Although there are many gaps to be filled in in our knowledge of the silent American film of the 20's, and to many missing films, it is unlikely that we will find many surprises in that well-explored area. The limited commercial value of the silent film is largely limited to the 20's, where the films are longer, slicker, bigger, and generally have a far greater concentration of major stars and directors. The pre-1920 years, often more vigorous and experimental, also tend to be less polished, and have been less investigated. Even more ignored, until recently, have been the years of the early American feature film, 1912-15, prior to the release of 15's "The Birth of a Nation". For years, all that was available to us - and that in no great profusion - were the primitive, tableau-like "Cleopatra" and "The Count of Monte Cristo", which seemed to throw away all the carefully built-up filmic grammar of DW. Griffith in exchange for mere length. In comparison with these films, Griffith's own pre-"Birth" features seemed to establish more than ever his total mastery of the early cinema.

Now however, the years 1913/14 (in particular) seem to be emerging as a New Frontier for major filmic research. The Danish cinema alone, as early as 1912, achieved a sophistication and maturity of theme quite unmatched by America and, probably, by any other film-producing country at that time. Now, slowly, early American features from the same period are emerging; they are, at least in the case of the 1913 "Traffic in Souls" and tonight's two 1914 films, not only better than the Griffith features of the same period, but more importantly, they do not display any notable influence from Griffith.

I have no wish to minimise Griffith's tremendous, even overwhelming, importance. He, after all, in the 1908-13 years, literally established the whole language of film. And no film has ever had the impact of his initial classic "The Birth of a Nation". All I wish to suggest with tonight's program is that the evidence now exists to prove that he was not unchallenged in those years, and that there is room for - and a need for - a good deal more exploration of those transitional years.

The very merits of tonight's films are probably what kept them in comparative obscurity; audiences (including critics) just weren't aware of the sophistication they contained, because those same audiences knew nothing of the subtleties of camerawork or editing. Theme and star names carried far more novelty, and it's difficult to understand a 1914 audience being far more excited by James O'Neill in "The Count of Monte Cristo" than by a little gem like "The Wishing Ring".

Are these films easy to write about today. It is difficult to describe how good they are without first showing something like the 6-reel 1912 "Cleopatra", an incredibly primitive film. To describe all the nuances and technical accomplishments of tonight's films would be to rob them of their greatest assets: surprise and charm. To over-sell their qualities would be as great a disservice as under-selling them. On the other hand, technique that was remarkable then is taken for granted today; not to mention at least some of their accomplishments would be unfair, and leave one wondering what all the fuss was about. Hopefully, we can reach a happy medium. For post-screening additional reading, I can recommend an excellent article on Maurice Tourneur by Richard Koszarski in "Film Comment" of March/April '73, and one on Tourneur and "The Wishing Ring" by Kevin Brownlow in the American Film Institute book, "The American Film Heritage". Apart from some perceptive contemporary comment on "The Italian" by Vachel Lindsay, virtually nothing seems to exist on that film - The NY Times apparently did not review it, and it was ignored by all the histories of film - but George Pratt's book "Spellbound in Darkness" has a good deal to say about its producer, Thomas H. Ince, and is highly recommended.

THE WISHING RING (World Film Corporation, 1914) Directed by Maurice Tourneur; Based on a story by Owen Davis; Camera, John van den Broek; With: Vivian Martin, Chester Barnett, Alec B. Francis, Johnny Mines; 5 rls

