



D. W. Griffith (1875-1948)

by William M. Drew

Recognized throughout the world as the single most important individual in the development of film as an art, David Wark Griffith was born on January 22, 1875, in Crestwood, Kentucky, to a middle-aged couple, Jacob Wark Griffith and Mary Perkins Oglesby, whose fortunes had suffered in the aftermath of the South's defeat. David's father, nicknamed "Roaring Jake," was a western adventurer, Confederate Civil War veteran, and Kentucky legislator who bequeathed to his son a taste for the romantic and dramatic along with Jeffersonian ideals. The boy's Southern identity as one of a conquered people likely contributed to the anti-imperialist sentiments that he would later express in his films. David was raised on the farm and received his early education in a one-room country school and from his older sister, Mattie, a school teacher. When he was ten years old, his father died, plunging the Griffith family into debt-ridden poverty. By the time he was fourteen, his family was forced to abandon their unproductive farm for a new life in Louisville where his mother opened a boarding house, an undertaking that soon failed. With the family still besieged by debts, David left high school to help with the finances, taking a job first in a dry goods store, and, later, in a bookstore, which became his "university," exposing him to the world of ideas.

Fired with an ambition to become a great playwright, Griffith began working on the stage in Louisville at the age of 20 and was soon touring the country in stock companies. For a decade he alternated work on the stage with manual labor, holding a variety of jobs—everything from shoveling ore to picking hops between theatrical engagements. During play rehearsals when he was not on stage, he continued to write. His ambition to become a playwright was given a boost in 1907 when James K. Hackett produced a play he had written entitled *A Fool and a Girl*. It proved such a flop, however, that, out of sheer necessity, Griffith and his young actress wife, Linda Arvidson, whom he had married in 1906, then turned to the new motion picture industry for their livelihood. Griffith began his work in motion pictures near the end of 1907 by playing the lead in *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, directed by Edwin S. Porter for the Edison Company and released in early 1908. Griffith soon moved to the Biograph Company in New York City, where he both acted in films and provided stories.

When Biograph's chief director became ill, Griffith was hired as a replacement. With the release of his first film, *The Adventures of Dollie*, in the summer of 1908, a new, decisive chapter in cinema history began. For the next five years, Griffith, working in anonymity as the studio refused to publicize the names of its talents, directed hundreds of mostly one-reel films for Biograph that reshaped the very language of film. In film after film, Griffith broke with the stagy, unimaginative approach to screen narrative still prevailing in the industry. Working in partnership with his brilliant cameraman, G. W. "Billy" Bitzer, Griffith demonstrated a singular genius in developing previous experiments in camera effects and movement, lighting, close-ups, and editing into a coordinated cinematic technique that gave motion pictures their basic grammar and transformed film into an art form. But Griffith's genius went far beyond technical tricks. His use of close-ups and medium shots enabled the spectator to empathize with the emotions expressed by the characters; his rhythmic editing style intensified the drama; his panoramic long shots created an impression of epic grandeur; and his innovations in lighting with the help of Bitzer added mood and aesthetic quality to the images. Placing great value on the use of locations for the realism he sought to heighten the drama, Griffith laid the foundations of Hollywood when in 1910 he began annually taking his

company from New York to California for seasonal filming.



Griffith built a stock company of young actors and actresses that included Mary Pickford, Blanche Sweet, Mae Marsh, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Robert Harron, Henry B. Walthall, and Lionel Barrymore. To convey his artistic vision, Griffith drew from his players a new, more restrained acting style wholly different from that of the stage. In many of his films, his actresses, for example, projected new, more assertive heroines in keeping with

the aspirations of the suffragette era.

