A Companion to D.W. Griffith
The Wiley Blackwell Companions to Film Directors survey key directors whose work together constitutes what we refer to as the Hollywood and world cinema canons. Whether Haneke or Hitchcock, Bigelow or Bergmann, Capra or the Coen brothers, each volume, comprised of 20 or more newly commissioned essays written by leading experts, explores a canonical, contemporary and/or controversial auteur in a sophisticated, authoritative, and multi-dimensional capacity. Individual volumes interrogate any number of subjects—the director’s œuvre; dominant themes, well-known, worthy, and under-rated films; stars, collaborators, and key influences; reception, reputation, and above all, the director’s intellectual currency in the scholarly world.

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Contributors

Kaveh Askari, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48823, USA
Jennifer M. Bean, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105, USA
Nicole Devarenne, University of Dundee, Scotland, DD1 4HN, UK
Daniel Fairfax, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA
Annie Fee, University College London, WC1E 6BT, UK
André Gaudreault, Université de Montréal, QC H3T 1J4, Canada
Philippe Gauthier, University of Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5, Canada
Tom Gunning, University of Chicago, IL 60637, USA
Maggie Hennefeld, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA
Laura Horak, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada
Joyce E. Jesionowski, Binghamton University (emerita), NY 13902, USA
Moya Luckett, NYU’s Gallatin School, New York, NY 10003, USA
David Mayer, University of Manchester, M13 9PL, UK
Paul McEwan, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA 18104, USA
Russell Merritt, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA
Anne Morey, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, USA
Andrew Patrick Nelson, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717, USA
Charles O’Brien, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada
Jan Olsson, Stockholm University, 114 18, Sweden
Tom Rice, University of St. Andrews, KY16 9AJ, UK
Ben Singer, University of Wisconsin – Madison, WI 53706, USA
Grant Wiedenfeld, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX 77340, USA
Time has not been kind to D.W. Griffith. His reputation among non-specialists is tainted by the infamy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation*, the film you love to despise because of its inflammatory racial politics. The curse had taken full effect through the hate mail and phone threats received by Griffith in his room at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Los Angeles, where the secluded drunkard spent the last days of his life; Jack Shea, president of the Directors Guild of America, formalized the verdict on December 14, 1999 with the announcement that the D.W. Griffith Award, established in 1953 and recently conferred to Stanley Kubrick, would be renamed as the DGA Lifetime Achievement Award, because Griffith “helped foster intolerable racial stereotypes.” Griffith is *persona non grata* in film museums, too. Public showings of *The Birth of a Nation* are an unlikely and highly unwelcome occurrence in the United States. Reconstructing the film’s original version is not an impossible feat (the available versions are mostly from the amended 1921 reissue), but the film’s centennial came and went, with no restoration project in sight.

If the editor, authors, and publisher of this book are to be applauded for its very appearance, it’s because at the present time – with or without *The Birth of a Nation* – D.W. Griffith is a profoundly unfashionable film director. Outside the realm of academic literature, critical assessment of his work is dependent upon two mirroring mantras. For a silent majority, Griffith’s shorts of the so-called Biograph period all look alike, but we can’t really appreciate *Intolerance* without ticking off some of the early work. Conversely, a small but vocal patrol of devotees has argued that the Biograph years are Griffith’s most inventive, and that he might as well have retired after *Broken Blossoms* and *Way Down East*. Both approaches have an element of truth. They do, however, perpetuate the parallel myths of a deterministic creative trajectory (with *Intolerance* as the
fulfillment of Biograph’s promises) and of film style as a poetic messenger of conservative ideals (with *The Birth of a Nation* as their most despicable expression). Either way, D.W. Griffith elicits deference rather than empathy. He may well be admired as long as he is kept at arm’s length.

A different but no less depressing fate has been bestowed upon Griffith’s longtime cameraman, G.W. Bitzer. The pictorial beauty of the films they made together from 1908 to the 1920s is nothing short of breathtaking, and yet very little of it can be seen today, aside from for a handful of titles. Bitzer was proud of what he could achieve with his Biograph camera and its Zeiss Tessar lenses, and was more than reluctant to settle for a Pathé replacement when Griffith left his alma mater company in 1913. In spite of this, generations of scholars have looked at Griffith’s early films through faint 16 mm reproductions of the paper prints deposited at the Library of Congress. The irony of this situation is that virtually all the films are still extant, a case with no equal in the cinema of the first two decades. Many titles survive as gorgeous-looking camera negatives. If copied properly, the paper prints are almost as beautiful. It is way too late for a resurrection of the complete works of D.W. Griffith in their original medium and format. A “critical edition” in digital form may come to exist some day. Don’t hold your breath.

