

## Document Citation

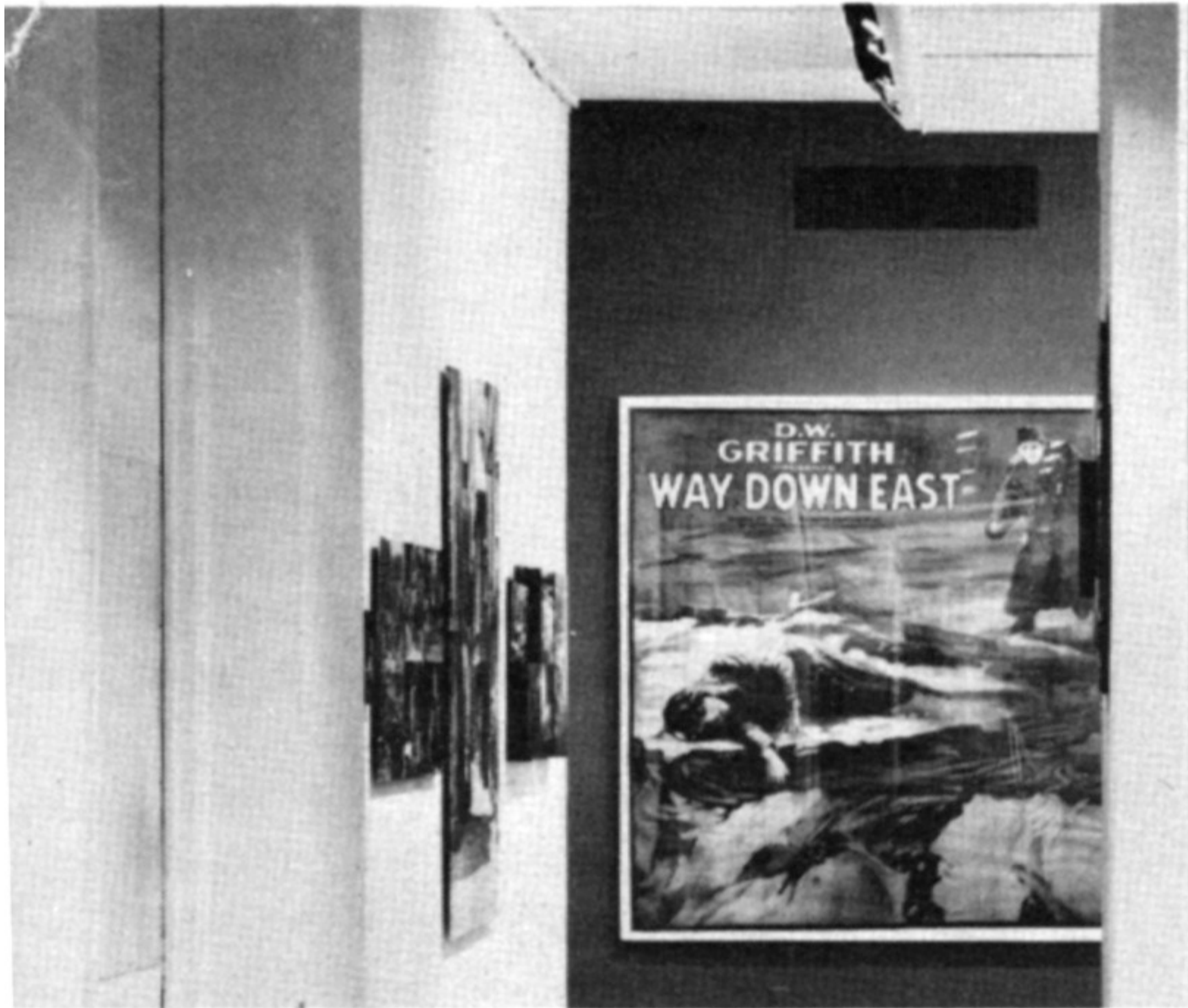
Title	<b>From the D. W. Griffith collection at the Museum of Modern Art</b>
Author(s)	Jon Gartenberg
Source	<i>Films In Review</i>
Date	February 1981
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	91-104
No. of Pages	14
Subjects	Gunning, Tom (1949) Barrymore, Lionel (1878-1954), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States Pickford, Mary (1892-1979), Toronto, Canada Disney, Walt (1901-1966), Chicago, Illinois, United States Goldwyn, Samuel (1882-1974), Warsaw, Poland Lloyd, Harold (1893-1971), Burchard, Nebraska, United States Walthall, Henry B. (1878-1936), Shelby City, Alabama, United States Griffith, D. W. (1875-1948), LaGrange, Kentucky, United States Gish, Lillian (1896-1993), Springfield, Ohio, United States
Film Subjects	A romance of Happy Valley, Griffith, D. W., 1918 The lonely villa, Griffith, D. W., 1909

The lady and the mouse, Griffith, D. W., 1912  
Dream street, Griffith, D. W., 1921  
Broken blossoms, Griffith, D. W., 1919  
A corner in wheat, Griffith, D. W., 1909  
Dr. Bull, Ford, John, 1933  
The battle of the sexes, Griffith, D. W., 1928  
The birth of a nation, Griffith, D. W., 1915  
True heart Susie, Griffith, D. W., 1919  
Death's marathon, Griffith, D. W., 1913  
The struggle, Griffith, D. W., 1931  
Those awful hats, Griffith, D. W., 1909  
Way down east, Griffith, D. W., 1920  
The sorrows of Satan, Griffith, D. W., 1926  
The Yaqui cur, ,



D.W. Griffith  
Film in Review. February, 1981  
From MoMA's third Griffith Retrospective,  
1975

Jon Gartenberg



The study of D.W. Griffith's influence over the entire course of film history has figured prominently in The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film. The films and documents relating to Griffith's career have been more intensively collected, exhibited, and reevaluated than that of any other director's work. He has been the subject of three major one-man retrospectives during the last forty years and his films are circulated to archives and museums throughout the world and made available to educational institutions within the United States. The archive contains an exhaustive collection of his films, personal and corporate papers, original production records, scrapbooks, posters, stills and music scores. Not only has the collection of Griffith materials in the Department of Film been an ongoing activity but also the continual examination of his works underscores our changing perception of the development of the art of film.

