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Griffith, Film Theory, and American Culture

Among most moviegoers today, the name D. W. Griffith elicits one of two responses: a polite nod toward "the father of film technique"[1] or a curt rejection of the racist creator of *The Birth of a Nation*. The hatred of Griffith is in many ways more appealing than the respect, for it is less immediately dismissive of his films' cultural power. This power, after all, arises not simply from *The Birth of a Nation*'s Reconstruction-era drama of men "united in defense of their common Aryan birthright" but from a more daunting matrix of nineteenth-century popular attitudes that Griffith carried into the twentieth century through its newest art form.

Imaginative participation in early silent films presents sufficient challenges to us now without Griffith's having, as it were, looked backward for their values. The mere names of Griffith's heroines have been enough to send tough-minded contemporary moviegoers fleeing toward exits: "The Little Disturber," "The Dear One," "Cutie Beautiful," and sundry "Little Darlings." His sentimentalisms have also been enough to turn many devotees into thoroughgoing formalists savoring his growing mastery in rhythmic editing and compositional style. For the rest of us, however, the key question becomes what can be additionally recovered from D. W. Griffith's work to admire and treasure. That, at least, will be our search in this volume.

To talk of "the films of D. W. Griffith" is to take in, at best count, some 495 titles, ranging in length from three minutes (*Those Awful Hats,* 1909) to three hours (*Intolerance,* 1916), even though Griffith spent the last seventeen years of his life, from 1931 to 1948, doing only token work in Hollywood. The records of the Biograph Company, his employer from 1908 through 1913, give some sense of his early pace. On Tuesday, July 21, 1908 – to take one random date – he managed to shoot all of *For Love of Gold* (adapted from a Jack London story), with time left over for interiors on the

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more complexly intercut *The Fatal Hour*. The astonishing fact about this output, however, is its survival rate. From an era in which no more than perhaps a fifth of the films produced survive, Griffith's work comes down to us essentially complete. Currently only 10 of those 495 titles are lost.[2]

It is this happy survival of Griffith's films, rather than his production pace, that complicates comparisons with his contemporaries. For instance, although he directed 61 films for release by Biograph in 1912, Allan Dwan easily bests him with a mind-boggling 120 for the American Film Company that year; yet while two of Griffith's 1912 films are lost, it seems that no more than two of Dwan's have survived. Indeed, my guess would be that Griffith directed the *majority* of surviving American fiction films from his most productive year, 1909.[3] This would be a curiosity for archival accountants only if it didn't underscore another unsettling question about Griffith today: Might he not be an important figure by default, as our only full representative of the transition from one-reel to feature-length filmmaking?

If Griffith's stock is low in the 1990s, it is not because of the vertigo – a pleasant vertigo, finally – induced by distinguishing such of his surviving one-reelers as *Her Mother's Oath* from *His Wife's Mother* or *His Mother's Son*. Neither is it due in any great degree to the fact that his weakest features of the 1920s (*Dream Street, One Exciting Night, Sally of the Sawdust, Drums of Love*) have become unwatchable to all but the most committed of specialists; Griffith would hardly be the only great director whose bad films are truly numbing. (John Ford comes to mind.) To some extent, Griffith's demotion is due to the wealth of recent scholarship devoted to silent filmmaking in the first decade of this century. The displacement of reminiscence by research has swept away, for instance, James Agee's heroic narrative ("Griffith hit the picture business like a tornado. Before he walked on the set, motion pictures had been, in actuality, static").[4]

Griffith's reputation has sunk further than can be attributed merely to denying him progenitive credit as the "father" of film language. It seems to have sunk in direct proportion to his identification with *The Birth of a Nation*. One need only go as far as Chapter 2 of every history of moviemaking to become lost in the tangle of justifications resulting from *The Birth of a Nation*'s apparent mix of stylistic genius with political incorrectness. There Griffith squats – embarrassing an art form ever anxious about its legitimacy – releasing "repellant" thought into "the screens's first masterpiece."[5] It is tempting, in this short book, to salvage Griffith by bypassing *The Birth of a Nation* altogether; but that sleight of hand would

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evade not merely the history of film history but also wider questions of culture and commerce.

