influenced its cinematic representation: Scott C. Combs (2012) credits D.W. Griffith with the formal innovation (and standardization) of the presentation of cinematic death scenes. Griffith himself was upfront about his indebtedness to Dickensian form, but his relationship to the theatre - in David Mayer's words one of 'pillaging, adapting, reshaping, revitalizing, preserving and extolling' (7) - was also strong and consistent throughout his career. It resulted in dramaturgical decisions based on strategies or routines from the stage and the implementation of effective or celebrated theatrical dramatic tableaux, which could be studied from photographic materials (Mayer). In this context, famous death scenes in popular theatre productions - such as Little Eva's death in the many stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Marguerite's death in *La dame aux camélias*,

the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*... were likely models for Griffith's 'tableaux of grief' (Combs 96). Griffith was not the only one with strong ties to the theatre; other prominent contemporary directors (who like Griffith hold a serious claim to participating in the establishment of classical narrative conventions and staging practices) such as Cecil B. DeMille and Maurice Tourneur were also connected with or had served an apprenticeship in the theatre. Via these directors and their creative collaborators (from stage or light designers to actors) dramatic lighting schemas, set design, acting conventions and dramaturgical principles had made their way into cinematic practice and eventually to Frances Marion's dramaturgical decisions.

Hurst's rendering of the death of Ma Birdsong already continued the narrative schemas laid out in previous literary, pictorial, and dramatic examples. The (literary) conventions for scenes of death included forgiveness for the bystanders, the moribund experiencing a vision of spiritual fulfillment and finding family (or a friendly, familiar presence) waiting on the other side, promises being made, and new social roles and responsibilities being passed along (Bronfen).

When Essie has found a man to convincingly pose as her future husband the conventionalized final deathbed goodbyes can take place. Ma Birdsong is ailing but she goes through her final moments with grace: she passes on her parental responsibility to Essie's new man, expresses a last sentimental wish to bring out an old lamp mat with the pious 'God is Good' embroidered upon it, an object from her youth that will serve as a keepsake or relict for her children to remember her by, and assures her family of a jubilant 'readiness' and 'lightness' as her final moments approach. These elaborate farewells, as well as a vision of

the after-life (such as the joyous vision of 'love, joy and peace' Little Eva experienced) resemble the stereotyped patterns described above and other well-known literary conventions straight out of Victorian or domestic fiction and drama. In Hurst's story the social roles are not redistributed on the spot, but Essie's upcoming marriage (even if this future marriage is still a white lie at the time of Ma Birdsong's dying) ensures her a new role.

While the actual deathbed scene in the film is in line with conventionalized descriptions, representations and staging, the whole scene is made more poignant - and more cinematic - by the fact that Essie is initially in danger of not making it on time. This danger is rendered in the most cinematographic of forms through a crosscutting schema. Combs (2012) convincingly maintains that silent films often employed this type of parallel editing because the 'cutaways prepare us for the registrant's late arrival' (92). Through crosscutting we are prepped for the potential unlikelihood of a final goodbye and consolation. As Combs points out, this parallel editing schema was most famously and most frequently employed by Griffith, and his Biograph films feature many such a dramaturgy of late or near-late arrival at death beds.

The mother daughter connection (Ma Birdsong is described as Essie's '*one true friend*' slipping away from her) adds affective power to the scene and gives Essie's tardiness extra potency. This crosscutting efficiently creates Linda Williams' well-known oscillation of melodrama's 'too late' versus 'just in time' (64) and adheres to the conventional staging of death in silent cinema, as noted and described in detail by Combs (2012 and 2014). As the story, after its initial descriptive passage, consists mostly of dialogue between the characters, with little reference being made to how the characters behave, look or act, Marion's

adaptation bases her direction and *mise-en-scene* on a combination of literary, pictorial, dramatic and cinematic examples. In contrast to the story, the film rapidly alternates between the domestic space and the public space, between the small and cosy bedroom and the large and spacious dance hall, emphasizing the spatial and affective distance and the possibility of Essie missing her mother's final goodbye. The crosscutting schema is broadly as follows³:

Ma Birdsong is seen suffering from severe pains in heart. Jimmie's reaction alerts us to the fact that this time they may be fatal. The action then moves to Essie and Joe in front of the dancehall. Joe wants to go in, but Essie explains she '*feels kinda mean dancing when ma is so sick.*' A quarrel ensues between Essie and Joe and we cut again to the dark family room, where Ma Birdsong expresses once again her concerns about Joe's intentions with Essie. There is a cut-back to Joe threatening to break up with Essie if she doesn't come along, which confirms her intuition. Essie and Joe enter the dance hall. Meanwhile Ma's condition worsens, she tells Jimmie that should Essie again fail to show up with her boyfriend it would be too much for her: '*Like I couldn't stand it,*' she says just before we see her collapse.

We cut back and forth a couple of times between the slow, caring and traditionally feminine or daughterly acts performed by Jimmie (putting his mother to bed, giving her medicine, playing the banjo to cheer her up) in the private cosiness of their cramped apartment and the public space of the dark and

³ This description is based on two different versions of the film (one domestic and one export version), which are not identical. There are more close-ups in the American versions and even camera angles are not always identical in the different versions. However in both films the crosscutting structure there or can be reconstructed from what remains in the extant print. I am basing my description on the American domestic version here.

noisy dancehall, where couples are seen shimmying, drinking and smoking. Joe wants to join in the dance but Essie's heart and thoughts are elsewhere (which offers another psychological motivation for the frequent intercutting). She is finally persuaded when, in exchange for 'a once around', Joe promises to come visit Ma Birdsong.

Meanwhile Ma Birdsong, who is clearly preparing Jimmie for her death and his new role as head of the family, symbolically compares him to his father. Actually, throughout the film the 'mother-son romance' has been the subject of a little subplot, aiming for both comic and endearing effects. At one point earlier in the film, Jimmie brings home a rose for his mother - instead of for his girl - and he tells her: *'gee ma, I wish I had a girl as nice as you.'* And despite Essie's continued teasing, Jimmie never leaves the house in the morning without a kiss from his mother. In his behavior towards his mother he acts both as a child and as surrogate husband/suitor. This Freudian subplot ends when Jimmie stops idolizing his mother and turns into a fatherly, authoritative man (the 'real man' or Superman of the story) for adoration and identification.

Again, we cut to the dancehall where Joe is now trying to convince Essie to stay a little longer to enter a dance contest. Joe fancies that the first prize (a 'pink ivory nail set') would make a good present for Essie's mother. The unlikelihood of Ma Birdsong desiring or indeed ever needing such a gift is made poignant through the next cut home where Jimmie's attempt to give his mother her medicine only results in her eyes glazing over.

Another cut to the search light in the darkened room of the dance hall where the dancing contest has begun. We see the frivolous and sensuous dancing of anonymous bodies. The dance hall space with its musical band finds a

sonorous analogy in a cut to Jimmie at home, playing the banjo for his mother in an attempt to cheer her up. Finally, the dancing contest goes sour as Essie and Joe are sabotaged by a group of bullies (they throw gum under Joe's shoe so he sticks to the floor and falls over) and Joe childishly blames Essie for 'jinxing' him. On her way home, she finally dumps him.

In the apartment Jimmie, in agony by now, is waiting for Essie. When Essie arrives home alone, she is met by Jimmie, angry and upset, who refuses to let her see their mother if she has not got Joe with her. Essie runs outside to look for the freshly-dumped Joe and discovers him playing pool and unwilling to come with her. We realize by now that she cannot give her mother her final dying wish (a meeting with her future husband) and the chance that she will be home in time to see her mother alive to say goodbye is also quickly dwindling. Roaming the streets she bumps into a concerned gentleman (played by Fred Thomson, Frances Marion's real life husband) who agrees to play along and 'pass' as her boyfriend. (Actually, earlier in the film Thomson can be glimpsed in the background of the restaurant where Joe and Essie are having coffee, proving he was already in Essie's world – just around the corner – if only she had been able *see* him.) They hurry home and reach Ma Birdsong in time for the proper ritual deathbed scene to commence.