# From the D.W. Griffith Collection

AT THE MUSEUM  
OF MODERN ART



From its inception, The Museum of Modern Art stressed an international approach in the collection and exhibition of all works of art. "At the time the Museum was founded in '29, the Director, Alfred Barr, in his preliminary report to the Trustees already envisaged for the future a department of motion pictures."<sup>1</sup> His concept of film as a modern visual art equal in stature to painting and sculpture was far-reaching. In '32, Barr wrote:



"That part of the American public which should appreciate good films and support them has never had a chance to crystallize. People who are well acquainted with modern painting or literature or the theater are amazingly ignorant of modern film. The work and even the names of such masters as Gance, Stiller, Clair, Dupont, Pudovkin, Feyder, Chaplin (as a director), Eisenstein and other great directors are, one can hazard, practically unknown to the Museum's Board of Trustees, most of whom are interested and very well informed in other modern arts...It may be said without exaggeration that the only great art peculiar to the twentieth century is practically unknown to the American public most capable of appreciating it."<sup>2</sup>

Barr succeeded in his arguments. In '35 primarily because of the work of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, John Hay Whitney and Edward M.M. Warburg, a Film Library (renamed the Department of Film in '66) was instituted "to trace, catalog, assemble, exhibit and circulate to museums and colleges single films or programs of films in exactly the same manner in which the Museum traces, catalogs, exhibits and circulates paintings, sculpture, architectural photographs and models or reproductions of works of art, so that the film may be studied and enjoyed as any other one of the arts is studied and enjoyed."<sup>3</sup>

### **Acquisition of Griffith Films**

From the beginning, Iris Barry, the first film curator (and formerly a co-founder of the London Film Society) realized the creative power of Griffith's work, its significance to the growing archive, and its pervasive impact upon other films and national cinemas. In '35, she travelled to Hollywood with John Abbott (the first director of the Film Library) to convince the motion picture industry of the importance of the Film Library's task to collect, preserve, and make available for study motion picture history. A party was held at Pickfair, hosted by Mary Pickford and attended by many Hollywood notables including Mack Sennett, Walt Disney, Samuel Goldwyn and Harold Lloyd. Looking back on this trip in '40, Iris Barry wrote:

"A major obstacle had been overcome in gain-

ing the attention and understanding of the industry as a whole. It remained to work out a basis on which films owned by large corporations rather than by individual producers could be made available to the Film Library. Its principles had been accepted even if there remain individuals to convert, like the world-famous director, D.W. Griffith, who, that same summer of '35, said amiably but firmly that he, for one, was not interested in the preservation of his own films and that nothing could convince him that films have anything to do with art. It is pleasant to record that he has latterly become a warm supporter of the Film Library's undertakings."<sup>4</sup>

In '38 and '40, more than one thousand films produced by the Edison Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company during the years 1900-1915 were acquired from dead warehouse storage. The Edison collection contains many films directed by Edwin S. Porter, the filmmaker most responsible for shaping film narrative in America before Griffith. The Biograph collection contains the bulk of films directed by D.W. Griffith during 1908-'13, during which time he transformed filmmaking into an art form of structural unity, visual beauty, and emotional power. In January, '38, numerous Griffith features were acquired under conditions enabling The Museum of Modern Art Film Library to "take possession of and properly store and care for all the films, music, still photographs, papers and miscellaneous items" and to "have the right to use any or all of the items...for its non-commercial and educational purposes."<sup>5</sup> Today, these important tasks of collection, restoration and study of Griffith films and documents are still carried forth.

### **First Griffith Exhibition in 1940**

The Griffith films acquired from warehouse storage were immediately transferred to the Museum's vaults. Iris Barry then embarked on a project to study these films, to prepare an exhibition, and to write a monograph. She encountered resistance from Griffith himself, who preferred others to prepare the show, including Albert Grey, his relative and part-time legal advisor. Griffith was concerned



that the appraisal of his work might adversely affect his chances of making another film, even though it had been nine years since his last directorial effort. Barry wrote about the exhibition:

"The Museum planned to give it at the same time as a companion exhibit on the Life and Work of the architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, with the intention of thus honoring the two greatest living Americans at one time...It will provide a genuinely educational analysis and explanation of (Griffith's) work and why it was of signal importance."<sup>6</sup>

In '65, Richard Griffith, the second Curator of the Film Library, recalled the purpose of Barry's work:

"Iris Barry hoped to restore D.W. Griffith's fading fame and also to overcome the long-lived intellectual prejudice which held (at least by implication) that because Griffith worked for vast audiences and made (and lost) a great deal of money, his achievement could not be classed with 'real' art...Outside the then tiny circle of film scholars the book *D.W. Griffith: American Film Master* provoked little celebration and comment, and it did not sell; overstocks remained on the Museum's shelves for years. In '40 Griffith and his era seemed fantastically remote and irrelevant to most people who thought of themselves as cultivated. His spotty knowledge of history, his literary eccentricities, his 'petit-bourgeois' morality, quite overshadowed for them the beauty, power and humanity of his formal structure and pictorial composition."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the Griffith exhibition and monograph affirmed that

"The motion picture is the liveliest art of the twentieth century and David Wark Griffith its unquestioned master...As a director for the old Biograph Company he first made and afterwards continued a wholly original contribution to the medium, forcing it to acquire new means of expression unlike those of stage or literature, applying a variety of technical devices — crosscutting, flash-backs, irises, split screens — to give it fluidity, momentum and eloquence...The study has been based on first-hand re-examination of his many films, from *The Adventures of Dollie* through *The Birth of a Nation* and *Broken Blossoms* to his swan song in '31...to furnish a critical understanding of the man under whose aegis the most popular of the arts first fully developed."<sup>8</sup>

Barry also included Griffith films in circulating programs and in-house History of Film cycles, showing *The Lonely Villa*

(<sup>'09</sup>), *A Corner in Wheat* (<sup>'09</sup>), *The Lonedale Operator* (<sup>'11</sup>), *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (<sup>'11</sup>), *The New York Hat* (<sup>'12</sup>), *Judith of Bethulia* (<sup>'14</sup>), *The Birth of a Nation* (<sup>'15</sup>), *Intolerance* (<sup>'16</sup>) and *Way Down East* (<sup>'20</sup>).

Iris Barry's lasting contribution was the positioning of Griffith films among the significant motion pictures which shaped the course of an *international* film history. Like the work of other curators in the Museum, she forced a reexamination of a neglected period of art history. Her first-hand viewing of the Griffith films gave her a fresh vision unencumbered by the inaccuracies of written film histories which were based on imprecise memories of their authors. Barry not only discussed Griffith's career, but also evaluated those cinematic elements which when brought together through Griffith's creative vision, resulted in works of dramatic power.

