



WILEY BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO FILM DIRECTORS

A Companion to D.W. Griffith

Edited by
Charlie Keil

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to D.W. Griffith

Wiley Blackwell Companions to Film Directors

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Preface

Paolo Cherchi Usai

Time has not been kind to D.W. Griffith. His reputation among non-specialists is tainted by the infamy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation*, the film you love to despise because of its inflammatory racial politics. The curse had taken full effect through the hate mail and phone threats received by Griffith in his room at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Los Angeles, where the secluded drunkard spent the last days of his life; Jack Shea, president of the Directors Guild of America, formalized the verdict on December 14, 1999 with the announcement that the D.W. Griffith Award, established in 1953 and recently conferred to Stanley Kubrick, would be renamed as the DGA Lifetime Achievement Award, because Griffith “helped foster intolerable racial stereotypes.” Griffith is *persona non grata* in film museums, too. Public showings of *The Birth of a Nation* are an unlikely and highly unwelcome occurrence in the United States. Reconstructing the film’s original version is not an impossible feat (the available versions are mostly from the amended 1921 reissue), but the film’s centennial came and went, with no restoration project in sight.

If the editor, authors, and publisher of this book are to be applauded for its very appearance, it’s because at the present time – with or without *The Birth of a Nation* – D.W. Griffith is a profoundly unfashionable film director. Outside the realm of academic literature, critical assessment of his work is dependent upon two mirroring mantras. For a silent majority, Griffith’s shorts of the so-called Biograph period all look alike, but we can’t really appreciate *Intolerance* without ticking off some of the early work. Conversely, a small but vocal patrol of devotees has argued that the Biograph years are Griffith’s most inventive, and that he might as well have retired after *Broken Blossoms* and *Way Down East*. Both approaches have an element of truth. They do, however, perpetuate the parallel myths of a deterministic creative trajectory (with *Intolerance* as the

fulfillment of Biograph's promises) and of film style as a poetic messenger of conservative ideals (with *The Birth of a Nation* as their most despicable expression). Either way, D.W. Griffith elicits deference rather than empathy. He may well be admired as long as he is kept at arm's length.

A different but no less depressing fate has been bestowed upon Griffith's longtime cameraman, G.W. Bitzer. The pictorial beauty of the films they made together from 1908 to the 1920s is nothing short of breathtaking, and yet very little of it can be seen today, aside from for a handful of titles. Bitzer was proud of what he could achieve with his Biograph camera and its Zeiss Tessar lenses, and was more than reluctant to settle for a Pathé replacement when Griffith left his *alma mater* company in 1913. In spite of this, generations of scholars have looked at Griffith's early films through faint 16mm reproductions of the paper prints deposited at the Library of Congress. The irony of this situation is that virtually all the films are still extant, a case with no equal in the cinema of the first two decades. Many titles survive as gorgeous-looking camera negatives. If copied properly, the paper prints are almost as beautiful. It is way too late for a resurrection of the complete works of D.W. Griffith in their original medium and format. A "critical edition" in digital form may come to exist some day. Don't hold your breath.

Back in 1996, not despite but thanks to those murky 16-mm prints, an international team of scholars undertook the task of examining every single film directed by D.W. Griffith for a multi-volume publication commissioned by the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, where all the films were screened in the best available prints. It took twelve years to complete the job. Charlie Keil was one of the most eminent collaborators in *The Griffith Project*. This book is the tangible evidence of his awareness that Pordenone's endeavor was nothing but a point of departure. D.W. Griffith is still waiting to be taken on his own terms, as we would do with Herman Melville when reading *Benito Cereno*, or with Richard Wagner when listening to *Parsifal*. To justify or condemn them won't take us far. Their ideas about art and those about society are inextricably linked to each other. We need to know more about both. Griffith's Biograph films should all be returned to the form in which Billy Bitzer wanted them to appear onscreen. An attempt should be made to restore *The Birth of a Nation* to its 1915 release version. Whether or not this will be achieved, concealing it from public sight won't make us good citizens. Our civil conscience ought to be mature enough to look into the tragedies of our past without fear.

The depth and scope of the contributions presented in this volume are the most eloquent proof that today's film scholarship is ready to undertake the task. D.W. Griffith's most undervalued works, his views on gender and morality, and the reception of his films are given here the renewed attention they have long deserved. The essays on the Biograph period are testimony to the inexhaustible source of knowledge embedded in Griffith's early output. Most heartening of all, however, is the fact that such knowledge comes

from scholars of younger generations as much as from well-established authorities in the field. In this sense, *A Companion to D.W. Griffith* is the fulfillment of *The Griffith Project*'s ultimate goal: to be a bridge between past and future research, a catalyst of intellectual discovery about one of the greatest filmmakers of all time.

Rochester, April 2015

Introduction

Charlie Keil

In a startling coincidence, the fall of 2016 saw the release of two films that explicitly referenced D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, though in distinct ways. Nate Parker's identically titled *The Birth of a Nation*, a black-authored filmic depiction of the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion, deliberately name-checks its notorious racist antecedent produced a century earlier. Replicating the title of the earlier feature is a provocative act of appropriation,¹ inverting the racial logic of the previous film while displacing its claims to cinematic singularity. Meanwhile, Ava DuVernay's *13th*, a documentary decrying the racist roots of mass incarceration in the USA, devotes a notable chunk of its running time to the role Griffith's film played in demonizing the black slave, the antecedent to today's African-American convict. Together, these films emphatically drive yet another nail into the coffin of D.W. Griffith's authorial legend, providing further confirmation of how his work, when invoked publicly, invites denigration and disdain.

It has been this way for quite some time: in 1990 Toronto's Cinemathèque Ontario launched a membership drive, offering prospective members different levels of sponsorship, each level identified by a celebrated film director's name, such as "Lang" and "Hitchcock." The highest level was labeled "Griffith," and that decision invited such a hailstorm of criticism that the campaign had to be revised, resulting in the elimination of the director's name from the list of auteurs chosen. Similarly, as Paolo Cherchi Usai recounts in the Preface, in 1999 the Directors Guild of America dropped the original name of its lifetime achievement award – inaugurated in 1953 as the D.W. Griffith Award – not because its namesake's talent was under dispute, but because his most famous film had "fostered intolerable racial stereotypes." All of these examples signal the current truism about Griffith: too important to ignore, but too controversial to revere.

If the disparagement of Griffith's first feature as a racist relic has tarnished his critical standing, the director's uneven record of achievement following the triumphant commercial success of *The Birth of a Nation* has fueled the suspicion

that his overall body of work may not warrant serious consideration. The whiff of decline sets in by 1921, the release year for *Orphans of the Storm*, the last of his features normally accorded more praise than scorn. Beset both by the opprobrium of intolerance and the stigma of artistic failure, Griffith's reputation rests more and more on the signal developments of his early career, 1908–1916. And yet, even those achievements have been scrutinized, with some scholars questioning the typicality of Griffith's contributions and challenging the idea that he proved central to the changes in cinematic form forged during those pivotal years.

Still, it is no exaggeration to say that cinema in its current state owes a tremendous debt to the accomplishments of D.W. Griffith. Griffith stands as possibly the medium's first acknowledged auteur and his contributions to the development of American film are significant for both their range and importance. No other figure defines the contours of the silent period more commandingly than Griffith, and few filmmakers pose such an historiographical challenge to scholars wishing to reconcile the role of the individual to the forces of industrial change, sociocultural context, and aesthetic norms. To properly situate Griffith is to engage with the dynamics of cinema's own development during the years when narrative became the dominant mode, when the short gave way to the feature, when film became the foremost form of mass entertainment, and when movies began to play a significant role in the cultural ethos of America. Griffith was at the center of each of these phenomena, though his changing fortunes during the twenty-five-year period stretching from 1907 to 1931 constituted a distinct career arc, one that would become a template for many film artists whose output eventually fell out of step with the trends established by an industry courting the favor of a public primed for diversion. Eventually regarded as irrelevant by a Hollywood that he helped to establish, Griffith remains vital to our attempts to understand how cinema moved from nickelodeon fixture to a national pastime.

During the time he worked at the Biograph Company (1908–1913), Griffith became the preeminent directorial figure within the American film industry. Though not publicized by name by Biograph, Griffith's centrality to the establishment of new forms of style and narrative tied to the demands of the single-reel format became apparent as the company vaulted to the forefront of the industry. Griffith dominated the transitional era in a commanding fashion and his experimentation with editing, his facility in eliciting powerful performances from his stable of actors (particularly many of his younger actresses), and his handling of the expressive capacity of the *mise-en-scène* marked him as a figure who could convert the telling of brief narratives into an involving and dynamic process.

After his departure from Biograph, Griffith proved his self-proclaimed importance by directing two of the most influential features in the history of cinema, films that helped establish the artistic and commercial viability of the extended format and the potentially epic scale of the multi-reeler: *The Birth of*

a Nation and *Intolerance*. The former became a box-office sensation, drawing interest for its formal ambitions from critical quarters that had previously ignored motion pictures. At the same time, the film invited controversy and even outrage for its reductive vision of the still recent American Civil War and its aftermath, precisely because the narrational power of *The Birth of a Nation* rendered its understanding of racial politics – and the American body politic – so incendiary. As contested as the film's reception was, it proved that a motion picture could become a national sensation and capture the imagination of the public in a way the medium had not achieved previously. Designed as a response to criticisms of *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* was even more elaborate than its predecessor, spanning multiple historical epochs and intertwining them via a complicated temporal structure that baffled audiences even as it demonstrated the potential of cinema to move beyond straightforward storytelling into the realm of metaphor and sustained suggestive parallelism.

Intolerance's massive budget and concomitant failure at the box-office marked the beginning of a series of setbacks and reassessments of Griffith's significance to the fast-growing American film industry that would persist for the next decade. Often derided but rarely ignored, Griffith's efforts throughout the late 1910s and into the 1920s still marked him as one of the most intriguing of American directors. Yet his pertinence to an industry intent on establishing standards of efficiency and predictability remained an open question, as many found his idiosyncratic approach to filmmaking to be at odds with an era defined by studio manufacture tailored to a reliance on genres and stars. Griffith's maverick status derived as much from his distinctive style as it did his adherence to modes of expression deemed out of step with popular taste, whether the mode be Victorian melodrama (*Way Down East*, 1920), the pastoral (*True Heart Susie*, 1919), or the tone poem (*Broken Blossoms*, 1919). Nonetheless, Griffith's reputation as America's first Great Director persisted, cemented by his participation in the founding of United Artists, a company formed to resist the power of an increasingly oligopolistic film industry; significantly, Griffith was the only one of UA's originators whose fame did not derive from movie stardom.

During the 1920s, Griffith continued to make films, but his relevance to the American cultural landscape became progressively less evident. By the time that sound arrived, the trailblazer had become a relic of a bygone era, largely disregarded in the remaining years of his life. Though some of his contemporaries (DeMille, Dwan, and Ford among them) retained their popularity into the sound era, these other directors had all learned to work within the constraints of the studio system and tailor their style to the demands of classicism. Griffith, much like von Stroheim, served as proof that those who could not accommodate themselves successfully to the homogenizing forces of the now-established film industry were doomed to exist outside of it, relegated to the occasional advisory role, effectively prohibited from making features under that industry's auspices.

Years after his death, Griffith enjoyed a second life of sorts with the advent of auteurism in the 1960s, when critical recognition of a distinct authorial personality and recurring thematic preoccupations served to revive interest in directors whom history had seemingly left behind. An even greater boon to Griffith's reputation was the subsequent historical turn within film studies that led to scholarly rehabilitation of the previously under-regarded early cinema era in general and a closely observed reappraisal of Griffith's Biograph period in particular. Aided by the comparatively comprehensive existing record of Biograph's output during these years, numerous young early cinema scholars devoted book-length works to Griffith's filmmaking activity in the crucial years of 1908–1913, ensuring the director's centrality to any understanding of the transitional period.² In more recent times, the combined efforts of the multi-volume Griffith Project and an exhaustive retrospective mounted by the Giornate del Cinema Muto, both spearheaded by Cherchi Usai, have prompted wholesale reevaluation of the director's entire oeuvre.

Where, then, does that leave present-day scholars, faced with the prospect of writing about D.W. Griffith for a volume such as this? Is there anything left to discover about a figure like him, and even so, why should we bother? As it turns out, and as the essays in this volume readily attest, there is plenty yet to say. In some cases, as with studies of the director's vaunted handling of editing, a return to the study of Griffith means drilling down for an even more exact understanding of an inexhaustible topic. In others, it entails examining the director within an apt context, such as the Progressivism of early twentieth-century America that further enriches our sense of his films' social effectivity. And, in still others, it involves pursuing avenues that have remained relatively underexplored, whether it be the reception of Griffith's films in cultural contexts beyond those of the USA or the complicated gender politics of the Biograph films. While a wealth of monographs has increased our knowledge of Griffith's contributions, the type of insight produced by the variety of perspectives that an edited collection can provide has been in short supply. A *Companion to D.W. Griffith* fills this void, affording its readership a comparative and developmental study of this important figure.

Griffith then and now

To say that if Griffith hadn't existed we would have had to invent him, has become something of an historiographical truism. Griffith has played so many roles in the history of the development of the medium one has difficulty keeping track of them all: cultural legitimator, stylistic maverick, architect of classicism, original auteur, artistic martyr, industrial savior, and so on. Initial reflection on Griffith typically sought to prove the director's importance and, by extension, elevate his stature by confirming his distinctiveness. In effect, Griffith performed two functions at once: in his singularity, he bore the mantle

of creative genius, singlehandedly pulling cinema out of the morass of primitivism to which the pre-1908 years were often relegated; in his devotion to editing, he played a crucial role in the narrative of that technique's evolution, bringing the early experiments of Porter and the Brighton School to their inevitable culmination in his deft handling of crosscutting. Depending on the historical argument, Griffith served as either a crucial missing link, connecting earlier tendencies to the emergence of classical-era continuity editing, or embodied a seismic shift, heralding – and shepherding – the onset of character-centered storytelling totally divorced from the days of trick films and *féeries*.

