

Document Citation

Title	Intolerance
Author(s)	Iris Barry
Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	
Type	distributor materials
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Griffith, D. W. (1875-1948), LaGrange, Kentucky, United States
Film Subjects	Intolerance, Griffith, D. W., 1916

A Short Survey of the Film in America circulated by The Museum of Modern Art Film Library

Program III: D. W. Griffith

At the end of 1913 Griffith left the Biograph Company, for which he had directed hundreds of short pictures since 1908. He had already contributed a new intimacy, emotional depth and flexibility to the cinema. He was prepared now to take advantage of the increased length for which precedent had been set by foreign productions like *Queen Elizabeth* and *Quo Vadis*. The following year he was to make *The Birth of a Nation*, twelve reels long.

Attaining at times to power and expressiveness never since surpassed, this film met with overwhelming success. It earned for the cinema as a whole a status hitherto denied it, compelled the acceptance of the film as art. But it also aroused much opposition and censure, especially north of the Mason and Dixon line. (See Ramsaye: *A Million and One Nights*. New York, 1926. pp. 641-644.)

Undeniably, the subject matter of *The Birth of a Nation* is of a controversial and, to many people, inflammatory nature. There can be little question, however, that in translating Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* to the screen, Griffith (himself a Southerner) believed that he had honestly, impartially told the truth about the South after the Civil War. More than that, though at first he had been ashamed of his connection with the movies, by this date he realized how superb a means of expression he had at his command. He himself had played a conspicuous part in their development, and he very naturally insisted on their right to share with literature the privilege of free speech. The protests against *The Birth of a Nation*, the moves to censor and muzzle the film which it provoked, threw him into a fighting mood. By his mastery over the medium he had unwittingly proved the film to be the most powerful of all instruments for propaganda. He determined now to use it as such.

Before *The Birth of a Nation* was released, Griffith had almost completed a new film, *The Mother and the Law*. It was a modern story with a plot drawn in part from the Report of a Federal Industrial Commission which bleakly revealed the wrongs inflicted by a pious factory-owner on his employees, and in part

from the famous Stielow murder case. Work had been interrupted while Griffith engaged in the battles raging around *The Birth of a Nation*. When he returned to the studio, *The Mother and the Law* seemed to him an insufficiently violent attack on injustice and cruelty. He determined to weave in with his modern story three parallel stories of other times, the whole to serve as an epic sermon, a mighty purge for hypocrisy. The slums of today, sixteenth century France, ancient Babylon and Calvary itself should all speak of the evil that the self-righteous have perpetrated through the ages. He flung up sets, hired players by the hundred, shot miles of film. Money was soon no longer forthcoming: he poured into the production his own rich share of the profits from *The Birth of a Nation*. His Babylon astonished the Californian skies with walls on which armies could march, halls in which men looked like flies. The film was two years in the making. And, against all probabilities, out of all this welter, passion, extravagance, footage, there issued finally a work of art, a film of unmistakable greatness and originality, called *Intolerance*.

Intolerance

1916

Produced by the Wark Producing Corp. Directed by D. W. Griffith. Acquired through the courtesy of D. W. Griffith. The cast of the four episodes is as follows:

Modern Story—*The Girl*: Mae Marsh; *Her Father*: Fred Turner; *The Boy*: Robert Harron; *Jenkins*: Sam de Grasse; *Mary T. Jenkins*: Vera Lewis; *Uplifter*: Mary Alden; *The Friendless One*: Miriam Cooper; *Musketeer of the Slums*: Walter Long; *The Policeman*: Tom Wilson; *The Governor*: Ralph Lewis; *The Judge*: Lloyd Ingram; *Father Farley*: Rev. A. W. McClure; *Friendly Neighbor*: Dore Davidson; *Striker*: Monte Blue; *Debutante*: Marguerite Marsh.

Judean Story—*The Nazarene*: Howard Gaye; *Mary the Mother*: Lillian Langdon; *Mary Magdelene*: Olga Grey; *Second Pharisee*: Eric von Stroheim; *Bride of Cana*: Bessie Love; *Bridegroom*: George Walsh.

French Story—*Brown Eyes*: Margery Wilson; *Prosper Latour*: Eugene Pallette; *Her Father*: Spottiswoode Aitken; *Her Mother*: Ruth Handforth; *The Mercenary*: A. D. Sears; *Charles IX*: Frank Bennett; *Duc D'Anjou*: Maxfield Stanley; *Catherine de Medici*: Josephine Crowell; *Marguerite de Valois*: Constance Talmadge; *Henry of Navarre*: W. E. Lawrence; *Admiral Coligny*: Joseph Hennaberry.