After this crosscutting sequence, which offered a contrast between movement and stillness, between the crowded and cluttered environment of the brightly lit public sphere and the personal, sparsely lit private sphere of the home, the actual final moments of Ma Birdsong's life are presented in a series of solemn tableaux (fig 2.). These are in turn alternated with striking close-ups of the mourners at Ma's bedside. A daring stylistic feature of the scene is the use of

optical point of view shots originating from Ma Birdsong's position in her deathbed. We see a two-shot of 'the real man' and Jimmie bending over and smiling down at Ma Birdsong and a similar shot from Essie in a single closer shot. These shots break up the more stylized and formalized composition of the tableau compositions. Stylistically they provide another instance of older and newer stylistic paradigms being juxtaposed. But they also bring us closer to the (unknowable) experience of Ma Birdsong.

These 'tableaux of grief' frame the end of Ma Birdsong (and the end of the story by Fannie Hurst), but they do not constitute the film's ending as Marion added a coda of vivid domestic activity to show that life indeed goes on. The domestic coda in the film is also the visualization and dramatization of the redistributed social roles, of the actual transformation the deathbed ritual creates for the bystanders or registrants described by Bronfen and Jalland. This tableau, after the crosscutting sequence a return to an 'older' aesthetic schema, is invoked for its familiarity of form, for the effectiveness of the address and the potency of its presentation. Many of the classical, eulogized (and later mocked) but also frequently copied deathbed scenes in nineteenth century popular Victorian and domestic fiction were in fact described as (dramatic and pictorial) tableaux, as characters temporarily frozen in conventional and coded emotional and gestural poses. Several popular authors - from well-known names like Dickens and Stowe to Ann Stephens or EDEN Southworth - looked to create powerful 'mental images' (Stowe's term) to impress upon their readers, especially in scenes that could invite a strong emotional response (scenes of death, of separation, of reconciliation, of (in)justice). Authors often explicitly identified these moments in their stories as *tableaux*, and they were created to

emphasize those moments that preceded or followed an important turn of events in the narrative (such as a death). An example from an author associated with domestic or woman's fiction can make this stratagem more concrete: Ann Stephens begins her description of a dual death scene in *The Old Homestead* (1855) as follows:

'[t]here are moments in human life when persons linked together in a series of events may form tableaux, which stand out from ordinary grouping, like an illustration stamped in strong light and shadow on the book of destiny.' (chapter X)

The relative distance that these tableaux imply (they describe a total picture, not the inner life of one character) work, perhaps paradoxically, towards greater emotional intimacy. Pulling back from the emotional proximity and intensity that is created through the close angle because the intimacy can be either too intense (Cohen 65) or impede the revelation of affective connections or emotional truths, which can only be grasped from an affective as well as spatial distance. Additionally, the tableau is connected to sacrifice and invites beholders (both within the narrative world and the actual readers) to participate in or respond with equal sacrificial moral behavior (Caplan cited in Cohen 66-67). Ma Birdsong's ultimate sacrifice is understood and honored by Essie, whose own behavior we can assume will from now on be less naïve and selfish, in other words, more like her mother's, and it is strikingly presented to us, viewers, as well.

As on the stage, tableaux occasioned a temporary stop in the narrative flow because actors literally froze on stage; in fiction, contemplation is invited through the longish description of the picture in its entirety and through the coded poses of the characters (such as sloped shoulders, hands held in supplication, faces covered by veils, sobs etc.). James G. Turner adds that in sentimental literature these 'touching literary scenes' (presented as tableaux) allowed readers to imagine a fictional world that was embodied and located' but also, more importantly, he found such a 'scenic or spectatorial imagination' essential for 'sentimental or internal empathetic reception' (73).