As many have pointed out, our limited knowledge of, and access to, the output of Griffith's peers has rendered it difficult to assess accurately the director's status during the Biograph period, when he worked for the same company for nearly six years, responsible for a prodigious number of short films, the vast majority of which are still extant. No other filmmaker of the period can lay claim to a body of work so extensive and few others were lifted out of the slough of anonymity that producing companies of the day favored for their directors. As such, Griffith has benefited doubly; both from an accident of preservation that saw almost all of his Biograph films saved, and from a self-engineered campaign of promotion that ensured his work for that company would forever be tied to his name, despite Biograph's efforts to the contrary. When he departed Biograph, Griffith took out an advertisement in the trade press that explicitly catalogued his stylistic achievements; in many cases, the ad erroneously gives Griffith credit for the "invention" of techniques that preexisted his directing debut in 1908. But, as I and others have argued, the ad is less important for its tenuous claims to accuracy and much more so for its overt positioning of Griffith as the premier auteur of the cinema (Keil 2011). With this ad, Griffith established the legend of his aesthetic preeminence that would forever mark his time at Biograph as the origins of "mature film language." (Later, more sophisticated approaches would discern Griffith's voice in his films' distinctive narration.)

One finds traces of the ad's language (and legacy-building) in the early historical accounts that position Griffith as a redemptive creative force, vanquishing the backward babbling that prevailed prior to his arrival. From Terry Ramsaye to Benjamin Hampton, Lewis Jacobs to Georges Sadoul, Arthur Knight to David Cook, historiographical orthodoxy anointed Griffith as the founding father of both a normative cinema (because its language was recognizable) and a cinema predicated on a personal vision (because its language was distinctive). Jennifer Bean, in this volume's first chapter, focuses productively on Griffith's nominal status as the medium's patriarch, contemplating both how Griffith figures in histories of cinema's form and as a touchstone for changing critical approaches, from structuralism to feminism. Such an approach demonstrates how Griffith's "utility" for film studies continues to transmute over time, a measurement of both the director's changing status and the shifting priorities of the discipline.

Ben Singer takes up Griffith's changeability as well, but Singer's exacting focus on Griffith as a (multi-faceted) moralist forces us to reexamine our judgments of the director's moral shortcomings. Griffith's reliance on the tropes of melodrama has been understood by many (including, ironically, the director himself) as a key aesthetic limitation. But Singer believes we have underestimated both the capacity of melodrama to represent a range of moral positions and the director's complex handling of same. Moreover, Griffith's melodramatic moralism informs many of the other labels thrust upon him and the positions that he adopted, from racist to didact to anti-reformer to confused champion of anti-melodramatic art. Singer examines them all, asking for a more nuanced understanding of the invariably conflicted meanings generated by Griffith's films and his statements about filmmaking.

Daniel Fairfax sees Griffith as the thread linking a number of disparate theorists and filmmakers whose ideas about cinematic presence find telling illumination in the director's Biograph films. Fairfax's efforts tie the director to theoretical tendencies not typically associated with Griffith's work, including photogénie and Bazinian realism. No less surprisingly, Fairfax makes the case for the affinity of Straub/Huillet's materialist praxis for Griffith's transitional-era experimentation. Reluctant to label Griffith himself a modernist, Fairfax nonetheless expands our sense of the director's aesthetic legacy, reminding us that Griffith's influence extends in unpredictable and generative directions.

Griffith as stylist

Fairfax's chapter crystallizes one of the challenges that the Biograph era poses for Griffith scholars: how does one reconcile the notion of Griffith-as-protoclassicist with his reputation as an innovator? One approach is to study Griffith with the precision exercised by the authors of the three chapters devoted to stylistic analysis of the director's shorts from this period. André Gaudreault and Philippe Gauthier raise the perennial issue of Griffith's centrality to the development of crosscutting, exhaustively demonstrating how the director dissects space in the canonical Biograph one-reeler, *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), before asserting that Griffith did indeed appear to inaugurate the coupling of crosscutting and the last-minute rescue, and usher in a distinct approach to cinematic narration in line with an increased institutionalization of the medium's formal properties.

Aligning editing with a particular narrational approach has been a hallmark of Tom Gunning's work on Griffith, and in his contribution to this volume he concentrates on the importance of editing to character development. Rather than Gaudreault and Gauthier's attention to crosscutting, Gunning examines scene analysis, as typified by a multi-shot sequence in *The Lady and the Mouse* (1913). Gunning asserts that Griffith's approach to the close-up, still evident in

a later film such as *Orphans of the Storm*, demonstrates a devotion to intimacy and direct address more so than spatial coherence. Through such stylistic observation, we gain greater insight into Griffith's idiosyncratic relationship to developing classical norms.

Close-ups figure in Charles O'Brien's analysis of Griffith's Biograph films as well, but O'Brien chooses to view stylistic development in the director's shorts as facilitated in part by changing production conditions. In particular, O'Brien looks to Biograph's move to the West Coast as signaling a change in lighting technique: the natural light afforded by the strong California sun negated the need for artificial lighting, leading to new approaches to staging and the length of shots, and a greater reliance on a nine-foot frontline, resulting in the effect of actors appearing closer to the camera. O'Brien demonstrates that stylistic tendencies in Griffith's Biograph shorts emerge out of a combination of directorial innovation and unpredictable filming circumstances, such as the form of electricity available.

Griffith and other media forms

Griffith began his career in the theater, and that is the contemporary medium to which he is most often linked, evidenced by David Mayer's continuing research in this vein. For Mayer, theater stood as Griffith's chief source of inspiration, influencing every aspect of the director's work, from generic traditions and storylines to rehearsal methods. Griffith's theatrical roots reveal themselves in a wide variety of works, encompassing numerous dance sequences, the vaunted cycle of Civil War films, and, of course, his many features patterned after Victorian melodramas. But other media forms also intersect with Griffith's work, as Joyce Jesionowski's examination of photography and Jan Olsson's exploration of poetry and music attest.

Olsson mines Griffith's films for their imagistic density, concentrating on the floral motif within his oeuvre, its origins detectable in a poem the director published in *Leslie's Magazine* the year before he began his filmmaking career. Poetry as source material, specifically the "Browning Series" inaugurated with *Pippa Passes* (1909), provides Griffith the platform for combining his penchant for floral imagery with an interest in the affective potential of music. Music also functions as art, allowing Griffith to align the musician figure with the artist struggling to be recognized within the constraining form of the one-reeler. The self-conscious strain for expressive meaning finds its most obvious outlet in allegorical flourishes, a third tendency Olsson identifies in the director's films, culminating in his most overtly artistic work, *Intolerance*. Jesionowski sees Griffith as participating in "the photographic imagination" of post-Civil War America that both captured character essence and prompted social typing. The potential of the photograph to override time's bounds, to exceed defined roles, and to pit the static against the dynamic, animates Griffith's enlistment

of photographic portraiture, lending an imagistic complexity to his films that neither surface sentimentality nor narrative imperatives can occlude, despite the director's own Manichean tendencies.

Griffith's exploration of gender in the progressive era

Jesionowski also sees Griffith's exploration of the photograph in gendered terms, with the portrait barely containing the potentially disruptive force of "woman," a force typically subdued through the comforting invocation of hearth and home. Gender as disturbance serves as the focal point of several essays that concentrate on underexamined aspects of Griffith's engagement with sexuality. Maggie Hennefeld, for her part, turns her attention to the "voluptuary," the functional counterpart to the director's preferred "spirituelle," a virginal ideal typified by Lillian Gish. Hennefeld sees the tension between these two types as endemic to Griffith's development of narrative cinema during the Biograph period, and chooses, quite provocatively, to concentrate on the director's oft-dismissed comic films to prove her point. The outsized corporeal gestures that define the comic presence of the voluptuary in the Biograph comedies infuse what Hennefeld labels the director's "slapstick-inflected melodramas;" ultimately, Hennefeld argues, the voluptuary's bodily performance works to produce narrative integration by prefiguring editing techniques even as it announces its own excess in ways that those techniques will forswear.

If Hennefeld focuses on the dichotomous relationship between the spirituelle and the voluptuary, Laura Horak seeks out those instances when Griffith indulged in less binaristic representations of gender, specifically in those Biograph films that feature cross-dressing. Putting women in men's clothing gave Griffith license to imagine gender as performance and to complicate the representational conventions so commonly attributed to him. Far from seeing figures like the cross-dressing Edna "Billy" Foster as contravening Victorian-era norms of social behavior, Horak insists on viewing them as products of their times: they stand as proof that both Griffith and his cultural influences possessed a greater potential for identity indeterminacy than we have allowed for.

Like Horak, Moya Luckett questions the ready identification of Griffith as "Victorian," shorthand to indicate that he possessed a limited and outdated worldview. Instead, Luckett prefers to understand him as a Progressive filmmaker, one whose treatment of space and gender reveals an ambivalent posture toward modernity. The contradictory nature of Progressivism's policies, which balanced social improvement with excessive monitoring of the citizenry, finds its counterpart in Griffith's often sympathetic depictions of tenement denizens even while his camera's prying gaze studies the increasingly public life of women with apprehension.

For Grant Wiedenfeld, Griffith's films also resonate with Progressive ideals, none more so than his pastorals. More than simply a nostalgic invocation of

the past, for both Progressives and Griffith, the pastoral represents a mode that allows a staging of agrarian activism (within farms), shared communal values (on front porches and lawns), and alleviation of urban stress (through the pleasure grounds of public parks). Griffith's sylvan landscapes, typically read as timeless images set in contradistinction to his modern urban settings, become in Wiedenfeld's reading part of a rich composite that cinema seems uniquely equipped to offer, wherein the pastoral paradoxically comes to life through technological reproduction.

Griffith in the 1920s

Anne Morey also finds Griffith engaged with his social context even as she shifts the timeframe from the Biograph era of Wiedenfeld's study to the early 1920s, a period when the director would find earning unalloyed critical praise an increasingly difficult proposition. Analyzing *The White Rose* (1923), a feature that both Ben Singer and Jan Olsson also spend time discussing, Morey uses its focus on religion to draw comparisons between Griffith's film and a novel by Thomas Dixon, *The One Woman*, as both feature a preacher as protagonist. Unlike his former collaborator, Griffith imagines his central character as a somewhat neutered fallen clergyman, which allows other figures in the narrative, principally an African-American woman, to assume religious authority. *The White Rose* failed to appease reform-minded critics, even as it opposed Dixon's vision of black religion as a failed enterprise. Ultimately, Morey argues, both Dixon and Griffith in their own ways saw film as "a new form of evangelism" and fervently believed in its potential for uplift. For Griffith, then, the moral instruction imparted by film still rivaled the interventions of Progressivism, long after the Biograph period ended.

Griffith's belief that his films could serve as strongly moral artistic statements, a position examined by Singer, continued to fuel his projects during the 1920s, even as they met with box-office indifference and critical ambivalence. Griffith has often been portrayed as the auteur-as-victim, but that characterization does a disservice both to the complexities of commercial feature-film production and notions of agency and collaborative decision-making that now inform most models of cinematic authorship. Seeing Griffith merely as a martyr results in both an overly aggrandized notion of the director at the same time that it diminishes (or, at the very least, simplifies) his actual accomplishments. We still know so little about the way films were made in the 1910s and 1920s that we should take every opportunity to use the example of Griffith to expand that knowledge, even if questions of his typicality remain.

Russell Merritt does exactly that, in his exhaustively researched account of the making of "*Isn't Life Wonderful*"³ (1924); in the process, he helps us understand how the Griffith of the mid-1920s fit into the broader international filmmaking context of that period. "*Isn't Life Wonderful*" is a particularly apt

case study, as Griffith actually traveled to Germany for part of its filming. Yet Merritt's account depicts a director unsure of how to sustain (or salvage) his artistic legacy; certainly, Griffith rejects the Germanic penchant for glistening *mise-en-scène*, moody lighting, and dynamic moving camera to produce instead a throwback to his social dramas of the Biograph era. "*Isn't Life Wonderful*" represents the director's most restrained work of the decade, disturbing its own cinematographer with its "dreariness."

Still, Griffith could not resist tinkering with the film, resulting in an unfortunate epilogue that dissipates much of the dark force of the preceding narrative. And the failure of "*Isn't Life Wonderful*" seemed to close off the potential to pursue projects with a social ambition suffused with a realist aesthetic. As Merritt puts it, "watching his [subsequent] Paramount and Art Cinema films we see a major director freeze and vanish inside the high-tech polish of studio concoctions." Andrew Nelson and Kaveh Askari each devote a chapter to one such "concoction," the 1926 Paramount release, *Sorrows of Satan*, long considered a Griffith *film maudit*. Nelson firmly situates *Sorrows* within the director's move to Paramount, coupling an analysis of the film with consideration of its immediate predecessor, *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925). The earlier release was an unexpected box-office success, but lacked the artistic aspirations of *Sorrows*. Nelson's analysis of *Sorrows* reveals a film that combines striking lighting effects with obtrusive contrastive editing and subtle approaches to staging; the result may not have invited widespread critical praise, but still earned recognition for Griffith's distinctiveness as a filmmaker.

Griffith's reputation as a director with artistic pretensions stands at the center of Kaveh Askari's approach to *Sorrows of Satan*. Borrowing a term from critic Vachel Lindsay, Askari explores *Sorrows* as a "minor-key work," understanding such a term to intimate a connection to art cinema tendencies of the 1920s. Though *Broken Blossoms* tends to be the film designated as Griffith's primary art cinema effort, Askari sees in *Sorrows* a deliberate artistic self-consciousness that aligns it with art films of this period. But more pertinent yet for Askari is the way in which discussion of *Sorrows* among critics contributed to a debate about Griffith's overall role in the ascendancy of art cinema and how this helped construct a mythos of the director not quite being of his time. Askari embeds this assessment within a broader context of critical discourse during the 1920s that elevated the pictorial and promoted particular notions of aestheticism. Even if *Sorrows* emerged as ultimately unsuccessful, its role in advancing a revised account of Griffith's strengths lends it renewed importance.

