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INTOLERANCE

(U.S.A., 1916)
Directed and written by D. W. Griffith
Photographed by G. W. Bitzer
Starring Lillian Gish. Mae Marsh. Constance Talmadge
Available from Museum of Modern Art

BACKGROUND

The Birth of a Nation was, in effect, the birth of *Intolerance*, for it furnished David Wark Griffith with $14,000,000 to invest in the new, more ambitious picture. The great success of *The Birth of a Nation* as a long, elaborate film gave Griffith his courage for even more lavish and longer film. The result was the highly complex picture, *Intolerance*, which was finished in 1916. It never engendered the public response of the former picture, but it is important in the history of the film by virtue of its story telling method, the complex technical devices it utilized, and the intricacies of its enormous sets and detail. With the latter, Griffih set the pace for the Selzniks, Goldwyns and De Milles. Through the ingenuity of his sharp cameraman, Bitzer, he launched the clean and clever Hollywood technique. But in the method and ambitiousness of his story telling he over-estimated his audience, a sin that Hollywood has ever since been over-correcting for.

ANALYSIS

The major effort in the film is the modern story of injustice built on prejudice and intolerance at the then-present time. It expounded the existant possibility of social and political action based on bigotry and lack of sympathetic understanding. Here was the pith of Grffith's message with the powerful implication that we all should stamp it out for a happier world. Today this seems slightly ironic and fastidious, for we have become more realistic and with this attribute, more cynical and full of despair. The decade before the first World War was more optimistic, cherishing hope and progress for a much better world ahead.

It is in the cutting and editing that *Intolerance* gains its power. The four stories could have been presented, one by one, in the usual manner, but Griffith already had decided that the modern day story seemed weak as a single element, run without break. He must have become infatuated with the possibilities of cross-cutting and the new proportion in time that it offered. So from the start we have an inter-weaving of the four episodes. . . . (As Griffith and Mayer said in their book *The Movies*, "As such, *Intolerance* is, in Terry Ramsaye's words, 'the only film fugue,' and as such it entirely failed of public favor. In spite of the splendor of its spectacle, in spite of its incredible cast—among those who played minor roles were Constance Talmadge, Monte Blue, Bessie Love, Alma Rubens, Ruth St. Denis, Carmel Myers, Colleen Moore, Carol Dempster, and Douglas Fairbanks—audiences were cold to it. Two years after its release, Griffith, realizing the inevitable, released the modern and Babylonian episodes as two separate films, but even their receipts did relatively little to relieve him of the burden of debt with which *Intolerance* had saddled him."

The cross-editing and cutting does several desired things to the audience. It at once develops an intense sense of anticipation. This Griffith used to advantage, for each story in itself has inherently a high degree of anticipation developed up to its climax, but with the addition of the synthetic, start-stop cutting method, even a high degree of intensity is achieved and of course Griffith wanted as highly charged a pitch as possible at the moment of each climax and especially the supreme climax: that of the modern story. This made his entire picture more powerful and his message more important. It is well known that the great Russian master-cinematographers, Eisenstein and Pudovkin, used this same type of cross-cutting as a starting point for what each termed "montage."

Toward the end of each episode and the entire "sun play", the intensity increases in several ways. There is the sure formula of "The Chase" to heighten the suspense and engander a greatly anticipated concern for the characters we have become sympathetic toward; the cutting becomes more sudden, both in the lengths of sequences shown and in the dropping of the transition cradle shot; and the action of each episode (excepting the scene of Christ carrying his cross, which is slower, more quiet) is increased more and more to the overcharged breaking-point.