Back in 1996, not despite but thanks to those murky 16-mm prints, an international team of scholars undertook the task of examining every single film directed by D.W. Griffith for a multi-volume publication commissioned by the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, where all the films were screened in the best available prints. It took twelve years to complete the job. Charlie Keil was one of the most eminent collaborators in *The Griffith Project*. This book is the tangible evidence of his awareness that Pordenone’s endeavor was nothing but a point of departure. D.W. Griffith is still waiting to be taken on his own terms, as we would do with Herman Melville when reading *Benito Cereno*, or with Richard Wagner when listening to *Parsifal*. To justify or condemn them won’t take us far. Their ideas about art and those about society are inextricably linked to each other. We need to know more about both. Griffith’s Biograph films should all be returned to the form in which Billy Bitzer wanted them to appear onscreen. An attempt should be made to restore *The Birth of a Nation* to its 1915 release version. Whether or not this will be achieved, concealing it from public sight won’t make us good citizens. Our civil conscience ought to be mature enough to look into the tragedies of our past without fear.

The depth and scope of the contributions presented in this volume are the most eloquent proof that today’s film scholarship is ready to undertake the task. D.W. Griffith’s most undervalued works, his views on gender and morality, and the reception of his films are given here the renewed attention they have long deserved. The essays on the Biograph period are testimony to the inexhaustible source of knowledge embedded in Griffith’s early output. Most heartening of all, however, is the fact that such knowledge comes
from scholars of younger generations as much as from well-established authorities in the field. In this sense, *A Companion to D.W. Griffith* is the fulfillment of *The Griffith Project’s* ultimate goal: to be a bridge between past and future research, a catalyst of intellectual discovery about one of the greatest filmmakers of all time.

Rochester, April 2015
Introduction

Charlie Keil

In a startling coincidence, the fall of 2016 saw the release of two films that explicitly referenced D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, though in distinct ways. Nate Parker’s identically titled *The Birth of a Nation*, a black-authored filmic depiction of the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion, deliberately name-checks its notorious racist antecedent produced a century earlier. Replicating the title of the earlier feature is a provocative act of appropriation, inverting the racial logic of the previous film while displacing its claims to cinematic singularity. Meanwhile, Ava DuVernay’s *13th*, a documentary decrying the racist roots of mass incarceration in the USA, devotes a notable chunk of its running time to the role Griffith’s film played in demonizing the black slave, the antecedent to today’s African-American convict. Together, these films emphatically drive yet another nail into the coffin of D.W. Griffith’s authorial legend, providing further confirmation of how his work, when invoked publicly, invites denigration and disdain.

It has been this way for quite some time: in 1990 Toronto’s Cinemathèque Ontario launched a membership drive, offering prospective members different levels of sponsorship, each level identified by a celebrated film director’s name, such as “Lang” and “Hitchcock.” The highest level was labeled “Griffith,” and that decision invited such a hailstorm of criticism that the campaign had to be revised, resulting in the elimination of the director’s name from the list of auteurs chosen. Similarly, as Paolo Cherchi Usai recounts in the Preface, in 1999 the Directors Guild of America dropped the original name of its lifetime achievement award – inaugurated in 1953 as the D.W. Griffith Award – not because its namesake’s talent was under dispute, but because his most famous film had “fostered intolerable racial stereotypes.” All of these examples signal the current truism about Griffith: too important to ignore, but too controversial to revere.

If the disparagement of Griffith’s first feature as a racist relic has tarnished his critical standing, the director’s uneven record of achievement following the triumphant commercial success of *The Birth of a Nation* has fueled the suspicion
that his overall body of work may not warrant serious consideration. The whiff of decline sets in by 1921, the release year for *Orphans of the Storm*, the last of his features normally accorded more praise than scorn. Beset both by the opprobrium of intolerance and the stigma of artistic failure, Griffith’s reputation rests more and more on the signal developments of his early career, 1908–1916. And yet, even those achievements have been scrutinized, with some scholars questioning the typicality of Griffith’s contributions and challenging the idea that he proved central to the changes in cinematic form forged during those pivotal years.

Still, it is no exaggeration to say that cinema in its current state owes a tremendous debt to the accomplishments of D.W. Griffith. Griffith stands as possibly the medium’s first acknowledged auteur and his contributions to the development of American film are significant for both their range and importance. No other figure defines the contours of the silent period more commandingly than Griffith, and few filmmakers pose such an historiographical challenge to scholars wishing to reconcile the role of the individual to the forces of industrial change, sociocultural context, and aesthetic norms. To properly situate Griffith is to engage with the dynamics of cinema’s own development during the years when narrative became the dominant mode, when the short gave way to the feature, when film became the foremost form of mass entertainment, and when movies began to play a significant role in the cultural ethos of America. Griffith was at the center of each of these phenomena, though his changing fortunes during the twenty-five-year period stretching from 1907 to 1931 constituted a distinct career arc, one that would become a template for many film artists whose output eventually fell out of step with the trends established by an industry courting the favor of a public primed for diversion. Eventually regarded as irrelevant by a Hollywood that he helped to establish, Griffith remains vital to our attempts to understand how cinema moved from nickelodeon fixture to a national pastime.

