

FILM HISTORY RESEARCH REPORT

David Llewelyn Wark Griffith is the name of the man who would become the inventor of cinema. By this I mean that the popularity of Griffith's films – dating all of the way back to 1908's *Adventures of Dollie* – served as the main foundation for what the cinematic medium would become; that is, grounded primarily in literature rather than the visual arts. At this crucial point in film history many possibilities for the medium were open for the taking; however, only a few could become engrained permanently and it was Griffith's narrative, literary, and theatrical approach to filmmaking that would win out above all and this particular event is indeed the most significant in all of film history.

At this starting point in cinema, the medium could have taken on painting as its primary foundation. This perhaps would have been the most logical step as cinema does seem to be a primarily visual medium, even if that approach is not often utilized. Instead we hear today about directors such as Maya Deren's proclamations that filmmakers should not limit themselves to "the logic of narrative" and that cinema is "inherently surreal," but these proclamations seem to us of the nature of experimental, alternative, and unusual film. The directors around the early point of cinema had the opportunity to ensure that these ideas could rather be the base of *usual* film; however, fate would be on the side of the novel and Griffith would go on to make movies that are essentially illustrated texts. The unparalleled success of these particular films would set a pattern that practically every film afterward would follow, save for the occasional aforementioned fare that would usually suffer the fate of being dubbed "arty" and "alternative"-style.

Motion pictures were seen as kin to still pictures which themselves derived much from easel art. Practically all early films oriented the camera at eye level on a stagnant

tripod. The perspective was one that a usual human spectator would see, and oftentimes one that a human spectator sitting down in a theatre would see. That is – particularly in Griffith’s films – the camera seems to be positioned as if one is at a seated eye level; as if one were watching a play, that is. Like many of Griffith’s films, his *Intolerance* of 1916 can be classified as a populist melodrama with its notions of Good and Evil and sudden, convenient resolutions. And the most popular style of theatre in the late 1800s to early 1900s was – that’s right – melodrama. These developments would position the film medium into another form – that of the narrative play – and help to give rise to the common belief by filmmakers and the public in general that movies are mainly and most importantly about “characters” and “storytelling.”

Griffith – like most directors today – saw movies as illustrated stories or recorded plays. To him, the acting and the projection of character mattered most. Because of this extreme focus on character, Griffith would help to initiate the concept of ‘celebrity’ and give rise to the public’s adoration of a number of thespians at the time. Lillian Gish was one of these and through Griffith films such as *An Unseen Enemy* and *The Birth of a Nation*, became one of the top stars in the industry right alongside “America’s Sweetheart” Mary Pickford.

A smaller contingent of filmmakers, however, saw the cinema as having the potential of initiating a whole new vocabulary for perceiving the world, attempting to break it away from a rooting in literature and theatre. To these filmmakers, much thought is given to the visual form of the vision and what it means to present – what it means to connect to the viewer’s mind through the medium and how cinema can address this issue uniquely. Concern above and beyond character and storyline is given to the camera

stance and how it relates viscerally to the audience. Images matter here and all – even the actors and story – are subordinate to greater forces of creation at hand. Notions such as these – the antithesis of the way that Griffith worked – would become so overshadowed by the popular styles of filmmaking that public realization of this opposite approach would not become known until much later and even now many refuse to grasp this filmic philosophy.

On the most fundamental of levels, films haven't changed at all since the days when D.W. Griffith was directing. Griffith succeeded in taking cinema primarily into the direction of narrative and therefore into the realm of the written word – the play or the novel. The way that the medium has been constructed can therefore be summed up as “text before image.” Since those days films have always started with text (or “screenplay”) first and with the image as an afterthought; an approach that is still taken by practically every movie project today. By the general public this has become considered to be a perfectly acceptable thing – the storyline, after all, is all that matters to most. On the other hand, thinkers in cinema may find it disconcerting to realize that what most acknowledge as being a primarily “visual medium” is in fact – in nearly every case, at least – just another literary one, really.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Michael. (1999). *Family secrets : the feature films of D.W. Griffith*. London: BFI Publishing.

This book is the result of Dr. Michael Allen's PhD research. It focuses on the formal structures and presentation designs of Griffith's films while also making commentary on thematic, storyline-related elements. Allen points out the highly theatrical qualities of Griffith's filmmaking style and his increased concern for the narrative entertainment values. All of this is

looked upon by Allen in a fairly favorable light; he argues that Griffith's style for the time was quite unique although – with time – his techniques have become so engrained in the cinematic consciousness that his work today (ironically/sadly) seems banal to many. The book covers every still-existing Griffith film in some detail.

Jesionowski, Joyce. (1987). *Thinking in pictures : dramatic structure in D.W. Griffith's Biograph films*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

In a fairly compact 200 pages, the Columbia-educated Jesionowski manages to go through a number of Griffith's more well-known films in a meticulous shot-by-shot analysis. Interestingly, she does not necessarily praise Griffith's output as director and takes a more passive stance in which she acknowledges the impact of his work on determining some of the most basic and fundamental structures of mainstream cinema. She acknowledges that popular cinema did not necessarily have to be characterized mainly by a clearly identifiable narrative structure but Griffith's work helped to solidify it with that fate. In a fairly unique passage, Jesionowski focuses on the editing of Griffith's films and the transitional techniques between shots that he used.

