**February 5, 2019 (XXXVIII:2) Frank Borzage: A FAREWELL TO ARMS (1932, 80 min.)**

**DIRECTED BY** Frank Borzage  
**WRITING** Benjamin Glazer and Oliver H.P. Garrett (screenplay), Ernest Hemingway (novel), Laurence Stallings (play) (uncredited)  
**PRODUCER** Frank Borzage  
**MUSIC** Herman Hand, W. Franke Harling, Bernhard Kaun, John Leipold, Paul Marquardt, Ralph Rainger, and Milan Roder: all uncredited  
**CINEMATOGRAPHY** Charles Lang (photographed by)  
**FILM EDITING** Otho Lovering (uncredited) and George Nichols Jr. (uncredited)  
**ART DIRECTION** Roland Anderson (uncredited) and Hans Dreier (uncredited)  
**COSTUME DESIGN** Travis Banton (uncredited)

**Academy Awards, USA 1934**  
The film won the Oscars for Best Cinematography (Charles Lang) and Best Sound, Recording (Franklin Hansen), and it was nominated for Best Picture and for Best Art Direction (Hans Dreier and Roland Anderson).

**CAST**  
Helen Hayes...Catherine  
Gary Cooper...Frederic  
Adolphe Menjou...Rinaldi  
Mary Philips...Ferguson  
Jack La Rue...Priest  
Blanche Friderici...Head Nurse  
Mary Forbes...Miss Van Campen  
Gilbert Emery...British Major

**FRANK BORZAGE** (b. April 23, 1894 in Salt Lake City, Utah—d. June 19, 1962 (age 68) in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California) was an active and successful director throughout the 1920s who reached his peak in the late silent and early sound era. He took influence from the German director F.W. Murnau in developing his own style of lushly visual romanticism. He honed this style in a hugely successful series of films starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, including *7th Heaven* (1927), for which he won the first Academy Award for Best Director, *Street Angel* (1928) and *Lucky Star* (1929). He won a second Oscar for 1931’s *Bad Girl*. In his early career, he directed 14 films between 1917 and 1919, including: *The Gun Woman* (1918), *Innocent’s Progress* (1918), *Society for Sale* (1918), *Whom the Gods Would Destroy* (1919), and *Prudence on Broadway* (1919). His greatest success in the silent era was with *Humoresque* (1920), a box office winner starring Vera Gordon. Themes Borzage would revisit involved the feelings of young lovers in the face of adversity, with love in his films triumphing over such trials as World War I (*7th Heaven* and 1932’s *A Farewell to Arms*), disability (*Lucky Star*), the Depression (*Man’s Castle*), a thinly disguised version of the Titanic disaster in *History Is Made at Night* (1937), and the rise of Nazism in *Little Man, What Now?* (1933), *Three Comrades* (1938), and *The Mortal Storm* (1940). He began to explore religious themes in films such as *The Big Fisherman* (1959). Of his later work, only the film noir *Moonrise* (1948) has enjoyed much critical acclaim. After 1948, his output was sporadic. He was the original director of *Journey Beneath the Desert* (1961), but was too sick to continue, and Edgar G. Ulmer took over. In 1955 and 1957, Borzage was awarded The George Eastman Award, given by George Eastman House for distinguished contribution to the art of film. Early in his career, he was an actor in short and feature films, garnering a staggering 129 credits, including, late in his career in 1957’s *Jeanne Eagels*. He directed 107 and produced 29 films. These are some of the other films he directed: *The Mystery of Yellow Aster Mine* (1913 Short), *The Pitch o’ Chance* (1915 Short), *Life’s Harmony* (1916 Short), *Progress* (1918), *Society for Sale* (1918), *Whom the Gods Would Destroy* (1919), and *Prudence on Broadway* (1919).
Short), The Silken Spider (1916 Short), The Code of Honor (1916 Short), Two Bits (1916 Short), A Flickering Light (1916 Short), Unlucky Luke (1916 Short), Jack (1916 Short), The Pilgrim (1916 Short), The Demon of Fear (1916 Short), The Quicksands of Deceit (1916 Short), Nugget Jim's Pardner (1916 Short), That Gal of Burke's (1916 Short), The Courtin' of Calliope Clew (1916 Short), Nell Dale's Men Folks (1916 Short), The Forgotten Prayer (1916 Short), Matchin' Jim (1916 Short), Land o' Lizards (1916), Immediate Lee (1916), The Pride and the Man (1916), The Valley of Silent Men (1922), The Pride of Palomar (1922), The Ninth Commandment (1923), Children of Dust (1923), Daddy's Gone A-Hunting (1925), The River (1928), Doctors' Wives (1931), After Tomorrow (1932), Young America (1932), No Greater Glory (1934), Big City (1937), The Vanishing Virginian (1942), Stage Door Canteen (1943), Till We Meet Again (1944), I've Always Loved You (1946), That's My Man (1947), and China Doll (1958).

ERNEST HEMINGWAY
(b. July 21, 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois—d. July 2, 1961 (age 61) in Ketchum, Idaho) was one of the most important twentieth-century novelists and short story writers. Hemingway's novels and stories have been adapted for film and television 85 times. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954 "for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in The Old Man and the Sea, and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style."

