

## Document Citation

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## GRIFFITH BIOGRAPH PROGRAM

Between 1908 and 1918 the American film developed its own peculiar characteristics and dominated the screens of the world. The great directors of this brilliantly creative period were David Wark Griffith, Thomas H. Ince, and Mack Sennett. Above all, it was Griffith (1875-1918) who developed the technical resources and the emotional content of the motion picture. Nearly every innovation that came later can be traced to his experiments.

He directed the astounding number of nearly 500 one-reel films between 1908 and 1913 for the Biograph Company, as the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company was soon to be known. This was one of the most important studios to have appeared in the wake of the Edison Kinetoscope. W. K. L. Dickson, after leaving Edison in 1895, soon associated himself with Herman Casler, Harry Marvin, and Elias Koopman in developing a new mode of screen projection. The word "Mutoscope" in the company name referred to a peephole machine devised to get around Edison's patents; based on a wheel of cards rather than a strip of film (the device used in the Kinetoscope), it was a simple and practical machine that long outlasted the Kinetoscope. A few Mutoscopes are still in use in penny arcades. "Biograph" represented Dickson's camera and projector (also ingeniously designed to avoid Edison's patents), and the company adopted this name not long after Griffith had revitalized its product.

Griffith, born and raised in Kentucky, was a temporarily unemployed actor and playwright when he came to Biograph, trying to sell his stories to the film companies and reluctantly accepting acting roles, then considered a comedown for those with stage experience. He was to change all that. When he became a director, he brought to the medium all the traditions of the nineteenth-century American theater; at the same time, he instinctively sought out means of expression more suited to the cinema. With the assistance of Biograph's resourceful cameraman, G. W. Bitzer, he began to try out different ideas: moving the camera closer to his actors instead of maintaining stage distance, breaking up scenes by a change of camera position, exploring new methods of lighting. His innovations soon made the company the most vital and lively on the market, and Biograph, which had been in a slump, began to thrive.

During these years of experiment, Griffith laid the foundations on which the art of the cinema was to be built. By 1912 he had at his command the means to achieve fluidity of narrative and subtlety of expression; employing the long shot, mid-shot, and close-up, he combined them in the editing process to produce the greatest visual excitement, crosscutting between scenes parallel in time to increase suspense, and expanding or contracting time by the length and number of shots. In his hands, stage conventions were gradually abandoned, and the motion picture began to be an eloquent and unique form of expression. E.B.

## THE LONELY VILLA

1909 Produced by the Biograph Company

Directed by D. W. Griffith Screenplay by Mack Sennett

Photographed by G. W. Bitzer and Arthur Marvin 10 minutes

Cast: Mother Marion Leonard Elder daughter Mary Pickford

Another daughter Adele de Garde Father Charles Mailes

Burglars James Kirkwood, Mack Sennett

Griffith made an amazing variety of films during his Biograph period. *The Lonely Villa* is an early example of a type he frequently repeated, the simple melodrama of suspense with a last-minute rescue. It is basically the kind of plot used in *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*. However, Griffith improved upon it, crosscutting extensively between the scenes of burglars trying to break into the room, the frightened mother and children inside, and the father rushing home to protect them, as well as creating an accelerating tempo by shortening the shots near the end.

No credits were given on Biograph films during Griffith's stay. Elsewhere during this period the star system had its beginnings, but at Biograph any actor was expected to play extras as well as important parts and remain content to be anonymous. He might also earn an extra fifteen dollars by writing the story, as Mack Sennett did by contributing the plot for *The Lonely Villa*, the idea for which he had found by reading the daily newspapers. James Kirkwood was making his film debut here, and Mary Pickford, a sixteen-year-old veteran of the stage, had only recently come to Biograph. Even after the public came to know their faces and to write them letters, Biograph would not identify the actors for fear they would demand higher wages. E.B.

