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“When the Bestial War Shall Rule No More”: D.W. Griffith, World War I, and the Antiwar War  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the U.S.'s World War I experience helped condition Americans to relate to war primarily through cinematic recreations. The country's geographical distance from the fighting provided Americans a degree of geopolitical spectatorship from which they could imagine their nation's role in an ever-changing world through film. Onto that blank screen D.W. Griffith projected three spectacular epics—*Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and *Hearts of the World* (1918)—that helped reconfigure America's modern global identity. Together, Griffith's military spectacles created what I call the antiwar war film, the generic template for American war cinema from which few productions have deviated since. Griffith's antiwar war film taught Americans what to expect and even desire in representations of war on screen. Aesthetically, Griffith's World War I movies introduced the burden of producing elaborate, realistic depictions of battle and delivering authentic portrayals of war's physical, psychological and emotional toll, a standard of legitimacy that arguably remains the most distinctive feature of the war film genre.

At the same time, Griffith housed his sensational war imagery within familiar, potent national myths. In so doing, he developed the possible actions, dramatic crises, and resolutions that, through repeated use, would constitute the generic world of all subsequent films about U.S. military conflicts. Griffith's World War I epics deployed narratives premised on a popular allegory of the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction. Specifically, this parable blamed the war on nineteenth-century Americans' inheritance of the original sin of slavery, for which they were forced to atone through senseless bloodshed that needlessly divided them. Only a righteous paramilitary race war between (black) tyranny and (white) democracy during Reconstruction

reunited Americans from the North and South in defense of their common ideals. Out of this violent but necessary historical crucible, the U.S. emerged a redeemed whole, and a nation uniquely devoted to peace.

Griffith's films further reinforced national mythology by evoking connections with the current European war. His images visualized President Woodrow Wilson's admonition that, furnished with the lessons of its tragic past, the U.S. now stood as the singular model of healthy civilization in a world ravaged by war. Applying the mythical logic of sectional reunion to a devastating contemporary world conflict combined Progressive-era ideas about war and history with Progressive-era faith in the essential value of technological progress. Griffith's films thus showcased America's technical prowess and asserted its global altruism by making visceral the aspiration that underwrote Wilson's argument for taking America to war in 1917: armed conflict was the only path toward lasting peace. The paradoxical reasoning that peace *required* war became the impetus of modern U.S. foreign policy and the foundational mythology of the antiwar war film.

Since World War I, American war cinema has consistently turned on a narrative that the U.S. military participates in world affairs only reluctantly and only when violence proves the only means to service the greater good for humankind. By making war palpable and palatable to audiences, Hollywood war films regularly condone the U.S.'s perpetual military presence around the globe. As such, the overwhelming impact of the antiwar war film has been to generate and sustain a remarkable tolerance for state-sponsored violence among the broader American public.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract		2
Acknowledgements		4
Introduction:	The American Antiwar War Film	8
Chapter One:	D.W. Griffith and the Shadows of War	44
Chapter Two:	“The Villainies of Real War” and “The Marvels of Realism”: Griffith’s War Films at the Biograph	96
Chapter Three:	The Birth of the Antiwar War Film	147
Chapter Four:	<i>Intolerance</i> and Griffith’s Antimilitarism	205
Chapter Five:	“Even the Pacifist is Persuaded”: D.W. Griffith’s <i>Hearts of the World</i>	257
Epilogue		320

## INTRODUCTION

### The American Antiwar War Film

D.W. Griffith opened his 1915 landmark *The Birth of a Nation* with a title card declaring the film's purpose: "If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain." Moments later, *Birth*'s prologue unfolded with the more notorious intertitle: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seeds of disunion." Although the latter has warranted far more scholarly attention and endured more prominently in national memory, both statements were inextricable in conveying *Birth*'s overarching message about war and American history. D.W. Griffith's Civil War epic coincided with the semi-centennial of that conflict's end and the outbreak of the First World War in Europe. Consequently, *Birth* stood as a monument to the dominant narrative of white reconciliation saturating public memory while simultaneously commenting on the current conflict overseas. *Birth* was as much about World War I as it was about the Civil War. Its opening title cards reflected that duality.<sup>1</sup>

*Birth* absolved white Americans from the North and South of all culpability in the Civil War, insisting instead they had been dealt a tragic hand by the nation's founders. According to *Birth*, this unfortunate historical inheritance inevitably—but senselessly—divided the nation's white people and obscured their common ideals. When forced to atone for their country's original sins, Confederate and Union soldiers fought bravely and suffered greatly. Despite the mutual honor and sacrifice of civilians and combatants on both sides, however, the conflict did

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<sup>1</sup>*Birth of a Nation* Title Sheets, *D.W. Griffith Papers, 1897-1954*, Microfilm Edition, 36 Reels, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), Reel 2. Hereon *DWGP*.



not end with the South's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Rather, in *Birth*, hostilities resumed when Abraham Lincoln's assassination thwarted a constructive and just peace. Republicans, misguided in their quest for racial equality, allowed a brutal, multi-racial regime to dominate the postwar South. In pursuit of absolute "black rule," leaders of this new order disenfranchised white men and defiled white women. Former Confederates responded by organizing a militia, the Ku Klux Klan, to wage a second war. The paramilitary race war that erupted during Reconstruction pitted the forces of (black) autocracy against those of (white) democracy and self-determination. White men from the North quickly joined cause with their southern brethren and "The former enemies of the North and South...united again in defense of their Aryan birthright." Only the Klan's victory over black tyranny justified the bloodshed of both wars by restoring the white nation's common ideals. To that end, the Civil War and Reconstruction period represented a violent but necessary historical crucible out of which the United States emerged a redeemed whole.<sup>2</sup>

Griffith's film further reinforced national mythology by evoking connections with the current European war. First, *Birth* rendered vivid, moving images of combat at a time when Americans craved visual knowledge of the fighting overseas. The film's fusion of cutting-edge technology and narrative film technique made Americans feel as though they were witnessing unmediated glimpses of modern warfare. Publicity surrounding *Birth* boasted of the lengths Griffith went to achieve accurate battle sequences and likened his efforts to the conduct of European generals abroad. War correspondent and recent eye witness to German atrocities in France and Belgium, Richard Harding Davis, marveled, "It is like real war. For the first time in

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

the theatre... battle [has] been presented as it actually is.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, *Birth* placed a new premium on obtaining realism in American war films.

Countless reviews praising the authenticity of *Birth*'s war scenes and exaggerating Griffith's military prowess blended with dominant perceptions of the European conflict in ways that informed Americans' sense of reality. Specifically, the film reinforced a popular tendency to view the European conflict through the retrospective lens of America's Civil War. Like white Americans fifty years prior, it seemed the civilized nations of Europe were now engaged in their own domestic struggle, as inevitable and as senseless as America's had been. *Birth*'s allegory suggested that Americans, furnished with the lessons of their tragic past, had become a people devoted to peace. Consequently, the United States stood as the singular model of healthy civilization in a world ravaged by war.

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*The Birth of a Nation* remains unrivaled in its list of film “firsts” and largely unchallenged as the most important film in American history. *Birth* almost single-handedly transformed the movie business, launching motion pictures as a respectable art form, viable commercial entertainment, and a national cultural institution. It signaled the arrival of the film industry we recognize today. The film likewise brought the Jim Crow era of American race relations into sharp relief and contributed to the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan. But *Birth* also marked the first coherent single-film articulation of what I call the antiwar war film, the generic template for American war cinema from which few productions have deviated since. Above all else, the antiwar war film demands that Hollywood war movies derive from some basis in

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<sup>3</sup>Compilation reels of *Birth* praise, *DWGP*, Reel 2-3. For more on Davis's career as a war correspondent see Michael Neiberg, *Path to War*, 25, 28-30, 38.

reality. Whether portraying physical, psychological, political or aesthetic aspects of war, such productions must at least aspire or claim to be authentic representations. At the same time, the antiwar war film dictates that American war cinema reinforce national mythology about the United States' role in the world. Specifically, antiwar war films assert that the nation's global influence is inherently benign and that the U.S. military involves itself in global affairs only reluctantly and only when violence proves the sole means to service the greater good for humankind.

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Griffith began developing the conventions of the antiwar war film between 1908 and 1913, during his tenure at the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. His arrival on the motion picture scene coincided with changes in the industry that marked a shift away from what Tom Gunning calls a "cinema of attractions" to a "cinema of narrative integration." In other words, production companies prized story-based films over non-narrative novelties or actualities. Griffith soon stood at the cutting edge of this transformation. Through his more than 500 one- and two-reel Biograph movies, Griffith did more than any other individual to develop the standard conventions of narrative cinema—the "basic grammar" of telling stories on screen.<sup>4</sup> His Civil War movies, in particular, launched Biograph as the industry's leading producer of the most sophisticated and popular productions. Critically, Griffith's Civil War stories emphasized white sectional reunion by obscuring the war's causes and dramatizing the mutual heroism and sacrifice of both sides. Furthermore, his innovations with camera technique rendered the most

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<sup>4</sup>Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994). I borrow the "basic grammar" phrasing from Griffith's biographer, Richard Schickel. Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), 112, 162, 203.

thrilling and realistic portrayals of combat ever before placed on screen. Griffith's Civil War Biographs helped knit together a national movie-going public based on narratives of national reconciliation and thrilling engagement with filmed battle.

By 1913, Griffith had grown tired of the one- and two-reel format his bosses demanded, for the serious limitations it placed on his artistic ambitions. Soon, Griffith left the Biograph for a new company that granted him more creative control over his work. The most attractive feature of his new contract was the freedom to make a big-budget, feature-length production of his choosing. Griffith's resulting film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), allowed him to combine the most popular elements of his Civil War shorts into a single, sensational epic. As such, *Birth* forged the first coherent template of the antiwar war film. *Birth* told the story of family friends from the North and South, separated by the war and reunited in its violent aftermath. It offered audiences both a powerful drama of national reunion and an opportunity to experience cinema's most elaborate, realistic battle-sequences to date. Moreover, the timing of *Birth*'s release—during the Semi-Centennial of the Civil War and less than a year into the fighting in Europe—raised the stakes of its historical and military realism. Consequently, in addition to almost single-handedly transforming the movie business, *Birth* catapulted Griffith to the height of his fame, establishing him as “the world's preeminent director of military spectacle” during the war years.<sup>5</sup>

Griffith followed *Birth* with an even more elaborate and violent spectacle, *Intolerance* (1916), which further advanced the antiwar war film. *Intolerance* contrasted four distinct episodes from world history—the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Medieval France, the fall of Babylon, Christ's crucifixion, and a story of modern-day urban injustice—in order to show the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984), 342.

persistence of regressive forces in human society. Griffith conceived *Intolerance* as a pacifist epic whose message of peace would further his personal and political agendas. He hoped the film might generate support for President Woodrow Wilson's reelection (premised on the campaign slogan "He Kept Us Out of War"), and demonstrate cinema's unmatched potential for social and moral uplift. Ironically, *Intolerance* proved Griffith's most violent film to date, and arguably the most violent film of the period. According to historian Kevin Brownlow, the film "almost physically assaulted" viewers.<sup>6</sup> In the end, *Intolerance* diluted Griffith's pacifist message by justifying war as sometimes necessary or even inevitable. Furthermore, the film's violence became its primary appeal and, paradoxically, the central vehicle through which its antiwar sentiments were expressed. Nevertheless, *Intolerance*'s herculean attempt to denounce bloodshed with the use of graphic, sensational imagery that Americans found authentic marked a significant stage in the antiwar war film's generic development. *Intolerance* ultimately condemned the current war as a product of the Old World and suggested that America, as a beacon of the New World with its long history of "peaceful democracy," needed to shape the postwar future.

Perhaps *Intolerance*'s greatest irony was that it drew Griffith directly into World War I. Despite Griffith pouring his immense profits from *Birth* into making his second epic, *Intolerance* failed to generate a return on that investment. Eager to recoup his losses and maintain his filmmaking preeminence, Griffith agreed to produce a feature for the Allied war effort. The idea came from two millionaires: German-born, New York-based investment banker, Otto Kahn, who had helped bankroll *Birth*; and British newspaper proprietor, Max Aitken, soon to be Lord

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 77.

Beaverbrook, England's first and powerful Minister of Information. Kahn and Aitken had grown concerned that British-American relations were worsening after the failure of the 1916 American peace initiative. They arranged for Griffith to travel abroad, where, at the behest of the British government, he would create a newsreel-style propaganda piece aimed at convincing Americans to enter the conflict on the side of the Allies. However, the U.S. had already declared war on Germany by the time Griffith arrived in Europe. In light of new circumstances, Griffith decided his film would instead symbolize the war's meaning to Americans and explain the nation's role in the struggle.<sup>7</sup> Never before had an American filmmaker been granted broad authority to explore European battlefields or given extensive use of men and materiel to make a fictional motion picture. The result was *Hearts of the World* (1918), the most popular and profitable film about the war released in the war period.<sup>8</sup>

*Hearts* likewise marked the apotheosis of the antiwar war film. Both before and after its release, Griffith insisted *Hearts* wove actual events and images from the Western Front into a seamless fictional narrative. He boasted of taking his camera into the thick of trench warfare and bringing the true nature of the fighting home to Americans. Press coverage substantiated Griffith's claims, reporting on the director's access to the front lines and the dangers he and his team faced during filming. In reality, *Hearts* contained little authentic footage of the First World War. Furthermore, what few genuine documentary images did appear were not Griffith's, but purchased from third parties. Indeed, Griffith filmed most of *Hearts* in California. As assistant

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<sup>7</sup>Russell Merritt, "D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War: the Making of *Hearts of the World*," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981), 45.

<sup>8</sup>There are only two monographs I am aware of that focus on American World War I films made during the war: Leslie Midkiffe DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) and Michael T. Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I, 1914-1941* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981). DeBauche acknowledges *Hearts* as the most prestigious and commercially successful World War I film of its era. DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, 47-49.

cameraman, Karl Brown, recalled during the making of the film, “A gun was fired in France and its shell shattered a wall on the [studio] lot.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite its contrivances, *Hearts* acquired an unmistakable air of superiority over all other productions as an authentic representation of the world conflict. Griffith’s drama was presented against such “a solid background of reality,” remarked one reviewer, that “the spectator cannot tell when he is witnessing actual war or the staged product.” Most praise went farther, insisting it was evident Griffith’s “battle scenes are not posed...[but] were taken as they happened.”<sup>10</sup> To be sure, *Hearts* hardly comes across as documentary realism to twenty-first-century viewers. Blessed with the passage of time and privilege of hindsight, Lewis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) instead emerged as the quintessential film symbol of the First World War.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, *Hearts*’ simultaneity with the actual war was consequential less for the accuracy of its portrayal than for what it taught American audiences to expect and even crave in representations of war on screen. *Hearts* enshrined the standard of “realism” into any future claims about war films’ legitimacy. Such claims have arguably become the most distinctive feature of the war film genre. Whatever level of experience a war film may endeavor to represent—physical, psychological, political, or aesthetic—it must always allege some

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<sup>9</sup>Karl Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 195.

<sup>10</sup>For these quotes and similar coverage: “Shell Struck Within Ten Feet of David Wark Griffith,” *Sunday Herald* (Boston), May 19, 1918, p4E. “At the Theaters,” *San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 3. Advertisement, *San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 2. “Griffith Returns from the Front with Official Pictures Made under Fire—Will Use Them in a Film Spectacle of the War,” *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*, October 27, 1917, 1644, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 83. “Griffith—and the Great War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 86. “Took Scenes in Trenches,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1917, 11, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 80. “Pictures and Projectiles,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1918, X9, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 98-99. “Lillian Gish, the Incomparable: Being a True Story of a Great Tragedienne,” by Sidney Sutherland, *Liberty Magazine*, August 13, 20, 1927, in Scrapbook/Lillian and Dorothy Gish 1912-1918, Box 1, *Lillian Gish Papers*. Advertisement, *The San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 2. “‘Hearts of the World’ Is Here,” *Illinois State Register*, August 11, 1918, 5.

<sup>11</sup>See John Whiteclay Chambers II, “*All Quiet on the Western Front* (US 1930): The Antiwar Film and the Image of Modern War,” in John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert, eds., *World War II: Film and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13-30.

foundation in fact.<sup>12</sup> The enduring contract between producers and consumers that war films must at least aspire to be authentic is a direct legacy of Griffith's World War I films, culminating with *Hearts*.

But *Hearts* was also significant for what it told Americans about themselves and about the war they were fighting. Its mytho-ideological message could not be separated from its formal conventions. In fact, the two were mutually constitutive. *Hearts* conveyed a story of ordinary people swept up in events beyond their control who acted courageously amidst harrowing circumstances. Its soldier-hero was an American expatriate living in France when the war broke out in 1914 who determined "the land that is good enough to live in is good enough to fight for." Despite his home country's noninvolvement, he nobly offered his life to the Allied cause. *Hearts*' protagonist symbolized the United States' role in World War I and visualized President Woodrow Wilson's assertions of the war's meaning. As representatives of the New World, Americans found themselves embroiled in the sins of the Old, and their national upbringing obliged them to aid their fellow humans in achieving lasting peace. Wilson said as much when he declared that the war had rendered Americans "provincials no longer," but "citizens of the world" forced to defend "the principles of a liberated mankind." The "essential principle of peace" for which the United States stood now transcended national borders. The marriage of Wilson's language and Griffith's images cemented a national mythology that war cinema has drawn on ever since: the U.S. military participates in world affairs with inherent trepidation and only does so when armed conflict proves the only solution to salvage the greater good for

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<sup>12</sup>For standards of realism in war films see J. David Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), passim.



humankind. Consequently, in the antiwar war film, no matter how tragic the consequences or unsightly the methods of warfare, America's global influence remains invariably benign.<sup>13</sup>

Griffith's three World War I epics—*Birth*, *Intolerance*, and *Hearts*—ultimately evoked the possibility that American idealism *and* militarism could be mutually directed to serve the ends of world peace. This was the same fantasy that underwrote President Wilson's foreign policy when he led the country into war in 1917. Wilson argued that precisely *because* the European War was “the most terrible and disastrous of all wars” it threatened to destroy human civilization. Therefore, Europe needed America's material strength to end the fighting and its moral superiority to make the postwar world “safe for democracy.”<sup>14</sup> The paradoxical reasoning that peace *required* war became the foundational mythology of the antiwar war film.

Since Americans' experience of war during and after World War I was characterized by geographic distance from the fighting, this dissertation argues that war films became critical to how Americans understood war and the nation's foreign entanglements. Both Griffith's films and World War I came during profound historical transformations that constituted modern life. By the time *Hearts of the World* was released in 1918, the rise of mechanical reproduction, urban culture, and mass consumption had almost completely restructured the ways individuals perceived and experienced the world. Commercial motion pictures epitomized these changes by using machines to represent distant occurrences, prompting visceral reactions among viewers, and creating publics from these viewers. War films, in particular, and *Hearts* especially,

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<sup>13</sup>Jennifer D. Keene, *World War I: The American Soldier Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 106-107. Wilson quotation in Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 6 vols. (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1925-1927), V, 3.

<sup>14</sup>David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14. Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 53.

simulated the experience of the modern urban environment as well as the modern military environment, both of which were characterized by physical and psychological “shocks.”<sup>15</sup>

Griffith’s war films made Americans feel as though they were experiencing war firsthand. As a result, his World War I epics indulged Americans’ fascination with the gadgetry of warfare and their attraction to what philosopher Chris Hedges calls war’s “bizarre and fantastic universe...[of]...grotesque and dark beauty.” In other words, Griffith’s antiwar war films helped create a space for Americans to experience some of the thrilling and terrifying sensations of war while remaining safely distant from its physical realities. This process helped trigger an enduring preoccupation with war among Americans and reinforced their association with war as a fundamentally distant occurrence. Likewise, the powerful mythic tropes Griffith employed in his films helped audiences *morally* distance themselves from national acts of military violence. Critical to Griffith’s reputation as the pre-eminent authority of cinematic war realism were the gritty depictions of war’s “horrors” and the suffering of soldiers and civilians that complemented his realistic battle sequences. For Griffith and his audiences, giving equal visual weight to war’s tragic and heroic aspects balanced out or even justified the enjoyment of consuming violent spectacle. Each of Griffith’s World War I films foregrounded war’s undesirability.

The burden to produce elaborate, realistic depictions of battle has helped Hollywood war films obscure the fact that they are essentially simulations. Furthermore, American audiences are peculiarly accustomed to engaging war through film to a degree that transcends the viewing

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<sup>15</sup>Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 72-99, 73, 94. See also in this volume, Richard Abel, “The Perils of Pathe, or the Americanization of the American Cinema,” 183-227. Slocum, *Hollywood and War*, 16.

experience. This enables American war films to continually fortify mythologies that justify the U.S.'s perpetual military presence around the globe. The overwhelming historical impact of American war cinema has been to make war palatable to audiences, thereby sustaining a remarkable tolerance for state-sponsored violence among the broader American public.

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As a work of cultural history, this dissertation explores the role commercial media has played in shaping popular understandings of American society's most enduring, fundamental values. In particular, I treat narrative films created for mass consumption as artifacts expressing the broadly shared values of a heterogeneous public. By emphasizing big-budget productions, I take for granted commercial media's primary concern with generating the widest possible audience. As such, my work regards motion pictures as among the most influential means of distilling historic and current events into digestible narratives for popular consumption. I therefore view the proliferation of American war cinema since 1908 as providing crucial insight into the national culture's deepest and most pervasive beliefs about war and U.S.-sponsored military violence.<sup>16</sup>

My analysis of D.W. Griffith's war films foregrounds the complex relationship between producers and consumers in the process of cultural construction. That is, I attempt to balance what Jackson Lears calls "the agenda-setting power of producers" with the relative autonomy of consumers to assign multiple meanings to a given product. Cultural producers place boundaries on the range of meaning consumers can derive from their texts. The financial motivation driving

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<sup>16</sup>For discussions of narrative film's cultural-historical function see for instance, Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 7-9; Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in The Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21-22, and Chapter 5, 146-171.

most corporate-sponsored entertainment embeds power relations that limit their interpretive possibilities. While economic imbalance restricts what products get made and who makes them, the profit motive encourages standardization. The way to attract the widest possible audiences is to offend as few consumers as possible. Marketing practices therefore circumscribe much of the hermeneutic field that exists between media and audiences. Accordingly, motion pictures often blur the boundaries between commerce, art, and entertainment, perhaps more than any other medium. Yet film audiences have never been empty ciphers waiting to be filled with whatever propaganda producers pass as amusement. Rather, audiences filter mainstream cultural products through the lens of personal experience and discrete identities—racial, ethnic, religious, regional, or otherwise. Consequently, viewers often interpret the same film differently. This is why audiences continue to debate the meaning of Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1979) nearly four decades after its release. (There is an entire feature-length documentary devoted to the myriad interpretations of Kubrick’s film).<sup>17</sup>

Foregrounding the reciprocal relationship between creators and consumers, this dissertation charts a course through Griffith’s films that is fraught with tension: tension between Griffith’s aspirations and the social, cultural, and economic limits of his historical context; tension between Griffith’s personal beliefs and their manifestation on film; and tension between

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<sup>17</sup>T.J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” *The American Historical Review, AHR Forum*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992), 1417-1426, 1422. Lawrence Levine, “Levine Responds,” *The American Historical Review, AHR Forum*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992), 1427-1430. Robin D.G. Kelly, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” *The American Historical Review, AHR Forum*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992), 1400-1408. Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” *The American Historical Review, AHR Forum*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec. 1992), 1409-1416. This forum revolved around Lawrence Levine’s article, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” published in the same issue. Conceptually I pull from both Lears’ and Levine’s approach to cultural history but am arguably more indebted to Levine because of his focus on film. For more on the concept of popular and mass culture: Ed., John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998). The documentary about Kubrick’s *The Shining* is called *Room 237*. DVD. directed by Rodney Ascher, New York City: IFC Films, 2012.

what Griffith intended audiences to take away from his films and audiences' competing interpretations. Through careful analysis, I show how these tensions led to the development of the antiwar war film. Specifically, I demonstrate how social and cultural changes shaped Griffith's understanding of war and influenced his filmic representations. I also examine how transformations in the film industry's production and distribution practices impacted both Griffith's narrative and aesthetic choices as well as his movies' popular reception. Finally, I place these currents within a broader context of historical change between 1908 and 1918, revealing the social, political, cultural, and economic contingencies that facilitated the antiwar war film's emergence.

By arguing that Griffith's World War I films added a new explanatory device to Americans' cultural repertoire, my dissertation emphasizes the power of myth and genre as discursive agents of historical change. Considering my assertion that the antiwar war film constituted a discrete genre, I am indebted to decades of scholarship on American war cinema. The central argument of my dissertation follows an approach to genre that most closely resembles Thomas Schatz' definition in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (1981). For Schatz and others who employ a genre approach to film history, movie genres represent a social and aesthetic contract between filmmakers and their audiences. In particular, film genres deploy certain character types, communities, and story forms made familiar to viewers through repeated use. As such, their appearance on the screen cues audiences into a readily understandable world of possible action, dramatic crisis, and resolution. Because images comprise the basic language of film, movie genres are unique compared to other mediums. All genres rely on consumers to make associations between story, characters, and

setting, but the visual primacy of motion pictures allows them to do so instantaneously, placing viewers in a genre world with minimal explication. Consequently, historians and films scholars often view genres as the clearest expression of the relationship between film and society.<sup>18</sup>

While determining the parameters of any genre is a slippery enterprise, scholars of American war cinema have found it particularly difficult to reach a consensus on what defines the “Hollywood War Film.” Nevertheless, the need for a working definition of war cinema has long seemed apparent to scholars, most of whom believe cinema has played an ongoing and privileged role in the development of what historian Michael Sherry calls the “militarization” of American society. Sherry describes militarization as “the process by which war and national security became consuming anxieties, and provided the memories, models, and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life.” Since, as J. David Slocum writes, “war is the most overt illustration of how violence is deployed by the nation-state in the name of order and civilization,” motion pictures that depict U.S. military conflicts possess far-reaching cultural significance. Movies about American war-making render and reveal ways of understanding war and shape the ways Americans experience geopolitical events. However, many scholars find it insufficient to define war films as simply productions that treat war as their subject or setting. Given the range of conflicts and types of warfare directors may choose to depict, scholars demand a more precise delineation of the conventions that construct a war film’s generic world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Matthew Bernstein, ed., *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 3. For more on genre see, Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981). Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Wheeler W. Dixon, ed., *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). John Sanders, *The Film Genre Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup>Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 262-263. For more on war film scholars’ struggles to define the genre see J. David Slocum, J. David Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-31.

As a result of war's apparent resistance to generic coherency, academic discussions of war cinema tend to divide productions into distinct subgenres—i.e. the combat film, the espionage film, the historical epic, the political thriller, the antiwar film, and so on. The rationale behind these subdivisions is that, as Jeanine Basinger has written, “Different wars inspire different genres” and wars do not just provide a setting, but present an issue. Thus, Basinger continues, “If you [fight a war] you have a combat film; if you sit home and worry about it, you have a domestic film; if you sit in board rooms and plan [or coordinate] it, you have a historical biography or political film of some sort.” Questions of terminology also arise when it comes to a film's “attitude” toward war. As Steve Neale notes, some of the writing on war films assume generic terms and definitions should follow an obvious logic, “that the category of ‘war film’ should logically include all films with a wartime background, that ‘combat film’ is the logical term for war films which focus on combat, and that ‘antiwar film’ is the logical term for films with an antiwar attitude.” Nevertheless, Basinger—and cultural historians—understand that genres do not develop from “logic,” but rather from “custom, convention, and history.” Consequently, whatever “attitude toward war” a film adopts, “war film” implies some degree of focus on combat.<sup>20</sup> Scholars have so thoroughly accepted combat as the generic essence of the Hollywood war film that to this day the category of “war film” is most frequently associated with World War II combat movies.

In my formulation of the antiwar war film, combat is a significant component, but neither necessarily central nor strictly defined. I agree with Basinger that different wars inspire different

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Michael Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>20</sup>Steven Neale, “War Films,” in Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War*, 24. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 10.

genres. Scholars have already shown how historical events inspire generic overlap, as well as the revision and creation of new genres. Yet Basinger and other scholars overstate the degree to which succeeding conflicts, because of the changing nature of combat, rupture an otherwise coherent genre. The antiwar war film suggests, instead, that while different mechanisms of warfare may reset the aesthetic parameters of portraying combat, they do not fundamentally alter the generic world that has already been established. So long as a film treats a specific U.S. military conflict, it welcomes audiences into familiar narrative space. Specifically, it lures spectators into what Richard Slotkin calls a “mythic space: a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture’s myth/ideological tradition.” Since Griffith’s World War I epics, filmed stories about American wars have consistently turned on a narrative that the U.S. military is a reluctant yet altruistic participant in global affairs.<sup>21</sup>

Put another way, this dissertation treats genre as an expression of national myth. Here again Richard Slotkin’s work is instructive. Slotkin defines myths as “stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness might contain.” Myths express themselves through narrative, rather than discursive or argumentative structures. As such, they communicate ideas through metaphorical and suggestive language instead of logical or analytical reasoning. Once established, myths can provide readymade explanations of historical problems that arise and articulate the range of possible solutions. Like the most enduring genres, the most important and

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<sup>21</sup>Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 234.



abiding myths develop around persistent areas of concern for a given culture. Nevertheless, even the most coherent and flexible myths are not immune to historical contingency. Rather, as Slotkin writes, “Sooner or later the bad harvest, the plague, defeat in war, changes in the modes of production, internal imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power cannot be fully explained or controlled by invoking the received wisdom embodied in myth.” During profound historical crises, myths are subject to revision or new myths are fashioned. Most often old formulas are blended with new ideas or concerns to erect a fresh mythology that acquires its own memorialization and subsequent re-use.<sup>22</sup>

For Slotkin, a fabled western frontier has been the defining myth of American culture. In his landmark trilogy—*Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992)—Slotkin traces the history of America’s frontier mythology from its colonial roots to more recent manifestations in the 1980s and early 2000s. He argues that throughout the nation’s development, debates about American history and politics have, at their core, revolved around the trope of a mythical frontier. The central metaphor at work in frontier mythology is recurrent “savage war” between regressive (“barbaric”) and progressive (“civilized”) forces. Because the two sides are fundamentally irreconcilable, the conflict can only end in the complete extermination of one or the other. In order for civilization to triumph over savagery, however, the civilized must temporarily adapt their foes’ barbaric behavior. Engaging in regressive violence cleanses both the civilized individual and his respective society of their primitive elements, laying the groundwork for white civilization’s continued progress. Consequently, frontier mythology becomes a ritualized narrative of “regeneration through

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<sup>22</sup>Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 6-8.

violence.” The mythical promise of the frontier’s inherent and inherently regenerative violence helps justify and explain the nation’s past while simultaneously guiding Americans through contemporary political challenges.<sup>23</sup>

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin argues that twentieth-century Americans re-fashioned the frontier myth to address new crises brought on by industrialization and, later, globalization. Specifically, after the 1890s, Americans swapped the “old myth of a domestic, agrarian frontier, for a new frontier of world power and industrial development.” A common “mythic language” of this new frontier characterized ideological and political struggles over the meaning and direction of American society, struggles in which issues of race, class and imperialism were central. Furthermore, this revised mythology found powerful expression in the new terrain of mass culture, particularly in the medium of film and the genre of the Western. Indeed, Slotkin contends movie Westerns became the paramount generic vehicle for America’s mythic discourse.<sup>24</sup> According to Slotkin, until the 1970s Westerns represented sites of “remarkable consonance” between the dominant concerns of popular and political culture. Their familiar mytho-generic space regularly helped Americans navigate national political realities. The failure of Vietnam and the ensuing cultural malaise that followed, however, diluted the potency of frontier mythology and diminished the Western’s cultural preeminence. Ultimately, Slotkin concludes that the Western’s descent from mass-media dominance after the 1960s catalyzed (or reflected) a larger crisis in “public myth” from which Americans have yet to recover. Left with neither a revised nor new mythic system to replace the old, Americans no longer share an authoritative system of beliefs about national origins or national purpose to “help us see our way

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 10-12.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 22-26.

through the modern world.” As a result, movie genres offer a less vibrant venue for achieving broad cultural consensus about American national identity.<sup>25</sup>

Unsurpassed as the definitive study of the movie Western’s historical evolution, *Gunfighter Nation* nevertheless overstates the durability of frontier mythology in twentieth-century-America. Slotkin’s analysis is particularly thin on the historical impact of World War I on American political and popular culture. In fact, the First World War scarcely emerges as much of a crisis at all in *Gunfighter Nation*. Rather, the “closing” of the western frontier, announced by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, represented the ultimate crisis of national identity until the 1930s. But by then, Slotkin argues, Americans once more embraced frontier mythology—rehabilitated through Teddy Roosevelt’s call to take up the challenge of empire in Cuba and the Philippines—as the basis of the nation’s historical progression. Imperialism thus launched a new era of regenerative violence by re-linking race to “righteous” or “savage” warfare and territorial expansion. In other words, Roosevelt’s solution to the frontier crisis won out over competing visions, and the frontier myth’s privileging of force over diplomacy or social policy would recur in American life thereafter. Yet because Slotkin takes as a given Roosevelt’s influence as “paramount in the realm of mass-culture mythology,” he never demonstrates the frontier myth’s application to the very real and momentous circumstances of World War I. Consequently, he relegates Woodrow Wilson’s historical influence to the exclusive realm of partisan politics and political ideology.<sup>26</sup>

My dissertation challenges Slotkin’s analysis by arguing that war in Europe eventually displaced the closing of the frontier as the nation’s paramount crisis. As the United States inched

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 626-627.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 56-60.

closer toward intervention in World War I, frontier mythology proved both inadequate and inappropriate to the task of transforming the nation's foreign policy. Americans could hardly conceive of or reimagine the Old World as a new frontier for national development. Furthermore, Americans understood the conflict in Europe as a cataclysmic contest between fundamentally "civilized" white nations. There were no obvious racially-coded "savage" enemies reminiscent of the Indian wars for the U.S. to purge from the current global struggle. America was being called upon to redeem the past, not regenerate the present. Nevertheless, Americans still had to consult their history in order to justify entering a world war primarily on behalf of another nation. Here the Civil War, not the western frontier, became most useful as a mythological basis for action. And the emergent antiwar war film, not the Western, reconciled the public to the political prerogatives of their national government in ways that reshaped America's prevailing mythic discourse in the twentieth century.

World War I combined with a national memory of the Civil War that emphasized reunion to create the foundational mythology of the U.S.'s modern global identity. During the three years before the U.S. entered the First World War in 1917, Americans' distance from the fighting allowed them a degree of geopolitical spectatorship from which they could imagine their nation's role in an ever-changing world through film. Into that breach Griffith launched *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, which combined Progressive-era American ideas about war and history with Progressive-era faith in the essential value of technological progress. *Hearts* further showcased America's technical prowess and asserted its global altruism by applying the mythical logic of sectional reunion to a devastating contemporary world conflict. *Birth*, *Intolerance*, and

*Hearts* made visceral the aspiration that underwrote Wilson's argument for taking America to war in 1917: armed conflict was the only path toward lasting peace.

The perplexing rationalization that peace *depended upon* war became the immutable moral logic of Hollywood war films. When a second world war broke out in Europe two decades later, American filmmakers and national leaders once more asserted that U.S. idealism *and* militarism could be mutually directed toward global redemption. Critical to maintaining this narrative is foregrounding an assumption that Americans are fundamentally opposed to war, a tradition that Griffith began during World War I and from which few if any filmmakers have departed ever since. That said, Griffith's films established the essential, recurring mytho-generic space of American war cinema. In the process, they forged an intricate relationship between American war-making, American film, and American self-understanding.

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In challenging the western frontier's cultural supremacy, my work joins the chorus of recent scholars demanding greater appreciation for the First World War's historical significance. Although the centennial of the war has generated renewed academic and popular interest in the conflict, many historians (and Americans) remain unsure about its broader importance for the United States. A critical barrier to clarifying how the war transformed American society has always been the compulsion to compare: to compare Americans' World War I experience with the more protracted and more obviously disruptive European experience, and to compare the U.S.'s involvement in the First World War with its lengthier participation in the Second World War. Americans' failure in the 1920s and '30s to construct a clear, coherent, and satisfying memory of the war to repeat for future generations has also obscured its place in American

history. Nevertheless, over the past two decades World War I historians have argued convincingly that the war permanently altered American society, marking a turning point in national politics, social movements, foreign policy, culture and the military. Such scholarship has established the war as a watershed moment in larger historical processes associated with the twentieth century: the growth of federal power, the rise of the U.S. as a global power, the growth of international humanitarianism, the efficacy of veteran political activism, the long civil rights movement, and the creation of a surveillance state.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, this dissertation seeks to place D.W. Griffith and the First World War at the forefront of our historical understanding of America's relationship to war in the twentieth century. It complements scholarship establishing Woodrow Wilson as the architect of modern foreign policy whose influence can be directly traced through the attitudes and decisions of wartime presidents who succeeded him. My work likewise builds on recent analyses of Wilsonian internationalism's complex global reach, and the role memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction shaped Wilson's approach to the Great War. I argue that D.W. Griffith's World War I epics visualized Wilson's wartime rhetoric and made his aspirations for the postwar world seem possible, even probable. They did this by seamlessly blending familiar national mythology

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<sup>27</sup>Concerning World War I as the foundation of the "War State" see Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Regarding World War I and the Long Civil Rights Movement, Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) and Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). For veteran political activism, Stephen R. Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) and Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). For recent work on Wilson and his wartime policies see John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 2011), Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009), and Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

with cutting edge technology. The unification of contemporary politics, a mythologized national past, and simulated experience in Griffith's films instated war as the central metaphor of American life. That is, Griffith's World War I films laid the cultural foundations of American militarization, the process through which, Michael Sherry explains, war became the "agent of and rationale for the nation's transformation...the blank screen on which unrelated concerns were often projected, and...the paradigm in which Americans defined themselves, pursued change, or resisted it."<sup>28</sup>

Most historians, however, locate the onset of militarization at the eve of the Second World War. In his seminal book on the topic, Sherry explains that militarization began with World War II because that conflict resonated with subsequent world events for Americans in ways prior U.S. wars did not. Thus while the Civil War may have "loomed over the American imagination" during World War I, it did so "as a site of contested memories about bitter division, not as the touchstone of national unity against a foreign threat."<sup>29</sup> I argue, conversely, that from the outset of the fighting in Europe, white Americans were compelled to conceive of the First World War through the retrospective lens of their own civil war. Believing the U.S. had fought the first modern and total war, and buoyed by the faith that they had emerged from it reunited and rededicated to their inborn pacifism, white Americans regularly—and forcefully—compared their past with Europe's present. In doing so, they shored up the white national unity necessary to follow Woodrow Wilson into a war not in defense of a foreign threat, but in pursuit of global redemption. Griffith's World War I films both reflected and fueled this process, making America's purpose in the war seem less abstract while powerfully reinforcing confidence in the

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<sup>28</sup>Sherry, *In the Shadows of War*, x.

<sup>29</sup>Sherry, *In the Shadows of War*, 4.

