

Chemistry Movies Blog

by Mark Griep,

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## ***A Modern Dr. Jekyll (1909) by Selig Polyscope***

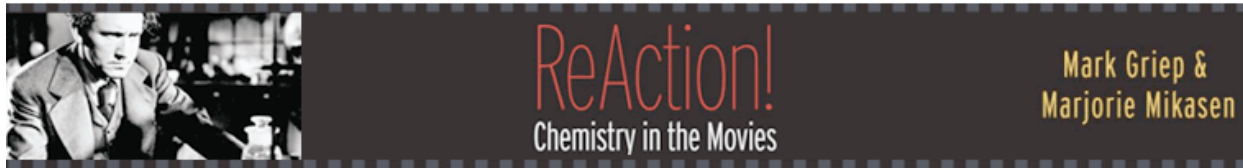
In 1909, Selig Polyscope Company of Chicago released *A Modern Dr. Jekyll*. This is surprising because one year earlier they had released *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In the absence of any information, scholars have cautiously proposed that the 1909 version was a reissue of the 1908 version although with an alternate title (Geduld, H. M., 1983, *The Definitive Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Companion*, New York: Garland; King, C., 1997, “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: A Filmography” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 25, 9-20; Dury, R. *The Film Versions of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”* continually updated at [www.unibg.it/rls](http://www.unibg.it/rls), University of Bergamo, Italy). Such practice has been documented for other Nickelodeon-era films. After a bit of sleuthing, we have discovered that *A Modern Dr. Jekyll* was actually an entirely new version of the Jekyll and Hyde story, was the first comedy version, and included the first male-to-female transformation.

During Spring 2008, Mikasen and I visited the Margaret Herrick library, run by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. The Herrick has an extensive collection of material relating to the Selig Polyscope Company, founded in 1897 by William N. Selig. He produced hundreds of one-reel films (about 1000 feet and about 15 minutes screen time) between 1905 and 1918 for the Nickelodeon market that was popular during that era. In 1912, he moved his company from Chicago to California and opened the first movie studio on the West Coast. After the move to East Los Angeles, he also began producing two-reel movies but never the longer films that soon dominated the market, and that eventually drove him out of business.

There are three sources that confirm *A Modern Dr. Jekyll* was released as a comedy in 1909. Two sources are available only in the Margaret Herrick library—the movie’s cutting continuity, and an advertisement flyer. The third item is a three-sentence review on page 960 in the 31 December 1909 issue of *The Moving Picture World*, which was a trade magazine catering to movie theaters. The film length was 471 feet, which equates to about 7 minutes screen time. It was the second half of one reel, following *Through the Hood River Valley*; and *Along the Columbia River in Oregon*, which was 529 feet, or about 8 minutes.

According to the cutting continuity, this was Selig film #326, directed by “Kenyon”, and starred “Barrows”. We have not been able to establish the identity of director Kenyon but the actor is probably Henry Arthur Barrows, who would have been 34 years old in 1909. His first acting entry in the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) is dated 1913 but he could certainly have started earlier. He appeared in a number of comedies, often as an authority figure.

According to the cutting continuity, *A Modern Dr. Jekyll* begins when Jekyll reads a letter at the post office. From there, he enters a chemist’s shop, demonstrates the formula, and then leaves. A policeman enters the post office to obtain a description of Jekyll. Meanwhile, Jekyll passes a check at the



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bank, goes home, and tries the “Mystic fluid” again. The policeman enters the bank to learn that Jekyll had just been there. When the policeman reaches Jekyll’s home, he is sent away by a woman, who transforms back to Jekyll after the policeman leaves. Jekyll rushes past a banana stand, steals a horse and buggy, and rides past the policeman who stops him. A rapid series of transformations and near captures follow, during one of which Jekyll transforms into a girl on a swing. In the end, he is captured.

The Advertising Flyer includes a picture of two men pushing a young woman on a swing. The photo is adjacent to the pitch: “A Modern Dr. Jekyll; The Funniest Comedy of Them All.”

The three-sentence review in *The Moving Picture World* (31 December 1909, page 960) claims: “It is one of those pictures that compels attention by its absurdity and then keeps up a roar of laughter by its pure fun.”

With this blog then, I have resolved the long-standing debate whether *A Modern Dr. Jekyll* (1909) was a reissue. It was in fact an altogether new version of the Jekyll and Hyde story and no less than the first comedy version.