During the time he worked at the Biograph Company (1908–1913), Griffith became the preeminent directorial figure within the American film industry. Though not publicized by name by Biograph, Griffith’s centrality to the establishment of new forms of style and narrative tied to the demands of the single-reel format became apparent as the company vaulted to the forefront of the industry. Griffith dominated the transitional era in a commanding fashion and his experimentation with editing, his facility in eliciting powerful performances from his stable of actors (particularly many of his younger actresses), and his handling of the expressive capacity of the mise-en-scène marked him as a figure who could convert the telling of brief narratives into an involving and dynamic process.

After his departure from Biograph, Griffith proved his self-proclaimed importance by directing two of the most influential features in the history of cinema, films that helped establish the artistic and commercial viability of the extended format and the potentially epic scale of the multi-reeler: *The Birth of*
a Nation and Intolerance. The former became a box-office sensation, drawing interest for its formal ambitions from critical quarters that had previously ignored motion pictures. At the same time, the film invited controversy and even outrage for its reductive vision of the still recent American Civil War and its aftermath, precisely because the narrational power of The Birth of a Nation rendered its understanding of racial politics – and the American body politic – so incendiary. As contested as the film’s reception was, it proved that a motion picture could become a national sensation and capture the imagination of the public in a way the medium had not achieved previously. Designed as a response to criticisms of The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance was even more elaborate than its predecessor, spanning multiple historical epochs and intertwining them via a complicated temporal structure that baffled audiences even as it demonstrated the potential of cinema to move beyond straightforward storytelling into the realm of metaphor and sustained suggestive parallelism.

Intolerance’s massive budget and concomitant failure at the box-office marked the beginning of a series of setbacks and reassessments of Griffith’s significance to the fast-growing American film industry that would persist for the next decade. Often derided but rarely ignored, Griffith’s efforts throughout the late 1910s and into the 1920s still marked him as one of the most intriguing of American directors. Yet his pertinence to an industry intent on establishing standards of efficiency and predictability remained an open question, as many found his idiosyncratic approach to filmmaking to be at odds with an era defined by studio manufacture tailored to a reliance on genres and stars. Griffith’s maverick status derived as much from his distinctive style as it did his adherence to modes of expression deemed out of step with popular taste, whether the mode be Victorian melodrama (Way Down East, 1920), the pastoral (True Heart Susie, 1919), or the tone poem (Broken Blossoms, 1919). Nonetheless, Griffith’s reputation as America’s first Great Director persisted, cemented by his participation in the founding of United Artists, a company formed to resist the power of an increasingly oligopolistic film industry; significantly, Griffith was the only one of UA’s originators whose fame did not derive from movie stardom.

During the 1920s, Griffith continued to make films, but his relevance to the American cultural landscape became progressively less evident. By the time that sound arrived, the trailblazer had become a relic of a bygone era, largely disregarded in the remaining years of his life. Though some of his contemporaries (DeMille, Dwan, and Ford among them) retained their popularity into the sound era, these other directors had all learned to work within the constraints of the studio system and tailor their style to the demands of classicism. Griffith, much like von Stroheim, served as proof that those who could not accommodate themselves successfully to the homogenizing forces of the now-established film industry were doomed to exist outside of it, relegated to the occasional advisorial role, effectively prohibited from making features under that industry’s auspices.
Years after his death, Griffith enjoyed a second life of sorts with the advent of auteurism in the 1960s, when critical recognition of a distinct authorial personality and recurring thematic preoccupations served to revive interest in directors whom history had seemingly left behind. An even greater boon to Griffith’s reputation was the subsequent historical turn within film studies that led to scholarly rehabilitation of the previously under-regarded early cinema era in general and a closely observed reappraisal of Griffith’s Biograph period in particular. Aided by the comparatively comprehensive existing record of Biograph’s output during these years, numerous young early cinema scholars devoted book-length works to Griffith’s filmmaking activity in the crucial years of 1908–1913, ensuring the director’s centrality to any understanding of the transitional period. In more recent times, the combined efforts of the multivolume Griffith Project and an exhaustive retrospective mounted by the Giornate del Cinema Muto, both spearheaded by Cherchi Usai, have prompted wholesale reevaluation of the director’s entire oeuvre.