Whatever one's reservations about the content of Griffith's thought, it is undeniable that, taken together, his films hold a coherent worldview, the vision of an auteur. Still, it is probably fortunate that the purer forms of the auteurist methodology are terminally discredited, as Griffith's appeal seems weakest under them, especially to the extent that auteurism in practice serves as boosterism for a filmmaker's unique "personality."[6] If Griffith's vision appears unique, it is less because his personality displays a brilliance worth examining for its own sake than because his films are the unparalleled surviving record of a widely shared vision of life in America, a vision that, insofar as it was depicted in art at all, often found expression in forms *more* ephemeral than the movies, such as the vaudeville stage and popular songs and even advice pamphlets and advertising flyers. Griffith's rival U.S. directors in the years before World War I – Thomas Ince, Sidney Olcott, Alice Guy-Blaché, and lesser lights – seem never to have completed so wide a survey of the world, although their relatively few surviving films make final judgment impossible. True, the auteurist angle on Griffith is not without its place. His vision is something other than loosely "Victorian"; one would be hard pressed to come up with another filmmaker who displays his mix of values drawn from, most notably, (1) the antebellum South, (2) theatrical melodramatists, and (3) Populist agrarianism.

Griffith's is not, finally, a particularly warm or comforting "personality" either on film or, according to reports, in person. Ironically enough, however, it is the retrograde nature of his work that brings it to the center of film studies today. As much as one might want to evade Griffith, his films force consideration of fundamental questions. What is it exactly that we treasure in film culture? What weight do we place on formal integrity? On moral consequences? How should imagination represent history? What sorts of values, beyond nostalgia, can film bring us from the past? Griffith's work now offers itself as a "problem": He has no rivals as the most troubling figure in American film, for ethical reasons, obviously, and for aesthetic reasons too. Before we look into such questions, it is worth surveying his career.

David Wark Griffith was born on January 23, 1875, in rural Kentucky, to parents who both traced their heritage to Virginia.[7] Notwithstanding the idolized mothers crowding Griffith's films, it was his father, "Roaring Jake"

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Griffith – self-trained physician and veteran of the California gold rush, the 1846–8 Mexican war, and, famously, the Civil War – who loomed largest in his reminiscences. Border-state Kentucky had made a stab at neutrality before siding with the North in the Civil War, but Jacob – a slaveholder via his wife Mary's inheritance – fought for the South as a lieutenant colonel. At the time of David's birth, the Griffith farm was a sustaining size (264 acres), although its income fell with sagging commodities prices following the Panic of 1873, the "Great Depression" of the nineteenth century.

Jacob Griffith's sudden death in 1885 exposed debts that forced sale of the family farm. Four years later Mary Griffith took David and the two other youngest of her eight children twenty miles west to Louisville, Kentucky's largest city. Thus at age 14, David found himself part of the defining population pattern of nineteenth-century America – one so often melodramatized in his films – the internal immigration from farm to city. Dropping out after perhaps a year of high school, David supported himself as a clerk at a department store and then a book shop, but his passion was the theater, initially as a stagehand and actor in amateur productions. At age 20, he left Louisville for the world of touring companies, although for the next thirteen years – until joining up with the movies – his roles, often under the stage name "Lawrence Griffith," were generally small and his employment precarious, and thus he also juggled such jobs as encyclopedia salesman, iron ore stoker, and hop harvester. It is not surprising to find Griffith in such popular melodramas as *East Lynne* and *A Celebrated Cause* or in theatrical adaptations of novels like *Trilby* and *Ramona,* but there is a shock in trying to match the Griffith we fashion from his movies to the actor in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (as the scene-stealing scholar and free spirit Ulric Brendel) and in Wilde's *Salomé* (as the obsessively romantic "Young Syrian" who kills himself at the feet of Salomé). If this avant-garde was far removed from the tradition Griffith brought to the movies, it was not for lack of awareness.

At his marriage in 1906 to a San Francisco actress, Linda Arvidson, Griffith listed his profession as "writing" – a nod more to ambition than achievement. In 1901, his one-act Revolutionary War drama, *In Washington's Time,* ran briefly on the East Coast's vaudeville circuit, but only after settling with Linda in Manhattan did he complete a full-length play, *A Fool and a Girl,* a work flaunting an entertainingly wide range of tones, from character comedy (when San Francisco "bunco" artists dupe an idealistic young Kentuckian) to florid melodrama.[8] The play's purchase by matinee-idol-turned-producer James K. Hackett was a success in itself, although it folded after two weeks, following wildly varying reviews for the Washing-

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ton, D.C., tryout of October 1907 ("realistic pictures of vital human interest" as against "if this be art, it is the art of Zola, and Washington wants none of it").[9] Griffith's next play, *War,* also set during the American Revolution, failed to find a producer.[10]