The reception of Griffith's films

Askari's careful reading of the critical reaction to Griffith in the 1920s finds echoes in many of the chapters of this collection, but attention to reception of the director's films becomes the primary focus in the volume's final section.

As I indicated at the outset, no film has defined Griffith's critical legacy more emphatically than *The Birth of a Nation*; Melvyn Stokes (2008) has devoted an entire book to its reception. Yet there is more to discover about the reactions this landmark engendered, and Tom Rice and Nicole Devarenne provide distinctive perspectives, spanning continents and decades in the process. Rice examines the role that *Birth* played in the relaunching of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s and 1920s. As Rice reveals, that role was not merely one of influence or an injection of heightened visibility; instead, the KKK, energized by campaigns of Americanization that seized the country in the late 1910s, actively enlisted cinema as part of a canny publicity campaign, and *Birth* became one of its key promotional tools. Tracing the uses of the film from the time of its release through various screenings in the 1920s, often accompanied by public appearances of the Klan at the venues and by local membership drives, Rice demonstrates how *Birth* became perpetually repurposed and reimagined within these diverse reception circumstances, designed to appeal to a "modern" Klan. Ultimately, the Klan's sustained association with *Birth* exerted an influence on the film's continued reputation as a monument to racism.

Nicole Devarenne extends that legacy of influence by showing how the racial dynamics of *Birth* and other Griffith films figure in the representational strategies of two South African films, *De Voortrekkers* (1916) and *Bou van 'n Nasie* (1938), which advanced the cause of aggressive nationalism in that country. Though *Birth* was not officially screened in South Africa until 1931, Devarenne posits a reciprocal relationship between Griffith's cinema and that of ideologically driven Afrikaners. Moreover, Griffith's early Biograph short, *The Zulu's Heart*, appropriates "an imagined African geography to represent white American anxieties." Devarenne's suggestive account demonstrates how future reception studies might look for Griffith's influence in unexpected locales and cultures.

The appeal of Griffith's films beyond an American context anchors Annie Fee's study of the reception of *Broken Blossoms* in France. Like Askari, she sees that critical reaction assuming an importance beyond the individual film and even Griffith: instead, it signaled an opportunity to further the cause of increased filmic appreciation. *Broken Blossoms* also consecrated the elevated aesthetic discernment of the French cinephile critics, a coterie of tastemakers who would soon become some of the most influential filmmakers in that country during the following decade. Despite its rapturous reception by the cinephiliac cognoscenti, *Broken Blossoms* invited a wide range of reactions, and Fee examines them carefully to reveal the fault-lines in film reception at this pivotal moment in film's development as both artform and mass cultural entertainment. If *Broken Blossoms* ultimately became an instrument that critics would use to boost the cause of specialized cinema, it demonstrates how Griffith's work served multiple purposes in a variety of culture wars, a conclusion also reached by Rice and Devarenne, to significantly different ends.

Paul McEwan finds that *Intolerance* has served a similar function, though his temporal context extends far past the release date of Griffith's epic. As McEwan charts the fluctuating critical fate of *Intolerance*, a film notorious for its formal complexity, he finds that the reactions of different critical communities serve as measurements of the openness of those communities to the possibility of film as an "expressive medium." To note the reputational ascendancy of *Intolerance* is to detect nothing less than the emergence of a distinct form of film culture in America (and elsewhere), a situation that finds striking parallels with Fee's analysis of *Broken Blossoms*' reception in France. As McEwan tracks the responses to *Intolerance* across the decades, especially via revivals at MoMA and amateur cine-clubs, he convincingly shows how that collective reaction reveals a gradual acknowledgment of Griffith's valuable contribution to a counter-classical tradition formed at the moment that classicism itself was about to become institutionalized.

McEwan ends his chapter with a consideration of how *Intolerance* is viewed today, having begun by citing the film's placement at #49 in the AFI Top 100 list. The film circulates in multiple versions, with a new 2K restoration issued just last year by Cohen Media Group, the first time that the film has been released on blu-ray. Its relative success as a silent cinema staple counterbalances the ignominy suffered by *The Birth of a Nation*. And the Biographs continue to find an intriguing afterlife through digital platforms, ranging from *The Sunbeam* (1912), subject to an inventive remix by Aitor Gametxo,⁴ to numerous paper prints from the Library of Congress functioning as a study pilot on the Media Ecology Project.⁵ Not only do these resuscitations of Griffith's work underscore the continued attractiveness of his oeuvre for both scholarly and artistic repurposing, but also they point to how novel perspectives on his films, facilitated by digital technologies, can reveal new dimensions – both of the director's artistry and film history itself. Katherine Groo has identified the potential for Gametxo's work to challenge film historiographical orthodoxy, but more simply, his remix dismantles and invigorates the seeming familiarity of Griffith's method. In Groo's words, "with each viewing, new points of contact and comparison emerge" (2012: 12). Similarly, this Companion invites its reader to see Griffith anew, measuring received wisdom against fresh insights, and prompting ongoing reconsideration of his protean talent. Ideally, the Griffith that emerges from this volume will serve future generations who will continue to contend with the unruly but generative legacy of his work.

Notes

- 1 When interviewed by *Filmmaker* magazine about why he chose the title, Parker responded:

When I endeavored to make this film, I did so with the specific intent of exploring America through the context of identity. So much of the racial injustices we endure today in America are [sic] symptomatic of a greater

sickness – one we have been systematically conditioned to ignore. From sanitized truths about our forefathers to mis-education regarding this country's dark days of slavery, we have refused to honestly confront the many afflictions of our past. This disease of denial has served as a massive stumbling block on our way to healing from those wounds. Addressing Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is one of the many steps necessary in treating this disease. Griffith's film relied heavily on racist propaganda to evoke fear and desperation as a tool to solidify white supremacy as the lifeblood of American sustenance. Not only did this film motivate the massive resurgence of the terror group the Ku Klux Klan and the carnage exacted against people of African descent, it served as the foundation of the film industry we know today.

I've reclaimed this title and re-purposed it as a tool to challenge racism and white supremacy in America, to inspire a riotous disposition toward any and all injustice in this country (and abroad) and to promote the kind of honest confrontation that will galvanize our society toward healing and sustained systemic change (Rezayazdi 2016).

Ironically, a few months prior to the film's release, Parker found himself at the center of a scandal concerning his past actions as a student at Penn State University. When allegations of a sexual assault from that time resurfaced, the media maelstrom, and Parker's problematic reaction to the controversy, tainted his reputation and apparently compromised the film's commercial prospects. For pointed commentary on the issues involved, see Gay (2016) and Jerkins (2016).

- 2 Crucial works include monographs by Jesionowski (1987), Gunning (1991), Pearson (1992), and Simmon (1993). Not coincidentally, every one of these books focuses on the Biograph period, with Simmon also branching out to incorporate the first two features.
- 3 The title for Griffith's last silent independent feature is usually rendered as *Isn't Life Wonderful?* Taking their cue from the copyright office, writers have conventionally left off the quotation marks that are used in film's head title. But "*Isn't Life Wonderful*," with the quotation marks, is the title Griffith himself consistently used, not only in the head title, but in his scripts, and is the format the D.W. Griffith studio followed in writing up its contracts and launching the film's publicity campaign. Further, it is how Griffith's source, Geoffrey Moss's short story, is titled. Consistent with Griffith's practice, it is how the film is titled in this volume, except in those instances where a contributor wishes to follow established precedent.
- 4 Gametxo's *Variation on the Sunbeam* can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/22696362>.
- 5 Paper print versions of selected Griffith Biographs, made available through the Media Ecology site, will facilitate a wide range of scholarly projects, from time-based annotations to collaborative analyses. Thanks to Mark Williams and Tami Williams for discussions of the Media Ecology Project, in person and via email.

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Part One

Griffith Redux

Disciplinary Descent: Film Studies, Families, and the Origins of Narrative Cinema

Jennifer M. Bean

Griffith... is to the various histories of the cinema what Abraham is to the Bible – the necessary Patriarch

(Aumont 1990: 348)

The laws governing inheritance are for the most part unknown

(Darwin 1996: 39)

What differentiates one period or phase of film history from another? How small or large must the differences be in order to determine where one element or stage leaves off and another begins? These are questions that any discipline must ask if it is to reflect on its historical parameters, which means that disciplinary knowledge is intrinsically bound to the construction of “families,” to the process of retrospectively organizing observable phenomena into what Charles Darwin calls “genera, families, sub-families” (1996: 562). What is intriguing from the perspective of Euro-American film historical discourse is the apparently irreducible equation linking the origins – the originality – of a properly *narrative* cinema to the Biograph films of D.W. Griffith (1908–1913), and beyond that to the metaphorical and ideological values associated with the nuclear family unit.¹

When Jacques Aumont describes Griffith as the “necessary Patriarch” of cinema’s “various histories,” he refers to a critical genealogy that relentlessly reiterates Griffith’s name as the signature stamp of narrative cinema’s artistic and cultural patrimony, even while the core or essence of what that patrimony means has altered over time. But even as we repeat Griffith’s name as the bastion of our field’s secular theology (the canon!), other more revolutionary

alterations are currently on the rise. Indeed, given the broader reach of archival and historiographic methods emerging in the digital age, the rash of encyclopedias and reference tools now being written, and a roaring wave of insightful work from scholars of varying political, regional, and aesthetic perspectives, it seems clear that we have only just begun to explore the films and figures that constitute narrative cinema's ascendancy and ongoing transformations in the early to mid-1910s. As Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (2004) observe in their introduction to the fine collection, *American Cinema's Transitional Era*: "The sheer diversity of changes experienced by the American film industry and within American filmgoing culture during these years [1907–1915] renders any attempt to encompass such developments within a uniform historical narrative problematic at best" (2). Anticipation mounts as newly restored or discovered prints mock revered critical assumptions, raising questions that remain as yet unanswered, the ultimate question being whether a positivist film history will ever again be possible or desirable. Then again, in the midst of such intellectual ferment and vitalizing possibilities, the most immediate question becomes quite simply: in the face of a substantial body of work about the man and his films, why write on D.W. Griffith *again*?

I have two contrary attitudes or inclinations. On one hand, I am firmly committed to the necessity of writing a new film history, of redrawing the cultural and aesthetic lineages of narrative cinema in accordance with whatever "genera, families, sub-families" one seeks to organize and classify and why. At the same time, I consider it imperative to move cautiously toward revisionist conclusions in an intellectual moment as volatile as ours, to remain wary of writing in reaction to, or against, an assumed critical norm, lest we run the risk of too quickly replacing bad old truisms with equally problematic new ones.

In rendering with some precision the role Griffith's name and films have played in our field's critical legacy, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive survey. Instead, I will sketch the diverse inflections this particular name and group of films have undergone when viewed through the lens of various critical categories. From classical to revisionist historical discourse, from structuralism's imperatives to genre studies, we find a sort of disciplinary descent, a series of perspectives through which the name, "D.W. Griffith," and its correlate, "the origins of narrative cinema," undergo constant modification.

Before proceeding, let me clarify that the myth of origins is always just that: a myth. Any claim for a discernible, locatable "first" or moment of beginning inevitably eclipses the complexity of overlapping and often competing elements and forces necessary to galvanize change. At the same time, I agree with Gilles Deleuze (1997) that the creation of a new concept (Darwinian evolution, for instance) can be marked by a proper name that serves to locate a generalized origin but does not limit its use or value: a concept begins by becoming visible and may therefore be attributed a proper name, the name of its most recognizable or marketable inventor. The meanings associated with that concept, however, depend on the uses to which it is put, the variables that develop

out of or through it. Insofar as this volume puts the meaning of the name “D.W. Griffith” to new and future uses, then my effort here is retrospective – a study of this name’s descent by modification.

The rise of the mythical father and the fall of the realist text

One can certainly find an historical basis in the status ascribed to David Wark Griffith, who postulated himself as a film artist/author *sine qua non* in 1913. Shortly after he left the Biograph Company (where he had been working as a “director” for five years), Griffith placed an advertisement in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, blowing his own horn, so to speak, for “revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art.” Listing in particular “[t]he large or closeup figures, distant views as represented first in *Ramona*, the ‘switchback,’ sustained suspense, the ‘fade out,’ and restraint of expression,” Griffith also lists over 100 film titles, retrospectively “crediting” himself as director in an era when credits as such rarely appeared onscreen (Jacobs 1968: 117). The novelty suggested by this attribution to the individual self as the site of creativity zooms into focus when one considers a similar commentary published in the same journal in 1912. Ascribing inventiveness of artistic techniques to the Biograph Company *qua* company, one anonymous reporter pronounced:

Biograph’s influence on picture production has been important. It was the first company... in America to present acting of the restrained artistic type, and the first to produce quiet drama and pure comedy. It was the first to attempt fading light effects. It was the first to employ alternating flashes of simultaneous action in working up suspense (qtd in Jacobs 1968: 117).

Leaving aside this writer’s qualifying emphasis on national location (“in America”), the nigh-uncanny resemblance this list bears to Griffith’s broadsheet reveals that the consideration of acting style, lighting effects, or suspenseful editing techniques was hardly new to the discourse surrounding cinema in 1913. Remarkably new, however, was Griffith’s loud claim to *individual* creativity and originality.

