

Document Citation

Title	Broken blossoms
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Source	<i>Dartmouth Film Society</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Broken blossoms, Griffith, D. W., 1919

The Dartmouth Film Society

moving picture
criticisms; review

BROKEN BLOSSOMS (U. S. A., 1919)

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Lucy, the Girl	LILLIAN GISH
The Yellow Man	RICHARD BARTHELMESS
Battling Burrows	DONALD CRISP
His Manager	ARTHUR HOWARD
Evil Eye	EDWARD PEIL
The Spying One	GEORGE BERANGER
Kid McCoy, a Prize Fighter	NORMAN SELBY

Screenplay: D. W. GRIFFITH, based on "The Chink and the Child," in Limehouse Nights by THOMAS BURKE. Photography: G. W. BITZER and HENDRICK SARTOV. Technical Advisor: MOON KWAN. Piano accompaniment by PETER COHEN '72, based on the original musical score arranged by LOUIS F. GOTTSCHALK and D. W. GRIFFITH. Premiered May 13, 1919. Released by UNITED ARTISTS. 75 minutes.

Directed by D. W. GRIFFITH

Griffith was certainly not a writer in any serious literary sense, but a filmmaker of extra-ordinary complexity and depth. When Richard Barthelmess first confronts Lillian Gish in BROKEN BLOSSOMS, the subtle exchange of emotions between the two players would defy the art of the greatest novelist, but the scene is almost invariably measured by the dime-magazine title that "explains" it. The same critics and historians who denounced the intrusion of dialogue into the silent film were guilty of reducing the glorious images of the silent cinema into the feeble conventions of the explanatory title. Very early in his career, Griffith mastered most of the technical vocabulary of the cinema, and proceeded to simplify his vocabulary for the sake of the greater psychological penetration of the dramatic issues that concerned him.

Thus, in one relatively short paragraph, critic Andrew Sarris sums up, in part, D. W. Griffith's great achievements as one of the masters of early motion pictures, and he also puts his finger on what brought about the fall of that director: his simplicity of action, words, and thoughts.

According to Lillian Gish in her autobiography The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me, Griffith was a man of simple tastes, strong ideals and a true Southern gentleman. Such a person was soon to be out of step with the cynical times of post World War I America. He was determined to make films about simple average people and films that were always morally instructive, either in patriotism, in virtue or religion.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS was made during the changeover from Adolph Zukor to the formation of United Artists in 1919. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Chaplin formed their own production and releasing corporation in order to insure that their pictures were the correct vehicles and that they were distributed the way they thought best. It was the bungled job of the distribution of JUDITH OF BETHULIA (1913) which drove Griffith from Biograph to Zukor's studios and the artistic shackles imposed by Zukor that drove him into the United Artists combine.

In his excellent article, "D. W. Griffith," film historian Lewis Jacobs gives the most complete, short and easily readable biography of Griffith that has yet been written. In it, he divides Griffith's career into three phases: development (from 1908 and his first directoral effort, THE ADVENTURES OF DOLLY through some hundred films to 1914 and the release of JUDITH OF BETHULIA); maturity (THE BIRTH OF A NATION (1914) and INTOLERANCE (1917)); and decline (from INTOLERANCE's financial failure to THE STRUGGLE (1931)).

Says Jacobs of BROKEN BLOSSOMS:

The first picture made for United Artists was his last outstanding cinematic achievement, BROKEN BLOSSOMS (1919). This picture, his most successful and most acclaimed effort since THE BIRTH OF A NATION and INTOLERANCE, supported his sagging reputation. A distinguished if not a great work, the film contained a number of features that were deliberately chosen for their publicity value and revealed Griffith's growing esteem for showmanship: the racial issue (the Chinese man in love with a white girl); the unusual locale (the Limehouse district of London); "impressionistic photography" (gauzes and soft-focus effects, then new enough to be startling); and the novelty of tinted sequences and beams of pastel colored lights, thrown from a projector while the picture was in progress to endow the sequences with additional emotional overtones. All these elements were reasons for the stir and admiration that greeted the film on its release... Impressive as the atmosphere is, it is equaled by the characterizations. Richard Barthelmess as the Chinaman appears as sensitive and fragile as the story wants us to believe. Slender and pale, with his tilted head, his withdrawn, curved body and his dreamy countenance emphasized in large close-ups time and again, he is a vivid character in contrast to the large, energetic Brute (Donald Crisp.)

In a Museum of Modern Art publication D. W. Griffith: American Film Maker by Iris Barry and Eileen Bowser, an analysis of the contribution BROKEN BLOSSOMS made to film-making was offered:

The chief contribution that BROKEN BLOSSOMS made... was its poetic atmosphere -- the rendition of London fogs, the tinted stock in soft blues, oranges and golds, the grays and browns, the lovely soft-focus photography. Perhaps it was these pictorial qualities that Griffith had in mind later when he told Ezra Goodman: "What the modern movie lacks is beauty -- the beauty of moving wind in the trees." ... BROKEN BLOSSOMS is a controlled film in every respect. Abetted by the influx of German films in the next few years, it had the effect of turning American film-makers away from location shooting. In it, Griffith demonstrated that it was possible to recreate an exotic atmosphere within the studio walls although ironically he would have preferred to make the film in London.

As great a film-maker as he was, D. W. Griffith was never able to overcome the fatal flaw which finally made his last pictures dated before the cameras stopped filming: sentimentality had no place in the sophisticated, hardened world of the 20s and 30s. Said Lewis Jacobs:

Whether as a fictioneer or pamphleteer, Griffith was a man of sentimentality. That accounts in part for his phenomenal prewar success and his swift post war eclipse... Original and profound as a craftsman, Griffith however was never to outgrow his Southern sentiments and Victorian idealism. When his creative genius was most vigorous, it could lift him from sentimentality to dignity and art; when he surrendered to his emotional impulsiveness, his films became orgies of feeling. This accounts for the incongruity between the discipline of his structure and the lack of restraint in his sentiment that mars even the best of his works.

--Jeffrey McFarland

Note: BROKEN BLOSSOMS is almost always seen today via inadequate black-and-white prints; we would like to thank Eileen Bowser of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for providing us with an extremely rare, tinted print of this film. The Dartmouth Film Society has long been noted for showing rare prints of old films, and we are pleased once again to provide this service for our members.