

### Beginnings

A native of Kentucky, born in 1875, D. W. Griffith started as an aspiring playwright and actor who had little respect for the first crude movies. He did offer a script, though, to **Edwin S. Porter**, who turned it down but gave Griffith a chance to act. Griffith needed money and took the job, graduating quickly to directing for the Biograph Company in 1908. He made dozens of one-reel pictures for Biograph, gradually becoming more sophisticated and ambitious in his craft.

### Creative Approach

Griffith was very much a product of the **Victorian Age** of the nineteenth century. The Victorian Age (named for the Queen of England at the time) promoted very "conservative" personal morality, featuring a very strict code of public behavior and rigorous sexual repression. Yet, the era was relatively "liberal" in social outlook, with new economic and professional opportunities for a rising middle class and democratic political reform gradually spreading through Europe. Griffith's films reflected this Victorian outlook. In his films, what we now call "family values" reign supreme: order in the home and in society assured by wise and tolerant father figures; woman as loyal spouse and mother or idealized virgin; peace assured by fundamental decency and good will; a stable, conservative social order where everyone knows and accepts his "place." Evil in Griffith's films takes the forms of war, censorship, treachery, broken homes, and sexual indulgence.

Griffith asserted these values in both dramatic and literary ways. Griffith's dramatic education had come through the conventions of **Belasco melodrama**. In the plays in which Griffith acted during his early career, good was subjected to the maximum amount of danger before the inevitable rescue, and Griffith brought this approach effectively to the screen. Yet Griffith had also been influenced by the greatest novelist of the Victorian period, **Charles Dickens**. Dickens used melodrama, but his novels were carefully structured, his plots often addressed significant social problems, and many of his characters had a depth and complexity of motivation that made them more than simple "heroes" or "villains." Inspired by Dickens' literary technique, Griffith realized that films offered an unprecedented sense of realism to an audience, but the careful structuring made possible by shooting and editing could create a final product that could not only be coherent and reasonable in a way that "real life" rarely is, but also offer special insight into character as well as surprising irony. Griffith did not always achieve this balance between morality and realism, and his films are sometimes heavy-handed in promoting Griffith's own moral agenda. Today, many of his didactic and puritanical moral ideas, particularly those involving race, seem crude, simple-minded, and--in the case of ***Birth of a Nation***-- even repugnant.

The "language" of film is largely the creation of D.W. Griffith. Here is a short list of his innovations:

1. He used the full range of shots in his films, employing everything from extreme long shots to close-ups. He wasn't necessarily the first director to use the close-up, but he was the first to use it to reveal character.

2. Griffith proved that editing film to cut back and forth among different kinds of shots would be coherent and understandable to an audience. He then used this editing process to create specific emotional effects; for example, he might cross-cut from close-ups of a gallant heroine fending off an attacker to long shots of her lover rushing to the rescue. We take this approach for granted today, but somebody had to invent it.
3. Griffith insisted that his actors rehearse and perform their parts realistically, even to under act, because he knew that he could edit the film to create the emotional response from the audience that he wanted. Griffith chose his acting company carefully, and many of his actors and actresses became silent film "stars": Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Lionel Barrymore, and Mae Marsh are examples.
4. Lighting, gesture, and movement all come to have meaning in Griffith's films. Griffith created scenes that had depth and realism, and used artificial lighting to provide symbolism.
5. Although Griffith did not make the first feature film, *Birth of a Nation* was the first "blockbuster." Its success made the showing of films that had the same length and complexity of stage plays financially feasible and established Hollywood as the capital of movie making, even though Griffith moved his own studio back to New York in the late 1910s.

The crucial element tying all of these innovations together is Griffith's concern for **character**. Character has always been at the heart of drama, but Griffith was the first movie maker to discover how the camera could be used to illuminate the deeper feelings of individuals and make an audience care about them. He focuses on expression and gesture almost obsessively, finding revealing moments and expressions for his actors, giving the viewer an unprecedented privileged intimacy with people on the screen, stirring a sense of vicarious emotional involvement for the moviegoer.

A good way to understand the significance of Griffith's approach is to contrast his short film, *The Girl and Her Trust*, a Biograph film from 1912, with Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, made in 1903. Porter's film, while full of action and detail, has no distinctive characters, and the film is almost entirely plot driven. It is justifiably honored as the first successful narrative film, but all it really does is show a series of actions associated with robbing a train in a coherent and visually compelling way. The only hint of "character development" is the scene of the men who will make up the pursuing posse at a dance. They are dancing with women, and therefore chivalrous, but they're tough too, firing off their pistols to add some spice to the dance. Yet, we don't ever get any sense of who these characters really are and why they act as they do. The purely sensational excitement of the robbery and the ensuing chase from the posse, culminating with the "shooting" of the audience at the end, must have been unbearably thrilling for early Nickelodeon patrons, but no one in the film "comes to life" as a person the audience can really care about..