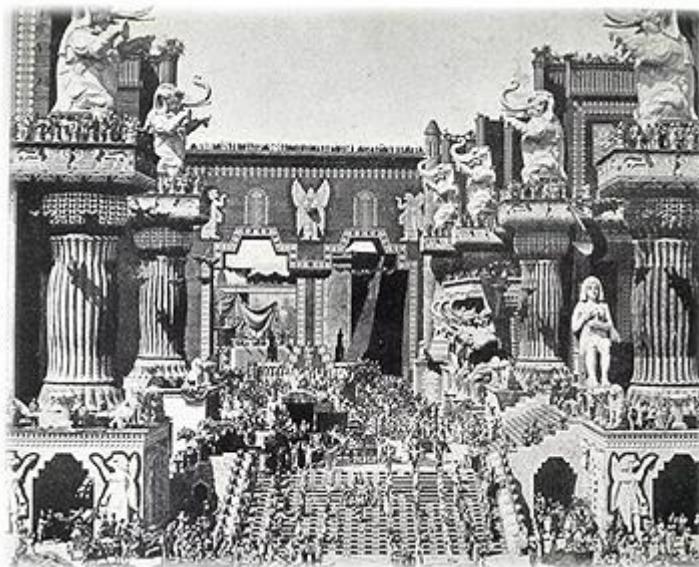
His rhythmic editing style in chase films like *The Lonely Villa* (1909) and *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) created a sense of excitement by intercutting action between the chaser and the pursued, employing shorter and shorter shots to add to the suspense. Again, in *A Beast at Bay* (1912), he used the technique to film a race between the heroine's car and a train commandeered by her rescuing boyfriend. Extending this technique to such films as *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913), Griffith played a pivotal role in the development of the western genre.

Griffith also began to deal with many subjects in his films that expressed his progressive social vision. In such films as *The Redman's View* (1909) and *Ramona* (1910), he denounced the white man's oppression of the American Indian. He excoriated capitalism's injustice toward the poor in films like *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and focused his camera on scenes of urban poverty in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and many other works. Griffith climaxed his years at Biograph with his first feature, *Judith of Bethulia* (1913), an epic dramatization of the Apocryphal story of the ancient Jewish heroine who saved her community from the invading Assyrians. Like many of his subsequent works, *Judith of Bethulia* demonstrates his abhorrence of imperialism through its depiction of the ravages of war and its effect on civilians.

Confronted with a Biograph still unwilling to tackle longer, more ambitious features, Griffith left the studio in 1913 and entered into a partnership with Harry Aitken of Mutual to set up his own independent company in Hollywood. He took Billy Bitzer and many of his players with him, including Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Blanche Sweet, Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall, and Robert Harron. In 1914, he directed several feature films of which the most noted was *The Avenging Conscience*, a psychological thriller adapted from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." This was followed by the film that would make Griffith's name a household word, and establish the motion picture as the dominant narrative medium in 20th century America. At the same time, the film would create a controversy that has clouded Griffith's reputation over time. With the assistance of Frank E. Woods, he adapted *The Clansman*, a best-selling melodramatic novel about the Reconstruction era by Thomas Dixon, expanding the story and its staged dramatization into a large-scale depiction of the Civil War and its aftermath that alternates spectacular scenes with poignant, intimate scenes of families caught up in the vortex of great events. The director perfected the techniques that he had been adapting and devising over a six year period. Under his direction, his players gave inspired performances that enhanced the narrative's power. Released in early 1915, *The Birth of a Nation*, with the unprecedented running-time of three hours, electrified audiences across the country and became the American cinema's biggest box-office hit prior to the 1920s. It premiered in Los Angeles on February 8, in New York on March 3, and after a special White House screening, President Woodrow Wilson reportedly said it was like "writing history with lightning." Praised by many reviewers as the first great achievement of a new art, its presentation in legitimate theatres with orchestral accompaniment finally signaled that the motion picture had come of age. But along with the plaudits came controversy, which

has only increased over the decades. Griffith's portrayal of the Reconstruction era in which Southern whites were rescued by the Ku Klux Klan from vengeful carpetbaggers and unruly blacks reflected the prevailing historical views of Reconstruction put forth by the Dunning School. The emotional presentation on screen, however, evoked a condemnation that the histories failed to ignite as protesters, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, repeatedly tried to ban the film as racist propaganda and an incitement to violence. As part of their strategy, they began a campaign to denounce the film and its director, claiming that *The Birth of a Nation* was the principal source of American racial violence from 1915 on and that its continued distribution was the leading factor in the Ku Klux Klan's revival in the 1920s. Records, in fact, do not support these claims and show, instead, that early 20th century lynchings and race riots were unrelated to the film and part of a long pattern of racist practice and economic imbalance. The reductionism implicit in the attacks on Griffith's epic evades the broader reasons for the persistence of racism in American society throughout the 20th century. For example, the Klan's resurgence several years after the film's initial impact had worn off owed far more to the post-World War I climate of Red-baiting and reaction to the demands by minorities and labor for greater equality. While the NAACP failed in its efforts to have the film banned outright, its strategy did serve to diminish appreciation of Griffith's overall achievement. Forgotten amidst all the emotional invectives was the film's passionate indictment of the horrors of war and its effect on ordinary individuals, a point of view that added to its initial popularity at a time when public opinion was strongly opposed to U.S. involvement in World War I. Griffith himself believed he had presented an antiwar film and an accurate picture of the Civil War and Reconstruction and was shocked at the charges of racism and angered at the attempts to suppress his film. In his 1916 pamphlet, *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America*, he attacked the censors whom he maintained were retarding the development of film art by curtailing freedom of expression.