Where, then, does that leave present-day scholars, faced with the prospect of writing about D.W. Griffith for a volume such as this? Is there anything left to discover about a figure like him, and even so, why should we bother? As it turns out, and as the essays in this volume readily attest, there is plenty yet to say. In some cases, as with studies of the director’s vaunted handling of editing, a return to the study of Griffith means drilling down for an even more exact understanding of an inexhaustible topic. In others, it entails examining the director within an apt context, such as the Progressivism of early twentieth-century America that further enriches our sense of his films’ social effectivity. And, in still others, it involves pursuing avenues that have remained relatively underexplored, whether it be the reception of Griffith’s films in cultural contexts beyond those of the USA or the complicated gender politics of the Biograph films. While a wealth of monographs has increased our knowledge of Griffith’s contributions, the type of insight produced by the variety of perspectives that an edited collection can provide has been in short supply. A Companion to D.W. Griffith fills this void, affording its readership a comparative and developmental study of this important figure.

Griffith then and now

To say that if Griffith hadn’t existed we would have had to invent him, has become something of an historiographical truism. Griffith has played so many roles in the history of the development of the medium one has difficulty keeping track of them all: cultural legitimator, stylistic maverick, architect of classicism, original auteur, artistic martyr, industrial savior, and so on. Initial reflection on Griffith typically sought to prove the director’s importance and, by extension, elevate his stature by confirming his distinctiveness. In effect, Griffith performed two functions at once: in his singularity, he bore the mantle
of creative genius, singlehandedly pulling cinema out of the morass of primitivism to which the pre-1908 years were often relegated; in his devotion to editing, he played a crucial role in the narrative of that technique’s evolution, bringing the early experiments of Porter and the Brighton School to their inevitable culmination in his deft handling of crosscutting. Depending on the historical argument, Griffith served as either a crucial missing link, connecting earlier tendencies to the emergence of classical-era continuity editing, or embodied a seismic shift, heralding – and shepherding – the onset of character-centered storytelling totally divorced from the days of trick films and féeries.

As many have pointed out, our limited knowledge of, and access to, the output of Griffith’s peers has rendered it difficult to assess accurately the director’s status during the Biograph period, when he worked for the same company for nearly six years, responsible for a prodigious number of short films, the vast majority of which are still extant. No other filmmaker of the period can lay claim to a body of work so extensive and few others were lifted out of the slough of anonymity that producing companies of the day favored for their directors. As such, Griffith has benefited doubly; both from an accident of preservation that saw almost all of his Biograph films saved, and from a self-engineered campaign of promotion that ensured his work for that company would forever be tied to his name, despite Biograph’s efforts to the contrary. When he departed Biograph, Griffith took out an advertisement in the trade press that explicitly catalogued his stylistic achievements; in many cases, the ad erroneously gives Griffith credit for the “invention” of techniques that preexisted his directing debut in 1908. But, as I and others have argued, the ad is less important for its tenuous claims to accuracy and much more so for its overt positioning of Griffith as the premier auteur of the cinema (Keil 2011). With this ad, Griffith established the legend of his aesthetic preeminence that would forever mark his time at Biograph as the origins of “mature film language.” (Later, more sophisticated approaches would discern Griffith’s voice in his films’ distinctive narration.)

One finds traces of the ad’s language (and legacy-building) in the early historical accounts that position Griffith as a redemptive creative force, vanquishing the backward babbling that prevailed prior to his arrival. From Terry Ramsaye to Benjamin Hampton, Lewis Jacobs to Georges Sadoul, Arthur Knight to David Cook, historiographical orthodoxy anointed Griffith as the founding father of both a normative cinema (because its language was recognizable) and a cinema predicated on a personal vision (because its language was distinctive). Jennifer Bean, in this volume’s first chapter, focuses productively on Griffith’s nominal status as the medium’s patriarch, contemplating both how Griffith figures in histories of cinema’s form and as a touchstone for changing critical approaches, from structuralism to feminism. Such an approach demonstrates how Griffith’s “utility” for film studies continues to transmute over time, a measurement of both the director’s changing status and the shifting priorities of the discipline.
Ben Singer takes up Griffith’s changeability as well, but Singer’s exacting focus on Griffith as a (multi-faceted) moralist forces us to reexamine our judgments of the director’s moral shortcomings. Griffith’s reliance on the tropes of melodrama has been understood by many (including, ironically, the director himself) as a key aesthetic limitation. But Singer believes we have underestimated both the capacity of melodrama to represent a range of moral positions and the director’s complex handling of same. Moreover, Griffith’s melodramatic moralism informs many of the other labels thrust upon him and the positions that he adopted, from racist to didact to anti-reformer to confused champion of anti-melodramatic art. Singer examines them all, asking for a more nuanced understanding of the invariably conflicted meanings generated by Griffith’s films and his statements about filmmaking.