*A Girl and Her Trust*, on the other hand, takes essentially the same plot, a robbery at a train station, and turns it into a human drama. Grace (she has a name), the telegraph

operator, is coquettishly fending off the advances of the stationmaster, whom she likes more than she is letting on, while robbers are casing the station to steal a big money shipment. Confronting the robbers alone, she also shows determination, bravery, and resourcefulness in refusing to allow the bad guys to carry out their crime, and the ensuing chase down the tracks has added suspense because the young stationmaster is not only trying to catch the robbers, but save his lady. The final scene of the two lovers eating lunch on the cowcatcher has great charm and humanity, and it's the sort of emotionally satisfying, sentimental ending that movie makers have been imitating ever since.

## **Griffith and *Birth of a Nation***

### Background

*Birth of a Nation*, filmed during the last half of 1914, is the first great American epic film, and certainly one of the most controversial artistic works ever created. The film is loosely based on a novel, *The Clansman*, by the Southern writer Thomas Dixon. Dixon, who was openly racist, was nonetheless a popular author whose works were widely read, particularly among white Southerners, but not just by them. Dixon's stage version of *The Clansman* was reasonably successful in theaters around the country. When Griffith read the book, he claimed not to have focused on its details, but rather on the dramatic possibilities for a great spectacle. Griffith's films were noted for their last-minute rescues, and the "ride of the Klan" that would climax the film version of *The Clansman* was envisioned by Griffith to be the greatest of its kind.

Once the rights to film were obtained from Dixon, Griffith began filming on July 4, 1914. Ultimately the film took five months to make, used 500 extras, and cost over \$110,000, all unheard of extravagances at the time. Reportedly, the movie's monopoly on horses and horsemen brought all filming of westerns to a halt. During production, Griffith was very secretive about the project, and even the cast had no real idea of the scope of the story until they saw the first edited version in February, 1915. It was thirteen reels long, ran nearly three hours, and in many cities the musical score was played by a 40-piece orchestra.

The film opened in Los Angeles in February and New York in March, and was a runaway success from the first. Viewers of every class and level of education were swept away by the movie. Throngs paid up to two dollars a ticket to see it, and by 1917 it had probably grossed over 50 million dollars. In short, *Birth of a Nation*, as it was known after the New York showing, established the modern motion picture industry as a major cultural and financial force in American life.

### The Controversy

Unfortunately, this milestone of art and culture is tainted by racial prejudice so open and obvious that many of its scenes are painful to watch today. Indeed, black opposition to the film, led by the fledgling NAACP, was immediate and heated. The black leadership was joined by numerous influential, progressive whites, including the president of Harvard and the mayor of New York. This protest did not succeed in having the film banned--it was simply too popular--but several scenes were cut out, with different versions showing in different cities.

Griffith himself was stunned by this adverse reaction. He had wanted his film to show historical "truth" with unprecedented realism, and he was shocked to discover that the "truth" might be different for others who had not been raised as the son of Confederate officer amidst the faded ruins of the White South, with its nostalgia for a lost gentility. Not only that, at the time the movie was made, white Southerners' abiding resentment over the so-called "Lost Cause" was reaching a peak, finding expression through widespread lynching, the enactment of racist Jim Crow laws to deny blacks civil rights, and the formulation of the myth that white opportunists (the "Carpetbaggers") and blacks under their control were entirely responsible for the South's suffering during Reconstruction.

Sadly, *Birth of a Nation* is entirely sympathetic to this white Southern point of view. The theme of the movie is not subtle at all. The young people of the two families portrayed in the film-- the Camerons from the South and Stonemans of the North-- share a fundamental decency and idealism that even the horror and tragedy of the Civil War cannot shake. Through the relationship of these two families, Griffith wanted to show that friendship, loyalty, and love can heal even the most terrible political wounds. This theme is of course completely in keeping with Griffith's sentimental leanings and provides the genuine melodramatic appeal of the movie. The dark and ugly side of this romantic dream comes from Griffith's portrayals of the villains, the carpetbagger Northern politicians and their black puppets. Griffith's use of demeaning racial stereotypes to show how the White South was "oppressed" after the Civil War comes across as disgusting today, and the film, like the Confederate battle flag, is still used by hate groups to promote a racist agenda.

*Birth of a Nation* demonstrated the power of film as a narrative medium, for both good and ill. Through the phenomenon of this movie, film became a legitimate art form as well as a profitable national enterprise. At the same time, the film did great social harm, reinforcing racist opinions and prejudices that still trouble our society nearly 100 years later. For its part, the movie industry has also yet to solve the problem of how to satisfy the need for realism and freedom of artistic expression without making repellent behavior perversely appealing.