U.S.'s divined role in human history. As a result, war became the benchmark of national unity and war films critical agents of national understanding.

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Just as scholars have tended to overlook World War I's enduring significance in American history, they have similarly neglected Griffith's foundational role in shaping American war cinema. Instead, scholarship focuses almost exclusively on World War II as *the* formative period in the genre's development. Part of this oversight may be due to the overwhelming racism of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. The film's profound historical impact on American race relations tends to dwarf its connection to the Great War. Later filmmakers, critics, and scholars may also have found it difficult to acknowledge the influence of the Griffith template without seeming to embrace or excuse the director's racist views. We might consider, for instance, the emergence of the multi-ethnic platoon—a staple of World War II combat pictures—as an effort to purge the genre of Griffith's racist taint.<sup>30</sup>

But the scale and visibility of Hollywood's involvement in America's World War II effort alone makes scholarly emphasis on the period understandable. From the outset of the conflict, governments and film industries everywhere seized on motion pictures as a means of mobilizing populations for war. Newsreels, documentaries, and feature films captured various aspects of the war and provided usable images for soldiers and civilians alike. Movies proved particularly effective for building wartime unity in the United States, where citizens already attended movie theaters regularly as a source of both information and entertainment. Indeed,

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<sup>30</sup>For discussions of the trope of the “all-American” platoon see, for instance, Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 1999), especially 274-276, but throughout the chapter titled, “Legacies,” 265-317.



motion pictures wielded unparalleled influence over how Americans understood the morality and politics of the Second World War and why it was being fought. In the process, war films, particularly films about World War II, became immensely popular and profitable for an entire generation. The war also generally stimulated the industry. By 1946, American movie audiences had more than doubled their prewar levels.<sup>31</sup> Considering the pervasive relationship that developed between the movies and Americans' collective experience of the war, it is hardly surprising historians point to World War II as the genesis of war cinema's evolution.

Yet the Second World War revived, much more than it generated, the most enduring conventions of Hollywood war films. World War II filmmakers labored no less than their World War I predecessors to provide viewers with sensational images and battle sequences that registered as authentic. Their films likewise resumed prototypical narrative reassurances about the U.S.'s timeless and empowering national values and linked reluctant warfare to American global identity.<sup>32</sup> The spate of World War I films released after the war and during Griffith's decline in popularity, however, also helped obscure Griffith's direct influence on the World War II generation of filmmakers. Productions like King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925) and Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) quickly assumed authority over the cinematic iconography of trench warfare. Such films emphasized the war's wastefulness and futility and deliberately sought to encourage "antiwar" attitudes among their audiences. Consequently, they

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<sup>31</sup>"Introduction," by John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert, in Chambers and Culbert, eds., *World War II: Film and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4-5.

<sup>32</sup>J. David Slocum, introduction to "Part Three: The Apotheosis of the Hollywood War Film," in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, ed. J. David Slocum, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 145-146.

eclipsed *Hearts of the World* (and its sanitized story of redemption) as quintessential film symbols of the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

It is the rupture in Griffith's template by World War I films of the 1920s and '30s that most often leads film scholars, in particular, to treat the Second World War as a natural starting point of the Hollywood war film's generic evolution. In her authoritative study, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Jeanine Basinger argues that the World War II combat film forged the generic pattern for almost all combat-related war films in the twentieth century. That is, productions made during the Second World War that dealt with combat in that war laid the definitive conceptual groundwork of American war cinema. According to Basinger, "the war film," per se, "does not exist in coherent generic form," although the World War II combat film undoubtedly does. From her exhaustive research viewing countless films, Basinger observes a historical progression during which the genre was defined, repeated, and then modified to suit changing times. While she recognizes important antecedents in war films made before the Second World War, Basinger nevertheless insists that the isolated story pattern comprising the "combat genre"—a story pattern that emerges in films treating a variety of different conflicts and sometimes in other genres such as the Western—did *not* exist before World War II.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>There were also some discernible continuities between Griffith's work and Vidor's and Milestone's. After all, King Vidor got his start in the movie business apprenticing under Griffith. And Milestone made new use of Griffith's characteristic narrative techniques by effectively integrating them with the new possibilities of sound. Griffith greatly admired Milestone's film both for its antiwar message and for Milestone's recognition that sound ought not be treated as a sufficient novelty in itself, but married to the active participation of the camera. Finally, for those filmmakers who understood Griffith's World War I productions as fundamental condemnations of war, the director remained their primary influence. French director Abel Gance expressly credited Griffith as inspiration for his famous antiwar production, *J'accuse!* (1919). Letter to D.W. Griffith from Abel Gance, January 2, 1921. Letter to Abel Gance from D.W. Griffith, October 5, 1921. Both in *DWGP*, reel 4.

<sup>34</sup>Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 9-14.

Despite Basinger's thorough and convincing conclusions, Griffith's World War I epics reveal an earlier, nearly-complete formulation of the genre she describes. Griffith's films meet all but two of Basinger's generic criteria: 1) They do not contain the presence of an observer or commentator and 2) their credits do not invariably unfold against military insignia. The specific limitations of silent film and the contextual peculiarities of World War I may sufficiently account for those absences. Otherwise, Griffith's productions align rather tidily with the "objective format" Basinger develops in order to determine whether or not a given film belongs to the genre. Such definitive generic conventions include: crediting a military advisor; opening statements that function as dedications; the protagonist undertaking an important military objective; the hero having leadership forced on him in dire circumstances; the enactment of rituals during encampment (i.e. letter reading); indication of the enemy's presence; climactic battle scenes; the resolution of a situation; and ennoblement of the audiences for sharing (vicariously) in the war experience. For Basinger, war films, or combat films, can vary any of these features without violating the basic parameters of the genre.<sup>35</sup> As the following chapters of this dissertation demonstrate, Griffith's three World War I films developed and refined a coherent story pattern that made use of just such conventions.

Furthermore, the timing of Griffith's productions underscores his central role in establishing and developing these conventions in the first place. Other crucial elements of Basinger's definition involve the very cinematic techniques that Griffith pioneered—action unfolding in a series of episodic contrasts, between "action and repose, safety and danger, combat and noncombat, comedy and tragedy, dialogue and action." One constitutive feature of

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<sup>35</sup>Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 73-78.

Basinger's genre is simply that "the tools of cinema are employed," meaning that cutting is used to create tension, camera movement to generate release, composition to construe intimacy and alienation, lighting to create the look of combat, documentary footage to conjure authenticity. As many scholars have shown, Griffith was the first to put such practices to coherent, effective use in narrative film. As my dissertation argues, they reached their apotheosis in his war films, in particular.<sup>36</sup>

A look at one early World War II production, *Sergeant York* (1941), offers a bridge between Basinger's study and mine. Basinger describes *Sergeant York* as among a series of films "obviously [designed] 'to get us in the mood' for war in Europe again." *Sergeant York* told the story of the real life pacifist-turned-war-hero, Alvin C. York, who realized during the First World War that he needed to set aside his religious principles and fight to advance the cause of liberty and serve the greater good for all humankind. Basinger and other scholars point to *Sergeant York* as an important film easing the transition from the pessimism of previous productions toward encouraging Americans to support preparedness for (and ultimately intervention in) World War II. *Sergeant York* refought the First World War for Americans—"with a much better plot and a much happier ending"—while simultaneously teaching audiences that they, too, *must* fight. "We don't want to, but we have to, just like York," writes Basinger. Indeed, by merging the combat film with biography, Basinger claims that *Sergeant York* "made itself more true [to audiences] than the earlier, downbeat, films." Consequently, it resolved the problem of audiences having been inundated with messages about war's futility and wastefulness in the prior decade: *Sergeant York* redeemed the First World War by exposing a pacifist's

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<sup>36</sup>Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 74-75.

(York's) unexpected conversion to the necessity of war and the realization that his skill was required to win it.

Rather than marking a transition between pessimistic films about World War I and more hopeful productions depicting the Second World War, we might instead understand *Sergeant York* as a resuscitation of Griffith's antiwar war film. Depicting a (former) pacifist such as York was more than a clever dramatic convention—it was crucial to re-grounding Americans in their own beliefs about themselves as a basically pacific people. The real Alvin York served a similar purpose for Griffith after the war, reassuring the director that the war's cause was righteous. York was one of the only individuals Griffith reached out to for the sole purpose of expressing his support and admiration.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, among both Warner Brothers' and York's motivation for making the biopic was to ready the country to fight freedom's arch enemy—the Nazis.<sup>38</sup> Of course, they also hoped to make a profit. On both counts they took a page from Griffith's book. Before its first scene unfolded, *Sergeant York* opened with a statement thanking the individuals who agreed to be depicted in the film and declaring, “To their faith and ours that a day will come when man will live in peace on earth, this picture is humbly dedicated.” Such a sentiment echoed Griffith's opening promise in *Birth of a Nation* that it aimed “to convey to the mind the ravages

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<sup>37</sup>In the summer of 1919 Griffith sent York a letter proclaiming his solidarity with York's Southern Methodist upbringing and praising his refusal to profit from his status as a war hero. “I also am from Kentucky,” Griffith wrote, “raised in the old stern faith of honor and principle in my youth. While I don't claim to hold exactly your opinions, anyone who has principles and stands by them is such a rare and wonderful personage in these days that I wish to offer you my admiration and congratulation.” The exact “opinions” from which Griffith distanced himself might have referred to York's particular strand of pacifist Protestantism; York belonged to the Church of Christ in Christian Union, which had formed as a reaction against Methodists' support of the Civil War. There is also the possibility that Griffith caught wind of York's belief that the movies were sinful expressions of the devil incarnate.

<sup>38</sup>Warner Brothers was the first studio to cut off business relations with the Third Reich, doing so in 1934 while MGM, Paramount, and Twentieth-Century Fox waited until 1940. Michael E. Birdwell, “A Change of Heart: Alvin York and the Movie *Sergeant York*,” *Film & History*, Vol. 27, Nos. 1-4, 22-33. Birdwell notes that Warner Brothers' “reputation as anti-Nazi producers set them apart from the rest of Hollywood.”

of war so that it may be held in abhorrence,” and its postscript hoping for “a day when the bestial war shall rule no more.” Like Alvin York, Griffith’s heroes did not want to go to war, but proved invincible once it was forced upon them. *Sergeant York* received 11 Oscar nominations, winning two of them, including Gary Cooper for Best Actor. In true Griffith fashion, both Alvin York and producer Jesse Lasky insisted the movie was “not a war picture.”<sup>39</sup>

Insisting that commercially successful war films are both true to life and convey morally ambivalent or hostile attitudes toward war is a time-honored ritual of American culture. This compulsion began roughly a century ago, during the First World War, when D.W. Griffith claimed to have provided Americans with a literal moving picture of their past, one that lamented the tragedies of the Civil War and Reconstruction while it revived their most thrilling and heroic episodes. Griffith followed *Birth* up with an even more elaborate historical allegory, *Intolerance*, through which he further harnessed America’s global destiny to its relationship to war and the filmic medium. Finally, Griffith inextricably fused modern war and American cinema to the U.S.’s national and global identity when the British government gave him unprecedented authority to explore European battlefields, and extensive use of men and materiel to make a fictional motion picture about a current world conflict. *Hearts of the World* introduced the movies as an instrument of international diplomacy and established the generic world of American war films.

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By emphasizing the theme of war, this dissertation departs from most historical treatments of D.W. Griffith, which focus on *Birth*’s profound impact on American race relations.

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<sup>39</sup>Birdwell, “A Change of Heart,” 26.

Opposition to *Birth*'s racist account of the Civil War and Reconstruction emerged even before its first preview screenings as *The Clansman* in Riverside, California. In deciding to adapt Thomas Dixon Jr.'s 1905 play of the same name, Griffith inherited a controversial property. Despite its substantial success and relatively short run, Dixon's play had generated protests in a handful of cities across the country. In fact, it was largely because Dixon anticipated the subsequent backlash against Griffith's film that he sought Washington's endorsement via his old friend and colleague, President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>40</sup>

But nothing and no one could stem the outcry against *Birth*'s racism, which far surpassed any prior opposition to Dixon's play. Calls to ban Griffith's film stalked its appearance in city after city. These efforts were spearheaded by the young National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) whose campaigning abilities had yet to be tested at the national level. Although they succeeded in obtaining statewide bans in Ohio and Kansas, as well as forcing cuts to be made to the film in several major cities, the NAACP ultimately failed to suppress *Birth*. Nevertheless, the process of mobilizing local chapters toward a discrete nationwide goal expanded the NAACP's size and announced its arrival as a major national force.<sup>41</sup>

If *Birth*'s racism invigorated the black freedom struggle, it also facilitated the growth of the modern Ku Klux Klan. The man who successfully re-launched the Klan in 1915, William J. Simmons, deliberately seized on Griffith's film as a publicity and recruitment tool for his new

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<sup>40</sup>Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51-54. Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Thomas Dixon, May 1, 1915. *PPW*, Vol. 32, 142, n1. Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Thomas Dixon, January 27, 1915, *PPW*, Vol. 32, 142. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 69 Vols.

<sup>41</sup>Melvyn Stokes provides a thorough account of the relationship between *Birth* and the NAACP in *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, chapters 6 & 8, 129-171, 227-277.

organization. *Birth* gave the new Klan a romantic origin story and updated its regalia. Indeed, the film's publicity stills depicting a Klansman raising a fiery cross atop a rearing horse became part of the order's official insignia. By the mid-1920s the organization boasted upwards of 4 million members in almost 4,000 local chapters across the nation. In addition to African Americans, targets of the Klan's hatred included Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. While it is difficult to determine *Birth*'s precise influence on the modern Klan's expansion, the film provided a powerful avenue for its popularization.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, *Birth* remained intimately associated with racial controversy in the public mind. After the Second World War, scholars labored to balance *Birth*'s racism against its monumental role in the history of narrative film. These efforts frequently resulted in interpretations that separated the film's form from its content. Scholarship that focused on *Birth*'s racism opened with preliminary acknowledgements regarding its technical innovations. Studies concerning *Birth*'s revolution of the film form prefaced their analyses with acknowledgments of its racist subject matter. By the 1970s, however, most academic treatments of *Birth* took its racism and groundbreaking film techniques as inseparable aspects of its tortured historical legacy. As a result, scholars have not only further detailed the film's material bearing on American race relations, but have uncovered more nuanced and insidious facets of its racist influence. For example, *Birth* can be seen as serving larger Progressive-era ambitions regarding technological advancement and corporate efficiency that simultaneously justified Jim Crow-style

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<sup>42</sup>For its role in the emergence of the second Ku Klux Klan see: David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), 22-39. Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6-12. Maxim Simcovitch, "The Impact of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* on the Modern Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Popular Film*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1972): 45-54.



segregation. *Birth* also helped construct a broader category of “whiteness” that welcomed a wider range of European immigrants into the national-cultural fabric for the first time. Some scholars suggest the film encouraged hatred of African Americans as a prerequisite to national belonging. Furthermore, reactions to *Birth* by black filmmakers facilitated the expansion of African American cinema and the development of distinctive modes of black spectatorship.<sup>43</sup>

This dissertation incorporates much of the voluminous scholarship concerning *Birth* and race into its analysis of the film’s relationship to World War I. I consider Griffith’s attitudes about race as integral to his beliefs about war and peace and the possibilities of motion pictures. As such, I link the emergence of race in Griffith’s films—both before and after *Birth*—to white America’s broad understanding of the relationship between modern war and American global identity.

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The dissertation is arranged in five chapters. The first two chapters cover Griffith’s biographical background and his entrée into the world of motion pictures. Chapter one

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<sup>43</sup>See, for instance, Peter Noble, “The Negro in *The Birth of a Nation*,” in Peter Noble, ed., *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948), reprinted in Fred Silva, ed., *Focus on “Birth of a Nation,”* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 125-132. Cedric Robinson, “In the Year 1915: D.W. Griffith and the Whitening of America,” *Social Identities*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 1997): 161-92. Daniel Bernardi, “The Voice of Whiteness: D.W. Griffith’s Biograph Films (1908-1913) in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 103-28. On black filmmaking, spectatorship and film criticism see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993). Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), Chapter 2, 59-107. Jane Gaines, “*The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*: Two Tales of the American South,” in *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Culture*, eds., Richard H. King and Helen Taylor, (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 177-92. Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993). Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975). Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

demonstrates how his upbringing in post-Civil War Kentucky profoundly shaped Griffith's personal identity and his relationship to war. In particular, it shows how Griffith's parents' allegiance to the Confederacy instilled in him a lifelong identification with the South's Lost Cause. This narrative was nevertheless complicated by Griffith's experience in the New South. Finally, it argues that Griffith's memory of his father as a war hero and his mother's postwar pacifism battled for dominance in Griffith's mind and gave him a sense that war could be simultaneously tragic and heroic. The second chapter charts Griffith's path to the Biograph Company and argues that he responded to pressures inside and outside the film industry most effectively through his development of the antiwar war film. Griffith's Civil War shorts, especially, laid the groundwork for the genre's foundational mythology and the standards of realism that would continue to determine a war film's legitimacy thereafter.

The remaining chapters are devoted to Griffith's three World War I epics—*Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and *Hearts of the World* (1918)—and follow chronological order. Chapter three argues that the outbreak of war in Europe raised the stakes of Griffith's war scenes and lent new significance to his narrative of reunion. It shows that while many regarded *Birth* as a sermon of peace, the film nevertheless became the dominant representation of modern war in the years leading up to U.S. involvement in the First World War.

Chapter four traces the grand ambitions behind Griffith's second feature, *Intolerance*, and provides a close reading of the film. I interpret *Intolerance* as representative of the antimilitarist doctrine that characterized the American peace movement. The chapter suggests that Griffith's pacifist tones blended with his graphic portrayals of violence to a degree that came to typify the antiwar war film. The last chapter examines Griffith's collaboration with the British and French

governments in making *Hearts of the World*. It argues that press coverage emphasizing Griffith's access to the European battlefields combined with his visual articulation of President Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy to make *Hearts of the World* the apotheosis of the antiwar war film.

## CHAPTER ONE

### D.W. Griffith and the Shadows of War

David Wark Griffith grew up in the shadows of war. Born January 22, 1875 in Oldham County, Kentucky, twenty miles outside of Louisville, Griffith was the seventh of eight children in a family defined by the Civil War. The family patriarch, Jacob Wark Griffith, joined the Confederate army in 1861 and fought as a cavalry commander with the Kentucky Brigade. His wife, Mary Oglesby Griffith, remained on the family's Kentucky estate with their three young children and a handful of their remaining slaves. As Confederate partisans in a border state, the Griffiths experienced the war as both civilians and combatants. After the war, Kentuckians in Oldham County, most of whom had abandoned allegiance to the Union, embraced Jacob Griffith as a decorated hero of the Lost Cause. But the South's defeat nevertheless weighed on Jacob Griffith personally, ending his upward mobility and his family's financial security. When he died in 1885, Jacob left behind seven children of widely varying ages as well as hidden debts that forced Mary to sell the farm. To his family, Jacob's failures as a provider complicated his enduring reputation as a war hero. His son David, in particular, developed a dueling sense of pride and resentment toward his father and the war that shaped his attitudes toward masculinity and violence as an adult.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, I rely primarily on three sources for Griffith's family history. First, I've compared the different accounts given in Griffith's published autobiography and the unfinished and unpublished drafts of the manuscript found in the D.W. Griffith Papers. D.W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: the Autobiography of D.W. Griffith*, ed., James Hart (Louisville: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 32. Unfinished autobiography drafts, *D.W. Griffith Papers, 1897-1954*, Microfilm Edition, *36 Reels* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), Reel 2. (Hereon, *DWGP* and reel number). I have also drawn on Richard Schickel's biography (arguably the definitive Griffith biography) when he provides material not found in the Griffith papers. He conducted a number of interviews with Griffith's family members that are particularly valuable. Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984). Finally, I depend frequently on Barnet Bravermann's Research Collection, 1897-1954, *DWGP*, Reels 35-36. Bravermann was a little-known

D.W. Griffith's early life placed him at the crossroads between the Old and New South. The Old South remained present in the Griffith household through rituals of family remembrance that traced their lineage to the earliest plantation classes of Virginia and Georgia. More direct memories passed down by D.W.'s parents and eldest siblings further rooted his identity in an irretrievable past. Indeed, the Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War pervaded the local and regional culture into which Griffith was born. The Lost Cause version of history contended that southerners waged war to preserve an idyllic agrarian past, the Old South, replete with faithful slaves, pious women, and chivalrous patriarchs. It further demanded posterity honor and vindicate the South's heroes, alive and dead, even though their valiant efforts failed.<sup>45</sup> Griffith's parents, as ex-Confederates, were subsequently living symbols of what the South fought for and ultimately lost. As such, Griffith's connection to the Old South became a source of pride and an indelible marker of his southern identity. Yet Griffith also resented exclusion from an imagined world of security and abundance. Consequently, I argue that Griffith balanced a lifelong romantic fascination with the Civil War against feelings of bitterness and self-pity over what the conflict took from him.

To be sure, Griffith's early life was marked by material hardships that were a direct consequence of the war and its aftermath. His family, ever rooted in the traditions of a

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journalist from Minnesota who spent a decade, with Griffith's blessing, collecting information and conducting interviews for what he planned to be the definitive biography of the legendary director. Unfortunately, Bravermann died before completing the project. Nevertheless, he compiled 1,500 items concerning Griffith's life and his work that prove invaluable to the researcher. These materials include hundreds of pages of type-written narrative, an exhaustive chronology of significant biographical and professional events in Griffith's life, and all of Bravermann's research notes—conversations with Griffith's family members, friends, and other contemporaries.

<sup>45</sup>For an in depth analysis of the Lost Cause as a manifestation of southern Civil War memory see Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For the Lost Cause in Kentucky see Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Chapters 4 & 5.

vanquished society, proved ill-equipped to navigate the new and very real circumstances of the postwar South. Griffith's father died when he was ten, leaving him with little male guidance and the expectation that he would assume head of household in his father's absence. His southern upbringing dictated that Griffith look to the past for models of manhood that would help ensure his family's survival. Yet the lessons of his family lineage seemed scarcely applicable to Griffith's current situation. The set of traits he was to have inherited from his male ancestors, and therefore expected to exhibit in the present, stressed battle-tested courage and martial leadership and adventure. However, Griffith found such characteristics neither accessible nor useful as he struggled to support his family in a world that would have been foreign to his forefathers. In response, he developed a view of war that arose from the circumstances of his early life, subscribing to an idea of manhood that, like his father, valued virility, while also embracing the postbellum pacifism championed by his mother.

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Like fellow white southerners regardless of rank or class, the Griffiths adhered to entrenched customs that appropriated the patriarchal family as the primary social and economic unit. Male heads of household exercised firm control over their wives and children who assumed a subservient role. The perceived honor of one's family determined its standing in the community and typically derived from patterns of paternal lineage. Indeed, the relationship between fathers and sons became the paramount feature of southern families and a constitutive element of southern life. It was through sons that fathers relinquished power and property to succeeding generations. Thus sons symbolized a family's future. The pressure of family succession, therefore, produced the main source of tension between fathers and sons and formed

the central source of generational strife. Two enduring southern conventions illustrated this phenomenon. First, the veneration of forefathers and their traditions was intended to inspire sons while also challenging them to live up to the family's mythological heroes. Second, southern child-rearing practices inculcated youth with rigid deference to hierarchy and tradition that often manifested as shame and humiliation in adulthood. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown states, "'Blood' was not an abstract concept" but a powerful determinant of a child's sense of worthiness. "Like horses," he elaborated, "human beings were supposed to exhibit traits of lineage." Male ancestors, however distant, provided standards of accomplishment, status, and character either to be matched or overcome.<sup>46</sup>

The Griffiths were no different from other southerners in their near-mystical displays of family pride. Jacob and Mary emphasized that the male bloodline on both sides of the family tree could be traced back to Scots-Irish and Welsh clans of the British Isles. Although both boasted Celtic extraction, the ritual repetition of ancestors' achievements was customarily reserved for Jacob's forebears. According to family legend, the Griffith men came from a long line of Celtic warriors distinguished for their grit and valor. The American Griffith lineage began in Wales, when a Welsh Prince, Llewelyn Griffith, married his daughter to a Lord Brayington whose participation in Monmouth's Rebellion forced his exile from Britain. Upon migration to either Virginia or Maryland, Brayington assumed his wife's name "Griffith" as his own. The Griffiths, it appeared, rebelled against the British monarchy before America did. Indeed, D.W. Griffith recalled stories of his great-grandfather, "a stormy, fierce old man who refused to allow the word 'England' to be spoken in his presence and...barred the door to anything English." The man of

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<sup>46</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 119.

whom D.W. spoke was Salathiel Griffith who served as a deputy constable during the Revolutionary War and was promoted to Sheriff of Somerset County, Maryland, following American victory.<sup>47</sup>

Jacob Griffith taught his sons that a genetic Cavalier spirit enabled their ancestors to serve important functions in the nation's history and pass onto them a vital stake in its future. In addition to Salathiel Griffith's role in securing American independence, his son and Jacob's father, Daniel Weatherby Griffith, helped sustain it by fighting the British himself in the War of 1812. Although family legend exaggerated the extent of Daniel's and Salathiel's military service, the two nevertheless loomed large as beacons of bravery for Jacob Griffith and his sons. Mary Oglesby Griffith's father and uncles were also Revolutionary War veterans who settled in Kentucky on land they received for their service. For the men on both sides of the family, D.W. Griffith later claimed, "Adventure was meat, drink and all," and military experience satiated their inherent thirst for battle.<sup>48</sup>

None embodied the Cavalier spirit and family honor more than D.W.'s own father, Jacob Wark Griffith. Indeed, Jacob Griffith—called "Thunder Jake" or "Roaring Jake" by his friends—exceeded the accomplishments of his elders both as soldier and adventurer. Although Jake's

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<sup>47</sup>For instances in which Griffith claimed to descend from Celtic stock see Henry Stephen Gordon, "The Story of David War Griffith: Part One," *Photoplay*, June 1916, 35-37, 162-165. "A Poet Who Writes on Motion Picture Films," *Theatre Magazine*, June 14, 311-12, 314, 316. Reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 13, 32. Also, Griffith and Hart, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 24. For documentation of Salathiel Griffith's positions as deputy constable and Sheriff see *Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970*. Louisville, Kentucky: National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. Microfilm, 508 rolls, vol. 259. Accessed via Ancestry.com. *U.S., Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

<sup>48</sup>Griffith and Hart, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 24. For documentation of Salathiel Griffith's positions as deputy constable and Sheriff see *Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970*. Louisville, Kentucky: National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. Microfilm, 508 rolls, vol. 259. Accessed via Ancestry.com. *U.S., Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.



paternal grandparents rose to prominence in Maryland, Salathiel Griffith excluded Jake's father, Daniel, from his will. Instead, several tracts of land and other scattered properties, as well roughly ten slaves, went exclusively to Daniel's siblings. Daniel had been the product of a second marriage and was the youngest of Salathiel's children. Because he was only six years old when his father passed, the material circumstances of Daniel's upbringing after Salathiel's death remain unclear, as do his sources of income as an adult. Nevertheless, records suggest he became a farmer. Following a brief stint as a corporal during the War of 1812, Daniel inherited land from his second wife, Margaret Wark, and later purchased land in Oldham, Kentucky, where he relocated in 1840.<sup>49</sup>

The War of 1812 transformed American life. During the fighting, trade with Britain and Europe ceased, forcing the U.S. to develop its own factories and mills, which created a more diverse economy by war's end. The postwar resumption of trans-Atlantic trade stimulated national prosperity, accelerated the emergence of a market economy, and turned the United States into a global powerhouse by 1850. Like several other farmers during this period, Daniel Weatherby Griffith was likely lured farther west by the promise of cheap land and access to better farming equipment. By contrast, seventeen-year-old Jacob Griffith followed his father to Kentucky to pursue one of the new professions available to young men as a result of market-based transformations. A proliferation of services followed the growth of towns and cities and opened opportunities for male employment outside farming, particularly in education, law, and

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<sup>49</sup>In 1927 Griffith commissioned a full genealogical report of his family which was compiled by Genealogist Florence E. Youngs. She included several legal documents along with her extensive report, "The Oglesby Family in Virginia and Kentucky," both of which can be found in Youngs' letter to Griffith, April 14, 1927, *DWGP*, Reel 15. More information in Bravermann Manuscript, Chapter 1, 1-7, Barnet Bravermann Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 36.

medicine. Jake elected to pursue the latter. Because no formal medical training was required to be a doctor at the time, Jake apprenticed under two local practitioners upon arrival in Oldham County. Within a few years he set up his own practice and established a clientele large enough to purchase a horse to help make his rounds and solicit new patients.<sup>50</sup>

Despite his apparent upward mobility, Jake's vocational calling was neither as a farmer nor doctor. When war broke out with Mexico in 1846, Jake answered the call for volunteers without hesitation. Indeed, he was among the first wave of volunteers in the state. Equipped with the horse that was his only property, Jake joined the First Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry Volunteers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Humphrey Marshall in May 1846. Jake was not alone in perceiving the war as a means of social advancement. For many young men in the region, becoming a soldier represented a first step toward becoming a genuine southern gentleman. Combat experience, in particular, promised the achievement of honor. Such expectations appeared especially strong in Kentucky where numbers of volunteers far exceeded the federal government's request. While the state was asked to raise only one cavalry unit and two infantry regiments, over 13,000 men—or 100 companies—enlisted. Not only was Jake quick enough to ensure enlistment, he also joined a branch almost certain to see battle. His background in medicine made him especially desirable in combat.<sup>51</sup>

The war with Mexico proved to be the ennobling experience for which Jake had hoped.

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid. For more on the Market Revolution and "Profession Boom" see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1845* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>51</sup>Tim Talbott, "Mexican War, 1846-48," *ExploreKYHistory*, accessed July 5, 2018, <http://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/209>. Adjutant General's Office, State of Kentucky. *Mexican War Veterans, Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky*. Frankfort, Kentucky: Capital Office, 1889. Accessed via U.S.-Mexican War Soldier Database, [usmexicanwar.org/soldiers](http://usmexicanwar.org/soldiers). Damon Eubank, (1998) "Kentuckians in Mexico: Kentucky Volunteers and Their Attitudes Toward the War, Mexico, and Mexicans," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 5, 38-50.

Within a month he was promoted from First Sergeant to Captain of his company. While the First Kentucky Mounted Volunteers saw relatively little action during the war, they nevertheless played a critical role in arguably its most dramatic confrontation, the Battle of Buena Vista. Jake's company reinforced General John E. Wool's left flank in his defense against General Santa Anna's advancing armies. Fighting on foot, the First Kentucky was initially forced to retreat, suffering a number of casualties during the withdrawal. However, the Cavalry regrouped and, mounting their horses, charged the attacking Mexican forces. Buoyed by infantry support from the Arkansas Regiment, The First Kentucky repelled Santa Anna's cavalymen, aiding the U.S.'s repulsion of the much larger Mexican Army. That was the last combat Jake and his fellow Mounted Volunteers saw before mustering out of New Orleans in June 1847. Back in Kentucky, they were welcomed as heroes. Lexington hosted an elaborate barbecue in their honor.<sup>52</sup>

Jake's service in the Mexican War bolstered his standing in Oldham County and positioned him to advance in southern society. Besides demonstrating his martial valor, Jake's participation in the conflict further ingratiated him with Kentucky's burgeoning slaveholding class. Jake even believed he fought on behalf of slavery's expansion into Texas. Furthermore, the war acquainted him with prominent Kentucky men whose stars continued to rise. For example, Jake obtained a lifelong association with his former commander, Humphrey Marshall Jr., who was a distant relative of Chief Justice John Marshall and whose father, Humphrey Marshall Sr., was a state senator. After the war, the younger Marshall settled near Jake in neighboring Henry County. He served as a Congressman in the U.S. House of Representatives, first as a Whig

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<sup>52</sup>Adjutant General's Office, State of Kentucky. *Mexican War Veterans, Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky*. Frankfort, Kentucky: Capital Office, 1889. Accessed via U.S.-Mexican War Soldier Database, [usmexicanwar.org/soldiers](http://usmexicanwar.org/soldiers). Tim Talbott, "John Hunt Morgan," *ExploreKYHistory*, accessed July 5, 2018, <http://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/206>.

(1849-1852) and later as a member of the American Party (1855-1859). Like Jake, Marshall would enlist in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, and eventually serve in the Second Confederate Congress. Jake Griffith also fought alongside future Confederate General John Hunt Morgan during the Mexican war, beside whom he would fight at the Battle of Shiloh.<sup>53</sup>

Shortly after returning from the Mexican War Jake married Mary Perkins Oglesby, who came from one of the most prominent families in Oldham County. At the time of their marriage in September 1848, Mary's father, Thomas Oglesby, owned several hundred tracts of land, upwards of eight horses, 20 head of cattle, a mule, and fourteen slaves.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the Oglesbys were a larger and more prosperous clan than the Griffiths who settled in Kentucky before them. Thomas Oglesby had purchased their estate, Lofty Green, with money inherited from his first wife, Sarah Easley. Mary was his daughter from a second marriage to Nancy Carter. On Lofty Green, Thomas Oglesby established a profitable farm that provided his large family with a comfortable lifestyle for decades. Nevertheless, while Jake stood to inherit a substantial portion of the Oglesby estate, he again exhibited little enthusiasm for farm life. After only 18 months of marriage, adventure beckoned and Jake left his wife and in-laws for the California gold fields.

Jake set out in search of both excitement and riches when he departed Oldham County in 1850, accompanied by two of Mary's brothers and a physician-friend. The journey began in Lexington, Missouri, where, according to Jake's son, D.W., they joined the longest wagon train to ever traverse the plains during the Gold Rush. Somewhere around 40 mule-drawn wagons

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<sup>53</sup>Bravermann I, 10, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

<sup>54</sup>*Marriage Records. Kentucky Marriages*. Madison County Courthouse, Richmond, Kentucky. Ancestry.com. *Kentucky, County Marriage Records, 1783-1965* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016. Film number: 000482442. United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls. *1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2004.

containing 100 men and a few women and children left Lexington and acquired more wagons and people as they journeyed west. D.W. claimed it was called the Lone Jack unit and boasted his father was elected captain. However, D.W. was either unaware or omitted that Jake was quickly dismissed from the post on account of his bad temper. The caravan split up in Utah. One group continued south along the Santa Fe Trail and the other, Jake's group, crossed Donner's Lake to the junction of the American and Sacramento Rivers.<sup>55</sup>

Jake Griffith spent two arduous years in what his son later called "the Eldorado of the West." In their pursuit of gold, the men faced such "hazards as following dimly blazed trails, crossing flooded rivers, [and] fighting Indians." One story told of Jake's party rescuing survivors of a caravan that had been attacked and destroyed by Native Americans in Colorado. However difficult their surroundings, Jake and his group enriched themselves out west. They staked a claim on a stream in Nevada County that yielded around \$16 a day. Furthermore, the men evidently found opportunities beyond prospecting, as they each returned to Kentucky with several thousand dollars. Nevertheless, Jake Griffith ended his adventure with scarcely more wealth than when he began. Although he made it to Louisville, only a few hours from home, with a sum of around \$24,000 intact, his only taxable property by the time he got to Oldham County were the mules pulling his wagon. Somewhere between Louisville and Lofty Green, Jake gambled away all his earnings and most of his brother-in-law's.<sup>56</sup>

Finding himself in the same material position he was in before his Gold Rush adventure, Jake had no choice but to resume his medical practice and assist on his father-in-law's farm. It

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<sup>55</sup>Bravermann, I, 6-8, *DWGP*, Reel 35. Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 24.

<sup>56</sup>Griffith and Hart, "Hollywood," 24. William L.C. Connelly and E.M. Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, Vols. I-V, ed., Judge Charles Kerr (Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1922), Vol. 5, 639.

was during this time, however, that Jake discovered a talent for oration. Using his Mexican War exploits and harrowing experiences out west as subjects, Jake developed a local reputation as a lively raconteur. Jake proved so charismatic that the county elected him to the Kentucky State Legislature, where he served for the 1854-55 session. That he served only one term was due either to disillusionment with public life, mounting family pressures, or both. While he was away, his and Mary's firstborn child, Thomas Jeremiah, died tragically at the age of three. Not long afterward, his father-in-law, Thomas Oglesby, also passed. Their grief, however, was tempered by the birth of a new child, Mattie Seamen Griffith, and by Jake's inheritance of most of Lofty Green. Oglesby divided the estate between Mary and her brother, William, leaving the Griffiths the main farmhouse and placing all property—including fourteen slaves—in Jacob Griffith's name.<sup>57</sup>

By 1860, Jacob Griffith was a man of substantial property with a growing family for whom he could comfortably provide. Along with their eldest child, Mattie, the Griffiths now claimed a three-year-old son, Woodson, and an infant daughter, Virginia. Mary's brother William and his wife Mary, also lived on the property. Two cabins on the edge of the estate housed the family slaves. Thus Jake Griffith had barely come into his own as a bona fide southern patriarch when the presidential election of 1860 sent shockwaves through the country and thrust Kentucky into political turmoil. Like most residents of Oldham County, Jake regarded the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln as nothing short of a threat to his livelihood and an

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<sup>57</sup>United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653, 1,438 rolls. Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2010. Map of land in Floyd'sburg, *G&M 24*; Roll Number: 24. Various publishers of County Land Ownership Atlases. Microfilmed by the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Ancestry.com. *U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

assault on southern honor. During the secession crisis then gripping the country, Jake wasted no time casting his lot with the emerging Confederacy. Indeed, just as the Kentucky Legislature—the very body on which Jake served four years earlier—issued its Declaration of Neutrality in the spring of 1861, Jake began aggressively recruiting men from neighboring counties to join the South’s cause. By October 15, 1861, a company of men under Jake’s command were sworn in as a unit of the First Kentucky Cavalry, a regiment in the Kentucky Brigade.<sup>58</sup>

Not only was the 42-year-old Jacob considerably older than most volunteers on either side, but he was also among a minority of Kentuckians who fought for the Confederacy. On the one hand, his eagerness to reprise a military career at such a mature age spoke to his distaste for farm life and thirst for adventure. On the other hand, the swiftness with which Jake declared allegiance to the South indicated shared political principles. In fact, despite Kentucky’s official position on the war, Jake’s loyalty to the Confederate cause was neither unusual nor surprising. Both he and his wife had familial roots in the Deep South. In fact, Kentuckians inherited the institution of slavery—the critical issue of the war—from Jake’s native Virginia. Far from dying out, slavery steadily grew in the Bluegrass state during the antebellum period. Although the plantation system never rooted itself there, farmers still equated economic wellbeing with slavery’s survival. Indeed, by 1850 Kentucky had a uniquely high proportion of small slaveholders compared to other states. For example, while close to 30% of white Kentucky families held slaves in 1850, they averaged about five slaves per household, representing the lowest ratio of slaves-to-owners in the South. Nevertheless, on the eve of the Civil War,

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid. Historical Data Systems, com *U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2009. Historical Data Systems, com *U.S., American Civil War Regiments, 1861-1866* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 1999.

