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Dartmouth Film Society Film Notes

INTOLERANCE

Program Notes - Buck Zuckerman '52

INTOLERANCE is a gigantic sum of paradoxes: at times vividly direct, at times impossibly confusing; sophisticated and naive; painfully human and incredibly unbelievable; simple and pompous. The product, however, is one of the most important "works of art" ever produced; certainly one of the most influential.

In 1916, D(avid) W(ark) Griffith had surrounded himself with a fortune in returns from BIRTH OF A NATION, acclamations of both artistic genius and social menace, and a crew of artists and technicians, most of whom had left Biograph Studios three years before when Griffith himself had parted company with those men who could not take the "risk" of bigger pictures. With INTOLERANCE, the great director dwarfed the wildest nightmares of cautious producers, and astounded those who had attacked him for the hypocrisy and viciousness that they found in BIRTH OF A NATION, made the year before.

Griffith was working on the first section of INTOLERANCE as a single film to be called THE MOTHER AND THE LAW, when he conceived the idea of giving the drama dramatic emphasis by parallelism: the juxtaposition of like themes. The interplay of four similar episodes, far apart in style and setting, forces the individuality of each story to "spread" out of its own limited context and blend into a gigantic sermon of tremendous universal implication.

For two years Griffith built and rehearsed and photographed. His sets for the Babylonian portion of the film were certainly as astounding as the walls and buildings of the original city itself. The costuming problem has rarely, if ever been matched. Thousands of extras had to be fitted with the appropriate clothing of three different periods of history, any one of which, with its huge cast, would have taxed the facilities of the best-equipped wardrobe department.

Griffith's actors, too, were under a tremendous strain. It was this director's peculiarity to "compose" a picture as he shot it; maintaining a secrecy about the actual continuity of the film calculated to breed confusion in the most experienced of his cast. Certainly a sense, an echo of this chaos leaves its mark on the final product - and is undoubtedly the reason for its commercial failure. An audience, accustomed to a two-reel blend of gentle comedy and obvious melodrama, was suddenly confronted with the most bewildering array of images, time shifts, and levels of meaning that had ever been thrust upon the screen. The sweetness of romantic tragedy was suddenly buried in the harsh and dirty reality of uncompromising photography; chivalry and subtilty were lost in a maze of brutality, lust, and envy; and the obvious points of reference that had heretofore held the commonplace film together were replaced by extremely subtle symbolism and imagistic association.

With this picture, the camera came to recognize a freedom and ability which had never been matched. G. W. Bitzer was responsible for the technical execution of Griffith's mammoth imagination; he had been his cameraman since the Biograph days in 1909 and had learned, in working with Griffith, that at times it was necessary to force the camera to do the impossible. Never in the history of the moving picture, with the exception of the Chaplin one-reel comedies, had there been such attention to rhythm and selection.

In INTOLERANCE three stories of bigotry and persecution - social, religious, and political - revolve around the central theme of Calvary. And revolve is truly the word, for the stories seem to wind around their nucleus like leaves in the funnel of a whirlpool, becoming, towards the end, a succession of rapid images with a blinding velocity as

powerful as their emotional impact. No one utilized the effects of the cross-cut (juxta-position of shots from different areas of action) to such advantage. The ever-increasing pace of the film is one of the aspects of Griffith's sense of rhythm - his experiments with timing. The less technical aspect of his rhythm can be found in the content of his shots: mostly in the effectiveness of Griffith's sense of contrast - the ironic coupling of Christ and the little children with the scene of the "Uplifters" and their treatment of the uncared-for; the shot of the page boy, yawning with boredom at the court of Charles IX (which serves both as comic relief and as sardonic comment upon the proceedings).

Composition plays an important role in the Griffith camera work. Many technical "tricks" are resorted to for the heightening of mood: emphasis of the vertical by blocking out the sides of the screen; pin-pointing attention by the partially closed shutter; opening the shutter slowly to increase the effect of vastness. Variety is another factor which keeps the long picture from boredom. Griffith left the old technique of stage sets and medium shots interspersed with infrequent close-ups far behind. He shoots from one side of the set to the other, makes close close-ups, lets the camera pace the action, moving quickly or dollying in slowly from a great height and distance.

It was discovered that action could be successfully inferred, that it was not necessary for the camera to record simultaneous events as it had been used to doing. Griffith found that emotive effect also more quickly and successfully by judicious selection of detail: the slight movement of a hand, the expression on a face, the placement of a property. The ingenuity and quality of the photography are brilliant for 1916 or any other year.

Mae Marsh is the Girl of the modern story. And if we can avoid the inevitable comparisons with modern costuming and acting habits, we must admit that her performance is excellent. She is, of course, the heroine of the film, and hers is the only characterization which actually evolves, passing in mood from one extreme to another

The story of Calvary suffers from that Renaissance prettiness and lack of vitality which seems to infect all film work involving religious material, Griffith's deference to the traditional insipidity in handling this section of his film can be partially explained as an effort to project some sense of solidarity into what is essentially the core of his allegory. The only familiar name in this section is that of Erich von Stroheim who appears as the second Pharisee.

Most confusing, perhaps, is the French story which almost gets literally "lost in the shuffle" of sequences. Margery Wilson is Brown Eyes and Eugene Palette is Prosper Latour. The main difficulty with this section is that the two themes, one of political violence and the other of personal lust, seem to stumble over one another in their effort to reach the climax.

Ancient Babylon provides an excellent foil for the modern story. Its immense grandeur contrasts vividly with the slum sections of the other story. Its battle scenes are among the most grimly realistic in pictorial history. Amidst the tremendous confusion one can see heads being lopped off, throats being clawed, and chests being stabbed with a vigorous intensity which make DeMille's pictures look like a game of cops and robbers. The Mountain Girl is Constance Talmadge, Alfred Paget plays Belshazzar, and Ruth St. Denis does a reasonably dull solo dance. Three extras in this section are, believe it or not, Douglas Fairbans, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and DeWolf Hopper.

Lillian Gish, for some strange reason, is the Woman Who Rocks the Cradle.

It is interesting to note that Griffith could not allow the modern story to follow what seems to be a path of inevitable tragedy. The parallelism runs askew with this somewhat mawkish denoument, but whether it is in deference to the emotions of the mass audience, we cannot tell. Out of this tremendous expanse of drama, however, out of the confusion and strain and break-neck pace there arises a film of great imagination and confiction.

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L'AVVENTURA will be presented Wednesday, November 6 instead of November 7.