#### Acquisition of Griffith Documentation Materials

When Griffith films were acquired from a New York warehouse in '38, his personal papers were also obtained. A gift from Henry de Sola Mendes in '51 added documents to this core collection. He found them in a house he had purchased once belonging to a relative of Griffith's. The D.W. Griffith collection contains several thousand documents and includes letters, contracts, newspaper articles, telegrams, scripts, pressbooks, scrapbooks, set design books, salary checks and other material ranging from financial documents to letters of praise from fellow filmmakers such as Abel Gance. Other documents were obtained with the Biograph films in '39 and still others discovered by Iris Barry during her research for the Griffith monograph published in '40. Most valuable of these additional materials are the original Biograph production records. They include a Biograph story book, noting authors (Anita Loos, Frank Woods, Mary



Pickford and others) and price paid for the stories, and production ledgers including production number, film title, location, cameraman and date photographed. Biograph Bulletins were also acquired with the Biograph material and annotated by G.W. (Billy) Bitzer, Griffith's cameraman, together with Katherine Stone, a Film Library employee, in '39-'40 in preparation for the Griffith show. These Bulletins were published in '73 by Octagon Books with an introduction by Eileen Bowser and complements Kemp Niver's earlier publication covering the Biograph period up to '08. Eileen Bowser has written that

"the Bulletins were broadsides, printed to advertise the product and to be thrown away...What the Bulletins do illustrate is Griffith as popular storyteller and social critic. They provide a record of the myths, morals, and stereotypes of pre-World War I America...The staple product during Griffith's tenure was his sentimental dramas — often featuring the innocent child who resolves the adult conflicts — and his thrillers, which literally brought audiences to their feet, according to contemporary accounts."<sup>9</sup>

In the '60s and '70s the D.W. Griffith Collection was expanded by donations from those individuals who worked with Griffith. The Billy Bitzer collection includes a postcard from Cuddebackville Inn in '11 commenting upon the Griffith films in the making. Material from Evelyn Baldwin (Mrs. Werner Kunze), Griffith's second wife and a star of his last film, *The Struggle* ('31), includes rare home movies of Griffith travelling across country in the late nineteen thirties. The Carol Dempster Collection contains scrapbooks and stills of her career. Gerrie Griffith Reichard, a relative of Griffith, placed on deposit documents of particular interest because they concentrate on Griffith's youth and include a photograph of Griffith at age three and a handwritten letter as he was travelling as an actor. Additional gifts include the Killiam-Sterling collection and the Barnet Braverman Collection, compil-

ed in preparation for a proposed biography of Griffith. They contain program books for *America* ('24), *Hearts of the World* ('18) and *Intolerance*, letters involving Harry Aitken and Richard Barthelmess, and newspapers articles including "Gregory Peck and Griffith Provide Movie Contrast."

In '61, the Rockefeller Foundation supplied funds to The Museum of Modern Art for scholarly activities. Eileen Bowser, the present Curator of the archive, catalogued the Griffith collection, arranging the documents chronologically by date from '13 to '36. In addition to this chronological and annotated list of documents, there are indexes by film title, name (individuals and organizations) and subject. The fragility of the documents and their complex and personal nature has necessitated restriction of their use to advanced research projects. During the past twenty years these have included Griffith's interpretation of history, an analysis of his sound films, studies of individual films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Broken Blossoms* ('19) and *America* and the extensive use of the production records in conjunction with the Griffith Biograph research at New York University to both analyse the films in depth and to accurately and completely identify all the actors and actresses appearing in them. Much of the fragile Biograph production records and Griffith scrapbooks have been transferred to microfilm and are available for consultation in the Museum's library. Also in the Museum's library are shot-by-shot descriptions of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* prepared by Theodore Huff and based on prints in the Museum's collection. In the Film Study Center files, reviews of individual Griffith films exist on microfilm and additional documents such as catalogues of Griffith tributes in other institutions are on file.

In order to make the Griffith papers available for study to a wider audience,



they will be microfilmed in '81, as a cooperative venture between The Museum of Modern Art, the University of Louisville Archives and Records Center (Louisville, Kentucky), and the Microfilming Corporation of America, a commercial firm. A separate printed guide to the use of the papers will also be prepared. Both the microfilm and the study guide will be made available through the Microfilming Corporation of America; archive copies will also be on deposit both at The Museum of Modern Art and at the University of Louisville Archives.

In '80, a group of film scores in the Museum's collection, including orchestral, piano, and conductor parts for such Griffith films as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, *A Romance of Happy Valley* ('19), *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East*, and *The White Rose* ('23) were microfilmed. This task was coordinated by the Library of Congress Music Division under the supervision of Gillian Anderson as an extension of a project to identify, catalogue and copy the Library of Congress' own extensive collection of film music. These once-fragile Griffith music scores are now available through the Library of Congress Music Division for scholarly study and for use in recreating the music accompanying the original Griffith performances. A finding aid, *Music for Silent Films (1894-1929)*, has been prepared by them to accompany the use of the scores.

The Films Stills Archive contains portraits and candid shots of D.W. Griffith, as well as photographs of the actors and actresses who worked with Griffith. Production stills and scenes from the original Griffith films are available. These photographs can be duplicated for educational use at a nominal fee.

The Griffith films and documents in the Museum's collections continue to provide a priceless record of the career of the first great film artist. These original materials

offer a unique insight into the work of a director and studio within the first two decades of motion picture history. Because so much original research material such as the Edison Company and Vitagraph Company collections is either missing, widely scattered, or inaccessible, study of the Griffith films and documents together in one place at The Museum of Modern Art increases its value to scholars. They must take care not to commit the errors of drawing erroneous conclusions about Griffith's style from, for example, the Biograph Bulletins without actually viewing the films or attribute to Griffith too many creative decisions without consulting the written records. Used correctly together, however, the materials enrich each other and enable extensive study of Griffith from a variety of points of view.

### Second Griffith Tribute

In '65, a second tribute to Griffith was organized by Eileen Bowser, Curator, Film Department. Her cataloguing of the Griffith papers just a few years earlier revealed a wealth of new information about Griffith so that an expanded publication of *D.W. Griffith: American Film Master* was issued with additional essays. Richard Griffith noted that "the interweaving of all the complicated data of a complicated life into a single skein is Bowser's great contribution to our understanding of Griffith's career and fate."<sup>10</sup>

More than a dozen features and numerous Biograph shorts not shown in the '40 exhibition were presented in this '65 show. In the expanded publication, Bowser added more facts about the planning, filming, exhibition and public and press reaction to the key films which Barry had written about earlier such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, and *Way Down East*. Bowser also provided historical notes and critical evaluations of lesser-known Griffith films such as *Dream Street* ('21) and *The Sorrows of Satan* ('26) and in-

