

Dorothy Davenport: From Social Conscience to Exploitation Pioneer

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Over the last few years, I have become increasingly interested in the independent, low-budget film industry of the 1930s. As I began to view the available films and read the scant research on this unique period of cinema's forgotten history, I repeatedly came across several references to Dorothy Davenport, a.k.a. Mrs. Wallace Reid, as director, producer, and writer. Who was this woman? Where did she come from? And why is there so little critical work on her career? Well, that was a few years ago, and research on the films of Dorothy Davenport has since proliferated. I should add that although the majority of the work has focused on her career in the silent period, my interest in Davenport focuses on her participation in the B movie and exploitation films of the early 1930s. She was one of a number of silent filmmakers who found themselves unable to meet the demands of the new "All-Talking" Hollywood picture. It was for this reason that Davenport, like so many others, found her way into the emerging B film industry. Overall, my research has focused on the emergence of the independent B movie industry and its relationship to the Hollywood studio system, the Exploitation film industry, and most importantly the connection between the B films of the 1930s and the films of the silent era. Correspondingly, my research has revealed that Dorothy Davenport played a substantial role in the development of these low-budget independent films. In this article, I would therefore like to concentrate on the portion of

Davenport's career that sees her move from producer of social conscience films in the 1920s to director and producer of B-grade genre and exploitation films in the 1930s. This will inevitably lead me to say some words about the direction I will be taking my future research on the B movie industry of the 30s.

Davenport began her film career as an actress in the early silent period, a rival to "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford. However, after the tragic, drug-related death of her husband, matinee idol Wallace Reid, Davenport embarked on a career as an independent film producer, and later, director. I feel it is important to stress that she worked independently, on the margins of the Hollywood studio system. In the late 1920s and into the 1930s, independent film producers maintained a complicated relationship with financially powerful Hollywood studios. Often this relationship was parasitic, with the independents employing Hollywood's numerous cast-offs and producing films that big studios were not interested in making. For this reason, independent productions of the time typically took the form of cheaply produced genre films: westerns, murder mysteries, horror films, and exploitation pictures.

Davenport's foray into independent film production was not motivated by a need for artistic integrity; rather, it was a socially motivated and calculated personal crusade against the horrors of the drug trade. With the assistance of the Los Angeles Anti-Narcotics League and independent producer Thomas H. Ince, Davenport produced the now lost anti-drug treatise *Human Wreckage* in 1923. The film tells the story of a

number of people who succumb to the evils of drug addiction, and although it did not directly discuss the circumstances of Wallace Reid's addiction, the star's notoriety certainly helped at the box-office. From the images preserved in *Human Wreckage's* production stills, the film appears to have featured an impressive Calagariesque streetscape, here used to represent a drug induced nightmare. It appears that the film was in no way hampered by low production values, unlike many of Davenport's later films. Most importantly however, the production proved to be immensely popular and profitable for both Ince and Davenport, and allowed her to continue the production of her "Sins of the World" film series.

Davenport followed *Human Wreckage* with the 1924 film *Broken Laws*. As Kevin Brownlow documents, during her personal appearances with *Human Wreckage*, Davenport became conscious of the plight of the juvenile delinquent ^[1]. As a result, she produced and starred in *Broken Laws*, the story of a young man's downward spiral, featuring fast cars, loose women, and plenty of booze. Although emotionally effective, the film was not as financially successful as her earlier work. Moreover, as Brownlow points out:

[Davenport] was a reformer at heart, but she had a showman's outlook. Brought up in the theatre, and a pioneer in Hollywood she believed that the primary mission of the screen was to entertain. Combining propaganda with entertainment was a difficult exercise in an industry ruled on one side by Hays and on the other by exhibitors, and it was not surprising that her later pictures—such as *The Red Kimono*—veered toward exploitation. ^[2]

Moreover, the move towards more entertainment-oriented films brought an end to Davenport's working relationship with Thomas Ince and the "Sins of the World" series. After Ince's death, she branched out into her own production company.

In 1925, Davenport produced and co-directed *The Red Kimono*, her earliest surviving film. The film centred on Gabrielle Darley, a young woman forced into white slavery, who during a moment of impassioned rage, murders her husband/pimp. After serving time in jail, she finds herself unable to readjust to normal society and heads back to New Orleans' notorious red-light district, Storyville, only to be eventually saved by the man who loves her. As Brownlow observes, the budget of *The Red Kimono* was much slimmer than Davenport's earlier films and this is most evident in the painted

library set used for the producer/director's cautionary introduction to the film. Moreover, the film's strong emphasis on the more lurid details of the white slave racket, the heroine's descent into Storyville and the murder of the husband/pimp, were signs of the shift from the pathos and melodrama of the social conscience films to the sensationalism and titillation of the burgeoning exploitation industry. Her next film was *The Earth Woman* in 1926. While there is little information to be found on this film, we can assume from the fact that it was the last film produced exclusively by her company, Mrs. Wallace Reid Productions, that it was not a financial success.

