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The colour of virtue: Lillian Gish, whiteness and femininity

Stars are things that shine brightly in the darkness. The word 'star' has become so taken for granted as meaning anyone who's a little bit famous in a little bit of the world that we're apt to forget just how appropriate the term was for people who did seem to be aglow on stages and screens in darkened halls. And no star shone more brightly in that firmament than Lillian Gish.

We may well mistake Gish's importance in film history. In the silent period, other women stars were bigger – Mary Pickford especially, but also Theda Bara and names still less familiar now such as Blanche Sweet, Norma Talmadge, Clara Kimball Young and Anita Stewart, all of whom often eclipsed Gish's place in the public imagination. It is partly because she was a star for so long that we now accord her such importance: she was still making it impossible for you to take your eyes off her in the 40s (*Duel in the Sun*, 1946), 50s (*The Night of the Hunter*, 1955), 60s (*The Unforgiven*, 1960), 70s (*A Wedding*, 1978) and 80s (*The Whales of August*, 1987) and she was always a wonderful interviewee who could bring early cinema to life. Our enthusiasm may also have to do with the fact that her acting seems so minimalist compared to that of many of her contemporaries, closer to a later aesthetic of screen performance in which not betraying the fact that one is acting is deemed such a virtue. And it is certainly because of her association with D. W. Griffith and the heroic place in the development of film that even the most revisionist histories accord him. Yet perhaps none of that would carry much weight if, when you see her in the Griffith films or *La Bohème* (1926), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) or *The Wind* (1928) she did not radiate the

screen. She is the apotheosis of the metaphor of stardom, a light shining in the darkness.

There is a scene in *True Heart Susie* (1919) which encapsulates the relationship between stardom and light, a relationship at once technical, aesthetic and ethical. The film tells of a country girl, Susie (Gish), who puts her true love William (Robert Harron) through college, only to have him marry a city girl, Bettina. Susie has to go to the party at which William announces his marriage; she knows that Bettina is also carrying on with a city boy, Sporty Malone. The establishing shot of the sequence has the party in full swing and Susie/Gish entering and sitting on a chair down screen right, where she remains throughout the sequence, looking at the party, at William and Bettina. The sequence cuts to other characters, to reactions to the wedding announcement, but keeps coming back to Susie/Gish, in close-up or in the original establishing set-up. This is lit from the front, with some extra fill and back light on Gish; she is more in the light.

The light is firstly an adjunct to storytelling: it emphasises Gish's narrative importance as the star and main character of the film; it enables us to see her better. The fill and back light create depth by making Gish stand out a little from the party further back in the image, while also placing her clearly in relation to what is unfolding. Fill and back light also beautify her, creating a subtle halo effect and bringing out the fairness of her hair; the use of make-up too gives her face a seamless white glow. This beauty is in turn a moral value, the aura of her true heart. There is, in other words, a special relationship between light and Gish: she is more visible, she is aesthetically and morally superior, she looks on from a position of knowledge, of enlightenment – in short, if she is so much lit, she also appears to be the source of light.

Such treatment is the culmination of a history of light that has many strands. The association of whiteness and light – of white light – with moral values goes far back. In classical Greek art, female figures are paler than male, as befits those whose proper place is in the home, a notion taken to angelic extremes in Victorian domestic ideology and imagery. Christian art has long emphasised the radiance of the pure white bodies of Christ, the Virgin, the saints and angels. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy stressed the intrinsic transcendent superiority of the colour white, notions that were grafted on to nineteenth-century biological

accounts of racial difference. The celebration of women in painting during the same period etherealised the body, drawing upon the translucent imagery of Madonnas, angels, nymphs and sprites.

Photography brought a special quality to such imagery – as images printed on white paper, photographs always show people as partly transparent, as ghost-like, a characteristic readily capitalised upon in nineteenth-century portraiture and fairy set-pieces. Some of this imagery was found in the theatre too, in the romantic ballet, the féerie and pantomime. Here the star metaphor really begins to take hold. With the introduction of gas lighting, the difference between the auditorium and stage was emphasised, with all light in the latter. Developments in make-up, costume (notably the tutu) and directional lighting made it possible to make the female performer the focus of light, to be suffused with light or to reflect and thus apparently emanate it. Film took all of this and intensified it; the halls could be darker and the images on the screen were always of people with light shining through them. Provided they were white people.

Film developed its own codes of lighting, with the female star as centrepiece and Lillian Gish as a supreme yet typical example. By the 20s the norm for correct lighting in Hollywood was what was known as 'North' lighting, light from the land of white people. The tendency for fair hair to look dark (too dark) in black-and-white photography was overcome by using back lighting. Three-point lighting, soft light, gauzes and focus could all be employed to create the haloes and glows of feminine portraiture.