According to the Nobel Prize bio, Hemingway "started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution.

“During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, The Sun Also Rises (1926). Equally successful was A Farewell to Arms (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer’s disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, The Old Man and the Sea (1952), the story of an old fisherman’s journey, his long and lonely struggle with a fish and the sea, and his victory in defeat.

“Hemingway — himself a great sportsman — liked to portray soldiers, hunters, bullfighters — tough, at times primitive people whose courage and honesty are set against the brutal ways of modern society, and who in this confrontation lose hope and faith. His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in Men Without Women (1927) and The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.” The Nobel bio writers soften the ending: while his wife slept upstairs, he donned his favorite robe, went to the foyer of the house, and blew off his head with a shotgun. (For a detailed account of this, see John Walsh: “Being Ernest: John Walsh Unravels the mystery behind Hemingway’s suicide” (The Independent 2011). https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/being-ernest-john-walsh-unravels-the-mystery-behind-hemingways-suicide-2294619.html


GARY COOPER (b. May 7, 1901 in Helena, Montana—d. May 13, 1961 (age 60) in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California) career spanned 36 years, from 1925 to 1961, and included leading roles in 84 feature films, 117 films in total. He was a major movie star from the end of the silent film era through to the end of the golden age of Classical Hollywood. Cooper began his career as a film extra and stunt rider, but soon landed acting roles. After establishing himself as a Western hero in his early silent films, he became a movie star in 1929 with his first sound picture, The Virginian. In the early 1930s, he expanded his heroic image to include more cautious characters in adventure films and dramas such as A Farewell to Arms (1932) and The Lives of a Bengal Lancer (1935). During the height of his career, Cooper


**MARY PHILIPS** (b. January 23, 1901 in New London, Connecticut—d. April 22, 1975 (age 74) in Santa Monica, California) was an American stage and film actress. She had a long working relationship with the New York theatre. In 1924
she appeared in the Broadway play *Nerves* with Humphrey Bogart and Kenneth MacKenna, both men remaining lifelong friends with Philips, as well as eventual marriage partners, respectively. Philips and Bogart married in 1928 when she was the more known stage actress and he a little-known actor. When Bogart began to gain film roles in Hollywood, Philips declined to move with him to California, as her stage career was firmly established in New York. Philips's career would later extend to the screen, acting in 24 films, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s.


While much of the writing on Frank Borzage will invariably argue that he is a neglected filmmaker, has not significantly lacked important critical commentary. (There is probably more major work on Borzage than there is on a comparable figure like King Vidor.) Among others, Henri Agel, John Belton, Jean-Loup Bourget, Fred Camper, Tom Gunning, Michael Henry, Kent Jones, Ado Kyrou, Robert K. Lightning, Jean Mitry, Marcel Oms, Phil Rosen, Andrew Sarris, Robert Smith, Paul Willemen and, above all, Hervé Dumont have contributed significantly to the literature on Borzage. And yet Borzage’s cinema does remain perpetually unfashionable. What is the problem? Commentators on Borzage have argued that the director’s sensibility is out of step with an emotionally distanced, post-modern culture, one more devoted to the supposed ironies of a Douglas Sirk or the wit and playfulness (amidst violence and melodrama) of an Alfred Hitchcock. By contrast Borzage seems old fashioned, devoted to pious and sentimental love stories. As Kent Jones writes, Borzage’s cinema “never partakes of the crisis of belief at the core of modern experience.” (p. 35) During the 1920s and ‘30s, Borzage had been one of the most important directors in Hollywood, twice winning an Academy Award for Best Director: in 1929 for *Seventh Heaven* (1927) and in 1932 for *Bad Girl* (1931). But a period of uncertainty began during the 1940s when his output also began to dwindle. After leaving theatrical filmmaking for nine years, he returned for two final films, *China Doll* (1958) and the biblical epic, *The Big Fisherman* (1959). By this point Borzage and his films were largely considered relics of an earlier era. He died before he was able to enjoy the kind of rediscovery and canonization of other directors of his generation who managed to outlive him, such as John Ford, Howard Hawks or Raoul Walsh.

But part of the problem Borzage has in relation to contemporary reception may also lie with some of the commentary on his work. For all of its importance, the literature on Borzage tends to be somewhat restricted in its methods of interpretation, driven towards uncovering an essence to Borzage. The most persistent argument about Borzage is that he is a romantic transcendentalist, devoted to male/female love above all else—above politics, culture and history, above the limitations of the flesh, the limitations of time and space and even rational thought. Certainly Borzage’s cinema does not lack for moments to back up such claims, as the delirious final sequences of such films as *Seventh Heaven, A Farewell to Arms* (1932) and *Three Comrades* (1938) illustrate. But where does this leave a film like *Bad Girl*? It is a major Borzage work but the world that we see here does not fully conform to this notion of romantic transcendence. On the contrary, the couple in that film remains perpetually and very touchingly earthbound. At the same time, to completely ignore or dismiss the drive towards the transcendent in many of Borzage’s films runs another risk, a form of agnostic denial that does not do full justice to the work. My intention here is not to offer yet another bold central argument that will miraculously explain Borzage. Instead I would like to cite, extend, and synthesize some of the approaches that have already been put forth in the hope that, through this process, a certain range of possibilities for understanding Borzage’s work will be apparent.