In the fall of 1907, the U.S. movie business had survived its first decade, having grown only slowly from the days of Edison's "Projecting Kinetoscope" tours until a boom in the previous two years had brought perhaps five thousand small "nickelodeon" theaters. A typical program, of less than an hour in "continuous performance" (as marquees often read), might include several short actualities and sing-along illustrated slides as well as a growing proportion of narrative films, primarily comedies, chases, and unauthorized bits and pieces of theatrical melodramas. Such narratives almost never exceeded nine hundred feet (running, at the most leisurely of the variable projection speeds, fifteen minutes), and the majority were closer to half that length. Although production was scattered as far afield as San Antonio, Jacksonville, and even Los Angeles (where Chicago's Selig Company had sent the first unit that fall), New York City had the leading companies – Edison, Vitagraph, and Biograph. This fledgling enterprise offered Griffith two easy avenues for uncommitted work (in light of his experience, if not success, as a playwright and actor), hired by the piece for page-long scenarios or by the day as an actor.[11]

The first surviving film in which Griffith has been spotted is *Falsely Accused!* filmed in December 1907 at the East Fourteenth Street studio of the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company (Biograph's official name at that time). The stylistically primitive film ingeniously capitalizes on the public's fascination with new motion picture technology itself, through a plot line in which a murder is inadvertently captured on film. Griffith's tiny role as a courtroom officer consists primarily of setting up a projector and hanging a sheet over the judge's bench to serve as a screen on which the evidence is "projected" (via double exposure), a wonderfully appropriate entrance for Griffith into the world of moviemaking.[12] For the rival Edison Company, he had what seems to have been his first lead, in the amusingly absurd *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest,* photographed and codirected by Edwin S. Porter, whose innovative *The Great Train Robbery* was now four years old. Cast as a lumberman, Griffith's performance style is energetic, let us say, in wrestling with a (mechanical) eagle on a (painted) cliff ledge in order to save his infant son. Through the first half of 1908 it was increasingly Biograph that employed Griffith (usually as a villain or seducer) or purchased his scenarios (a motley group of contemporary and medieval stories).

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The opportunity for Griffith to direct seems to have come when Biograph's most regular director, Wallace McCutcheon, Sr., took ill in June and Griffith was asked to try his hand. The result, after a tutorial by cinematographer Billy Bitzer and two days of nearby location shooting in New Jersey and Connecticut, was *The Adventures of Dollie,* a ten-minute tale of idyllic family life disrupted after a couple's young daughter is snatched from their backyard badminton lawn by vengeful gypsies ("those peripatetic Nomads of the Zingani type," as the advertising copy for exhibitors, issued as the *Biograph Bulletin,* put it, in title writer "Doc" Dougherty's ever-voluptuous style).[13] The thrills in young Dollie's trip downstream, nailed inside a barrel, are, it's true, mitigated by the river's uncooperative smoothness (and by the linked-scene editing that does little to enliven it). Still, if *The Adventures of Dollie* is notable primarily as its director's first work, Biograph's management apparently regarded it as competent. By the time *Dollie* was released to theaters a month later, Griffith had directed at least another five films (and perhaps codirected two more).[14]

For the next year and a half, Griffith assumed direction of all of Biograph's films, increasingly with Bitzer as his photographer, which works out to some two or three films a week until December 1909 when he was allowed to turn over part of the production, especially the shorter "split-reels," to a unit headed by Frank Powell, another actor turned director. Early in 1911, a third unit was added, mainly for comedies, with Mack Sennett turning director. By the time Griffith left Biograph in 1913, he was supervising six directors. Thus while his personal output was gradually reduced over his five years at Biograph, his production supervision remained intense.

It is evident from this pace and from the films themselves that Griffith could not devote careful attention to each of his Biographs. Single-shot films like *The Mexican Sweethearts* or single-camera-position ones like *A Rude Hostess* merit little more than his "just grinding out sausages."[15] Some of the early split-reels are barely more than anecdotes: Didja hear the one about the baby who was nearly roasted (*The Maniac Cook*) or the one about the baby mistaken for a cat and nearly drowned (*In a Hempen Bag*)? Others (such as *The Golden Louis* or *Waiter No. 5*) rely for their minor punch on a dose of unearned irony or (as the intertitles are more likely to put it) "a strange designing of fate."[16] Taken as a whole, the surprise of Griffith's Biographs is not that the "masterpieces" outshine the "sausages" but that the level – at least the level of ambition – at which the great majority were produced was so high.

