The Musketeers of Pig Alley

*Musketeers of Pig Alley*, from 1912, is the first urban gangster film. In its 18 minutes, it traces a fairly complicated plot involving a poor musician and his wife, an attempted seduction, gang warfare, and a morally complex conclusion. The action gradually builds in intensity, featuring vivid characterization enhanced by close-ups, unexpected plot twists, and rapid cutting. Viewers of the time must have been breathless with excitement, and even today the movie challenges our powers of observation.

At the beginning, a struggling young musician leaves his wife and her mother behind to seek his fortune. While he is gone, the mother dies, leaving his “Little Lady” despondent. To cheer her up, a friend takes her where she has no business going, a gangsters’ ball. The “Snapper Kid,” the local gang leader, has already noticed her and sees her at the ball, but his deadly rival gets to her first. The Snapper Kid sees his rival trying to drug the Little Lady in a private room and challenges him. This conflict spreads into open warfare. In the meantime, the young husband returns with a wad of money and the Snapper Kid steals it from him. Fortunately for the desperate musician, the ensuing confusion caused by a gun battle between the rival gangs provides him with an opportunity to recover his money. Then, the Snapper Kid, fleeing from the police, ends up seeking shelter in the couple’s apartment. The police are closing in, and the gangster looks done for, but he reminds the Little Lady of how he had saved her from his rival's attempted seduction. In return, she agrees to give him an alibi, getting the Snapper Kid out of trouble, at least for the moment.

By the time he made *Musketeers*, Griffith had assembled a group of young players who would appear in many of his films. Their gestures are for the most part entirely realistic, especially the acting of Dorothy Gish, who, along with her even more famous sister, Lillian, would become an important silent film star. Harry Carey, who plays the Snapper Kid, also had a successful film acting career, as did his son Harry Carey, Jr., who had important parts in several John Ford films of the 1940s and 1950s. The setting, or mise en scene, is quite believable: crowded streets, assorted curious urban characters, a variety of interiors and exteriors that are connected with a clear visual logic. The moral ambiguity of the ending is realistic, too. The bad guy’s capacity for one act of goodness, even though he did it entirely from self-interest, saves him from arrest in the end. Griffith thus implies that street justice and legal justice don’t always coincide, a notion that we’re still all too familiar with.

Broken Blossoms

After the failure of his epic film, *Intolerance*, in 1916, D.W. Griffith scaled back his ambitions for the creation of film “spectacle.” His dramatic ambitions for films, though, did not diminish. After *Intolerance*, he turned to a project that would provide an unprecedentedly intense dramatic experience in harsh realism for moviegoers.

In 1918, Griffith’s close friends and business partners, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (two of the leading silent film stars) brought Griffith a story by British writer Thomas Burke called “The Chink and the Child,” and told him they thought it would be an ideal vehicle for him. Griffith acquired the rights and adapted it into the screenplay that would become *Broken Blossoms*. The girl in
the original story was twelve years old, but Griffith made her fifteen because the actress he wanted for the part, Lillian Gish, was already well into her twenties, and, as he said, “this story is just too violent and tragic for a child actor.”

And violent and tragic it is. The plot turns on the still very relevant theme of domestic abuse. A brutal prizefighter from the Limehouse section of the London docks, Battling Burrows, lives with his fifteen-year-old illegitimate daughter Lucy, whom he treats like a slave, making her wait on him hand and foot, physically abusing her at the slightest provocation. Unknown to her, she has a secret admirer in a once-idealistic Chinese storekeeper in the neighborhood, Mr. Cheng Huan. Once a devout and idealistic Buddhist, Mr. Huan is now a lonely opium addict, but he is still a sensitive person who can see Lucy’s actual beauty beneath her ragged, cringing appearance. Eventually, Lucy stumbles into Mr. Huan’s shop after a particularly bad beating, and the Chinese man takes care of her. Once word comes to the vicious father that Lucy has “taken up” with a man of another race, terrible consequences ensue.

**Direction, Editing, and Visual Style**

*Broken Blossoms* is a brilliant example of D.W. Griffith’s fully realized directorial style. Griffith has made sure that each of the characters uses distinctive gestures to convey feeling and personality. Notice Lillian Gish’s posture as she portrays Lucy Burrows, the “broken blossom.” Every detail of her body language expresses just how low her self-esteem has been driven by her cruel father, and her attempt to smile by pressing up the corners of her mouth is literally heartbreaking.

Richard Bathelmess, who plays the Chinese man, is of course not Chinese, but the combination of clever makeup and his keeping his eyes partially closed to give them an artificial “slant” make him believable. Notice the contrast between his body language in the Shanghai, China, sequence at the start of the film that establishes his character’s background, with the body language he uses as London shopkeeper. In China, he seems serene and confident, but once we see him in London, his sidelong glances, his arms wrapped around his body, his tendency to lean on his surroundings rather than stand upright, all show him to be a man alienated from others and lost in his private fantasies.

Battling Burrows, the heavy, played by Donald Crisp (who was a film director himself) comes across initially as a stereotypical villain, with his heavy eyebrows and shifty mouth. Yet, as the movie goes on, his calculated, deliberate cruelty intensifies to a level of frightening realism. Note his “cauliflower ear,” that throws his face out of proportion, and when combined with his exaggerated facial expressions, show us a man who has sacrificed his head (the seat of reasoning and intelligence) entirely to the powerful demands of his body.