If Harold Bloom is correct in his argument that American culture is fundamentally Gnostic in its religious inclinations, emphasizing the experiential aspect to religion above all else and believing that it is possible to enjoy a direct communication with God, then Borzage’s life and work present us with one variation on this American tendency. Borzage was born in Salt Lake City, the home of one of the most American of all religions, Mormonism. Borzage’s family was actually Roman Catholic but they appear to have gotten along well with their Mormon neighbors. Furthermore, Borzage himself was never formally baptized. According to Dumont, Borzage was (like a number of major figures in Hollywood at the time) a Freemason, eventually rising very high within the order of the Ancient and Approved Scottish Rite. As “custodians of holy architecture in the Western World,” (p.406) the Masons, while maintaining certain links to Judeo-Christian ideology, were devoted to politically progressive concepts of tolerance within a broad notion of a universal brotherhood. Consequently, Dumont argues that many of Borzage’s major films should be seen as Masonic texts. On the one hand, then, Borzage is brought up within a family whose religion is strongly tied to pre-Reformation Europe; on the other hand, during his childhood and youth he is surrounded by a religious culture that is not only diametrically opposed to Roman Catholicism but which is American and experiential to its core. What Borzage ultimately adopts as his ‘religion,’ however, is not quite a religion and not quite a philosophy but a set of deistic precepts with strong roots in a post-Enlightenment Europe. At the same time, many of the
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figures associated with the establishment of American democracy were Freemasons and the American dollar bill contains a crucial Masonic symbol of the pyramid. America, then, embraces certain Masonic elements at its inception while Borzage’s own cinema may be seen as incorporating some of these Masonic tenets.

A Masonic reading of Borzage could clarify certain aspects to his work. And it certainly provides a coherent basis upon which one may be able to discuss the complex question of mysticism which occur in a number of Borzage films, a context that has been conspicuously lacking in much of the literature which continually refers to the spiritual element of Borzage in only the most general terms. However, I would not want to go quite as far as Dumont in reading Borzage’s work in relation to Masonic teachings, particularly Dumont’s method of seeing virtually all of Borzage’s important films as variations on the Masonic Mozart’s opera The Magic Flute. The prescriptive nature of this kind of analysis can quickly ossify. The evidence that Borzage was a Freemason appears to be irrefutable. But there is no irrefutable evidence that the films themselves are Masonic texts (this would simply be a matter of interpretation) nor that Borzage ever directly attempted to insert Masonic philosophy into his films. Dumont’s research is invaluable. But any reading that is done on the basis of this research needs to be performed with caution, since the Masonic nature of Borzage’s work will invariably be subjected to or shaped by other determining elements.

Instead, let us put aside the Freemasons for a moment and attempt to isolate in the most immediate and spontaneous manner the emotional experience of Borzage’s cinema—what these images feel like and the emotions they give rise to. How might we do so? Certainly one crucial place to begin would be to speak of an erotics of filmmaking. As with a number of directors working in the late 1920s, Borzage fell under the influence of F.W. Murnau. Although Borzage directed some significant films prior to the international awareness of Murnau in the mid-1920s, it is after this that we find in Borzage an increasingly voluptuous response to the properties of light and shadow, to clothing and decor, and to movement. It is a fluid and natural world that Borzage often creates, in which water in various forms, from rivers, oceans, and waterfalls to rain and snow, serve as potent visual metaphors (most notably in his 1928 film The River), but a naturalness most often created, paradoxically, in the studio (another likely Murnau influence). Murnau was shooting Sunrise (1927) at Fox at the same time that Borzage was shooting Seventh Heaven, both directors sharing the same leading lady, Janet Gaynor, who frequently went back and forth between sets. The two films (as well as Borzage’s follow-up, the 1928 Street Angel) have similar visual styles, creating artificial story environments that strongly evoke the world of fairy tale and sentimental romance. But Borzage’s lovers seem at once more sexual and more innocent than Murnau’s, a paradox which stands at the center of much of Borzage’s cinema.