Kentucky was home to more slaveholders than any other state except Virginia and Georgia. For his part, Jake Griffith boasted nearly three times as many slaves as the average Kentuckian.<sup>59</sup>

However much slavery varied in Kentucky, pro-slavery sentiment remained ubiquitous. By 1861, antislavery inclinations in the commonwealth had all but vanished. Consequently, whether they sympathized with the Union or the Confederacy, white Kentuckians collectively feared the war's threat to their "peculiar institution." Whichever side one supported primarily rested on a calculation of who could better preserve slavery in Kentucky. Unionists argued that the federal government, through crucial safeguards like the Fugitive Slave Law, offered the best means of maintaining Kentucky's antebellum status quo. By contrast, Jake Griffith and other rebel sympathizers took the opposite view, believing that a Republican administration doomed slavery everywhere. While Jake himself never wavered in his sectional loyalties, Kentucky, conversely, shifted from neutrality to supporting the Union in 1861.<sup>60</sup>

Jake Griffith's service during the Civil War became the defining experience of his life and enshrined him in the mythical annals of family legend. He fought a long and active war,

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<sup>59</sup> For numbers of Kentucky men estimated to have fought for either side see Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 20 and Jacob F. Lee, "Unionism, Emancipation, and the Origins of Kentucky's Confederate Identity," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 111, No. 2, 205, n19. Connelley, William Elsey. *History of Kentucky. Vol. I-V*. Chicago, IL and New York, NY, USA: American Historical Society, 1922, V, 766. Ancestry.com. *Kentucky History, 1922* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2004. For numbers of slaves and free blacks in Oldham and its neighboring counties see "Oldham County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2499>. "Henry County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2368>. "Jefferson County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2376>. "Shelby County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870," *Notable Kentucky African Americans Database*, accessed June 27, 2018, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2564>.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, "Origins of Kentucky's Confederate Identity," 199-233. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 10-16.



steadily rising through the ranks and possibly earning the brevets of a Brigadier General.<sup>61</sup> Jake led his men during the Army of the Tennessee's retreat toward Nashville following Grant's successful capture of Forts Donelson and Henry. He then spent time guarding railroad bridges and monitoring Union supply lines before rejoining the brigade at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862. Covering the rear guard in the chaotic retreat to Corinth, Mississippi, Jake was shot through the shoulder on Hewey Bridge in Alabama. Although badly wounded, he recovered enough to lead his men as they joined John Hunt Morgan's and Nathaniel Bedford Forrest's raiders in a northward sweep toward Louisville. From there, Jacob's cavalry was dispatched to General Joseph Wheeler's command, with whom they fought in the treacherous battle of Stones River just before the New Year. By March 1863, the brigade had suffered one-quarter casualties and Jake Griffith was promoted from captain to lieutenant colonel. His official title was now Lt. Col., Jacob Wark Griffith, third regiment, of the Kentucky Brigade, now called the Orphan Brigade for its affiliation with a cause not endorsed by its home state.<sup>62</sup>

General Wheeler provided Jake with several opportunities to demonstrate bravery on the battlefield. In his commander, Jake found not only a man who understood his talents but a lifelong friend (after the war he would name his newborn daughter Wheeler). Although technically second-in-command, Jake frequently performed the responsibilities of a full colonel under General Wheeler. One such example was when the Orphan Brigade was transferred from the Tennessee to the Mississippi front in order to alleviate Grant's siege of Vicksburg. When

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<sup>61</sup>I did not find the brevetting confirmed in any official records, but as Richard Schickel notes, that does not necessarily mean it was not true, since record keeping became less of a priority during the last year and month of the war. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 21-24.

<sup>62</sup>Much of this information is from Edwin Porter Thompson, *History of the Orphan Brigade* (Louisville: L.N. Thompson, 1898), 333-336, 558, 883-884, 906-975, 999.

they failed to do so, the brigade and other units of the Confederate Army returned to Tennessee in time to experience a short-lived victory at Chickamauga. Shortly afterward began the siege of Chattanooga, during which most of Wheeler's cavalry corps, including Jake's Kentucky men, were ordered north of the Tennessee River to intercept Union supply lines. It took little time before Wheeler encountered a train of 32 mule-drawn wagons in Sesquatchie Valley. He destroyed the wagons and seized the animals but soon met Union cavalry escorting a much larger caravan of 1,500 wagons. Outnumbered and less equipped, Wheeler asked Jake to have his Kentucky men penetrate the defenses. According to a participant, "in less than two minutes the First Kentucky was going up the ridge. In less than ten minutes the train, with a number of prisoners, was ours. And the commander of the escort, with his surviving men, was going toward Chattanooga on short rations." Adding to his "distinguished...gallantry," Jake suffered an even worse wound than the first, receiving a minié ball somewhere between his left groin and hip.<sup>63</sup>

Jake's wound was serious enough that, at least according to family legend, he was not able to mount a horse when Union forces finally broke out of Chattanooga. As the Confederates fled toward Georgia, the Orphan Brigade, including Jake's unit, once again covered the rear guard. Forced to turn the charge over to a subordinate, Jake could not bear seeing his troops charge without him. When the moment came to rush Union lines, Jake commandeered a nearby horse and buggy and led his men into a successful assault. Whether or not Jake actually guided the First Kentucky into battle from a hijacked horse-drawn carriage, the anecdote became so crucial to Griffith family mythology that D.W. repeated it many times and later took measures to

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<sup>63</sup>Porter, *History of the Orphan Brigade*, 907.

prove its veracity.<sup>64</sup>

To quote Griffith biographer Richard Schickel, “one [almost] hopes the story is true, for here was to be little enough glory for Jacob Griffith or anyone else in Joe Wheeler’s command thereafter.” During the final months of 1864, Jake, his men, and other Confederate units, futilely resisted Sherman’s advance to the sea. Despite their efforts, the Union Army reached supply depots in Chattanooga and Nashville and took Atlanta by the first of September. From there, the First Kentucky was sent to Virginia where they joined General Joseph Johnston’s rag-tag army as they tried to protect Lee’s rear and defend Charleston, South Carolina. With Sherman in Savannah, Johnston sent his army in two directions, toward Augusta and Charleston. Sherman struck Johnston’s center at Columbia, reuniting Wheeler and Griffith in the swamps of South Carolina. The First Kentucky scouted for Johnston both before and after the Battle of Bentonville where he was ultimately defeated.<sup>65</sup>

John C. Breckinridge, first commander of the Orphan Brigade and Confederate Secretary of War, brokered surrender negotiations between Johnston and Sherman. Of critical importance in these talks was the issue of Jefferson Davis and his cabinet. Refusing to leave the country, Davis decided to make his way to the two remaining Confederate armies in the field, located in Southern Alabama and East Texas. Breckenridge assigned elements of the Orphan Brigade, including Jake’s First Kentucky, to serve as Davis’s mounted escorts. They made it as far as Georgia before a portion of the Tennessee Cavalry intercepted Davis on May 10, 1865.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>The story was recounted in at least one unofficial source, William Elsey Connelly and Ellis Merton Coulter, *History of Kentucky, Vol. I-V* (Chicago New York: American Historical Society, 1922) V, 639.

<sup>65</sup>Bravermann Research Notes, 14, Bravermann Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 35. Also Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 21-23.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

Jacob Griffith returned from the war physically crippled and financially destitute. His left shoulder wound never fully healed and he lost full use of the arm. Jake also suffered chronic pain and complications resulting from a bullet to the hip. According to his son, D.W., all that was on Jake's person when he returned to Lofty Green were "a handful of worthless Confederate money...[and]...articles he had seized from the Yankees." Evidently, Jake had stolen a Union soldier's uniform, pistol, and saber. His son later lamented the irony that the only "relics we have of this ardent rebel bear the symbol of his enemies." Although Jake retained ownership of the stock farm, which sat on several hundred tracts of land, the demands of the war significantly depleted its value. Furthermore, almost all of his former slaves fled the estate at some point during the conflict. D.W. would later claim that "three extraordinarily large families [of former slaves]" remained on the property "with a childlike faith that 'Colonel Jake' would take care of them." In fact, only a small family of five African Americans appeared as residents of Lofty Green in the 1870 Census. Nevertheless, a fire destroyed the main house claiming most of the home's furnishings as well as some family records. Perhaps no clearer sign of the manor's lost grandeur was Mary Griffith herself, who developed poor health and a noticeable stoop during her husband's absence.<sup>67</sup>

The war proved unimaginably difficult for Mary. When he joined the Confederacy, Jake left his wife to run the farm with two young children and a newborn baby. Although she apparently had the company of two sisters-in-law who remained on the property with her, they had their own young children to look after. As D.W. phrased it, Mary "had been raised in the

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<sup>67</sup>Year: 1870; Census Place: *Floydsburg, Oldham, Kentucky*; Roll: *M593 493*; Page: *38B*; Family History Library Film: *545992*. Ancestry.com. *1870 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Griffith and Hart, "Hollywood," 26. Bravermann, 13-23, *DWGP*, Reel 36. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 23-24.

easy conditions of the rich South,” and thus was scarcely prepared to manage a farm much less endure several other unforeseen hardships that came with the war. Coupled with her husband’s abandonment was the fact that Kentucky officially declared itself loyal to the Union, risking the Griffiths’ identification as enemy-sympathizers. The state’s strategic tributaries along the Ohio River made northern Kentucky, in particular, a site of military maneuvering on both sides. Confederates viewed the state as an important defensive barrier. The Union regarded it as an avenue of invasion. As such, guerilla warfare pervaded Kentucky during the war and several military campaigns rolled through. The commonwealth saw so much war activity that historian Anne Marshall has argued “nearly every Kentucky woman [on the home front] had an opportunity to engage very personally with the enemy.” Confederate women, in particular, were targets of federal control and suppression.<sup>68</sup>

While Jake had the military commendations to prove his wartime bravery, Mary Griffith had been a combatant in her own right. Where Jake returned to find his old world ruined, Mary witnessed the destruction of her childhood home firsthand. Furthermore, in a war of occupation where the home and battle front merged, Mary’s native Kentucky represented the war’s most divided state. Perhaps no other place more genuinely experienced “a brother’s war” than the commonwealth. The war literally divided family members into enemy combatants. Although most white Kentuckians abandoned the Union when it became evident the war was being fought for Emancipation, the state remained officially loyal throughout the war. Beginning in fall 1861, Washington imposed a military government and occupied the state. The following year

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<sup>68</sup>Unpublished Autobiography, *DWGP*, Reel 2. For Kentucky’s importance for military strategy during the war see McPherson, 225. Anne E. Marshall, “A ‘Sisters’ War’: Kentucky Women and Their Civil War Diaries,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 110, No. 3, New Perspectives on Civil War-Era Kentucky (Summer/Autumn 2012), 481-502, 497, 501.

Kentucky became a police state, targeting anyone with southern sympathies, until martial law was formally declared statewide in 1863. Thus the stakes were incredibly high for disloyal women. Anne Marshall has argued that nowhere else did federal troops work so hard and so long to control enemy women than in the Bluegrass state. Indeed, had Jake held a higher rank in the Confederate Army, Mary could have faced imprisonment.<sup>69</sup>

Just as their southern affiliation made Mary and her children targets of federal suspicion and punishment, so, too, did it force their compliance with Union and Confederate guerillas. From the outset of the struggle, armed and mounted bands of irregular troops roamed rural areas, stealing from civilians and destroying property. Although their aims were mixed, most often these marauders were Confederate stalwarts who employed paramilitary tactics to disrupt Union supply and communication lines and punish Union supporters. They also sought supplies for the southern war effort. The Griffiths almost certainly encountered guerillas at some point during the war. In fact, relatives claimed John Hunt Morgan's raiders were responsible for the fire that destroyed Lofty Green's main house. Whether or not that specific story was true, the "citizen warfare" plaguing Kentucky fostered an environment of fear, suspicion, and violence that was difficult for civilians of either persuasion. Indeed, however much Mary supported the South and her husband, parting with scarce resources involved significant sacrifice just as the threat of criminal retribution fueled permanent anxiety.<sup>70</sup>

Mary's wartime experience also differed from Jake's in how it foreshadowed sectional reunion. Throughout the conflict, communal relations in the commonwealth increasingly

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<sup>69</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 16. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 21-22. Marshall, "Kentucky Women and Their Civil War Diaries," 487, 497.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid. Marshall, "Kentucky Women and Their Civil War Diaries," 484.

underscored the ugliness and cost of the war for both sides. Whether of Union or secessionist persuasion, civilians interacted with family and community members of divergent loyalties on practically a daily basis. As such, the strain on personal relationships constituted a shared wartime experience. White Kentuckians continued to find common ground as the war pressed on. For example, Union sympathizers had objected to the Federal government's heavy-handed treatment of southern partisans since early in the conflict. As the war progressed, the majority of white Kentuckians, regardless of sectional affiliation, generally deplored the U.S. military's punitive behavior in their state. Perhaps most significantly, white Kentuckians continued to support slavery. The specter of black enlistment in the Union Army thus provided another avenue through which white Kentuckians on both sides expressed collective fear and anguish.<sup>71</sup>

Although Kentucky remained technically loyal for the war's duration, by its end white Kentuckians predominantly came to identify with the Confederate cause. Several factors prompted once-loyal residents of the Bluegrass state to turn their sympathies against the Federal government. Since 1862, the Union army's treatment of civilians caused Kentuckians of all stripes to resent their state's seeming inclusion as part of the rebellion despite its loyal status. The Lincoln Administration's inclusion of black freedom as a war aim further convinced Kentucky Unionists that commitment to the Federal government had been a mistake. Worst of all, Washington's willingness to recruit black Kentuckians into the Union army and deploy them locally rather than on distant battlefields represented an unforgiveable betrayal. Indeed, many Kentucky whites staked their allegiance to the Union on faith that their slave property would be protected. By late 1864, however, the Union cause evolved to a degree that the majority of

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<sup>71</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 21-22. Marshall, "Kentucky Women and Their Civil War Diaries," 484, 489.

Kentucky Unionists felt they could no longer claim it as their own. For their part, southern-sympathizing Kentuckians welcomed their fellow citizens' reversal of fealty.<sup>72</sup>

After the war, white Kentucky distanced itself from the Union cause and retroactively claimed a Confederate identity. Socially, the Bluegrass state became embroiled in violence and lawlessness which, for the rest of the country, amounted to nothing short of *post factum* rebellion. Indeed, native whites turned to bloodshed to restore as much of the antebellum status quo as possible. In the name of the prewar social and racial order, loosely organized white vigilantes terrorized freed people, Union veterans, and Republicans alike. Kentucky began to resemble the former Confederacy in its commitment to violent white supremacy. Throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, Kentucky's violence combined with enduring notions of southern honor and justice to further cement its association with the Confederate states to the South. On the one hand, the commonwealth's violent reputation helped reshape memories of wartime loyalties. White Kentuckians' primal affiliation with the South eventually superseded its actual loyalty during the war. On the other hand, violence also became a source of reunion. In Kentucky, Confederate and Union veterans as well as noncombatants frequently came together to both perpetrate and fight crime. Indeed, the prevalence of guerilla activity and civilian unrest during the war allowed crime to become the hallmark of a populace still reeling from social, political and racial upheaval after the war.<sup>73</sup>

Kentucky's sectional realignment arguably became most visible in the realm of politics. During the state's first postwar elections in summer 1865, eligible Unionist voters filled the majority of Kentucky's state legislature and congressional seats with Conservatives and

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<sup>72</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 26-29.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid*, 55-57.



Democrats. Anti-Republican sentiment and racial conservatism accounted for most of the vote, demonstrated by the legislature's unequivocal rejection of the Thirteenth Amendment that fall. Furthermore, because Kentucky's loyal status exempted it from Federal Reconstruction, former Confederates were able to reenter state politics by 1866. Teaming up with Conservative Unionists and a wave of onetime Unionists who switched parties, former Confederates helped envelop postwar Kentucky in Democratic politics based on a Lost Cause narrative.<sup>74</sup>

So quickly did former Confederates begin to lead and define the Democratic Party in the commonwealth that northern observers became convinced Kentucky was exchanging wartime loyalties *ex post facto*. When Democrats came to dominate every level of state politics by 1867, some northerners called for Federal Reconstruction there as well. The polls emerged as a powerful site around which previously divided white Kentuckians reunited. Indeed, near unanimous support for the Democratic Party in Kentucky revolved around wartime grievances. Many voted Democrat to retaliate for the injustices of martial law during the war and the treatment of civilians by occupying federal troops. Others vehemently opposed Emancipation and Radical Reconstruction farther south. Race lay at the heart of Kentucky conservatism both before and after the war. Above all, white Kentuckians regarded the federal government's disruption of the racial order as the most egregious crime needing redress.<sup>75</sup>

If vigilante violence and Democratic politics painted postwar Kentucky as a Confederate state to outsiders, memorial activities nevertheless rooted that identity in a broad culture of national reconciliation. Of course, both former white Unionists and Confederates mourned their respective war dead and commemorated their sacrifices. However, despite the outcome of the

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<sup>74</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 33-43.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid*, 45-55.

war, when it came to national holidays, white Unionists found themselves with fewer reasons to celebrate. To begin with, African Americans were now successfully laying claim to Union heritage. Black Kentuckians participated for the first time in established national traditions and designated new commemorative anniversaries to honor their own wartime sacrifices. Enduring white supremacy discouraged former Kentucky Unionists from taking part in patriotic celebrations that included African Americans in the national family, yet neither could they claim the Lost Cause as their own.

Similarly disinterested in federally-designated commemoration, former Confederates also established their own rituals of remembrance. Unlike their Union counterparts, Confederates were responsible for funding and organizing the burial of their war dead. The cost of such an endeavor forced Kentucky Confederates to appeal directly to the public for sympathy and assistance. The state's former Unionists enthusiastically supported Confederate relief efforts and commemorative events—so much so that it became part of the larger phenomenon of the commonwealth adopting the South's Civil War cause. For the next three decades, stone structures honoring the Lost Cause sprung up throughout the state, in cemeteries, on courthouse lawns, and in town squares. These became, literally, concrete manifestations of white sectional reunion in Kentucky, and the clearest indication that reunion carried an unmistakably Confederate-tint. Indeed, by 1902 D.W. Griffith's native Oldham County boasted not only one of Kentucky's sixty-one Confederate memorials, but its only official burying ground for Confederate soldiers.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 82-85, 95-97. For information on the Confederate Cemetery in Oldham County Kentucky see The Pee Wee Valley Historical Society's website: <http://www.peeweevalleyhistory.org/pv-confederate-cemetery.html>

The myriad developments forging Kentucky's retroactive Confederate identity were scarcely underway when Jake and Mary Griffith began their postwar lives. Partisan sentiments doubtless remained mixed in the outer Bluegrass Region of the state where the Griffiths lived. Nevertheless, there is little evidence to suggest Jake Griffith was welcomed home as anything other than a noble warrior of the Lost Cause. Like many Confederate veterans, he was indicted for treason in 1866. However, the District Attorney dropped all charges.<sup>77</sup> For the rest of his life, Jake carried the formal title of Colonel Griffith and was referred to as "The Colonel" in his small community. But Jake's days of martial valor were over. Although his son would later claim Jake became a night rider in the Ku Klux Klan, it is unlikely. Not only was Jake approaching fifty by war's end, but his wounds left him in poor physical condition.<sup>78</sup>

Jake's affiliation with the Klan also seems unlikely given his and Mary's abiding identification with the codes of honor and chivalry associated with the Old South. Specifically, the Griffiths allied themselves with the Cavalier culture of Kentucky's Bluegrass region, which acquired mythical proportions during the first half of the nineteenth century. Violence was a constitutive element of this culture. Kentucky's reputation for violence began long before the Civil War, with the celebrated exploits of pioneers like Daniel Boone whose long rifles became a symbol of the state and the western frontier generally. Later, Kentucky's planter class brought social customs inherited from their mother states farther south, particularly Virginia. As the commonwealth's white gentry grew, southern codes of honor blended with pioneer lore in ways

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<sup>77</sup>"Treason and Misdemeanor," *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville), September 21, 1866, 3. "Indictments for Treason in Kentucky," *Louisville Daily Courier*, September 21, 1866, 1.

<sup>78</sup>Along with his father's stories about the suffering of Confederates during wartime, Griffith claimed to remember stories about his "mother staying up night after night, sewing robes for the Klan." Filmed prologue to 1930 re-release of *Birth of a Nation*, new shortened version with soundtrack. Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kino Intl. Corp, 2002). Transcription of the interview reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 188.

that lent bloodshed a sheen of respectability. Violence, whether in the form of duels, lynch law, or the pervasiveness of concealed weapons, was widely regarded as a reasonable means of settling disputes and defending one's honor. Critically, such violence operated within strict customs of social and racial hierarchy that kept the Cavalier's "natural impulses in check." The nature of the violence that prevailed after the Civil War, however, proved simultaneously less romantic and less acceptable to northern onlookers. Throughout the postwar period, press coverage both inside and outside the state characterized Kentucky's violent proclivities as a threat to its honor as well as its rank in the nation as a "civilized" society.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to depriving the commonwealth of its noble past, Kentucky's reputation for violence after the Civil War also derailed its future. To begin with, purveyors of violence frequently used the language of honor, chivalry, and civilization to justify barbaric acts. As such, Kentucky became increasingly associated with the former Confederacy, whose lawlessness stymied reincorporation into the Union. Yet Kentucky was free from Federal Reconstruction policies and its officials proved either unwilling or unable to curtail vigilantism. Consequently, the commonwealth's pervasive culture of disorder threatened its economic development. Specifically, violence and terror depreciated property values, encouraged "good citizens" to move elsewhere, and discouraged immigration. *Louisville-Courier* editor Henry Watterson became the chief opponent of Kentucky's violent reputation, labeling it a profound detriment to the state's material future. His newspaper likewise served as the central mouthpiece disseminating these views. At some point, Jake Griffith and Henry Watterson developed a personal relationship—one close enough for Jake to borrow money from the publisher. Jake

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<sup>79</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 73-78.

likely shared many of Watterson's views. As a rural farmer increasingly dependent on the labor of free blacks after the war, Jake hardly stood to benefit from the vigilante violence that hit rural areas especially hard. By depleting agrarian populations, Regulator and Klan terrorism worsened already severe labor shortages. That D.W. Griffith was perhaps disingenuous in linking his father to the Klan was likewise evidenced in his early films, at least one of which depicted the organization as indiscriminate bullies.<sup>80</sup>

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Despite his status as a local war hero, Jake Griffith remained handicapped by economic and military defeat after the war. He had barely become a genuine Southern patriarch when the outbreak of war threatened to rob him of his livelihood and community standing. While Jake never proved an especially adept or enthusiastic farmer, he doubtless relished his newfound dominion over family, land, and (slave) labor. Indeed, much of the appeal of Jake's inheritance was the possibility of leading a relatively idle life, performing little physical labor, and busying himself with maintaining a reputation.<sup>81</sup> Shorn of the free labor upon which the farm's prosperity depended, Jake put forth little effort of his own in restoring Lofty Green to its former abundance. Since battle wounds diminished his physical capacities, most of the chores were left to Mary and their eldest daughter, Mattie. Nevertheless, apart from another brief and undistinguished term in the state legislature, Jake did nothing of record in the twenty years left to him. Family members

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid, 60, 70-71, 76-77. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 24. Unpublished Autobiography, 12, *DWGP*, Reel 2. At the Biograph Griffith made a film called *The Rose of Kentucky* wherein the protagonist, a middle-aged tobacco farmer, is tormented by Klan after refusing to join their ranks. He saves both his black laborers and young female ward from their wrath. Scott Simmon suggests that Griffith's inspiration for the film was the actual "Black Patch War" of 1904-10 which broke out between tobacco farmers and in which the Klan was involved. Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 123-124.

<sup>81</sup>Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*, 79.

and neighbors recalled him variously drinking, gambling, playing the fiddle, and telling war stories, but rarely if ever lending a hand on the farm.<sup>82</sup>

Jake's postwar idleness evidently did not extend to his sex drive, as he and Mary raised what amounted to a second family between 1866 and 1880. Within a year of Jake's return from the battlefields the couple welcomed their fourth child, a daughter named Wheeler after Jake's former commander. During the next twelve years three additional sons followed: Jacob Jr. (1870), David (1875), and Albert (1879).<sup>83</sup> Jake and Mary Griffith had already lived full lives when they brought three new children into the world. Considerably older parents, Mary was almost fifty years old and Jake almost sixty when their youngest, Albert, was born. By 1880 their three eldest, William, Mattie, and Virginia (Jennie), were young adults, and the middle child, Wheeler, a teenager. Later in life, D.W. Griffith often remarked that his siblings "were old enough to be my parents." Indeed, the age disparity between the pre- and postwar Griffith children seemed to prohibit meaningful closeness, with the exception of Mattie, who had assumed a co-parenting role since the outbreak of the war. Nevertheless, excepting Mattie, the absence of D.W. Griffith's siblings in any of his published and unpublished memoirs is striking.<sup>84</sup>

Mattie and Jake Griffith factored most prominently in D.W.'s accounts of his early life in Oldham, County. Mattie had been Jake's favorite child. Indeed, the only surviving correspondence during Jake's two legislative terms are between him and his eldest daughter. He reportedly borrowed money from Louisville newspaper-owner and spokesperson of the New

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<sup>82</sup>Bravermann I, 13-16, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

<sup>83</sup>These dates are approximate as there were no birth certificates registered for the three youngest Griffith boys.

<sup>84</sup>Unpublished autobiography, *DWGP*, Reel 1. Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*. Passim.

South, Henry Watterson, to buy Mattie a piano and send her to college, something he did not do (or was unable to do) for his other children. Records indicate Mattie graduated from Millersburg Female College in 1875, the year her brother David was born. Millersburg was the female branch of the Methodist-run Kentucky Wesleyan College for men in Bourbon County. As both a finishing school and a normal school, Millersburg equipped Mattie to establish her own schoolhouse in Oldham County shortly after her graduation. There she taught each of the Griffith children at different times as well as some former slaves and neighboring children. Besides teaching, Mattie also rose at dawn to help her mother with farm work. She later instructed her younger sisters in the same practice when they came of age.<sup>85</sup>

Jake evidently saw Mattie as a steward of the family's respectability, particularly as the Griffiths fell on hard times. To supplement the children's formal learning, Jake and Mattie began reading from famous plays and novels, what Jake referred to as their "fireside club." Memories of their "club" comforted Jake during his second legislative term in 1878, where he felt poorly educated compared to his peers. Despite his own poor schooling, Jake was "consoled by the fact that from the little acorn the big oak grows," and "what [educated men] are now, so you may be." From Mattie, Jake hoped his children would become cultured and sophisticated. Explaining his hopes for his sons, in particular, Jake wrote "The question here is not...if he is rich, but [if] he [is] a man of brains." Above all else, Jake implored Mattie, "force upon your brothers and sisters the dire necessity of cultivating their minds." Mattie heeded her father's injunction

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<sup>85</sup>For copies of Jacob's letters to Mattie see *DWGP*, Reel 35. Bravermann Manuscript, 15, Bravermann Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 35. Year: 1880; Census Place: *Floydsburg, Oldham, Kentucky*; Roll: 437; Page: 61A; Enumeration District: 154. Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. *Annual Announcement and Catalogue of the Millersburg Female College, Millersburg, Bourbon County, KY, 1887*. Democrat Publishing Company, Book and Job Printers, Harrodsburg, KY, 1887. Kentucky Historical Society (Digital Publisher), 11. See also Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 32-36.

devotedly, earning enough on her own to send her two siblings, Jacob and Wheeler, to Kentucky Wesleyan after Jake's death in 1885.<sup>86</sup>

Despite Jake's desire that all his children receive an education, only Mattie, Jacob Jr., and Wheeler ever did. Indeed, Jake would pass onto to his son, David, an enduring complex about his lack of formal education. Nevertheless, during the ten years D.W. had with his father, Jake filled their house with a spirit of knowledge and learning that supplemented Mattie's lessons. D.W. Griffith recalled as one of his dearest childhood pleasures a weekly reading night hosted alternately by the Griffiths or the Oglesby-Whytes in nearby Shelby County. On these occasions Mattie and Colonel Griffith took turns with cousins John and Sally Whyte reading aloud from such authors as Edgar Allen Poe, Shakespeare, and Oliver Goldsmith. Among the favorites at reading night were pioneers of the plantation romance, William Gilmore Simms and John Pendleton Kennedy. Sir Walter Scott likewise factored prominently in the Griffith-Whyte reading lists as his conception of social castes and lofty manner of speech remained representative of postwar Kentucky. Authors critical of slavery or the American South were conspicuously missing from this period of D.W. Griffith's literary upbringing.<sup>87</sup>

While D.W. Griffith recalled reading nights with unmistakable sentimentality, his father's own stories left the most indelible impression on him. With his sons as an audience, Jake delved into dramatic yarns about his grandfather Salathiel's service in the Revolutionary War and his father Daniel's participation in the War of 1812. These tales became suspenseful preludes to Jake's personal accounts as a soldier-adventurer, which he relayed in even more theatrical fashion. Varying the volume and pitch of his voice and acting out scenes with

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<sup>86</sup>Letter to Mattie Griffith from Jacob Griffith, January 4, 1878, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

<sup>87</sup>Bravermann, 22, *DWGP*, Reel 35.



remarkable energy, Jake gave equally dramatic emphasis to memories of heroism and adventure as he did recollections of suffering and defeat. One moment he would cease animation and soberly recount marching into battle barefoot and surviving for weeks on end without provisions, the next he would leap to his feet, making sweeping gestures to illustrate his company's rout of Gen. Rosecrans' men despite great odds. Sometimes fellow Confederate veterans would join Jake's commemorative performances. Together, D.W. Griffith remembered, the aging men "would fight the Civil War all over again—with ever-increasing victories." They also relived the collective experience of falling to the ground and weeping like children upon learning of General Lee's surrender.<sup>88</sup>

To his sons, Jake emphasized the multitude of losses the family endured with Confederate defeat. He explained how their mother's physical deterioration began when the family's slaves fled the property. Jake stressed the ease of life that came with being a slaveholder during the Antebellum Era. He characterized his wife being forced to toil on the farm as something older relatives could have scarcely imagined. To be sure, in Jake's accounting, the abolition of slavery wrought hardship on every single member of the Griffith family. Such determinations could have done little but stir resentment in young D.W., whose early life in Oldham County was so marked by material hardship. Nevertheless, his family's victimization was not wholly without honor. As the Lost Cause narrative assured the Griffiths and other southerners, Confederates fought heroically for a noble purpose. "Always, always be proud you are a Griffith," Jake regularly implored his sons, for they descended from Welsh royalty and were endowed with transcendent virtue of manly bravery.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 24, 36. Bravermann, 19, *DWGP*, Reel 35. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 25-28.

<sup>89</sup>Bravermann, 19A, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

The overwhelming sense that his family knew much better times before he was born permeated D.W. Griffith's early childhood and profoundly shaped his identity. On the one hand, his father's tales of the Griffith men's battle-tested courage and royal Welsh bloodlines inspired a pride of birth that D.W. never completely abandoned. On the other hand, such anecdotes provided little practical wisdom for Jake's sons as they came of age in the New South. Lamentations of a lost agrarian paradise did not help young Kentucky men achieve financial independence in a society that sought industrialization. The tenets of antebellum paternalism and aristocratic ideals were similarly ill-suited to the changing social world of postbellum Kentucky in which D.W. Griffith grew into adulthood. While Griffith would always see the Civil War as the source of his economic disadvantage as a youth, he would have struggled to maintain a narrative of Jake Griffith as an unqualified tragic hero. For instance, it was common knowledge while Jake was alive that the Griffith *women* worked the farm. Rumors abounded of Jake's regular intoxication and gambling problem. In one family anecdote, Jake was responsible for selling the season's crop in order to secure shoes for the children during the upcoming winter. Sell the crop he did, but then gambled away the profits. What is more, upon Jake's death Mary Griffith learned of insurmountable debts and mortgages that forced her to sell the farm and move the family to Louisville. However brave a soldier he may have been, Jake certainly proved to be a poor provider in peacetime.<sup>90</sup>

Regardless of Jake Griffith's conflicted reputation in the community, his death in 1885 became the defining moment of his son David's young life. Although it had been twenty years since Jake's failed defense of the Confederacy, D.W. Griffith blamed the war for his father's

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<sup>90</sup>Bravermann, 14-15, 19A, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

death. According to D.W., a Union blockade prevented his father from using proper medical supplies to dress his battle wounds. The “crude dressings” Jake was forced to use instead “rotted and broke” and “finally brought his death.” It is unclear what actually caused Jake’s death, but D.W.’s conclusions were evidently important for his own healing. Not only did they place Jake back on the battlefield, allowing him to perish honorably with his fallen comrades, they also gave D.W. Griffith a more explicit claim on the South’s Lost Cause. Griffith experienced his father’s death as the final reckoning of the Civil War, a “blow from the past [taking] that which I loved more than anything I have ever loved in my life.” He recalled Jake’s final days wherein each child was called to his bedside to receive a parting word. “He looked at me for quite a long time with those brave eyes that now seemed so soft and tender,” Griffith recalled; “Finally he said, as I drew close to him, ‘be brave my son, be brave.’” “Since then,” Griffith continued, “there has never been a crisis in my life [when those words haven’t] come to me—‘be brave, be brave.’” Most often during these reminiscences Griffith determined he “was not born to live up to this advice” and claimed he never exhibited bravery like that of his father and other Griffith men.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Jake’s death cast a long shadow over D.W. Griffith’s sense of himself as a man. Throughout his life he would struggle to both honor his father’s memory and avoid his tragic errors.

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After Jake’s death, Mary was almost immediately forced to give up the family farm. Initially they moved to neighboring Shelby County, to what Griffith described as “the most useless farm in the world.” There they lived with Griffith’s eldest brother, William, and his wife,

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<sup>91</sup>D.W. Griffith, Unpublished Autobiography, *DWGP*, 5-6.

Mary. For two years they struggled to wring enough profit out of their new piece of land to pay off the \$1800 mortgage they owed on Lofty Green. Instead, Griffith remembered waging a “losing fight against rocks, roots, bugs, and worn-out soil” after which they “never [even] made a dent” in the money they owed. Griffith’s memories of Shelby County were characterized by hard labor on the farm and two-and-a-half mile walks to the nearby schoolhouse which were pleasant in summer but miserable in winter. The Griffith children were always under-clothed during the cold months and although he enjoyed learning, Griffith’s dominant memory of his school days was being bullied mercilessly on his route to and from home. Not only did Griffith regularly arrive at school drenched and shivering during wintertime, but once the bell rang one bully was always armed and ready with a barrage of snowballs he had frozen in the nearby stream. “He sometimes missed my head in a moment of weakness,” Griffith conceded, “but seldom did he miss me somewhere.” While the frozen snowballs were particularly memorable, Griffith alleged the bullying was just as persistent in the warmer months.<sup>92</sup>

Griffith’s experiences being bullied in Shelby County represented his first encounters with violence and his first memory of following his mother’s and Christ’s pacifist instruction. He reflected on the irony that his tormentors came from more money than he did and as such “came from families of allegedly high moral principles [who were], of course, churchgoing people.” Yet it seemed only Griffith “acquired a good Christian spirit and actually strove to follow the teachings of nonresistance that had been pressed upon me by my mother and other [family] members.” Indeed, Griffith recalled that after his father’s death his mother “clung...more earnestly than ever to religion” and instilled in him a near-absolute rejection of violence even as

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid. Unpublished Autobiography, 8, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

a means of self-defense. He recounted with amusement bordering on ambivalence an instance when a tollgate keeper's son punched him in the face without warning. "Following my religious training," Griffith claimed "I actually turned the other [cheek]." Of course, "He whooped and walloped that side, too." Sometimes in his memoirs he made light of the fact that he was so easily influenced by his mother, recounting several boys wailing on him at one time, aware he would never fight back. Since there were "no punching bags in those days," Griffith reasoned, "I was a gift from God." Nevertheless, he also credited these early attacks as the source of his later obsession with physical fitness, something people who knew him as an adult frequently observed.<sup>93</sup>

In many of ways, Griffith's path to adulthood was representative of turn-of-the century Americana. For instance, once Mary accepted they would never again own Lofty Green, the Griffiths embarked on a characteristic New South existence. At her eldest daughter Mattie's urging, Mary determined that the best chance for her sons to become something resembling middle-class would be if she moved the family to nearby Louisville. Mattie and another daughter, Virginia (now going by Ruth), had been living there since Jacob's death and insisted rural Kentucky held no promise for a woman in Mary's position. So in early 1889 Griffith remembered the family loading up all their belongings on a two-horse wagon and heading for Louisville. The Griffiths' move was part of a much larger trend sweeping the South. Between 1880 and 1910 the region's village and town population grew by five million people. Along with

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<sup>93</sup>D.W. Griffith, Unpublished Autobiography, 9, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

Nashville, Louisville was the landmark city of the Griffiths' sub-region, the central plateau. By 1910, it was the South's second largest city.<sup>94</sup>

Griffith recalled excitement at the prospect of moving to the city. "No more back-breaking toil," he thought, "no more tediously long farm chores. We are going to live in the city—hooray! hooray!" Once they arrived in Louisville, however, Griffith realized their problems were far from resolved. As he sat atop the mountain of furniture on their horse-drawn wagon, "from all sides, as we slowly creaked and rattled towards our new home, came jeering cries from street urchins: 'Country Jakes!' 'Country Jakes!'" It suddenly dawned on D.W. that "dire poverty [would trail] the Griffith family right into...Louisville." He was not completely wrong. Throughout the 1890s the Griffiths lived in at least seven different residences in the downtown area, taking in boarders at each one. While every member of the household brought in enough money to keep the family from "dire" straits, the Griffiths' life in Louisville was nevertheless still characterized by financial hardship.<sup>95</sup>

The first two years in Louisville were not all bad. Griffith was able to attend school again, this time with fewer assaults from his peers. As in Shelby County, however, Griffith struggled to make friends as the demands of home left little time for leisure. He also generally did not fit in well with other people his age. In Shelby County schoolmates recalled D.W. deigning to water the cows but refusing to play with other children in the stream. Griffith preferred instead to sit on a bench and read. Not a few times did these same children pelt him with walnuts to vent their frustration and confusion, teasing, "Hey, funny boy, why don't you

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<sup>94</sup>Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55. Ayers actually uses the Griffiths as an example of this phenomenon, 63.

<sup>95</sup>Unpublished Autobiography, DWGP, Reel 2.

play with us?” In Louisville, Edmund Rucker, who later became one of Griffith’s only friends, remembered his first impression of D.W. as “a hick...[who] badly needed a haircut.” On the first day of school, he evidently wore “jeans that barely reached his ankles, red suspenders and rawhide shoes.” Other witnesses to Griffith’s first years in Louisville remembered him coming to class with dirt caked on his face and under his nails. In Griffith’s own hazy memory of the period he claimed to struggle gathering his bearings at school. He was, however, able to stay at the Louisville school for two whole years, longer than he had been in any school before. His sister, Mattie, provided additional tutoring for him in the evenings. The extra help paid off and Griffith eventually caught the eye of an instructor, “Mr. Wasabeer,” who helped him advance two grades, landing him early placement in the public high school.<sup>96</sup>

But just as Griffith began to adjust—even excel—in certain aspects of his new environment, tragedy struck again. During his first summer in Louisville, his sister, Mattie, died of tuberculosis, dealing a major material and psychological blow to the family. In addition to providing emotional stability and financial support, Mattie was also most familiar with the city. They depended on her to ease the transition to urban living. Not long after Mattie’s death the family’s boarding operations slowed to such a degree that Griffith was forced to give up school and secure permanent employment. Indeed, every time the family moved “the schoolhouses kept getting farther and farther away from me,” he remembered. Griffith described the disappointment he felt about abandoning his education, “having for some [time now] entertained the thought that perhaps some unheard of uncle rich as Croesus would [learn] of our plight and promptly mail me a million-dollar check special delivery.” Although the tone of his recollection was lighthearted,

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<sup>96</sup>Bravermann, MS, Chapter II, 3, Bravermann Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 35. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 39. Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 41.