## 1776 or THE HESSIAN RENEGADES

1909 Produced by the Biograph Company

Directed by D. W. Griffith

Photographed by G. W. Bitzer 14 minutes

Cast: Colonial farmer James Kirkwood

Farmer's daughter Mary Pickford

and Linda Arvidson, Wilfred Lucas, Vernon Clarges, Kate Bruce, Owen Moore, Arthur Johnson, Mack Sennett, George Nichols, Tony O'Sullivan, Frank Powell

Made before *A Corner in Wheat* but after *The Lonely Villa*, this film is discussed separately here because it is circulated by itself and not on the Biograph program. It depicts an incident of the Revolutionary War, never a popular subject on the American screen but one that occupied Griffith for some time. He had been working on a play called *War* which was never produced; much later he made a full-scale film treatment of the subject in *America* (see page 51), although it was not based on his own script. There seems to have been in 1911 a curious surge of Revolutionary War films, which, however, never equaled the Civil War subjects in quantity and became unpopular during World War I when Great Britain was a United States ally.

Some time before Griffith began to take his company to California for winter film production, he took summer trips to a sleepy town called Cuddiebackville, New York, which remains little changed today. This was one of his earliest productions to be filmed in its locations. The authentic Colonial stone house shown in the film was the property of a Mr. Goddefroy, who had carefully preserved it. Robert Henderson has inspected the locations in recent years and concluded that Griffith may have had to move the camera closer to the actors than was usual lest an inappropriate background intrude on the shot. However it happened, by this time Griffith was beginning to photograph his actors with their legs invisible below the picture frame, and to stage action toward the camera as well as horizontally before it. It becomes increasingly evident as the surviving Biograph films come to light that Griffith first discovered the value of varying camera placements and the direction of the movement within the frame when shooting out-of-doors, and as he realized their dynamic qualities, he gradually introduced these elements into the scene staged in the studio sets. E.B.

Note: The results of Henderson's investigations appear in "The Role of David Wark Griffith in the Development of the Dramatic Motion Picture, 1908-1913" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1965).



## A CORNER IN WHEAT

1909 Produced by the Biograph Company

Directed by D. W. Griffith

Photographed by G. W. Bitzer 14 minutes

Cast: *The Wheat King* Frank Powell

and Henry B. Walthall, James Kirkwood, Jeanie Macpherson, Arthur Johnson, Mack Sennett, Linda Arvidson, Kate Bruce, Grace Henderson

Griffith tried to make his characters resemble persons in real life and to reveal them intimately. First, he experimented with lighting effects. Then, with a sure sense of the essential principles of cinematography, he boldly manipulated his material. Abandoning straightforward narrative and theatrical style, he ruthlessly cut short the action, joined brief unrelated scenes together in the manner of *The Great Train Robbery*, inserted cut backs and close shots, and thus made free with space and time in a manner proper to the film. He used titles where necessary to bridge gaps but seldom to expound plot.

*A Corner in Wheat* reveals the amazing strides Griffith had made in just over a year of direction. Unlike most film people of that day, he was convinced of the artistic possibilities of his medium and even sought the aid of other artists to enhance them. The opening and closing sequences of *A Corner in Wheat* are consciously modeled after Millet; the story itself, while reflecting the headlines of its day, shows an awareness of the novels of Frank Norris. For all its careful composition, its inventiveness, *A Corner in Wheat* was turned out in ten days—just another assignment for Griffith. I.B.

Note: The Museum of Modern Art prints do not carry the original titles. These may be seen in the Library of Congress collection of paper prints submitted for copyright. However, not all the shots are contained in the paper print and the order in which they are edited is quite different from and inferior to that of the Museum prints. For example, a stunning instance of contrast editing is missing from the Library of Congress print: from a busy, lively scene of the Wheat King and his friends at a feast, Griffith cuts to a shot of a line of poor people waiting for bread at the bake shop, frozen into immobility. As Richard Meyer has pointed out, the shot resembles the modern freeze-frame, but it is not: Griffith must have instructed his actors to hold the pose, which shows that he had conceived the final editing at the time that he shot the film. E.B.