It is this particular erotic sensation one might have in watching the films that has caused Gunning to see in Borzage’s work a very American fascination with the tactile in which we find “an emotional participation in the visualisation of physical and personal devotion.” (p. 17) In place of a more traditional reading of Borzage which stresses the transcendent and spiritual awakening of the characters, Gunning finds a strong drive in Borzage’s male characters towards “recovering a maternal unity” (p. 18) that stands opposed to the renunciation of the mother and identification with the father so common to the psychoanalytic readings of sexual and romantic relations in Hollywood cinema. It is this ‘incest theme’ that Gunning detects running through much of Borzage’s work. This theme does indeed occur in a number of the films although not all of them strictly related to mother love. I’ve Always Loved You (1946) involves several displaced incest elements: Catherine McLeod’s initial lack of sexual interest in William Carter is related to the fact that she thinks of him “like a brother.” When McLeod eventually does agree to marry Carter, Borzage dissolves from a shot of Carter embracing McLeod to Carter embracing his daughter from their eventual marriage, as the film moves ahead several years, two symbolic incestuous relations connected through a single dissolve. Dumont has expressed his impatience with those who detect incest themes in Borzage, finding such an approach too Lacanian. But one might just as easily see the incest theme as yet another manifestation of the close links Borzage’s films have with the folk and fairy tale, in which incest is a frequent motif. It seems to me that what is of interest here is not simply the incest theme as such but how it relates to a larger conception of sexual desire that runs throughout Borzage’s work. What does it mean to love someone else? And what are the boundaries of love itself? In Green Light (1937), Anita Louise describes her mother as someone who “loves everything—books, men, women, dogs…,” a description which links this love to a profoundly religious and Christian impulse but also one that cannot be contained by religion either. We are dealing, then, with a world which is not simply concerned with the formation of the couple but with a world of erotic possibilities, in which desire may conceivably be articulated in various forms and in which the word love itself contains multi-faceted connotations.

Borzage’s lovers so often retain a connection to childhood. Such a connection may be a symptom of the Americaness of these films and their belief in a fundamental innocence which lies at the basis of human behavior and action. It is this inability to create fully adult characters and story situations that Leslie Fiedler famously sees as the central problem male novelists in America have always had, their works dominated by male characters who are continuously in flight
from marriage and adult relations with women and often bonding in unconscious homosexual relations with other men: “The ideal American postulates himself as the fatherless man, the eternal son of the mother.” (p. 338) Symbolically presiding over the birth of the American imagination for Fiedler is the figure of Rip Van Winkle, an asexual man who sleeps much of his life away in order to avoid the process of growing up. (p. 26) In Borzage’s *Lazybones* (1925), with its own displaced incest elements elsewhere discussed by Gunning (p. 19), the Buck Jones protagonist is specifically compared at one point to Rip Van Winkle. But Borzage’s cinema does not present an uncomplicated example of the type of American sensibility that Fiedler isolates. Certainly the basic drives of his male characters are not away from the possibility of sexual relations with women even if, in some cases, they may initially be hesitant towards them. On the contrary, the films repeatedly document the simultaneous drives that both female and male characters have towards the fulfillment of their erotic and romantic desires. If Borzage’s characters seldom completely lose their connection to childhood it may be that by retaining this connection they also retain a connection to a more spontaneous realm of eroticism, unencumbered by the potentially oppressive notion of “adult” heterosexual relations.

The eroticism of Borzage’s work, though, extends to another major element of *mise en scène*: the actor. This cinema is clearly one of expressive gestural bodies and beautiful faces responding to one another with directness and transparency, the camera transmitting this eroticism to the spectator in an equally direct and transparent manner that seems at once movingly naive and boldly modern. Prior to becoming a film director, Borzage was a successful actor on stage and (beginning in 1912) screen, an early example of what would become a long tradition of major directors who began as actors. Quite often for these actor-turned-filmmakers the primary method of using the camera is not for the seizing and framing of images—the camera as an instrument of power and control—but as a method of elucidating the interaction between the actors and of conveying this to the spectator in the most vivid manner possible, as though placing the spectator within the erotic space of the film. Borzage was known for his ability to create an extremely intimate atmosphere on the set of his films, an intimacy that played itself out primarily through a relationship between the director and his actors in which the actors often felt as though they were enveloped in a nurturing and romantic environment. During the silent period, and in a manner not uncommon for directors at the time, Borzage would often continuously talk to his actors while the camera was rolling, establishing a bond between the voice and presence of the filmmaker, standing just beside or behind the camera, and his camera subjects. (If the love scenes in his sound film *A Farewell to Arms* so often evoke those of his silent work it may be due to the intimacy also achieved through the voices of Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes, so often pitched low and closely miked.) Late in his career, Borzage briefly returned to acting in George Sidney’s fascinating exercise in late Expressionism, *Jeanne Eagels* (1957). Here Borzage plays a version of himself directing Kim Novak as Eagels on the set of a silent film in precisely this manner. (As a matter of historical record, though, Borzage and Eagels never made a film together.)