Griffith *did* harbor such hopes of a distant relative swooping in to relieve him of his stress and sacrifice well into adulthood. After all, he had been told he descended from Welsh royalty and had ties to the earliest plantation classes of Virginia and South Carolina.<sup>97</sup>

By all means, reminders of paternal ancestors—his father, especially—filled Griffith with shame about his station in life. He found it especially difficult to uphold his forbearers’ legacy when he lived in a completely different world than they had. Symbols of that difference abounded in Louisville, where Griffith frequently came across prominent individuals who had known his father. He recalled one instance while working his first full-time job at a dry goods store. Famed Kentucky belle, Sallie Ward Downs, apparently approached him asking if he was Colonel Griffith’s son. Before he could even acknowledge her question, his boss yelled ““Cash boy! Cash boy! Come here with that change!”” Startled, Griffith hurried over to his employer “and was promptly weighted down with some material and shoved down to the basement steps toward the wrapping desk.” While feigning gratitude that his boss “saved me from an embarrassing situation,” Griffith relayed the story as a mortifying anecdote. He further acknowledged that he did not dare “cloud father’s reputation by letting [any of] his friends know that I was his son.”<sup>98</sup> This curious mixture of pride and shame characterized Griffith’s Louisville experience. He clung to his affiliation with the Lost Cause through his father’s heroic service and held tight to the promise that he contained royal blood. At the same time, such abstract sources of reassurance and self-respect could be difficult to summon when living hand-to-mouth.

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<sup>97</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 41. Griffith, Unfinished Autobiography, 12, *DWGP*, Reel 2. Gish, *The Movies*, 48.

<sup>98</sup>Unpublished Autobiography, *DWGP*, Reel 2.



Yet some of the physical reminders of his socio-economic plight provided their own kind of salve to his vulnerable masculinity. At the same dry goods store where he was once a cash boy, Griffith was promoted to elevator operator. Griffith's task was to start and stop the machine by pulling on thick wire ropes which suspended the weight. Too poor to afford proper gloves, the wires "gently tore off the skin on my hands to such an extent that they were swollen and bleeding for weeks." Griffith claimed his biggest concern was "keeping the blood from showing to the customers" who might be put off by his open wounds. Evidently his mother was so horrified by his injuries that she tried to get him fired for fear he would lose a hand. But Griffith grew proud of the elevator work. It gave him a sturdy constitution by building his upper body strength. "When my boss approached me [because of my mother's complaint], I told him I was doing great," remembered Griffith, "and [eventually] the hands got used to it." Once his hands were callused Griffith could take more breaks between elevator runs during which he read anything and everything he could get his hands on. An avid reader coming of age in the heyday of Horatio Alger, Griffith doubtless encountered tales of urban youth who, after toiling at similar jobs as his, worked their way out of poverty into positions of power and influence. Indeed, Griffith seems to have always been optimistic that the hardships he faced in Louisville were temporary.<sup>99</sup>

Griffith continued to work the elevator at Lewis's Dry Goods Store for two more years, during which he resigned himself to the fact that his formal education was over. Now seventeen years old, it was time to think about a long-term career. Such considerations put him at odds with family tradition. He remembered that the only "honorable" professions available to men his age were "gentlemanly farming, ministry, or the law." As far as Griffith was concerned, he had

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<sup>99</sup>Letter to Willard Griffith (nephew) from D.W. Griffith, April 8, 1933, *DWGP*, Reel 25. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 40.

already tried farming. Not only did he fail, but he loathed the work. Farming was out. The law apparently interested Griffith as little as farming. While he had cousins who established successful legal careers in Louisville, he seems to have never considered following in their footsteps. Griffith recalled the law as a “stepping stone to ‘statesmanship,’” for which he had no aspirations. Indeed, with a few notable exceptions, Griffith rarely expressed any distinctly political views throughout his life. As an adult, Griffith’s politics were incoherent at best, tinted with an ambiguous strand of populism that later became mildly reactionary.<sup>100</sup>

Griffith’s mother hoped he would pursue the ministry. “[Mary] wanted him to be a [Methodist] preacher,” his great niece later relayed. Mary’s religious instruction certainly had an enduring impact. Among Griffith’s earliest recollections were of his mother sending him to school with a meager lunch and insisting he not let anyone call him “Dave.” His name was the Biblical “David, [which meant] dearly beloved.” Griffith’s mother so impressed upon him the sense that he was touched by God that one morning on the way to school he was certain Jesus Christ visited him through the trees. It was after a storm when the sun caused the icicles to produce an almost blinding gleam. Recounting the experience in the 1930s, Griffith wrote, “As clearly as I now can see a brick wall, I saw the face of Christ.” He spoke to the deity and professed his abiding love. Despite the vivid experience, Griffith seems to have hardly entertained the prospect of pursuing a religious career. As an adult he maintained a loose

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<sup>100</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 39. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 29. Of course, following agitation against *Birth*, Griffith became an impassioned spokesperson for First Amendment Rights, culminating in his publishing the pamphlet *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America* (Los Angeles, 1916). Schickel claims that Griffith opposed the New Deal, but does not provide any evidence or examples, Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 29. Griffith did write three versions of an article titled, “The Injustice of the Income Tax,” in 1932, copies of which he sent to several U.S. senators, *DWGP*, Reel 18.

personal connection with Methodism, but otherwise became a Mason with no strong sectarian beliefs.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, Griffith took to heart the dictate that whatever career he chose needed to be “honorable”—or at least not disgrace his family. But aside from professions that did not appeal to him, those standards left Griffith little options. The spirit of the Old South and the shadow of the Civil War that continued to stalk the older members of Griffith’s family was proving to be an unusable past for the seventeen year old. Indeed, he recalled that pursuing *anything* “merely to make money was frowned upon,” yet money seemed to be what all of them sorely needed. He later lamented that it took him so long “to discover just how silly this idea was,” and surmised that “many good, sound, American dollars slipped through my fingers...on account of that poisonous belief.” By 1893, however, Griffith had models for possible alternatives beyond the honor-trifecta of farming, ministry and the law. For instance, his older brother, Jacob, Jr., began to turn his apprenticeship as a type-setter into full-blown profession. Jacob had been working for the *Spencer County Courier*, a weekly paper owned by Will Griffith’s new brother-in-law, when he evidently fell in love with the newspaper business. His brother David later described him as a “lifelong newspaper man” and attributed his death from lead poisoning at 40 to his early days setting ink for local Kentucky papers.<sup>102</sup>

As he continued to operate the elevator at Lewis’s, the only thing about which Griffith grew certain about was his passion for literature. Once he realized he could complete a considerable amount of reading on the job, Griffith began frequenting Louisville’s Polytechnic

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<sup>101</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 39. Griffith, Unfinished Autobiography, 11, *DWGP*, Reel 2. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 33.

<sup>102</sup>Hart and Griffith, *Hollywood*, 39. Letter to Kent B. Stiles of the Newspaper Club, from D.W. Griffith, April 15, 1933. *DWGP*, Reel 18. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 32.

Library. He determined that he would continue what education he had by deepening his knowledge of the literary greats. The library was also where he forged his friendship with Edmund Rucker. Rucker recalled Griffith devouring books as if possessed by some unspoken purpose. His tastes ranged from Leo Tolstoy to Charles Dickens. He cherished equally the poetry of Robert Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickenson. Griffith also consumed several histories of the Civil War. Soon, Rucker and Griffith were taking field trips inspired by their readings. One such excursion suggested Mark Twain's influence. The two young men explored an abandoned cabin on the banks of the Ohio River which Griffith insisted had at one point housed Louis-Phillippe, former Duke of Orleans, whilst he was in exile during the French Revolution. Rucker also recalled the two friends attending a lecture by Mrs. George Pickett, widow of the famous General who led the charge at Gettysburg. Anyone who knew Griffith was aware of his lifelong fascination with Pickett's Charge.<sup>103</sup>

One summer, Griffith started to perceive ways in which his passion for literature might find professional expression. Specifically, while helping his eldest brother, William, on his farm in Southville, Griffith began experimenting with his singing voice. Melodies on the farm gave way to vocal stylings during his breaks from the elevator at Lewis's. Eventually, his brother Jacob encouraged Griffith to join the church choir. Jacob and the youngest Griffith, Albert, shared D.W.'s enjoyment of singing and, together with a fellow Lewis employee, Frank Coyle, the four men formed a quartet. Although the ensemble never quite took off, the experience was an important one for Griffith. He was widely considered their stand-out talent. Significantly, the

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<sup>103</sup>Gish recalled Griffith saying "he would have rather written one page of *Leaves of Grass* than to have made all the movies for which he received acclaim." She also said Griffith could recite lines by Whitman on command. Gish, *The Movies*, 47, 167. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 41-42.

consistent praise Griffith received for his singing voice sent him on a new path toward exploring other avenues of performance.<sup>104</sup>

Soon, Griffith's reading habits and foray into musical training dovetailed with his growing love of theater. Any surplus income went toward purchasing cheap tickets to theatrical performances at one of the city's many arenas. Louisville loomed large in the New South as a haven of the arts and its theater world spoke to the city's cultural and economic advancement. There were as many different kinds of performances to choose from in Louisville as there were theatrical venues. The Avenue promised quality melodrama while the Grand and Harris stock company offered serious subjects for audiences on a budget. Those seeking burlesque could visit The Buckingham, those who preferred variety frequented The Bijou. Best of all to Griffith were the Auditorium and Macauley's, where touring companies from the East stopped through to perform split weeks. Griffith fondly recalled the moment when he "saved enough pennies to see Julia Marlowe in *Romeo and Juliet*," which he claimed changed his life forever.<sup>105</sup>

At some point during his last year as an elevator boy at Lewis's the theater became Griffith's principal fixation. He simply could not keep away. As a practical response, Griffith upped his dramatic readings, coming to appreciate Browning's plays as much as his poems. Despite Griffith's mounting obsession, however, there were no obvious ways to penetrate the world of the stage. One break came when his voice coach convinced Griffith to take a part in a local Baptist Church's production of *The District School*. In it Griffith played a dunce, perched on a high stool complete with a pointed hat, and was given one line: "The breeze from the lake blows chilly tonight." Accounts vary as to the quality of Griffith's performance, but the

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<sup>104</sup>Unpublished Autobiography, 42, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

<sup>105</sup>"The Week's Playbills," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 10, 1895, 24.

experience motivated him to begin practicing reading aloud from plays, pacing his room at night while he experimented with voice projection and pantomimes. Eventually Griffith took it upon himself to present his services as an usher, stagehand, or super, to various theater managers throughout the city.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, for the moment it was unclear what exactly Griffith sought in gaining closer access to the theater world.

In the meantime, another fortuitous event helped Griffith clarify the nature of his budding dramatic ambitions. In 1893 one of his cousins, Albert Shipp Oglesby, set Griffith up with a job at Flexner's Bookstore. Griffith's position at Flexner's represented a profound transition from operating a grain elevator. Now he was responsible for acting as a custodian to the objects he most treasured—books—tending to their organization, dusting them, and sometimes handling sales. Not only was Griffith getting paid to maintain a veritable library—Flexner's was Louisville's pre-eminent book shop—but his bosses, the Flexner family, were ambassadors of Louisville's cultural and intellectual elite. One brother, Simon, was a pioneering physician and scientist who later became the first director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research and friend and advisor to John Rockefeller, Jr. The other Flexners' prominence was primarily local. Jacob Flexner was a successful physician and served on the State Board of Pharmacy; Washington Flexner ran a successful brokerage firm; and Mary Flexner was a playwright with a handful of productions on Broadway.

Flexner's Book Store became a hot-spot for Louisville's intellectual scene. Both local and visiting luminaries used the space as a meeting place to discuss what Griffith referred to as "mighty subjects." Griffith recalled hovering as close to the discussions as possible, pretending

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<sup>106</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 42. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 41.

to organize whatever row of books was nearby. Indeed, Flexner's opened the world up to Griffith. "It was one of those few jobs I suppose," he later wrote, "where a boy would find various excuses [to stay at work] rather than go home." As an adult, Griffith claimed he owed much of his success to the Flexners and their gentle way of permitting him to read, more often than dust, the treasure trove of books at his disposal.<sup>107</sup>

Griffith worked at Flexner's for three years until the family sold the store to a new owner who eventually fired him. By 1895, the twenty year old could delay no further in selecting a path for his future. Informing his mother of his ultimate decision proved difficult—Griffith was going to pursue acting. In her son's telling, Mary Griffith was beside herself when she learned of his theatrical aspirations. Her first impulse was to give him a brief family history lesson. This time, Mary included a few more sordid details to underscore just how unconscionable a dramatic career appeared in light of the Griffith bloodline. She began by covering familiar ground, reminding her son that his "great-grandfather claimed direct descent from those Griffiths who were the reigning family of Wales from the seventh to the thirteenth century...[and who] had intermarried with most of the royal families of Europe." Mary confessed that those ancient Griffiths became buried in the later historical record "doubtless because they had in the interim committed...assorted villainies." She insisted, however, "none is on record as...[falling]...so low as to...become an actor." Although Griffith recalled this anecdote with a measure of amusement, he doubtless experienced genuine pressure to square his pursuit of a theatrical career with his family's expectations. For the time being, he reassured his mother—with little success—

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<sup>107</sup> Interestingly enough, Dr. Flexner's research helped dismantle the apprentice system which had allowed individuals like Jake Griffith to practice medicine without formal training. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 10, 1885, 8. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 11, 1907, 9. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 44. D.W. Griffith, Unpublished Autobiography, 13, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

that acting represented a temporary measure en route to his nobler ambition of becoming a great dramatist.<sup>108</sup>

There is evidence suggesting Griffith felt the need to justify his decision to himself as well. In a 1916 retrospective on his life published in *Photoplay*, Griffith claimed his “first and last ambition, until Fate turned me into a picture man, was to be a writer.” He further mythologized that writing had been his aim since childhood, barring his innate desire to become a soldier. “My father’s sword and its early effect on my mind,” explained Griffith “[as well] as his noble career [and] [battle] wounds...impart[ed] a martial trend to my character.” But, he reasoned, “there was no war, and the scholarly atmosphere of my home, I suppose, was responsible for my inclination to become a great literary man.” Griffith’s suggestion that historical circumstances stymied his inborn disposition toward the soldiering life hardly bares scrutiny. To begin with, he was of ripe military age in 1898 when the U.S. went to war with Spain, and there were recruitment centers in Kentucky where he might have enlisted. Nor did he appear to have ever investigated other avenues of military service during his young adulthood. Indeed, Griffith frequently justified his foray into performing as the only avenue through which he could learn stagecraft and become a playwright. Nevertheless, that he used aliases throughout his acting career, even when success seemed imminent, further suggested he took his mother’s disappointment to heart. And yet, Griffith’s stage names often bore some resemblance to his noble ancestors, as when he went by Lawrence Brayington, whose surname matched that of his

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<sup>108</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 42, 49. Griffith, Unpublished Autobiography, 14, *DWGP*, Reel 2.



alleged royal forefather.<sup>109</sup> Such a detail implied Griffith's determination to transform his dramatic ambitions into an honorable profession worthy of the family name.

In 1897 Griffith joined the Meffert Stock Company, a touring theater group based in Louisville's East Market District. He found regular work for two years with Meffert, obtaining small roles in such performances as David Belasco's *Men and Women*. Doomed to remain unemployed during the spring and summer of 1897, however, Griffith took up with a motley crew of actors who comprised a new company, The Twilight Revelers. The purpose of the group was to tour small towns throughout Kentucky and Indiana as a means of supporting themselves that summer. Griffith's experience with the Twilight Revelers later became a hallmark of his self-made mythology. The Revelers exposed Griffith to diverse individuals who, like him, were trying to perform their way into better social, if not material, circumstances. They taught Griffith the ins-and-outs of life as a traveling actor. In his reminiscences, Griffith often relayed tales of that adventurous summer, claiming several occasions during which the Revelers evaded landlords demanding rent by departing for their next engagement in the middle of the night. He also recalled the frequency with which the company would exchange membership or stage time for room and board. In fact, evidence that the summer season was officially over came when their last performance generated no cash customers, but rather an audience of new members' wives. The itinerant, hand-to-mouth experience convinced Griffith he had decidedly arrived on the scene. "Now," he later wrote, "now...*I was an actor*."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Henry Stephen Gordon, "The Story of D.W. Griffith (Part I)" *Photoplay Magazine*, June 1916, Vol. X, No. 1, 28-37. Also in *DWGP*, Reel 2, 1916 General; and Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 31.

<sup>110</sup>Griffith and Hart, *Hollywood*, 48-50. Unpublished Autobiography, 15-17, *DWGP*, Reel 2. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 48-49.

When Griffith returned to Louisville that fall he rejoined Meffert, which had recently changed management. He once more found steady employment and was cast in several small productions that helped shape his dramatic tastes. Two plays by Adolphe D'Ennery, for example, *A Celebrated Cause* (1877) and *The Two Orphans* (1875), clearly influenced Griffith's artistic sensibilities. Both stories were set during the French Revolution and dealt with tragic familial separations and misunderstandings. Not only did Griffith regularly draw on those themes as a filmmaker, but he risked a great deal when he adapted *The Two Orphans* in 1921, with what became *Orphans of the Storm*. Furthermore, The French Revolution appeared as a subject countless times in the over 500 one-reel shorts he later made for the Biograph Company.<sup>111</sup>

It was during this period, too, that Meffert's management loaned Griffith out to a Chicago-based company for a season. In Chicago, Griffith received better parts in better plays, landing his first significant role as Abraham Lincoln in William Haworth's *The Ensign* (1898). The play dealt with the Trent Affair during the Civil War when Confederates attempted to sneak past the Union Navy and secure European diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy as a country. Although small, Lincoln's part in the play was crucial to its melodramatic climax (he prevented the ensign's execution). Griffith earned praise for his performance in Chicago papers and was asked to don his Lincoln costume, makeup and all, at a local Elks club minstrel show. Griffith later identified this time in Chicago as the moment he saw his first movie, by which he claimed to be utterly underwhelmed. For the next two years, Griffith continued to work

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<sup>111</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 50-51.

regularly, moving between the James Neill Company in Chicago, Meffert in Louisville, and another small troupe in Clinton, Iowa.<sup>112</sup>

By 1900, the now twenty-four year old decided he had sufficiently proven not only that he could maintain steady employment as an actor, but that his star was on the rise. His most recent role as Athos in a Louisville production of *The Three Musketeers*, officially convinced Griffith it was time to take his career to the next level. And so with only nineteen dollars in his pocket, he sailed to New York City, bent on making a full-scale assault on the mecca of American theatre. Once he arrived, Griffith proved remarkably adaptable to the harsh conditions of itinerant urban living. During his first several months, Griffith stayed in cheap flophouses in Brooklyn and on Houston Street near the Bowery. Finally, he landed a lead in the popular five-part melodrama, *London Life*, for which he earned \$25 a week. *London Life* took Griffith all over the country, through most states in the East, Midwest and West Coast. While the production generated regular attendance, it received mixed critical reviews.<sup>113</sup>

When *London Life* closed, it became much more difficult for Griffith to support himself in New York through acting alone. He therefore turned to other forms of remuneration between theater gigs, for instance, shoveling concrete and iron ore, and offering his services as a type setter for local newspapers. In 1904 he decided to try his luck out West, and joined a stock company based in San Francisco. Although California provided no better circumstances for maintaining regular theatrical work than New York, the change proved significant in a number of

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<sup>112</sup>Melvyn Stokes, *American History through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 57. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 50-51.

<sup>113</sup>Schickel concluded that Griffith was likely fired after the play's Minnesota run but Eric Flom has shown that this was not the case. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 55-59. Eric L. Flom, *Silent Film Stars on the Stages of Seattle: A History of Performances by Hollywood Notables* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2009), 80-81.

ways. First, the social atmosphere and physical environment profoundly stimulated Griffith's imagination. When he was not performing, Griffith made money travelling up and down the West Coast picking hops. This experience furnished him with material for the first play he ever wrote, *A Fool and a Girl*. Laboring in the California hop fields also likely summoned memories of Jake Griffith's flamboyant tales recounting his adventures during the Gold Rush. As such, it reacquainted Griffith with his heritage and shored up his sense of belonging to venerable Cavalier stock. Indeed, Richard Schickel drew a convincing parallel between Griffith's attraction to the stage and his connection to his father. On the one hand, acting offered Griffith "what war had [offered Jake], a place that could comfortably encompass grand emotions, sweeping gestures." Yet the theater was also "a place for wanderers; and Griffith, no less than his father, would need to be free of confining domesticity and imprisoning roots." If nothing else, Griffith's time in California further whetted his appetite for romance, which reassured him of his chosen path.<sup>114</sup>

California was also where Griffith met a fellow performer, Linda Arvidson, whom he would marry two years later. Linda not only shared Griffith's love of the stage, but she encouraged his larger ambitions to become a playwright. Most importantly, she reconnected Griffith to his southern heritage. A native of San Francisco herself, Linda recalled Griffith as the first southerner she ever met. As the two grew close, she claimed, "A new world soon opened up for me—the South." It turned out the South from where D.W. Griffith hailed was a far cry from the place Linda had read about in her high school history books. "The one I...studied," she later wrote, "didn't tell of Colonel Jacob Wark Griffith...who fought [with] Stonewall Jackson...was

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<sup>114</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 46.

called ‘Thunder Jake’ for his roaring voice...owned lots of negroes, gambled, and loved Shakespeare.” “‘Sister Mattie’” likewise made frequent appearances in the re-education Griffith gave Linda regarding this distant and exotic region of the country. Before long, “The South began to loom [large] as a land of romance” in Linda’s imagination. Linda’s curiosity and her willingness to be Griffith’s audience as he performed mythologies of his homeland allowed Griffith to conjure his father’s spirit in new ways. It also gave Griffith a sense that his background lent him a unique, and therefore valuable, perspective in the bustling world of the theater, a community that otherwise seemed far removed from his place of birth.<sup>115</sup>

There is no question that during the near decade he spent crisscrossing the country as a traveling actor, the South and the Civil War remained a constant presence in Griffith’s life. His father’s memory and his mother’s persistent financial struggles hovered over Griffith’s every move. On the wall of each of his residences, Griffith was rumored to have hung the tattered Union uniform his father donned when he returned from the war in 1865. Any surplus money Griffith earned, however small, he sent to his mother in Louisville. For her part, Mary Griffith continued to make ends meet by housing boarders, although she changed addresses several times before her death in 1915. Griffith’s strength to persevere along his chosen path stemmed as much from the increasing value he placed on physical exertion as it did his identification with the South’s Lost Cause. For example, he prided himself on outlasting his fellow workers as they shoveled iron ore into the holds of steamers that carried it from the Niagara River in Tonawanda, New York, across the Great Lakes. Much later, when he became a famous filmmaker, Griffith claimed to still “feel the benefits [of shoveling ore for twenty-hour stretches] every day I live.”

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<sup>115</sup>Linda Arvidson Griffith (Mrs. D.W. Griffith), *When the Movies Were Young* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 13.

He continued, “It gave me physical resiliency, fortitude, determination to go all the way through to a given ambition.” Griffith’s obsession with physical culture was common among other white men with middle-class values in turn-of-the-century America, as was his experience migrating from town to city both inside and outside his home state of Kentucky.<sup>116</sup>

While these traits made him a characteristic man of his time, Griffith’s relationship to the Old and New South imbued him with a special allure to others. He would tell Civil War stories and anecdotes from his family history to anyone who would listen. Next to Jake Griffith’s commandeering of a horse-and-buggy during battle, Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg remained Griffith’s favorite tale. He retold it throughout his life. Griffith relayed his attraction to the story in a 1930 interview he gave Walter Huston. In response to Huston’s praise for Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith cited Pickett’s Charge as among the reasons he deserved little credit for *Birth*:

You can tell easily a story *about* something...about a tremendous struggle. A story of people that were fighting desperately against great odds, [about] great sacrifices. Suffering. Death. It was a great struggle, a great story...Pickett’s Charge [for example], pitiful thing. There were boys, like many in battle. When the fathers dropped the guns, these nothing but children picked them up and went on fighting, and...fought to the bitter end. It’s easy enough to tell that kind of story...Anybody can do that. It’s a story in itself...[it] tells itself.<sup>117</sup>

Stories. Stories of triumph and tragedy, stories heroic and mournful—American stories about America’s violent but redemptive past—these were the stuff Griffith was made of. During the

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<sup>116</sup>For middle-class interest in physical culture see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15, 42, 87, 157. Quote in Robert Edgar Long, *David Wark Griffith: A Brief Sketch of His Career* (D.W. Griffith Service, 1920), reproduced in Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 59.

<sup>117</sup>Filmed prologue to 1930 re-release of *Birth of a Nation*, new shortened version with soundtrack. Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kino Intl. Corp, 2002). Transcription of the interview reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 188.

next two years, his route to becoming a playwright would take him somewhere unexpected—to the movies—where he would express his talents as a storyteller in ways he never anticipated, and discover talents he never knew existed. In the process, Griffith would tell Americans several important stories about themselves, and they would listen. Many would hang on every word and image.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>For an in-depth analysis of the way Pickett's Charge shaped postwar memory of the Civil War see Carol Reardon, *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Erich Von Stroheim explained in one interview that Griffith's flamboyant dress distracted from his basic, unavoidable charm. Had Griffith worn "overalls" or something more humble, he would have become irresistible to everyone around him. He had, Von Stroheim claimed, "what we would call 'allure.'" *The Great Director* (BBC West, 1966), 16mm print, UCLA Film and Television Archive, TV, T71421.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “The Villainy of Real War” and “The Marvels of Realism”: Griffith’s War Films at the Biograph, 1908-1913

This chapter traces Griffith’s path to the motion picture industry and rise to prominence as the nation’s leading filmmaker between 1908 and 1913. It begins by surveying his dramatic writings during his failed years as a playwright in order to highlight certain themes that reappeared in his early motion pictures. Griffith’s plays revealed a preoccupation with fusing sweeping romance and gritty realism as well as an inclination toward spectacle that would prove better suited to the motion picture camera than the live theater. Once financial desperation forced Griffith into the movie business he did more than any single individual to forge the basic language of narrative filmmaking. I argue that his war films, in particular, best responded to industry pressures for more story-based films that treated distinctly American subjects. Furthermore, Griffith’s one- and two- reel pictures about the American Civil War, specifically, helped enhance the respectability of motion pictures as commercial entertainment. A survey of Griffith’s war films for the Biograph Company reveals his experimentation with a fundamental tension that constitutes American war cinema: realistic portrayals of combat that attempt to question the morality of violence.

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By fall of 1906 D.W. Griffith found himself newly married and living in New York City without stable employment. Despite almost a decade with little meaningful success, Griffith refused to abandon his theatrical ambitions. In between brief acting gigs Linda and David supported themselves through various odd jobs. Linda encouraged her husband’s aspirations—he



had listed occupation as “writer” on their marriage license—and sought a place alongside him wherever the world of the arts finally embraced them. A break seemed to come when they were both cast in another Thomas Dixon Jr. play, *The One Woman*, but the couple was dismissed after only two months. Undeterred, Griffith decided to finish his first play, *A Fool and A Girl*, and shopped it around to New York’s theater managers and producers. In the meantime, he was able to make ends meet almost exclusively through artistic work. Still using the professional alias “Lawrence Griffith,” an opportunity finally came for him to proudly reclaim his given name. He sold a poem, “The Wild Duck” to *Leslie’s Weekly* under “David Wark Griffith” for a handsome sum and much-desired exposure. Weeks later he was cast in a Virginia production of *Pocahontas* that spring. But the best news was yet to come.<sup>119</sup>

During a brief stint in Edward Ellsner’s one-time performance of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, Griffith became acquainted with actor James K. Hackett. Hackett was the son of James H. Hackett, who was the first American of wealth and social standing to pursue acting for hire. As America’s first “gentleman” actor, James H. Hackett enjoyed a successful stage career during the middle of the nineteenth century. Although his son, James K., experienced early success as a matinee idol, he nevertheless felt hemmed in by his father’s enduring reputation. By the time Griffith met him, Hackett was trying his hand at producing and looking for a fresh vehicle through which to showcase promising ingénue of later film fame, Pauline Frederick. On Christmas Eve 1907, Hackett purchased the rights to Griffith’s *A Fool and a Girl* and issued

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<sup>119</sup>New England Historic Genealogical Society; Boston, Massachusetts; *Massachusetts Vital Records, 1911–1915. Massachusetts, Marriage Records, 1840-1915* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013. Linda Arvidson (published under Mrs. D.W. Griffith), *When the Movies were Young* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 22-26. Originally published by E. Dutton & Company, New York, 1925. See also Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: an American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 85-87.

Griffith \$700 as an advance against future royalties. In addition to being the largest sum of money Griffith had ever seen at one time, the transaction also further convinced him that his vocational calling was as a dramatist.<sup>120</sup>

Nevertheless, the play's production was beset by difficulties—not least of them being Griffith's inability to lease creative control over his work. Although Hackett received financial backing from Klaw and Erlanger, the most powerful theater syndicate at the time, as a novice producer himself he was ill-equipped to compensate for the inevitable shortcomings of an inexperienced playwright's first play. Problems with casting and constant rewrites frustrated Griffith who recalled being “frequently...ejected into the alley behind the theater for objecting to changes in the script.” Hackett lost patience trying to curb changes and stay faithful to Griffith's original conceptions. In the end, *A Fool and a Girl* ran for only two weeks, one in Washington and the other Baltimore, before quietly folding.<sup>121</sup>

Despite its short run, *A Fool and a Girl* marked an important milestone in Griffith's dramatic career. Beyond affirming his ability to profit from artistic pursuits, the play explored themes to which Griffith would frequently return as a filmmaker, and its critical reception foreshadowed his future difficulties with film censors. *A Fool and a Girl* centered on a protagonist, Albert, a poet-dreamer who has struggled for years as an itinerant stage actor. The biographical parallels are clear—the protagonist shares the name of Griffith's younger brother and the experiences and life choices of Griffith himself. Unlike his creator, however, Albert had suddenly come into a large sum of money when the story began. *A Fool and a Girl*'s central tension revolved around various attempts by a group of crass fellow actors to swindle Albert out

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid. For a copy of Griffith's poem in *Leslie's Weekly* see Bravermann Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 36.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

of his new wealth. Among the group were two sisters situated on the two poles of female existence as Griffith understood it. One sister was quite clearly a prostitute while the other was the embodiment of virginal sweetness. Albert fell in love with the latter, but could never trust her noninvolvement in the actors' plans to defraud him. Years passed before her name was finally cleared and the two reunited as lovers in old age. Ultimately, as one critic aptly put it, *A Fool and a Girl* lacked both "movement and suspense." Yet however clumsily devised, Griffith had offered his first sustained treatment of some of his central preoccupations: a male protagonist's inherent distrust of himself, disguised by his claims to higher birth, and a near obsessive Madonna-whore complex.<sup>122</sup>

Most significant about *A Fool and a Girl* were Griffith's early attempts to blend realism and sentimentalism. Griffith drew on his own experiences as a wanderer to establish the play's setting. He described the California hop fields (where he and Linda had both worked picking hops), and the peculiar Poodle Dog café in San Francisco which hosted upper-class slumming expeditions into the city's subterranean attractions. Griffith's main characters existed at the crossroads of America's cultural disparities, hailing from the streets but seeking transmutation via the elevation of the theater. To capture this strange junction, Griffith reproduced the language of both worlds in equal measure. That is, Griffith juxtaposed the vernacular of the streets with cloying frenzies into romantic and religious sentimentalism that he evidently associated with the educated classes. Although ultimately unsuccessful, *A Fool and a Girl* represented Griffith's first

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<sup>122</sup>*A Fool and a Girl*, copy, 1906, *DWGP*, Reel 2. "New Play at the Academy," *The Sun*, October 8, 1907, 9.

genuine effort to express a tension that beat at the heart of his artistic sensibility—a desire to fuse the real and the romantic and a conviction that the best stories included both.<sup>123</sup>

Unfortunately, it was precisely in struggling to blend authenticity with idealism that Griffith's play alienated theater critics. For instance, F.B. Morse of the *Washington Post* found *A Fool and a Girl* so packed with “disgusting vulgarity” he (correctly) predicted it would not “last through the season.” The harshest review came from the *Washington Herald's* theater critic, Hector Fuller. Fuller acknowledged that “the dramatist wanted to show where his hero's feet strayed,” but insisted that “to tell the...old and beautiful story of redemption...through love, it is not necessary to portray the gutters from which they are redeemed.” Griffith vehemently disagreed. Although his play received a handful of positive reviews in publications as obscure as the *Toledo Blade* and as relevant as the *Dramatic News*, Griffith became fixated on Fuller's assessment. He wrote a lengthy, angry rebuttal defending the play, stressing that its morality lived in its honesty. “That the play is candid I admit,” wrote Griffith, “but that it is in the least immoral I do most emphatically deny.” In fact, Griffith insisted “it preaches unmistakably the...old sermon of redemption through love...without in any way hurting the intelligent sensibilities of any man or woman.” Both the criticism Griffith received and his impassioned response to it would recur during his film career; he remained especially sensitive to any suspicion of his motives or morality and attuned to any note of hypocrisy he could detect in his critics' assessments.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>*A Fool and a Girl*, copy, 1906, *DWGP*, Reel 2. “Theatrical News,” F.B. Morse, *Washington Post*, October 6, 1907, E10.

<sup>124</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 87.

Far from deterred by *A Fool and a Girl*'s limited success, Griffith immediately began writing a new play through which he further honed his artistic point of view. Titled *War*, Griffith's latest project was an epic tale of the American Revolution. Far more ambitious in scope and conception than *A Fool and a Girl*, *War* demonstrated where Griffith's shortcomings as a playwright would later serve him well as a filmmaker. For example, several scenes in *War* called for more actors than could possibly fit on a stage, but that, conversely, were well suited to the panoramic capabilities of the motion picture camera. Furthermore, *War*'s battle sequences demanded the kind of mob action that would be difficult to produce in live theater, but for which Griffith would distinguish himself as a filmmaker. In writing *War* Griffith also became fixated on achieving historical verisimilitude, a quality that likewise later characterized his filmmaking. His wife, Linda, remembered helping her husband conduct copious amounts of research at the Astor Library before he even put a word on the page. The couple spent weeks copying "soldiers' diaries and letters and read[ing] histories of the period until [we were] sufficiently imbued with the spirit of 1776."<sup>125</sup> The process of immersing himself in whatever world he sought to render artistically would become a hallmark of Griffith's filmmaking technique.

Finally, as its title suggested, *War* provided Griffith the ideal subject through which he could explore his preferred themes and situations. The character of the soldier, in particular, proved an apt vehicle for the narrative progression of a typical Griffith hero. Indeed, *War*'s protagonist was an indentured servant named Jack White, an ordinary man who found himself in extraordinary circumstances. Despite Jack's status as a bondsman, Griffith indicated early on that Jack was likely from good stock, possibly the illegitimate child of a wealthy family.

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<sup>125</sup>*War*, Undated scenarios, stories, poems, and plays by D.W. Griffith, *DWGP*, Reel 19. Arvidson, *When the Movies were Young*, 27.

Nevertheless, Jack remained in servitude until the outbreak of the Revolution furnished him with opportunities to earn his freedom. Unsure of his true identity, Jack oscillated between bravery and cowardice until finally establishing himself as brave during the play's climax. The moment of truth came when Jack, disguised as a Quaker, infiltrated the Hessian camp at Trenton. Under orders from General Washington to spy out the enemy's plans, Jack discovered that the woman he loved, the virginal Jennie, had fallen into Hessian captivity. Forced to decide between saving Jennie and fulfilling his secret mission, Jack elected the latter. As a reward for his military heroism, Jack was released from his indenture and given land in Virginia on which to settle.<sup>126</sup>

*War's* central characters and situations anticipated many of Griffith's later films, particularly in its intermingling of sex and violence, heroism and impotence. Just as Jack represented a typical Griffith protagonist, so too were *War's* heroine, Jennie, and chief villain, Captain Robert Cunningham, to become familiar Griffith types. Cunningham was a sexual sadist, described as belonging to the primitive past, "hairy and naked, a son of Thor." When Jack entered the Hessian camp, Cunningham's soldiers were gambling over possession of one girl, while the rest of the men watched as four other women were forced to impersonate horses. Jennie was tied to a pillar to await ravishing by Cunningham at his convenience. A beacon of female purity, Jennie threatened suicide should Cunningham so much as touch her. Once Jack discovered his beloved, Jennie insisted she understood where his larger obligations lay but begged him to kill her. Jack returned from fulfilling his military duty to find Jennie ravished and did his best to avenge her by killing Cunningham in a duel. Nevertheless, Jennie's shame proved insurmountable and when the couple reunited in a military hospital after the war, she rejected

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<sup>126</sup>*War*, Undated scenarios, stories, poems, and plays by D.W. Griffith, *DWGP*, Reel 19.

Jack's marriage proposal. Not only did Cunningham prefigure Griffith's most famous sexually-depraved screen monsters (Silas Lynch and Gus in *Birth of a Nation* and Von Strohm in *Hearts of the World*), but the testing of male and female honor in a war-driven context would likewise become a standard trope in Griffith's most successful films.<sup>127</sup>

In the end, nothing became of *War*. Griffith never finished writing it. Linda Griffith later claimed that Henry Miller had expressed interest in purchasing the play if D.W. lowered his asking price, but no evidence exists to substantiate this. Nevertheless, Griffith did return to the Revolutionary War in his 1924 film, *America*, which he based in part on Robert W. Chambers' 1905 novel, *The Reckoning*. In *America* Griffith re-worked the Valley Forge scenes he wrote for *War*, but with little payoff since the film was a failure at the box office. Regardless, *War* showed Griffith grasping at spectacle for the first time and reaching for stories in which violence—specifically, battle—became an avenue for blending realism and romance.