In other words, Griffith’s 1913 posting heralds the origins of the “author function” in film historical discourse, a critical function that Michel Foucault (1980) describes as “result[ing] from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author... [in which] we speak of an individual’s ‘profundity’ or ‘creative’ power” (127). To speak of a *film* author, especially one working in a commercial context, most often involves a humanistic operation employed to elevate the individual’s films above the grimy morass of the marketplace, to efface the rude machinery of production. That this civilizing gesture often summons familial metaphors proves particularly

intriguing, although hardly unique to film studies. As Roland Barthes (1977) reminds us, the conception of the Author as a figure of originality and creativity, a figure designed to ensure the homogeneity and unity of a text, emerges in post-Middle Age culture as a crucial tenet in the growing emphasis on individuality, privacy, and selfhood in the Western world. That the historical construction of selfhood as such is buttressed by a positivism that finds its epitome in capitalist society, the same society that invents and privileges the nuclear family unit, generates a set of interrelated issues that emerges in the common, now naturalized use of parental – or more specifically, *paternal* – analogies for speaking of authorship. As he observes:

The Author, when believed in... is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecendence to his work as *a father to his child* (Barthes 1977: 145; last emphasis mine).

Barthes's assessment of authorship as a figuration of paternity attains acute visibility in classical film historical discourse, which rapidly enshrined Griffith as "the father of classical narrative cinema and inventor of narrative filmmaking" (Elsaesser and Barker 1990: 293). In Terry Ramsaye's 1926 history of American cinema, *A Million and One Nights*, for instance, we find "Griffith Evolves Screen Syntax," a chapter dedicated to Griffith's years at Biograph, in which the biological idiom of evolutionary growth images the cinema as a child maturing under Griffith's tutelage: "The motion picture spent the years up to 1908 learning its letters. Now, with Griffith it was studying screen grammar and pictorial rhetoric" (508). By reprinting in part Griffith's *Dramatic Mirror* posting (636), Ramsaye's account initiates a line of descent embellished in Lewis Jacobs's 1939 study, *The Rise of the American Film*, which reproduced the 1913 ad in full (1968: 117). Passed from the self-professed progenitor of Motion Picture Art to the founding "fathers," so to speak, of American film history, Griffith's legacy crossed the Atlantic in 1951, gaining pride of place in George Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma* and shimmering across Jean Mitry's prolific writings throughout the 1960s. "Without exaggerating in the least," Mitry effectively summarized,

...one can say that if the cinema owes its existence as a means of analysis and reproduction of movement (and therefore as an entertainment form and an entertainment industry) to Louis Lumière, it is to Griffith that it owes its existence as an art form, as a means of expression and of signification (1985: 68).

One easily discerns Griffith's name attaining mythical status through this critical genealogy, especially if we understand myth as a story told in reverent tones, with broad plot strokes and with little care for empirical data. The remarkable adaptability of this myth to differing critical contexts surfaces in the work of Christian Metz, whose semiotic approach to cinematic language

in 1964 has come to emblemize, in Dudley Andrew's terms, the "weening of modern film theory from Mitry's paternal embrace" (1984: 58). But Metz, for all the "weening" he accomplished, remains in full accord with Mitry's elevation of Griffith. Directly quoting his predecessor, and allowing that certain expressive techniques could be discerned among the "primitives" (Georges Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, George Albert Smith, James Williamson), Metz observes:

It was Griffith's role to define and to stabilize – we would say, to codify – the *function* of these different procedures in relation to the filmic narrative, and thereby unify them up to a certain point in a coherent "syntax"... Thus it was in a single motion that the cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language (2004: 67).

More than simply a vestigial remnant of earlier mythmaking histories, Metz's peculiar turn of phrase reveals the evolutionary concept implicit in the critical genealogy we have been tracing. In the sudden timelessness of Metz's "single motion," there exists no development, no growth, and no history, only an instantaneous and inexplicable break with the past.

Even so, salient elements of this discourse transformed as the meaning of Griffith's legacy descended from one critic to another. An increasing focus on crosscutting techniques as the salutary mark of originality, for instance, develops in tandem with critical investment in editing's capacity to produce a self-sufficient, filmic space capable of absorbing the viewer into a remarkably detailed fictional world. What Jacobs refers to as "the device of parallel and intercutting," which could "catch and control the emotions of the spectator," (1968: 98) becomes, in Mitry's account, a technique capable of "introduc[ing] the audience 'into' the drama... making them participate in the action as though actually experiencing it themselves" (1997: 98). In 1972, Jean-Pierre Baudry explained the origins of cinematic language thus:

...that which the short films of D.W.G. inaugurate and *Intolerance* rearticulates, is, roughly speaking, the formation of a rhetorical machinery which uses the cinema for effects analogous no longer to those of photography and the theatre, but of the novel (qtd. in Aumont 1990: 348).

Irony stains this account when we recognize that Griffith's achievement of an avowedly novelistic technique both forms the bastion of his privileged status as "the father of narrative cinema" and proves the basis of his later fall from grace, a critical reversal of terms whereby the spectator's interpolation in filmic space comes to be perceived negatively – as trap, delusion, or lure.

Treated as an extension of the realist tendency in the nineteenth-century novel, the emergence of a self-sufficient narrative discourse in film was increasingly understood by theorists in the 1970s to satisfy a social appetite or demand

for verisimilitude and illusory mastery, to recapitulate the “oedipal” pleasures that Roland Barthes identified in his 1970 study of Balzac, *S/Z*, as typifying the realist or “readerly” text. The ubiquity of this model, known as Hollywood “classicism,” gained explanatory power by eschewing specific or local examples in favor of outlining a broad set of traits shared by the realist novel and the dominant mode of commercial cinema (Barthes 1975). As Stephen Heath wrote in his 1981 *Questions of Cinema*: “In its films, cinema reproduces and produces the novelistic: it occupies the individual as subject in the terms of the existing social representations and it constructs the individual as subject in the process” (127). I quote Heath in particular since his readings remain among the most far-sighted in the field, although the assumptions governing his project are far from idiosyncratic. Hence Dudley Andrew would summarize in 1984:

This [cinema] is an art born in, and as part of, the age of realism. It has known no other norm. Even today, despite the struggle of modernist filmmakers, realist cinema dominates our screens. Semiotics of cinema has, then, felt obliged to deal with the issue over and over. Film semiotics is virtually synonymous with the study of codes of illusion (63).

These “codes of illusion,” in turn, virtually confirmed that American narrative cinema functioned as an apparatus calibrated to induce the ideological effects that thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, and Louis Althusser stress: the coercive character of identity, the entanglement of subjectivity, and subjection to a dominant norm.

The thinker who has perhaps done most to fix the interrelations of the realist text and Griffith’s work at Biograph is Raymond Bellour, whose structural reading of *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) also remains a celebrated instance of what close textual analysis can reveal about the operations of any one film’s “rhetorical machinery.” The film’s plot is relatively simple: a female telegrapher (Blanche Sweet), left alone in an isolated station when her boyfriend/engineer departs for work, is threatened by two bandits attempting to invade the station and subsequently saved when her boyfriend learns of her plight and rushes to the rescue. Bellour focuses on the ways in which this film moves forward through a system of repetitive echoes that structure and unite the narrative level (with its emphasis on sexual difference) and the formal level (different patterns of symmetry and asymmetry in the composition of the frame, in figure movement and in visual rhymes). As he explained in an interview with Janet Bergstrom,

From the very beginning we see the setting up of a diegetic alternation: he/she/he ... And so it continues: the text of the film goes on dividing, joining up and redividing its elements through a succession of varied alternations over 96 shots, until the final joining up which shows us in a single last shot the majority of the elements involved (1979: 77–79).

The perfect balance operating at multiply embedded levels in this film, all geared toward a harmonious equilibrium and goal-oriented resolution, thus discloses a historical locus for “the systematicity at the heart of the great American classicism” (Bellour 1990: 360) while revealing that system’s origins in the “socio-historical situation opened up by the simultaneous development of the bourgeoisie, of industrial capitalism and of the nuclear family.” This situation is shared, Bellour explains, by “the nineteenth century novel” (Bergstrom 1979: 89).

Griffith’s melodramatic imagination and cinema’s mother tongue

Such semiotic-structural approaches to narrative cinema as this one have lost their purchase in contemporary film studies, just as the self-same tenets of a doctrine that shone across the fields of literature, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s have, with varying degrees of submission, met their demise in humanistic inquiry more generally. We now recognize that even the best of narratological readings derive from an assumption that all meaningful questions are synchronic ones, and that the axiom that any one film or instance reveals the larger system’s governing principles betrays a methodology that necessarily produces, rather than identifies, homogeneity in its object of inquiry. As film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s sought alternatives to classical cinema’s purported homogeneity, melodrama, a tradition associated with theatricality and hyperbole, with excessive spectacle and overt parallelisms, emerged – unsurprisingly – as psychological realism’s most virulent competitor. What warrants scrutiny here is the critical shift through which Griffith’s films came to emblemize a cinema rooted in melodrama’s theatrical traditions rather than the nineteenth-century novel. Now this “father of cinema’s cinematic language,” rather than embodying the patriarchy of capitalism’s investment in novelistic narrative, was associated with the feminine – the realm of sentiment, fantasy, domesticity – and ultimately with an *embodied semiotics*, a sort of mother tongue. If, previously, scholars had understood Griffith’s filmed stories as expressing eventfulness, linearity, and causality, they now viewed them in terms of experience, feeling, the body, and moral imperatives.

This shift from Griffith as realist to Griffith as melodramatist took place gradually, buoyed by relatively new historical methodologies. In 1981, voicing a perspective lauded as “revisionist,” Tom Gunning chastised earlier mythmaking histories: “D.W. Griffith, the mythical ‘father’ of film as art, haunts films history. All too often Griffith has been an excuse for a lack of scholarship on early film” (1990: 336). Rather than exorcizing the paternal ghost per se, Gunning fleshes out a more historically informed view of Griffith’s narrative experiments in the initial 1908–1909 period. Establishing a perspective that

would later inform his well-known recovery of the erstwhile “primitive” period as a “cinema of attractions” fully commensurate with fin-de-siècle culture and the medium’s locus in technological/industrial modernity, Gunning argues for a view of the Biograph films as determined by the local effects of industrial and cultural mores. Linking the onset of Griffith’s career in 1908 to the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), Gunning reveals that the initial objective of the “Trust” to achieve greater economic stability among its ten allied companies found a corollary by seeking the stability promised by social respectability. This aggressive “wooing of a middle-class audience” materialized in two ways: by improving theatrical conditions (providing better lighting, comfortable chairs, and proper ventilation) and by improving film content (eliminating “gruesome melodrama or vulgar comedy” and “lobbying for the happy ending as a requisite for all films”) (1990: 338–339).

The textual effects of this stress on “family values,” so to speak, emerge with vivid precision in Gunning’s 1991 study, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Cinema: The Early Years at Biograph*, where a micro-archival methodology informs rigorous close readings of key films. Deftly excavating the myriad sources for Griffith’s *The Lonely Villa* (1909), for instance, Gunning reaches back to a one-act play by André De Lorde, *Au Téléphone* (1901) and forward through multiple pre-Griffith film incarnations: *Terrible Angoisse* (1906, Pathé), *Heard Over the Phone* (1908, Porter), and *A Narrow Escape* (1908, Pathé), among others. As he observes, each of these productions shares the story of a domestic order shattered by outside intruders; each turns on the husband’s absence from the home; and each dramatizes a pivotal moment in which the threatened housewife telephones her husband, thus emphasizing the physical separation of the couple as the news of danger is relayed. Endings, however, differ dramatically. Whereas the 1901 play ends with the husband listening on the phone as his wife and child are murdered (a Grand Guignolesque-style finale repeated in *Terrible Angoisse* and *Heard Over the Phone*), the husband in *The Lonely Villa* races to the rescue, arrives in the nick of time, and effectively restores the sanctity of the hearth and home. More than simply showing male impotency and gruesome horror transmuting to the period’s requisite happy ending and the symbolic reassertion of familial-social order, Griffith’s ending articulates suspense through a triangulated editing pattern – victimized women, aggressive thieves, noble rescuer – that provides the basic armature for what Gunning terms cinema’s “narrator system,” a specifically filmic variation of literary and theatrical narrational strategies. The editing weaves into one harmonized form distinct moments in different spaces and from different times.

Of course, the recovery of specific theatrical influences renders moot any theorization of cinema’s narrative discourse as a direct or simplistic extension of the nineteenth-century novel. In a heuristic move that bears affinity with Gunning’s approach, Rick Altman (1992) observes that Biograph films like *Ramona* (1910), often identified as coming from novelistic originals, might

best be viewed in terms of the text's intermediary adaptation for the stage. For Altman, one need not think of a stark division between novelistic realism and spectacular melodrama; instead, one can view them in complementary terms, as two aspects of a single phenomenon. Significantly, Peter Brooks's study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, often cited as the most influential work for scholarship on screen and stage melodrama, takes the late nineteenth-century novels of the presumably *ur*-realist author Henry James as a key example. Brooks shows that elements of dramatic periphery and the increasingly polarized and oppositional choices that characters such as Isabelle Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* are forced to make produce a psychic drama closer to the language of dreams than to that of the social world. Geared to express a hidden or repressed meaning, a moral occult, this melodramatic mode originated, Brooks (1985) says, on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European stage as a response to the period's unsettling revolutionary violence and as a mode particularly appealing to a newly secularized middle class, a public for whom the moral coherence afforded by a sacred Being no longer had purchase.

The preeminent status Brooks grants to the body in melodrama's system of signs proves particularly pertinent in the present context, not least because this semiotic system strives to resuscitate an *original* language rather than mimic (however "realistically") an ordinary one. Brooks hence turns to the aesthetic theory of gesture in eighteenth-century writers like Denis Diderot, whose *Encyclopédie* claims that gesture was "the primitive language of mankind in its cradle" and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Essai* construes gesture as "a kind of pre-language, giving a direct presentation of things prior to the alienation from presence set off by the passage into articulated language" (1985: 66). Yet, as Mary Ann Doane observes in her study of the 1940s woman's film, Brooks seems relatively unaware of the gendered implications underlying this conceptual move. Locating its expressive register in the "cradle" of "mankind," trumpeting its relation to the natural world, to bodily plenitude, and to non-differentiated signs, melodrama, she argues, theoretically resembles a "maternal tongue" (1987: 84). Adopting this perspective offers a partial explanation of the genre's association with the feminine.