Lang, Robert. (1989). *American film melodrama : Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lang focuses mainly on the argument that melodrama in Griffith's films serves as a reflection of the Western world's patriarchal ideals. He contends that melodrama is essentially a dramatization of society's placement of us all in a familial context and the difficulties that naturally arise from certain expectations and obligations in this regard. To Lang, both men and women suffer under patriarchy in Griffith's films and he identifies the caste system-like power divisions in cinematic melodrama, relating this to the notion that we should all relate to this overriding issue enough to want to address how it plays into and influences our own lives.

Pearson, Roberta. (1992). *Eloquent gestures : the transformation of performance style in the Griffith Biograph films*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Focusing mainly on Griffith's Biograph films between the years 1908 to 1913, the Yale-educated Pearson foregrounds her opinion that Griffith's directorial concern for the way in which his actors "projected" would forever change the face of cinema for the better. While acknowledging that Griffith's films would retain a substantial amount of theatrical values, she points out how they also appear to take a step away from that abstract acting realm of the 19th Century stage. The acting in many of these films, she says, is on a much more subtle and realistic level in which reversions to that histrionic, theatrical style of projection occur much less than in most other films from the time.

Curtis, Bryan. (2003). *D.W. Griffith in Black and White*. Retrieved November 16, 2005,

from <http://www.slate.com/id/2076307>.

This article addresses the criticisms that D.W. Griffith faced throughout his entire career. Mainly, Curtis focuses on accusations that Griffith knowingly set out to make a racist polemic of a film with *The Birth of a Nation*. Curtis acknowledges that there is some truth to this viewpoint; however, he says, blame should not be attributed so much to Griffith himself but rather to the “Zeitgeist;” the spirit of the time. Unlike clearly motivated “political message directors” such as Oliver Stone and Spike Lee, Curtis says, Griffith would dramatically change the statements behind his films as the years progressed. Therefore, he concludes, the notions behind Griffith’s films were perhaps more reflective of the times than of Griffith’s own personal mindset.

Feaster, Felicia. (2005). *The Battle of the Sexes*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from <http://www.turnerclassicmovies.com/ThisMonth/Article/0,,107412,00.html>.

Feaster’s article focuses on Griffith’s 1928 production *The Battle of the Sexes* to help illustrate his fondness for the “morality tale.” Feaster states that Griffith knew how to engineer a film melodrama very effectively, usually resulting in an engrossing storyline. She mentions other recurring motifs/thematics throughout his work: “sentimentality, moral absolutes, and anger over injustice.” Another interesting section mentions how Griffith was far more concerned with his art than with business matters, which is what perhaps ultimately led to his downfall in the money-obsessed Hollywood system. The financial failure of *Intolerance*, she notes, surprised but did not discourage Griffith from making further films; however, the studios had by then already lost faith in the man, making it much more difficult for him to produce anything more to his satisfaction.

Gallen, Ira. (1999). *D.W. Griffith at The Biograph Company*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from <http://www.tvdays.com/biograph.htm>.

Fairly extensive documentation of Griffith’s career here, not just focusing exclusively on Griffith but also detailing out his relationships with performers and crew workers, particularly his cameraman Billy Bitzer. The article makes Griffith out to be something of a revolutionary, claiming that he had felt “degraded” by the state of the medium and therefore set out to break existing conventions. One may also learn of Griffith’s pre-cinematic life here: the article notes that Griffith had ambitions to become a writer (mainly for the theatre) long before entering the movie business.

Jacobs, Christopher. (2000). *Pioneer film director dishonored by those who follow in his footsteps*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from <http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/cjacobs/DWGriffith.html>.

This article addresses a relatively recent issue that occurred in December 1999 when the Directors Guild of America decided to rename its prestigious “D.W. Griffith Award” (for excellence in film direction) due to protestations at Griffith’s supposed racism. The DGA felt that they needed

an award now that would “better reflect the sensibilities of our society.” The author here, however, argues that they are going by mere speculation and even if Griffith did have certain narrow-minded beliefs, Jacobs says, that does not detract from his contribution to the art form itself. Jacobs says that the DGA should not single out one specific film (*The Birth of a Nation*) from an overall career of such eclectic variety and that most people familiar with much of Griffith’s work would not deem *The Birth of a Nation* Griffith’s most notable work anyway.

Lussier, Tim. (1999). *What Was The Great Man Like?*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from <http://www.silentsaregolden.com/articles/griffitharticle.html>.

This article delves mainly into research and mostly – it seems – factual information on D.W. Griffith’s personality. He was apparently a very private and (surprisingly) oftentimes shy individual. Duly noted here is that Griffith was apparently quite a generous soul; however, this lack of heedfulness toward money would – according to many who knew him – become a main factor in his career downfall. Also according to the article, Griffith put much effort into behaving kindly toward his actors; even when mistake after mistake would occur, Griffith would calmly correct his actors whereas most other directors tended to display an uncontrolled temperamental side.

Malcolm, Derek. (1999). *D.W. Griffith : The Birth of a Nation*. Retrieved November 16, 2005, from http://film.guardian.co.uk/Century_Of_Films/Story/0,4135,107276,00.html.

This article by film critic Derek Malcolm argues for Griffith’s worth as a creative virtuoso of sorts, even if his personal “philosophy and mindset” were objectionable. The article focuses mainly on *The Birth of a Nation* from his directorial output and – against most critics’ opinions, it seems – Malcolm contends that the film deserves nothing but high praise for the following reasons: Griffith’s use of directorial technique in relation to the storyline ex. the film’s then-novel rapid cutting techniques helped to provoke a certain emotional response from audiences. Griffith’s contribution in elevating the medium from mere “entertainment” to a serious art form. And Griffith’s unyielding concern for his performers – he was not so much interested in making them into “stars” so much as helping them to interpret their roles with believable authenticity.