

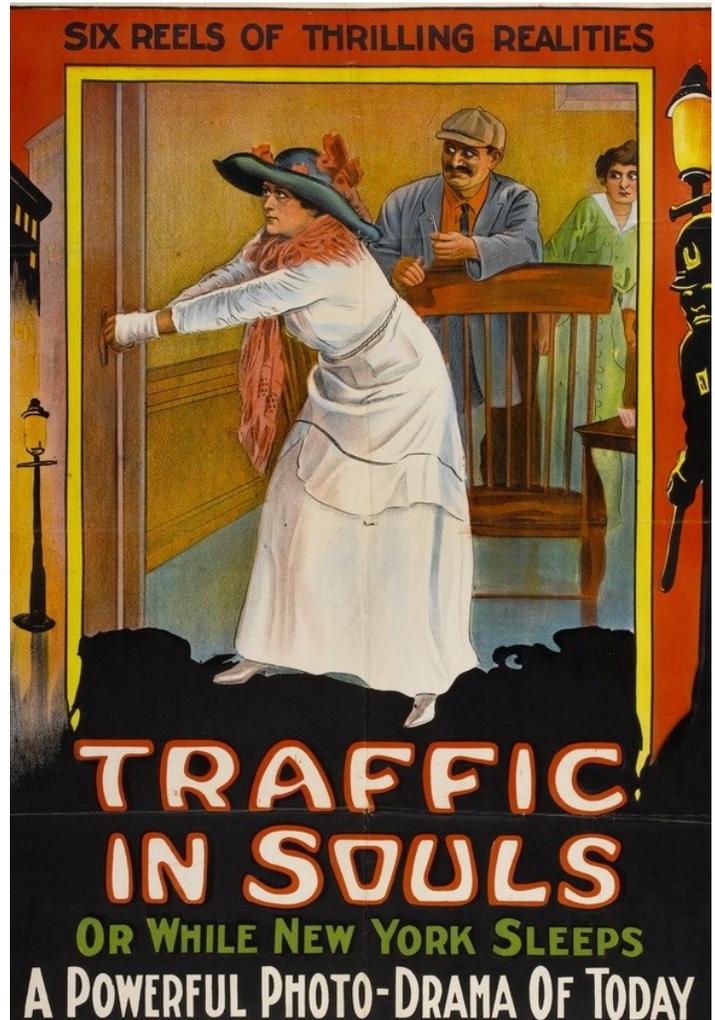
Traffic in Souls

By Marilyn Ferdinand

The United States as we know it today was founded on the hopes of immigrants hoping to make a better life than the one they left in scores of countries around the world. With the renewed hopes and vitality of newcomers to the country inevitably arises anxiety of established Americans that the life they have so carefully established will be upended by the unfamiliar ways of each wave of immigration. This was certainly true in the first decade or so of the 20th century, when immigration set off a wave of concern that the pimps who were luring off-the-boat female immigrants into prostitution would start preying on the flower of white American maidenhood. George Loane Tucker's 1913 "Traffic in Souls," (aka *While New York Sleeps*) one of our earliest feature-length films, pretended a concern with so-called white slavery while offering audiences the titillation they craved in this era of the earliest film femme fatale—the vamp. "Traffic in Souls" was a huge hit in its time, providing a solid foundation on which Universal Pictures was built, and earning its place on the National Film Registry as a culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant film.

"Traffic in Souls" is equal parts melodrama, social indictment, and documentary, which makes it a fascinating film as a crowd pleaser with actual relevance. The film stratifies the worlds of respectable American society, carpetbaggers in morning suits and silk, squalid criminals, and isolated and vulnerable immigrants. The Barton family comprises an invalid inventor father (William H. Turner), responsible eldest daughter Mary (Jane Gail), who is engaged to sincere Officer Burke (Matt Moore), and devil-may-care younger daughter Lorna (Ethel Grandin). Lorna is put in danger when she is spotted in the candy store where she and Mary work by the manager of a prostitution ring (Howard Crampton) run by the wealthy social climber William Trubus (William Welsh), who hides his activities by heading the International Purity and Reform League. Such reformist associations often were hiss-worthy villains in silent films, with meddlesome social workers tearing babies away from the bosoms of their destitute mothers with some frequency.

Before we get to the central plot—Lorna's kidnapping and rescue—Loane Tucker offers a look at how brothels operated at the time. The film, shot in New York City, offers location scenes at Ellis Island, the Upper West Side, and in Penn Station, where new-



Poster artwork used to promote the film.

comers to the big city from small American towns and other countries are waylaid by "helpful" procurers, like the seemingly safe "Respectable" Smith (William Burbridge), who offer to help them find their lodgings or take them to an employment service. Two Swedish girls (Flora Nason and Vera Hansey) looking like stereotypical milkmaids in long-braid wigs, are separated from the brother (William Powers) who meets them at the boat and lured into the brothel by a homemade sign scribbled in English and Swedish that says "Swedish Employment Agency." Inside the brothel, the film increases its veracity by showing the African-American madams and prostitutes who actually comprised the largest group of working girls in New York.

Technology plays a large role in this film. The manager writes the daily returns on a tablet that form magically on a similar tablet in Trubus' office, the imagination of the film's creators prefiguring email. Trubus is unmasked for what he is by Mary, discharged from the candy store because of the immorality attached to her sister's situation—kidnapping is

no excuse for low morals, apparently—and hired by Mrs. Trubus (Millie Liston) to replace the sexually loose secretary (Laura McVicker) she has discovered smooching with the manager. Mary learns the truth and brings a microphone her father has invented to eavesdrop on Trubus and his manager—an early phone bug. We also have an early example of product placement—Edison recording cylinders are used to record the conversation the bug picks up.

The precision of the police assault on the brothel is a masterful bit of filmmaking. Loane Tucker builds suspense as the police get their orders and man various positions on top of and surrounding the brothel. When the police storm the building, the camera work is kinetic and dizzying, and Burke's pursuit of the manager to the roof ends in a quick, realistic way with the manager ending as a slick on the cement below, a scene with which moviegoers are now quite familiar.

The ruin of Trubus is the ruin of his family as well—his daughter's (Irene Wallace) betrothal to the season's most eligible bachelor unceremoniously ended and an outraged mob screaming for blood at his predatory hypocrisy, his wife killed by the shock and shame of the double life he has been leading. The audience feels that Lorna has learned her lesson about straying into a willful life of her own, redemption for having thrilled to the madam's whip hovering over her quivering, tearful form.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Marilyn Ferdinand is a Chicago-based film critic and frequent fundraiser for film preservation, partnering with the National Film Preservation Foundation and the Film Noir Foundation on several fundraising blogathons. Her reviews appear online at [Ferdy on Films](#).