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Griffith likely turned away from writing *War* as his and Linda's financial situation became more desperate during the fall of 1907. Facing a long winter, neither had found steady acting work and they had begun pawning various items in order to make ends meet. It was in this context of increased hardship that Griffith made his first call to a motion picture studio. Accounts vary regarding the precise circumstances under which Griffith found himself looking for work in the movies, but most scholars agree that Max Davidson steered him in that direction. Davidson and Griffith knew each other from their days in the acting troupe, *The Twilight Revelers*. Evidently Griffith, Davidson, and another actor, Harry Salter, were all making their rounds to

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<sup>127</sup>*War*, Undated scenarios, stories, poems, and plays by D.W. Griffith, *DWGP*, Reel 19.

local theaters looking for stage work when the topic of motion pictures arose. Davidson and Salter had recently discovered the perks of movie work, which they shared with Griffith: actors could make upwards of five dollars a day, work outdoors, and because the films were silent, they did not have to memorize any lines. The greatest risk motion pictures posed was to a stage actor's credibility among the theater crowd. Still, Salter and Davidson assured Griffith that they had yet to be recognized and the pay was worth it. Furthermore, they suggested that if he was uncomfortable appearing in the films, he could, given his recent experience, sell scenarios to the studios instead. Successful scenarists could make as much as \$30 apiece.<sup>128</sup>

The anonymity of screenwriting doubtless appealed to Griffith. Shortly after receiving Davidson's tip, Griffith presented a screen version of *La Tosca* to the Edison Studio in the Bronx. Edison was the source of Edwin S. Porter's American story films (the first of their kind), including *The Great Train Robbery*. Although studio heads rejected his scenario, they cast Griffith in his first film, *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*. The film was typical of its time: an eagle snatched a baby from its cradle, sending family, friends and neighbors into a panic until a brave mountaineer climbed to the bird's nest and retrieved the child. Griffith played the lead role of the mountaineer, earning the promised five-dollars-a-day on a four-day shooting schedule. The experience was enough to convince both Griffiths that until something more substantial came along in the live theatre, they would support themselves through motion picture work.<sup>129</sup>

By early 1908 Linda and D.W. had found regular work at the American Biograph and Mutoscope Company (called simply "The Biograph"). Griffith had only been in three films

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<sup>128</sup>William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>129</sup>J. Searle Dawley material, Bravermann collection, *DWGP*, Reel 36. *Rescued From an Eagle's Nest*, Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley, 1907-08. Videocassette copied from silent film, Motion Picture Collection, UCLA Film Archive, VA437 M.



before the company's head scenario writer, Lee Dougherty, asked him to try his hand at directing. Having read some of Griffith's scenarios, Dougherty felt Griffith had promise working behind the lens. As it was, Biograph's chief director, Walter McCutcheon, was nearing retirement. Griffith agreed to direct one film under the condition that if he failed, he could retain his position as an actor. Dougherty consented and Griffith directed his first picture, *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908). *Dollie* proved an unexpected success. The story was simple: gypsies stole a child, Dollie, from her family and placed her in a water cask in the back of their wagon. As they attempted to escape, the cask slipped out and floated downstream returning Dollie to the safety of her parents.

Despite being standard narrative fare, *Dollie* stood out for several reasons. First, the story moved quicker because Griffith depicted continuous action through a series of shots that built upon one another, rather than autonomous shots relating only to the spectator. Furthermore, Griffith broke from the action at one point to capture the anguished expressions of Dollie's parents. Biograph's management noticed something was different about *Dollie* when exhibitors requested 24 prints instead of the standard 15. Griffith himself took notice of his natural aptitude for making the camera an active participant in telling a story. After *Dollie* he became one of Biograph's top directors, making 59 more films in 1908 alone.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>*Adventures of Dollie*, D.W. Griffith, 1908. Videocassette copied from reproduced version of silent film, Motion Picture Collection, UCLA Film Archive, VA23470 M. On Griffith taking over for McCutcheon see Billy Bitzer Collection, unpublished writings, *DWGP*, Reel 35 and G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 64-66. For more on *Dollie*'s technical innovations see Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 66-67.

Griffith's rise to historical significance as "the Father of Film"--a title filmmakers, critics, and theorists around the world would bestow on him throughout the twentieth century--was the result of his talent, ambition, and historical circumstances. Griffith wound up in the movie business out of financial necessity, discovering the medium's potential and becoming the industry's leading artist and chief spokesperson largely by accident. As his colleague and friend, Mack Sennett, facetiously remarked, "Griffith was the first one to realize he *was* a genius."<sup>131</sup> More than anything else, it was that self-awareness that positioned Griffith to take the best advantage of transformations already underway in the American film industry.

Between 1908 and 1913 American cinema changed profoundly as a commercial and cultural institution. The Biograph Company and D.W. Griffith were on the cutting edge of those changes. To begin with, Griffith's first year at Biograph (and thus his first year as a filmmaker) coincided with the creation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), which fundamentally restructured the movie business. Prior to the MPPC, the Edison Manufacturing Company maintained a near-monopoly on domestic film production. Because Edison owned most U.S. motion picture camera and projector patents, any filmmakers, distributors, or exhibitors who failed to use Edison materials faced lawsuits for patent infringement. Beginning in 1897 a decade of litigation against Edison's competitors crippled the domestic film market as rival companies were forced to import European films. Only Biograph, which used a different camera design, evaded Edison's grasp.

Rundown by lawsuits, in 1907 all the major film manufacturers except Biograph met with Edison to negotiate a new licensing agreement. In an attempt to freeze Biograph out of the

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<sup>131</sup>Mack Sennett with Cameron Shipp, *King of Comedy* (San Jose: iUniverse.com Inc., 1954, 2000), 76.

market, Edison initially excluded it from negotiations. Biograph retaliated, however, by purchasing the patent to the Latham Film Loop, an essential feature of every motion picture camera then in use. Unable to sue for ownership of the Latham patent, Edison was forced to welcome Biograph into the trust. Together Edison, Kalem, Essanay, Pathe Freres, Vitagraph, Lubin and Biograph as well as Eastman Kodak, principal merchant of raw film stock, formed the MPPC.<sup>132</sup>

By pooling all major patents required for American filmmaking, the MPPC stimulated domestic competition and slowed the influx of European films into American movie houses. It also standardized U.S. exhibition and distribution processes, which improved the technical quality of all American film products. For instance, rather than sell films outright to exhibitors and distributors, the MPPC instituted a rental system that ensured a better standard of film prints were exhibited. Establishing a standard rental rate prompted exhibitors to select films based on their quality, rather than their price, which inspired further upgrading of production values. While the MPPC allowed for greater and better film production than the previous Edison licensing system, it became a monopoly in its own right, effectively determining who could make and screen films and where they could do so. That Eastman Kodak agreed to only sell raw film to MPPC members further impaired independent film companies.<sup>133</sup>

The MPPC also formed in response to what scholars identify as the “nickelodeon boom”—the sudden proliferation of thousands of cheap movie theaters between 1904 and 1908.

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<sup>132</sup>Tom Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 59-63. Gordon Hendricks, *Beginnings of the Biograph: the Story of the Invention of the Mutoscope and Biograph and Their Supplying Camera* (New York: Beginnings of the American Film, 1964), passim.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*

Prior to the nickelodeon, production companies sold what Tom Gunning calls “a self-contained attraction.” That is, producers not only sold theaters the films themselves but also the cameras and projection machines required to screen them. In 1897, however, the Edison Company began marketing its Projecting Kinetoscope, which became the industry standard and could be sold separately. Soon all major production companies were formatting their films to fit Edison projectors. Biograph further broke with the “self-contained attraction” model when it focused primarily on selling films. Such changes divided production and exhibition into distinct markets and created a new position in the industry—the exhibitor. Exhibitors initially functioned as traveling attractions, extending the novelty of a film as long as possible by showing it in different locations. But as projection machines became simpler and more efficient and film exchanges became the primary barterers of motion pictures, theaters emerged as principal exhibitors. By 1904, theaters could show a variety of films cheaply, prompting the considerable rise in “nickel theaters” that offered motion pictures as their main attraction.<sup>134</sup>

Within four short years, nickelodeons—which began as makeshift viewing rooms in converted storefronts—were substantial institutions and staple features of American life. This presented concerns both for the film industry and custodians of national culture. To begin with, the growth of nickelodeons quickly outpaced film production. The burden of Edison’s perpetual lawsuits, together with an incoherent distribution system, kept production companies from meeting the new demand. Failure to supply theaters with sufficient motion pictures stifled the industry’s overall growth. Furthermore, the nickelodeon boom stoked urban reformers’ fears about the negative impact of motion pictures on the poor and working classes. What was once a

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid. Max Alvarez, “The Origins of the Film Exchange,” *Film History* 17, No. 4 (2005), 431-65.

scientific novelty had quickly become mass entertainment and filmmakers faced increased scrutiny regarding the respectability of their product. The MPPC addressed the issue of supply by stimulating film production and streamlining distribution. In the process, MPPC members also took it upon themselves to elevate the cinema's public image by increasing their production of story films and avoiding non-narrative actualities.<sup>135</sup>

D.W. Griffith began his tenure at the Biograph just as the film industry was taking major strides toward corporate consolidation and social legitimacy. No one could predict just how much further Griffith would advance motion pictures in both respects. During his five years as their chief director, Griffith made Biograph synonymous with the most popular and highest quality films. Through his more than 500 one and two reel Biograph movies, Griffith did more than any other individual to develop the standard conventions of narrative cinema—the “basic grammar” of telling stories on screen. In the process, I argue he also set the fundamental parameters for the American war film genre.

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Believing by now that the theater world had essentially rejected him as either actor or playwright, Griffith approached his role as filmmaker with unique zeal. Indeed, the industry-wide pressure to make movies a more respectable form of entertainment complemented Griffith's own desire for artistic legitimacy. Thus once he began experimenting with the film form Griffith became obsessed with realizing his vision of the medium's true potential. In particular, Griffith saw in the motion picture camera possibilities for both drama and spectacle that were impossible to achieve on the stage. Furthermore, the recent demand for more narrative

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<sup>135</sup>Gunning, *The Origins of American Narrative Film*, 59-61.

subjects convinced Griffith that motion pictures could bring high art and culture to the masses. Lacking much formal education himself, Griffith empathized with poor and working-class Americans who were excluded from more sophisticated modes of entertainment and leisure. As such, during his first few months at Biograph alone Griffith seemed to portray every conceivable kind of story. He made crime mysteries, urban melodramas, historical romances and Westerns, adapted famous poems and novels. As Richard Schickel writes, “Virtually no setting was a stranger to Griffith...he ranged as far back in history as the Middle Ages and as geographically far afield as Japan.” Marked by their technical sophistication and diverse subjects, Griffith’s Biographs quickly became the most popular among regular movie-goers and drew audiences from the upper and middle classes.<sup>136</sup>

It was Griffith’s response to the lack of distinctly American stories, however, that established him as an industry leader. While he treated a range of national subjects, the Civil War provided Griffith the richest material to distinguish himself as an artist. First, Griffith’s Civil War Biographs demonstrated how motion pictures transformed war into *dramatic spectacle* unmatched by other mediums and unrealized by other filmmakers. Griffith’s background in melodrama and talent for spectacle rendered his war stories gripping and realistic. Second, Griffith’s southern perspective set his Civil War films apart from rival productions. Specifically, he infused the Civil War with southern notions of honor and portrayed the nuclear family as the enduring symbol of the nation. Indeed, upholding family honor during war tested the virtue of Griffith’s characters. Meanwhile, the survival of the family unit defined the war’s redemptive potential. Finally, by stressing the mutual sacrifices of both North and South, Griffith obscured

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<sup>136</sup> Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984), 119. On Griffith’s determination to dignify his new profession, Arvidson, *When the Movies Were Young*, 54-56.

historical motivations behind the conflict. For Griffith, how individuals conducted themselves during the war mattered more than why they fought. Emphasizing personal drama over structural causes of war became an essential feature of the American war film.

The two major Civil War-related productions that preceded Griffith were *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Porter, 1903) and *Days of '61* (Porter, 1908). Both were successful Edison one-reelers, albeit for different reasons. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a ready-made potboiler that capitalized on the enduring popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and its successful stage adaptations. Porter depicted the most significant episodes from Stowe's novel from the point of view of a theater audience, using state-of-the-art costumes and set designs. His intention was to demonstrate the theater's relevance to filmmaking as well as motion pictures' superior ability to present a play. Beyond using the finest appurtenances available to the stage, Porter included a race between paddle-wheel steamers using toy model ships and a made-to-scale diorama of the Mississippi River. Despite brief title cards that introduced each scene, the film's tableau structure, typical of the time, required audiences to be familiar with Stowe's story in order to follow its narrative progression.<sup>137</sup>

Only half the length of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Days of '61* represented the first true Civil War battle film. It depicted two West Point classmates and dear friends, Northerner David Stratton, and Southerner Ned Grey. Upon visiting Ned's family in Virginia David fell in love with his sister, Alice. The war interrupted the couple's courtship and divided the two friends. Wounded during a successful capture of a Confederate fortification, David was carried to the

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<sup>137</sup>*Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Slavery Days*, Edwin S. Porter, 1903. Videocassette reproduced from 35 mm. safety print, Motion Picture Collection, UCLA Film Archive, M52932. For its demonstration of film's theatricality see Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 37-38.

Grey's home where he was reunited with and cared for by his sweetheart, Alice. Meanwhile, Ned, charged with carrying a dispatch through Union lines was detected, wounded, and chased through a swamp. Arriving safely at his family home, David and Alice concealed him, protecting him from Union apprehension. Unbeknownst to the couple, however, Ned snuck out of the home disguised in David's Union coat and fulfilled his mission. When Union sentries discovered David's discarded coat, however, he was wrongfully court martialled for treason and sentenced to die. Desperate, Alice obtained a last-minute pardon for David from President Lincoln, which she delivered seconds before David was to be shot.<sup>138</sup>

Several trade papers praised *Days of '61* for its realistic portrayal of battle and even-handed treatment of the war. The *Moving Picture World* described it as containing among "the best reproductions of war scenes ever attempted" and declared it a "bi-partisan" production, comparing it to Bronson Howard's popular reunion novel, *Shenandoah* (1888).<sup>139</sup> That the film depicted battle at all made it a novelty compared to other films, and its depiction of a North-South romance mirrored the dominant trope of reconciliation that appeared in other media treating the Civil War as its topic. The success of *Days of '61* prompted the release of several more Civil War films—eleven more were released within the remaining four months of 1908. Yet Southern theater owners and distributors soon began complaining that most productions disproportionately favored the Union foot-soldier. Such protests came to a head after the Kalem's release of *The Escape from Andersonville* (1909) which dealt with Union captives in the notorious Confederate prison camp. "Why do all the Civil War movies have the northern army

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<sup>138</sup>I was unable to find an existing copy of the film, so my summary comes from Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) 40-41.

<sup>139</sup>*The Moving Picture World*, Vol. 2, No. 26, June 27, 1908, 543-544.



come out ahead?" a West Virginia exhibitor asked the *Moving Picture World*. "Everyone knows the South won some battles," he continued, insisting that more sympathetic portrayals of the Confederacy had a built-in audience in the South. The *World* responded that it was not a matter of lingering prejudice against the South but the lack of Southern manufactures and a paucity of film exchanges in the region.<sup>140</sup>

As both a Southerner and burgeoning film artist, D.W. Griffith also perceived myriad shortcomings in the standard Civil War productions available to American audiences. He responded with his own treatment of the topic, *The Guerrilla* (1908), which quickly surpassed its predecessors in technical and dramatic sophistication. The film portrayed a group of men of unknown loyalties stealing Confederate uniforms and preparing to plunder nearby homes. Meanwhile, the protagonist, a Union soldier named Jack, kissed his sweetheart, Dorothy, goodbye and departed for the battlefields only miles from her home. A month passed and Dorothy received word that Jack was coming to visit her while on furlough. When one of the guerrillas from earlier, disguised in a Confederate uniform, arrived instead, Dorothy sent her faithful "Negro servant" to notify Jack. The servant endured a perilous journey past attacking guerrillas and across enemy lines, but was shot from his horse just as he reached Union headquarters. Loyal to the end, the servant managed to crawl to Jack's encampment and deliver the message. Jack and his comrades immediately mounted their horses and road toward Dorothy's home, where the guerrilla was chasing her from room to room. Several other bush fighters posted outside the home tried to prevent Jack's entry but were repelled by him and his

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<sup>140</sup>Charles Harpole and Eileen Bowser, eds, *History of American Cinema*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 177.

men. The film's climax came when Jack defeated the guerrilla in hand-to-hand combat, rescuing Dorothy and welcoming her into his embrace in the final shot.<sup>141</sup>

*The Guerrilla* immediately stood out as a unique Civil War film and superior motion picture. The *Moving Picture World* noted *The Guerrilla* treated a subject that felt distinct from "the line of work generally handled by the Biograph" and predicted that the novelty of its story alone would draw crowds. Yet it surpassed any Biograph production equally in terms of its plot and photographic realism. "The man...who made the pictures...[of]...spirited horsemanship and the battle scenes deserves to be congratulated," the *MPW* concluded, as they brought "the warmest applause from the spectators." *The Guerrilla* represented one of Griffith's most experimental films of 1908 and a singular advancement in narrative filmmaking. The film contained 45 different shots, more than any of his previous one-reelers and twice the average used by rival filmmakers.

Specifically, *The Guerrilla* marked Griffith's first use of a three-pronged editing pattern that would become a staple in his last-minute-rescue films. This approach demonstrated Griffith's mastery over the traditional chase format while freeing it from its simple reliance on linear movement. That is, rather than cutting between two spaces that converged toward one action—Jack and his men as they rode to the rescue and the guerrillas as they prepared to ambush them—Griffith split certain elements of the action to add melodramatic suspense. In addition to cuts between Union troops on horseback and Dorothy struggling with the intruder, Griffith intercut between close-ups of Dorothy cowering in fear and the guerrilla trying to gain

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<sup>141</sup>"The Guerrilla: An Exciting Episode of War Times," *Biograph Bulletins 1908-1912*, Eileen Bowser, ed., (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 187.

entry on the other side. In that way, the ambushing guerrillas actually formed a fourth space that further dramatized the action.<sup>142</sup>

*The Guerrilla* also revealed the first hints of Griffith's characterization of the Civil War as family drama. In this early rendition the family—constituted by Jack, Dorothy and their black servant—provided the basis for the story's dramatic unfolding and final resolution. The war threatened the family's unity not by dividing its loyalties between the North and South but by enabling the formation of a paramilitary menace that lay outside both. *The Guerrilla* did not position Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers as enemy combatants, but as common victims of irregular mercenaries. By disguising themselves as Confederates, this rogue contingent of men misrepresented Southern troops' as dishonorable and deliberately preyed on non-combatants. Thus in breaking the rules of war, the guerrillas threatened families on either side who were separated during the conflict. As such, *The Guerrilla* universalized the war experience suggesting the family unit as a loose symbol of nation reunion. Critically, the black servant functioned as an auxiliary member of the national family whose loyalty (and expendability) enabled the white heads of the household to withstand the risks to their safety and security.

Griffith's next Civil War film, *In Old Kentucky* (1909) more explicitly transformed the war into a family melodrama. The film followed two brothers, George and Bob, who fought for opposing sides, George for the Union and Bob for the Confederacy. During the war, Bob, the Confederate, was charged with delivering a sealed dispatch across the same Union lines where his brother, George, was stationed as a guard. Union troops apprehended Bob as he tried to sneak

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<sup>142</sup>*Moving Picture World*, November 21, 1908, Vol. 3, No. 21, 398. Gunning, *Origins of American Film*, 130-134.

past their encampment and, unaware the two were brothers, delivered him to George. Despite immediately recognizing his kin, George's duty as a soldier demanded he order Bob's execution. During the night Bob miraculously escaped captivity and sought asylum in their family home. Over her husband's objections, the mother hid Bob in the upstairs bedroom. When George arrived later demanding his brother be turned over, their mother threatened to shoot herself should Bob be taken. Unwilling to lose his mother in such fashion, George conceded and left. Sometime later Bob rejoined his Confederate comrades. After the war, George returned to a hero's welcome and the village gathered to celebrate in the family home. Outside, a ragged and dirty Bob approached the house, but turned back once he glimpsed the festivities. The family's black servant "Uncle Jasper" noticed Bob and rushed to bring him inside. The film ended with Bob collapsing into his mother's arms before George, the Union flag draped over his arm, took them both into his embrace.<sup>143</sup>

By depicting two brothers with divided loyalties, *In Old Kentucky* emphasized the mutual sacrifices of Union and Confederate soldiers during the war. Absent any explanation of the war's causes or the reasons behind each brother's allegiance, war itself emerged as the real enemy. It forced both men to decide between military duty and familial affection. Yet because they each elected the former and fought honorably for their respective sides, both were welcomed back into the family. Similarly, despite Union victory, Confederate soldiers' valiant service warranted their acceptance back into the nation as fellow countrymen. The role of African Americans after the

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<sup>143</sup>I have been unable to find any surviving prints of the film so take my summary from the description in *Biograph Bulletins*, 465.

war was to help facilitate that reunion. Furthermore, white women, whether mothers or daughters, were to remain stalwart arbiters of “love [that] knows not the laws of war.”<sup>144</sup>

Following *In Old Kentucky*, Griffith’s Civil War films regularly showed the conflict forcing individuals to act either virtuously or disgracefully. Each film opened with the war having already begun, rendering its characters’ behavior during wartime the central drama of the story. For men of fighting age, the war provided an opportunity for either heroism or cowardice. For dependents—women, children, slaves or servants—the war tested their ability to endure hardship and make necessary sacrifices on the home front. Only by upholding one’s duty as a combatant or non-combatant could war’s tragic impact on family and community be redeemed. Griffith’s four Civil War films of 1910—*In the Border States*, *The Fugitive*, *The Honor of His Family*, and *The House with Closed Shutters*—treated war as a tragedy and dealt with individuals’ who either vindicated or worsened their family’s suffering. *In the Border States* and *The Fugitive* depicted female dependents whose purity and virtue preserved the dignity of their male family members. By contrast, *The Honor of His Family* and *The House with Closed Shutters* revealed the corrosive effect of male cowardice on a family’s respectability.

*In the Border States* focused on a tight-knit family whose elderly patriarch declared for the Union. Following the father’s tearful departure, Union sentries discovered Confederates foraging near the family’s home. In his attempt to avoid apprehension, one Confederate took refuge on the family property where he encountered the youngest daughter (Mary Pickford) perched near a well. The soldier pleaded with the girl to hide him in the well, and she reluctantly obliged. Despite her evident ambivalence about harboring the enemy, the girl directed pursuing

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<sup>144</sup>Ibid.

Union troops away from the Confederate's whereabouts. Dismissing his demonstrable gratitude, the girl curtly sent the soldier on his way once the coast was clear. Meanwhile, the girl's father was discovered trying to deliver a dispatch across enemy lines. During the melee he shot and killed a Confederate before collapsing on his own front lawn. His daughters laid him down in the upstairs bedroom where he ordered the youngest to destroy the undelivered missive. Just as she set the papers aflame, the same Confederate she hid earlier beat down the door. Realizing the coincidence the soldier returned the girl's kindness by helping her conceal her father. Shortly afterward Union troops rushed to the father's aid. The film closed with a shot of the aged patriarch as he tipped his hat at his daughter and flashed her a knowing smile.<sup>145</sup>

Where *In the Border States* focused on the transcendent power of a daughter's love for her father, *The Fugitive* emphasized a mother's love for her son. It followed two soldiers, "Union John" and "Confederate John" as they left for battle and bade farewell to their mothers and sweethearts. During a fierce battle, Union John became separated from his comrades. Confederate John and his fellow soldiers ran after Union John who turned around and shot them, killing Confederate John. With the others still on his heels, Union John unknowingly arrived at Confederate John's house and pleaded with the boy's mother to save him. Like the daughter in *In the Border States*, she reluctantly agreed to hide the enemy soldier. Meanwhile, Confederate soldiers arrived with her son's body. Once the men left, the mother and Union John quickly realized he was responsible for Confederate John's death. Nevertheless, when Confederate soldiers returned asking after Union John, the mother denied knowledge of his whereabouts. When it was safe, Union John left, the mother of his fallen enemy barely looking up as he

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<sup>145</sup>*In the Border States; or, A Little Heroine of the Civil War*, D.W. Griffith, 1910, Video cassette copied from silent film, Motion Picture Collection, UCLA Film Archive, VA647M.

departed. *The Fugitive* concluded with a scene of Union John reuniting with his family after the war before cutting to Confederate John's mother as she welcomed her would-be daughter-in-law's new beau. The final shot showed Confederate John's mother pinning flowers on her son's uniform that hung on the wall.<sup>146</sup>

Like Griffith's previous Civil War films, *In the Border States* and *The Fugitive* operated within a context of mutual sacrifice between the North and South. However, both films dwelt longer on the juxtaposition of women's tearful farewells to their sons, husbands, and fathers and the parades celebrating enlistment. As such, each film conveyed a message about the power of female love to mitigate the suffering caused by war. In the case of *In the Border States*, viewers were shown "how the presence of a child averted a double fatality" and "accomplished good which cannot be measured." Similarly, *The Fugitive* suggested that "A mother's love will never be fully appreciated" as enduring the sacrifice of her own son allowed another mother to enjoy the return of hers.<sup>147</sup>

If *In the Border States* and *The Fugitive* demonstrated the restorative effect of female love during wartime, *The Honor of His Family* and *The House with Closed Shutters* captured the ways in which male cowardice exacerbated war's horrors. It focused on a family whose men descended from a long line of military heroes. When the Civil War broke out, the family patriarch, Colonel Pickett, eagerly wanted to join the Southern cause but was too old to fight. He sent his son, George, in his stead imploring him to "emulate the brave deeds of those who have gone before you. Be fearless, brave, and fight, fight." Despite his lineage, George lacked the

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<sup>146</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Fugitive*, 1910, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

<sup>147</sup>*Moving Picture World*, June 18, 1910, Vol. 6, No. 24, 1057. *Moving Picture World*, June 25, 1910, Vol. 6, No. 25, 1101. *Moving Picture World*, November 19, 1910, Vol. 7, No. 21, 1178.

martial fervor of his ancestors. Once in combat the fighting proved too much for George and he deserted his comrades, running through forest and dodging a steady rain of bullets. Meanwhile, from his living room the Colonel observed smoke rising from the nearby battlefield and smiled proudly at his son's presumed bravery. Just then George burst through the door and crouched in fear and shame. Shocked at his son's cowardice, the Colonel also realized George would be hanged for desertion, forever tarnishing the family's honor. Colonel Pickett resolved this dilemma by shooting George himself and together with his black servant, carried the son's body to the battlefield to be considered among the days' fallen. The plan worked. The Colonel preserved his family's honor by sacrificing his only son.<sup>148</sup>

*The Honor of His Family* represented Griffith's most personal film to date. Its premise echoed Griffith's own account of his relationship to his father and family name. Griffith always insisted that his male bloodline descended from a long line of Cavalier warriors, and believed his paternal ancestors fought in all the nation's wars since its founding. Furthermore, Griffith recalled his father's dying words being an injunction to his sons to uphold their family name and "be brave" at all costs. Yet Griffith also admitted feeling that, like the character George, he never lived up to his father's admonition—"I never was brave and never have been." That Griffith made Colonel Pickett too old to fight mirrored his father's mature age (44) when he joined the Confederacy. Indeed, it is difficult not to read *The Honor of His Family* as Griffith musing on his own lack of battle-tested courage. Having chosen to pursue the theater over, say, enlisting in the Spanish-American War, Griffith now found himself in a profession his ancestors would neither

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<sup>148</sup> D.W. Griffith, *The Honor of His Family*, 1910, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).



understand nor likely deem honorable.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, injecting so much of himself into the film suggested Griffith's earnestness in transforming motion pictures into legitimate art.

Furthermore, *The Honor of His Family* stood apart from other productions in its visual sophistication and rendering of a distinctly Southern melodrama. As *The Moving Picture World* explained, while the film's conception of honor was particular to the South, it nevertheless showcased "the highest degree [of drama]" that was sure to appeal to everyone. Specifically, *The Honor of His Family* demonstrated the motion picture camera's ability to register emotional complexity through "what it suggested [more than] what it actually showed." The *MPW* acknowledged that some viewers would wholly sympathize with the father and find his act of filicide justifiable, while others would condemn the decision. Still more might deem the Colonel's "dishonest placement of his son's body on the battlefield equally offensive." However audiences felt about the characters' morality mattered less than the fact that the film evoked so many "delicate questions" in the first place. Forcing audiences to draw their own conclusions was sure to make the film popular and elicit repeat viewings.<sup>150</sup>

Where the *MPW* praised Griffith's handling of melodrama in *The Honor of His Family*, other critics questioned its taste level. For example, *Variety*—which, unlike *MPW*, covered a range of entertainment besides motion pictures—found "much to criticize" about the film. Besides generally objecting to "the picturing of an actual murder" the critic was particularly appalled that the film visualized "the murder of a son by his father." Furthermore, *Variety*'s reviewer resented the depiction of officers ordering soldiers into battle without any intention of fighting themselves. He likewise argued that realistically an officer or fellow soldier would have

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<sup>149</sup>Unpublished Autobiography, 5-6, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

<sup>150</sup>*Moving Picture World*, February 5, 1910, Vol 6, No. 5, 169.

kept George from deserting. Beyond its tasteless themes, the *Variety* critic declared, "The excited action of the principals and the general conduct of the battle scene shows bad management." This was not the first time *Variety* charged a Griffith film with wanton vulgarity. Of *The Fugitive* a different reviewer wrote, "Although everything is fair in war, it wasn't fair of the film arranger to picture such ghastly and unpleasant details."<sup>151</sup> The *MPW*'s and *Variety*'s contrasting assessments of Griffith's work nevertheless reflected a growing consensus that his films were especially graphic and as such provoked either praise or criticism depending on the story and publication.

*The House with Closed Shutters* was an even more unapologetic Southern melodrama, albeit one that better flaunted Griffith's knack for military spectacle. *The House with Closed Shutters* contrasted the bravery and cowardice of a brother and sister during the Civil War. As in *The Honor of His Family*, the son proved unable to endure the terror of war. This time, however, the boy was selected by General Lee himself to deliver a special dispatch across Union lines. Soon after beginning his mission he was detected by the enemy and fled their pursuit on horseback. Fellow soldiers provided reinforcements and died trying to keep the Union men off the boy's trail. Nevertheless, rather than return to headquarters, the boy ran home, bursting through the door "a drunk-mad coward" on the lam from the enemy and soon his own troops. Already a lush, the boy drank himself into oblivion as his mother and sister puzzled over what they should do. Horrified to discover the undelivered dispatch, the women determined that the sister must complete her brother's mission. Disguised as her brother, the sister not only fulfilled his special orders but continued fighting as him on the battlefield. Later the mother and son

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<sup>151</sup>*Variety*, January 19, 1910, Vol. XVII, No. 8, 13. *Variety*, November 19, 1910, Vol. XX, No. 11, 13.

received a telegram that the sister—believed to be the brother—died honorably in combat. On behalf of their family name the mother forced her son to remain indoors forever, making outsiders believe that his death turned his sister into a grief-ridden recluse. The family maintained the lie for twenty-five years until the son, drawing his last breaths, opened the house’s shutters. The film concluded with the sister’s former suitors learning the truth and together with her mother, solemnly saluted the girl’s heroism.<sup>152</sup>

*The House with Closed Shutters* made such an impact that the *Moving Picture World* gave it special notice as a distinct movie event. In particular, the *MPW* marveled at the film’s ability to visibly please audiences although its thrilling “battle scenes [do] not lead to any happy solution.” In fact, all of the film’s “episodes are sombre [sic] and the catastrophe is unhappy.” Yet the film’s appeal stood in its message about Southern women during the Civil War and women’s crucial role in wartime generally. *The House with Closed Shutters* demonstrated that “behind every Dixie soldier was a proud-hearted woman willing and ready to die in his place.” Furthermore it revealed that through their bravery women could uphold their family’s integrity “even when the cause [is] lost and she [has] to bear the greater burden of sorrow.” Indeed, the anonymous courage of the sister and steadfastness of her mother and family servant were necessary so that “the family honor is preserved.” Yet it was the effectiveness with which *The House with Closed Shutters* merged its drama and action that earned its highest acclaim. The film’s vivid juxtaposition of “[realistic] battle scenes, the intense mental strain of the mother,

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<sup>152</sup> D.W. Griffith, *The House with Closed Shutters*, 1910, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

actions of the cowardly...son...[and] heroism of the young girl” rendered it a “veritable poem” of the screen.<sup>153</sup>

Griffith’s 1910 Civil War films reinforced the themes of white reconciliation that dominated popular memory of the war while simultaneously casting reunion in a distinctly Southern glaze. The Lost Cause bent of Griffith’s Civil War nationalized Southern suffering during the war which further presented the war as a mutual tragedy and further obscured its causes. As such, the reasons behind the war became less consequential than the decisions individual characters made once the war had already broken out. The war presented both combatants and non-combatants with circumstances that tested their personal virtue and threatened their families’ dignity. Oftentimes a soldier’s inability to fulfill his grim duty on the battlefield forced one of his dependent family members to further sacrifice on the family’s behalf. Upholding the integrity of the family unit could both redeem the horror of battle while preserving the glory inherent in combat and the transcendence of perishing on the battlefield.

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By 1911 Griffith had grown rightly confident that his films outshone those of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, he was increasingly dissatisfied with the one-reel format of Biograph productions and frustrated with his boss’s inability to see that the future was in longer films. Having by that point earned his superiors more money for their product than anyone before, however, he decided to ask forgiveness instead of permission and began the year with his first two-reel story. Unsurprisingly he chose the Civil War as his subject. The movie would be a small-scale epic that centered on one of Griffith’s by now staple characters, the faithful black

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<sup>153</sup> ““The House with Closed Shutters’—a Dramatic Poem,” *Moving Picture World*, August 20, 1910, Vol. 7, No.8, 402-404.

servant. His intention was for the two reels to comprise the two halves of the story which would force his superiors to ensure they were screened back-to-back or at the very least, serially.

Griffith titled the pictures, *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*.

*His Trust* opened with the departure of a Southern patriarch, Colonel Frazier, to the battlefields once the “cruel war has just begun.” Frazier left his wife and daughter in the care of their servant, George, played by Wilfred Lucas in black face. Upon the Colonel’s death on the battlefield, his comrades delivered the news to his family as well as the Colonel’s sword which his wife hung over the mantle in memoriam. Shortly afterward Union soldiers stormed the house, plundered it and set it on fire, chasing the young wife from the flames while her infant child was still inside. When George glimpsed the smoke and realized what was going on he rushed inside and rescued the child. Once the infant was safely with her mother, George ran back in to rescue the Colonel’s sword. With saber and child secured, the house collapsed. Realizing the weight of his promise to the Colonel, George led mother and child to his humble cabin, the one remaining structure on the property. *His Trust* concluded with George offering his bed to the grieving widow and baby while he slept on the floor.<sup>154</sup>

*His Trust Fulfilled* began four years after Union raiders burned down the Frazier home. The war was over, and while other “negroes leave to enjoy their emancipation...George remains true to his trust.” George’s burden only grew when the worry-worn and grief-stricken widow soon died, leaving him the sole caretaker of her young daughter and the only remaining Frazier family member. Sensing the impropriety of such a situation, George arranged for a neighboring family to take the girl in. George agreed to cover all the girl’s expenses until she married so long

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<sup>154</sup>*His Trust*, D.W. Griffith, 1911, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

as the family never revealed the source of her livelihood. The arrangement worked until the girl reached college-age and sought schooling that George could not afford. He depleted his savings to try and pay for the girl's education, but it only covered one term. Unable to bear witnessing the girl's disappointment when told she could not return to college, George snuck into the man's office who was head of the family that had taken the girl in. In a momentary lapse of judgment George desperately snatched a thick wad of money from the man's desk. He then immediately thought better of it and put the money back. However, the man already saw George take the money and confronted him. Convinced of George's pure intentions the man mercifully decided not to prosecute him for theft. Meanwhile, a wealthy English cousin arrived in town seeking the girl's hand in marriage. Their betrothal resolved George's dilemma. He watched their wedding from a distance, "tears streaming down his black, but honest cheeks." After the ceremony George returned to his cabin where he pulled down his master's saber and clutched it to his chest. The film closed with George embracing the sword, "happy in the realization that he has fulfilled his trust."<sup>155</sup>

Together, *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* gave fullest expression to the paradoxical war message that remained at the heart of Griffith's Civil War films. On the one hand, they showed war to be a "cruel" enterprise capable of bringing out the worst in men and inflicting senseless suffering on non-combatants. Not only did Colonel Frazier's wife lose her husband in battle but his enemies also left her "homeless with no apparent asylum." Moreover, *His Trust Fulfilled* suggested that the widow's death represented her capitulation to ailments she developed under the strain of wartime. On the other hand, *His Trust* upheld the honor of combat by depicting

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<sup>155</sup>*His Trust Fulfilled*, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

Colonel Frazier's heroism on the battlefield. The *Moving Picture News* declared, "[*His Trust's*] battle scenes are simply...marvels of realism" sure to ring true to anyone "who has 'smelt powder.'" Audiences admired when Colonel Frazier "[died] for his flag amidst the fury and blare of the fight." In fact, it was Griffith's equally realistic portrayal of the fighting and the home front—of war's tragedy and its sources of redemption—that rendered *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* an "honor of motion pictures." "To those who have known the stress and villainy of real war," wrote the *MPN*, "it is real"; while for "those whose good fortune has protected them [from war], it is a revelation."<sup>156</sup> In other words, *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* had the power to move or instruct viewers depending on their relationship to war.

Forced to return to the one-reel format, Griffith's next Civil War films nevertheless expanded on his achievements in *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*. In particular, *Swords and Hearts* (1911) even more deeply explored war as a domestic drama while *The Battle* (1911) marked the height of military spectacle yet reached on film. *Swords and Hearts* dealt with a wealthy southern family (again named Frazier) whose eldest son, Hugh, joined the Confederacy. Hugh was in love with his neighbor, Irene, who promised to marry him when he returned from the front "victorious." Meanwhile, Hugh's other neighbor, a poor farm girl named Jennie, was desperately in love with him. The main action occurred when Hugh broke from the fighting to sneak a visit with Irene. Jennie watched from next door and realized that Union soldiers had followed Hugh. She acted quickly, donning his uniform and taking his horse, fooling the Union men into chasing her until they were off Hugh's trail.

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<sup>156</sup>*Moving Picture News*, February 11, 1911, Vol. IV, No. 6, 14.

Meanwhile, guerrillas attacked the Frazier mansion. Despite his black servant's admonitions, the family patriarch refused to leave his home. Luckily the servant, Old Ben, was able to sneak out the family's chest of valuables. While Old Ben buried the chest, the invaders knocked the patriarch unconscious and set the house on fire. By then Jennie returned and together she and Old Ben dragged the elder Frazier from the burning home. Evidently unaware of all this activity, Hugh found his belongings where he left them outside Irene's residence. He remounted his horse and returned to the front. *Swords and Hearts* then cut to Hugh returning from the war in a tattered uniform, finding his home in ruins and Irene engaged to a Union officer. The film ended with Hugh realizing Jennie's devotion to him and Old Ben presenting the couple with the chest he rescued from the guerrillas.<sup>157</sup>

In *Swords and Hearts* Griffith ignored combat altogether in order to wring out a fuller drama of the home front during war. Although it lacked battle scenes, its "domestic drama [resulted] directly from [the] conflict raging elsewhere," observed the *Moving Picture World*. In other words, the film considered what happened "at home while...able-bodied men are away at war." Just as combat tested soldiers' mettle on the battlefield, their absence from the domestic sphere tested the devotion of their dependents and the worthiness of their romantic interests. As such, the circumstances of war could humble men regardless of their bravery and elevate individuals from humble backgrounds. While viewers knew not Hugh Frazier's performance as a soldier, they could nevertheless sympathize with all that he lost. He returned from the war robbed of his prior identity—diminished in his social stature, homeless, bereft of his father and jilted by his lover. Yet hope was restored when he discovered the abiding loyalty of Jennie and

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<sup>157</sup>*Swords and Hearts*, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).