Whether or not Brooks familiarized himself with Doane's analysis is anyone's guess. But in 1992 he turned to melodrama's "inevitable" encounter with silent-era cinema, specifically to the mode's renewal in Griffith's films, and elaborated a "convergence in the concerns of melodrama and of psychoanalysis." Both "conceiv[e] psychic conflict in melodramatic terms," he writes, and both understand the body to be the privileged site on which repressed matter is acted out, brought to visibility and hence legibility (1994: 22). Moreover, the body most prone to the production of meaning as such is the victimized, often hysterical, suffering female body. And in Brooks's analysis this body proves to be Griffith's most salient representational sign. Attending to Griffith's historical epic *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), specifically to the static pictorial tableau

where Henriette, on her way to the guillotine, bids a final farewell to her sister, Louise, Brooks writes:

It is a pure image of victimisation, and of the body wholly seized by affective meaning, of message converted on to the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation (1994: 22–23).

Routed through and across the suffering, feminized body, melodrama's expressive register differs dramatically from the "realist" norms presumed by Bellour, the "Grand Syntagmatique" sought by Metz, or the "syntax" alluded to by Ramsaye. Its ideological emphasis differs as well from the generalized "narrator system" outlined by Gunning, although scholarly attention to the female body's symbolic potency in the Biograph films depended on the textually and historically sensitive revisionist perspective that Gunning's analysis, among others, rendered imperative by the mid-1980s. Through the work of scholars as diverse as Shelley Stamp, Aumont, and Altman, it became clear that Griffith not only staged the hysterical reactions of his many female victims in interior spaces or domestic dwellings; he also developed and relentlessly rehearsed a specifically cinematographic expression of feminine space.

The details are telling. Almost without exception, as Stamp (see Lindsey 1994) notes, a single, consistent camera set-up frames the interior space represented in these films. If there is a variation in the camera set-up – the shot of Blanche Sweet telegraphing for help in *The Lonedale Operator*, or the housewife on the phone in *The Lonely Villa* – it tends to be a closer view along the same axis as the initial camera position. The stability of the frame, and the consistency of viewpoint, is reinforced by the visual linkage of walls and other architectural features that often double the edges of the frame so that screen space and room coincide, generating what Aumont (1990) terms "the prison of the frame." In *An Unseen Enemy* (1912), for instance, the orphaned sisters played by Dorothy and Lillian Gish remain trapped in a single room throughout their ordeal, while the "slatternly maid" and her cohort rob their house and hold the girls at gunpoint. Here the girls' confinement in an enclosed "space" is rearticulated by the repetitious use of a confining frame, a medium-close shot of the girls' physical immobility and expressions of terror, which Aumont (1990) tallies as reoccurring fifteen times in the cutting sequence that relays their brother's race back home to the rescue. In other suspense-laden rescue films of the same period, however, Griffith dramatizes the female victims' mobility among rooms in an interior dwelling. As Rick Altman notes in an eloquent reading of *The Lonely Villa*, the mother and her daughters successively retreat from the front parlor to an inner library as the thieves penetrate the mansion from the outside. But, Altman argues, the match-on-action cuts that link the laterally contiguous rooms, as well as the horizontal character movement between the two rooms, emphasize the similarity of the spaces more than their succession

in a larger space. The point is crucial: rather than enlarging the space available to the female characters, the progressive movement to narratively “different” spaces actually refutes linear progression and heightens the sense of interior confinement (1981: 129).

The emphatic stress on the female body’s symbolic equation with space does not render temporal dimensions insignificant. On the contrary, the emotional reverberations of feminine space become intimately bound up with the dramatic significance of temporality; indeed, the very crux of the rescue paradigm remains its emphasis on time: the last-minute rescue. As Stamp (see Lindsey 1994) summarizes, the logic of parallel editing, that of simultaneity, would seem to imply that the alternating scenes of returning rescuer and victimized womanhood transpire in a comparable amount of time. Yet this pattern builds suspense by *expanding* the time of the events in the space under siege, while accelerating and eclipsing the rescuer’s frantic return. Accentuating this spatial-temporal dynamic in one of the boldest studies of melodrama to date, Linda Williams returns to Griffith’s reiteration of crosscutting techniques in the climactic scenario of *Way Down East* (1920), observing that even as

...a rapid succession of shots specifying the physical danger gives the effect of speed, of events happening extremely fast, the parallel cutting between the breaking ice, David’s pursuit, Anna’s unconscious body, and the churning falls prolongs time beyond all possible belief. Actions *feel* fast, and yet the ultimate duration of the event is retarded (2001: 33).

Of particular relevance to what Williams is getting at here is the wildly asymmetrical form of Griffith’s rescue scenario, which is commensurate with the tense and contradictory nature of the viewer’s emotional experience. “The ‘main thrust’ of melodramatic narrative, for all its flurry of apparent linear action, is thus actually to get back to what *feels* like the beginning,” Williams explains. Offering “the hope... that there may still be an original locus of virtue,” Griffith’s melodramatic mode links itself to the moral imperative and “maternal tongue” of the broader mode outlined by Brooks. At the same time, Williams reasserts Griffith’s primacy in the production of a cinematic form of expression: “This teasing delay of the forward-moving march of time has not been sufficiently appreciated... as an effect that cinema realized more powerfully than stage or literary melodrama” (2001: 35).

Coupling space and time: Technology’s family

When Williams refers to melodrama as an “expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast” (2001: 35), she might be articulating an aesthetic-ideological impulse born from melodrama’s roots in late eighteenth-century European culture. But narrative cinema’s capacity to defy time, to subvert or pervert its quickening, attains privileged status in the context of early twentieth-century

culture's flagrant affair with technological modernity. Associated with momentary shocks and unprecedented speed, modernity fostered an anxious fascination with ever more powerful and equally unruly machines. It also fed a capacious public appetite for spine-tingling thrills, for sensational stimuli capable of breaching the body's integrity. With the concurrent development of technological inventions like the train in the early to mid-nineteenth century and the large-scale construction of urban centers, the threat to individual selfhood suggested by technology's sensory pummeling finds itself reinforced by the incursion of a mass public, emblemized by the unruly crowd. By extension, the wildly indiscriminate body of the public mass threatens the stability and cultural privilege previously assumed by the integrated and hierarchical structure of the private family or heteronormative couple.

Although the earliest cinema's position as a crucible in this constellation of terms may seem transparent to us now, it has not always been understood thus. Once the bastion of a critical theory debated by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer among others in the 1920s and 1930s, cinema's bawdy affair with modernity vanished in the wake of a humanist tradition emblemized by the mythmaking histories of Ramsaye, Jacobs, Sadoul, and Mitry, just as a pre-Griffith cinema languished in the face of a heuristic poised to privilege artistic refinement and the humanizing touch of an individual author-Father. Nor could the homogenizing theoretical models preached by Metz and Bellour permit detailed scrutiny of modernity's historical exigencies. But in the late 1980s, concurrent with a revisionist methodology proselytized most powerfully by Gunning, the conjunction of the terms "modernity" and "early cinema" rushed into critical purview. Without opening up once again the illuminating and often competing perspectives of a fin-de-siècle "cinema of attractions," in which Lumière's one-shot actualities, Méliès's trick fantasy films, or the popular "phantom rides" (in which a camera was hooked to the front or back of a moving train) become fully commensurate with social and subjective upheavals of modernity, we can ask how this historical perspective reframes once again analyses of Griffith's films and the elaboration of a properly narrative cinema.

Noticeably, parallel editing techniques reemerge as the *locus classicus* of Griffith's narrative system, even as the explanatory rationale for editing's mechanisms and effects shifts. Editing's capacity to disassemble and reassemble elements of space and time, to manufacture the illusion of continuity out of fragmented and otherwise discontinuous moments, allows editing to be recast as an active participant in the technological culture to which cinema contributes. As Gunning notes, when revisiting his reading of *The Lonely Villa* in an essay that highlights the period's "terrors of technology," the confusing leaps in space produced by parallel editing depended for their sensibility on plots that incorporated communication technology's capacity to instantaneously link one space or another. Hence, the telephone in *The Lonely Villa*, like the telegraph in *The Lonedale Operator*, gets coded for narrative purposes, "naturaliz[ing]"

film's power to move through time and space" (1998: 219). When the isolated housewife telephones her husband to relay the news of impending danger, or the endangered telegrapher frantically types her message to the station down the line, the image of the phone or telegraph makes sensible the cut to an entirely different space.² For Lynne Kirby, however, whose 1993 study details the disorienting fascination both pre-1908 cinema and the nineteenth-century train elicited for "out-of-control" bodies and things, Griffith's narrative mechanisms do not draw from an already naturalized technological function. Rather, editing normalizes or "tames" an otherwise unruly technology. Speaking specifically of the purposeful race of the engineer back to the station in *The Lonedale Operator*, Kirby claims that "the train in Griffith became an agent and an object made to serve human agents... his engineer-driven trains are a far cry from out-of-control early train films" (1993: 108). Ultimately, what cinematic technology naturalizes in these films, says Mary Ann Doane in her 2002 study, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, is the illusion of a meaningful, directed, energized time (196).

Although differing in style and scope, these analyses together foreground the uneasy alliance Griffith forges between modern technologies and the family, between a mass public and the private sphere. Trains, telegraphs, and telephones, like editing, earn privileged status by virtue of the capacity to bring together, or "couple" as Kirby says, husbands with wives, sisters with brothers, or girl telegrapher with sweetheart engineer. But that same technological prowess bears with it the capacity to annihilate interpersonal connections, to disperse both families and publics. In her 2008 study of silent-era cinema's affair with the new forms of "traffic" wrought by industrialization and urbanization, Kristen Whissel probes this paradox relative to the train's status as a transportation technology crucial to the efficient circulation of commodities and capital. As she writes, the orchestrated system of mechanized transport enables it to function as a host for an unlawful system, a parasite that feeds on the system's efficiency. Two shots in *The Lonedale Operator* visualize the point with precision:

In the middle of this film the camera provides us with an image of passengers, a payroll bag, and other cargo being loaded on a locomotive and thereby offers a glimpse at the efficient circulation of capital, populations and commodities by the railway system. An ensuing shot of the same train arriving at the Lonedale station appears to repeat this image. Yet in this second shot...two rough-looking transients emerge from the undercarriage of the train unbeknownst to the operator or anyone else... This shot make the transients both dangerous by virtue of their undetected mobility and sinisterly illegitimate by virtue of the space from which they emerge – itself a materialization of modernity's dark underbelly (170).

The promises and perils of modernity prove inseparable at multiple levels. Gunning points out the deliberate way Griffith bases his rescue dramas on stories determined by absence and separation: more often than not, the

husband's or male sweetheart's departure from the isolated home or railway station inaugurates the dramatic action. More than simply fueling the plot, the threat that the family or couple may be sundered irreparably, the recognition that the sanctity of the private sphere is neither immutable nor natural but fragile at best is, ironically, the most meaningful dramaturgical element here. Viewed in the context of a technologically altered and disorienting modern world, the paradoxical and irresolvable dilemma at stake in these films lies in the simple fact that the restoration of the family or couple depends on the same technologies that would otherwise destroy it, on the message relayed via telephone or telegraph and on the rescuer's fast-paced automobile or train ride.

Significantly a similar paradox holds true for Griffith's use of parallel editing, which generates an expressive system predicated on representational instability, including its potential for destroying the very illusion of continuity on which editing's "original" configurations of space and time depend. As Mary Ann Doane shrewdly notes, Griffith's mode of suspense lies

...on the side of invisibility, and depends upon the activation of off-screen space, or [what Pascal Bonitzer calls] the "blind spot." In parallel editing, when shot B is on the screen its legibility is saturated by the absent presence of shot A, and vice versa (2002: 195).

The viewer's experience of the dramatic rescue in these films hence depends on what is not seen or represented – on what editing edits out. Doane's analysis gets at this point by illuminating the interrelation between editing's dependency on invisibility and the exploitation of space in the Biograph films whereby the victims' entrapment in an interior and their successive retreats to increasingly confined closets, libraries, or bedrooms strain to make the terror of an absent, unseen space, acutely felt. In other words, the representational (what is on the other side of the door, the threshold) becomes a figurative expression of cinema's signifying system (what is on the other side of the frame, the off-screen space). Speaking more generally, the offscreen space is the space between shots, the disfiguration of continuity on which editing depends and which Griffith's narrative system labors to hide. In this unseen space lurks fatality, death, invisibility. It is, says Doane, this "semiotically dense" space that "makes it possible for the cinema to say anything at all" (2002: 195).

Coda

If the cinema *says* something, this then implies that cinema has a voice and, by extension, that cinema articulates or enunciates a subjective perspective. As I hope to have revealed, however, the metonymy implied in this logic is dubious at best. Returning to where this essay began, we find Griffith noisily casting himself in the role of artistic luminary, precisely because his films

alone could never reveal the self behind the set. Nor does an individual voice resonate in the system delineated by Bellour, for whom dominant ideology occasions both formal system and manner of address, just as the more localized constraints imposed by the MPPC provide Gunning's "narrator system" its axiomatic pitch. Perhaps the suffering female body, as Brooks would say, expresses otherwise ineffable meanings, or the telephone – an emblem of speech conveyed rather than speech itself – allows technological configurations of space and time to form a continuous line of meaningful sense. As we listen to the multiple voices chorusing through this familiar conjunction of terms – "D.W. Griffith," and the "origins of American narrative cinema" – we find little that resembles an epistemological guarantee for fixing the patrimony of our cultural and aesthetic past.³ We find, instead, a far more provocative disciplinary affair, an ongoing renegotiation of the terms and traditions through which we turn our passing contemporaneity into the signs of history.

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Notes

- 1 As this volume attests, one can detect no straightforward, consistent political stance in the Griffith oeuvre. But "there is a theme that runs through his major works," as John Steinle (2006) observes:

That theme is Family. Family threatened, family torn apart, family reunited, family destroyed, family created. One can only guess at the motivations for this obsession with Family from a man whose father died when he was ten, and who was never able to create a strong family relationship in his real life. But there is no mistaking his affinity for this theme, which occurs time and again.

