Kino Video's *Grif?th Masterworks*: Watching movies become art

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The Kino Video collection *Grif?th Masterworks* contains D.W. Grif?th's four most honored ?lms—*The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance, Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm*, as well as 23 Biograph shorts from 1909-1913 and six hours of supplemental material. As such, the collection offers an opportunity to watch D.W. Grif?th (1875-1948) develop most of what would come to be known as the grammar of cinema.

The Birth of a Nation and *Intolerance* reveal Grif?th creating visual techniques to better capture reality, and in *Broken Blossoms* the director uses these same techniques masterfully to create his most complete ?lm.

The Birth of a Nation (1915), about the US Civil War era, Grif?th's best known and most controversial movie, features a number of innovations that bring the movement and even stark beauty of battle to the screen and allow his actors to develop more realistic characterizations than had heretofore been seen.

There are times when the parallel editing results in jarring rhythms, but the film's greatest flaw is its appalling racialism.

The Birth of a Nation is divided into two parts: the Civil War and the Reconstruction. By following the close friendship of two well-to-do families, one from the North (the Stonemans) and one from the South (the Camerons), the ?lm portrays the major battles and issues of the war, as well as its consequences, in terms of personal relations.

Grif?th also uses the two families to portray the collapse of the South, and former slaves taking over state legislatures and treating whites the way whites had been treating them. Patriarch Col. Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) is inspired by these events to form the Ku Klux Klan, resulting in the reuni?cation of the North and South based on the idea of Aryan superiority.

Grif?th's visual stylistics are evident throughout the movie. The crowd scenes are wonderfully framed compositions; high-angle shots show the uncounted victims of war (one striking instance of this occurs when we see, from above a hill where women and their children are huddled together, Gen. Sherman's army marching on Atlanta); and a shot of the dead lying on the battlefield with limbs crossing recalls the beauty and humanity of Michelangelo's murals.

Close-ups allow the actors to use facial expressions to convey emotions, carried out most effectively by Lillian Gish as Elsie Stoneman. A close up of Col. Cameron leading a charge of Confederates looks forward to director John Ford's use of the same technique in his classic Westerns, and parallel scenes are used throughout to create the sense of movement (which Grif?th understood to be the foundation of moviemaking) and tension.

The parallel shots of opposing Northern militia and Ku Klux Klan forces rushing headlong into battle occur so rapidly that the viewer is left with more of a feeling of confusion than tension.

Racist imagery and words may be found throughout the movie, including a quote by President Woodrow Wilson claiming that "the South is being run by Negroes with no concept of what it meant to lead."

The fantastic imagery is by now well known: the antebellum South was a place where gentlemen and ladies led a slow-paced, idyllic existence and slaves catered to their every need. During the Reconstruction, the freed African Americans are portrayed as little more than animals who force whites to give way, and stalk and rape white women.

Grif?th was born in Kentucky in 1875 into a once-aristocratic Southern family that had been practically ruined by Reconstruction-era policies. Unlike his father, a Confederate war hero whom he idolized, the young Grif?th was born too late to follow in his footsteps and instead read romanticized stories about the pre-war South.

Grif?th was astonished by the protests and calls for censorship that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation.* Responding to the criticism of the film's racism, he sounded very much like an antebellum plantation owner: "To say that [I am against Negroes] is like saying that I am against children, as they were our children, whom we loved and cared for all our lives."

The furor that followed the release of *The Birth of a Nation* was at least partly responsible for the theme of his next movie, *Intolerance* (1916) , which was even more ambitious than its precursor. The original version's eight hours, to be shown in two parts on consecutive nights, were cut to two and a half hours on the advice of exhibitors who refused to show it at its original length.

Hailed by many as the greatest ?lm ever made, *Intolerance's* complex construction led to box office failure and financial difficulties—Grif?th never recouped the $1.9 million he borrowed and spent to make the ?lm—that plagued the director for the remainder of his career and life.

The ?lm consists of four stories drawn from different historical eras with the intertwining theme of intolerance: the fall of the Babylonian Empire; the story of Christ's purpose on earth and crucifixion; the events surrounding the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of French Protestants in 1572; and a contemporary story of capital's exploitation of labor.

Lillian Gish as "Eternal Motherhood" (taken from the Walt Whitman poem "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking") appears at various points as the film's centering figure. Due to the work's length and complexity, this reviewer will only offer a few examples of the more striking effects as well as its weaknesses.

In addition to the use of parallel editing (an incredible feat in itself,

given that Grif?th was now interweaving four stories instead of two, while continuing his career-long practice of working without notes or script), Grif?th's vision for the ?lm necessitated the creation of new and influential techniques.

Throughout the movie, scenes are framed by doorways or archways, tying the different periods together and helping establish a theme of a world that offers riches and pleasures but often at a tragic price.