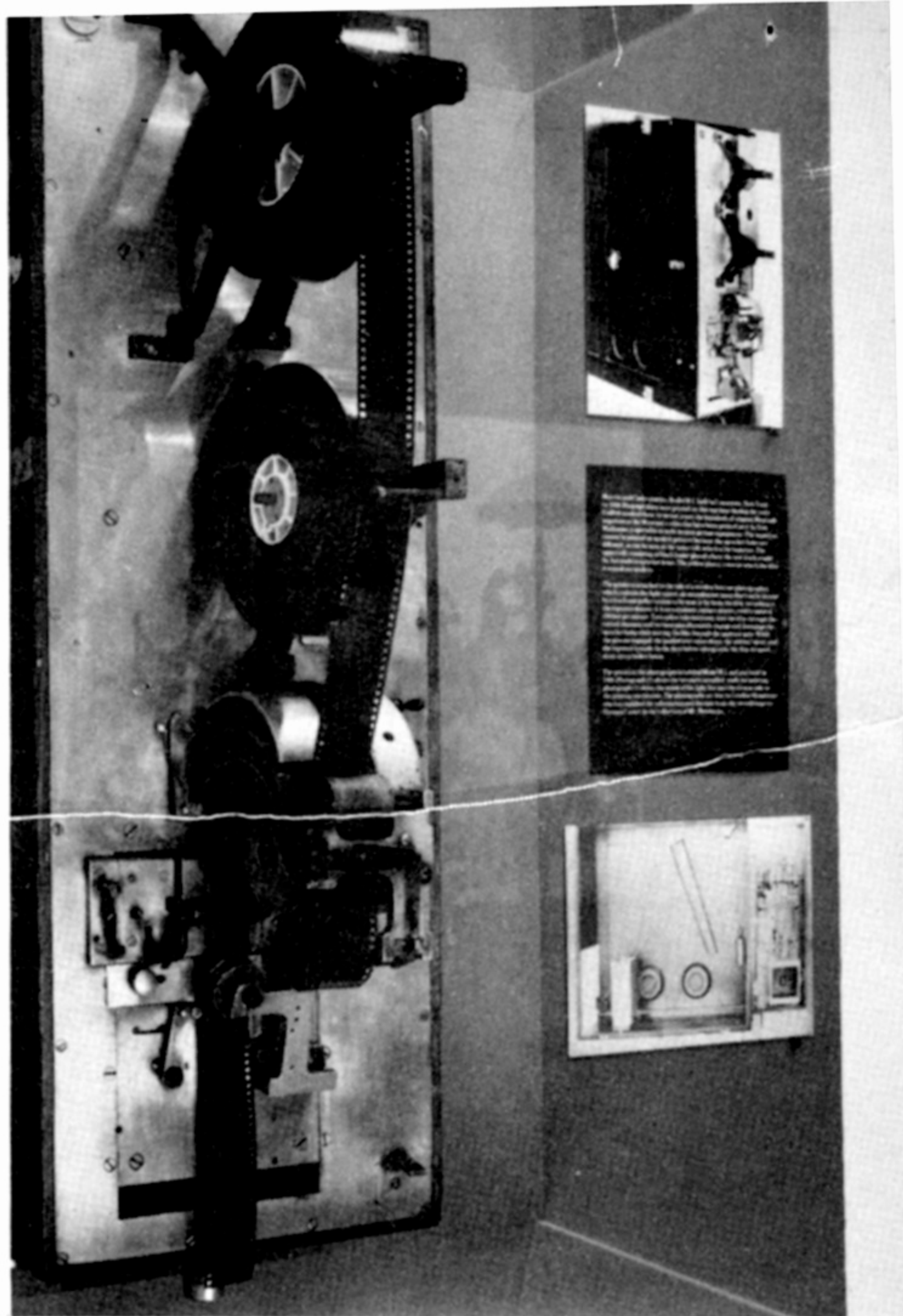




cluded a filmography of Biographs. In this latter regard, Bowser set the stage for the Griffith research of the ensuing decades. She wrote:

The films made at the beginning of Griffith's career for the Biograph Company represent his greatest contributions to the art of the film. They are not as ambitious or as famous as his masterworks, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, but in them Griffith made all the discoveries for which he is remembered today and which made

(Above) the first Griffith Retrospective, 1940; (opposite) the original Biograph printer, 1975 Retrospective; (below) posters from 1975 Retrospective



his later films possible. An amazing number of them survive, though many remain in negative or paper print form only. They still await serious study by the film historian. To realize the importance of Griffith's achievements in his Biograph period, it is necessary only to view films made by anyone else in the world during the years 1908-13.<sup>11</sup>

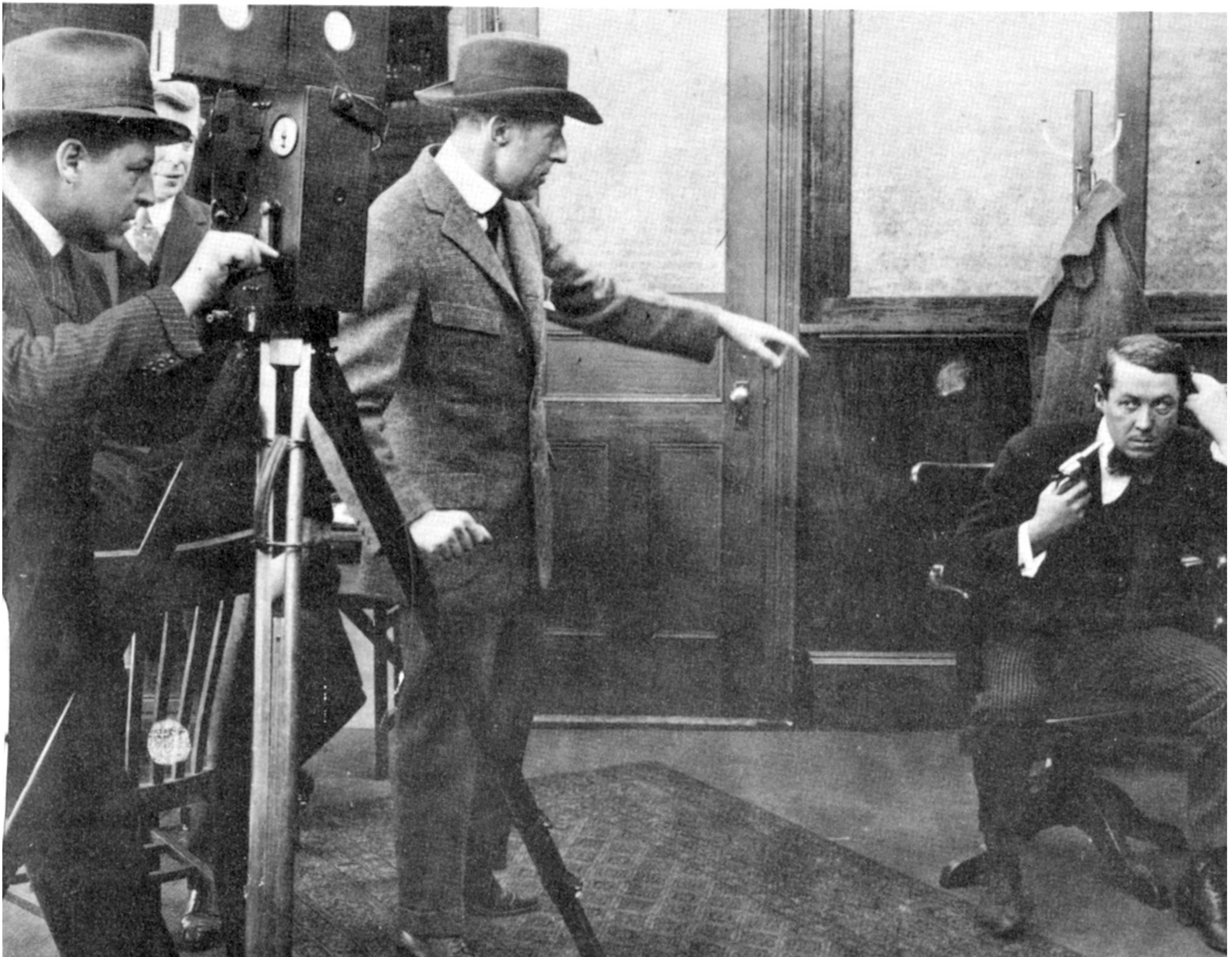
### Preservation and Restoration Problems