Old Ben. Indeed, their commitment redeemed the war and ennobled Hugh as he “turn[ed] to these two lowly creatures and grapple[d] them to his heart with hooks of steel.”<sup>158</sup>

The overwhelming lesson of wartime in *Swords and Hearts* was the honor of sacrifice and the virtue of humility.

Despite its focus on the home front, *Swords and Hearts* earned notices for its realism. Viewers were struck by the Frazier mansion, in particular, which the *MPW* described as a “substantially built structure...[and]...a piece of artistic realism that...[conveyed]...the true atmosphere of antebellum gentility.” Its apparent verisimilitude and solid construction heightened the impact of its destruction by the menacing bushwhackers. The *MPW* declared the attack and retreat of the guerrillas, together with the burning of the mansion and failed rescue of the senior Frazier constituted “one of the most thrilling and realistic scenes ever seen in motion pictures.”<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, Jennie’s race on horseback to divert Hugh’s would-be pursuers was among Griffith’s best chase sequences, replete with a bullet whizzing past her head before she shot a Union soldier on her heels. That Dorothy West, who played Jennie, was genuinely riding her horse at a dangerous speed is evident even to twenty-first century viewers.<sup>160</sup>

In the end, however, *Swords and Hearts*’ most significant advancement in film technique existed in the actors’ performances. Indeed, Tom Gunning identifies the film as Griffith’s fullest realization of the natural style of acting he pioneered, characterized by a subtlety more suited to the motion picture camera than to the live theater. Griffith was the first filmmaker to bring the camera close enough to actors’ faces to capture the natural play of expression. This freed them

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<sup>158</sup>*Moving Picture World*, August 26, 1911, Vol. 9, No. 7, 523-524.

<sup>159</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup>*Swords and Hearts*, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

from reliance on histrionic gestures (exaggerated waving of arms and legs) for the interpretation of character and plot. Similarly, through schooling a whole generation of film actors to practice “emotional restraint” in front of the camera, Griffith helped teach movie audiences how to engage a characters’ psychology. Between 1908 and 1913 Griffith’s Biograph films exemplified the transition in performance style from one based on theatrical melodrama to one more allied with the “realist” movements in art and literature.<sup>161</sup>

I argue that the effect of naturalist acting in Griffith’s war films, in particular, helped universalize the context of war by prompting viewers to identify with certain characters. An anecdote from assistant cameraman Karl Brown’s memoirs helps illustrate this point. During the making of a short called *Apple Pie Mary* (1914) Griffith arranged a scene where the actress Mae Marsh’s character washed dishes. According to Brown, cameraman Billy Bitzer complained to Griffith, ““with Miss Marsh crowded into a corner like that we won’t be able to see her face.”” Griffith smiled and replied, ““If we see her face, it will be Mae Marsh washing dishes. If we only see her back and arms, it will be every woman in the audience doing dishes. We’ll play it with her back to the camera.”” By conventional wisdom in most productions prior to Griffith’s influence, an actor’s back was only to the camera during non-emotional scenes. Griffith pioneered the opposite method, having an actor face away from the camera in order to heighten a scene’s emotion. Similarly, in *Swords and Hearts* the camera lingered on Hugh Frazier’s back as he looked upon his now-destroyed home. As Gunning notes, this dramatized the character’s

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<sup>161</sup>Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 262-263. Roberta E. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5-6, 10-16 and passim.

sense of loss and failure. At the same time, I argue, it prompted viewers to identify with that loss and failure, extending the relatability of wartime to constitute a universal experience.<sup>162</sup>

Where he focused on rendering a domestic drama of war in *Swords and Hearts*, Griffith turned almost exclusively to the battlefields in his following Civil War film, *The Battle*. *The Battle* was another Griffith study in cowardice and bravery, this time as they struggled for dominance within a single character. A Union soldier kissed his sweetheart goodbye as he left for the battlefields near her home. The flurry of combat frightened him and panicked, he ran back to his girlfriend. She promptly derided him, demanding he return to the fighting. Inspired, the boy not only resumed participation in that day's battle but began performing beyond the expectations of a regular soldier. At one point he risked his life to procure more ammunition for his regiment. The climax came when opposing forces constructed bonfires along the road to disrupt the intervening powder wagons. A series of explosions ensued until at last the soldier made it to the trenches where he and his men rained victorious fire on the assaulting Confederates.<sup>163</sup>

*The Battle* received several special notices for its thrilling battle scenes. Even the cinema-reluctant *Variety* claimed it was the only motion picture worth braving bad weather to see.<sup>164</sup> So memorable did *The Battle* become that scholars have incorrectly identified it as the first combat film about the Civil War.<sup>165</sup> Its lengthiest tribute came from *Moving Picture World* contributor and film lecturer, W. Stephen Bush, who marveled at the “more than ordinary degree [of] that

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<sup>162</sup>Karl Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 29. Gunning, *The Origins of American Narrative Film*, 262. D.W. Griffith, *Swords and Hearts*, 1911.

<sup>163</sup>*The Battle*, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

<sup>164</sup>*Variety*, November 11, 1911, Vol. XXIV, No. 10, 25.

<sup>165</sup>For instance, see J. David Slocum, “General Introduction: Seeing Through American War Cinema” in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

pleasing Biograph characteristic of throwing the spectator into the very heart of things.” Indeed, the film’s subject needed little exposition, argued Bush, since it so viscerally thrust spectators “on the threshold of the great war between the North and the South.” No sooner did viewers recognize their setting than they were “hurried into a battle with stirring incidents and varying fortunes, ending [in Union victory only] after anxious moments of dreadful suspense.” Much of what made *The Battle* such an intense experience was the nerve-wracking uncertainty of which side would emerge victorious. Bush recalled, “The grouping of the soldiers in the trenches, their unremitting fire, the martial fury of their officers, were shown with a realism” that left audiences physically stunned and speechless when the film ended. Evidently the Biograph made good on its advertisement that *The Battle* was “without question...the most stirring war picture ever produced.”<sup>166</sup>

Beyond *The Battle*’s achievements in military spectacle, Bush determined its overwhelming impact on audiences also derived from its unique storyline. Bush praised the plot’s “utter freedom from the clap-trap and commonplace, which are the bane of so many ‘military’ and ‘historical’ dramas.” In particular, *The Battle* depicted an “unconventional” hero who registered as more authentic and believable than the typical soldier-protagonist. It was realistic, wrote Bush, that initially the soldier “took to his heels...at the first sight of the bloody horrors of war.” Not only would “the roar of cannon [and] comrades falling by his side” frighten any raw recruit, but his experience reflected those of “many a brave soldier before him.” The soldier’s sweetheart likewise impressed viewers as equally dynamic and genuine. When he ran to

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<sup>166</sup>*Moving Picture World*, November 4, 1911, Vol. 10, No. 5, “Reviews of Notable Films; ‘The Battle’ (Biograph, Nov., 6<sup>th</sup>) reviewed by W. Stephen Bush,” 367. *Moving Picture World*, November 11, 1911, Vol. 10, No. 6, 439.

her seeking reprieve from the fighting, she was so disbelieving that she visibly laughed at him. Then the camera captured her gradually changing expression as she realized her “gallant hero of a few weeks ago” was actually a coward. By “[showing] her disgust in a violent outbreak and order[ing]...[him]...out of her house,” the sweetheart inspired the soldier to atone for his earlier pusillanimity. In the end, his “heroic daring” brought victory for his comrades, earning him both commendations from his captain and “the hand of the girl, whose faith in his manhood and courage [was] fully restored.”<sup>167</sup>

Productions like *The Battle* demonstrated that only the Biograph could combine realistic depictions of warfare with a thrilling fictional narrative. The *Moving Picture World's* review of another notable film in the same issue as its review of *The Battle* illustrated that fact. Unlike *The Battle*, whose war realism offered quality entertainment, Edison's *Life in the United States Army* was educational in nature and intent. The film provided a visual exposition on the nation's coastal defense system, showing Americans “the actual working of...the most powerful weapons used...in our modern fortifications.” While the forts it depicted had long been open to the public, *Life in the United States Army* revealed their marvelous efficiency, providing “an object lesson to those who glibly discuss the possibility of foreign invasion.” Indeed, the film captured artillery destroying several different targets from a range of distances. By detailing the sophistication of America's defensive weaponry, the *MPW* argued that *Life in the U.S. Army* educated the public and advanced domestic filmmaking. While most movie-goers were uneducated, they were nevertheless “desirous of knowing more than they do.” Furthermore, “attractively-presented

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<sup>167</sup>Ibid.

scientific or historical information...raise[d] them to a higher plane” and subjected them to progressive ideals that benefitted all classes.<sup>168</sup>

Griffith shared the conviction that motion pictures should never condescend to audiences. In fact, he spent more than a little time at the Biograph trying to convince management that viewers could understand more than was expected of them. He frequently battled for the burden of the story’s meaning and coherence to be placed on the use of images rather than the multiplication of title cards. Thus Griffith’s war films complemented productions like *Life in the U.S. Army* in their un-patronizing but educational character. Where *Life in the U.S. Army* demonstrated the interworking’s of modern military equipment, Griffith’s films explained the nation’s historical relationship to war and instructed audiences on the value of bravery and shame of cowardice, the regrettable nature of war but the necessity of individual sacrifice. In other words, Griffith provided Americans with useable frames of reference regarding the morality of war and violence.

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By 1912, Griffith had made several hundred short films for the Biograph Company that innovated, consolidated, and ultimately standardized narrative filmmaking techniques. His previous four years were marked by a relentless pace of production and tireless experimentation that thrust the Biograph to the forefront of the film industry. Movie-goers now associated the Biograph with the most technically sophisticated and artistic films produced in America. Biograph films had also increasingly attracted middle-class viewers. Griffith’s productions especially stood out as superior film fare for their achievements in drama and spectacle.

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<sup>168</sup>*Moving Picture World*, November 4, 1911, Vol. 10, No. 5, “Reviews of Notable Films; ‘Life in the United States Army’ (Edison) by Louis Reeves Harrison,” 367.

Nevertheless, studio heads refused to accommodate Griffith's persistent demands to make longer and more expensive films. Much of Biograph's reluctance stemmed from the challenge feature-length films posed to the MPPC's system of production, distribution and exhibition that ensured its hegemony in the industry. Regardless, the writing was on the wall. A steady influx of European multi-reel epics, the appearance of higher admission prices and the construction of more elaborate theaters all pointed to imminent replacement of the one-reel format with the feature film. Furthermore, independent production companies had been gaining enough strength since 1910 that they would soon rival the MPPC.<sup>169</sup>

Griffith was acutely aware of these changes and refused to observe from the sidelines as the industry embarked on its second major transformation. Needless to say, 1912 spelled Griffith's last full year with the Biograph. In early 1913 he would head production of a newly formed independent company, Reliance Majestic, taking practically all of his regular actors and his cameraman with him. For the moment, however, Griffith continued to experiment with narrative style and composition in his final Biograph films. Several of the formal innovations and narrative themes that characterized Griffith's late Biographs profoundly shaped his generic development of the American war film. For instance, Griffith rendered his most spectacular battle sequences in *The Massacre* (1912), *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills* (1912), and *The Informer* (1912), which gave modern combat scenes much of their definitive form. Griffith also treated violence as the central theme of his most philosophical production to date, *Man's Genesis* (1912), which he remade two more times during his career. *Man's Genesis* represented the most coherent articulation of Griffith's antimilitarism which would reemerge full force in his World

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<sup>169</sup>Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 255-259.

War I epics. Ultimately, Griffith's 1912 Biographs allowed him to perfect elements of violent spectacle and further explore a didactic approach to his filmed stories. He would attempt to merge military realism with a dramatic moral lesson in his first feature-length production the following year, *Judith of Bethulia*.

Although more of a Western than a war film, *The Massacre* consolidated certain editing patterns that would later define modern combat scenes. The film's climax came when Indians massacred a village and a battle ensued that ended the film. While the battle sequence contained more than fifty distinct shots, it followed a four-shot pattern of alternating perspectives that rendered the scene both visually spectacular and dramatically profound. The sequence began with the camera capturing the action from a distance; a panoramic view from a mountainside of the village below revealed combatants as tiny figures. Viewers witnessed a flurry of action—the miniature settlers huddled together while Indians swarmed them on horseback—replete with small puffs of gunfire and plumes of desert dust. Next the camera moved to a ground level shot of the huddling settlers who became almost completely concealed by the accruing dust and gun smoke. Then the lens inched closer to the bunched settlers, revealing two gamblers fire revolvers despite their limited mobility, while the hooves of the Indians' horses could still be glimpsed in the background. Finally the camera moved still closer to focus on the film's main character, a mother with her baby, wedged between a preacher reading from the Bible and an anonymous hand firing a revolver. She covered her baby's ears tighter with each shot of the revolver.<sup>170</sup>

*The Massacre's* seamless cutting between extreme long shots of the action and close-ups of the characters connected violent spectacle to human vulnerability. As such, it gave fullest

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<sup>170</sup>*The Massacre*, D.W. Griffith, 1912. Videocassette copied from silent film, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, VA928 M. Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 271-272.



expression to the kind of sensational battle sequences that would become standard in later combat films.<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, Griffith's placement of the main character—a mother with her child—between contrasting symbols of peace and war (a Bible and a firing gun) showed him grasping toward a broader condemnation of bloodshed. Indeed, Griffith's next battle-driven films marked his further attempts to interrelate action-driven suspense with a dramatic lesson denouncing violence. As such, he reapplied his now-perfected editing patterns to battle sequences in *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills* and *The Informer*, but denied viewers redemptive resolutions to the violence those films depicted. Instead, violence emerged as almost wholly destructive.

*The Informer* was Griffith's last Civil War Biograph. In it he depicted two brothers whom the war divided, not because they maintained divergent loyalties, but because the circumstances of war brought out one brother's more sinister nature. *The Informer* opened with a Southern couple embracing as the man prepared to depart for the battlefields. Before leaving he asked his younger brother to look after his fatherless sweetheart until he returned from the war. During his brother's absence, however, the younger brother fell in love his sweetheart and decided to convince her that the elder brother had died in combat. The plan worked and the girl began warming to the younger brother until the eldest one showed up wounded on their doorstep ("caught between enemy lines in his own neighborhood"). Realizing the deception, the girl banished the younger brother from the property. While the couple took refuge in the slaves' cabin, the younger brother informed Union pursuers of their location. Union forces stormed the cabin and the younger brother observed from a distance as both the girl and slaves took up arms

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<sup>171</sup>Ibid.

against their attackers. Confederate troops eventually arrived and rescued the cabin's inhabitants but during the scuffle the younger brother was killed by a stray bullet. Although the couple survived and were reunited, the camera zoomed in on expressions of ambivalence and disillusionment as the episode ended. The film's conclusion suggested no happy resolution to the carnage.<sup>172</sup>

*A Feud in the Kentucky Hills* conveyed an even more forceful denunciation of violence in its story of two feuding mountaineer families. The film focused on two brothers who were both in love with a girl the family adopted when they were children. From the outset the two brothers were a study in contrasts, with the elder a true mountain man, brutish and gruff, and the younger displaying a more sensitive disposition, frequently referred to as "The Psalm Singer." The girl developed a romance with the youngest brother that was forced to end when he became a traveling minister. During a period of the youngest brother's extended travel, the parents pressured the girl into marrying their eldest son. When the young minister returned for a visit later on he and the girl rekindled their romance, causing serious unrest within the family. The youngest son refused to fight his brother and so agreed to leave. Before he could do so, however, the father and eldest son got into a skirmish in town that reawakened an old feud with another family. With the longstanding feud rekindled, the younger brother was forced to fight for his family. An intense battle between the two families ensued that killed everyone except the youngest brother and the girl. The film ended with the couple walking arm and arm away from the cabin, presumably leaving Kentucky for the "Peaceful Valleys" below. Although everyone

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<sup>172</sup>*The Informer*, D.W. Griffith, 1912. Videocassette, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, M07416.

they loved was dead, the couple was able to start anew, untethered to old feuds and senseless violence.<sup>173</sup>

*A Feud in the Kentucky Hills* represented one of Griffith's first concerted efforts to depict graphic violence as a means of condemning it. The result, according to the *Moving Picture World* was "an unusually tense picture, even for a Biograph." Once viewers were introduced to "excellent" scenes of mountain life, the film became "a whirlwind...one act...of the almost complete annihilation of a mountain family." As such, the *MPW* could not wholly recommend it. For even if its "love story softens it some...it is a hard picture, almost brutal."<sup>174</sup> While Griffith intended the brutality of *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills*'s to serve as an indictment of violence, he evidently risked alienating viewers in the process. He therefore chose a completely different setting in which to express what he saw as the hereditary origins of violence in his next film, *Man's Genesis*. A lengthy subtitle described the film's subject: "A Psychological Comedy Founded on the Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of Man." Indeed, by focusing on the much more distant past, Griffith hoped to better articulate a moral lesson about humans' propensity for violence.

Griffith had been trying to develop a story about natural selection for months, but his bosses were reluctant for him to go forward. Even after Griffith finished *Man's Genesis*, studio heads initially refused to release it, fearing its esoteric theme and unconventional story structure would turn audiences off. They may have been right. In the end, *Man's Genesis* received few notices and no substantive reviews. Nevertheless, the film is less significant for its reception than

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<sup>173</sup>*Feud in the Kentucky Hills*, D.W. Griffith, 1912. DVD copied from 35 mm safety print, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, DVD1205M.

<sup>174</sup>"Comments on the Films," *Moving Picture World*, October 19, 1912, Vol. 14, No. 3, 242.

its conception—*Man's Genesis* was a veritable treatise of the role of violence in human history as Griffith understood it. The film began in the present day with an elderly man discovering his grandchildren fighting. He interrupted the kids' skirmish to tell them a story of prehistoric man. Then the setting changed, introducing (via a proto-flashback) the characters of the grandfather's story.

Two Neanderthals, "Bruteforce" and "Weakhands" both desired the affection of a woman, "Lilywhite." Because "might was right" in prehistoric times, Bruteforce, with his superior physical prowess, appeared the more likely candidate. But his brutishness frightened Lilywhite and she fell in love with Weakhands when she witnessed him outsmart Bruteforce during a fight. The couple settled down together in a small hut. Outraged, Bruteforce refused to allow them to live in peace until Weakhands proved capable of defeating him in battle. Beset with danger and far outmatched by Bruteforce, Weakhands decided to fasten a rock to the end of the stick, developing the first weapon, a stone hammer. When the two men faced off Bruteforce could no longer easily overtake Weakhands and soon Weakhands delivered a crushing blow with his new invention. Fellow villagers watched and cheered Weakhands' victory as he and Lilywhite returned safely to their home. The film then cut back to the grandfather closing the book and his two grandchildren agreeing to reconcile. The lesson of *Man's Genesis*, according to the *Biograph Bulletin*, was to show that "the first conflict between brains and brawn results in a victory for brains."<sup>175</sup>

Griffith released a two-reel version of the same story the following year, however, that suggested *Man's Genesis* only partially conveyed Griffith's intended message. Renamed *The*

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<sup>175</sup>*Biograph Bulletin*, 420. *Man's Genesis*, D.W. Griffith, 1912. Videocassette copied from silent film, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, VA9218 M.

*Primitive Man*, the second version began differently, this time at a high society party during which a young man grew bored and stumbled upon the book about Bruteforce and Weakhands in the library. In *The Primitive Man* Weakhands no longer defeated Bruteforce alone but used his innovation to form an army “of stone club men who inhabit the upper caves of the mountain.” Bruteforce ruled his own tribe of men who walked like monkeys and occupied the caves’ lower region. During a battle between the two tribes, a man from Bruteforce’s tribe, Monkeywalk, procured one of Weakhands’ stone hammers. The Monkeywalkers then armed themselves with mallets and viciously attacked the people of Weakhands’ domain. The sequence was very violent—Monkeywalkers beat, killed, and abducted women and children and one scene suggested Lilywhite was gang raped. The film cut to Weakhands, helpless and despairing once again. Then a title card flashed “The eternal law of progress” and Weakhands was shown toying with a twig and thread before transforming it into a bow and arrow. Armed with two different kinds of weapons, Weakhands’ army rescued their women and children and defeated the Monkeywalkers once more. A sarcastic title card explained “Hero Worship in Every Age,” as Weakhands’ comrades celebrate his inventions. The film ended with the present-day socialite who, having apparently dozed off during the story, woke up and closed the book. He glanced back at the library once more, looking unimpressed, as he returned to the party.<sup>176</sup>

Taken together, *Man’s Genesis* and *The Primitive Man* offered a view of humanity Griffith would evoke many times in his later war films. Specifically, the films proposed that human evolution was inextricably tied to violence and that humans’ superior intellect

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<sup>176</sup>*The Primitive Man*, D.W. Griffith, 1913. Videocassette copied from silent film, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, VA9218 M.

disproportionately served the purposes of conquest and war-making. As such, human beings may claim to be the “fittest” of the species, but perhaps not the most civilized. If consciousness and innovation created human civilization, then it was a civilization steeped in the principles of barbarity and militarism.

As Griffith worked on *Man's Genesis*, a new feature-length European film, *Quo Vadis?* (1913), began stirring public interest. Running at an unprecedented two hours, *Quo Vadis?* was a Biblical epic set during the latter years of Roman Emperor Nero's reign. Its Italian director, Enrico Guazzoni, boasted the use of over 5,000 extras and charged an extraordinary \$1.00 admission price. The film's appearance in the U.S. was accordingly ostentatious. Premiering at the Astor Theater on Broadway, *Quo Vadis?* was the first motion picture to be screened in a legitimate theater house. Although Griffith was in California during its release, its 22-week long run ensured he saw it upon his return to New York. The experience undoubtedly filled him with envy and intensified his resentment toward the Biograph. No less a publication than *The New York Times* endorsed *Quo Vadis?* as a revelation in motion pictures. In particular, the *Times* reviewer praised Guazzoni's handling of crowds and lavish set design, which suggested the screen possessed distinctive merits in producing spectacle. Whether or not Griffith saw the *Times* review, *Quo Vadis?*'s sustained publicity prompted him to begin constructing his own elaborate set, the walled Biblical city of Bethulia. Back in New York, Griffith's superiors were furious. In addition to the hefty cost of the set, Griffith wired his bosses expenses for costumes, props, and extras amounting to upwards of \$30,000. Despite the front office's outrage, Griffith would not be deterred and by the spring of 1913 he was ready to film his own feature-length spectacle, *Judith of Bethulia*.

*Judith of Bethulia*, represented Griffith's first feature-length film and most complete rendition of military realism that would become a standard component of the American war film. Based on Thomas Bailey Aldrich's play of the same name, *Judith* portrayed the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes. Judith was a recently widowed woman of high birth in the Jewish city of Bethulia, which stood as a buffer between Assyria and Jerusalem. King of the Assyrians, Nebuchodonosor (or, Nebuchadnezzar), sent Prince Holofernes to "lay waste all the countries of the West," which included Bethulia. Holofernes laid siege to Bethulia, and while its fortifications prevented Assyrians from entering, Judith's people began to starve and die. In order to save them, Judith (Blanche Sweet) disguised herself as a harem girl and infiltrated Holofernes' camp. Holofernes immediately fell in love with Judith, granting her free reign of his encampment and barring all other women from his tent. Despite her best efforts, Judith also fell in love with Holofernes. Nevertheless, her devotion to her city prevailed and when Holofernes passed out from too much wine Judith, with the help of her handmaid, beheaded him. Without their prince the Assyrians faltered in carrying out the siege, and Bethulia was saved. Although her people hailed Judith as a hero, the film ended with her kneeling in prayer while a close up of her face suggested remorse or ambivalence.<sup>177</sup>

Griffith was pleased with what he had done and confident *Judith* would impress audiences and industry insiders alike. Nevertheless, Biograph refused to release the film. *Judith* had cost twice the amount the studio budgeted and management became preoccupied with exerting control over their errant director. This was not the first time Griffith had gone over budget and studio heads doubted it would be the last. Furthermore, he showed no signs of

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<sup>177</sup>*Judith of Bethulia*, D.W. Griffith, 1913. Videocassette copied from silent film, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection, VA420 M.

relinquishing the sole authority over stories and casting he had expropriated over the years and that his bosses had come to resent. Thus when Griffith returned to New York that summer, Biograph proposed a new contract that amounted to his demotion from chief director to a supervisory role in middle management. Griffith promptly rejected the offer and executives followed up by clearly stating their demands of his continued employment: “If you stay with Biograph it will be to make the same kind of short pictures you have made in the past,” before noting, “You will not do that. You’ve got the hundred thousand dollar idea in the back of your head.” They were right. Griffith left the Biograph with his most prized picture securely in their vault.<sup>178</sup>

Biograph decided to release *Judith* after Griffith’s departure, partly out of spite and certainly to avoid paying Griffith a portion of its profits. But Griffith managed the last word. In December 1913 the *New York Dramatic Mirror* ran the now-famous full page ad declaring Griffith “Producer of all great Biograph successes.” The ad clarified just what that meant: Griffith was the man responsible for “revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art.” Following two brief paragraphs outlining Griffith’s innovations *The Dramatic Mirror* reproduced a list of his Biograph films that “contributed to make American production famous the world over.” The list included *In Old Kentucky*, *The Honor of His Family*, *In the Border States*, *The House with Closed Shutters*, *His Trust*, *His Trust Fulfilled*, *The Battle*, *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills*, and *Man’s Genesis*. Finally, the advertisement notified readers of Griffith’s multi-reel productions that had yet to be released, most notably *Judith of Bethulia*.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 196-199.



*Judith* premiered at Los Angeles's Clune's Auditorium to great fanfare. Shortly afterward it was featured as the main event of a local film festival. *Judith*'s popularity, combined with Griffith's continued self-promotion, quickly garnered him unmatched notoriety as the nation's leading filmmaker. *The Motion Picture News* observed that *Judith* and Griffith's other multi-reel productions still held in reserve by Biograph were considered by common consensus "the best stuff ever turned out in this country or any other country." *The New York Tribune* concurred, hailing *Judith*, in particular, as "a Dramatic Achievement Unequaled Among American Pictures." Griffith evidently spared no detail in rendering "the thrilling story of Bible times realistic." Indeed, the *Tribune* reported, "The big battle scenes...keep the spectator on the edge of their seats" while the rest of the picture exhibited "an appreciation of dramatic values...seldom seen in motion pictures." A review in the *Baltimore Sun* further marveled over the film's reproduction of "battering rams and war engines only seen in ancient battle prints," declaring "the fighting on the walls is convincingly real." "Battle, murder, beauty, romance...portrayed with an artistic realism and historical fidelity...[that upheld]...the program's hyperbolic title, 'the world's greatest motion picture,'" concluded *The Sun*.<sup>180</sup>

Ultimately, by providing Griffith the longer format he so desired, *Judith* more fully showcased his talent for military spectacle than his previous productions. Furthermore, the film demonstrated that American filmmakers could rival the lavishly-produced Biblical epics coming out of Europe. Nevertheless, *Judith* fell short of realizing Griffith's vision for the kind of feature-length films he was certain would transform the industry into a viable and respectable form of

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<sup>180</sup> "Thrilling Tale Silently Told. Motion Picture Masterpiece at Movie Festival," *Los Angeles Times* March 24, 1914. "Two Striking Films: 'Judith of Bethulia,' a Dramatic Achievement Unequaled Among American Pictures—'The Great Diamond Robbery' with a Broadway Cast," *New York Tribune*, March 29, 1914, pg. B9. "Attractions at the Theaters: Ford's Judith of Bethulia," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 7, 1914, 7.

commercial entertainment. In particular, Griffith wanted to tell a story that riveted viewers and conveyed a moral lesson. It seemed that required him to turn once again to a distinctly American subject. The Civil War had always provided Griffith inspiration and ideal material for reaching his highest artistic ambitions. No longer tied to the Biograph and one- and two-reel productions, Griffith returned to the Civil War in 1914 with new energy and freedom. The result would be a much more significant film, one that would both revolutionize the movies and lay the foundations of the American war film.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Birth of the Antiwar War Film

This chapter reveals how *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) became America's most popular representation of modern war during World War I. It begins by tracing Griffith's path to *Birth* through his first several months as chief director of a new production company. In the first films he made under his new contract, Griffith experimented with themes and techniques that he would put to more effective use in *Birth*. They would also boost his profile as the industry's leading visionary and chief spokesperson. The chapter then examines the various reasons Griffith chose Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman* as the basis of his most ambitious project yet and discusses what the director hoped to accomplish with his feature. The chapter closes by analyzing the making and reception of *The Birth of a Nation*.

I argue that with *Birth* Griffith created the antiwar war film that became the generic template for Hollywood war films in the twentieth century. By 1915 Griffith's Civil War epic had a readymade audience in a culture steeped in commemoration. Nevertheless, *Birth* became the capstone of America's Civil War Semi-Centennial by conveying a familiar mythology of white reconciliation through the powerful new medium of motion pictures. Griffith's masterful exhibition of the cinema's novel capabilities lent *Birth*'s narrative of national reunion potent credibility. At the same time, the outbreak of World War I coincided with Griffith's production in ways that profoundly affected his finished film. The European war raised the stakes of Griffith's battle scenes while simultaneously inspiring him to expand the film's message of national reunion into a broader sermon against war. By being widely embraced as both a plea for

universal peace and an authentic portrayal of modern war, *Birth* became a vehicle through which Americans weighed concerns about the conflict abroad.

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Following the *Dramatic Mirror*'s unveiling of Griffith as "Producer of all Great Biograph Successes," the trade press announced his new affiliation with the recently formed Reliance-Majestic. Reliance-Majestic was created by two brothers, Harry and Roy Aitken, whose successful chain of film exchanges in the Midwest prompted their entrée into film production in 1911. After repeated stonewalling by both the MPPC and the independent circuit, they founded their own Los Angeles-based production company, Majestic. A short time later the Aitkens acquired the Reliance Company and its studios in Yonkers, New York. The films produced by Reliance-Majestic were distributed through a third outfit, Mutual. The Mutual Film Corporation represented the Aitkens' entire operation of production and distribution.

Although relatively new to the scene, the Aitken brothers proved adept at exploiting new trends in the industry ahead of their competitors. For instance, while most production companies refused to disclose their actors' identities, the Aitkens formed Majestic based on the star power of Mary Pickford and her then-husband Owen Moore. They were similarly drawn to Griffith's burgeoning reputation as the cinema's preeminent visionary and chief spokesman. Given the director's renown for productivity and commercial acumen, it made good business sense to offer Griffith a leadership position at Mutual\*. Griffith likewise found the new partnership suitable to his needs: in addition to directing and supervising the company's regular program features,

Mutual permitted Griffith two longer, independent features each year. Griffith was also guaranteed stock in the company.<sup>1</sup>

Once they signed Griffith, the Aitkens committed themselves to further boosting his profile in the industry. To begin with, they made sure Griffith was credited with developing the talent of the nation's biggest stars, many of whose identities had now been revealed before his. Several well-known performers—Mary Pickford, Owen Moore, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Blanche Sweet, Mae Marsh, Clair McDowell, Miriam Cooper, Constance Talmadge, Arthur Johnson, Bobby Harron, Mack Sennett, Lionel Barrymore, Henry Walthall and Richard Barthelmess, to name a few—were now labeled Griffith protégés. The Aitkens also publicized the fact that practically all of the individuals who worked with Griffith at the Biograph followed him to Mutual.<sup>2</sup>

Although Griffith could hardly wait to begin work on his long awaited independent feature, his contract stipulated that he first complete a string of regular program pictures. Happily for Griffith, this obligation did not impose on him the same kind of noxious conditions under which he labored for the Biograph. Rather, in addition to enjoying autonomy over his material and casting, Griffith was also granted up to six reels in length for each program picture. This new freedom suited Griffith and by the summer of 1914 he produced four films—of no less than five reels apiece—that pleased audiences and his new bosses alike. The first, *The Battle of the Sexes* (April 1914), was a boiler plate about a man whose midlife crisis caused him to become unfaithful to his wife and neglect his children. When the eldest daughter intervened on her

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\*I will refer to Mutual as the stand alone name for Reliance-Majestic.

<sup>1</sup>*New York Dramatic Mirror*, October 29, 1913, Vol. LXX, No. 1819, 31.

<sup>2</sup>“Actresses Must be Young, Says Griffith,” *Reel Life*, December 22, 1913, Vol. III, No. 14, 3. “Studio and Exchange Notes,” *Reel Life*, December 27, 1913, Vol. III, No. 15, 2.

mother's behalf and caught the eye of the mistress's sweetheart, the man realized the error of his ways. The film taught an important lesson, wrote the *Moving Picture World*: "There is but one standard of morals, a single one for men and women."<sup>3</sup>

Griffith's second Mutual picture, *Home Sweet Home* (May 1914), rendered a fictional account of songwriter John Howard Payne's life leading up to his writing the song of the same name. In addition to being filmed in L.A.'s now famous Griffith Park (named after Col. Griffith J. Griffith, not D.W.), *Home Sweet Home* also boasted "the greatest all-star motion picture ever produced." Upon its release, leading *Moving Picture World* columnist and established Griffith fan Louis Reeves Harrison called the picture "an appreciation of genius by genius." Harrison could not express enough "high praise" for the film since it somehow managed to be both inventive and wholesome. After all, wrote Harrison, "Drama that is noble in purpose, poetic in spirit and artistic in presentation...make[s] life lovely and wonderful...[and]...give[s] it that stimulus which leads to progress."<sup>4</sup>

Out of the gate Griffith proved with Mutual, as he had with Biograph, that his pictures advanced the legitimacy of motion pictures as art and entertainment. Nevertheless, while both *The Battle of the Sexes* and *Home Sweet Home* earned positive notices in the trade press and maintained successful runs, they hardly stood out from other productions of similar length. As the fan publication *Motion Picture Magazine* explained, *The Battle of the Sexes* was "fine, but by no means [Griffith's] best" while *Home Sweet Home* was "well done, but not really great."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Reviews by the *New York American's* Ada Patterson and Arthur Lewis, *Moving Picture World*, May 9, 1914, Vol. 20, No. 6, 845.

<sup>4</sup>"Doings at Los Angeles," *Moving Picture World*, April 25, 1914, Vol. 20, No. 4, 529.  
 "Notes of the Trade," *Moving Picture World*, May 2, 1914, Vol. 20, No. 5, 683. "'Home Sweet Home' reviewed by Louis Reeves Harrison," *Moving Picture World*, May 30, 1914, Vol. 20, No. 9, 1234.

<sup>5</sup>"Greenroom Jottings," *Motion Picture Magazine*, June 1914, Vol. 7, No. 5, 126. "The Spirit of the Play, by 'Junius,'" *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1914, Vol. 7, No. 6, 124.

Luckily, Biograph's belated release of *Judith of Bethulia* sustained Griffith's reputation as the industry's "master artist" and bought him time to ensure his final two contract pictures made a greater impact.<sup>6</sup>

Griffith's last two program films in 1914—now advertised as "Griffith Specials"—were literary adaptations. *The Avenging Conscience* represented an experimental composite of two Edgar Allen Poe poems, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "Annabel Lee." Griffith had done one-reel adaptations of both poems separately at the Biograph, but joining them in the same film better represented his vision for their cinematic value. Taken together, the poems reflected a moral sermon against violence and promoted redemption through love. Thus, while the bulk of the story depicted Poe's "Tell-Tale-Heart," excerpts from "Annabel Lee" were sprinkled throughout the picture in title cards and brief images. The ever-dependable Louis Reeves Harrison, who so often called Griffith's films "dramatic poems," received *The Avenging Conscience*'s message loud and clear, claiming "Never has a play driven home the lesson 'thou shalt not kill' as 'The Avenging Conscience.'" Indeed, Griffith reached "new powers of contrast" by transporting viewers from "the fabric of a delicious dream to common and hideous reality," balancing the two throughout so as to powerfully drive home the film's moral admonition.

Furthermore, Harrison identified the contemporary relevance of Griffith's homily in light of recent global events. At the time of Harrison's review Germany had officially declared war on France and was at war with Britain. Harrison compared the film's antihero to "a certain plumed Knight of Europe" who had similarly become possessed by vengeance against anyone who might "usurp his privilege." In other words, *The Avenging Conscience* showed the viciousness of a man

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<sup>6</sup>"Expression of Emotions," *Motion Picture Magazine*, August 1914, Vol. 8, No.7, 107. "Answer Department," *Motion Picture Magazine*, October 1914, Vol. 8, No. 9,138.

driven by “primitive emotion”—the lust to kill—yet convinced of his rationality. Similarly, newspaper accounts of the European conflict pointed to its root causes in Germany’s rapid advancement as a modern nation begetting its militarism.<sup>7</sup>

Even *Variety* acknowledged that Griffith was perfecting his achievement of “allegorical views” on the screen. In particular, *The Avenging Conscience* “hit upon what everyone possesses, even the low-brow and the no-brow, conscience.” Especially remarkable was what Griffith managed to show audiences—nothing short of a choking scene and a graphic double suicide—without causing them to recoil in discomfort. As such, Griffiths proved he could appeal to “the thinkers” as well as the general public, although for his labor he would likely not “receive the appreciation [he] deserved.”<sup>8</sup> More significantly, *The Avenging Conscience* revealed Griffith toying with ways to explore moral themes on screen through the portrayal of graphic violence.

*The Escape* even more forcefully depicted sordid aspects of humanity in an attempt to convey a moral and intellectual lesson. Based on Paul Armstrong’s successful play of the same name, *The Escape* offered a drama concerning hereditary violence. It opened with a prologue that explained the science of eugenics and compared the pure breeding of the animal kingdom to the haphazard mating practices of human beings. The film centered on a working-class family, the Joyces, whose patriarch, Jim, embodied primitive brutishness. A single father, Jim, created a miserable existence for his son and two daughters. Realizing his son was born naturally sensitive, Jim viciously beat him until the son became, like him, senselessly brutal. Meanwhile, one of the daughters, Jennie, married a man much like her father, street gangster Bull McGee. Bull killed

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<sup>7</sup>“‘Avenging Conscience,’ reviewed by Louis Reeves Harrison,” *Moving Picture World*, August 15, 1914, Vol. 21, No. 7, 936. “Causes of the War,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 17, 1914, 6. “H.G. Wells’ Vision of Armageddon,” Special Cable to the *New York Times*, August 5, 1913, 3.

<sup>8</sup>“Film Reviews,” *Variety*, August 7, 1914, Vol. XXXV, No. 10, 18.



the couple's newborn child, sending Jennie into a mental stupor that soon claimed her life as well. The other daughter spent her time as a senator's kept woman until she earned the affection of a young surgeon who discovered a way to restore her brother's humanity. The surgeon medically reinstated the son's inborn sensitivity and the family lineage was decontaminated. The daughter's subsequent decision to marry the gentle and refined doctor further demonstrated the family's "escape" from doomed, uncivilized bloodlines.