Daniel Fairfax sees Griffith as the thread linking a number of disparate theorists and filmmakers whose ideas about cinematic presence find telling illumination in the director’s Biograph films. Fairfax’s efforts tie the director to theoretical tendencies not typically associated with Griffith’s work, including photogénie and Bazinian realism. No less surprisingly, Fairfax makes the case for the affinity of Straub/Huillet’s materialist praxis for Griffith’s transitional-era experimentation. Reluctant to label Griffith himself a modernist, Fairfax nonetheless expands our sense of the director’s aesthetic legacy, reminding us that Griffith’s influence extends in unpredictable and generative directions.

Griffith as stylist

Fairfax’s chapter crystallizes one of the challenges that the Biograph era poses for Griffith scholars: how does one reconcile the notion of Griffith-as-proto-classicist with his reputation as an innovator? One approach is to study Griffith with the precision exercised by the authors of the three chapters devoted to stylistic analysis of the director’s shorts from this period. André Gaudreault and Philippe Gauthier raise the perennial issue of Griffith’s centrality to the development of crosscutting, exhaustively demonstrating how the director dissects space in the canonical Biograph one-reeler, *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), before asserting that Griffith did indeed appear to inaugurate the coupling of crosscutting and the last-minute rescue, and usher in a distinct approach to cinematic narration in line with an increased institutionalization of the medium’s formal properties.

Aligning editing with a particular narrational approach has been a hallmark of Tom Gunning’s work on Griffith, and in his contribution to this volume he concentrates on the importance of editing to character development. Rather than Gaudreault and Gauthier’s attention to crosscutting, Gunning examines scene analysis, as typified by a multi-shot sequence in *The Lady and the Mouse* (1913). Gunning asserts that Griffith’s approach to the close-up, still evident in
a later film such as Orphans of the Storm, demonstrates a devotion to intimacy and direct address more so than spatial coherence. Through such stylistic observation, we gain greater insight into Griffith’s idiosyncratic relationship to developing classical norms.

Close-ups figure in Charles O’Brien’s analysis of Griffith’s Biograph films as well, but O’Brien chooses to view stylistic development in the director’s shorts as facilitated in part by changing production conditions. In particular, O’Brien looks to Biograph’s move to the West Coast as signaling a change in lighting technique: the natural light afforded by the strong California sun negated the need for artificial lighting, leading to new approaches to staging and the length of shots, and a greater reliance on a nine-foot frontline, resulting in the effect of actors appearing closer to the camera. O’Brien demonstrates that stylistic tendencies in Griffith’s Biograph shorts emerge out of a combination of directorial innovation and unpredictable filming circumstances, such as the form of electricity available.

**Griffith and other media forms**

Griffith began his career in the theater, and that is the contemporary medium to which he is most often linked, evidenced by David Mayer’s continuing research in this vein. For Mayer, theater stood as Griffith’s chief source of inspiration, influencing every aspect of the director’s work, from generic traditions and storylines to rehearsal methods. Griffith’s theatrical roots reveal themselves in a wide variety of works, encompassing numerous dance sequences, the vaunted cycle of Civil War films, and, of course, his many features patterned after Victorian melodramas. But other media forms also intersect with Griffith’s work, as Joyce Jesionowski’s examination of photography and Jan Olsson’s exploration of poetry and music attest.

Olsson mines Griffith’s films for their imagistic density, concentrating on the floral motif within his oeuvre, its origins detectable in a poem the director published in Leslie’s Magazine the year before he began his filmmaking career. Poetry as source material, specifically the “Browning Series” inaugurated with Pippa Passes (1909), provides Griffith the platform for combining his penchant for floral imagery with an interest in the affective potential of music. Music also functions as art, allowing Griffith to align the musician figure with the artist struggling to be recognized within the constraining form of the one-reeler. The self-conscious strain for expressive meaning finds its most obvious outlet in allegorical flourishes, a third tendency Olsson identifies in the director’s films, culminating in his most overtly artistic work, Intolerance. Jesionowski sees Griffith as participating in “the photographic imagination” of post-Civil War America that both captured character essence and prompted social typing. The potential of the photograph to override time’s bounds, to exceed defined roles, and to pit the static against the dynamic, animates Griffith’s enlistment
of photographic portraiture, lending an imagistic complexity to his films that neither surface sentimentality nor narrative imperatives can occlude, despite the director’s own Manichean tendencies.

**Griffith’s exploration of gender in the progressive era**

Jesionowski also sees Griffith’s exploration of the photograph in gendered terms, with the portrait barely containing the potentially disruptive force of “woman,” a force typically subdued through the comforting invocation of hearth and home. Gender as disturbance serves as the focal point of several essays that concentrate on underexamined aspects of Griffith’s engagement with sexuality. Maggie Hennefeld, for her part, turns her attention to the “voluptuary,” the functional counterpart to the director’s preferred “spirituelle,” a virginal ideal typified by Lillian Gish. Hennefeld sees the tension between these two types as endemic to Griffith’s development of narrative cinema during the Biograph period, and chooses, quite provocatively, to concentrate on the director’s oft-dismissed comic films to prove her point. The outsized corporeal gestures that define the comic presence of the voluptuary in the Biograph comedies infuse what Hennefeld labels the director’s “slapstick-inflected melodramas;” ultimately, Hennefeld argues, the voluptuary’s bodily performance works to produce narrative integration by prefiguring editing techniques even as it announces its own excess in ways that those techniques will foreswear.