Griffith's next cinematic endeavor surpassed *The Birth of a Nation* in its scale and sweep. For *Intolerance*, first shown in September 1916, Griffith devised a revolutionary new narrative structure that broke with preceding conventions while further perfecting his use of dramatic close-ups, camera movement, and parallel editing to create what is perhaps the cinema's foremost masterpiece and surely the most ambitious film produced before the 1920s. In 1914,



prior to the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, he had begun making what would become the Modern Story in *Intolerance*, a dramatic indictment of societal injustice toward the poor in the United States. With the working title of *The Mother and the Law*, the new film included a powerful depiction of capitalism's brutal suppression of labor, an attack on capital punishment, and a forecast of the evils resulting from Prohibition. But seeking to outdo both *The Birth of a Nation* and spectacular European imports like *Cabiria*, as well as respond to critics of his earlier film, Griffith decided to expand his narrative to encompass four stories from different periods of history, illustrating the persistence of intolerance and inhumanity through the ages. Instead of telling them sequentially, Griffith intercut his Modern Story with the Judean Story portraying the events leading to the Crucifixion of Christ; the French Story dramatizing the massacre of the Huguenots; and, most spectacular of all, the Babylonian Story depicting, with massive sets and thousands of extras, the destruction of ancient Babylon and its civilization by the imperialist forces of Cyrus of Persia in league with the city's reactionary clergy opposed to the reforms

introduced by Prince Belshazzar. In the climax, "history itself," in the words of archivist Iris Barry, "seems to pour like a cataract across the screen" during the rapid intercutting between the four parallel stories. As in other of his films, Griffith drew from his players restrained yet emotional performances that were as extraordinary as the breathtaking sets. In its thematic complexity, too, *Intolerance* was a towering achievement. The director's indictment of the injustices of modern American society climaxed the Progressive era's cry for justice, while his depiction of antiquity, in a sharp break from traditionalist conceptions of "heathen" Babylon, revealed the ancient civilization as one of high ideals. The portrayal of the conflict between the conservative theocracy of the male god Bel and the reformism centered around the worship of the goddess Ishtar was yet another indication of Griffith's latent feminism. As has often been noted, the pacifist message of *Intolerance* was consistent with America's antiwar mood in 1915 and 1916. Indeed, the film was initially quite popular on its release, but as the United States moved towards full-scale war with Germany in 1917, attendance began to fall off, and *Intolerance* ultimately failed at the box office. Overseas, *Intolerance* enjoyed a far more sustained success in countries like Russia and Japan. The film ran for ten years in the USSR and became the single most important influence on the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s. Its Japanese popularity was equally crucial in inspiring the early Japanese directors to develop a new, more cinematic style. In France, Germany, and Scandinavia, Griffith's epic paved the way for a generation of filmmakers to create their greatest achievements, while in the United States, it was to influence such directors as Cecil B. DeMille, Rex Ingram, Erich von Stroheim, and King Vidor. Called by film historian Theodore Huff "the only film fugue," Griffith's masterpiece remains a timeless landmark of cinematic art that crystallized themes featured in his other works.

Griffith followed *Intolerance* with *Hearts of the World* (1918), the most notable of several films he directed on behalf of the Allied cause in World War I. *Hearts of the World* incorporated actual footage taken in England and at the front in France, although the bulk of the film was shot in California. Though he later regretted the propagandistic aspects of *Hearts of the World* as incompatible with his antiwar sentiments expressed in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, Griffith surpassed most of the other contemporary films on the conflict through his poignant portrayal of the devastating effects of war on ordinary civilians. Enhancing his presentation of a French village overrun by the forces of Imperial Germany was the outstanding work of his stars, Lillian and Dorothy Gish and Robert Harron.