# THE LONEDALE OPERATOR

1911 Produced by the Biograph Company

Directed by D. W. Griffith Screenplay by Mack Sennett

Photographed by G. W. Bitzer 14 minutes

Cast: The girl telegrapher Blanche Sweet

The railwayman Wilfred Lucas

and Frank Grandin, Edward Dillon, Joseph Graybill, Dell Henderson, Charles West

The methods used to create suspense in *The Lonely Villa* have in this film developed much further. Griffith achieves a much greater degree of breathless excitement and suspense in the scenes where the railwayman-hero races his train back to the depot to rescue the heroine attacked by hold-up men. A comparison of the two films shows how far Griffith had progressed in the interim. The camera is used with far more flexibility in the later film, achieving a wider variety of setups and angles. Perhaps even more noticeable is the brevity and terseness with which each shot is edited. In *The Lonely Villa* many scenes begin quietly with the entrance of the characters onto the set; significant action follows this slow-paced start only belatedly. In *The Lonedale Operator* there is no leisurely entrance—the characters are already in midaction when each shot begins—no deliberation in getting on with the story when haste and excitement are what is needed. Griffith was confidently relying on his images to speak eloquently and immediately to the eye and the emotions.

I.B.

# THE MUSKETEERS OF PIG ALLEY

1912 Produced by the Biograph Company

Directed and written by D. W. Griffith

Photographed by G. W. Bitzer 11 minutes

Cast: A girl of the slums Lillian Gish

The husband Walter Miller The gangster Elmer Booth  
and Harry Carey, Robert Harron, Lionel Barrymore, Jack Dillon,  
Alfred Paget, W. C. Robinson, Jack Pickford

The social problem film, the gangster film, the documentary, all these genres are forecast in this little masterpiece. As an exercise in motion picture composition, it is a remarkable work that well rewards study: the camera placements and the movement of the action in unlimited space are especially notable. The acting is relaxed and natural; the camera seems to be reaching out for what is significant and, at the same time, almost to be recording everyday life (much of it was shot in the streets of New York). Individual shots are no longer composed for "painterly" effects, but for drama and suspense. I.B.

## THE NEW YORK HAT

1912 *Produced by the Biograph Company*

*Directed by D. W. Griffith Story by Anita Loos*

*Photographed by G. W. Bitzer 14 minutes*

*Cast: Schoolgirl Mary Pickford Her father Charles Mailes*

*The minister Lionel Barrymore*

*Gossips Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Mae Marsh, and others*

A girl with long curls, at first anonymous as were all Biograph players but afterward canonized as Mary Pickford, responded curiously to Griffith's direction. Her gestures were small, drawn-out, but expressive; there was warmth and sincerity in the parts she played.

Even today, under the mawkish sentiment, the period morality and clothes, this little film remains singularly fresh and moving. Mary gives herself a half-disparaging look in the mirror, arranges one glove to look like a pair, and trips hopefully outdoors. This is neither literature nor theater: it is pure film, of the kind we associate with Chaplin, yet made a year before Chaplin abandoned vaudeville for the screen. This close approach to the character, its highlighting of details which illuminate a mood and have universal significance, is among Griffith's finest contributions to the cinema. I.B.

## THE NEW YORK HAT

1912

8 min.

Anita Loos (scenarist of Griffith's last film, THE STRUGGLE) was 16 when she wrote THE NEW YORK HAT. The film features Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore.



# **THE BATTLE OF ELDERBUSH GULCH**

**1914**

**22 min.**

**Rental: \$12.50**

One of Griffith's last films for Biograph, **THE BATTLE OF ELDERBUSH GULCH** features Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh as two Eastern girls who move to the West, and are nearly scalped by Indians. The cast includes Lionel Barrymore and Robert Harron.