GRIFFITH AND THE RISE OF HOLLYWOOD

by PAUL O’DELL
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Above: Robert Harron

To Jacki Wilson
With happy memories of
Bobby Harron
William Irish.
THE AMERICAN FILM INSTITUTE SALUTE to LILLIAN GISH will be aired on CBS Television Tuesday, April 17th, 1984 9:00 to 10:30 p.m. E.S.T. A Joyful Easter to you. Lillian Gish
Victory Parade: Miriam Cooper, Lillian Gish and Henry B. Walthall in KKK uniform. In background Elmer Clifton as Phil Stoneman and Spottswoode Aiken.

lasting a full minute. Here, with wild action, shots follow each other at a rate of under three seconds each. After those quick shots comes a shot of the Klan riding to the rescue. This single shot, lasting almost eight seconds, is followed by yet another sequence at the cabin, this time a group of fourteen shots and an overall running time of forty-three seconds. Another shot of the Klan, and again the cabin, but this
time only four shots. The Klan again, and now only a single shot of the cabin. A tracking shot, or moving shot taken from a car, of the Klan precedes seven more shots of the cabin, at the end of which the Klansmen ride into view. After a short fight, the cabin is relieved.

This breathless sequence of shots is followed by a kind of epilogue to the film, in which the Negroes are disarmed and an uneasy order is restored. But, as we see in the next election when the Negroes are once again barred, there has been no progress towards any form of unity.

In *The Birth of a Nation* as in *Intolerance* which followed it, the film closes with allegory. After shots of Margaret and Phil and Elsie and Ben on a double honeymoon, the title "Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial war shall rule no more. But instead—the gentle Prince in the hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace" is followed by a symbolical scene in which a god of war is raging on the back of a lumbering beast. This scene fades to be replaced by a scene in which the figure of Christ fades into the upper part of the screen.

A shot of Ben and Elsie on a cliff top makes a visual bridge to further allegorical scenes, in which people, singing and jubilant in the foreground, gradually fade away leaving a vision of a city in the background. Ben and Elsie, with the symbolical city superimposed in the sky above them, clasp hands and turn towards each other. The scene fades and the last title fades up: "Liberty and Union, one and inseparable, now and forever." This title eventually fades out.

The main title, *The Birth of a Nation*, including the words "The End" and copyright insignia and so on, follows, and it is this title that concludes the picture.

To Judge McCullom

This was the picture

that made films important

around the world.

Lillian Gish

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"Out of the cradle endlessly rocking"—Lillian Gish
GRiffith and the rise of Hollywood

by Paul O'Dell
(with the assistance of Anthony Slide)

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1. Introduction

DAVID WARK GRIFFITH HAS TENDED TO BECOME, in recent years, a figure in cinema history attributed with innovation in film technique; the close-up, the flashback, cross-cutting have all appeared in connection with his name. And so it is that he is now in danger of achieving a widespread reputation merely as a technician: an inventor of cinematography. This does justice neither to Griffith himself nor to his work. It may very well be that he did “invent” all these ideas of pictorial presentation—but there is much evidence to suggest that he did not—and if he did not, then he certainly developed their use to startling effect. But these ideas, these techniques were for him only a means towards an end; never the ultimate distinguishing factor of his pictures. Nor was he dependent on these techniques in order to produce a film which stood above all contemporary works. Many of his early pictures contain no close-ups, no flashbacks, no camera movement, no complicated editing techniques, and no innovations. But nevertheless they are indisputably films of high artistic quality. Many post-Intolerance films also contain few, if any, of the “innovations” attributed to Griffith, and yet they are outstanding works nonetheless.

It is unfortunate—indeed it could be tragic—that a man who strove so hard to perfect the cinema as a medium for the stimulation of ideas should also have been the one who recognised the real potential of an embryo art form. The fact remains that while the technical achievements of D. W. Griffith have become the main reason for his importance in film history, his purely artistic achievements, the very reason why he ever made films at all, have tended to become relatively obscured.

The work of an artist is the door to his soul: whatever we see written about the artist, we will never get closer to the man himself than through his work. David Wark Griffith produced a tremendous volume of work during the twenty-three years he spent making motion pictures. It is via these films—those that remain—that we can come to a real understanding of Griffith, because into these films he poured all of his ideas
6. Into the Twenties: Way Down East and Orphans of the Storm

In terms of cinema history, Griffith was the man who fired the starting-pistol. It was he who gave the medium what it required to develop and expand. There came a time when he inevitably appeared to have been “left behind,” a “non-starter.” It was to happen that he would be attacked again and again for his refusal to participate in the race. “Your refusal to face the world,” wrote one critic, “is making you more and more a sentimentalist. You see passion in terms of cooing doves or the falling of a rose petal... your lack of contact with life makes you deficient in humor. In other words, your splendid unsophistication is a menace to you—and to pictures.” Thus wrote James Quirk in 1924, cruelly cutting down the man who had virtually furnished him with a job (inasmuch as Griffith had given to the movies what no other individual had even come near to possessing). What Quirk failed to recognise was that Griffith was not a man to be swept along in the tide of fashion. Why should he follow others? How could he follow others, when in effect they were following his precepts?