After the war, Griffith returned to the more tranquil world of his rural past through a series of films that included *True Heart Susie* (1919), an idyll starring Lillian Gish, acclaimed decades later as one of the world's greatest films by French New Wave directors Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer. Griffith's most extraordinary work in the late 1910s was *Broken Blossoms* (1919), a poetic masterwork and the most influential of his intimate films. The narrative concerns an idealistic Chinese Buddhist who had come to World War I London in a failed effort to spread his philosophy of love and peace in a society beset by bigotry and violence. Through the tragic outcome of the Chinese man's love for an innocent young white girl whom he vainly attempts to shelter from her abusive pugilist father, Griffith attacks both racism and imperialism, beliefs that had plunged the world into war. Griffith's narrative fusing of realism and romanticism is accomplished through strikingly new and innovative soft-focus photography, bold close-ups, and an atmosphere created entirely through sets replicated at his studio. The film was an immediate critical and popular success, impacting on filmmakers across Europe and in Japan. Griffith's ability to reproduce and transcend reality foreshadowed the German *Kammerspiel* films, while his sensitive direction of Lillian Gish and Richard

Barthelmess in the leads set new high standards for cinematic performances.

Through all this time, Griffith had sought to maintain his independence and creative control in the face of the rising Hollywood-based film industry of the 1910s. Initially releasing his features through Mutual, he had left that organization in 1915 to form Triangle in partnership with Mack Sennett and Thomas Ince. There, Griffith supervised a number of features, including the early films of Douglas Fairbanks,



Sr., although *Intolerance*, like *The Birth of a Nation*, was distributed by a separate organization. He left Triangle in 1917 and released his films, first through Paramount-Artcraft, and then through First National. In 1919, he joined with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., and Charlie Chaplin to form United Artists, and, in a further effort to remain free of industry control, moved his production company from Hollywood to a new studio in Mamaroneck, New York. He scored his greatest popular triumph since *The Birth of a Nation* with *Way Down East* (1920), the most acclaimed of his bucolic films. To intensify the drama, Griffith filmed on location in New England, including the famous climax on the ice floes in which Lillian Gish is rescued by Richard Barthelmess. Adapting a venerable turn-of-the-century melodrama about a country maiden betrayed by a callous playboy, Griffith and his star Lillian Gish, in a remarkable performance, transformed the story into a potent attack on puritanism and the sexual double standard toward adultery. Although the film evoked nostalgia for the agrarian America of 1900, its simultaneous indictment of provincial bigotry and sexism was very compatible with a society that in 1920, having finally granted women the right to vote, promised a new era of greater gender equality.



Griffith's next great film, *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), was a spectacular recreation of the French Revolution with 18th century Paris virtually replicated at his studio. As in his previous epics, Griffith presented the events in human terms, showing his feminine protagonists, two sisters played by Lillian and Dorothy Gish, as separated by the *ancien regime* and caught up in the storm of revolution. Griffith's social conscience is again apparent in his impassioned indictment

of the class injustices and male chauvinism that were wreaked upon the poor by the wealthy ruling class of the monarchy. His political hero is Danton, who leads the people in their struggle to overthrow the regime. The film's chief historical villain, Robespierre, is portrayed as a puritan who uses the license of the frenetic mobs as a means to construct a new tyranny on the ruins of the old, an incipient moralistic orthodoxy that simply perpetuates despotism in a new guise. Once again, Griffith's narrative underscores his belief in the individual and his opposition to the historical oppression of women by the ruling elite.

Contrary to legend, most of Griffith's Mamaroneck films made money, but because of the debts incurred by the director in managing the studio and his ineptitude in business matters, he failed to realize the profits from the films he made after *Way Down East*. For its part, the Hollywood establishment, which had lauded him as the cinema's foremost

genius in the 1910s, grew increasingly resentful of Griffith's Eastern-based defiance of the West Coast industry. More and more, it was said that Griffith was wedded to an old-fashioned Victorian outlook and out of touch with the times. Nevertheless, he continued to produce solid achievements like the last of his rural films, *The White Rose* (1923), shot on location in the South, with Mae Marsh in the role of an unwed mother deceived by a minister; and *America* (1924), another large-scale epic, this time depicting the American Revolution with all his accustomed skill. His continued interest in technical innovation was demonstrated by his addition of synchronized sound sequences to his 1921 feature, *Dream Street*.