Even in contemporary cinema, if you look for it, and quite noticeably in silent cinema, there is often a change of lighting between a general shot of a scene and a close-up or two-shot within it. It is here particularly that the specialness of stardom, or of the experience of romance, is signalled. There is a scene in *Way Down East* (1920), for instance, where Anna (Gish) comes to the Bartlett family farm; she has been wandering the country, having been abandoned by the man who married her in a false ceremony and having lost her child at birth. She enters at the back of the set, which in the establishing shot is in even, outdoor light. But when the film cuts to a close-up of her, a gauze over the camera, side lighting and an iris all create the beauty of pathos. There is cross-cutting between her and the Bartlett son (Richard Barthelmess), whom she will eventually marry. Both are gorgeous and treated to special,

glamorising lighting – but he is shot against a dark background with a close black iris, leaving little light around him, whereas she is fully in the light against a light background and wearing a hat that suggests a halo. When she speaks to father Bartlett, who is suspicious of this waif, both stand in the full sunlight and wear hats of much the same size – but his casts his face in shadow, whereas her face, with some extra fill light no doubt, remains radiantly white, with the hat still a halo, not a shade.

Many lighting set-ups were developed for the depiction of the heterosexual couple, frozen to perfection in production stills (a neglected factor in the construction of film-historical memory). There is the soft haze that envelops the couple, with often a subtle fill radiating the woman's face so that the man appears to be wrapped up in her glow. Or there is the head-and-shoulders close-up, with the man darkly dressed and only his shirt collar and face white and light, while the woman is lightly dressed, but even lighter around the face. He rears up out of the darkness, but she is already in the light. That light comes from behind his head, magically catching the top of his hair but falling full on her face, itself an unblemished surface of white make-up which sends the light back on to his face. Barthelmess and Gish in *Way Down East*, Harron and Gish in *True Heart Susie*, Lars Hanson and Gish in *The Scarlet Letter*: she is the angel of light who can redeem his carnal yearning.

Lillian Gish could be considered the supreme instance of the confluence of the aesthetic-moral equation of light, virtue and femininity with Hollywood's development of glamour and spectacle. She may also be its turning point. Very soon the radiance of femininity came to be seen as a trap for men, not a source of redemption – Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box*, Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*. Even when it wasn't that, its artifice, its materiality, its lack of spirituality have become more and more evident, taken to a post-modern apogee by the so artfully named Madonna. Lillian Gish, however, simply was a Madonna, as indeed Monte Blue observed: 'She is the madonna woman, and greater praise no man can give.'

Gish's place in this history of light is not mere chance. The weight of association and the careful assemblage of light have to 'take' on the figure to which they are applied. One could throw all the light one wanted on any number of attractive and talented young white women and not come up with Lillian Gish. This does

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Darkness and light: Lars Hanson and Lillian Gish in 'The Scarlet Letter' (1926)

not mean that no one else could have held an equivalent place in the history, but that nonetheless there had to be qualities which could carry these light values.

Gish's face and body have characteristics that suggest both the steeliness and the simplicity of virtue, which is to say that she embodies the values of feminine white light. Because having eyes larger than one's mouth was a touchstone of female beauty, and because this was not the case with Gish, she purses her mouth, keeps it closed – not intensely (which would suggest anxiety or neurosis) but poisedly – eliminating the lasciviousness of the opened mouth and suggesting primness or purity, according to taste (people found her both). Her carriage is erect, worthy of a ballet dancer, recalling the dictum of turn-of-the-century deportment (stand up straight, shoulders back) – to me a very New England look suggesting Quaker piety, Puritan simplicity. If it didn't seem ungracious, I would compare her aesthetically to a Shaker chair.

Thus her appearance has a sinewy and unfrilly quality that has its own particular historical and cultural resonances. These are carried equally by her performance style. She is thin and small, and sometimes that also means painfully frail, not least in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) as she cringes away from her abusive father or from the moment of lust that passes over the face of the Yellow Man before his own goodness reasserts itself. Yet her toughness is at least as legendary, braving the ice flows without a double in *Way Down East*, facing up to the remorseless sand blows of *The Wind*, facing down Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter*. Her body and face are mobile and flexible when necessary, an astonishing range of nuances may play over her face in a single shot: she can if need be let herself go to heights of joy, abjection or dementia – yet the formal means used remain small and uncomplicated. I want to put her alongside Willa Cather, Margot Fonteyn or Ella Fitzgerald, artists able to imply depths of feeling through spare, limpid means. With Gish, this toughness and limpidity, this steeliness and simplicity, is of a piece with the prevalent conceptions of light, virtue and femininity. Her body and performance can seem to emanate the same qualities the light is moulding. This is why all that white light took so breathtakingly, why she shines so compellingly in the dark.

There is one film that acts like a hiccup in accounts of Lillian Gish's career. It cannot be avoided – it makes a loud noise – but it is quickly passed over. This is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). It certainly is