As he developed his directing style in his short films, D.W. Griffith pioneered the use of the crosscut to build suspense and give audiences both intimacy with and broad perspectives on the action (“The Girl and Her Trust,” for example). In *Broken Blossoms*, he uses crosscutting in a much more subtle and expressive manner, to develop character by showing the contents of his characters’ thoughts and memories. As Battling Burrows gloats over a boxing victory, the scene cuts to the actual match where he sees himself battering his opponent into submission in the first round. Mr. Huan’s inner reflections on how far he has fallen morally since arriving in England are given in series of cuts to opium dens where he and others lie around in a stoned haze. But he also can remember the sound of the temple bells, implying that he is not utterly lost. Lucy’s thoughts of her equally unappealing future options—an exhausting, poverty-stricken marriage or street prostitution—
drive home why she seems so depressed. As Martin Scorsese points out in his essay “the Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema,” the great Russian director Sergei Eisenstein would come to call this editing technique of Griffith’s intellectual montage. (Montage is the European term for film editing.)

Griffith also uses tinting of the images for emotional and psychological effect. Notice that the interior scenes are often tinted red or blue, while the exteriors are uniformly gray. The Limehouse neighborhood is thus a depressing dead end, while life, for good or ill, colors the interiors.

Finally notice how detailed the set construction is. The streets and building were modelled on actual London neighborhoods, and even though they are a tangled maze, the precise orientation of the camera and directional movement of the actors give us the impression that we know our way around as well as they do.

Characters

The Yellow Man (Mr. Huan): Of course, calling Richard Barthelmess’s character “the Yellow Man” is hardly “politically correct” today, but keep in mind that referring to all Asians as the “yellow” race was common practice in the US and England until the 1960s. (The same goes for the demeaning term, “chink,” in the title of the original story on which the movie is based.) We can infer the character’s real name from the name of his store, “Cheng Huan.” As the first scenes of the movie show, Mr. Huan was originally an idealistic Buddhist who wanted to bring the Buddhist ideals of peace and reverence for all life to the “uncivilized Anglo-Saxons.” Once we see him in London several years later, though, Mr. Huan’s ideals have literally “gone up in smoke.” The British used the “treaty ports” mentioned in the opening of the film to import opium from India and Afghanistan to China with the collusion of a decadent, corrupt Chinese monarchy, and millions of Chinese were addicted. Mr. Huan’s own addiction is portrayed graphically in the film. In fact, when Lucy ultimately collapses in his shop and he sees her, he automatically assumes that she is part of his opium dream.

For a brief interlude, however, it seems that Mr. Huan has a chance at redemption. Although clearly head over heels in love with Lucy, he does not give in to sexual temptation, but instead nurses her gently, dresses her in his treasured clothes, and introduces her to her own beauty and potential. These idyllic few moments in the film make the tragic ironies of what occurs afterward all the more poignant for the audience.

Lucy Burrows: Lillian Gish was the female star most closely identified with Griffith both personally and professionally, and this is probably her greatest role. Though not beautiful in the “glamor girl” sense, her round, soft face and luminous eyes certainly qualify her as radiant. Although her acting career spanned seventy-five years (She died in 1993 at the age of 99.), Miss Gish (as she preferred to be called) is best known for her silent roles, especially those directed by D.W. Griffith. Although she plays a girl ten years younger than her actual age at the time Broken Blossoms was filmed, she manages to convey such a troubled childlike innocence in the role that she thoroughly inhabits the poor, battered teenager. Notice also how she finds ways to “diminish” herself in order to seem physically more vulnerable. Supposedly her screams and pleas when attacked by Battling Burrows were so intense and realistic that a passerby heard them through the studio walls and tried to break in to save her. By 1918, Griffith’s direction has totally converted dramatic film acting to the highly realistic pantomime that we see in Broken Blossoms. In the earlier short films we have seen seen,
there were still a few examples of overblown, melodramatic gestures. There is melodramatic intensity to *Broken Blossoms*, but Griffith’s actors now express it through their faces rather than through flailing arms and legs. Thus, Griffith now uses **close-ups** to profound effect, drawing the audience into a whirlwind of emotions so strongly expressed through facial expressions and physical posture that words really do seem superfluous.

Horror movie directors have been forevermore influenced by the overwhelming terror that, with Griffith’s urging, Lillian Gish and Donald Crisp bring out in the final, and truly disturbing, attack scene (notably the “Here’s Johnny!” scene at the climax of Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*).

**Battling Burrows:** His character is so thoroughly violent and egotistic that Griffith gives over an **intertitle** at the beginning to reassure audiences that even if they could not imagine that anyone could be as physically brutal as Burrows, they should still recognize that we all engage in at least verbal cruelty to others. **Donald Crisp** definitely overacts somewhat in his early scenes trying to establish the harshness of his character (his close-up facial grimaces, for example), but once he starts threatening and abusing his daughter, he’s one of the most terrifying villains in the history of the movies. Griffith’s genius, though, is to show how his brutality actually arises from moral weakness. His drinking and womanizing will destroy his career soon enough, and his manager tells him so, thereby motivating Burrows to take out his egotistic frustrations over the reprimands on his daughter. Despite his physical power, his mind and spirit are weak, and his combined traits of moral degeneracy and a lust to dominate prove a lethal combination.