If Hennefeld focuses on the dichotomous relationship between the spirituelle and the voluptuary, Laura Horak seeks out those instances when Griffith indulged in less binaristic representations of gender, specifically in those Biograph films that feature cross-dressing. Putting women in men’s clothing gave Griffith license to imagine gender as performance and to complicate the representational conventions so commonly attributed to him. Far from seeing figures like the cross-dressing Edna “Billy” Foster as contravening Victorian-era norms of social behavior, Horak insists on viewing them as products of their times: they stand as proof that both Griffith and his cultural influences possessed a greater potential for identity indeterminacy than we have allowed for.

Like Horak, Moya Luckett questions the ready identification of Griffith as “Victorian,” shorthand to indicate that he possessed a limited and outdated worldview. Instead, Luckett prefers to understand him as a Progressive filmmaker, one whose treatment of space and gender reveals an ambivalent posture toward modernity. The contradictory nature of Progressivism’s policies, which balanced social improvement with excessive monitoring of the citizenry, finds its counterpart in Griffith’s often sympathetic depictions of tenement denizens even while his camera’s prying gaze studies the increasingly public life of women with apprehension.

For Grant Wiedenfeld, Griffith’s films also resonate with Progressive ideals, none more so than his pastorals. More than simply a nostalgic invocation of
the past, for both Progressives and Griffith, the pastoral represents a mode that allows a staging of agrarian activism (within farms), shared communal values (on front porches and lawns), and alleviation of urban stress (through the pleasure grounds of public parks). Griffith’s sylvan landscapes, typically read as timeless images set in contradistinction to his modern urban settings, become in Wiedenfeld’s reading part of a rich composite that cinema seems uniquely equipped to offer, wherein the pastoral paradoxically comes to life through technological reproduction.

Griffith in the 1920s

Anne Morey also finds Griffith engaged with his social context even as she shifts the timeframe from the Biograph era of Wiedenfeld’s study to the early 1920s, a period when the director would find earning unalloyed critical praise an increasingly difficult proposition. Analyzing The White Rose (1923), a feature that both Ben Singer and Jan Olsson also spend time discussing, Morey uses its focus on religion to draw comparisons between Griffith’s film and a novel by Thomas Dixon, The One Woman, as both feature a preacher as protagonist. Unlike his former collaborator, Griffith imagines his central character as a somewhat neutered fallen clergyman, which allows other figures in the narrative, principally an African-American woman, to assume religious authority. The White Rose failed to appease reform-minded critics, even as it opposed Dixon’s vision of black religion as a failed enterprise. Ultimately, Morey argues, both Dixon and Griffith in their own ways saw film as “a new form of evangelism” and fervently believed in its potential for uplift. For Griffith, then, the moral instruction imparted by film still rivaled the interventions of Progressivism, long after the Biograph period ended.

Griffith’s belief that his films could serve as strongly moral artistic statements, a position examined by Singer, continued to fuel his projects during the 1920s, even as they met with box-office indifference and critical ambivalence. Griffith has often been portrayed as the auteur-as-victim, but that characterization does a disservice both to the complexities of commercial feature-film production and notions of agency and collaborative decision-making that now inform most models of cinematic authorship. Seeing Griffith merely as a martyr results in both an overly aggrandized notion of the director at the same time that it diminishes (or, at the very least, simplifies) his actual accomplishments. We still know so little about the way films were made in the 1910s and 1920s that we should take every opportunity to use the example of Griffith to expand that knowledge, even if questions of his typicality remain.

Russell Merritt does exactly that, in his exhaustively researched account of the making of “Isn’t Life Wonderful” (1924); in the process, he helps us understand how the Griffith of the mid-1920s fit into the broader international filmmaking context of that period. “Isn’t Life Wonderful” is a particularly apt
case study, as Griffith actually traveled to Germany for part of its filming. Yet Merritt’s account depicts a director unsure of how to sustain (or salvage) his artistic legacy; certainly, Griffith rejects the Germanic penchant for glistening mise-en-scène, moody lighting, and dynamic moving camera to produce instead a throwback to his social dramas of the Biograph era. “Isn’t Life Wonderful” represents the director’s most restrained work of the decade, disturbing its own cinematographer with its “dreariness.”

