Rob Wagner's Script
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D. W. Griffith Is Still with Us

MORE serious nonsense has been written about D. W. Griffith than any other figure in the history of the screen, perhaps in all of the twentieth century arts. I mean *serious* nonsense, of course, not the morbid puffery that celebrated Theda Bara or Salvador Dali.

While Griffith was alive the nonsense ranged far and wide. Critics said he invented the close-up, the pan shot, the iris, the moving camera, back lighting, the fade-out, the long shot, the flash-back, the intercut chase, the use of a musical score. On the basis of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), some of them said he was a genius whose work would never be equaled. In between these two films came the fiasco of *Intolerance* (1926), in which Griffith, overborne by the success of the quadruple cut-backs at the climax of *The Birth of a Nation*, tried to tell four separate stories of four different epochs through a similar technique. Jove had unquestionably nodded, and when the celebrant of the Ku Klux Klan, who spelled Negro with a small *n* and carpetbagger with a capital *C*, launched a press campaign as the high priest of tolerance, many a critic saw him as a victim of megalomania. Through *Hearts of the World* (1918), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922), Griffith's reputation wobbled between the poles of sheer genius and crass commercial adroitness.

In the ten years after *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith made more than fifteen pictures which were so disappointing to both critic and box office that all but two or three of their titles have been forgotten. When, on top of this, Griffith tried his hand at a talkie in *Abraham Lincoln*, and did no worse than most of the silent directors who were trying to master sound in 1930, the poor man was done for. Hollywood studios ignored him even while they built their pictures on the broad basis of what he had taught them.

Such estimates of Griffith, from adulation to scorn, give no true picture of the man. And we get no truer picture, I think, from the dithyrambs of veneration, the fulsome beatings of the breast, the ostentatious assumptions of sack-

cloth and ashes which followed his death.

Griffith should owe his fame no more to his actual invention of production processes and camera tricks than to his attempted invention of a "non-puncturable tire." As a matter of fact, he invented very little. Go to Lewis Jacobs' excellent *The Rise of the American Film* or George Sadoul's article, *Early Film Production in England*, in *The Hollywood Quarterly*, and you will find Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Americans using, as far back as 1900, and between then and 1907, most of the devices that Griffith brought together and employed so masterfully in *The Birth of a Nation*.

GRIFFITH'S genius lay in the way he used the technical discoveries that other men did not properly appreciate and understand. He alone knew what to do with these things and comprehended their potentials. Jacobs cites an excellent example from *Enoch Arden*, released in 1908 as *After Many Years*. After a medium shot of the heroine, Griffith cut to a brooding close-up, and then to the object of her thoughts, her husband on a desert island. Here was artistry, not invention. Here was a creative mind applying imagination and intuitive psychological sense to the means of interpretation that other men had only half grasped.

From an ability to assemble three simple shots in this fashion, Griffith went on to build up larger sequences, to assemble characters and action, to march through narrative into drama. In *The Birth of a Nation* he did all this through half the picture, and then pressed on to a tense and surging climax of complicated human relationships told in terms of time, space, and emotion through fourfold cutting that has never been surpassed in intricacy and effectiveness.

THIS was no sudden outbreak of genius. It took Griffith five years to develop his artistry. He began his study of the film as an actor in 1907. Between 1908 and 1913 he directed or produced almost 150 one-reel and two-reel films and went on to a four-reeler, *Judith of Bethulia*. In all this work he experimented with devices other men had used, and he bettered them. He also tried things no one else had attempted. In every case he was analyzing a new medium and a new area of audience-reaction, and he was guessing audaciously and successfully at the means that would achieve his ends. He brought better acting to the screen. He told better stories. He added crowds and spectacle. But even more important were his ability to understand how emotion

could be stimulated and satisfied through visual impressions and associations, and the courage and skill with which he used camera and cutting for his purposes. He developed and all but perfected a new means of expression. He did not invent many of the words of this new language of communication, but he found out how to put them together and give them vastly greater meaning. As Terry Ramsaye has admirably expressed it, although Griffith did not provide a whole new vocabulary, he gave the screen its syntax.

Griffith's shortcomings are all too evident. They stand out in his best films just as much as in his poorest. His defects were psychological—a curious phenomenon in a man who understood almost instinctively the psychology of eye and brain in relation to a new medium. In certain areas, Griffith's mind was shallow and obvious, his emotions sentimental and maudlin. He saw life through Victorian opera glasses. Heroines were blonde and fragile, villains, darkly sadistic. In spite of his personal kindliness and consideration, he valued himself, or at least his ideas and his prejudices, too highly. He set himself up as historian-philosopher. In his

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