Babylonian Story—*The Mountain Girl*: Constance Talmadge; *The Rhapsode*: Elmer Clifton; *Belshazzar*: Alfred Paget; *Princess Beloved*: Seena Owen; *High Priest of Bel*: Tully Marshall; *Cyrus the Persian*: George Seigmann; *The Mighty Man of Valor*: Elmo Lincoln; *Judge*: George Fawcett; *Old Woman*: Kate Bruce; *Solo Dancer*: Ruth St. Denis; *Slave Girls, Dancers, etc.*: Alma Rubens, Carmel Myers, Pauline Starke, Mildred Harris Chaplin, Eva Southern, Jewel Carmen, Colleen Moore, Carol Dempster, Winifred Westover. *Triangle stars who played extra roles*: Douglas Fairbanks, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, De Wolf Hopper.

***Woman Who Rocks the Cradle*: Lillian Gish.**

The film *Intolerance* is of extreme importance in the history of the cinema. It is the end and justification of that whole school of American cinematography based on the terse cutting and disjunctive assembly of lengths of film, which began with *The Great Train Robbery* and culminated in *The Birth of a Nation* and in this. All the old and many new technical devices are employed in it—brief, enormous close-ups not only of faces but of hands and of objects; the “eye-opener” focus to introduce vast panoramas; the use of only part of the screen’s area for certain shots; camera angles and tracking shots such as are commonly supposed to have been introduced by German producers years later; and rapid cross-cutting the like of which was not seen again until *Potemkin*.

The sociological implications of the modern episode seem, perhaps, more pointed now than they did in 1916. They undoubtedly account for the fact that Lenin arranged for *Intolerance* to be toured throughout the U.S.S.R., where it ran almost continuously for ten years. The film was not merely seen there; it was also used as study-material for the post-revolutionary school of cinematography, and exercised a profound influence on the work of men like Eisenstein and Pudovkin. It is true that Griffith is often disorganized and always instinctive in his methods, where the Russian directors are deliberate and organized: but it was nevertheless in large measure from his example that they derived their characteristic staccato shots, their measured and accelerating rhythms and their skill in joining pictorial images together with a view to the emotional overtones of each, so that two images in conjunction convey more than the sum of their visible content.

Though *Intolerance* has been revived time and again, especially in Europe, unlike *The Birth of a Nation* it was not a popular success. Audiences find it bewildering, exhausting. There is so much in it; there is too much of it; the pace increases so relentlessly; its abrupt hail of images—many of them only

five frames long—cruelly hammers the sensibility; its climax is near hysteria. No question but that the film is chaotic, difficult to take in, or that it has many evident faults. The desire to instruct and to reform obtrudes awkwardly at times. The lyricism of the subtitles accords oddly with the foot-notes appended to them. The Biblical sequence is weak, though useful dramatically to point up the modern sequence. The French episode seems to get lost, then reappears surprisingly. And, as Pudovkin says, “the abundance of matter forces the director to work the theme out quite generally . . . and consequently there is a strong discrepancy between the depth of the motif and the superficiality of its form.”

Of the Babylonian and the modern episodes little adverse criticism is permissible and only admiration remains in face of the last two reels, when the climax of all four stories approaches and history itself seems to pour like a cataract across the screen. In his direction of the immense crowd scenes, Griffith achieves the impossible for—despite their profusion and breath-taking scale—the eye is not distracted, it is irresistibly drawn to the one significant detail. The handling of the actors in intimate scenes has never been equalled either for depth or for humanity, particularly in the modern sequence and most notably with Miriam Cooper, with Mae Marsh in the trial scene and with Robert Harron as he approaches the gallows. This searching realism, this pulsing life comes not only from Griffith’s power to mould his players but, in equal measure, from his editorial skill.

The list of players in *Intolerance* given above has been furnished by Mr. Theodore Huff, an authority on the film to whom I am much indebted. The number of actors in it afterwards to become stars is not more remarkable than the number of actors in it afterwards to become directors—Erich von Stroheim, Elmer Clifton and Joseph Hennaberry. Griffith himself especially delights in recalling that in the crew of assistant directors was a young man, W. S. Van Dyke, whose work in *The Thin Man* (1934) will be fresh in the mind of even the youngest filmgoer today.

Iris Barry

The next program in this series will be

The German Influence