Way Down East was Griffith’s longest picture since Intolerance, and ran for more than three hours. In terms of construction, it relies on finely interwoven detail rather than the more instantly recognisable cross-cutting that distinguished his earlier work. In the opening sequences for example, when Anna is tricked into an illegal marriage to Sanderson, the ceremony itself is full of visual commentary, with the ring falling to the floor, cutting to Bartlett (played by Richard Barthelmess) waking suddenly from a nightmare—and this before any knowledge on anyone’s part of their two fates and the way they will eventually come together.

Lillian Gish as Anna has received much deserved praise for her work in this picture, especially for her superhuman feats among the ice-floes in the climactic sequences of the picture. The manner in which she receives the news of her false marriage, in the knowledge that she is pregnant, is yet another triumph for her acting ability under Griffith. The scene in which she baptises her own child as it is dying also comes
Way Down East: the loveless marriage. Lowell Sherman and Lillian Gish as Sanderson and Anna

close to being one of Griffith’s supreme cinematic achievements.

She also adds a sense of frightening realism to the scene in which she is told that her baby is dead. For a second or two she stares blankly into space, then slowly begins to shake her head from side to side. Suddenly, as if the news strikes her like some physical blow, she throws her head back, and, as if going into an epileptic fit, her whole body stiffens and she sits choking and screaming.
Anna eventually recovers and goes away to a town in which no one (she believes) can possibly be aware of her tragic situation, a situation which will also be regarded as shameful. She meets David Bartlett (Richard Barthelmeiss) and he, like many other characters in Griffith pictures, is here identified with doves in one sequence. The truth will out, however, and especially in a small town. Unknown to Anna, Sanderson is to reappear, and her secret is to become common knowledge. Bartlett is undeterred, although the rest of the town immediately brand her an evil woman. The scene in which Anna is ordered out of the house by the Squire has been excused by some who explain that it

Left, Lillian Gish. Below: Way Down East: Squire Bartlett (Burr Mackintosh) and Anna
Way Down East: Anna turned out into the snow. Right to left, Burr Mackintosh, Kate Bruce, Vivia Oden, Lowell Sherman, Lillian Gish, Mary Hay, Creighton Hale, George Neville, Richard Barthelmess and Edgar Nelson needs dialogue for its effectiveness. On the contrary, this scene is of great emotional intensity, and this intensity is achieved simply by Griffith's editing technique. Once again, he uses visual commentary on the basic situation to replace long sequences where there should be dialogue.

Anna is sent out into the blizzard, and David runs after her. There follows some really remarkable photography, shots in which Anna's cape seems to vanish and reappear behind trees and snowdrifts, close-ups of Anna, whose eyelashes seem to have icicles on them, and this sequence leads directly to the chase on the ice-floes.

This sequence has achieved a great deal of notoriety over the years, and seems to have become the only part of Way Down East that is now
—and social realism: Schildkraut and Gish at the foot of the guillotine

must exercise care not to exchange our good government for ‘Bolshevism and license’.”

The familiar “Last Minute Rescue” towards the end of reel twelve
is as exciting and as beautifully executed as we have by now come to
expect from Griffith. Cutting between the guillotine and Henriette
(Lillian Gish) and Danton (Monte Blue) racing on horseback with
her pardon, the sequence is a perfect example of “stretched action,”
in which the time taken for Lillian Gish to walk three paces, for example, in
the completed sequence, now intercut with other action, takes twice
or maybe three times as long. This serves to build the suspense inasmuch
as it creates an almost unbearable sense of impatience.

The crowd scenes have been likened to those of The Birth of a
Nation, and in the emotional effect they create this is certainly valid.
Griffith’s approach to their arrangement had altered considerably during
Epic extravagance: Joseph Schildkraut and Lillian Gish in Orphans of the Storm

the ‘orphans,’ creating a necessary condition for the story with the least possible expenditure of effort.” The parallel with those early pictures seems not to end here, for it appears, looking at Orphans of the Storm today, that once more Griffith was having to work within imposed conditions. However, as in the case of the Biographs, this does not make Orphans of the Storm an imperfect picture, and here again can be seen Griffith’s faultless gift for re-creating a period, a gift that goes back to Judith of Bethulia and beyond.

The sequences that seem the most successful are those in which the poverty of the age is most obvious. Griffith’s sense of social justice is here given the perfect setting of course, and as Wagenknecht observes, “like Dickens, Griffith approved of the French Revolution but deplored its excesses, and he could not resist telling us, in long subtitles, . . . that while the French Revolution rightly overthrew a bad government, we