Borzage himself sometimes spoke of the importance of directing his actors in such a way that the performances and the emotions of the scene were completed by the spectator: “Make the audience sentimental instead of the player. Make the audience act.” (cited by Dumont, p. 414; originally appeared in Cecil B. De Mille’s *The Cheat*, March 7, 1933). This general approach towards the spectator is one strongly bound up with the silent era in which filmmakers were not simply concerned with creating stunning images but in creating images which seemed to speak directly to the spectator and which set up an implied dialogue between image and viewer. While Dumont (citing William K. Everson) argues that this silent conception of the viewer stands opposed to the practice of a Hitchcock and Hitchcock’s emotional manipulation of the spectator, this is not quite accurate. The Kuleshov effect, so important to Hitchcock, is probably the central textbook example from the silent era which conceives of the spectator as an active rather than passive participant in the unfolding of moving images. But if for Kuleshov and his followers the emotion most often arises in the relation between the individual shots of a montage sequence, in Borzage the emotion most often arises directly within the images themselves. Borzage’s images are at once transparent and slightly veiled, allowing for the spectator to mentally and emotionally fill in what is not fully visible or explicitly acted out. One of Borzage’s major successes as a screen actor was in the film *The Wrath of the Gods* (Reginald Barker, 1914) in which one of his co-stars was Sessue Hayakawa, with whom he was to co-star on three later occasions. Hayakawa’s performance in Cecil B. De Mille’s *The Cheat* in 1915 was a central one for establishing the importance of understatement in acting for the camera in which acting was based upon restricted gestural and facial expression. When Borzage began to direct, his approach to actors was influenced by this type of understatement which refused to Signify All to the spectator and is a major example of this move towards increasingly naturalistic performance styles. Borzage’s approach is not always consistent, however, and what one often finds is a mixing of styles in which supporting players will often perform in a more exaggerated or melodramatic style all the more to contrast with the subtlety of the leads. At any rate, it is through this approach that we are able to fill in and project onto these images which do not do all of the work for us but instead require...
a form of completion that was so central to Borzage and to the silent era in general. But how does this quality of understatement specifically get manifested?

In October of 1915, *Motion Pictures* magazine wrote that as an actor Borzage “has the reputation of having better control of facial expression than any other screen artist before the public today.” That same year he directed his first film, a two-reeler called *Pitch O’ Chance*, in which he also co-starred as he would continue to do for the next two years while also directing himself. As a director, the face assumes for Borzage (as it does for so many filmmakers) a privileged role, what Sarris has termed Borzage’s “emotional Eldorado.” (p. 140) As already noted, these faces are most often beautiful ones and the camera is as likely to be taken with male beauty as it is with female: Gary Cooper in *A Farewell to Arms* as much as Loretta Young in *Man’s Castle* (1933), Alan Curtis in *Mannequin* (1938) as much as Margaret Sullivan in *Little Man, What Now?* (1934). Borzage’s tendency in filming the face is one which aims towards an effect of slight immobility, the features not so much in motion and continually connoting thought as they are poised between movement and stasis, between the expression of emotion and the withdrawal of it. The frequent close-ups of Janet Gaynor in *Seventh Heaven* and Margaret Sullivan in *Little Man, What Now?* often seem suspended above the direct unfolding of the action, assuming a form of portraiture of infinitesimal movement specific to the cinema. Through the act of looking into these faces, the eyes often assume a central role, becoming the culminating moment in facial contemplation, from the large and sad liquid eyes of ZaSu Pitts in *Lazybones* to the ravaged beauty of Gail Russell’s equally liquid eyes in *Moonrise* (1948). At the end of *History Is Made at Night* (1937), Charles Boyer and Jean Arthur are going down on what they believe to be a sinking ocean liner. As they gaze at one another’s faces, as though attempting to take them in for one final time, Arthur asks Boyer, “Did you always look like this, your eyes?”

It is inevitable, then, that these beautiful and impassive faces of Borzage’s call out to be touched and throughout his body of work we find images in which the face is not simply an object of contemplation for the camera but also one in which the face is literally being touched by others. In *Little Man, What Now?*, for example, Douglass Montgomery repeatedly touches Margaret Sullivan’s face with his handkerchief, a gesture paralleled and somewhat parodied in the same film by DeWitt C. Jennings performing the same actions to Montgomery’s face. While in *History Is Made at Night* we find a merging of face and hand as first Boyer and then later Arthur draw a face directly onto their own hands which then assumes the role of a character they name Coco. But the hand in Borzage also assumes its own expressive functions through the subtle and expressive use of gesture. In *Lucky Star* (1929), the act of Charles Farrell washing Janet Gaynor’s hands for their first lunch together becomes a major step in bringing the two together and in Gaynor’s transformation from child into woman. *Lazybones* is among the most interesting of Borzage’s films in this regard in which gesture not only serves its immediate emotional function within a sequence but acquires structural meaning over the course of the narrative. In particular, the film draws a strong link between Pitts’s repeated gesture of placing her hand to her mouth at moments of emotional crisis and the same gesture being performed by her illegitimate daughter who is otherwise unaware that Pitts is her real mother.