Tellingly, book editions of these popular stories (initially published serially in story papers and magazines) would often include illustrations for the most dramatic and narratively charged moments. Here the verbal mental pictures were, to reference Martin Meisel, 'realized' and precisely those illustrated moments 'would make it' from one adaptation to the next – the tableaux singled out for illustration were adapted for the stage and in turn the theatrical tableaux were often an important model or structural principle for subsequent cinematic adaptations. The 1914 book edition of *Just Around the Corner* features an illustration of the family's deathbed gathering. The drawing illustrates the moment when Joe takes up Ma's raised hand 'in a wide, gentle clasp that enveloped it,' which is also the caption of the illustration. It features Jimmie and Essie standing on opposite sides of the bed, Ma Birdsong in her bed, and Joe sitting down next to her, holding her hand. The end tableau of Ma Birdsong's death in the film is not held by the actors for as long as it would if it were performed onstage, but the subsequent fade-out assures the approximation

of the effect of a curtain closing, adding to the ritual theatricality of the whole scene.

The coda can be seen to function as a domestic tableau as well (even though the actors are not striking poses or halting their business.) Jimmie, now a self-assured grown man, who even tries smoking, visits his sister, now happily married. Essie is in the process of furnishing her visibly more genteel home (she is ordering Joe around with heavy furniture) and she is baking – burning really - her first apple pie, a prime symbol of maternal and domestic bliss. Her life as a toiler has brought her the ideal promoted by the domestic code, i.e. a lady-like existence, not exactly idle (she will be a busy homemaker) but at least removed from paid labour and the dangers it entails. Grouped in a final, domestic tableau, Essie, Joe and Jimmie (who stands in for future offspring) listen happily to a record playing. Ma Birdsong too is present in the photograph displayed prominently on the wall. The final words in the film, spoken by Jimmie to mother's portrait, are reassuring: "It's alright, ma. Your dream has come true. Essie is safe and taken care of."

Conclusion

As films directed by women would become increasingly sparse during the twenties, this feature film should capture the interest of feminist (film) historians or anyone interested in the extra-canonical and varied output of Hollywood during the silent era. As this analysis will have made clear, the film is undecided in its moral position and politics, as it simultaneously critiques and confirms, resists and complies with narrative forms that sustain social, cultural and politically conservative, capitalist, even patriarchal discourses. It does so through a continuation and revision of a broad repertory of formal strategies. The final balance makes it no feminist text, but as a text favoring a female point of view and focusing on female experience it is complex and revealing of the tensions that women faced. Yet, the struggle to balance private desires and duties (filial, domestic and affective) with careers, of mother daughter relationships should not be considered as a problem of the past, as it continues to be a struggle of women today and remains a topic addressed in feminist and post-feminist discourse (for a potent testimony see Slaughter).

The film's relative obscurity might be connected to the fact that it was not carried by a performance from an important star, that it was not reviewed positively and that it signaled personal defeat and disappointment for Marion herself (see Beauchamp). Written by two women who were progressive, feminist and socially unconventional (Marion was married but professionally independent and Hurst was married but living apart), the film's social commentary and compromising ending is indicative of the contradictions and compromises that characterise the period of production.

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Stella Dallas. Dir. Henry King. USA. 1926

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The Eternal Grind. Dir. John O'Brien. USA 1916

The Golden Chance. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. USA. 1916

The Love Light. Dir. Frances Marion. USA 1921

The Song of the Shirt. Dir. D.W. Griffith. USA 1909

The Twelve Chairs. Dir. Mel Brooks. USA. 1970

Way Down East. Dir. David W. Griffith. USA. 1920

Figures

1. An image of the tired and withered female workers at the basement garment sweatshop. (Courtesy of Eye Film Institute Netherlands).
2. The final death bed scene, presented as a 'tableau of grief.' (Courtesy of Eye Film Institute Netherlands.)