The superiority of Griffith's films did not go unnoticed in the trade press: "The Biograph Company . . . in the last few weeks have by common consent

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placed themselves at the very head of American film manufacturers alike for the technical and dramatic quality of their pictures," the New York *Dramatic Mirror* wrote nine months after Griffith took over the directing.[17] Even when saddled with the company's entire output, he appears to have been dissatisfied with anything less than ambitious work. Five months after the half-day shoot on *For Love of Gold,* he reshot Jack London's naturalist story about dishonor among thieves, "Just Meat," this time as *Money Mad,* expanding it from three almost static interior shots (running about eight minutes) into a flamboyant thirteen-shot drama (running about ten minutes) with evocative exteriors true to Jack London's urban jungle.[18]

The search for varied locations beyond the studio confines led in 1910 to the first of the company's yearly trips to Southern California, generally extending from January through May. As filmmakers were beginning to discover, a studio in Los Angeles could offer a range of scenery within a day's drive. Deserts, mountains, seascapes, ranches, Spanish missions, and even the vacant avenues and rose gardens of Hollywood were put to use by Griffith within two months. His first film completed in California, *The Newlywyeds,* already has a proto-Hollywood buoyancy. In it, a female "man-hater" and a male "anti-matrimonial club" member are mistaken for newlyweds because of the rice in his hatband. The climax, as the couple is met at the train station by jeering, placard-waving club members, captures the improvisational resources of the Biographs: The company would have been gathered on arrival at the platform anyway. Whatever temperamental antipathy Griffith came to feel for the West – for both its blanker landscape and Hollywood's developing production system – the yearly excursions did away with winter confinement in the Manhattan studio, which for weeks on end were broken only by such ludicrous location work as that seen through the top-coated lovers of *A Rural Elopement* (1909), "the weather being decidedly hibernal," as the *Biograph Bulletin* couldn't help but note.

Griffith's tireless work habits on both coasts combined with his formality even on location to make him a figure of authority and respect to the Biograph workers. He seems to have taken almost no time off, arriving at the studio before the others and staying long into the evening to supervise editing, using Sundays to search locations, read scenarios, and screen the work of rivals. He was "Mr. Griffith" to all but old theatrical cohorts, and a measure of his reserve can be gathered from the fact that it was not until the first California trip that most of the company discovered he was married to their fellow actress Linda Arvidson. If this seems more than a little odd, it was partly a function of their marriage itself (which cooled into a separation sometime in 1911), but it is also true, as Griffith's most recent biog-

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rapher, Richard Schickel, points out, that "one can find in none of the reminiscences of those who worked with him a single incident in which an exchange of confidences took place, let alone an exchange of intimate emotions."[19] Still, on the set Griffith clearly found ways of eliciting such emotions from his actors or, strictly speaking, from his actresses. Lionel Barrymore recalled that Griffith tended to leave such relatively "hardbitten" stage actors as himself to their own talents but would minutely coach others, sometimes acting out the parts himself, "from the lifting of an eyelid to the correct way to scream," and then talking the players through the scene while it was photographed.[20]

One evident development, if that's the word, over the five years of Griffith's Biographs is his replacement of taller, stronger-looking actresses in their twenties (such as Florence Lawrence – the first "Biograph Girl" – and Linda Arvidson herself) with more petite teenaged girls (such as Mary Pickford and the Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy). It is tempting to write off this pattern to Griffith's psychopathology: The tiny joke at the center of the 1909 split-reel *Choosing a Husband* – that none of a woman's four suitors can resist kissing 13-year-old Blanche Sweet, put in their paths as a test – may have hit close to home. But Barrymore's comment also suggests that Griffith's increasing preference for adolescent, presumably more pliant, actresses at Biograph was also in line with his overall strategy away from stage conventions, at least insofar as he found it difficult to teach old stage actors new tricks. In a relatively primitive film like *The Girls and Daddy* (begun 1908) – and what a title *that* was for Griffith's growing stock company! – the theatrical convention of splitting the frame with a half-wall (as opposed to cutting between two spaces) is combined with his disconcerting attempt to mold Florence Lawrence into his new ideal of a sprightly juvenile. After five years at Biograph, Griffith had thoroughly mastered a sophisticated camera grammar, but this formal advance was intimately tied to changes in performance technique that, for whatever reasons, Griffith was most successful at mastering only with very young actresses.

With a contract that linked his substantial salary (perhaps $3,000 a month by 1911) to film footage sold, Griffith might have had reason to maintain the Biograph production system, which seems to have functioned most profitably by releasing single reels several times a week. But his restiveness with the limitations of length is evident even within the late Biograph films themselves. Against the trend in American moviemaking generally, Griffith's films of 1913 slow their camera speed to near the optical limit, pushing two-reelers (at about fourteen frames per second) to the almost-feature length of thirty-five minutes.