But in this cinema of the body, Borzage’s concern with the emotional possibilities of the face and the gesturing hand will also manifest itself in a concern with the opposite end of the body. Belton, for example, has drawn attention to the repeated tight close-ups of not only hands but also feet in *Moonrise* as part of the “psychological intensity” of the images. (p. 112) Both Borzage and Fritz Lang filmed Molnar’s play *Liliom*, Borzage in 1930, Lang in 1933 and the intensity of male/female relations in the work of both directors has some points of contact. But for Lang, a footprint is invariably related to its status as a clue in a crime scene, something marked for death or capture. Footprints in the mud dominate the opening images of Lang’s 1941 anti-Nazi film, *Man Hunt*. But in Borzage’s anti-Nazi film of a year earlier, *The Mortal Storm*, footprints are quickly covered over by the falling snow, the merest trace or memory of the body that once placed them there. Our relationship to the physical in Borzage, to the totality of the body from top to bottom, is almost always in place. The comic nature of DeWitt C. Jennings in *Little Man, What Now?*, for example, is reinforced through the low-angle shots of his feet, while in *History Is Made at Night* the gesture of Jean Arthur kicking off her shoes to dance with Boyer barefoot becomes a crucial step in the intensification of their attraction for one another. Just before Janet Gaynor is taken off to prison in *Street Angel* she has an hour in which to say goodbye to Charles Farrell. A pivotal moment in this sequence occurs when he lies on their bed and she removes his boots, clutching and stroking his feet as she fights back tears while Farrell speaks of a possible male child they’ll have, “a funny boy with big feet” like him. And again *Lazybones* is central in which we find repeated shots of Buck Jones’s feet perched against a tree, marking his Rip Van Winkle nature even more firmly than his face. There is a well known publicity still from *A Farewell to Arms* showing Gary Cooper running his finger along the top of a woman’s foot as he looks up into her face, which is out of frame. While the image suggests something of the fetishistic world of Luis Buñuel, its function within *A Farewell to Arms* itself is not quite of this order. Cooper’s character in the film is an architect by profession (“The most ancient of arts,” he says, an almost Masonic statement) and he discusses the foot here in architectural terms, emphasizing the beauty of a foot’s arch.

We may isolate, then, a certain tension in Borzage’s work between the body as a form of architecture while architecture itself becomes an extension of the body. In much of
the literature on Borzage we find the argument being put forth that the reality of space in his cinema exists ultimately in order to be dissolved through the spiritual power of the desires of the romantic couple: “All of Borzage’s objects are abstract non-representational entities of light and dark which are connected not by any spatial mechanics but by the generalised spiritual sense which seems to pervade the whole frame.” (Camper, p. 343.) Without wishing to completely disagree with this reading, I would also want to equally stress the tangibility of this world, the sheer presence of not only the bodies that inhabit these spaces but also the spaces themselves. As has often been noted, throughout Borzage we find the characters driven towards spaces which are marked purely by the force of the protagonists’ desires, most emblematically the top floor apartments of Seventh Heaven and Little Man, What Now? which literally lift the romantic couple above the harsh realities of the world below. But while often rendered in abstract and stylized terms, these spaces in Borzage rarely dissolve by the forces of desire, however much the protagonists may explicitly articulate such a desire. It may be more accurate to write that architecture and decor are, at the height of their expressivity, simultaneously made to measure the protagonists’ desires while also existing within their own right. The Shining Hour (1938) has two major works of architecture which stand at the center of the narrative conflicts. The one is the longtime (and luxurious) family home into which New Yorker Joan Crawford enters as the wife of son Melvyn Douglas, initially as a flight from the sterility of her New York existence; and the other is the unfinished new home, close to the family residence, in construction as the eventual refuge for Douglas and Crawford. It is the second of these which, while still not completed, is burned to the ground by Crawford’s hostile sister-in-law, unwilling to accept the working-class Crawford as a member of the family, causing both Douglas and Crawford to finally leave Wisconsin. Architecture, then, may function as the site of oppression as much as a potential refuge. “Born on the second floor, probably died on the fifth. Two lives spent climbing three flights of stairs,” is James Dunn’s hypothetical description of life and death in a tenement in Bad Girl, a line Dunn utters as he and Sally Eilers are standing on the stairs in the lobby of her tenement.

Staircases assume a privileged role throughout Borzage’s work, available to be read in multiple ways. Within Masonic rites, spiritual ascension is often represented through a staircase which “symbolizes the axis of the world uniting Heaven and Earth” (p. 436) with the famous staircase leading to Charles Farrell’s rooftop flat in Seventh Heaven perfectly corresponding to this simultaneous physical and spiritual ascension. The basic sense of movement in so much of Borzage is as vertical as it is horizontal, with spaces often conceived in terms of extreme levels and the characters frequently ascending and descending. Apart from its relationship to the Masonic, one may also see this fascination with levels and verticaity as part of the films’ relationship to the world of the fairy tale and sentimental romance, which so often depend upon motifs of falling and ascending, and of transformations and renewal. At the same time, in much of melodrama staircases often function as crucial spaces of transition between levels, architectural symbols of psychological and class conflicts, as the line from Bad Girl quoted above indicates. The crane shots of Joan Crawford ascending and descending the stairs to her family’s New York tenement in Mannequin establish even more clearly than the space of the apartment itself the sense of economic despair that Crawford feels.