Doubtless confused in its logic, *The Escape* nevertheless deeply impressed (and shocked) audiences. As *Variety* noted, *The Escape* was not a "vice picture" per se, but it ventured into that territory on several occasions (as when, for instance Donald Crisp stomped a baby to death and Bobby Harron twisted a kitten's neck till it broke). Marveled *Variety's* reviewer, "I don't know what's getting to be the matter with Mr. Griffith—as a director he will take the most awful chances!" Indeed, although the film is lost, its unflinching depiction of familial dysfunction would today be considered ahead of its time. As historian William K. Everson explained, *The Escape's* "unrelievedly sordid procession of brutality, madness, disease, and death" suggested it was perhaps "the first feature-length *film noir*."<sup>9</sup> *The Escape* marked another attempt by Griffith to demonstrate the vitality and transcendence of motion pictures. In particular, by opening with a "scientific" prologue before unfolding a realistic contemporary human drama, *The Escape* fused education, social commentary, and a moral injunction, all focused around a fundamental condemnation of violence. Whatever his critics' doubts with this particular film, Griffith was confident they would catch up.

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<sup>9</sup>William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 76. "Film Flashes," *Variety*, June 5, 1914, Vol. XXXV, No. 1, 19.

Indeed, by August of 1914 Griffith's Mutual "Specials" were as distant a memory for him as his Biograph shorts. Since the *Battle of the Sexes* Griffith had moved his production team to Los Angeles, and upon the success of his three subsequent films, the Aitkens permitted him to stay there. Yet Griffith's main purpose for relocating was to begin his first independent feature, something he had hounded the Aitkens about since at least April. Harry Aitken was thrilled that some of the biggest names in New York expressed enthusiasm over Griffith's work—humorist Irvin Cobb, theater producer Daniel Frohman, finance titan Otto Kahn, and illustrator Mary Wilson Preston, to name a few. Nevertheless, Aitken hesitated to set the director loose on his first major independent project. To begin with, Griffith had a reputation for frequently going over budget and tearing through expensive film to achieve his envisioned effects. With no company oversight in California, Griffith's extravagance might know no bounds. But Aitken was likely also skeptical of Griffith's chosen subject, an adaptation of Thomas Dixon Jr.'s controversial novel-turned-play, *The Clansman*. Aitken suggested instead that Griffith make a longer, more elaborate version of one of his successful Biographs, perhaps a pulp Western like *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*. Of course, their contract left the decision to Griffith, and he would not be deterred. Consequently, once his required specials were in circulation he did not wait for Aitken's go-ahead to begin tireless work on his long awaited American epic.<sup>10</sup>

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It was scenario writer Frank Woods who introduced Griffith to the idea of making a filmed version of *The Clansman*. Woods had worked with Griffith since 1908 and followed him from the Biograph to Reliance-Majestic where Griffith instated him as their chief scenarist. Like

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<sup>10</sup>Letter to D.W. Griffith from Harry Aitken, April 15, 1914, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

fellow Griffith disciples, Woods credited the director with having “almost prophetic vision...[anticipating] virtually every important development in the infant art [of motion pictures].” That foresight included elevating the position of storywriters like Woods, thereby enhancing the overall quality of film narratives. Woods’ collaboration with Griffith now made him the foremost authority on screen writing.<sup>11</sup> It was the two men’s mutual appreciation for each other’s talents that prompted Woods to suggest Griffith consider an adaptation of Dixon’s play. Woods had previously written a scenario of *The Clansman* for a failed Kinemacolor production. He believed only Griffith could find the cinematic merit in Dixon’s troubled play, and, he was right. As soon as Woods showed Griffith the script he became a man possessed—stopping at nothing and for nobody in order to put his version of the story on screen.

To be sure, not everyone understood Griffith’s choice much less his unbridled enthusiasm over it. Ever since he had signed with the Aitkens, those closest to Griffith knew he was determined to make “a big Civil War picture *in twelve reels*.” In particular, Griffith wanted to tell “*his* version of the Civil War.” As a result, as soon as Griffith and his team arrived in California anyone remotely associated with the motion picture world caught wind that Griffith was planning his biggest venture yet. Once word spread that *The Clansman* would be the basis of Griffith’s dream project, however, the mood on the studio lot became slightly uneasy. *The Clansman* (1905) was the second installment in pulp novelist Thomas Dixon Jr.’s racist trilogy of the Reconstruction era, which he later turned into a play. Dixon’s novels offered a sentimental account of the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan that emphasized the perils of miscegenation and black enfranchisement. Cameraman Billy Bitzer remembered being immediately skeptical and

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<sup>11</sup>“Scenarios and Scenario Writers,” *Reel Life*, February 21, 1914, Vol. 3, No. 23, 34.

not a little surprised by Griffith's selection. "I was from Yankee country," Bitzer explained. "To me the K.K.K. was sillier than the Mack Sennett comedy chases. A group of horsemen in white sheets? Preposterous."<sup>12</sup>

Assistant cameraman Karl Brown recalled harboring even deeper reservations about Griffith's choice. Brown and his parents were veterans of the industry who had closely followed the news that "the one and only, great, and world-famous D.W. Griffith" would be relocating to their native Hollywood. The family kept tabs on Griffith's every move so that as soon as he arrived they could greet him and offer their services. Brown was even more enamored of Bitzer, and a perfectly posed question to the cinematographer earned him an apprenticeship alongside his two heroes. Needless to say, the teenager was eager to learn the nature of Griffith's unprecedented undertaking—a project he would have the privilege of helping create. Once he found out they were going to make *The Clansman*, Brown claimed he rushed to the library to absorb all he could of the material. While he finished the book in one sitting, he remembered it leaving him "sick at heart," and he worried that Griffith's best days were behind him. For Brown, the director's choice reflected more than poor taste. It signaled an uncharacteristic misreading of broad-based audience appeal. Where Bitzer deemed "a crazed Negro chasing a white girl" cheap melodrama, Brown saw the reopening of old national wounds and an invitation to "burn, slay, [and] kill [African Americans] without mercy." Worse, Griffith's genius meant that he "would take every element of this book and make it a thousand-fold more terrible than it could possibly be in print."<sup>13</sup> In other words, by applying his virtuosity to an unapologetic

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<sup>12</sup> G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 90. Lillian Gish with Ann Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco: Mercury House Inc., 1988), 136.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 9-12, 32-33.

Southern story about the war period, Griffith risked dividing the heterogeneous public he was trying to unite through motion pictures.

Whether or not hindsight prompted Bitzer and Brown to fabricate their wariness about the project, there were valid reasons to be unsure of *The Clansman*'s viability. Although both the play and the novel had been largely successful, the play, in particular, stirred up considerable local controversy during its 1905-1906 runs. Public outcry centered on its inflammatory racism, which aroused conflict at a handful of its premieres in the South. The play was also believed to have contributed to the 1906 Atlanta race riot that left over forty African Americans dead. A full-blown uprising during one of the play's performances in Philadelphia resulted in its ban there. Nevertheless, *The Clansman* enjoyed a full year of steadily enthusiastic white audiences across the country, and two of its companies continued performing for several years thereafter. Still, *The Clansman*'s past controversies cast doubt on the idea that a filmed version of the play would generate the kind of mass appeal Griffith sought for his project. Kinemacolor's disastrous 1912 production further suggested a movie adaptation was doomed to fail.<sup>14</sup>

Griffith was used to being second guessed, however, and he would move forward with *The Clansman* despite his colleagues' doubts. To begin with, he never intended a strict adaptation of Dixon's story. Rather, as he had tried to show with *The Avenging Conscience* and *The Escape*, Griffith believed established works best served as a film's foundation, while the director fleshed out a narrative through his own fictionalizations. Therefore, Dixon's trilogy of Reconstruction would literally provide only the *basis* for Griffith's epic about the entire Civil War period. Moreover, Griffith sensed early on that his Mutual contract would not cover the

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<sup>14</sup>Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 51-54.

complete cost of the kind of production he had in mind. That said, “adapting” a secondary work (especially one that had already proven successful) would better legitimize his project to financial backers who were likely to be apprehensive about funding a wholly original *and* extravagant film creation.<sup>15</sup>

For Griffith, *The Clansman* represented everything he had been working toward in motion pictures. From the time the notorious *Dramatic Mirror* advertisement declared him the founder of cinematic technique, Griffith and his supporters had primed the American public to regard him as the Messiah of the new medium. In the process Griffith became even more convinced of his moral purpose. In an interview with *Reel Life*, Mutual’s in-house publication, Griffith insisted films that drew the ire of censors did so because they lacked artistry. “The most delicate subjects can be presented on the screen without the least danger of offense,” Griffith argued, so long as they were “staged artistically and with the careful avoidance of sensational treatment.” Indeed, the biggest impediment to motion pictures’ recognition as genuine art stemmed from the fact that so many were produced with the object “of obtaining purely sensational results.” For Griffith, crass treatment of otherwise artistically vital subjects indicated terrible short-sightedness. Capitalizing on the cinema’s shock value forced films to be divided into productions that were family-friendly and those whose appeal was subversive. This division diminished potential film audiences and further discredited motion pictures because it suggested certain subjects could never be placed on the screen except in objectionable fashion. Griffith was determined to disprove that assumption and verify the capacity of movies to be both serious and wholesome, educational and entertaining.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 132.

<sup>16</sup>“Studio and Exchange Notes,” *Reel Life*, January 3, 1914, Vol. III, No. 16, 3.

Throughout 1914, press coverage of Griffith stressed his persistent struggle to raise the industry to a higher standard of sophistication. He insisted such improvement did not mean restricting sensitive material from the screen. Rather, filmmakers needed to better exploit the motion picture camera's unique ability to illuminate humanity's most delicate and fundamental questions.<sup>17</sup> As *The Moving Picture World* observed, "Not all of us...agree with Griffith[']s choice of subjects...[but] we are compelled to admit that he...[discovers] in his subject some things we did not suspect were there." Even when Griffith presented "things that [are] startling, if not always pleasing," his work commanded appreciation for its craftsmanship. Indeed, wrote film reviewer George Blaisdell, "You are not long talking with Mr. Griffith before you realize his chief aim is to produce life as it is [and to avoid] the stagey, the artificial, the affected." For Griffith, motion pictures were the ideal dramatic medium. Their photographic quality knew no bounds. It captured "real...human emotion" thereby revealing "human nature" more authentically than any other art form. "It is humanity which interests Griffith," *Theater Magazine* reported. Thus, like a true poet, Griffith found material everywhere and in everything. His skill and sensitivity enabled him to "[interpret] even the sordid and weak in human nature...[with]...an idealism founded on understanding."<sup>18</sup> Put simply, Griffith promoted the movies as a powerful tool in humankind's eternal quest for truth and understanding.

The subject of war was never far from Griffith's mind when he contemplated the cinema's many unrealized possibilities. Those who followed Griffith from the Biograph recalled being captivated by his insistence that they were developing nothing short of a new, "universal

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<sup>17</sup>Trade publications constantly featured discussions of "uplifting" the cinema by treating only "clean" and "decent" subjects. For instance, "To Show Uplift Films," *Reel Life*, January 17, 1914, Vol. 3, No. 18, 35.

<sup>18</sup>"David W. Griffith, Motion Picture Director," *Moving Picture World*, July 11, 1914, Vol. 21, No. 2, 184. George Blaisdell, "At the Sign of the Flaming Arcs," *Moving Picture World*, January 3, 1914, Vol. 19, No. 1, 52.

language.” Such a language, he argued, had the power to correct misunderstandings and resolve differences between the world’s nations and peoples. Griffith muse and confidante, Lillian Gish, recalled the director regularly sermonizing on the seriousness of their work in such terms: “‘Do you know,’ he would tell us, ‘we are playing to the world! What we film tomorrow will stir the hearts of the world—and they will understand what we are saying. We’ve gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We’ve found a universal language—a power that can make men brothers and end war forever. Remember that. Remember *that*, when you stand in front of a camera!’” Gish repeated countless versions of this memory throughout her life. “He made us believe we were taking the first steps in a medium that had been predicted in the Bible,” she reiterated in a 1966 interview; “[a] universal language...[that]...would bring about the Millennium and end wars.” A 1988 variation of the story placed Griffith’s sermon in the context of a reprimand he gave an actor for referring to the movies with the dismissive term “flickers.” “[Movies] can speak to the world,” scolded Griffith, “and the reason we have wars is because men don’t understand one another, too many different languages.” So “when we...perfect this,” the director preached, “it will end wars and bring about the Millennium!”<sup>19</sup>

Beyond forging a common language that might rid the world of future wars, Griffith also believed motion pictures could illuminate wars from the past and chronicle their occurrence in the present. As he had demonstrated through his strenuous efforts to accurately reproduce the Biblical city of Bethulia in *Judith*, Griffith understood that movies visualized historical events in dynamic ways. Through exhaustive research filmmakers could provide veritable history lessons

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<sup>19</sup>Lillian Gish and Anne Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco, Mercury House Inc., 1969), 130. *The Great Director* (BBC West, 1966), 16mm film reel, UCLA Film Archive, Television Collection, T71421. *Lillian Gish: The Actor’s Life for Me* (American Film Foundation and American Masters, 1988) Videocassette, UCLA Film Archive, Television Collection, VA2879 T.



that were not only instructive but accessible to the illiterate and uneducated. Furthermore, because the motion picture camera humanized and vitalized the past, historical films would appeal to younger audience who might be otherwise uninterested in times gone by. Ultimately, Griffith predicted, historical movies would replace history books in the nation's libraries. Finally, should a war break out, motion pictures offered invaluable "possibilities as a newspaper." By supplying "up-to-the-minute illustrated news," filmmakers could visually document "the history of the world" as it unfolded. Perhaps such an innovation would hasten a war's end. Imagine "the picture...[in]...the hands of a great political party with a big issue like...slavery," proposed Griffith. The counterfactual was clear: had so powerful a unifying force as the cinema existed in 1860, the United States might not have gone to war with itself.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Clansman* Griffith saw an opportunity to brandish the widest possible range of cinematic ingenuity in a single film. In doing so, his picture would announce the arrival of motion pictures as an unrivaled force for art, entertainment, education, and moral instruction. First, he would expand Dixon's Reconstruction story to include the whole Civil War period. By depicting the actual war, Griffith planned to capitalize on the upcoming semi-centennial commemorating the end of the conflict. While he would maintain a predominantly Southern view of the war and its aftermath, Griffith's film would also emphasize white sectional reconciliation. Second, through consulting current scholarship—including the work of recently-elected President Woodrow Wilson—Griffith would render an authentic historical account that registered as a moving photograph of the past. Finally, Griffith would skillfully exploit to maximum melodramatic impact what he saw as the most visually promising aspects of Dixon's

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<sup>20</sup>Robert E. Welsh, "David W. Griffith Speaks," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, January 14, 1914,

novel, namely the Ku Klux Klan rides. He hoped the result would be a singular celebration of national reunion and a thrilling testament to the new language of motion pictures.

Transforming *The Clansman* into an unqualified exaltation of national reconciliation required altering Dixon's story in significant ways. Most importantly, where Dixon's narrative opened during the final days of the Civil War, Griffith needed his version to begin on the eve of the conflict. Pushing the narrative back allowed Griffith to thoroughly allegorize the conflict as a family drama. He subsequently revived characters from Dixon's novel that were left out of the play, eliminated others, and created some of his own. Griffith kept Dixon's basic narrative structure that contrasted two families from the North and South, the Stonemans and the Camerons respectively. He likewise retained most of Dixon's central characters: Southern patriarch, Dr. Cameron, and his son, the protagonist, Ben, as well as Northern patriarch, Austin Stoneman, and his daughter and Ben Cameron's love interest, Elsie. Dixon's villains, mulatto Silas Lynch and renegade freedman Gus, also survived Griffith's telling. To the Cameron family Griffith reinstated the novel's Mrs. Cameron, the daughter, Margaret Cameron, as well as Austin Stoneman's housekeeper-mistress, Lydia Brown, and his son, Phil. Griffith created two additional sons for the Cameron family, Wade and Duke, and gave Phil Stoneman a younger brother, Tod. The character of Marion Lenoir, Ben Cameron's childhood sweetheart and Gus's victim in Dixon's story, became in Griffith's story Ben's youngest sister, Flora Cameron. Fleshing out both families drew a stronger counterpoint between them, which allowed Griffith to more firmly shape his film into a domestic drama. The tensions that developed between (and

within) the Cameron and Stoneman families symbolized the war as a rupture in the national family<sup>21</sup>

Casting the conflict as familial melodrama also enabled Griffith to perfect certain characteristics of his Civil War Biographs by applying them to a feature-length format. Consequently, the emergence of those features in Griffith's *Clansman* adaptation would enshrine them as constitutive elements of the American war film. For example, housing the Civil War in the symbol of a family unit (or units) underscored reunion by obscuring the causes of the conflict. Indeed, Griffith almost completely eliminated politics from his film, omitting the various political struggles that factored prominently in Dixon's writing. Missing from Griffith's story was any mention of Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, and his battles with both Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Austin Stoneman. Nor did Griffith choose to depict Dixon's local tug-of-war between fictional South Carolina Governor Shrimp and Silas Lynch.<sup>22</sup>

That politics were conspicuously absent in Griffith's film was all the more striking since he deliberately chose to begin the story before the war broke out. As with his one and two-reel shorts, the reasons behind the Civil War remained vague in Griffith's *The Clansman* and difficult to link to any of the film's main characters. Rather, Griffith explained the conflict's origins in a prologue that predated the war's immediate context. In it a title card flashed: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion," and a procession of manacled African Americans at an eighteenth-century slave auction emerged on the screen. Griffith then cut to a

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<sup>21</sup>Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, page, 1905). Play script of "The Clansman," by Thomas Dixon Jr., *DWGP*, Reel 2. 1914 script for the film and list of sequences, *DWGP*, Reel 2. "Birth of a Nation" Title Sheets, *DWGP*, Reel 2. Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 81-82.

<sup>22</sup>Griffith did, however, briefly mention Charles Sumner and William Seward in one version the film. "Birth of a Nation" Title Sheets, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

brief image of nineteenth-century abolitionists “demanding the freeing of the slaves” before introducing the two contemporary families who comprised the central drama. The film became slightly more specific when viewers were taken to the South Carolina plantation where Doctor Cameron read a newspaper on his mansion’s porch. An intertitle explained, “The power of the sovereign states...is threatened by the new administration,” and the camera closed in on the paper’s headline: “IF THE NORTH CARRIES THE ELECTION THE SOUTH WILL SECEDE!”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps most critically, Griffith made no discernible connection between slavery and secession in establishing the circumstances that led to war. Neither did he explicitly name Abraham Lincoln or the Republican Party. Instead, Griffith traced the roots of the conflict to the proverbial “Sins of the Father”—in this case, America’s founding fathers—whose progeny was forced to pay for the original crime of slavery. Lincoln would later emerge as arguably the most potent emblem of reconciliation in Griffith’s film.

Griffith also emphasized reunion to ensure his film’s broad commercial appeal to white audiences. Since 1911, American culture had been immersed in retrospective consciousness about the Civil War. Newspapers and magazines enthusiastically reported a spate of commemorative activities celebrating the conflict’s semi-centennial anniversaries, from Fort Sumter to Appomattox and Lincoln’s assassination. In addition to coverage of reunions and exhibitions, popular media became saturated with special features and series memorializing various leaders and battles. As historian David Blight has shown, “the dominant mode of

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<sup>23</sup>“Birth of a Nation” Title Sheets, *DWGP*, Reel 2. My discussions of the film are based on three full-length versions I viewed: *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002); *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith, undated reissue with soundtrack, 3 reels, 16 mm safety print, UCLA Film Archive, Motion Picture Collection (MP), M71611; *Birth of a Nation*, laserdiscs copied from original print, UCLA Film Archive, MP, VD878M. I also viewed unedited footage of the film and outtakes at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, MP, 35mm print, M59495 as well as excerpts and commentary in *D.W. Griffith: Father of Film* (PBS, 1993), UCLA Television Collection (TV), 2 Videocassettes, VA11669-11660.

memory was [white] reconciliation.” The overwhelming theme of reunion that permeated Civil War commemoration emphasized the mutual glory and sacrifice of soldiers from the North and South. For example, several publications reprinted Clarence Clough Buel’s and Robert Underwood Johnson’s famous multi-volume *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (Century, 1887). Collectively, the volumes claimed to generate “better understanding between the soldiers who were opposed in that conflict” through “nonpartisan” accounts. (Griffith would keep a copy of them on hand throughout filming of *The Clansman*).<sup>24</sup>

More specifically, by the time the semi-centennial arrived, the role of slavery and racial division had been “banished from the national story” in favor of a “collective victory narrative.” In this formulation, the Civil War emerged as not only a transformative event in the nation’s history but an unparalleled achievement in the history of the world. Columbia University professor Dudley Miles articulated the central tenets of the reunion narrative in a 1913 essay, “The Civil War as Unifier.” In it, Miles argued that the most remarkable fact of America’s Civil War was the swiftness with which wartime bitterness ceased along with the fighting. Where so many other civil wars and revolutions were followed by periods of continued bitter faction, America’s conflict represented “an unexampled obliteration of sectional animosities.” Even more impressive, what was essentially the deadliest “struggle of modern times” actually “deepened and spread the sense of nationality” throughout the country.

One simple explanation for such an outcome, Miles claimed, was the scale and speed of modernization. The swift stream of progress—“Electricity...industry...and commerce”—“swept away the bitter animosities” and mended the nation’s wounds through trade and economic

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<sup>24</sup>Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 381. Clarence Clough Buel and Robert Underwood Johnson, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, IV Vols. (New York: Century Co., 1884-1887), Vol. 1, ix.

growth. Yet it was the American people themselves who demonstrated a unique ability to forgive the past and weld a new nation. “The sober truth of the matter,” concluded Miles, “is that...instead of splitting the country asunder [the war] cemented it more firmly than any other force could have done.” To that end, the Civil War was a necessary, noble, and mutual sacrifice that proved Americans’ could overcome even the worst crises as a redeemed whole.<sup>25</sup>

President Woodrow Wilson echoed the sentiments of reunion in speeches he delivered at various semi-centennial events. For some, like Griffith, Wilson’s election itself was a sign of the country’s reunification. Wilson was the first southerner to be elected president since the Civil War. He had studied the conflict with keen interest and published several works of professional scholarship on the subject. Wilson was from Virginia, his parents had identified with the Confederacy during the war and cared for wounded soldiers at his father’s church. In other words, Wilson was the first president to have a deep and personal connection with the South’s Lost Cause, something that encouraged Griffith to identify with the nation’s leader and politics more generally in a way he never had before. In fact, those who knew Griffith never questioned his profound admiration for Wilson.<sup>26</sup>

Griffith insiders were also aware that the director hoped to impress the president as both an artist and fellow southerner with his *Clansman* project. Indeed, Griffith further deviated from Dixon by literally translating Wilson’s words into both still and moving images. At the notorious 1913 Blue-Gray Gettysburg reunion, Wilson declared the Civil War’s “quarrel forgotten,” while

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<sup>25</sup>Dudley Miles, “The Civil War as Unifier,” *The Suwanee Review*, April 1913, Vol. 21, No. 2, 188-197. Blight also uses Dudley’s essay as an example of “a master narrative of reunion,” but emphasizes different quotations from it in his analysis. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 382-383.

<sup>26</sup>For more on the Lost Cause see Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For Wilson’s relationship to the war see Anthony Gaughan, “Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War,” *Civil War History* 43 (September 1997), 225-42. Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*, 136.

insisting Americans would never forget “the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other’s eyes.” Griffith translated this sentiment onto the screen the following year when he filmed his famous battle scenes. The eldest sons, Ben Cameron and Phil Stoneman, are commanders of their respective regiments. At one point their younger brothers, Tod Stoneman and Duke Cameron, reunited on the battlefield. During a charge Duke caught Union fire and collapsed. Tod appeared with his bayonet and raised it to finish off who he assumed was an injured foe. He stopped when he realized it was Duke and a title card explained, “True to their promise, the chums meet again.” At the precise moment of recognition, Tod was shot with his weapon in midair and fell beside his friend. The two boys held each other and smiled as they drew their last breaths. Griffith then showed the two grief-stricken families receiving word of their loss.<sup>27</sup> Later, postcards celebrating the film’s premiere even more precisely echoed Wilson’s reunion sentiment. One of them depicted a Union and Confederate soldier shaking hands across a small stream that separated them.

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<sup>27</sup>Woodrow Wilson, “Hard Tasks Ahead of the Nation” (1914), in Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 6 vols. (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1925-1927), III, 41. (Hereon *PPWW*). *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).



Griffith began his story when he did to highlight the mutual “valor” of Confederate and Union soldiers about which Wilson spoke. Perhaps more importantly, however, Griffith was determined from the outset to produce the most cutting-edge battle scenes ever placed on the screen. Indeed, Griffith’s portrayal of modern combat was critical to his larger goal of announcing “the beautiful possibilities of the art of motion pictures.”<sup>28</sup> Battle scenes were powerful emblems of cinematic realism as Griffith defined it, and they effectively showcased the fundamental methods of narrative filmmaking that he helped develop. With the freedom of the feature-length format, Griffith planned to outdo himself in putting the technical innovations of the motion picture camera to dramatic use. Extravagant combat sequences were essential in achieving that end.

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<sup>28</sup>D.W. Griffith, “Reply to the New York Globe,” *New York Globe*, April 10, 1915. Reprinted in Robert Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 168



The editing patterns Griffith honed at the Biograph represented what Michael Rogin calls “a formal vocabulary of modern life.” By cutting back and forth between distinct shots, Griffith juxtaposed events separated in time and by space. Such juxtapositions suggested the miraculous capabilities of the cinema: movies collapsed the distinction between images in the head and events in the world and overcame the barriers of distance and time. They made the jolts of modern life intelligible and controllable.<sup>29</sup> Crucially, by telling a story about the Civil War Griffith would bring the past into the present and enable Americans to share the experience of “real” combat with their ancestors. In this way, Griffith’s film would not only offer a monument to national reunion, but it would also manifest the modern, new nation that Wilson proclaimed had reached “maturity” over the last fifty years.<sup>30</sup>

Little did Griffith know that less than a week before he started filming *The Clansman* the opening shot of World War I—the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand—had already been fired. Indeed, while Griffith and his team dug trenches and laid out gun emplacements for their filmed Civil War battles, newspapers reported a series of actual battles along the eastern frontier of France and southern Belgium. Griffith continued to stage combat in the San Fernando Valley for six months, during which time Americans learned of such unprecedented calamities as the First Battle of the Marne and the First Battle of Ypres.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*,” in Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation*, 258-259.

<sup>30</sup>Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, III, 41.

<sup>31</sup>Willis Fletcher Johnson, “Present Battlegrounds Scenes of Historic Conflicts,” *New York Tribune*, August 16, 1914, C4. “War Situation in Tabloid Form for Benefit of French Readers,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 1914, 3. “Which Began the War?” *The Sun*, September 20, 1914, 2. “Belgians Retire from Louvain toward Antwerp,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 1914, 4. “Tales of Horror Told by Wounded,” *New York Tribune*, September 24, 1914, 4. “Allies Claim Success on Whole Line,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 27, 1914, 1.

The Great War hovered over every stage of production, and it affected Griffith's film in important ways. First, it raised the stakes of Griffith's battle scenes. Although newspapers chronicled many details of the fighting, Americans received scant visual documentation of the carnage in Europe. As such, Griffith's sophisticated renderings of modern combat would offer viewers more than a glimpse of the past: it would actually imply a current reality abroad. Ultimately Griffith's film would place a premium on "realism" as a generic standard of the American war film. Second, the European war allowed Griffith to expand his allegory of national reunion into a larger sermon against modern war. The result was a commentary on global affairs and an assertion of America's unique role in the world that mirrored the sentiments espoused by President Woodrow Wilson. Griffith's visual manifestation of Wilson's foreign policy would forge the central mythology of American war films.

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Griffith's associates abandoned any lingering doubts about the project as soon as filming commenced. Inspiration simply *poured* out of Griffith, infecting the entire set with seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm. From the first day of shooting the director exhibited indomitable confidence that this film would make history. Cameraman Billy Bitzer recalled Griffith's "directorial personality [transforming] entirely." Whereas his typical temperament on set tended to reflect some form of frustration with his superiors, now Griffith arrived every morning shadow-boxing. He smiled and burst into song between takes, sometimes sweeping Lillian Gish up into an impromptu ballroom dance. Griffith's zeal alone convinced everyone that they were participating in something truly consequential. Furthermore, he kept most actors on a need-to-know basis and swore his confidantes to complete secrecy regarding specific details of

the project. This heightened the mood of anticipation that already permeated production. Not even persistent money issues dampened Griffith's spirit. "I had never seen him so determined and self-confident," Bitzer later wrote. "Somehow, feeling the strength of his conviction...[being] low on funds temporarily did not seem to matter." Nothing could stem the tide of Griffith's vision.<sup>32</sup>

Griffith soaked himself in the Civil War period and committed himself completely to obtaining the most authentic portrayals of the era. Notes, maps, and pamphlets bulged out of the director's pockets. He kept several books on hand for reference. For his battle scenes Griffith relied not only on Century's *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, but also on Harper's *Pictorial History of the Civil War* (1894-96), *The Soldier in Our Civil War: A Pictorial History of the Conflict 1861-1865* (1890), and Matthew Brady's *Civil War Photographs*. Griffith became obsessed with making every minute detail as genuine as possible. When, say, a Brady photograph depicted ill-fitting uniforms, Griffith dressed his soldiers in garments that were either over- or under-sized. Crates of costumes and military equipment arrived regularly only to be sent back if Griffith deemed them inaccurate or too affected. Even General Lee's horse, Traveller, "had to be just the right dappled gray," Bitzer recalled, although it only appeared in the film once. Griffith tried to replicate every aspect of the surrender at Appomattox as it appeared on an engraving. He likewise parsed out every reproducible feature of Lincoln's assassination as documented by the president's former secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 109. See also Bitzer's "Reminiscences" in G.W. Bitzer Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

<sup>33</sup>Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 75. Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 133, 136. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 107.

The project seemed to transport the director back in time. “This was not just [a] picture for Griffith,” Bitzer explained, “he was fighting the old war all over again and, like a true Southerner, trying to win...or at least justify losing it.” Bitzer was right. As far as Griffith was concerned, “we were back in 1864-5.” Except Griffith was not fighting the “old war...again,” but rather a new war for the first time. The *carte blanche* experience of filming *The Clansman* allowed Griffith to command his own kind of play-war. Indeed, the language of real war and references to Griffith as a military leader of sorts permeated his colleague’s reminiscences. He directed battle scenes just “like a general,” remembered Lillian Gish, coordinating the action from atop “a forty-foot tower, commander-in-chief of both armies.” Karl Brown recalled the revelation of “witnessing...a Griffith rehearsal of battle.” Even when “there was no action to run through...everyone in any capacity” knew their function in Griffith’s larger scheme. Consequently, this freed Griffith of having to involve himself in preparations for battle scenes. Like the most beloved captain of a regiment, “[Griffith] knew, because he knew his men, that when he appeared on the field ready to shoot, every trench, every gun emplacement, every costume, *every detail* would be set and ready.” All the director had to do was say “Fade in”—and the “battle” would begin.<sup>34</sup>

With premium resources at his disposal, Griffith’s mock campaigns felt uncannily real to participants. Karl Brown, who was later drafted into the American Expeditionary Force, remembered the grueling labor required in laying out battlefields according to Griffith’s vision, and the thrilling, but terrifying, experience of enacting combat. Before each take, Brown “braced” himself “much as Pickett’s men must have done before the charge at Gettysburg.” Part

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<sup>34</sup> Bitzer, *His Story*, 104. Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 139-140. Brown, *Adventures*, 59.

of Brown's and others' apprehension stemmed from the trial-and-error nature of using real explosives and gunfire during filming. The team's one-armed explosives expert, "Fireworks" Wilson, erected real mortar which he packed with homemade mulligan in order to produce the "bombs bursting in air" Griffith requested. Although Wilson exceeded Griffith's expectations, his creations shot up past the men charging each other on the ground, making it impossible for the camera to capture the action occurring simultaneously. They turned instead to custom-made hand grenades that contained enough powder to affect a terrible explosion without significantly endangering the actors. Of course, explosives were inherently dangerous, particularly when wielded by the inexperienced. Thus, it was not long before one supernumerary, Tom Wilson, almost lost a hand. Nevertheless, Wilson brandished his injury with pride, presenting the director his mangled fist, "black and wet with dripping blood," and boasting, "I ain't dogging out on you, Mr. Griffith! See[!]"<sup>35</sup>

The famous Klan rides were no less hazardous than the Civil War battles. In fact, it was Thomas Dixon's description of the assembling Klansmen that first struck Griffith as cinematic gold. "I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying," Griffith later wrote. More specifically, the Klan rides offered Griffith an opportunity to reach the apotheosis of the classic "chase" sequence as both a dramatic and spectacular cinematic device:

We had all sorts of runs-to-rescue in pictures and horse operas. The old United States cavalry would gallop to the rescue—East, one week; West the next. It was always a hit...the most surefire gag in the business...Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one poor little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation.

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<sup>35</sup>Brown, *Adventures*, 54-55, 75.

Nevertheless, because of the war in Europe horses were in short supply, so the horses Griffith rented for the scene proved expensive. Furthermore, none of them were “Blue Ribbon” winners, as Bitzer recalled, and neither were the countless extras expected to ride them “Steeple-chase” jumpers. But no matter for Griffith—he would test every novel idea and spare no expense in realizing what was to be the climax of the film’s second half. He therefore insisted on shooting the chase from every angle. At one point Griffith and Bitzer filmed from the back of an automobile as it raced ahead of the Klansmen. On another occasion Griffith asked Bitzer to film the rides while lying on his back in a ditch to achieve a perspective of the horses leaping overhead. Bitzer obliged, but he barely escaped being trampled. The horses and the horsemen were covered in sheets that kept blinding them as they gathered speed, and the ever-thickening dust left in their wake further obscured their vision.<sup>36</sup>

Griffith’s experience filming *The Clansman* allowed him to conjure the “warrior spirit” of his male ancestors in a way he had never done before. It bears repeating Griffith’s explanation that his paternal lineage “impart[ed] a martial trend to my character, but there was no war...[so I decided]...to become a great literary man.” Not only had Griffith been of age to fight in the Spanish-American War, but his associates distinctly recalled the director lacking any sort of violent temperament. Bitzer described him as always “on an even keel, rarely even perturbed,” while Lillian Gish remembered Griffith “avoiding violence” at all costs. Yet filming *The Clansman* occasioned a rare burst of machismo and aggression from Griffith. While shooting one of the battle scenes, an extra fired a shot after Griffith had ordered the action to stop. Men further down in the trenches assumed the rogue shot meant an order to resume gunfire and discharged a

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<sup>36</sup>Griffith and Hart, *The Man who Invented Hollywood*, 88-89. Bitzer, “In the Rides of the Clansman,” G.W. Bitzer Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 35.

flock of valuable blanks while the camera was not rolling. The director reprimanded the extra from his megaphone, but the man twice more fired his weapon after Griffith had yelled “cut.”

Bitzer remembered what followed as nothing short of “startling”:

Griffith tore off his hat, threw it on the ground, rushed own to the trench (I followed); ‘Where’s that damn fool? Whoever it is get out of the trench and get the ‘ell off the lot, or I’ll put him off.’ The show off came up out of the trench and with a ‘you and who else’ murmur strode toward Griffith. They were punching in a jiff and before others could butt in, Mr. Griffith had caught him one among others that just about knocked [him] cold and almost back into the trench...Mr. Griffith...a bit disheveled, stood over the fellow and said ‘You go. Now you go,’ and Mr. Griffith went back to his work.<sup>37</sup>

Evidently commanding dangerous and elaborate battle scenes summoned the latent “martial trends” of Griffith’s character to the surface.

Throughout production Griffith remained as devoted to depicting the less glamorous aspects of war as he was to capturing realistic and thrilling scenes of combat. As was his standard practice, he did not work from a detailed shooting script for *The Clansman*. Rather, Griffith developed a broad conception of the overarching story and allowed the details of certain scenes to emerge organically as filming went along. Such improvisation resulted in a handful of the finished film’s most memorable scenes. For instance, while staging Sherman’s March to the Sea, a lull in production inspired a flash of genius. As he waited for the crew to arrive with the necessary cannons, Griffith noticed a family of laborers eating their lunch on the hilltop below. He ordered Bitzer to take several close-ups of the family. Later, during the editing process, Griffith inserted these shots into the larger sequence depicting Sherman’s campaign. He alternated between “the long panorama shot...[and]...this little intimate picture of a mother and

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<sup>37</sup>Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 128. “D.W. Griffith,” G.W. Bitzer Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

her children caught in the grip of war.” “It was one of those touches that made *The Birth* so real and convincing,” remembered Bitzer. Lillian Gish similarly insisted that it was Griffith’s unflinching portrayal of “war’s horrors” that made his film feel like a documentary account of the conflict as opposed to a historical pageant.<sup>38</sup>

By December of 1914 Griffith had completed most of the filming for *The Clansman* and could now turn to editing. Editing was where everything came together for Griffith, the place where he melded otherwise disjointed images into a coherent story. That said, it was neither unusual nor surprising for new inspiration to seize Griffith in the editing room, prompting his call for a series of additional scenes to be taken. The intensification of the war overseas and the new prospect that President Wilson might preview his film also impacted Griffith’s final decisions and finishing touches. Accordingly, while the trade press announced filming complete by December, the first finished cut of the project would not be shown to test audiences for another two months. During that time Griffith took measures to make his picture more than a visceral reproduction of the past that celebrated national reunion.<sup>39</sup> He added certain scenes and title cards that more clearly evoked concerns about the United States’ relationship to the European conflict. To do so Griffith again echoed themes and sentiments espoused by Woodrow Wilson. Specifically, he portrayed a Ku Klux Klan that attempted to reconcile the differences between Dixon and Wilson’s respective descriptions of the organization. Griffith’s composite Ku Klux Klan rounded out his allegory of a nation that had rid itself of war and stood poised to influence the rest of the world as a beacon of peace and democracy.

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<sup>38</sup>Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 108. Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 147, 151.

<sup>39</sup> “‘The Clansman,’ Griffith Production, Coming,” *Moving Picture World*, November 28, 1914, Vol. 22, No. 9, 1247. “Griffith’s Production of ‘The Clansman’ Finished,” *Motion Picture News*, January 2, 1915, Vol. 10, No. 6, 33.