Up until '52, 35mm theatrical films were made on a nitrate base. These films, especially when improperly washed, handled and stored, are subject to inflammability and eventual disintegration into powder. In Iris Barry's day, the solution to this pressing problem was to make successive dupes of the originals once every decade. The invention of triacetate stock in '52 not subject to such decomposition, increased the life expectancy of film by several hundred years, thereby assuring the preservation of motion pictures for countless generations to come. A major





(Above) D.W. Griffith and Lillian Gish on the set of WAY DOWN EAST; (below) G.W. Bitzer, D.W. Griffith and Henry Walthall on the set of DEATH'S MARATHON





task was then undertaken to transfer all the original Biograph negatives onto longer-lasting triacetate fine grain master stock. This laborious and demanding task was technically executed by Don Malkames, a former cameraman and collector of motion picture equipment. He rebuilt and electrified the original Biograph printer so that it would produce frame by frame pictorially sharp and beautiful images from the original negatives. This work could not be handled by commercial laboratories because the Biograph negatives have one perforation per frame (this was to avoid Edison copyrights) and because the rare value of the entire collection demanded special work and attention (which most laboratories are not equipped to handle). In '69 it cost approximately \$200 to transfer one original Biograph negative onto fine grain stock. To date we have spent more than \$200,000 and two decades for the preservation of the Biograph collection alone, thanks primarily to the financial support of film preservation work in the archives in the United States by the National Endowment for the Arts and in New York State by the New York Council on the Arts.

At great additional expense we have been gradually restoring the films to projection print status. From each acetate fine grain master, duplicate negatives and prints must be struck, and the materials then assembled. The original negatives were acquired in separate rolls, probably according to how they were tinted. The number of each shot was etched between the frames so that the material may be sequenced with relative ease. Where inter-titles are missing, the original Biograph title sheets are used to prepare title cards and where title sheets do not exist, the Biograph Bulletins are used as a guide. The pictorial quality of the 35mm prints prepared in this manner are breathtaking.

In recent years the Film Circulation Department of The Museum of Modern Art

has been restoring the Griffith Biograph films in 16mm so that they may be widely circulated to educational institutions. The restoration work of generating negatives and prints and titling and sequencing costs about \$1500 per title! Approximately one hundred new Griffith Biograph films are being made available in this manner, some for the first time in more than seventy years. These restorations will eventually provide one of the most complete records of the career of any filmmaker. A similar project to restore the Edison films in our collection in order to ascertain Porter's contribution to the evolution of filmmaking style before Griffith is also in progress.

Before motion picture copyright laws came into effect in '13, films were deposited like books: each frame was photographed onto durable paper and then deposited with the Library of Congress Copyright Office. In '67, Kemp Niver of the Renovare Company completed the transfer of these paper prints onto 16mm negatives, from which the Library of Congress makes 16mm prints for the public's consumption. Their quality is inferior to the Museum's prints. Since the Museum's collection of Biographs, however, lacks '08 and many of the '09 Griffith films, the two collections complement each other.

The greatest film restoration dispute in recent years has centered around the '09 Biograph film *A Corner in Wheat*. The Museum's collection was missing the original negative but contained a nitrate print and safety master material. The Library of Congress paper print collection also contained a slightly different version. Based on her analysis of Griffith's style as a result of the '75 Griffith show, a new version was then assembled by Eileen Bowser. She placed shots of the sowing of the wheat and the freeze frame on the bread line in different positions emphasizing the circular structure to the narrative and a contrast edit between the rich



and the poor. When the original negative was recently returned in a collection of Biographs and Edisons on loan to the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, the shot numbers etched between frames showed the restored version to be incorrect. The record has now been set straight; the Library of Congress version is correct although missing a key shot. In Bowser's restoration, too much emphasis was placed on making the most sophisticated choices, yet her version does make the film more striking.

### Third Griffith Tribute

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film paid homage to Griffith with another retrospective of his work on the Centennial of his birth in '75. Directed by Eileen Bowser, important program notes were contributed by Ron Mottram and Tom Gunning, two doctoral students in the New York University Department of Cinema Studies. Like the two previous tributes, this one also included a display of posters, stills and documents from the Griffith collection. A rare wall-size poster from *Way Down East* was restored, the Biograph printer was exhibited, film stills were enlarged, and recently-acquired Griffith documents especially relating to his youth were displayed. The film part of the exhibition was divided into two sections. Part I was devoted exclusively to more than 100 Biograph films and part II included all extant features except *Drums of Love* ('28), which could not be obtained for showing. Part I evaluated the significance of the Biographs in greater detail than did the '65 exhibition. Ron Mottram wrote:

"What Griffith accomplished in this early period goes far beyond the notion of an apprenticeship of preparation for his later masterpieces. It amounts to more than a series of development landmarks or an accumulation of specific cinematic devices.

Rather, it was a period in which he produced a body of work significant in its own right, extraordinarily complex, which became and has remained a standard by which the narrative begin-

nings of the cinema can be judged. The films of this period need to be seen for themselves and evaluated on their own merit, and not merely as stepping stones to *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

There is a tendency to think of Griffith as a director of spectacle, and, indeed he was a master of this aspect of filmmaking. He excelled in handling crowd scenes and in organizing mass movement, in recreating historical periods, in parallel cutting for last minute rescues and opposing forces, and in melodramatic action in contemporary settings. One need only see *Judith of Bethulia*, *The Battle*, *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills*, or *An Unseen Enemy* to be convinced of his skill as a director of spectacle. But just as important to an understanding of Griffith are his intimate dramas of individuals involved in their own personal conflicts, or at moments of crisis or joy. A study of these films is especially useful because their meaning arises out of subtle structural characteristics rather than the more obvious devices of rapid cutting, dramatic close-up, flashback and dynamic movement.