French director Maurice Tourneur (father of Jacques Tourneur) was perhaps the greatest pictorialist director of the silent screen. Reaching his peak in the late teens and very early 20's with such films as "The Blue Bird" and "Captains of the Nightship", he returned to France in the late 20's, and worked there (and in Britain and Germany) through the sound period, making some of his most remarkable films even after the end of the war, during the German occupation in World War Two. Although "The Wishing Ring" is an early film, it still has a great deal of pictorial beauty and charm, and much of his deliberately theatrical approach was akin to that of the much later James Whale, although both used somewhat different methods to harness theatrical style to cinematic technique. "The Wishing Ring" is so slight a
piece of whimsy that it is all too easy to sit back and let it "wash over" one. It's a mistake to do that; for while it's slight, it's not trivial. Plot points are important, and accumulate steadily. Technique is worth studying too; editing is never attention-grabbing, nor should it be, but it's remarkably smooth, with many shots effortlessly interwoven in some scenes so that one is almost unaware of the cutting. Too, the camerawork, while picturesque and symmetrical, is also realistic in one key element: there is always a source for the light, be it firelight, sunlight through a window, the glow from a camp-fire. There is always a logical as well as a pleasing reason for the lighting pattern on screen, something that Griffith was decidedly unconcerned with. Note too, how effortlessly, and how simply, Tourneur turns Fort Lee New Jersey into a convincing English locale - by the way he shoots existing buildings, and by the way he builds simple sets into the landscape. All in all, a most pleasing and well-ahead-of-its-time pioneer work, and an enjoyable example of the style of Vivian Martin, one of the most likeable of the Mary Pickford rivals. Incidentally, this print originated from a well-used 16mm original print; the American Film Institute blew it up to a 35mm negative, and this print is a reduction from that new negative. It still looks good, having gone through all those stages; imagine how it must have looked in a pristine color-toned original 35mm print!

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PIANO SCORES FOR BOTH FILMS ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART ODERMAN

THE ITALIAN (Thomas Ince Production; later re-released by Paramount) 1914
Directed by Reginald Barker; Scenario by C. Gardner Sullivan and Thomas Ince; no other credits available; starring George Beban; supporting players include Clara Williams and Leo Willis; 5 reels

No directorial credit appears on the print, no doubt due to producer Ince's penchant for grabbing as many credits as he could, and minimising the contributions of others. (We'll have more to say about Ince, and his very real importance, in the introductory comments). However, it has been established that the film was directed by Reginald Barker, one of the best and most durable of the Ince directors. He made his last films - still good ones, considering his small budgets - for Monogram in the 1930's.

There's a striking affinity between the style of this film and such early Danish films as "The Evangelist", and the Danish films were shown here; however, it would be guesswork and conjecture to suggest that Barker or Ince had seen them, and were deliberately trying to recreate their intensity and (especially) their unique acting style. Regardless, it's a remarkable film. It predates the naturalism of "Greed" by a decade, and the acting is both intense and yet casual, with Beban seeming to look "past" the camera and ignore it. There's incredible mobility to the car-ra - stately dolleys in, trucking shots, even it seems a hand-held camera at times to create a sense of spontaneous movement. Many dissolves are so smooth one wonders why they were not duplicated their polish. (Remember those jerky, non-matching dissolves in that late French silent, "The Miracle of the Wolves", that we ran a few seasons back?). The plot takes a little while to get under way, but then is well-paced; the very last shot is perhaps a little disappointing in that it conveys a major emotion through the words from the page of a book, as though admitting that the film itself could not handle it - which it probably could have. But it's a minor quibble in an otherwise quite extraordinary film. The early scenes, set in Italy, were largely shot in Venice, North Hollywood, while the slum scenes - supposedly New York - were done mainly in San Francisco, because Los Angeles' own slums had not deteriorated sufficiently at that time to suggest New York.
Incidentally, the film has been processed from a new negative made from one of the original paper prints, submitted to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes. Pictorial quality is not of the best, but it is always adequate, and certainly suggests that it must have been most impressive in original 35mm prints.

Wm. K. Everson

A note on projection speed: There is no such thing as a specific silent speed. Each silent film was an individual case, and often speeds varied within the film. On most projectors today, we have to opt out for either sound speed (much too fast for the bulk of tonight's films) or an arbitrary silent speed. We think that the approx. 18 frames-per-second speed chosen for tonight's films will work best; some scenes may seen a little slow, but if so, blame contemporary inadequacies of technology, not the original films!

"The Evangelist", referred to above, should be "The Evangelist's Life". 