One such world is the Babylonian court. For the feast of Belshazzar scene, Grif?th created the precursor to the crane by attaching his camera to a rope-controlled elevator that included a platform where Grif?th and his cameraman could stand and observe the entire quarter-mile long court. As the camera moved over the court scene, Grif?th was able to catch every image of the opulence and decadence that allowed King Cyrus and his Persian forces to catch the Babylonians unaware and destroy their empire.

Grif?th also combines several techniques to create scenes of powerful emotional impact. A jump cut is made from Christ's crucifixion to the contemporary world where the "Dear Little One" (Mae Marsh) has just learned of the wrongful execution of her husband, "The Boy" (Robert Harron), for killing his boss. Grif?th then uses an extreme close-up and fade-out to register the anguish and loss on the Dear Little One's face. It is hard to recall a more heartbreaking and memorable scene in ?lm history.

As was the case with *Birth*, Grif?th's decision to increase the number of jump cuts as *Intolerance* reached its climax results in confusion and frustration. Due to the severe shortening of the ?lm, Lillian Gish wrote that "Audiences found the climax," with its "images (falling on the audience) like spent buckshot...particularly bewildering."

Nevertheless, following its release, the ?lm ran for 10 years in revolutionary Russia, and V.I. Lenin invited Grif?th to take charge of Soviet ?lm production (an offer Grif?th turned down because, according to Gish, the director was not a revolutionary, as Lenin had mistakenly surmised, but an aristocrat who believed in the "brotherhood of all mankind").

In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Grif?ths created a poetic masterpiece, and while his gift for visual effects is still evident, the bold inventions of the previous ?lms are replaced or supplemented by strong acting performances and a story about poverty, bigotry and interracial love that looks forward to some of the better American ?lms of the 1930s and 1940s.

The Yellow Man (Richard Barthelmess) journeys from his home in China to bring a message of peace to the "barbarous Anglo-Saxons." However, his hopes are crushed when he encounters London's slums and finds little more than poverty and prejudice.

Languishing in opium dens when he is not working as a storekeeper (perhaps a reference to Britain's devastation of much of China via the introduction of opium?), The Yellow Man's hope returns when he is attracted to a young woman (Lucy—Lillian Gish) dressed in rags, but possessing an ethereal beauty. Regularly beaten by her professional boxer father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), and often going without meals, Lucy passes out one day in front of The Yellow Man's store, and he takes her inside to care for her.

Their happiness lasts until Battling Burrows learns that his daughter is with a Chinese man, resulting in a tragic ending.

Grif?ths had a set constructed to simulate the squalor of London's Limehouse district in the early twentieth century. Shadows and dimly lit scenes create an overall sense of drudgery and isolation from the outside world.

Barthelmess and Gish are magnificent as two innocents—The Yellow Man due to his foreign beliefs and Lucy because she has done nothing but feed and clean house for her brutish father. In one poignant scene, The Yellow Man takes Lucy upstairs to his bedroom to care for her battered body and face. Under the influence of opium, he gazes down upon her sleeping form as if she were a dream, a close-up capturing Barthelmess's expression of adoration.

As Lucy, Gish's eyes capture a character who is at once bereft of a childhood and wearied by her role as a battered caretaker for her father. Even when her father is threatening to beat her (which he does) for being with the Chinese man, it is her eyes that draw the attention of the viewer.

The story, a Romeo and Juliet tale of two naifs who are allowed to enjoy a very brief time of happiness and love for each other before a tragic ending, looks forward to a number of later, similar movies, most memorably *They Live by Night.*

Among the recognized Griffith masterpieces, this reviewer finds *Broken Blossoms* to be the most satisfying and completely realized piece of filmmaking.

The 23 Biograph shorts included in the Kino Video collection are an indispensable record of Grif?th's development as a ?lmmaker. *Corner in Wheat* (1909), *The New York Hat* (1912), featuring Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore, and *The Usurer* (1910) are of particular interest.

The six hours of supplementary material, truly worth watching, include the making of *The Birth of a Nation*, the protests and censorship battles that followed its release, Lillian Gish (?lmed in the 1970s) introducing *Broken Blossoms* and Orson Welles paying homage to Grif?th.

D.W. Grif?th's vision of moviemaking as an art form was based in reality. In a 1914 interview, he explained the development of the close-up in the following terms: "We were striving for real acting.... The close-up enabled us to reach real acting, restraint, acting that is a duplicate of real life."

Books consulted for this article:

D.W. Grif?th: Interviews, ed. Anthony Slide (University Press of Mississippi, 2012)

Lillian Gish: The Movies, Mr. Grif?th, and Me, by Lillian Gish and Ann Pichot (Prentice-Hall, 1969)