- 2 In a detailed study of early cinema's representations of the telegraph, Paul Young adds that if the telephone and the telegraph serve similar formal and textual functions in films such as *The Lonely Villa* and *The Lonedale Operator*, then the historical contexts of the two media reveal quite different *cultural* meanings. The relatively recent introduction of the telephone in the late nineteenth century and its association with the penetration of the private sphere, locate it more squarely in what Gunning terms the "terror of technology." By contrast, the telegraph dates back to the early 1840s, and was associated with the fantasy of an interconnected public sphere. Young (2003) writes:

The persistence of this "ancient" technology of modernity as a specific kind of mechanical icon – a machine that doesn't break down, one that preserves not only threatened individuals like the Lonedale operator but also bourgeois social order (the valuable mail pouch the operator protects is also saved) – leads me to postulate that such "demonstrations" of the telegraph helped early cinema to position itself as a certain kind of new medium, one that would resemble telegraphy in its public mode of address as well as in its powers over space and time (231).

- 3 It bears stressing that chapters in this volume by Margaret Hennenfeld and Laura Horak investigate the meanings of the female body in Griffith's *comedies* from the Biograph period and thus dramatically expand the critical legacies I have outlined here.

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Griffith's Moral Profile

Ben Singer

It goes without saying that the topic of morality obtrudes upon the study of Griffith and his work. Owing to the prominence of a single, uncharacteristically incendiary, cultural and cinematic landmark, a cloud of moral ignominy invariably enshadows, if not overshadows, the director's legacy. That said, the first order of business in thinking about the moral contours of Griffith's oeuvre should be to forestall automatic assumptions about what an inquiry along those lines entails. My goal here will be to work toward a suitably multi-dimensional framework for analyzing Griffith's moral profile, by which I simply mean examining the different ways in which his works intersect with the topic of morality.

I begin by positioning Griffith as a "melodramatic moralist," underscoring the degree to which his films manifested generic patterns of moral configuration that largely transcended the director's particular moral sensibility. As a genre filmmaker first and foremost, Griffith's moral propensities are inseparable from the possibilities afforded, or tendencies encouraged, by the melodramatic tradition in which he worked. Scholars commonly oversimplify that tradition, as well as Griffith's connection to it, I argue, and so I introduce a new conceptual model for mapping the moral dynamics of melodrama as a whole and observing Griffith's favored permutations within it.

I then turn to a discussion of Griffith as a "moralistic moralist," examining his distinctively didactic and mannerist mode of moral intonation and weighing various factors motivating such narrational idiosyncrasy. A section on Griffith as an "immoral moralist" broaches the unavoidable issue of the director's penchant for racist imagery. Although the topic has already elicited reams of commentary, I attempt to advance the discussion by offering a comparatively comprehensive, if brief, overview of the representational record, while venturing several critical perspectives that might help nuance conventional appraisals of the director's moral failing. A fourth section deals with Griffith's peculiarity as an "antimoralist moralist" – a moralist who could not stand other

moralists. The paradox cannot help but appear hypocritical and irrational, inviting yet more imputation of moral deficiency. Contextualizing his stance in relation to historical intellectual currents and more recent philosophical arguments, I evaluate whether such a position – essentially, amounting to an intolerance of intolerance – might be logically and morally defensible.

The last aspect of Griffith's moral profile that I explore highlights another, even stranger, paradox: Griffith as a "conflicted moralist." The director repeatedly articulated feelings of disenchantment, disdain, and disgust toward exactly the sort of popular melodrama that he was famous for. Buying into endemic criticism of melodrama's putative moral simplemindedness, Griffith evidently counted himself among the moralists he could not stand. I analyze his predicament as symptomatic of a woeful convergence of ideological, artistic and commercial problems and pitfalls that vexed his later career.

Overall, I am keen to demonstrate that Griffith's relationship to morality warrants recognition as an engagingly multi-faceted issue, one too complex for either sympathetic apology or categorical censure of the sort typically informing appraisals of his work and influence.

Griffith as melodramatic moralist

Perhaps the most pertinent point of departure for thinking about Griffith's moral profile is the truism that Griffith absorbed and perpetuated a melodramatic tradition. As Sergei Eisenstein ventured in the early 1940s, "Melodrama, having attained on American soil by the end of the nineteenth century its most complete and exuberant ripeness, at this peak must certainly have had a great influence on Griffith ..." (Eisenstein 1944: 226). However unremarkable this assertion may sound to us today, it deserves renewed attention for at least two reasons.

First, like many givens, it turns out to be surprisingly elusive once one tries to nail down what it actually means. Neither the melodrama genre nor Griffith's oeuvre are as coherent or readily definable as assumed, so their points of connection are far from self-evident. Spotlighting the commonplace that the two were intimately connected impels one to chart out the correlation, and in so doing, realize a more nuanced understanding of both.

Second, underscoring Griffith's embeddedness within a melodramatic tradition also reminds us that he was a tradesman practicing an established craft, manufacturing generic narrative wares that, for the most part, adhered to basic designs and techniques that he inherited rather than invented. Engineering the kinds of arousal and gratification that defined his melodramatic commodity, Griffith usually followed standard blueprints of proven efficacy. Such a framing accentuates the degree to which Griffith's moral profile was as much (or more) a function of the genre he worked in as it was some sort of direct expression of his psyche.

Beyond the coterie of academic specialists, discussion of Griffith conventionally focuses on just a handful of famous feature films – what Eisenstein referred to, in passing, as the “official” Griffith. This core canon, I would venture, basically consists of five works: *The Birth of a Nation*; *Intolerance*; *Broken Blossoms*; *Way Down East*; and *Orphans of the Storm*. Devotees may quibble, (“What about *Hearts of the World*? Didn’t you forget *True Heart Susie*...?”), but I am inclined to regard “the big five” as a coherent and overwhelmingly predominant set of texts based on any empirical measure of canonical heft, whether scholarly page count, classroom screenings, home media consumption, or what have you.

A striking fact stands out when one assesses this core canon. Every single film comprising it was manifestly rooted in the seminal tradition of nineteenth-century stage melodrama marked by stark moral polarization. Hinging on elemental oppositions between unambiguous embodiments of virtue and villainy, Griffith’s most important blockbusters amplified the “Manichean” cosmology distinguishing popular melodrama. Simple moral dichotomies are a defining characteristic of the Griffith canon, and they also structure many of the less-celebrated films lying beyond it. That said, the moral configuration of Griffithian melodrama cannot be reduced to this tendency. His works, like the genre as a whole, varied more widely in their moral and aesthetic contours.

One indication of the heterogeneity of Griffith’s melodramatic output emerges from his characterization as “the father of the woman’s film.” Scott Simmon floated this designation (while recognizing the suspect nature of any such epithet) to underscore the extent to which Griffith’s Biographs focused on “a woman’s ordeal and suffering, and occasionally her triumph, within domestic confines” (Simmon 1993: 69). In recent decades, scholars have observed the evident incongruity between what the term “melodrama” tends to denote in the field of Film Studies – women’s films; tearjerkers; stories emphasizing pathos and domestic or romantic duress, and so on – and what it typically implied in various historical contexts and, still today, among specialists in Theater Studies and Literature, namely, violence; blood and thunder sensationalism; villainy versus virtue, and so on. The distinction points to two quite discrete strains of melodrama, one conventionally associated with female audiences, the other with male spectators. Most scholars simply accept the same generic label for two substantively different genres, putting in abeyance the problem of what they might have to do with each other.

Griffith becomes an intriguing figure in this light. A few grand works like *Way Down East* – interweaving female-oriented pathos, spectacular action, and moral outrage – hint toward a common ancestry, an ur-melodramatic amalgam of elements that may have subsequently diverged along separate paths. Other Griffith films seem more uniformly rooted in one or the other mode of melodrama after they parted ways.¹ However accepted the notion of two

separate strains of melodrama has become (if only as a lax, pre-theoretical default), it remains too blunt-edged to shed light on the genre's moral variance. A more helpful conceptualization, I suggest, would posit not two but three main strands or types of melodramatic narrative. The three primary strains, however, can be combined in several ways, yielding a few additional common configurations – at least one of which, we will see, features prominently in the Griffith filmography.

The model I propose is simple, although its terminology will sound unfamiliar. The first major strand of melodrama showcases interactions between unambiguous embodiments of virtue and villainy, good and evil, right and wrong. Vicious malefactors torment pure innocents. Although the label “Manichean” is conventionally applied to this kind of melodrama, I prefer to call it “antipodal” melodrama, denoting the variety of melodrama hinging on moral antipodes. The word “antipodes” refers to diametrical opposites, like the Earth's north and south poles. Antipodal melodrama thus presents conflicts between characters representing diametrically opposed moral bearings. The overweening goal of antipodal melodrama is to engage deep-rooted affective responses of pathos and antipathy, triggered by situations in which inherently righteous people are harmed by the actions and attitudes of inherently malevolent people. We feel compassion for virtuous protagonists suffering abuse, injustice, and degradation, while admiring the fortitude, altruism, and courage they display in enduring their ordeal, succoring others in distress, and fending off their antagonists. As for the wrongdoers, their cruelty and selfishness stoke primal feelings of outrage and hatred accompanied by aggressive cravings for forceful retaliation and retribution. Most antipodal melodramas offer the corollary gratification of poetic justice, with rightful reward and punishment offering the comforting reassurance that, ultimately, some kind of moral providence governs the universe. Even dark melodramas presenting tragic or bittersweet endings (e.g., *Broken Blossoms* or the modern story in *Intolerance*) afford the spectator a kind of existential reassurance that right and wrong are palpable, self-apparent entities that we can apprehend with complete confidence. Affirming the trueness of one's own moral compass, antipodal melodrama indulges a desire for a kind moral certitude and transparency ordinarily frustrated by the complexity of real-world human affairs. This fantasy of moral legibility and providential superintendence – what Peter Brooks called melodrama's “moral occult” – defines antipodal melodrama in particular (Brooks 1976).

I would argue that an even more basic component of antipodal melodrama – the element allowing moral certitude to exist in the first place – involves a moral axiom that philosophers refer to as the principle of “autonomy” or “autonomous will.” A liberal ideal growing out of Enlightenment humanism, the concept is most closely associated with Kant, who propounded autonomy of the will as the ultimate foundation of morality. It denotes the right to live freely and pursue wellbeing and happiness without harmful interference by external forces (except as necessary to insure the like freedom of others).

Sometimes paraphrased as “the sovereignty of the self,” the principle affirms inalienable human rights to “self-ownership” and “self-determination” (Dryden n.d.; Dworkin 1988; Reath 2006; Schneewind 1998; Sensen 2013; Shell 2009). Adapting formulations proffered by political theorists Hugo Grotius (1625) and Gershom Carmichael (1724), the authors of the Declaration of Independence encapsulated the right most felicitously in the famous phrase, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”² Restated in the form of a moral injunction, the principle of autonomous will holds that it is inherently wrong to impede or impair the freedom or potential wellbeing of another, whether through physical force, coercion, exploitation, deception, institutionalized inequality, or abuse of any other kind. Such wrongs, and the feelings of pathos and antipathy they elicit, constitute the very stuff of antipodal melodrama.

A very different sort of melodrama pits not good versus evil, but rather good versus good. “Antinomic” melodrama, as I will call this strain, dramatizes moral ambiguities, dilemmas, and deadlocks in the encounter between one fundamentally sound ethical principle (and associated virtuous agents and actions) and another one that, within a given narrative, is equally righteous but unfortunately incompatible with the first. This is the situation of “antinomy” – from the Greek “antonimia,” meaning a contradiction between laws. By way of example, one might point to Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (pitting the good of mother love against the good of negating racism) or *There’s Always Tomorrow* (the good of familial domesticity versus freedom to live and love passionately). It is no mean feat to craft a narrative counterpoising and embodying two ethical goods so perfectly that neither is able to edge out the other as a moral priority. (Even the prime examples just offered are open to debate). That being the case, one could qualify that the mode hinges less upon the realization of genuinely antinomic stalemates (the holy grail seldom definitively achieved) than upon the dramatization of moral vexation per se; it focuses on the duress suffered by sympathetic characters finding themselves at odds with other more or less sympathetic characters expressing ethically defensible opposing perspectives in good faith.

Granting that latitude, antinomic melodrama would encompass the dramatization both of ultimate antinomies (those proving fundamentally insoluble and only coming to a close when one party dies or surrenders any claim to contentment) and what one could call “nominal antinomies” (those presenting oppositions and impasses that eventually yield when one moral position is allowed to take precedence over the other). Every popular cinematic tradition has produced myriad romantic melodramas portraying protagonists torn between the desire to “follow their hearts” and the desire to heed norms and obligations surrounding filial duty, social integration, and care for the wellbeing of others.³

Antipodal and antinomic melodrama occupy opposite ends of the melodramatic spectrum. The third major strand of melodrama, and by far the more variable in its manifestations, occupies the zone in between. If antipodal

melodrama stages contests between good and evil, and antinomic melodrama poses good versus good, this third form focuses on characters whose moral identity is divided, ambiguous, paradoxical, or fluid, combining aspects of goodness and badness in various ways and degrees. There are too many possible permutations to chart systematically here, but historically prominent examples would include stories of “fallen women” (heroines at once abject and altruistic, debased and saintly) and adjacent melodramas of sin and forgiveness in which errant protagonists injure loved ones and themselves when seized by vices and temptations like liquor and lust. This domain of compromised or complicated virtue also encompasses most melodramas emphasizing pronounced character arcs. Protagonists blighted by moral transgressions or negative character traits gradually, or ultimately, perceive the error of their ways, display contrition, and generally awaken to the better angels of their natures.⁴ I propose the label “antithetic” to designate this melodramatic mode of moral ambivalence and ambiguity inhabiting a disparate middle zone between antinomic and antipodal ends of melodrama’s moral spectrum. Antithetic melodrama refers to stories accentuating characterological antitheses, that is, portraying significant contradictions or divisions, either synchronic or diachronic, marking the moral bearing or status of central characters.