Much of the writing on Borzage tends to de-politicize his work, seeing in him a filmmaker whose primary impulse is to avoid the overtly ideological: Borzage as the director “with absolutely no interest in the workings of everyday life” (Jones, p. 33) and who “was only attracted to the universal and the everlasting” (Dumont, p. 404.) One need look no further than Bad Girl, however, with its detailed attention to working class life, its de-glamorized performances, and its engaging use of vernacular dialogue to see how Borzage may often show a great deal of interest in the workings of everyday life. (Lightning, it should be noted, is one recent critic who challenges this de-politicized view of Borzage.) Borzage was of Swiss, German, Italian and Austrian heritage (four nationalities that would assume an important background for the World War I setting of A Farewell to Arms). Throughout his work, as with a number of filmmakers of his generation, one finds a strong desire to document certain aspects of the American immigrant experience in which the relationship between American and European culture is a frequent dynamic: Europe comes to America, America goes to Europe. This may play itself out in the nature of the images themselves. As Dumont’s research has shown, Borzage ultimately decided against shooting Seventh Heaven in Paris but instead constructed a version of it on the Fox lot. What we get in the film is not a documentary-like recreation of that city but an American’s dream of it instead. It is this kind of imaginary European world concocted by Americans that Borzage would also draw upon for the Italy of Street Angel and the Germany of Little Man, What Now?, Three Comrades and The Moral Storm, in the latter three films the fantasy gradually giving way to nightmare as the rise of Nazism intrudes more strongly into each succeeding film.

But the relationship between Europe and America occurs within the narrative content of the films as well. It is to America that Joan Crawford and Clark Gable want to flee in Strange Cargo (1940). Europe literally comes to America in one of the high points of History Is Made at Night as French head waiter Boyer and Italian chef Leo Carrillo transform a faltering New York restaurant, with bad bouillabaisse and even worse service, into a first-rate establishment with a decidedly European flair. Borzage’s first major commercial breakthrough occurred in 1920 with Frances Marion’s adaptation of the Fannie Hurst story of Jewish immigrants, Humoresque, with its still-astonishing early location shots of the Lower East Side. Borzage most often depicts a culture that is fundamentally multi-ethnic and at the center of which are sharply drawn class and economic conflicts.
Some of these details are purely comic in nature, as in the Jewish Chinese restaurant in *Mannequin*, with the waiter Horowitz in Chinese attire serving gefilte fish, Mandarin-style. But in such ostensibly minor films as *Stranded* (1935) and *Big City* (1937), the issue of immigration, of America as a space of refuge and of oppression in which notions of work and community are central, is at the very core of what those films are about. Dumont acknowledges the presence of such issues in Borzage’s work, describes them all in some detail (even quoting Borzage’s interest in the matter), and then finally dismisses them all, arguing that “in the end he shows only limited interest in social mechanisms or class struggles.” (p. 410) One wonders here whether it is a certain critical method that is showing “only limited interest” in these issues while a vital part of the films is being half erased.

That Borzage’s characters often express a desire to escape from the problems of the political, the social or the economic is obvious. What the overall positions of the films themselves are in relation to this desire is a subject for debate. “I was thinking of how nice it would be,” says Margaret Sullivan in *Three Comrades*, “to pick a time to be born. I’d pick a time of reason and quiet.” The notion of transcendence from the material world as articulated through alternate experiences of time is one which turns up in a number of Borzage films. In *Three Comrades*, for example, we find a strong relationship between how the characters perceive historical time and how they perceive personal time. The protagonists are regulars at a cafe precisely because it has no clock. A frequent customer in the cafe is a veteran of World War I whose only calendar is one shaped by the dates and battles of the war. The love between Sullivan and Robert Taylor forms the ultimate transcendence from the confused political situation of post-war Germany, a relationship in which “it isn’t day, it isn’t night. It’s the age of eternity.” The sheer intensity of physical and romantic attraction attempting to obliterate the restrictions of time and space recurs in Borzage and has clear relations to fairy tale and myth as well to more immediate manifestations in Romanticism and Surrealism. (As is well known, André Breton regarded the resolution of *Seventh Heaven* as a primary example of *l’amour fou*.) It is important, however, not to succumb too strongly to the allure of withdrawal from the social that the characters give voice to since it is by no means certain that the films are thoroughly devoted to a simple transcendence through love. *Moonrise* could not be clearer on this matter. Rex Ingram’s statement, “The worst crime is to resign from the human race,” is one which is borne out by the development of the film. Dane Clark’s initial desire simply to withdraw into the physical intimacy of his relationship with Gail Russell rather than face the consequences of his murder of Lloyd Bridges is eventually shown to be unrealizable. At the end, Clark “comes clean” and admits to the murder of Bridges. But by doing so he and Russell are able to even more firmly express their love for one another, seeing themselves and the world around them with a previously unknown clarity as the film closes on the image of the sun rising. “It’s wonderful to see your face, Dan,” says Russell, “To really see it.” This resolution encapsulates a fundamental aspect to Borzage’s cinema: if one transcends through intense love and physical passion one does so most thoroughly and profoundly by a direct confrontation with the social rather than by a flight from it.

The issues at stake in Borzage’s cinema, far from being old fashioned, could hardly be more urgent. In particular, they repeatedly address the implications of extreme sexual and romantic desires in relation to cultural or political environments that cannot fully account for these desires. In their fusion of the erotic and transcendent, and in their very instability, these desires repeatedly threaten to destabilize the social order. That Borzage’s films are also beautiful pieces of cinema, acts of seduction performed on the viewer, only intensifies the audacity of what Borzage has achieved. Borzage the Old-Fashioned Romantic? How about, for argument’s sake, Borzage the Romantic Modernist?