Griffith's work at Mamaroneck climaxed with *Isn't Life Wonderful?* (1924), his most extraordinary experiment since *Broken Blossoms*. Distinguished for its social commentary, the film was made largely on location in Germany and depicts the harrowing conditions in post-war Europe. Centering his narrative around the experiences of a refugee family struggling to survive in the chaos and deprivation that followed the German defeat, Griffith, without melodrama, conveys the poverty of the time in his scenes of listless, undernourished people with their meager savings, crowding in line for meat as they watch the prices steadily climb. And as in his other works, Griffith elicited superb performances from his leads, Carol Dempster, his principal actress of the period, and Neil Hamilton as her fiancé, a returning war veteran. An artistic triumph that anticipated Italian neorealism and influenced directors from King Vidor and Frank Borzage to Akira Kurosawa whose 1947 *One Wonderful Sunday* was a remake of Griffith's film, *Isn't Life Wonderful?* proved a risky commercial gamble. American audiences were now less attracted to films of social commentary in the age of Coolidge prosperity and a film that asked them to empathize with the problems experienced by people in other lands was especially unwelcome at that time. Therefore, *Isn't Life Wonderful?* failed at the box office and Griffith was soon forced to become a contract director for Paramount.

Griffith's later films of the '20s, made for Paramount on the East Coast and for producer Joseph Schenck at United Artists in Hollywood, were traditionally dismissed as largely commercial imitations of other Hollywood productions of the time. But in fact, far from exhibiting creative decline, they reveal the director continuing to mine his personal experiences to make memorable films. The last of his Mamaroneck films, *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925) was intended for Paramount distribution but was released by United Artists. With W. C. Fields reprising his stage hit, *Poppy*, *Sally of the Sawdust* combined Fields's comic genius and Griffith's own vision, as he drew on his youthful memories of working in the theatre when actors were still shunned by respectable people. *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926), the story of a critic who sacrifices his integrity in pursuit of the worldly success offered him by Satan, recalls the director's early years with Linda Arvidson when he was attempting to establish himself as a writer. In its blending of the realistic and fantastic, the film demonstrates Griffith's skill at incorporating German expressionist techniques into his filmmaking. *The Battle of the Sexes* (1928), in its wryly comic depiction of a middle-aged businessman who allows himself to be seduced by an attractive gold-digger, seems to reflect the director's own mid-life crisis.

Griffith successfully met the challenge posed by the coming of sound with his 1930 biopic, *Abraham Lincoln*. Walter Huston was memorable as the 16th president in a film that chronicles Lincoln's life from his birth in a log cabin to his assassination at Ford's Theatre. The scenes of Lincoln's courtship of Ann Rutledge against a pastoral backdrop are in the classic vein of Griffith's rural films, while the Civil War scenes serve as another of the director's compelling commentaries on



the suffering engendered by war. But although he pays tribute to the sacrifice and heroism of the South as personified by Robert E. Lee, this time Griffith's political sympathies are fully with Lincoln in his efforts to preserve the union and abolish slavery. The film's box office appeal did not match its critical success, however, and Griffith, unhappy with the changes in the final release-print requested by the producers, sundered his ties with Schenck to make one more try for independence.

His next film, *The Struggle*, made on the East Coast in 1931, would prove to be his last. Having for several years suffered from a drinking problem, Griffith conceived of a film that, while opposing Prohibition, reflected his own torments. *The Struggle* relates the story of a good-natured but weak-willed working man who succumbs to the allure of the speakeasy, causing a personal decline that nearly destroys his family. Griffith took his cameras out into the streets of the Bronx to record the unvarnished reality of tenement life, an approach consistent with many earlier Griffith films but at odds with Hollywood's new preference for recreating and often modifying the details of slum life in the studio. The combination of Griffith's unpolished realism and an unheroic leading man in the throes of alcoholism (Broadway star Hal Skelly in an outstanding performance) held no appeal for the Depression era audiences of 1931. The film was both a commercial and critical disaster that ended Griffith's directorial career, although many later critics would recognize it as one of his finest works.