Still, Griffith could not resist tinkering with the film, resulting in an unfortunate epilogue that dissipates much of the dark force of the preceding narrative. And the failure of “Isn’t Life Wonderful” seemed to close off the potential to pursue projects with a social ambition suffused with a realist aesthetic. As Merritt puts it, “watching his [subsequent] Paramount and Art Cinema films we see a major director freeze and vanish inside the high-tech polish of studio concoctions.” Andrew Nelson and Kaveh Askari each devote a chapter to one such “concoction,” the 1926 Paramount release, Sorrows of Satan, long considered a Griffith film maudit. Nelson firmly situates Sorrows within the director’s move to Paramount, coupling an analysis of the film with consideration of its immediate predecessor, Sally of the Sawdust (1925). The earlier release was an unexpected box-office success, but lacked the artistic aspirations of Sorrows. Nelson’s analysis of Sorrows reveals a film that combines striking lighting effects with obtrusive contrastive editing and subtle approaches to staging; the result may not have invited widespread critical praise, but still earned recognition for Griffith’s distinctiveness as a filmmaker.

Griffith’s reputation as a director with artistic pretensions stands at the center of Kaveh Askari’s approach to Sorrows of Satan. Borrowing a term from critic Vachel Lindsay, Askari explores Sorrows as a “minor-key work,” understanding such a term to intimate a connection to art cinema tendencies of the 1920s. Though Broken Blossoms tends to be the film designated as Griffith’s primary art cinema effort, Askari sees in Sorrows a deliberate artistic self-consciousness that aligns it with art films of this period. But more pertinent yet for Askari is the way in which discussion of Sorrows among critics contributed to a debate about Griffith’s overall role in the ascendancy of art cinema and how this helped construct a mythos of the director not quite being of his time. Askari embeds this assessment within a broader context of critical discourse during the 1920s that elevated the pictorial and promoted particular notions of aestheticism. Even if Sorrows emerged as ultimately unsuccessful, its role in advancing a revised account of Griffith’s strengths lends it renewed importance.

The reception of Griffith’s films

Askari’s careful reading of the critical reaction to Griffith in the 1920s finds echoes in many of the chapters of this collection, but attention to reception of the director’s films becomes the primary focus in the volume’s final section.
As I indicated at the outset, no film has defined Griffith’s critical legacy more emphatically than The Birth of a Nation; Melvyn Stokes (2008) has devoted an entire book to its reception. Yet there is more to discover about the reactions this landmark engendered, and Tom Rice and Nicole Devarenne provide distinctive perspectives, spanning continents and decades in the process. Rice examines the role that Birth played in the relaunching of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s and 1920s. As Rice reveals, that role was not merely one of influence or an injection of heightened visibility; instead, the KKK, energized by campaigns of Americanization that seized the country in the late 1910s, actively enlisted cinema as part of a canny publicity campaign, and Birth became one of its key promotional tools. Tracing the uses of the film from the time of its release through various screenings in the 1920s, often accompanied by public appearances of the Klan at the venues and by local membership drives, Rice demonstrates how Birth became perpetually repurposed and reimagined within these diverse reception circumstances, designed to appeal to a “modern” Klan. Ultimately, the Klan’s sustained association with Birth exerted an influence on the film’s continued reputation as a monument to racism.

Nicole Devarenne extends that legacy of influence by showing how the racial dynamics of Birth and other Griffith films figure in the representational strategies of two South African films, De Voortrekkers (1916) and Bou van ’n Nasie (1938), which advanced the cause of aggressive nationalism in that country. Though Birth was not officially screened in South Africa until 1931, Devarenne posits a reciprocal relationship between Griffith’s cinema and that of ideologically driven Afrikaners. Moreover, Griffith’s early Biograph short, The Zulu’s Heart, appropriates “an imagined African geography to represent white American anxieties.” Devarenne’s suggestive account demonstrates how future reception studies might look for Griffith’s influence in unexpected locales and cultures.

The appeal of Griffith’s films beyond an American context anchors Annie Fee’s study of the reception of Broken Blossoms in France. Like Askari, she sees that critical reaction assuming an importance beyond the individual film and even Griffith: instead, it signaled an opportunity to further the cause of increased filmic appreciation. Broken Blossoms also consecrated the elevated aesthetic discernment of the French cinephile critics, a coterie of tastemakers who would soon become some of the most influential filmmakers in that country during the following decade. Despite its rapturous reception by the cinephiliac cognoscenti, Broken Blossoms invited a wide range of reactions, and Fee examines them carefully to reveal the fault-lines in film reception at this pivotal moment in film’s development as both artform and mass cultural entertainment. If Broken Blossoms ultimately became an instrument that critics would use to boost the cause of specialized cinema, it demonstrates how Griffith’s work served multiple purposes in a variety of culture wars, a conclusion also reached by Rice and Devarenne, to significantly different ends.
Paul McEwan finds that Intolerance has served a similar function, though his temporal context extends far past the release date of Griffith’s epic. As McEwan charts the fluctuating critical fate of Intolerance, a film notorious for its formal complexity, he finds that the reactions of different critical communities serve as measurements of the openness of those communities to the possibility of film as an “expressive medium.” To note the reputational ascendancy of Intolerance is to detect nothing less than the emergence of a distinct form of film culture in America (and elsewhere), a situation that finds striking parallels with Fee’s analysis of Broken Blossoms’ reception in France. As McEwan tracks the responses to Intolerance across the decades, especially via revivals at MoMA and amateur cine-clubs, he convincingly shows how that collective reaction reveals a gradual acknowledgment of Griffith’s valuable contribution to a counter-classical tradition formed at the moment that classicism itself was about to become institutionalized.

