SCREEN

D.W.G.: A Poet Sings in Celluloid

Herb Sterne

D.W. Griffith was born on January 22, during the closing quarter of the last century at La Grange, Oldham County, Kentucky.

The first and probably the greatest single creative talent to find expression in film, Griffith directed his initial motion picture, "The Adventures of Dolly," for the Biograph Company thirty-seven years ago.

D.W.'s contribution to the cinema cannot be overestimated, for his genius, vision, courage and devotion combined to conceive, bear, and rear to maturity a new art for a world peopled by beings sadly in want of dreams.

THE ARTIST SEEKS and discovers his creative outlet in sundry forms. Rembrandt chose paint and canvas as his mode of expression; Donatello, marble; Shakespeare's instrument was words; Mozart's, music; and David Wark Griffith selected celluloid.

Griffith not only founded the cult of the cinema, but he was also its major prophet. His accomplishments, salient when seen from the vantage-point of the present, were miracles when audiences of 1908 compared Griffith's directorial works with those of his contemporaries. Griffith, with the aid of genius and a camera, expanded the confines of the legitimate stage until they included and encompassed the world, and he bestowed a new sweep and dimension to drama as it had been known, theretofore, since its inception in history.

D.W., as producer and director, proved a lyric poet who sang his songs in celluloid. His delicate images have a contoured grace comparable to that of Shelley, Dowson and Keats. In addition, Griffith's visual verse is couched in a language instantly universal, one that all the peoples of the world can read and comprehend at sight.

The films of Griffith are one-man shows, spun from himself, his personality, his individuality. Unlike the majority of standardized motion pictures currently spewed from the studios' assembly lines, his photoplays have a style and distinction that are unmistakable. Beauty and rhythm, an argent idealism, a compassionate appreciation for the simplicities are invariably in evidence. For his masterworks, Griffith evolved a fluid cinematic form that was molded and maneuvered to meet the specific requirements of each individual photoplay.

Today, Griffith is pleased to refer to his films as "experiments." His films *were* experiments, not only because he was modelling in a new and virtually untried medium, but also because his restless creative urge continually sought

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unorthodox and additional means of capturing effects and emotion on celluloid. The Griffith films *are* experiments —but only as all meritorious photoplays are that, whether made during the formative years of the medium, or during the sleek, slick days of 1945 when the technical expression of the craft is so majestically mature and so many of the films are meaningless.

Griffith invented or developed the flash-back, the iris device, close-ups, inter-cutting, parallel plot weaving, the quick-shot and affiliated effects because he felt an urgency to impart the impression of life to his moving fictions. The first American motion picture director to realize the importance of music as mentor to emotion, D. W. had scores composed for orchestras of symphonic size, scores which accompanied his major efforts and italicized the action sequence by sequence and sometimes almost frame for frame.

Of the major works developed under the Griffith aegis, best remembered, and perhaps most noteworthy, are "The Birth of a Nation," "Intolerance" "Broken Blossoms," "'Way Down East," "Isn't Life Wonderful?" and the dialogue film, "Abraham Lincoln." In most of these, the producer-director dramatized the natural backgrounds, making them as important and persuasive as the characters who were the protagonists of his plots. Certainly the New England landscapes of "'Way Down East" are an integral merit of the drama, and one remembers them as vividly as *Anna Moore*, the *Bartlett* family. And the river, with its shattering ice flow, quite equalled, and often dominated, *Lennox Sanderson* as the heavy of the plot.

Some of the minor Griffith idylls, less trumpeted and therefore less triumphant through the years, are important for this same strategic molding of nature to the demands of dramaturgy. As tender, lovely sketches in which the countryside contrived to be a successful thematic intensification of the Thespians, "A Romance of Happy Valley," "The Girl Who Stayed at Home" and "True Heart Susie" are memorable. The bayou country of Louisiana, with its curious, hyacinth-cluttered streams, was caught in all its beauty for "The White Rose," a film that has been improperly evaluated and appreciated. And the South Seas, languorous and lovely, have never been so completely captivating on the screen as when netted in celluloid by Griffith for "The Love Flower" and "The Idol Dancer."

As a discoverer and developer of stars, Griffith is paramount in filmdom. He has a way of bringing Wonder to his actors, garbing them in lambent raiment they never can quite match under other managements. It was D.W. who set Mary Pickford's feet towards fortune as "America's Sweetheart." In addition, he sponsored such other performers who became successes as Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Douglas Fairbanks, Mae Marsh, Constance Talmadge, Wallace Reid, Jack Pickford, Blanche Sweet, Henry Walthall, Richard Barthelmess, Robert Harron, Seena Owen, Miriam Cooper, Lowell Sherman, Erich von Stroheim, Bessie Love—the list is limitless.

The impress of David Wark Griffith remains strong on the motion picture even though, to the disgrace of current moguls of the medium, he has been permitted to remain in retirement for some years. One sees D.W.'s influence motivating the creations of Clifford Odets ("None But the Lonely Heart"), John Ford ("How Green Was My Valley," "The Long Voyage Home") and in the design and editing

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and structural solidity which Orson Welles utilized in "Citizen Kane," Preston Sturges improvised for "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek," and Edward Dmytryk shaped to his needs in "Murder, My Sweet." To the sensitive and sentient director of dialogue films, Griffith is as much mentor and model as he was to Rex Ingram for "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," and to King Vidor for "The Big Parade" and "The Crowd" during the silent era.

The years have neither dimmed nor diminished the quality and value of Griffith's creations. Time, perhaps, unceremoniously brushes the modes and manners, apparel and moralistic comportment of motion pictures as Time does not tamper with inanimate efforts in art. However, when compared with any photoplays of any year in originality, spirit, texture, design, and what for lack of a more satisfactory word must be termed 'soul,' those of David Wark Griffith remain securely in the forefront of cinematic accomplishment.

Happy birthday, Mr. Griffith, on January 22. By this time next year may you have completed the direction of a new film for the edification of your multitudes of admirers, one as fine as any of the many with which you have distinguished the screen in the past.

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