Important among these structural characteristics are circular organization of the narrative, often beginning and ending a film with the same camera setup, and the extensive use of repeating camera set-ups throughout a film in order to raise the meaning of a setting above its role as place in which action unfolds to a level closely associated with the emotional, psychological or spiritual state of a character. This relationship that exists between actor and decor is, of course, common to the cinema, but Griffith was probably the first to meaningfully exploit the possibilities of integration and separation of these two elements. As this area of Griffith's work becomes more widely known, films such as *The Country Doctor*, *As It Is In Life*, *In the Season of Buds*, *A Modern Prodigal* and *The Painted Lady* will be seen to occupy an important place in the Biograph canon."<sup>12</sup>

Part I clearly revealed that in the Biograph films Griffith was fundamentally preoccupied with the importance of maintaining the integrity of the family unit at all costs against the threats of destruction to it from without and within. Whether the drama of protecting the railroad safe from thieves in the telegraph office in *The Lonedale Operator* and in *A Girl and Her Trust* ('12), the attack on the family huddled together in a cabin while surrounded by Indians in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* ('13), a father's neglect of his family



through cruelty and drunkenness in *A Drunkard's Reformation* ('09), *What Drink Did* ('09), and *Brutality* ('12), or the father killing his own son to save the reputation of the family name in *The Honor of his Family* ('10), Griffith skillfully brought together diverse cinematic strategies such as parallel editing, framing and close-ups and the use of real objects to define character in order to bring home this theme. Who can forget the haunting image of a shocked Blanche Sweet wrapping a shawl around her shoulders recalling the lover she unknowingly killed or a grieving and enraged Lillian Gish thrashing the flowers in her garden because her husband's neglect killed her child? The exhibition also revealed the many ways the Griffith Biographs may be studied such as by chronology, genre, or the use of a specific technique. The feature films shown in Part II were primarily viewed in the context of their similarities to the Biographs in theme, genre, and style. For example, in *The Struggle*, "This location shooting gives the film a spontaneity and vitality which recalls his work for Biograph (which Griffith briefly refers to in the film's prologue set in '11)."<sup>13</sup>

### Touring Program

As a result of this '75 retrospective, a Griffith touring show was prepared as the Museum's contribution to celebrating the '76 American Bicentennial throughout the world. Comprising sixteen programs of Biographs and features, the series began with '09 films *A Corner in Wheat* and *Those Awful Hats* and concluded with Griffith's last film, *The Struggle*. This touring show was carefully selected to provide a range of chronology, theme, and subject and a balance between comedies and dramas and epics and intimate and rural stories. Program notes were included. One set of prints was prepared in 35mm for distribution to archives and museums in Europe and another set in 16mm for distribution to universities in the United States and an additional set of 16mm prints has recently

been assembled for museums in South America. The 35mm program has traveled to such countries as Mexico, Brussels, Switzerland, the Soviet Union, Poland and Austria under the auspices of the International Federation of Film Archives. This forum has provided the opportunity for extensive appreciation of Griffith's films on an international basis in keeping with the Museum's role as an international museum of art through the arm of its loan program.

### Lost Films

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film presented a series on educational television in '78 entitled "Lost and Found" which consisted of missing American films discovered in foreign archives, brought back to the United States and preserved and restored with English titles by The Museum of Modern Art. This series included *Anna Christie* ('23) starring Blanche Sweet and *Souls for Sale* ('23), featuring an all-star cast in a story about the virtues and vices of Hollywood. Also shown were two Griffith films, *A Romance of Happy Valley* ('19) and *The Lady and the Mouse* ('13), a Biograph starring Lillian Gish and Lionel Barrymore. These programs brought to the public's attention the problems of nitrate decomposition and the role of the archives in restoring our film heritage.

Of the feature films personally directed by Griffith, the following are still missing: *The Battle of the Sexes* ('14 version), *The Escape* ('14), *The Great Love*, ('18), *The Greatest Thing in Life* ('18) and *That Royle Girl* ('26, with W.C. Fields). Of the more than 400 films Griffith directed between '08 and '13, only less than ten are lost! Two have been discovered in recent years and subsequently preserved by The Museum of Modern Art: *Fate* ('13), a drama of a family threatened by forces outside of it, and *The Yaqui Cur* ('13), an Indian story combining extreme long shots with close-ups and a breathtaking poetic ending of



the death of an Indian boy against the setting sun. The missing Biographs are *How She Triumphed* ('11), *The White Rose of the Wilds* ('11), *A Tale of the Wilderness* ('12), *Heredity* ('12), *Oil and Water* ('13), *A Misunderstood Boy* ('13) and *Two Men of the Desert* ('13). Although most all of the Griffith films do survive, we will not be satisfied until the other films are recovered.

### Color Restorations

The Griffith film collection in the Museum of Modern Art features original nitrate tinted prints of the major Griffith films *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* and *Broken Blossoms*. The color in these films greatly heightens their dramatic impact. In *Intolerance*, the attack on Babylon is vivified by a fiery red tint and in *Broken Blossoms* color is carefully employed to define alternating moods of peace and violence. In '78, the Los Angeles International Film Exposition (FILMEX) paid tribute to The Museum of Modern Art and the nitrate tinted print of *Broken Blossoms* was shown with a full symphony orchestra based on the written orchestral parts in the Museum's film music score collection. It is our desire to plan a showing of the color *Intolerance* in this way in New York City. We are also investigating restoring tints to the Biograph films where we have records of them. Color material on *The Avenging Conscience* exists, but it has not yet been properly assembled.

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film recently spent nearly \$20,000 to preserve a 35mm nitrate tinted print of *The Birth of a Nation*, and a recently-discovered nitrate tinted print of *Way Down East* is now in the process of being copied. Within the last few years, the nitrate tinted prints have shrunk beyond the point of projection. Since all those films are preserved, however, color acetate prints have been generated from the Eastmancolor negatives. One of the great rewards of film archive work is that

more lost Biograph films have come to light and more key Griffith features are preserved in color, thereby enabling presentation of these films as they were originally shown.

### The Griffith Influence in the Collection

The preceding pages have described the kinds of Griffith materials in the Museum's collection and the numerous ways they have been collected, preserved, exhibited, and studied. During the past forty years, not only have the Griffith films been examined in their own right, but also they have stood as a cornerstone for comparison with many other films in the collection. His modernism stems from the view that as our knowledge of film history becomes more sophisticated, so does our appreciation of the pervasive influence Griffith exerted upon the course of filmmaking in both stylistic and thematic terms. The following remarks suggest a number of ways in which David Wark Griffith has influenced our thinking about the development of an international film history.

In a recent museum-wide exhibition on Art of the Twenties, *Broken Blossoms* inaugurated the film section of the show:

"It is appropriate that a film made by David Wark Griffith should open a film series dedicated to the exploration of film art in the twenties. In the years prior to '19, his films led the way toward the consideration of film as art, not only in America where he was the acknowledged film master, but in European countries where most of his major films were seen only in the postwar period. Appearing one after another in quick succession, his films had their strongest impact on European cinema in the twenties.