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By the time the Biograph management came around to encourage more two-reel films, commercial innovation in epic features in 1913 had been taken by the U.S. release of Italian and French spectaculars (such as *Quo Vadis?* at eight reels and *Les Misérables* at nine reels in its U.S. version), by stageplays transferred to the screen (such as Adolph Zukor's five-reel production of *The Count of Monte Cristo* starring James O'Neill), and by other non–Patents Company productions (such as Thomas Ince's five-reel *The Battle of Gettysburg*).[21] The last title might have been particularly galling if, as is likely, Griffith had begun to think of the Civil War in epic-film terms. In the month of *Gettysburg*'s release (June 1913) and at the end of that year's California trip, Griffith began his own ambitious feature, the four-reel *Judith of Bethulia,* which combined the effective siege structure of his recent Western *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* with the Old Testament spectacle of the Italian imports. The resulting feature, in which besieged Jerusalem is redeemed by Judith's sexual entrapment and murder of the invader Holofernes, seems now a falling off from other late Biographs, with the impressive if sometimes confusing spectacle further slowed by a weighty gestural style. The expensive production proved Griffith's last for Biograph.

In retrospect, the gap between Griffith's ambitions and Biograph's studio system was clearly wider than any compromise. As a commercial enterprise, Biograph was set in the production and distribution ways of the nickelodeon era (and would be essentially out of production by 1915), and by the fall of 1913 Griffith was already dreaming of *The Clansman* (as *The Birth of a Nation* was titled until a month into its release). Harry Aitken, owner of several medium-sized production companies releasing under the "Mutual" trademark, signed Griffith to a contract for modest features, with provision for an upcoming "special."[22] Although Mutual budgeted Griffith's upcoming features at $5,000 each – or at less than a seventh of what Biograph finally had been forced to spend on *Judith of Bethulia* – Mutual seems to have been, in contrast, a dynamic company, and Griffith's key actors and assistants soon followed him there. In the nine-month interval before beginning *The Clansman,* Griffith dutifully set to work supervising Mutual's output and directing four features, only two of which survive, both completed after the company moved permanently to Los Angeles: *Home, Sweet Home,* an odd, episodic tale, sentimental and savage, of the redemptive power of the song of that name, and *The Avenging Conscience,* a superior psychological horror story with touches of expressionism, loosely inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Even while completing these films (which had, at most, two-week shooting schedules) in the early months of 1914, Griffith was arranging the complex

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preproduction for *The Clansman*. In July, he began shooting for five fairly solid months, staging in California's San Fernando Valley large swatches of his version of the Civil War and Reconstruction, including a massive Ku Klux Klan ride to the rescue of the South. Although the epic required nothing like the publicity claim of eighteen thousand extras (four hundred was closer to the truth), the scale surpassed anything thus far attempted in American moviemaking, with the cost finally running to nearly $100,000. It wasn't long into the shooting before Griffith's ambitions again outpaced his financing. Along with his directorial tasks, he found himself at the center of a complex scheme of stock sales and, eventually, at the head of a corporation founded exclusively to distribute the picture, owned jointly with Aitken and a host of small backers.

It is hard to believe that authentic surprise figured greatly in Griffith's professed amazement that protests should greet the release of *The Clansman*. The Reverend Thomas Dixon's 1905 source novel of the same name was notoriously vitriolic, and the Richmond (Virginia) *News-Leader* had called its stage dramatization (also 1905) about as "elevating as a lynching."[23] The play had been performed in Philadelphia and Atlanta shortly before the 1906 race riots in those cities, the Atlanta riot leaving twenty-six dead. On the basis of the play's inflammatory history, the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP (an organization Dixon liked to label the "National Association for the Intermarriage of the Races") won an injunction, for half a day only, against the February 8, 1915, premiere, one of its few successes in a long campaign against the film. As ever, controversy boosts box office, but the film's commercial success was beyond all prediction. By 1917 Griffith had personally earned from it about $700,000, Dixon over $1 million, and even those who bought regional distribution rights soon after its release (notably Louis B. Mayer) took in founding fortunes. The New York opening in March, with two-dollar top ticket prices at the Liberty Theater, looks as definitive an end to the nickelodeon era as any one event and also in a sense marks Griffith's long-awaited triumph, if by an unconventional route, in the "legitimate" theater.

The protests and controversy had another unintended effect. Griffith's responses – which for the most part he deftly kept on the lofty level of "free speech" – made him known outside the movie industry (this in an era when a film's director was barely acknowledged even in the trade press). His two new roles, as the movies' preeminent showman and as the spokesman for freedom in an art form unprotected by the First Amendment, combined almost to determine his next project: *Intolerance* (1916), a work key to Griffith's aspirations and limitations and to which we'll return in the con-

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