So, how does Griffith’s filmography graft onto this framework? Unquestionably, the oeuvre is solidly rooted in the quintessentially antipodal mode the director absorbed from nineteenth-century stage melodrama. Griffith clearly understood melodrama as a showcase for egregious violations of human autonomy engineered to inflame reactions of aversion and outrage. One could hardly find starker affronts to autonomy than the brutal physical and emotional abuse, and ultimate killing, of the waif Lucy in *Broken Blossoms*. Likewise, the ordeal of the blind sister Louise in *Orphans of the Storm* involves a perfect combination of physical constraint, abuse, coercion, exploitation and injustice.⁵

One particularly emblematic manifestation of antipodal conflict – the climactic race to the rescue – became such a mainstay for Griffith that critics began to begrudge its seeming inevitability. As journalist Tamar Lane griped in 1923:

D.W. cannot seem to get away from the situation of attacking, raping or wronging of the defenseless girl. He places full reliance in this piece of mechanics as the most effective in existence, as is proven by the fact that he hardly ever attempts to make a screen story without it (63).

(Howe (1920) and Schallert (1920) similarly criticize the predictability of Griffith’s narrative “machine.”) Lane cited nine titles among the features, but a more comprehensive inventory would reveal perhaps twice as many cases in point.

Antipodal melodrama pervades Griffith’s oeuvre, but such a generalization only goes so far. Closer observation reveals a considerably more complex

picture, particularly regarding Griffith's emphasis on the moral dynamics of antithetic melodrama. His ostensibly sympathetic characters are sometimes remarkably amoral. In *The Love Flower*, for example, a virtuously devoted daughter commits three separate acts of attempted murder in an effort to prevent her father from being taken into custody by an overzealous officer of the law. In *A Romance of Happy Valley*, a good but financially stressed man (the father of the all-American boy central in the romantic plot line) robs a sleeping stranger, and in the course of doing so, appears to kill him. Fortuitously (although rather disturbingly), all ends happily, as the crime goes undetected and unpunished.

Several of Griffith's features follow the most familiar antithetic blueprints. *The Struggle*, Griffith's final feature, encapsulated the tradition of temperance melodramas prominent on the nineteenth-century stage. Gripped by alcoholism, a decent family man inflicts terrible pain upon the ones he loves. While his actions are reckless, callous, even brutal, his moral status is tempered by an understanding that he is "not himself" when under the spell of his demons. A malefactor without malevolence, he represents a kind of mitigated evil differentiated from the deliberate cruelty and venality of an antipodal villain. Heartfelt expressions of remorse and vows of reform and atonement, combined with scenes affirming the abiding love and forbearance of the victims, further establish such protagonists as essentially good but wayward figures. Melodramas focusing on wayward fiancés or husbands – *True Heart Susie* and *The Battle of the Sexes* representing prime examples – operate in a similar way, just substituting libidinal intemperance and insensitivity for inebriation, factoring in feminine rather than fermented temptations, and highlighting the emotional, more than the physical, injury of the crushed loved ones.⁶

The White Rose taps another antithetic mainstay, the fallen woman saga, but adds another dimension of moral ambivalence and ambiguity involving profound harm inflicted unintentionally by an already self-punitive fallen man. Characterological antitheses hinge on a virtuous woman branded as a harlot (a contrast between her true moral countenance and the one perceived and acted upon by others) and on a man torn between body and soul, passion and shame, and, above all, guilt and innocence (as the unintentional and unknowing cause of profound harm to a virtuous woman). While both protagonists are sympathetic and earnest, pushing the narrative toward an antinomic structure, the focus of the film is not really on competing moral principles (like, say, the good of expressing genuine love without inhibition versus the good of piety and prudence) as much as it is on the tribulations of divided identity and subjectivity.⁷

Alongside these straight-out antithetic melodramas, Griffith frequently gravitated toward a hybrid design that fleshed out antithetic patterns against an overarching backdrop of antipodal peril. *Dream Street* serves as an example. The story concentrates on the fluctuating relationships among a putatively fetching lass and two supposedly likable but deeply flawed brothers – one a

cocky, egocentric Alpha male and would-be rapist who must learn the meaning of altruistic sacrifice and romantic tenderness; the other a cowardly weakling and starry-eyed simp who must learn the meaning of self-reliance, fortitude, and practical judgment. The core melodrama is antithetic, revolving around the protagonists' emotional tribulations and corresponding trajectories of moral maturation. The backdrop, however, is essentially antipodal, pitting the conflicted but ultimately decent trio against a set of two-dimensional personifications of unalloyed evil: a criminal lowlife; a coercive and cold-blooded police inspector; and a leering, lascivious yellow menace bent on revenge and rape. The Manichean cosmology of this backdrop is made explicit through self-consciously symbolic personifications of Good and Evil, the former embodied by an auratic street preacher; the latter by of a hideous trickster wearing a mask of tempting beauty.

In optimal instances of narrative craftwork, the two melodramatic strands intersect meaningfully in a climactic antipodal crisis that secures the moral transformation of the antithetic ensemble. In *The Idol Dancer*, the remote Polynesian outpost where the story is set serves as a busy intersection of transformative trajectories. The female protagonist, White Almond Flower (Clarine Seymour), a mixed-race free spirit whose dividedness is cued by her name (both white and almond), evolves from a heathen, worshiping pagan idols and resisting Western restraint, to a more demure, conventionally pious, "white" woman. Her love interest, "The Beachcomber" (Richard Barthelmess), enacts a more pronounced moral conversion from a world-weary nihilist – indolent, alcoholic, atheistic, cynical, selfish and self-indulgent – to an upstanding, honorable man willing to work hard, and for the first time comprehending the meaning of Christian brotherhood and romantic sincerity. A potential rival for White Almond Flower's affections, a visiting nephew of the resident missionary, transforms from a cowardly milquetoast to a brave hero who sacrifices his life staving off a horde of marauding savages. The missionary, chastened by his dying nephew's respect for the Beachcomber and the girl, shifts from a stern figure of righteous but repressive godliness to a kinder representative of human tolerance and compassion. These are all essentially good but nominally or substantively flawed people who over the course of the narrative follow meandering pathways toward moral illumination and maturation, culminating in states of exemplary personhood. On top of this antithetic arena, Griffith overlays a swath of straightforward antipodal melodrama imperiling the ensemble in an onslaught of out-and-out evil. The experience of collective peril, and the acts of allegiance and heroism it engenders, serve to resolve antithetic discord and solidify emerging romantic and affiliative bonds (while also affording a convenient means to dispense with romantic rivals). One can recognize a similar design, although quite variably set up and inflected, in works such as *The Birth of a Nation*; *The Girl Who Stayed at Home*; *Scarlet Days*; and *America*. Adversaries turn into allies upon the obtrusion of an incomparably more aversive embodiment of evil.

The prominence of antipodal melodrama in Griffith's work is common knowledge. I have been suggesting the need to recognize his inclination toward antithetic formulas as well, and also toward a hybrid model combining the two. I have said conspicuously little about the place of antinomic melodrama in Griffith's oeuvre. The lacuna reflects Griffith's relative indifference to this strain. On one level, it may seem surprising that Griffith largely sidestepped such a basic staple of popular melodrama around the world, namely, heart-rending tales of yearned-for romantic coupling impeded by compelling (if ultimately yielding) familial and social pressures. To my knowledge, not one Griffith feature taps that formula as its primary focus (with the possible exception of *Lady of the Pavements* – a scenario Griffith did not develop). Griffith's films do not elide impeded love altogether; one does find obstinate parental opposition to wholesome cross-class and cross-faction romance in the narratives of *Orphans of the Storm* and *America*, but the conflict seems decidedly lackluster in the latter, and in both films, more momentous and thrilling antipodal crises of evil run amok overpower any romantic tension. Overall, antinomic melodrama may simply have been crowded out by the other two melodramatic variants, which Griffith presumably felt afforded richer opportunities for elemental affect, thrilling suspense, epic sensation, and didactic preachment.

Griffith as moralistic moralist

In the previous section, I sought to underscore that an inquiry into Griffith's moral propensities is inseparable from an inquiry into the variable moral configurations of melodrama as a whole. Griffith was a genre filmmaker first and foremost, a craftsman proffering familiar wares. But Griffith was also cinema's first real auteur. It would be a mistake to approach his features as little more than tokens of the generic mainstream. Griffith was idiosyncratic, at once epitomizing dominant strains of popular melodrama and standing as an outlier in relation to them.

Paradoxically, one of the qualities that made Griffith's features atypical had to do with their very prototypicality as intermedial exemplars of the melodramatic tradition from which they sprang. However undeniably cinema absorbed and perpetuated the popular theatrical tradition, the film industry was hardly eager to draw attention to such a lowbrow lineage. Few, if any, directors embraced theatrical melodrama's conventions and resurrected its chestnuts as self-consciously and unabashedly as Griffith.

Accordingly, Griffith's never shied away from melodrama's traditional mode of hyperbolic moral intonation. Capitalizing upon his prerogative as an independent producer, and more than other directors in his cohort, Griffith seized upon his narrational function as an oratorical platform for the pronouncement of moral instruction, aphoristic wisdom, and polemical admonition. The assertive mode of didactic address he tended to employ, particularly within highly

enunciative prologues and intertitles, reflected a relatively brief window of opportunity in which Hollywood conventions of narrational transparency had not yet fully congealed. Experts like Gunning (1991) and Keil (2011) have shed light on the distinctively expressive narrational posture animating the Biograph shorts. This general propensity carried over into the feature format, which permitted even more extensive and emphatic articulation by means of intertitles. Rejecting the softer-sell mode of thematic suggestion and ideological intimation emerging as the Hollywood norm, Griffith's narrational style was extraordinary in both the blatancy of its didacticism and the mannerism of its rhetorical filigree. The effect was to amplify the moral dimension of an already morally imbued genre. In Griffith's treatment, melodrama was not just moral in a routine way; it was self-consciously and fervently moral. Or, to express the inflection in a slightly different way, one could say that Griffith's melodramatic mode was more than just moral – it was *moralistic*.

I attach this label with some hesitation. Griffith has long been characterized in terms of an “old fashioned,” “Victorian,” or “Puritanical” worldview. Susan Sontag (1961), for example, insisted that his work “reeks of fervid moralizing about sexuality and violence whose energy comes from suppressed voluptuousness.” Such imputation of repression and sublimation is too simplistic. Griffith often demonstrated surprising candor in acknowledging the appeals of sexuality and vibrant modernity. Portraying a hedonistic roué like Lennox Sanderson in *Way Down East*, Griffith does not merely condemn cosmopolitan carnality, he fleshes out its overwhelming attraction. In *True Heart Susie*, as Tom Gunning (2006a) has highlighted, bad-girl Bettina's restless need for convivial stimulation is set against a tacit acknowledgment of the tedium and alienation of staid small-town life. The premarital sex in *The White Rose* is not treated as fodder for prudish finger-wagging, but rather as a natural, though guilt-laden, expression of heterosexual communion. White Almond Flower's urge to dance wild and free in *The Idol Dancer* celebrates the cosmic earthiness of eros, legitimating it even as the narrative works to temper it in deference to civilization. The daughter in *The Love Flower*, another uninhibited nature girl, exudes erotic vitality displaying her figure in semi-transparent wet clothing that clings to her body after a swim.⁸ The closing vignette of *A Romance of Happy Valley* appears downright saucy in its not-so-subtle reference to the busy sex life anticipated by the soon-to-wed romantic couple.⁹ Overall, I am inclined to agree with Gunning's perspective (2006a, 2006b) that, rather than simply pigeon-holing Griffith as an old-fashioned moralist out of touch with modern sensibilities, a more illuminating approach would apprehend him as an index of a complex cultural moment in which America navigated the simultaneous pull of both traditional Protestant conservatism and modern urbane liberality.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that many of Griffith's features justify the perception of him as a uniquely stentorian moral proselytizer. His imposing style of narrational overttness had its roots in an earlier Biograph

strain, exemplified by titles such as *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), that scenarist and publicist Frank E. Woods dubbed the “film editorial.” In the feature era, the manner of grandiloquent direct address came to the fore in *The Birth of a Nation* and other works positioning the filmmaker as a quasi-pedagogical authority delivering substantive historical education. Eventually, however, the most salient association would become neither filmmaker as newspaper editorialist nor as pedagogue, but rather, as preacher, or, preacher combined with poet or some such literary aesthete. Griffith commonly began his features with intertitles spelling out in advance what moral lesson audiences were supposed to take away from the film. *A Romance of Happy Valley* begins by feigning a certain casual or humble attitude toward the didactic impulse – “Must all our stories have a moral?” – but proceeds to deliver the moral missive forthwith: “Here we shall find one readily – ‘Harm not the stranger within your gates, lest you yourself be hurt’.” The lessons were sometimes relatively focused, as in this example roughly equivalent to “Do unto others...” or the notorious sermonizing about monogamy as a Christian imperative at the beginning of *Way Down East*, but frequently the central message entailed a more basic exhortation, simultaneously fundamental and facile, about the goodness of love and the badness of hatred. Even *Isn't Life Wonderful*, a film often held up as a bold departure for Griffith in its move toward unvarnished naturalism, begins with a syrupy coating of moralism:

This simple story shows that LOVE makes beautiful all that it touches; That when we LOVE, no trials are ever grim; No disappointments make us morbid; Our struggles, however tense, are never depressing; For where there is LOVE there is HOPE and TRIUMPH – which is what MAKES LIFE WONDERFUL.