"*Broken Blossoms* was an experiment in a new direction for Griffith...*Broken Blossoms* is small in scale, with few characters, filmed in the artificial setting of the studio and characterized by its poetic atmosphere and its psychological intensity...Filmmakers studied *Broken Blossoms* carefully...The influence of *Broken Blossoms* was world-wide and long-lasting, sometimes even to the detriment of Hollywood filmmaking, which misused the soft focus and concentrated for too long on films made entirely



in the studio. In France, it influenced the impressionist films and in Germany, the *kammerspiel* films. For the young Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, *Broken Blossoms* was 'among Griffith's finest and most thematically acceptable films.'<sup>14</sup>

In "Art of the Twenties", other Griffith influences were acknowledged: "Rene Clair described the plot of *Coeur Fidele* ('23) as 'a kind of *Broken Blossoms* reseen through French eyes'";<sup>15</sup> Carl Junghans, director of *Such is Life* ('29), stated that "the single influence that I recognize is that of Griffith. Everything that I know of cinema, I learned while working for many years as a cutter, in particular, cutting the films of Griffith."<sup>16</sup> A comparison of Griffith's *Isn't Life Wonderful* ('24) to Pabst's *The Joyless Street* ('25) reveals that both films are about "the chaos of inflation-ridden postwar Europe. No irony is intended by the title of Griffith's film, the characters are honest and decent working people driven to desperate acts by dire necessity. The characters of *The Joyless Street* are savagely drawn, motivated by cynicism and depravity, given license by the chaotic conditions of their times."<sup>17</sup>

In recent years *Way Down East* has been re-evaluated in the context of the suffragette movement. Like *Hail the Woman* ('21), a key film which argues against the double standard of conduct for men and women in society, so does *Way Down East* expose this injustice. The film transcends its melodramatic aspects and takes on a new significance when understood as a film about the resourcefulness of Gish's character in surviving this hypocrisy until she becomes compelled to rebel and expose its injustice.

Apart from the Biographs and Edisons, the largest single collection of studio holdings in The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film is that of Twentieth Century-Fox films. A study of the motion pictures such as *Doctor Bull* ('33), *State*

*Fair* ('33) and *Lazybones* ('25), directed by John Ford, Henry King, and Frank Borzage, reveal that their depiction of Americana is inherited from the family-centered dramas and rural romances of D.W. Griffith.

In the fall of '80, The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film presented a retrospective of the films of Lillian Gish. Although this film program paid homage to her entire (and still active) film career, which already spans eight decades, and not just to her work with Griffith, a program was shown of Biograph shorts featuring Miss Gish, including *An Unseen Enemy* ('12), *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* ('12), *The Lady and the Mouse* ('13), and *The Mothering Heart* ('13) as well as four features in which she starred under Griffith's direction: *True Heart Susie*, ('19), *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East*, and *Orphans of the Storm*. A monograph written by Charles Silver accompanied this exhibition, and it included recollections about Miss Gish by her friends and colleagues, a filmography, and several pages of text are devoted to her work with Griffith. The retrospective also acknowledged Lillian Gish's tireless fight for film preservation and the appreciation of film as art. In the foreword to the monograph, Eileen Bowser writes:

"In the early days of the Department of Film (then called the Film Library) at The Museum of Modern Art, Lillian Gish met Iris Barry and was fired by her enthusiasm. As she recalled last year when she was testifying for the cause of film preservation before a Congressional committee: 'The first time I ever heard the words 'film library' they were used by a lady called Iris Barry. She was an English lady who had this dream. She had a tiny room up on Madison Avenue. It was her dream to open a film library. Nobody would give her film. She asked if I could use my influence to get to D.W. Griffith to give her some of his films, which he did...' "<sup>18</sup>

The most significant reappraisal of Griffith's films has been caused in recent years by the extensive study of early cinema before Griffith. In May of '78, the International Federation of Film Archives



(FIAF), held a symposium in Brighton, England, on fiction films made between the years 1900 and 1906. All extant films in the more than sixty archives from around the world were collected and studied by archivists and scholars in the months preceding the symposium. In the fall of '79, in The Museum of Modern Art, all available films made in the years 1907 were viewed by scholars in the same fashion. The goal was to determine the state of film narrative as it was found by D.W. Griffith when he began directing at Biograph in '08. The following are some comments about what we learned from these viewings. While acknowledging the significance of Lumiere and Melies, film study has neglected a full evaluation of early cinema. The first decade of the Twentieth Century was an era of great vitality and innovation in film. In terms of the techniques of camera movement and editing, the cultural sources upon which the films drew, and the genres which evolved, such as the one-shot panorama, the two-shot "explosion" film, the chase film and the kidnapped child story, a cinema was formed different in style from later periods. Even within the span of one year, great transformations in conventions occurred such as stop motion photography to make people disappear, moving the camera closer to the protagonists, and intercutting between groups of characters within one shot and those in another.

Styles and themes emerged and changed during this period, for example, in the chase films *Escaped Lunatic* ('04), *Personal* ('04), and *Stolen By Gypsies* ('05), conventions became established. The films begin with a camera pan in which the theft or escape occurs. Then, in a series of about ten shots, the chase ensues. The protagonists run diagonally from the background toward the foreground of the image, traversing obstacles such as steep inclines, fences and bodies of water.

Camera pans sometimes occur within these shots. All of the characters pass through the image before the cut to the next scene occurs.

By '11, D.W. Griffith had radically transformed the chase film into dramatic rescues. *The Lonedale Operator* contains nearly one hundred shots, six times the amount in *Train Wreckers* (an Edison film of '05). By isolating the robbers, heroine, and trainmen into separate shots and then frequently cutting between them, Griffith fully exploits the power of parallel editing to build suspense. Tension is further increased by careful attention to the spatial geography of the exterior of the station, the outer room, and the inner telegraph office and the heroine's strategy to hold the thieves at bay. Further excitement is created through the positioning of the camera "closer to the heroine in order to convey intensely her terrified expressions"<sup>19</sup>, especially when contrasted to the love and romance carefully established in the opening scenes of the film.<sup>20</sup>

Early cinema research has uncovered films with Griffith as an actor which were heretofore unknown. Apart from *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, ('08) and *At the Crossroads of Life* ('08), he acted in *Cupid's Pranks* ('08), *When Knights Were Bold* ('08), and *Classmates* ('08) portraying such characters as a partygoer and a dancer. He was not a good actor. Griffith wrote the story for *Old Issacs*, *The Pawnbroker* ('08) and the completed film contains a parallel edit. Eileen Bowser has recently analyzed how these acting and writing experiences affected Griffith's filmmaking ideas when he first began directing.