**Geoff Andrew:** “A Farewell to Arms: a greater film than Hemingway knew” (British Film Institute)

David Thomson – he of the Biographical Dictionary of Film and many other fine books on the cinema – has written a characteristically illuminating article for the June issue of *Sight & Sound* about the way the First World War has been depicted in the movies. Its fascination lies not only in the sheer range of films covered by Thomson – whose encyclopaedic knowledge of certain areas of cinema history is rightly renowned – but in his reminder that movies so often tell us lies.

The cinema’s most frequent resort to dishonesty concerns human mortality, and not only because Hollywood and its imitators have long believed that there’s probably more money to be made from a happy ending than from a downbeat one. Death, in fact, is incredibly common in the movies. Its fascination lies not only in the sheer range of films covered by Thomson – whose encyclopaedic knowledge of certain areas of cinema history is rightly renowned – but in his reminder that movies so often tell us lies.

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And that’s one reason why war – where death proliferates – has given rise to all manner of cinematic deceits. (There are other reasons, of course, particularly those linked to propagandistic purposes, but I won’t go into those here.) And it’s presumably why, as Thomson mentions in his article, Ernest Hemingway – who prided himself in a certain kind of tough-talking, no-nonsense honesty – had little time for Frank Borzage’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1932), adapted from the partly
autobiographical novel he’d had published a couple of years previously.

But perhaps we shouldn’t set too much store by his disdain: writers are often dismissive of adaptations of their work, especially if the story in question was, as here, based on personal memories and experiences. Besides, even if one accepts that a film isn’t wholly faithful to its source, it doesn’t automatically follow that it’s not a good film. Let’s not forget that some extremely fine movies have been made from not very good books, and that many great literary works have been deemed ‘unfilmable’. The quality of the one has little to do with the quality of the other; it’s possible that a film and its source may both be equally good (or equally bad, for that matter), but for entirely different reasons. A book and a film are not at all the same thing, and we expect and get different things from them.

So, in assessing Borzage’s *A Farewell to Arms*, considerations of whether it’s faithful to, or even as good as, the source novel are not of primary concern. What counts is surely how well the film works as a film. And I for one believe it works extremely well in that regard; it’s a masterpiece, as fine as anything the now underrated Borzage made.

One of the finest and most successful American directors of the late 20s and 30s, he’s now largely forgotten, partly because his films are rarely shown and so difficult to see, and partly, perhaps, because his distinctive, almost mystical brand of transcendent romanticism isn’t fashionable (even though many filmgoers are perfectly happy to watch more recent works of a supposedly ‘spiritual’ nature).

Yet it’s this very quality – his profound commitment to the passionate emotional lives of his characters, so strong that he often allows love to triumph, in its own incandescent way, over poverty, despair, oppression, even death itself – that makes his films so remarkably moving, and, somewhat unexpectedly, so remarkably modern. *A Farewell to Arms* is a heartrendingly brilliant example of his artistry. It has a lot going for it anyway: sexy, insolent Gary Cooper as the American serving with the Italian ambulance brigade; Helen Hayes as the sweet but surprisingly direct British nurse he falls for; Adolphe Menjou as the protagonist’s meddling, intriguingly jealous friend (he repeatedly calls the Coop character “Baby” and stays awake at nights awaiting his return).

The evocation of the war-gutted landscape is memorable; though the opening scene may now show its age through the use of models, other sequences are distinguished by a nightmarishly strange Expressionism suggestive of a highly physical, agonised brutality. Lighting, composition, camera movement and choreography of the performers contribute to a mise-en-scène of enormously expressive intensity.

And then there is an astonishing climactic Liebestod. Whereas other filmmakers, as noted earlier, have tended to use the prospect of death as a button to produce tears, pity, anxiety or whatever in the viewer, and have avoided confronting the very real finality of a human’s life on earth, Borzage gets in there and grapples with it, rather as a Carl Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman or Terence Davies might do. If they come to different conclusions, that’s not what concerns me here; what matters is that in acknowledging the inevitability of death, their films tend to tell the truth as they see it. In Borzage’s *A Farewell to Arms*, that truth is at once as painful, as regenerative and, finally, as unfathomably mysterious as love itself.

### Coming Up in the Spring 2019 Buffalo Film Seminars (series 38)

Feb 12 Gregory La Cava *My Man Godfrey* 1936  
Feb 19 John Huston *The African Queen* 1951  
Feb 26 Jean-Luc Godard *Breathless* 1960  
Mar 5 Luis Buñuel *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* 1972  
Mar 12 David Lean *Dr. Zhivago* 1965  
Mar 26 Arturo Ripstein *Time to Die* 1966  
Apr 2 Michelangelo Antonioni *Blow-Up* 1966  
Apr 9 Michael Cimino *The Deer Hunter* 1978  
Apr 16 Terry Jones *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* 1983  
Apr 23 Stanley Kubrick *Eyes Wide Shut* 1999  
Apr 30 Frederick Wiseman *Monrovia, Indiana* 2018  
May 7 Alfonso Cuarón *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 2004

CONTACTS:...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com...for cast and crew info on any film: [http://imdb.com](http://imdb.com/)

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