The popular "Hazard of Helen" railroad series started in 1913 with Helen Holmes, and Helen Gibson took over in 1915/16, before the series came to an end. Thereafter Miss Gibson moved to Universal for three years, making features along similar lines. In 1920 she starred in another independent series - of which "The Ghost of the Canyon" is a typical example - which was more or less the last part for this kind of short. They just had nothing new to offer, and by now the regular and increasingly slicker and more elaborate serials had completely bypassed them. Nevertheless, "The Ghost of the Canyon" is a most enjoyable little actioner. It was shot - as were all the others in this particular series - on the San Pedro branch of the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, with non-railroad locations in suburban (and now very much built-up) Los Angeles. No director is credited, and for a film as late as 1920 it does lack to a surprising degree the editorial finesse that J.P. McGowan had brought to the much earlier "Hazard," and on the other hand it keeps moving all the time, and Helen's ultimate escape from her "tied to the tracks" predicament is more logical than most. Despite the dramatic title, it isn't much of a canyon - but then it isn't much of a ghost either, as the afficionados who recall "Bircham's" and "Isle of Desire" won't have too much difficulty in anticipating the (quite illogical) explanation of the spectre!

--- Intermission ---


"The Heart of Humanity" is either marvellous or dreadful, depending on one's point of view. Whether it's depicting beastly Hun atrocities or offering a poem to mother love, it plucks out all the stops. It's unsophisticated with a vengeance and in that sense is the kind of old-time movie that is today so often, and so unfairly, ridiculed as being typical of all silent movie-making. To many people for a 1918 movie, it can be considered remarkably good. The staging of the war and action scenes is quite expert, and much of the photography is quite fine; directorially it has many elements that were by no means commonplace by 1918. Yet its weaknesses become spectacularly apparent when it is compared with D.W. Griffith's "Hearts of the World" of a year earlier. If the inevitable comparison with Griffith seems an unfair tack to take, then the film itself unavoidably forces the comparison, for it is quite literally stolen from the Griffith film. In its construction, in its basic plot, even in individual incidents (the heroic temporary madness for example) and in Florida titles (especially the opening tribute to the power of Love), it clearly attempts to duplicate Griffith's work. Two of the leading players (Stroheim and Anderson) literally repeat the roles they had under Griffith, and Dorothy Phillips makes the very most of a slight resemblance to Lillian Gish by copying Lillian's facial expressions at every opportunity. Even the film's title betrays its deliberate affinity to Griffith's film, while the prepared press reviews even have the gall to claim that the film is superior to "Hearts of the World," that Holubar is a major rival to Griffith and that, since the inception of the movies, there have been just three great masterpieces of the cinema, "Toleration" - and "The Heart of Humanity"! Griffith must have been incensed and irked to the utmost by any of this, though his vanity told him that such a blatant copy could not be a commercial success. However, the film - which billed itself as "The biggest picture in ten years... eight gorgeous heart-throbbing soul-searching scenes rather far surpass all other picturized productions" - was a big commercial success. At the Broadway Theatre in New York it enjoyed a long run, top grosses, and excellent reviews. Eileen Bowser of the Museum of Modern Art very kindly dug out from the Griffith files a letter from Griffith to Holubar, apparently D.W. had been confident of routine business when the film opened in San Francisco that he had bet Lesser that the grosses for a week wouldn't exceed $7,000. They did, by a spectacular margin, and Mr. Lesser was looking forward to collecting his hundred dollars!
There is, of course, nothing new about the practice of copying a highly successful movie, but usually it is done with enough switching around so that the process is legally safe, and to the average moviegoer, not too obvious. Thus DeMille's "Coral Reef" was a thinly disguised copy of "The Big Parade", with the playgirl heroine substituting for Gilbert, and losing an arm rather than a leg. But no such subtleties are performed in "The Heart of Humanity". Indeed, one wonders whether Lasalle induced Stroheim to work closely with Holubar, tipping him off to all the Griffith methods, with the promise of directing "Blind Husbands" as a reward. This is a pure conjecture of course -- but it is odd that Stroheim, for all of his long-estimated admiration for Griffith, was never given a chance by Griffith to direct one of the Triangle-Fine Arts pictures in the 1916-17 period, though other trainees who started off, like Stroheim, as apprentices (Elmer Clifton, Chester Franklin) were given directorial berths. It's possible that Stroheim saw a chance to get ahead (and get even?) by using Griffith as a stepping-stone. But, as I say, this is pure supposition.

If nothing else, the film illustrates the folly of trying to duplicate the work of a man like Griffith. "Hearts of the World", itself hardly a masterpiece, nevertheless had those moments of inspiration and poetry which can only come from the instinctive film-maker. For instance, Griffith's inherently soft, mellow, and sentimental sincerity is carried throughout the whole painful saga of the little girl and her mother in the constant firelight. Likewise, Griffith added a kind of documentary conviction to his battle scenes by inserted closeup detail shots -- guns being loaded, bayonets being fixed. Holubar tries the same thing, but without knowing quite where to place them. When they are unrelated to the conflict, the characters or action, they merely become confusing. Lilian can always pull off those sentimental shots where she is talking to birds or squirrels; Dorothy Phillips merely manages to look put out because the squirrel doesn't chat back to her. The cameras move in long tracking shots in the scenes of the armies advancing -- just as Griffith would have had them move -- but without the kind of build-up he would have provided, so that it becomes technique for its own sake.

While (presumably) tipping off Holubar as to what Griffith would have done, Stroheim seems to have gotten in a few little bits of his own too -- the confrontation with the girl while she is praying, and the spider spinning his web on a statue of the Madonna, suggest that Stroheim was already full of the images that he would later give full reign to in his Hapapourg trilogy.

Holubar (whom many of us know best as Captain Nemo in Universal's early "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" in 1916) never did become a potential rival to Griffith, and Dorothy Phillips, who was seen in an incredible number of films in the 1916-19 period, became popular, but never a really big star. She was carried to Holubar, and they continued to turn out rather un-earth-shattering pictures through the early 20's.

If I seem to have spent the bulk of these notes in contrasting Holubar's film with Griffith's, it's because -- historically and academically -- that is where its major interest lies, especially as most of us have seen "Hearts of the World" recently.

For those who haven't, it will probably seem that these notes are unjust, for on its own it is a vigorous and extremely interesting film. It is determined to be a "big" and "important" film all the way, and doesn't let up even when the story has run its course -- it is still in there trying to wring a last even out of the climactic wrap-up. And certainly its pictorial elegance and its sheer pace command respect and attention. The battle scenes are marvellous in their unabashed sentiment, and there's an exciting little tree-falling scene where obviously the tree falls exactly contrary to where it was expected to fall, and it's a miracle that the cameramen weren't crushed on the spot!

But it is really Stroheim's show, and he more than makes up for Griffith having made Siegmund the No.1 Hun in "Hearts of the World". Here slab, already sporting that black mourning band that he was so fond of, has a high old time as the epitome of the arch Hun, raping, looting and even dashing a baby to its death as a prelude to a prolonged attack on Miss Phillip's virtue.

William K. Everson

As a postscript, it is worth calling attention to the brief but extremely interesting aerial shots in the film. Presumably this was official Government footage, bought and syndicated; regardless, I cannot think of any other war film made during the war that contains footage actually shot from other planes.