As an independent producer, Davenport was well acquainted with the difficulties of being outside the Hollywood studio system, and as Brownlow states, she was more of a showman than a social reformer. This bent towards entertainment becomes evident in her later film work. Although Davenport had entered production as an advocate for the less fortunate by making films that exposed the horrors of drug use, juvenile delinquency, and white slavery, her chosen subjects were being co-opted by a new breed of low-budget B movie and exploitation producers. In 1929, Davenport joined forces with low-budget film producer Willis Kent, head of one of the most important independent production companies of the early 30s and an original member of exploitation cinema's "Forty Thieves." Their first collaboration was the convoluted and meandering melodrama *LINDA* (1929). The story focuses on a young hillbilly girl, forced into a loveless marriage with a lumberjack. Although repellent, the tree cutter turns out to be a lonely and warm-hearted fellow; nevertheless she runs off to the big city. Although the film, full of plot twists so strange as to make viewers dizzy, was made with one of the largest budgets Willis Kent would ever work with, *Linda* was a pretty 'cheap' film compared with Hollywood's output at the time.

Nonetheless, Davenport's association with Willis Kent was a successful one. After *Linda*, Davenport directed or co-directed three more films: *Sucker Money* in 1933, *Road To Ruin* and *The Woman Condemned*, both from 1934. Although none of these films can be considered cinematic masterpieces, they are all representative of the low-budget genre films of the period. Despite the fact that these lurid pulp films have been critically neglected, I find them absolutely fascinating and irresistible. The first, *Sucker Money*, was subtitled "an exposé of the psychic racket" and is an unofficial sequel to the earlier Willis Kent pot-boiler, *Sinister Hands* (1932). In the first film, Mischa Auer played the sinister, but

deceptive, character of the fake swami, Yomurda. In Davenport's sequel, it is revealed that the fake mystic is in fact a diabolical and ruthless criminal mastermind. His fake mysticism and bogus séances are a front for his stock fraud and kidnapping operations. However, justice prevails and after a great car chase, the police gun down the evil swami, who dies squirming in a ditch. Although the narrative is similar to many mystery/horror hybrids of the period, *Sucker Money* is unique as an exposé on the fake spiritualist movement quite popular at the time. The film's daring revelation of this particular social blight raises the question as to who among those responsible for the film can take credit for exploiting these nefarious scams. I have reason to believe that we can assume that this sensationalism was the work of Willis Kent more so than Davenport, who was attempting to profit from her earlier reputation as a social reformer. Manipulation of Davenport's crusader image would again be exploited in their next collaboration.

The Road To Ruin was a remake of Willis Kent's 1928 film of the same name and centres on two young teenage girls who are neglected by their parents and run afoul of moral decency. (Davenport was not involved in the production of the earlier version.) As Eric Shaefer points out, the sound version was a virtual shot-for-shot remake of the silent film ^[3]. Interestingly, Davenport plays Mrs. Merrill, the jailhouse matron of young girls, who labels the two girls as sexual delinquents and sternly lectures their neglectful mothers (again, following her role as social advocate). Undoubtedly, the prestige and respectability of Davenport's reputation would have assisted in imbuing the proceedings with a certain authenticity, as well as serving to guarantee a substantial box-office boost. Davenport's final directorial effort was *The Woman Condemned*, a convoluted murder mystery surrounding mistaken identity, plastic surgery and twins.

After working with Willis Kent, Davenport gave up the director's chair for the role of producer. She first worked at Monogram Pictures, producing comedies, melodramas, and westerns. After the company declared bankruptcy, she accepted a multi-film contract with the new company Republic Studios, but she produced only one film, *THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND CANDLES* (1936). Then she returned to the newly reformed Monogram to produce several more films. In 1938, she gave up production and became a screenwriter working on the scripts of many independent and Hollywood studio B movies until the mid-50s.