In addition to didactic and fancied intertitles, often incorporating quotations (or faux quotations) from the Bible or poetic verse, Griffith's impulse toward preachment found expression in tableaux conveying Christian imagery and themes (most famously at the conclusions of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*). The impulse reached an apotheosis of sorts in *Dream Street*, a project that one critic aptly observed “smacks of old morality plays.” (M.M.F., 1921) Along with its symbolist embodiments of Good and Evil, interpolated tableaux visualized Christ on the cross and sinners writhing in Hell, while insistent art titles proclaimed the Evening Star “the symbol of Eternal Love.”

Griffith's moralism and sentimentalism went hand in hand with his florid mode of aestheticism. Mindful of the mutual reinforcement of cultural/artistic capital and moral capital, Griffith harnessed earmarks of intellectual authority and aesthetic refinement both as a means to amplify the affective impact of his moral messaging and as a means to project himself as a man of sophistication and culture, someone eminently qualified to pontificate upon matters of human import. Hence, Griffith gravitated toward conspicuously high-toned allusion (e.g., “Maternity – Woman's Gethsemane” – *Way Down East*); poetic

pastiche (e.g., "Oh, lily flowers and / plum blossoms! / Oh, silver streams and / dim-starred skies!" – *Broken Blossoms*); and highly poeticized prose (e.g., "Passion's urge knows no conscience and various its ways to betrayal" – *Way Down East*; "Like her broken hopes, tropic moonbeams swoon in the jasmine scented air." – *The Love Flower*). The transitional interludes in *Intolerance* epitomize Griffith's intermingling of morality, sentiment, and aestheticism. Superimposed over an archetypal image self-consciously emulating painterly tenebrism, quasi-poetic, quasi-scriptural lines intone, "Endlessly rocks the cradle / uniter of here and hereafter. / Chanter of sorrows and joys." One would be hard pressed to extract any sort of concrete propositional meaning from these transitions, but even so (or perhaps as a result), the rarified image and text emanate an aura of oracular wisdom. Poetic and pictorial aestheticism undergirds the impression of existential significance issuing from the vague admixture of sentimentality (relating somehow to abiding mother love), morality (conveying some sort of didactic message regarding intolerance), and spiritual vision (touching on metaphysical realms of eternity and afterlife).

As Hollywood norms of transparency solidified, Griffith's moralistic grandstanding would appear more and more conspicuous and galling. A 1922 *New York Times* review pointed to the director's "inevitable pulpiteering" and "self-consciously solemn" posture of "melodramatic moralizing" (Anon. "Griffith Gives Thrills" 1922). Donald Clive Stuart, Professor of Dramatic Literature at Princeton, scorned the way that "*Way Down East* begins by forcing a supposed 'moral' down my throat." The intertitles' "pretension piffle," he complained, "flaunts in one's face an undisputed but absolutely irrelevant truth in the shape of a moral" (Stuart 1922: 8). In a caustic open letter published in 1924, *Photoplay* editor James R. Quirk censured Griffith for regarding himself "the evangelist of the screen" (Quirk 1924). "Isolation" and "austerity" imbued his films with "a certain brutality," Quirk charged, and betrayed "[p]uritanical repression, an unyielding eye upon humanity" that "see[s] men and things in sharp blacks and whites, as being very good or very bad." Moral severity often went hand in hand with sentimentality. Griffith's "refusal to face the world," Quirk declaimed, was "making [him] more and more a sentimentalist" insistent upon fancying "a false world of things as [he] would like to have them" rather than "portay[ing] life as it is." Ludwig Lewisohn similarly complained (with particular reference to *Way Down East*) that intertitles written "in a style of inimitably stale sugari-ness... serve but to intensify the coarse and blundering insufficiency of the moral involved" (Lewisohn 1920: 18). "[Griffith] is but a sentimentalist who would be a moral philosopher," sneered a critic reviewing *Dream Street* in the journal *Visual Education* (M.M.F. 1921).

As the above interjections attest, critics have tended to take Griffith's didactic impulse at face value as a direct expression of his deep-rooted character, psychology, mentality, or temperament. Quirk spoke of the director's "splendid unsophistication," while James Agee noted the director's "moral and poetic earnestness" (Agee 1948). I would prefer to place emphasis

elsewhere, observing ways in which Griffith's imposing style stemmed from deliberate decisions relating to the rhetorical and aesthetic conventions and objectives of his craft, which we can identify in terms of two rudimentary goals governing virtually any cinematic enterprise. The first goal, unremarkably, would be the achievement of broad commercial success – a goal essential to the very viability of the director's professional occupation. Second (again, as would be expected), Griffith was fundamentally motivated by "vanity fair," to use E.H. Gombrich's term denoting the artist's basic desire for recognition and esteem, that is, the will to achieve a status of importance, to be taken seriously, to command attention and respect. Although Griffith's ostentatious pulpsteering seems to betray a particularly pronounced yearning for cultural gravitas – perhaps not surprising considering his lowly background as a poor Kentuckian and failed thespian lacking formal education beyond the ninth grade – ultimately, he was an artistic craft worker motivated by the same goals as any other.

Griffith's moralism and sentimentalism presumably tell us more about how he apprehended the pertinent means of commanding cultural respect and popular appeal than it does about any naively genuine or "earnest" moral sensibility. The director's narrational persona begins to look rather less straightforward and symptomatic when, for example, one finds him stubbornly rejecting the notion of abiding true love in a 1919 interview (Naylor 1919b: 114) (a stance obviously contradicting the heartwarming sentiment proffered in, for example, the prologue to *Isn't Life Wonderful* quoted previously). Likewise, when one finds Griffith bemoaning that commercial necessity forced him to "go on sugar-coating life, idealizing our celluloid characters" (Smith 1922), one must question Quirk's assumption that "splendid unsophistication" accounts for the director's sentimental and judgmental tendency. The simple psychologism of such an assumption seems itself to reflect a kind of splendid unsophistication.

One occasionally even senses a lack of earnestness in Griffith's aestheticism. The slapdash prologue of *One Exciting Night*, for example, all but compels spectators to see through its pretense of didactic profundity. It reads:

The mystery of Passion; unruly devouring, that has destroyed kingdoms, slain its millions – the mystery of Love, the sweetest of all mysteries, without which there would be no light, no music – The mystery of Greed – the mystery of Fear – in short, the mystery of LIFE itself which someone has said is even greater than they mystery of death.

Lofty prattle such as this, with no discernible conceptual connection to the narrative, seems utterly perfunctory, as if conceding its purely decorative function. It perfumes the air with a sense of gravitas even as it invites recognition of its own vaporousness. Ultimately, Griffith's didactic grandeur warrants analysis less as an expression of moral conviction than as authorial performance.

Griffith as immoral moralist

Auteurist egoism proved both an asset and a liability. The self-conscious aggrandizement of authorial command brought with it an unanticipated side effect that proved particularly consequential in relation to *The Birth of a Nation*. It meant that, for those outraged by the film, the target of their anger was immediately apparent, a specific individual wrongdoer to reproach and scorn (along with Dixon). A conventionally transparent mode of narration might not have sparked such a vigorous and coordinated reaction by the NAACP and others. The responsible parties would have seemed less tangible: an anonymous narrational agency; a vaguely apprehended corporate body; or an entity as nebulous and difficult to hold to account as dominant American society as a whole.

Looming large even to this day, the controversy surrounding *Birth* presents another reason why one cannot approach Griffith as simply a journeyman purveyor of melodrama as usual. The film invariably draws attention to the irony that a surpassingly moralistic director, working in a genre recognized as the essential dramatic domain of morality, should be responsible for one of the most infamously immoral works in film history.

Griffith “seems genuinely to have been shocked by the outrage his film stirred,” surmised biographer Richard Schickel (1984: 289). Lillian Gish (presumably his uncredited source) stated as much in interviews over the years (Oderman 2000: 55; Manchel 2007: 175). Griffith may well have embarked upon *The Birth of a Nation* with only the vaguest sense that the project might spark controversy (even were he aware of prior agitations surrounding the publication and stage production of *The Clansman*). Multiple factors would have allowed him to proceed unbothered by moral qualms or worries over reception. The American public was generally habituated to and untroubled by racism as a cultural norm, and Griffith was no exception. Like his audience, Griffith was likely predisposed to think of blacks and ethnic outsiders as inferior simply based on the fact that they *were* inferior, palpably and perennially so, measured by wealth, civic power, educational, and professional attainment, or any other index of cultural status and success. Griffith was mindful of persistent socioeconomic and environmental forces conspiring to keep the underclasses trapped in poverty and criminality (he stressed the point in melodramas like *The Mother and the Law*), but it proved no easier a century ago than today to disentangle character and context, or conceive of social types apart from the manifestations of their disadvantage.

Indeed, the ideological climate the director inhabited made it considerably harder to do so. The theory of Social Darwinism, still influential despite the emergence of a Progressive counter-discourse, lent credibility to the tenet that some individuals, groups, and races were inherently superior to others, and large-scale social-engineering enterprises (such as the enfranchisement of freed slaves) interfered with normal processes of natural selection. In the realm of moral philosophy, a related variant of naturalism expressed itself in Nietzsche's

contrarian or “immoralist” conception of morality, which argued that some people were intrinsically more noble than others, and the ideal of equality advanced by “herd morality” (a.k.a. “slave morality”) was nothing but a ploy by resentful and vindictive underlings to bring down their betters. It seems reasonable to assume that Griffith’s background and self-conception as a genteel Southerner would have predisposed him to intellectual currents such as these, especially since, like many proud Southerners, he harbored a feeling of righteous grievance about the historical hardships and indignities borne by his kin and kind. His culturally grounded perception of white Southerners as victims eclipsed other outlooks. Finally, even were Griffith able to appreciate the injuriousness of his portrayal of African-Americans, the pretext that he was offering the public a painstakingly accurate reproduction of actual historical events insulated him from any such concern.

On reflection, the apparent contradictoriness of Griffith’s moral persona should hardly come as a surprise. It highlights a kind of occupational hazard inherent in his line of work. Stoking hatred (along with sympathy) has always been a crucial part of the melodramatist’s job. Arguably the main reason Griffith could undertake *The Birth of a Nation* without moral qualms had to do with his assimilation of the melodramatic tradition as such. Griffith understood himself to be working in a firmly established moral-generic form, mounting a ripping antipodal yarn like any other – bigger and punchier, to be sure, but nevertheless based on the same gut-level abhorrence of evil (violence, rape, cruelty, tyranny, anarchy, hypocrisy, etc.) and the same embrace of virtue (altruism, family love, civility, bravery, decency, self-respect, piety, etc.) as any such melodrama. What could possibly be problematic about a melodrama hewing so faithfully to traditional conventions of the form? How could such a work be anything but morally unimpeachable? What could be less controversial than the proposition that brutality and injustice are abhorrent and must be redressed? Is it not manifestly right and proper to hate vicious incarnations of evil who are, after all, hateful?

Defending *The Birth of a Nation* during the period of protests and legal machinations following its release, Griffith recurrently stressed his paramount interest in advancing the motion picture as an expressive art form (Schickel 1984: 289–292). Put more prosaically, he undertook to tell a powerfully moving and exciting story in his given medium. By implication, he did not aim to be inflammatory in the manner imputed by his opponents. Instead, he simply sought to accomplish what his job called for: creating a flaming melodrama on film. And that is what he did, distinguished by enhanced scale and finesse, but basically following the same generic protocols that melodramatists have always employed. It was to this aspect of *The Birth of a Nation* – as a terrifically impressive melodrama – that period critics and mass audiences alike overwhelmingly responded.

In key regards, however, *The Birth of a Nation* was not a melodrama just like any other. Most significantly, it threw the genre’s customary moral compass

out of whack by shifting the locus and basis of evil away from the realm of individual villains and their intentional evil actions toward the realm of vast social and racial aggregates and their intrinsic ignobility. Villainy became embodied not by persons, but by an entire race. Specific agents of evil obviously remained pivotal (Stoneman, Gus, Silas Lynch), but cinema allowed for a much wider and more convincing canvas in its portrayal of apocalyptic evil. The new medium's expansiveness of scope, combined with its referential concreteness, resulted in a much more palpable, sweeping, and frightful realization than ever had been seen on stage. The image was so powerful that, a few faithful servants notwithstanding, it appeared to implicate the entire black race – past, present, and future.

Griffith denied any such scope of vilification, insisting that his animus was directed solely toward an historically specific cohort of wrongdoers. Whatever his intentions, such a defense cannot help but seem pallid and disingenuous in view of the film's exploitation of vituperative racist stereotypes, its white-supremacist rhetoric of "Aryan birthright," its celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, and its categorical abhorrence of miscegenation. None of these elements were historically encapsulated; they bled into current realities so directly that, for many observers, it was impossible to regard the film as either "just history" or "just melodrama" in a routine sense.

Framed in terms of the principle of autonomy, racism clearly violates the percept voiced by Grotius that a man's reputation and honor are "his own;" that is, properly determined by his own character and actions rather than *pre*-determined by discriminations attending to factors entirely unrelated to individual self-governance. The film's endorsement of intimidation as a means of voter suppression also runs counter to the principle that people have a basic right to pursue their own wellbeing without malevolent interference. So too does the proposed solution of forced mass deportation of blacks back to Africa (in the original epilogue that censors expunged). Slavery, of course, constitutes the ultimate offense against human autonomy. One should note that the film does not actually broach the morality of that institution (beyond very obliquely conceding its wrongfulness by blaming Yankee traders for its emergence and treating Lincoln with reverence). Contemporary viewers are likely to overlook that nuance, however, in view of the film's promotion of white supremacy. Overall, one can scarcely ignore the mismatch between Griffith's posture as a beacon of moral edification and what today appears to be a patently indefensible deficiency of moral vision. The overheated imagery of Christian peace and love at the end of the film does little to ameliorate the preceding ugliness, and instead leaves a lasting impression of moral myopia.

How representative was *The Birth of a Nation*? As many critics have underscored, *Broken Blossoms* shows that Griffith's outlook was not always so incompatible with contemporary moral percepts regarding race. To describe that work as a kind of *mea culpa* or deliberate atonement, as some have done (e.g., Niemeyer 1971: 137) misses the mark, as Griffith never believed he had