Griffith's remaining years were marked by unfulfilled attempts to realize his literary ambitions and intermittent efforts to resume his directorial career. His only sojourn in the studios in later years was the assistance he provided to Hal Roach on *One Million B.C.* (1940), a project with which Griffith became quickly dissatisfied. Much of this period was marked by frustration and intermittent bouts of alcoholism, although he did make a belated effort to settle down into a domestic life. Separated from Linda Arvidson for twenty-five years, he finally divorced her in 1936 and married Evelyn Baldwin, a young woman who had played a supporting part in *The Struggle*, but that marriage also ended in divorce. There were no children from either marriage. Although Griffith was not destitute, he was far from wealthy. The highlights of his later years were a special Oscar presented to him by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1936 for his contributions to film art, and a 1940 retrospective of his work by the Museum of Modern Art, which had begun the task of preserving and disseminating his films. On July 23, 1948, at the age of 73, he died in Hollywood of a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried in Kentucky, near his birthplace.

Despite D. W. Griffith's central position in film history as the cinema's most influential director, his legacy has still not been fully assimilated by most film analysts. Although impossible to ignore, with so much written about him, perhaps only a minority of the writings are completely appreciative of him as a complex artist with a true vision. At best, he has been taken for granted as the father of narrative cinema, and at worst, he has been repeatedly condemned as the arch-racist of American history. Many of these attacks were predictable and ritualistic, if not altogether self-righteous. They have surely been simplistic in the reductionism of his vast *oeuvre* to the disturbing images of the second half of *The Birth of a Nation*, images which ultimately derive from a popular melodrama and the prevailing contemporary historical views of Reconstruction, not simply Griffith's imagination. The continual progressive and humanitarian vision that colored Griffith's entire career is either discounted or misrepresented by these critics who also appear to miss the significance of the virtually unanimous esteem with which the director was regarded by several generations of filmmakers, including Orson Welles who hailed Griffith as "the premier genius of our medium." Griffith's critical fortunes in the United States have inevitably been tied to political currents in the society. In his own time, his films were alternately praised and denounced by both the left and the right. Later screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*, his most frequently revived work, invariably galvanized the NAACP in its persistent efforts to have the film banned. But influential liberal and left critics like James Agee emerged as Griffith's champions over the years. The late 1960s and the 1970s were probably the high point in Griffith's posthumous reputation, a time in which a number of critics began to reexamine his work as a whole

and dispute the widely-established myth of the director's artistic decline. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that this new appreciation, culminating in a commemorative postage stamp during his centenary in 1975, occurred during a time of widespread antiwar sentiment stemming from opposition to the Vietnam War. But if much of Griffith's humanism was in accord with the revolt against the Establishment in the '60s and '70s, it ran afoul of the later orthodoxy of political correctness. New and ever more strident attacks on *The Birth of a Nation* in the 1980s and 1990s once again shifted attention away from a wider perspective of his work. The ultimate decline of his reputation in his own country was symbolized by the Director's Guild of America's 1999 decision to retire their prestigious D. W. Griffith Award in order to demonstrate their disapproval of the racial attitudes in *The Birth of a Nation*. This formal repudiation of Griffith by the Hollywood establishment coincided with a more entrenched and militant political correctness by liberals who had largely abandoned the antiwar sentiments of the '60s and '70s in the wake of the Kosovo War and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East. To proponents of the new ideology, Griffith's ardent Jeffersonianism, which championed the individual in his struggles with imperialism and puritanism, doubtless seemed more out of touch than ever. But besides tarnishing the reputation of a great artist, the anti-Griffith jeremiads reveal an unease that persists, not just towards one man or one film, but to the challenge that Griffith's creation of a new art form posed to traditional media, along with the aesthetic controversies that always accompany the attempt to reevaluate popular art. It is this challenge, resulting in the director's many extraordinary achievements, that film historians and critics of the future must resolve in order to finally recognize the lasting value of D. W. Griffith's art which transformed creative expression throughout the world, establishing motion pictures as the dominant narrative form of the 20th century and beyond.

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