McEwan ends his chapter with a consideration of how Intolerance is viewed today, having begun by citing the film’s placement at #49 in the AFI Top 100 list. The film circulates in multiple versions, with a new 2K restoration issued just last year by Cohen Media Group, the first time that the film has been released on blu-ray. Its relative success as a silent cinema staple counterbalances the ignominy suffered by The Birth of a Nation. And the Biographs continue to find an intriguing afterlife through digital platforms, ranging from The Sunbeam (1912), subject to an inventive remix by Aitor Gametxo, to numerous paper prints from the Library of Congress functioning as a study pilot on the Media Ecology Project. Not only do these resuscitations of Griffith’s work underscore the continued attractiveness of his oeuvre for both scholarly and artistic repurposing, but also they point to how novel perspectives on his films, facilitated by digital technologies, can reveal new dimensions – both of the director’s artistry and film history itself. Katherine Groo has identified the potential for Gametxo’s work to challenge film historiographical orthodoxy, but more simply, his remix dismantles and invigorates the seeming familiarity of Griffith’s method. In Groo’s words, “with each viewing, new points of contact and comparison emerge” (2012: 12). Similarly, this Companion invites its reader to see Griffith anew, measuring received wisdom against fresh insights, and prompting ongoing reconsideration of his protean talent. Ideally, the Griffith that emerges from this volume will serve future generations who will continue to contend with the unruly but generative legacy of his work.

Notes

1 When interviewed by Filmmaker magazine about why he chose the title, Parker responded:

When I endeavored to make this film, I did so with the specific intent of exploring America through the context of identity. So much of the racial injustices we endure today in America are [sic] symptomatic of a greater
sickness – one we have been systematically conditioned to ignore. From sanitized truths about our forefathers to mis-education regarding this country’s dark days of slavery, we have refused to honestly confront the many afflictions of our past. This disease of denial has served as a massive stumbling block on our way to healing from those wounds. Addressing Griffith’s Birth of a Nation is one of the many steps necessary in treating this disease. Griffith’s film relied heavily on racist propaganda to evoke fear and desperation as a tool to solidify white supremacy as the lifeblood of American sustenance. Not only did this film motivate the massive resurgence of the terror group the Ku Klux Klan and the carnage exacted against people of African descent, it served as the foundation of the film industry we know today.

I’ve reclaimed this title and re-purposed it as a tool to challenge racism and white supremacy in America, to inspire a riotous disposition toward any and all injustice in this country (and abroad) and to promote the kind of honest confrontation that will galvanize our society toward healing and sustained systemic change (Rezayazdi 2016).

Ironically, a few months prior to the film’s release, Parker found himself at the center of a scandal concerning his past actions as a student at Penn State University. When allegations of a sexual assault from that time resurfaced, the media maelstrom, and Parker’s problematic reaction to the controversy, tainted his reputation and apparently compromised the film’s commercial prospects. For pointed commentary on the issues involved, see Gay (2016) and Jerkins (2016).

Crucial works include monographs by Jesionowski (1987), Gunning (1991), Pearson (1992), and Simmon (1993). Not coincidentally, every one of these books focuses on the Biograph period, with Simmon also branching out to incorporate the first two features.

The title for Griffith’s last silent independent feature is usually rendered as Isn’t Life Wonderful? Taking their cue from the copyright office, writers have conventionally left off the quotation marks that are used in film’s head title. But “Isn’t Life Wonderful,” with the quotation marks, is the title Griffith himself consistently used, not only in the head title, but in his scripts, and is the format the D.W. Griffith studio followed in writing up its contracts and launching the film’s publicity campaign. Further, it is how Griffith’s source, Geoffrey Moss’s short story, is titled. Consistent with Griffith’s practice, it is how the film is titled in this volume, except in those instances where a contributor wishes to follow established precedent.

Gametxo’s Variation on the Sunbeam can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/22696362.

Paper print versions of selected Griffith Biographs, made available through the Media Ecology site, will facilitate a wide range of scholarly projects, from time-based annotations to collaborative analyses. Thanks to Mark Williams and Tami Williams for discussions of the Media Ecology Project, in person and via email.

References


Part One

Griffith Redux