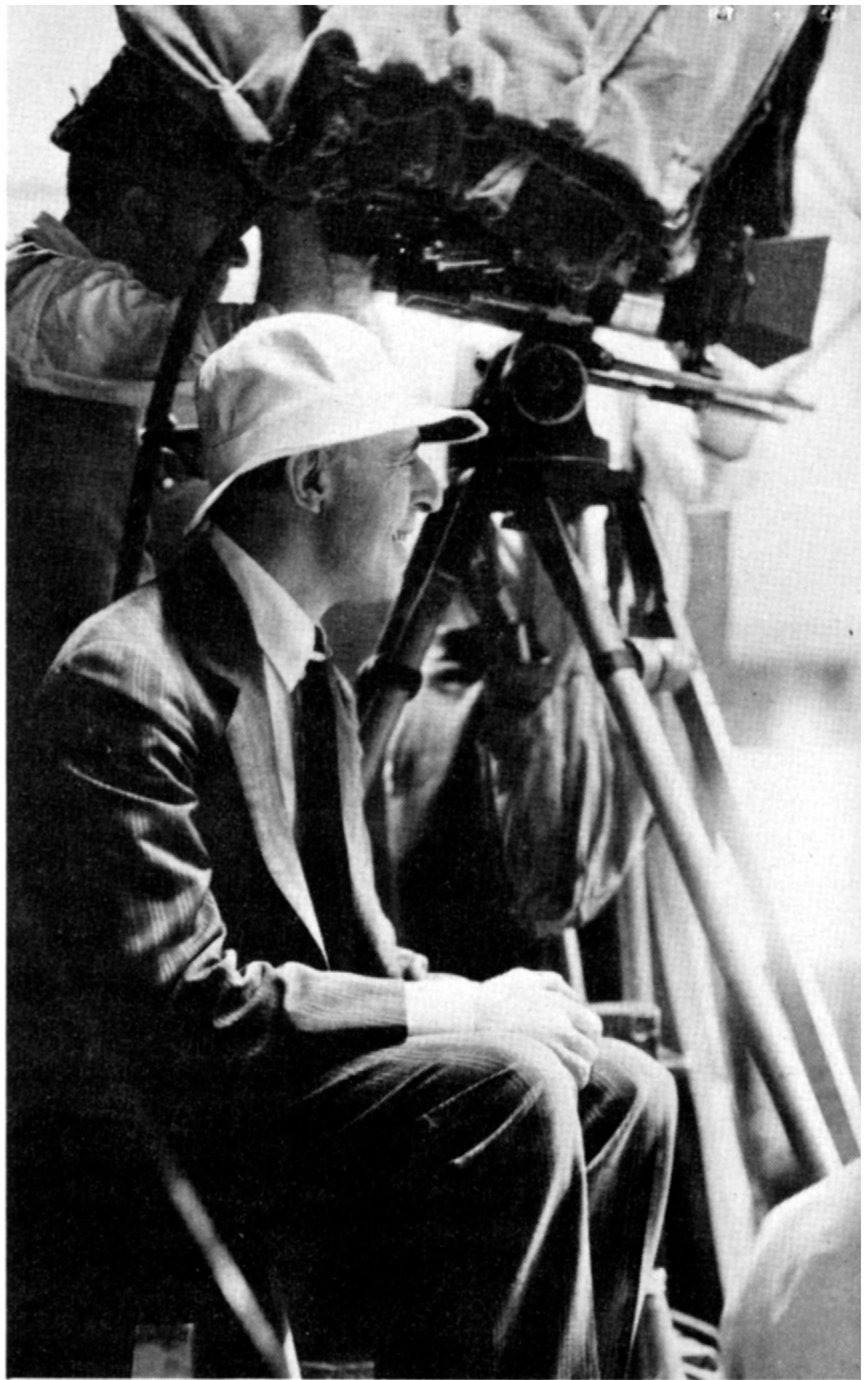
The study of early cinema before Griffith firmly confirms that the American Film Master *invented* nothing. Rather, he dramatically created a unique personal style. The naturalistic acting, the spare use of close ups, the framing, circular structures, increased number of shots,



and crosscutting in Griffith's films made cinema conscious, coherent, powerful, artistic and modern. He altered the cinematic language which preceded him and pervasively influenced the filmmaking which followed. More than forty years after Iris Barry's public recognition of Griffith's importance, today in The Museum of Modern Art we continue to see the significance of his work whenever we are confronted with new areas of study or with a re-examination of earlier periods of film history.

#### Footnotes

1. **The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art: The Film Library**, 2 Volume 3, November 1935.
2. **The Public as Artist**, pamphlet of The Museum of Modern Art, quoted in **Remembering Iris Barry**, ed. Margareta Akermark, The Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p. 3.
3. **The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art: The Film Library**, 2 Volume 3, November 1935.
4. **The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art: The Film Library**, 5 Volume 8, June-July 1941, p. 6.
5. Unpublished document in departmental files.
6. Unpublished letter in departmental files.
7. **D.W. Griffith: American Film Master** by Iris Barry, with an annotated list of films by Eileen Bowser; New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965, p. 5.
8. Unpublished publicity pamphlet in departmental files.
9. **Biograph Bulletins, 1908-1912**, introduction by Eileen Bowser; New York: Octagon Books, 1973.
10. **D.W. Griffith: American Film Master** by Iris Barry, with an annotated list of films by Eileen Bowser, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965, p. 5.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
12. "Introductory Remarks to Part I: The Biograph Years", p. 2, in Film Study Center files.
13. *The Struggle*, program note by Tom Gunning, in Film Study Center files.
14. *Broken Blossoms*, program note by Eileen Bowser, in Film Study Center files.
15. *Reflections on the Cinema* by Rene Clair. William Kimber, London, 1953, p. 46, quoted in *Coeur Fidele*, program note by Eileen Bowser, in Film Study Center files.
16. From an interview in a French periodical, a clipping unidentified as to source, quoted in *Takovy Je Zivot (So Ist Das Leben/Such is Life)* program note by Eileen Bowser, in Film Study Center files.
17. *Die Freudlose Gasse (The Joyless Street/The Street of Sorrow)*, program note by Eileen Bowser, in Film Study Center files.
18. **Lillian Gish**. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p. 3.
19. Ron Mottram.
20. These remarks are based on a four program series of films I prepared for the Whitney Museum of American Art in November 1979 for the exhibition "Researches and Investigations into Film: Its Origins and the Avant-Garde."



**D.W. Griffith directing his swan song, *THE STRUGGLE*, 1931**

*This paper was first presented in April, 1980, in Salsomaggiore, Italy, on the occasion of an international symposium organized by the Cineteca D.W. Griffith of Genoa and dedicated to D.W. Griffith's Biograph films and to Blanche Sweet, the actress. It has recently been revised and updated for this publication. • Jon Gartenberg is Assistant Curator in the Film Department of The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.*

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