Generally speaking, the independent low-budget films of the 1930s are a curious lot, but they have often offended critics and scholars due to their continued devotion to silent film aesthetics. Performances tended to be histrionic and still evoked pantomime, and direction was often stagey, slow, and encumbered by the injection of sound and dialogue. Many critics from the period labelled these films as old-fashioned in comparison to the more advanced Hollywood films—an attitude that has received little opposition over the years and that has, in fact, been perpetuated by the limited scholarship on figures like Davenport and on the early B film industry in general. *Forgotten Horrors*, written by George Turner and Michael Price and published in 1999, offers little in the way of new insights into films of this ilk, electing to criticise them for the fact that they often fail to challenge silent cinema's aesthetic principles. In their discussion of *Sucker Money*, for instance, they note that the evil swami Yomurda's exaggerated wickedness owes largely to the influence of co-director Dorothy Reid and that the film suffers from clumsily forced writing (by producer Kent) and inept direction ^[4]. With regards to Reid's later film, *The Woman Condemned*, they state that a certain 20s aura clings to it ^[5]. However, these criticisms are for naught. As Brian Taves explains, the B filmmakers of the 30s were not prized for their artistic and stylistic innovation; value was placed in their experience and ability to simply get the job done ^[6]. Furthermore, the preservation of this "antiquated" style worked in a positive sense that many have overlooked: the creation of something of a hybrid set of aesthetic values. The mixing of the old-fashioned look of the silent film and the new technologies of sound recording created a contradictory and unstable cinematic image, one that borders on the aesthetic interests of surrealism. Hence, when examining Davenport's film work, I think that rather than focusing on her antiquated reliance upon silent film aesthetics, we should see these lagging old fashioned techniques as evidence that these films were open to a new aesthetic discourse, one that leads to the fringes of the surreal.

In addition, my research has revealed that the urban representation of the B and exploitation cinema of the early 30s parallels French novelist and essayist Pierre Mac Orlan's literary concept of the "Social Fantastic:"

For Mac Orlan, the notion of the social fantastic is the presence of the undefined, the mysterious and the threatening beneath the surface of modern society. It is the sinister, inexplicable nature of this phenomenon, the insidious threat

as opposed to total, explicit horror that renders it more disturbing.^[7]

For Davenport, beginning with her early social conscience films, the modern city was a place of sexual threats and impending danger. We could consider the Caligariesque dream-city in *Human Wreckage*, or the following, from *The Red Kimono* (I cite Kevin Brownlow):

The picture suffers from a lack of realism, mainly in its art direction. It would have been a relatively simple matter to re-create the red-light district on location in a run down part of town; instead, it is reproduced on an unconvincing set. Perhaps Mrs. Reid remembered the lawsuits that followed the first spate of white slave pictures, when owners of restaurants used as locations took companies to court and won. The trouble with the film is that all the other exteriors were shot on location, and the blatant artificiality destroys conviction.^[8]

Certainly, the decision to have the Storyville location as a studio set may have been motivated by the possibilities of impending lawsuits, but I disagree with Brownlow when he states that the artificiality of Storyville destroys the film's believability. Instead, I offer this interpretation: when the film moves from its actual location settings of Los Angeles to the back lot staging of the red-light district, the result is the evocation of the social fantastic, which, as we have seen, has little regard for standards associated with 'realism.' In the film, Storyville is not only a locus of ill repute, but the location of the mysterious, sinister and threatening, which manifests itself in the attempted rape of the heroine. Therefore, we can see *The Red Kimono* as an early cinematic manifestation of the social fantastic; the representation of the modern city as a place where danger and uncertainty lurks in the shadows. I should also add that the social fantastic finds its way into the genre films of the emerging B industry, and Davenport's later films are populated with characters looming from the urban spaces of the social fantastic: the evil swami in *Sucker Money*, the drug-peddling cad in *Road To Ruin*, and the sexually frustrated and murderous gangster in *The Woman Condemned*— they all evoke the hidden dangers of the modern city.

To conclude, my initial examination of the low-budget film industry of the 1930s has revealed that Dorothy Davenport played an important role in developing this emerging cinema. Her films are exemplary of certain narratives, aesthetic forms, and themes that were developed in the silent era, all of which, as

abandoned by the new technology-seeking Hollywood studios, were maintained by the filmmakers of the low-budget independent cinema of the 1930s. In addition, the maintenance of this old-fashioned style and the subsequent evocation of the surreal and the "Social Fantastic" make these wonderful and lurid pulp films worthy of further critical investigation.

FOOTNOTES

1 Brownlow, Kevin. *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 173.

2 Brownlow 175.

3 Schaefer, Eric. *‘Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!': A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 58.

4 Turner, George E. and Michael H. Price. *Forgotten Horrors: The Definitive Edition*. Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999. 100.

5 Turner, and Price 136.

6 Taves, Brian. "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half." *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Ed. Tino Balio. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. 329-330.

7 Baines, Roger W. *Inquietude in the Work of Pierre Mac Orlan*. Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000. 36.

8 Brownlow 92