It is in this section that the editing and direction genius of David Wark Griffith shines most, for he has used a combination of filmic and dramatic devices that work with and against each other to achieve a grand emotional total and his desired effect in the grand climax. They are:

A. Increased Speed
B. Parallel
C. Antithesis
D. Surprise.

Perhaps aware of the complexity of his film, Griffith tried to keep the strands straight with his chapter-heading shot of the mother rocking the cradle. We begin the picture with this scene, over which is superimposed the title (slowing fading in), "Endlessly rocks the cradle—Uniter of Here and Hereafter—Chanter of sorrows." The sorrows, he hopes to clearly show, are all results of Intolerance, now and in the past. And as a scene changes from one period in history to another, before or later, again the mother and the cradle and a similar title, usually—"Out of the crade endlessly rocking. . ." This, then, is intended to be a sort of transition piece, but actually he does not belabor it and finally drops it between segments toward the end when he wishes to increase the heightening momentum for he wants no slow-downs. Chaplin in *Verdoux* uses the same trick for the opposite effect. In it he has shown the stock shot of the thundering train engine wheels tearing along the track amid steam and dust each time Charles Verdoux is on his way North or South on a mission of murder. Toward the end after his capture he does not travel anywhere, but Chaplin wants the audience to have the same reaction of high, nervous expectancy; he cuts in the stock shot of the rushing wheels and they work without the audience so much as noticing what has been put over on them.

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The sudden streak of similarity of these three tales and the desire for increased speed. allows the endlessly rocking cradle-transition shot to be dropped. Spliced together without break is the Massacre of St. Bartholomew (with the frantic and hampered chase of Prospere through the streets to save his love, Brown Eyes), the pursuit of the chariot-driving mountain girl by the hordes of Cyrus as she drives back to warn Belshazzar of his coming doom, and the taxicab chase of the Governor's limousine to the station, only to miss him as he charges off in the gubernatorial train and the renewal of this chase by racing-car after the train itself.

It is exactly at this point that this order is broken by the crucial reintroduction of the cradle-rocking shot, followed by the cross-carrying scene of Christ that is described above. In effect, the speed—the tremendous speed and pace of the three pursuits is broken by the cradle shot and the following, slow but frantic procession to the crucifixion. The change of pace together with our knowing familiarity with the inevitability of Christ's doom works as sort of a gigantic metaphor for the Intolerance throughout the ages, and in each particular story, rather than a simile of the others as those three are to one another.

This difference is easily seen when we analyze our emotional concern for each story. We do not know if the mountain girl will safely reach Belshazzar and warn him in time for preparation; we do not know if Prospere will make it through the wholesale slaughter in the streets to his loved one, Brown Eyes, in time to protect her with the free pardon from the king. Nor do we know if the Governor's train can possibly be overtaken by the primitive racing car and the Governor persuaded quickly enough to stay the boy's hanging. In each case we are filled with suspense and hope that those innocents (toward whom we have built sympathy) will some how come through safely. With Christ we know by familiarity (even Christ foretold it himself) that he is doomed to die by injustice and intolerance, so we cannot share a hope that he will not and here we do not have the same feelings of suspense, though we may have a deep anxiety and hopeless pity toward him.

We have been led on these sad chases with no hints of their outcome and when they are finally resolved, two with tragic endings and one with a happy ending, the surprise is great, for since they all did not come out one way or the other, we have the feeling that it was pure chance that overcame such an evil and potent force as this Intolerance in the one story and it easily could have been otherwise. This increases the potency of Griffith's intention.

Why D. W. Griffith decided he wanted the modern story to end well could be answered in several ways, but which is correct is hard to determine. Perhaps it is that the story, being first completely filmed with the intention of it standing alone, simply ended that way. It also could be that it being the most developed and closest to us in time, the director felt that we would build up our strongest sympathy with its hero and heroine and to have the hero hanged unjustly and the heroine and their child plunged into greater despair than before, would simply be too unkind a finish. Rather he may have felt it needed a bit of hope in an uplift ending, since his point had been clearly made at least four times, if not forty.

For our present day point of view and the conditioning we have received from many more perfect film productions, it is most easy to pick *Intolerance* apart. It is even presented to us quite apart to begin with. But in the objective, sum-total, it was a bold and brave undertaking for it took on some of the most complex possibilities of the medium and exploited them for all they were worth, both technically and dramatically. It is true that these were hampered by an overambitiousness, an unfamiliarity with the limits inherent in both medium and audience, and the very nature of the thing being a new experiment in an infant medium. But in the historical view these are not unforgivable errors. We must take Griffith's admonition and be tolerant toward his great early cinematic epic, recognize its value, and take them for all they are worth.

—*Cameron McCauley*

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