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While Griffith's treatment of the Civil War intimated white reunion by emphasizing mutual aspects of the conflict, his allegory of national reconciliation fully emerged in the film's second half. Griffith's Civil War forced his main characters, the Stonemans and the Camerons, family friends from the North and South respectively, to become enemies in a bloody war with an unclear purpose. Both families' youngest sons perished on the battlefield while their eldest sons survived and performed bravely as commanders of their regiments. Shared honor and suffering thus characterized the war experience in Griffith's film. After the war, those common sacrifices were primarily housed in the symbol of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had symbolized the war's regrettable nature earlier when Griffith depicted the president weeping as he signed the first call for volunteers. Once the South surrendered, Lincoln alone urged familial regard for the former combatants. For instance, immediately following the conflict, Ben Cameron lay in a hospital bed awaiting execution after being wrongfully condemned as a guerrilla. Mrs. Cameron and Elsie Stoneman appealed directly to Lincoln for Ben's pardon, which Lincoln granted over his cabinet's objections. A short time later Ben returned to his family.

Griffith's depiction of Ben Cameron's homecoming revealed the distinct devastation the war wrought on the South and underscored Lincoln's critical role in achieving a just peace. In a now timeless sequence Ben Cameron, clad in a tattered uniform, stumbled slowly toward the entrance of his family's once grand estate. Dead and dying crops lined the front gate of a mansion in evident disrepair. As Ben approached the doorstep, an arm reached out from inside the house, then another, until two anonymous limbs welcomed Ben inside. The faceless embrace represented the general suffering of the South and the universal suffering caused by war.

Nevertheless, the Cameron family and their Southern counterparts looked optimistically toward the future. The film revealed them happily working together to transform their home into a boarding house while a title card explained: "The South, under Lincoln's fostering hand, goes to work to rebuild itself." Hardly any time passed, however, before Lincoln's assassination violently interrupted "the healing days of peace [that] were at hand." Upon receiving word of the president's death, Dr. Cameron lamented, "Our best friend is gone. What will become of us now?"

With Lincoln's passing, Griffith's film introduced the resumption of wartime hostilities through the new horrors of postwar occupation. Misguided in his ideals of racial equality, Austin Stoneman, "now the greatest power in America," charged his protégée, mulatto Silas Lynch, with directing operations in the Camerons' native Piedmont, South Carolina. Lynch organized a militia of former slaves to disenfranchise white men and defile white women in pursuit of absolute "black rule." Only a few "faithful souls," like the Camerons' black servants, chose loyalty to their white masters over emancipation. Following an election day during which Lynch's men intimidated white voters in the streets and in the state legislature, Ben Cameron formed his own militia, the Ku Klux Klan, to wage a new war in the South. The Klan battled Lynch's forces in the film's most climactic sequences. During the conflict the Camerons took refuge in a cabin owned by sympathetic Union veterans dismayed to see their wartime sacrifice serve the purpose of black militarism. Austin Stoneman similarly grasped his egregious misjudgment when he recognized Lynch's true aims, which included marriage to Stoneman's daughter, and Ben's sweetheart, Elsie. Meanwhile, a contingent of black forces attacked the white families in the cabin while Lynch imprisoned Austin and Elise Stoneman. Griffith's story

thus concluded with two sensational chase sequences in which the Klan rescued both sets of captives.<sup>40</sup>

Griffith's Civil War emerged as a senseless but inevitable tragedy thrust upon a generation of Americans chosen to atone for their country's original sins. Despite the mutual sacrifices of the North and South, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln thwarted a constructive and just peace once the fighting ended. Consequently, a new war broke out during Reconstruction—a paramilitary race war—that threatened to upend the principles of democracy and self-determination shared by white veterans of the North and the South. Only the Klan's victory over black autocracy redeemed the bloodshed of both wars by restoring the white nation's common ideals. As a title card explained during the siege of the Union cabin, "The former enemies of the North and South... united again in defense of their Aryan birthright." Thus, where the surrender at Appomattox marked the triumph of a unified democracy over unbridled state sovereignty, the Klan's postwar victory insured a united national spirit. Once the Klan disbanded, the two inter-sectional romances—Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman and Phil Stoneman and Margaret Cameron—enjoyed a "double honeymoon." In the final image, Ben and Elsie embraced on a bluff, only their profiles visible to the camera, and gazed upon a tranquil sea below.<sup>41</sup>

Sometime between November and January 1915 Griffith expanded his film's sermon on national reunion to include a broader indictment of war. Since the summer he had been toying with different ideas for a powerful symbolic image to close the film. Initially he determined to portray hundreds of angels hovering over a battlefield strewn with fallen soldiers. He ordered the

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<sup>40</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

erection of no fewer than one hundred telephone poles from which actresses would be suspended in custom-made harnesses. Thirty poles went up and several materials for the angel costumes were ordered when Griffith abruptly changed his mind. Bitzer recalled Griffith declaring dismissively, “Mars and the God of War would be better for an ending,” having evidently forgotten all about his original orders.

Specifically, Griffith decided to portray the God of War dissolving into the Prince of Peace. To the lingering portrait of reconciled lovers on the cliff-side, Griffith subsequently added an epilogue that would now conclude his film. A title card read, “Dare We Dream of a Golden Day where the Bestial War Shall Rule No More—But Instead of the Prince of Peace in the Hall of Brotherly Love.” Next an image appeared of a brutish man on horseback wielding a giant sword: dead bodies lay to his left and living people pled for mercy to his right. This chaotic scene of violence then transitioned into an ancient city where happy people bustled about as an ethereal figure of Jesus Christ overlapped them, fading in and out. A snapshot of the peaceful city was then juxtaposed with the shot of Ben and Elsie on the bluff and replaced the sea they were previously shown observing. Finally, a closing title card read: “Liberty and Union, one and inseparable, now and forever.” With the Civil War and the War of Reconstruction finally over, Ben and Elsie looked toward millennial peace.<sup>42</sup>

Griffith’s two-part allegory now suggested that the lessons of national reunion furnished the United States with unique standing in a world presently ravaged by war. Specifically, sectional reconciliation via the reassertion of white supremacy established peace at home and provided a model for peace abroad. To his prologue citing the importation of Africans to

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<sup>42</sup>“Money,” G.W. Bitzer Collection, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

American colonies as the source of domestic strife, Griffith added an earlier statement declaring his film's purpose: "If in this play we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain." Griffith further proclaimed his film's anti-war message in the advertisements he placed ahead of its preview screenings for test audiences. Griffith had developed the practice of previewing his longer films for smaller audiences in nearby towns and adjusting his work based on their initial responses. Before its first runs in Riverside, California, local papers boasted the opportunity to witness a twelve-reel picture by the "world's foremost motion picture director" months ahead of its Los Angeles premiere. *The Clansman* promised to be among "the greatest universal peace sermons ever staged in drama" and "one of the greatest pleas for universal peace possibly devised."<sup>43</sup>

The advance publicity of *The Clansman* captured a recurring paradox in both Griffith's intentions for the film and its later reception. On the one hand, Griffith wanted viewers to receive the film as a marvel of authenticity, particularly in terms of its battle scenes. On the other hand, the purpose of such military realism was to "preach against the horrors of war." For example, the director boasted use of real weapons during production. Griffith insisted that although it would have been simpler to use contemporary cannon, to "do so would be a farce," so he employed genuine Civil War artillery lent to him by the government. Nevertheless, Griffith directed his campaigns like a present-day military commander, coordinating the action with telephones, field couriers, flag and mirror signaling, and even a tethered balloon. "No general on the European battlefields has made better use of the modern instruments of warfare than did D.W. Griffith [during the making of *The Clansman*]," declared the *Riverside Enterprise*. He thus achieved "the

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<sup>43</sup>“‘The Clansman’ is Coming to Loring,” *Riverside Daily Press*, December 30, 1914, 9. (The newspaper says 3, but the official citation from Readex is 9).

most spectacular battle scenes ever staged” while simultaneously making a “powerful plea for universal peace.” Nevertheless, some early audiences were confused by the film’s dueling imperatives, so Griffith continued perfecting it until the film’s official premiere.<sup>44</sup>

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It is unclear when Griffith learned that a special screening at the White House was underway, but it is likely Thomas Dixon raised the prospect of a presidential viewing early on during the film’s production. Dixon and Woodrow Wilson had known each other since 1883 where they met as new graduate students at Johns Hopkins University. The two men studied under the same professors, and although Dixon dropped out before completing his degree while Wilson remained in school, they maintained what Dixon described as an “intimate” friendship. Both Southerners, Wilson and Dixon shared a lifelong identification with the Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Their training in graduate school allowed them to merge their southern views of American history with a broader framework for interpreting world history. Specifically, Wilson and Dixon were educated in German historicism. The Hegelian theory of history claimed modern nations evolved much like biological organisms, growing from primordial racial roots. From this logic the two men determined that the essential identity of the American people, which included their democratic institutions, derived from Anglo-Saxons. Dixon applied this germ theory of history to his novels while Wilson employed it as the basis for his academic writing. Dixon so admired Wilson’s dissertation, *Congressional Government*, that in 1887 he persuaded his alma mater, Wake Forest College, to confer an honorary degree on the

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<sup>44</sup>“The Clansman’ Coming to Loring,” *Riverside Enterprise*, December 30, 1914, 2. “Riverside to See First Production of ‘The Clansman,’” *Riverside Enterprise*, December 31, 1914, 2. “‘The Clansman’ Comes Friday,” *Riverside Daily Press*, December 31, 1914, 3. “‘The Clansman’ Receives Enthusiastic Approval,” *Riverside Enterprise*, January 2, 1915, 2.

future president. The recognition profoundly enhanced Wilson's reputation as a leading scholar.<sup>45</sup>

When Dixon requested a meeting with the president in 1915 to discuss the invention of a "universal language," he had several goals in mind. First, Dixon knew that a film with the same name as his controversial play was likely to draw attention from local censorship boards who might keep it from being screened. Having viewed a draft of Griffith's production, Dixon found it more powerful than his play and wanted to prevent any obstacles to its presentation throughout the country. Dixon reasoned that if would-be censors learned that the president himself had viewed the film, they would be less likely to propose its ban. Second, Griffith's film so impressed Dixon he felt certain the president would share his enthusiasm. The idea of a motion picture receiving endorsement from the White House appealed to Dixon as a way of furthering his own political agenda. He believed Griffith's film could "revolutionize Northern sentiments...[with]...a presentation of history that would transform every...audience into...good Democrat[s]!" Finally, Dixon was proud to be associated with something he regarded as a profound innovation in communication. He told the president that Griffith had birthed "a new art...the mightiest engine for molding public opinion in the history of the world." That the fullest realization of this new art was based on Dixon's ideas suggested widespread acceptance of a southern view of history.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and *The Birth of a Nation*: American Democracy and International Relations," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* (2007), Vol. 8, No. 4, 689-718.

<sup>46</sup>Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Thomas Dixon, May 1, 1915. *PWW*, Vol. 32, 142, n1. Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Thomas Dixon, January 27, 1915, *PPW*, Vol. 32, 142. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 69 Vols. Hereon Link, *PWW* followed by volume and page number.

Wilson's only objection to viewing the film was that he was technically still in mourning for his recently deceased wife, which prohibited his attending the theater. The president proposed instead that Dixon arrange a private screening in the East Room to which Wilson could invite his family and some cabinet members. Dixon agreed and on February 18, 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* became the second, but arguably most significant, film screened at the White House.<sup>47</sup> Griffith had changed the title sometime in the preceding weeks to better reflect its historical lesson. So often would Griffith be asked to explain the name of his film that he developed a standard response that he later used in official publicity. According to Griffith,

To the American people, the outcome of four years of fratricidal strife, the nightmare of reconstruction, and the establishment of the south in its rightful position is the birth of the new nation. The new nation, the real United States, as the years glided by, turned away forever from the blood lust of war and anticipated with hope the world-millennium in which a brotherhood of love should bind all the nations together.<sup>48</sup>

The film Woodrow Wilson saw offered a version of national history and a commentary on the U.S.'s global influence that Griffith hoped would showcase the cinema's unmatched capacity as an agent of peace and understanding.

*The Birth of a Nation* affirmed Wilson's own interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction and echoed his current stance on the European conflict. In fact, the final product contained more of Wilson's and Griffith's ideas than Dixon's. Specifically, *Birth* reflected a paternalistic strand of white supremacy and a vision of national progress that contrasted with

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<sup>47</sup>The first film was *Cabiria* (1914), according to Arthur Lennig, "Myth and Fact: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*," *Film History* 16 no. 2 (2004), 117-141. "President Witnesses Moving Pictures in the White House," *Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis), February 19, 1915; "President Sees Photo-Play," *Morning Telegraph* (New York), February 19, 1915; "President Acts in White House Movies," *Evening Globe* (Boston), February 19, 1915; "Feature Film Shown at the White House," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), February 19, 1915; "Wilson to See Moving Pictures," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), February 19, 1915. All in *DWGP, Birth* Scrapbook, Reel 24.

<sup>48</sup>*DWGP*, Reel 2.



Dixon's radicalism. Nevertheless, all three men shared fundamental views that *Birth* expressed which demand bearing out before identifying their significant departures. Dixon, Wilson, and Griffith all believed that during the nineteenth-century the North had been incapable of understanding the realities of southern life and the necessity of maintaining strict separation between the races. They all likewise claimed to oppose slavery as an economic rather than moral failing and suggested that slavery in the American South had been the most humane form of slavery in the world. Similarly, each man perceived racial equality as a threat to democracy and national survival. Thus all three regarded the pursuit of racial equality during "Radical Reconstruction" as the most tragic and egregious consequence of America's Civil War.<sup>49</sup>

Wilson and Griffith differed from Dixon in the tone and degree of their racial nationalism. For Dixon, African Americans so imperiled white civilization that slavery had been the only safeguard against their presence. Ideally, Dixon wished for their forcible and permanent removal from the United States. By contrast, Wilson and Griffith believed that white and black Americans could coexist so long as it was on an unequal basis. For Wilson, black advancement had not reached a point to warrant consideration of their full citizenship, so he cast that prospect into an unforeseeable future. In the meantime, African Americans needed to acquiesce to a subordinate position in national life and accommodate themselves to something akin to the Jim Crow South. Although Griffith never specified his beliefs regarding black citizenship, his films bespoke conditional acceptance of them into the national family as subservient dependents. At one point during the film's national controversy Griffith made a prologue depicting students at

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<sup>49</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and *The Birth of a Nation*: American Democracy and International Relations," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* (2007), Vol. 8, No. 4, 689-718.

Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute with a title card exclaiming the swiftness with which the race had advanced in the last fifty years.<sup>50</sup>

The treatment of the Klan in *Birth* combined elements of Dixon's and Wilson's accounts in ways that made Griffith's characterization uniquely his own. Griffith retained the romantic glaze of Dixon's Klan but simplified its structure and rituals. Where Dixon's Klan was highly organized, functioning more like a corporation than a folk movement, Griffith's Klan was localized, and its formation more organic. Griffith also removed most of the elaborate rituals that Dixon detailed in his novels. The primary ritual that emerged in Griffith's story occurred when Ben Cameron removed the now bloodstained Confederate flag his youngest sister, Flora, wore around her waist as a belt. Upon taking it from Flora's dead body Ben raised it simultaneously with his standard, "the fiery cross of Old Scotland's hills," before wringing his sister's blood from the cloth over the burning cross.<sup>51</sup> While he pared down much of Dixon's Klan, Griffith nevertheless clothed his Klan in more flamboyant outfits. Griffith's Klan costumes were more modern and their headwear, ironically, resembled the Pickelhaube of the modern German military.

From Wilson's Klan Griffith explained the organization's historical purpose and necessary disbandment. *Birth* quoted directly from Wilson's *History of the American People* when he explained that Radical Reconstruction brought carpetbaggers who "swarmed out of the North to cozen, beguile, and use [the negroes]." Congressional policy followed that "wrought...a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South...[determined]...to 'put the white South under the heel of the black South.'" White disenfranchisement and unbridled black rule ensued. Thus,

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<sup>50</sup> *DWGP*, Reel 3.

<sup>51</sup> Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation*, 194-195.

it was out of “mere instinct of self-preservation” that the “great Ku Klux Klan” emerged “bound together in loose organization to protect the southern country.” While Wilson justified the Klan’s formation, he lamented its evolution over time. He understood that white southerners were compelled to take “law into their own hands” in order to achieve “by intimidation what they...[could not]...by the ballot or by any ordered course of public action.” Nevertheless, by resorting to violence, “Brutal crimes were committed, the innocent suffered with the guilty; a reign of terror was brought on, and society was infinitely more disturbed than defended.” *Birth*’s original title cards similarly qualified the Klan’s heroism. Although “the organization...saved the South from black rule...[it was] not without the shedding of more blood than at Gettysburg.” Before depicting the “double honeymoon” at the film’s close, Griffith further explained, “The Klan’s work accomplished, their costumes were destroyed. The leaders themselves disbanded the organization forever.” For both Wilson and Griffith the Klan performed a vital function in the nation’s history through less than ideal means. Ultimately the Klan’s violence represented democratically-determined, triumphal warfare that was required to create the possibility of an enduring peace.<sup>52</sup>

More than anything, Griffith’s Ku Klux Klan helped *Birth* symbolize Woodrow Wilson’s current stance on the European conflict. Since the war broke out Wilson had urged Americans to look despairingly on the situation abroad and to take comfort in their noninvolvement. By remaining “impartial in thought as well as action,” Wilson insisted Americans were keeping the United States “fit and free to do what is...truly serviceable for the peace of the world.” Indeed,

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<sup>52</sup>*Birth* Title Cards, *DWGP*, Reel 2. Woodrow Wilson, *History of the American People*, Vol. 5, *Division and Reunion*, 46, 49-50, 58, 60. Stokes provides a detailed comparison in *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 198-200. Ambrosius, “Woodrow Wilson and *The Birth of a Nation*.”

the president cautioned against taking the achievement of sectional reconciliation for granted as it had profoundly advanced the nation's crusade for both peace and democracy. Consequently, the United States stood as a beacon of "peace and concord" in a world of "nations now in the throes of war." At present, then, the U.S. needed to fortify its neutral position lest it squander a unique opportunity to help broker a resolution in the current conflict. By influencing the peace, America could apply the lessons of its past and the happy circumstances of its present to the world's future. Wilson therefore admonished recent calls for national preparedness, as building up military defenses would compromise U.S. principles and policies during peacetime. "When all this half of the world [Europe] will suffer the unspeakable brutalization of war," the president implored, "we shall preserve our moral strength, political power, and our ideals." Griffith hoped his film echoed that injunction.<sup>53</sup>

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In many ways *The Birth of a Nation's* reception in 1915 exceeded Griffith's grandest expectations. To begin with, most white Americans praised the film as a powerful monument to national reunion in both form and content. As such, *Birth* demonstrated the legitimacy of motion pictures as dramatic art, as well as their educational and commercial appeal. From its earliest showings reviewers observed that *Birth's* scale alone rendered its relationship to Thomas Dixon's work misleading. *Birth's* "mighty combination of motion photography, music, and realistic stage effects" wrote the *Atlanta Constitution*, "so thoroughly [eclipsed] the Dixon novel and play that no comparison can be made." Indeed, while many exhibitors feared *Birth's* use of

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<sup>53</sup>"American Neutrality—An Appeal By the President" (1914), "Second Annual Address to Congress" (1914), reprinted in Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, 158-159. Unnamed public address quoted in Michael S. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.

Dixon's material would alienate northern viewers, the opposite proved to be true. Northerners and southerners alike enjoyed "the spectacle for its massiveness, strong human appeal and its splendid superiority over anything [like it]...ever...unfolded to the public." In fact, "Southerners will be surprised to hear," reported *The Sun*, that northern audiences "never [fail] to cheer the dash of the Ku Klux Klan across the films." While *Birth* did present some of Dixon's "inflammatory" ideas, the *New York Times* determined viewers' consensus to be "simply that it is an impressive new illustration of the scope of the motion picture camera."<sup>54</sup> In other words, if *Birth* did nothing else, it transformed the North and South into a national movie-going public.<sup>55</sup>

For many white Americans, *Birth* represented the crowning achievement of the Civil War semi-centennial. Through the new medium of cinema, it offered a simultaneously authentic and dramatic account of the nation's past. "Never before, on canvas, by photography, or by literature has the great grapple of the Civil War been so graphically visualized," the *New York News* reported. *Birth* was "historically...magnificent; a great, true, artistic photograph of the crisis of a great war." After witnessing *Birth*, several reviewers began to share Griffith's premonition that motion pictures provided a superior form of historical education. Critics claimed that by intensely visualizing events that Americans "have only been able to read [about] hitherto" *Birth* provided an opportunity for citizens of all ages to actually "live through a period of ruin and destruction in the country where [they were] born." Thus "Children must be sent to see this masterpiece," urged the *New York Evening Journal* for "no film ever...[had] more educational

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<sup>54</sup>"'The Birth of a Nation' at Atlanta All Week," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 5, 1915, 12. Cheer Ku Klux Klan," *The Sun*, March 14, 1915, M. "'The Birth of a Nation,'" *New York Times*, March 4, 1915, 9.

<sup>55</sup>For how the film transformed the American movie-going public see Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, Chapter 5, 111-129.

points.” As such, it possessed infinite value to “old and young” alike.<sup>56</sup> Evidently, *Birth* accomplished something no other art form could. It fused photographic realism with compelling human drama. The film *showed* Americans a “true” and “authentic” record of their collective past through a fictional melodrama whose emotional appeal surpassed anything offered on the stage. Several leading theater critics agreed that *Birth* delivered a dramatic impact absent in most live productions.<sup>57</sup>

More importantly, however, *Birth* raised the Americans’ standards for commercial entertainment at the same time it deepened their sense of national pride. Griffith told a “story of the nation’s upbringing that will appeal...to the average human,” one Boston paper reported. Specifically, any American who sought more than “a few hours of [cheap] enjoyment” would appreciate Griffith’s powerful blending of “intelligence and patriotism” and leave the film “rejoicing that he or she is a part of that great nation and a sharer in a glorious heritage.” The *Dallas Morning News* similarly remarked that *Birth* thrust viewers back to “those tempestuous years when this Union of States was being reborn, in unfathomable pain, into an indivisible unity of nationalistic purpose.” The film therefore offered countless “opportunities to indulge with intense satisfaction...[the best] order of Americanism.” Pioneering advice columnist Dorothy Dix likewise called *Birth* the “apotheosis of the moving picture” and implored readers to “go see it because it will make a better American out of you, for out of the baptism of blood of the Civil

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<sup>56</sup>Ned McIntosh, “Birth of a Nation’ Thrills Tremendous Atlanta Audience,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 7, 1915. For *Birth* as true history, see for example, “Griffith’s Drama Returns to Trent,” *Sunday Trenton Times* (New Jersey), November 14, 1915, 7. Or the particularly scary, “Birth of a Nation,” *Charlotte Daily Observer* (North Carolina), November 18, 1915, 4. There are countless other examples space does not permit reproducing here. Compilation reels of New York reviews, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

<sup>57</sup>*Life* theater critic James Metcalfe wrote, *Birth* brought “audiences to their feet as no theatrical play has in many, many years.” *The New York American* similarly claimed the film “furnishes the spectators with a thrill that has long been absent from Broadway.” Compilation reels of New York reviews, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

War was born the new nation, one and indivisible.”<sup>58</sup> Griffith’s film honored America’s past and testified to its spiritual and material progress.

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As *Birth* continued to premiere throughout the country the war in Europe intensified, altering the nature of the film’s reception. In particular, Griffith’s film prompted new musings on the conflict and became a vehicle through which Americans weighed concerns about preparedness and belligerency. Many publications hailed *Birth* as a film whose condemnation of war reinforced Americans’ appreciation and desire for peace. For some individuals, *Birth*’s message of peace derived from its realistic portrayals of war which reflected current circumstances abroad. Others emphasized the film’s merits as visual documentation of modern warfare at a time when Americans lacked visual knowledge of the European conflict. Still more were unsure how to balance *Birth*’s intended message of peace against its thrilling portrayals of battle. Critics of *Birth* linked its unapologetic racism to German belligerency in the current war and argued that the film fostered militaristic sentiments among the American public. Ultimately *Birth* reinforced Americans’ tendency, early on, to perceive the war in Europe through the lens of their own Civil War. By simultaneously deploring and glorifying war, Griffith’s film became an antiwar war film and forged the template for Hollywood war films in the twentieth century.

Griffith’s earliest souvenir programs emphasized “The Play’s Message of Peace” and encouraged viewers to regard *Birth* as an indictment of war. “Great care has been taken not to glorify battle,” one playbill explained. “Even the music stops in its motif of glorification to

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<sup>58</sup> “‘The Birth of a Nation,’” *Boston Morning Journal*, April 23, 1915, 8. “‘Birth of a Nation,’ History in Motion,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 5, 1915, 7. Dix excerpt in compilation reels of praise for *Birth*, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

sound the note of terror and desolation which is the real truth of WAR.” Several public officials and clergymen professed that *Birth* unequivocally promoted peace. Social reformer and Professor of Theology Charles Parkhurst declared that “every lover of peace...experience[s] painful gratification that...on Griffith’s screen...there is no glory [in war] but only horror, brutality and stark butchery.” Parkhurst especially applauded Griffith for “bringing home” war’s true ugliness while a real one raged overseas. Baptist ministers in Boston similarly insisted *Birth* could only “aid the cause of peace [because] it shows the terrible horrors of war.” Washington Senator Wesley Jones believed that Griffith’s film demonstrated “the futility of armed conflict” and would “do more to deter people from...war than anything written or spoken on the subject in years.” Peace advocate and philanthropist George Foster Peabody anticipated Griffith would soon make a second “Great...Peace Picture” that more directly conveyed what *Birth*’s allegory suggested.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, many who read *Birth* as an unqualified sermon against war based their interpretations on Griffith’s graphic and authentic portrayal of the past. As one newspaper put it, *Birth* rendered the “tragic leave-takings...wreck[ed] homes...broken ties...fearful sights on the battlefield” with such “relentless fidelity” it was almost too painful to watch. A review in *The Sun* concurred, claiming that for many viewers “the pain of these...pictures exceeds the pleasure derived from them” since they so unflinchingly conveyed a tragic page of national history. Nevertheless, the effect of Griffith’s realism was to “impress the horror of war upon the mind and increase popular appreciation of peace and the blessings that attend it.” Such lessons were

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<sup>59</sup>“Dr. Parkhurst on ‘The Birth of a Nation,’” *Augusta Chronicle* (Georgia), February 7, 1916, 6. Also printed in *The State* (South Carolina), February 13, 1916, 6. “People’s Forum,” *Springfield Union* (Illinois) reprinted from Boston editorial, November 3, 1915, 10.



often cited in defense of the film's racism and to blunt persistent agitation against the film that followed its presentations throughout the country. "It seems to [me] that the greater lessons of the spectacle are overlooked in the controversies over racial prejudice," wrote one local columnist. "Mr. Griffith's big sermon is...peace...peace not only among nations but among states and communities." He closed by asking rhetorically, what "better subject than...the Civil War and Reconstruction" could Griffith have chosen to preach such a sermon?<sup>60</sup>

Inherent in *Birth's* message of peace was a commentary on the war in Europe. As one of its playbills explained, "Armies seldom settle disputed questions of state...but where they accomplish this much, in the wake of conflict arise newer and more terrible questions." "But for the hatreds engendered by the Civil War," it continued, "the suffering of the Reconstruction period would never be known." Griffith asked viewers to glean from his film not only the tragic circumstances of wartime but the prolonged suffering caused by an unjust peace. Many audience members obliged. Because *Birth* so effectively showed that "the horrors of war do not end with war," it forced some Americans to wonder "what will happen in Europe when the present struggle is ended and the warring nations...[attempt to build] a new order." Indeed, by so vividly illustrating "the conclusion of our Civil War," a California newspaper suggested, *Birth* might hasten or influence "the conclusion of the European [war] or any other [future] war." For some Americans, it seemed, *Birth* brought "the calamity in Europe...home with sickening vividness," in ways that advanced the plea for universal peace Griffith envisioned.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Clipping from unidentified Boston newspaper, April 1915, *DWGP*, Reel 2. "War Drama to Close: 'Birth of a Nation' Enters upon Final Presentation at Ford's. Like Trip into Olden Days," *The Sun*; April 18, 1916, 6. George A. Benson, "Peace Lesson of Great Film," *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (North Dakota), December 15, 1915, 5.

<sup>61</sup>*Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* souvenir programs, *DWGP*, Reels 2-3. George A. Benson, "Peace Lesson of Great Film," *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (North Dakota), December 15, 1915, 5. "'Birth of a Nation' Has Peace Allegory," *Duluth News Tribune* (Minnesota), December 9, 1915, 9.

While Griffith's realistic portrayal of war appealed to many viewers' pacific sentiments it also indulged Americans' fascination with modern warfare in ways that risked its glorification. So impressive were *Birth's* battle scenes that references to the European war theater abounded in coverage of the film. *The Sun* claimed Griffith supervised "an area as large as the corner of Belgium, occupied by Anglo-French forces [in directing] his private war." Referring explicitly to the current French and English commanders, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that Griffith was as "equipped [in staging his mock campaigns] as a modern Joffre or von Kluck." Griffith himself could not help boasting about the modern gadgetry at his disposal and depicting himself as akin to a military general. Even as he insisted his film was in the service of peace, Griffith professed working alongside several "West Point army officers, a regiment of the National Guard and [dozens] of G.A.R. veterans" in order to render the best effects. He alleged that all of his extras were required to train "thoroughly...in military tactics" before being hired. The resulting battle sequences felt so authentic, according to the *New York Tribune*, that they "appeal[ed] to everyone who cares for novelty, spectacular drama and thrills piled upon thrills." By all means, Griffith's realistic portrayals of combat were the most prominent feature in reviews of *Birth*.<sup>62</sup>

No less authority than war correspondent Richard Harding Davis affirmed that Griffith's war scenes were true to life. "It is like real war," Davis said of *Birth*. "For the first time in a theatre a battle scene has been presented as it actually is." Davis's endorsement carried weight. He was a veteran correspondent of seven wars who had become famous for his reporting on both the Spanish-American War and the Russo-Japanese War. Davis had only recently been to Belgium and France. He was in Louvain when the German Army came through and brutalized

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<sup>62</sup>How Roads Were Made for the Famous Ku Klux Klan," *The Sun*, April 16, 1916, pg. SM5.

civilians, and in Reims during the German shelling of its famous Cathedral. What Davis witnessed abroad convinced him early on that a policy of neutrality placed the United States on the wrong side of history. Nevertheless, few Americans were interested in heeding Davis's call to action, and in the meantime he provided the public with among the most detailed written accounts of the fighting overseas. For that reason, his endorsement of *Birth* as an authentic presentation of modern warfare lent the film special credibility for American film-goers.<sup>63</sup>

*The Birth of a Nation* placed a new premium on the achievement of realism in American war films. In addition to countless reviews praising the authenticity of *Birth*'s war scenes, exaggerations of Griffith's military prowess blended with perceptions of the conflict abroad in ways that altered Americans' understanding of reality. To begin with, Griffith's film reinforced a popular tendency to view the European conflict through the retrospective lens of America's Civil War. Articles comparing the two events frequently declared the current conflict inferior in terms of romance and transcendent meaning. One Union veteran described the differences to the *Washington Post*. He explained that fighting in the U.S. Civil War required constant movement and the use of bayonets. Such direct contact with one's enemies fostered an atmosphere wherein "every man who stood behind a gun knew just what he was fighting for." Conversely, the conflict abroad seemed to be characterized by stalemate and distance between combatants which severed soldiers' sense of purpose. *Birth* vitalized such recollections in ways that enhanced their romantic glaze. First, as the *Detroit Free Press* observed, Griffith showed "the panorama of a battlefield flung over many miles of mountains and valleys." Next, the camera closed in on "men

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<sup>63</sup>Compilation reels of *Birth* praise, *DWGP*, Reel 2-3. Neiberg, *Path to War*, 25, 28-30, 38. For more on Louvain and Reims see John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 82-83, 12, 126, 179, 181, 185.

forming for the advance, their charge over broken ground, *the bayonet rush of the devoted few right up to the trenches* [and] the physical hand grapple with the enemy.” So while *Birth* was lauded for its depiction of “realistic trench warfare,” it nevertheless offered a superior real war than the one raging overseas.<sup>64</sup>

Just as Americans were quick to disparage the impersonal, mechanized nature of the fighting in Europe, so were many slow to grasp its unprecedented brutality. At the Illinois Cavalry Association’s forty-fourth annual convention, for example, veterans rendered a verdict that the current conflict was relatively painless compared to their experiences in the Civil War. Modern soldiers, they reasoned, were granted “physical comforts” that were unheard of fifty years ago. Assuming armies abroad were provided opportunities for “[regular] shaving, baths, [and] clean clothes,” one veteran lamented that such conditions were the stuff of dreams, never realized. Incidentally, according to the First Illinois, European soldiers knew nothing of marching “for days through mud ankle deep, sleeping [on soaking wet] blankets...over a bed of fence rails and ford[ing] frozen streams on half-starved horses.” Nor could Europe’s troops fathom the deprivation of “[living] all day on a single corn pone...washed down with tepid water full of animal life and...mud.”<sup>65</sup>

With no visual equivalent to counter these suspicions, *Birth* helped Americans momentarily sustain their illusions of unmatched hardship during wartime. After all, Griffith pictured soldiers, grimy and starving, readying themselves “on the battle lines before Petersburg,

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<sup>64</sup>“Recalls Civil War Strife: Representative Sherwood Says Contest Then Differed From That in Europe,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1915, pg. 5. “Detroit: Griffith’s Great Spectacle Still On,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 23, 1916, pg. D6.

<sup>65</sup>“European War a Parlor Conflict As Compared with ‘61, ‘Vets’ Say,” Special to the Washington Post, Oct. 3, 1915, pg. E3. “European War as a Picnic: Civil War Veterans Declare They Endured Worse Hardships; By Direct Wire—Exclusive Dispatch,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1915, pg. 11.

parched corn their only rations.” Another scene revealed a mass of miserable Confederates waiting for a food train that never arrived, but actually wound up behind Union lines. The *Detroit Free Press* made much of the fact that soldiers’ uniforms in *Birth* were “far from spic and span” and that so many were “coatless and hatless.” Moreover, the “clothing of others is tattered; the flags, even, have the look of battle-scarred ribbons.” Such effects convinced Detroiters, at least, that they had glimpsed real war, because “For the first time the grime, dirt, sordidness, *as well as the glory* of war is accurately presented.” To be sure, *Birth* suggested that war’s ugliness was a part of its romance, soldiers’ suffering a part of their heroism.<sup>66</sup>

*Birth* encouraged Americans to regard their Civil War as superior to the European conflict not only as a more romantic and trying event, but also in its military innovations. According to the *Washington Post*, the Civil War “revolutionized mounted warfare.” Indeed, “practically every variety of cavalry operation now used saw its inception in either the Union or Confederate Army.” Although it initially appeared as though European combatants might eclipse America’s advances in the “mounted arm,” such was not the case. In fact, the absence of cavalry operations in the present war reflected a general lack of imagination among European leaders. Evidently the war in Europe had yet to produce “a Lincoln, Grant, Lee, or Jackson.” The British press agreed. As Britain’s chief propagandist, Lord Northcliffe, explained, compared to the American Civil War, which produced “more than one military genius...the European war in this

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<sup>66</sup> D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915. *Birth* Title Sheets, *DWGP*, Reel 2. “Director Griffith is a Soldier’s Son,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 2, 1916, pg. D11. Emphasis mine.

respect [has] been barren.” It remained to be seen what advancements in strategy or tactics, if any, would emerge from the current conflagration.<sup>67</sup>

While the American press lamented Europe’s failure to produce any noteworthy military minds, it simultaneously hailed D.W. Griffith as a new kind of authority on war. Despite having the California National Guard at his disposal, Griffith alone knew “the tactics of picture evolution.” Where the European conflict made little use of mounted arms, Griffith employed “thousands of cavalrymen” for his Klan rides. Although his aim was to convince viewers that these scenes took place in the nineteenth-century south, the director nevertheless accomplished new feats of “landscape engineering” in achieving his effects. If nothing else, Griffith had proven that obtaining the kind of martial realism he did with *Birth* was not for the faint of heart. At one point during filming Griffith evidently “took his thousands of militiamen on a month’s countryside campaign [with] each squadron...commanded by a sub-[general].” The director then assumed his position as commander from a high tower and ordered “real [contemporary] cannon [to discharge] real shells.” He also used authentic Civil War “muskets with the old-fashioned bayonets” in ordering his men into their (mock) infantry charges. Mounting apocrypha affirmed the hazards of fighting in a Griffith battle: Jim Jeffries’ former sparring partner, boxing coach Tom Wilson, had the wounds to prove it. Other actors insisted they literally had to defend themselves during production.<sup>68</sup> Like its actual Civil War, even the U.S.’s movie-made wars were allegedly more dangerous and exciting than the conflict abroad.

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<sup>67</sup>“U.S. Developed Use of Cavalry: Civil War Stands Alone in Use of Mounted Arm, Though Present Conflict May Surpass it,” *Kansas City Star* printed in *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1914, pg. M4. “Military Geniuses,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 1915.

<sup>68</sup>Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 54-56, 75. “Director Griffith is a Soldier’s Son,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 2, 1916, pg. D11. Emphasis mine.

If *The Birth of a Nation* implied certain aspects of the European war that were familiar, it also suggested motion pictures could help decipher what was peculiar about it. Some correspondents were already anticipating the crisis in language that World War I would create. For instance, political commentator and reporter Charles Willis Thompson acknowledged that while advances in communications made for more instantaneous reporting, the scope of the European conflict compromised its coverage. “Two Fronts?” Thompson marveled, “Why Europe is all fronts.” And the fighting was “not only deadly but continuous...a fight that never ceases.” Consequently it was difficult for correspondents to disentangle and describe discrete skirmishes. Protracted and “indecisive battles like Antietam [are] repeated almost daily on...a scale the world has never seen.” Similarly, reviewers determined that *Birth*’s vastness likewise defied delineation. “The mind falters and the typewriter balks,” wrote Burns Mantle of the *Evening Mail*, “before an attempt to either measure or describe [*Birth*].” One Pennsylvania paper directly compared the film and the war. “When the European war broke out,” the paper explained, “correspondents [faced] an unprecedented assignment.” No familiar words or phrases could describe the carnage. “And so it is with an attempted description of [*Birth*], either oral or written,” concluded the writer. Likening *Birth* to any other book, play, or motion picture was as inappropriate as comparing “the conflict across the Atlantic to the Spanish-American spat.”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the film also indicated that motion pictures might be more suited to disseminating information about modern wars than the written or spoken word. Griffith himself would encourage this line of thinking throughout the war period.

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<sup>69</sup>Compilation reels of *Birth* praise, *DWGP*, Reels 2-3. “‘The Birth of a Nation’ at Grand Opera House an Indescribable Feature,” *Wilkes Barre Times Leader* (Pennsylvania), December 14, 1915, 17.

The controversies over *Birth's* racism are well-documented. Scholars continue to shed new light on the ways in which battles over the film shaped twentieth-century American race relations. *Birth's* controversy factors into this story primarily in the ways it jeopardized the film's reception as an antiwar picture, which influenced Griffith's subsequent World War I productions. To begin with, *Birth* alienated black Americans who not only formed a substantial portion of the movie-going public, but who would later contribute large numbers to the American Expeditionary Forces. While Griffith maintained his paternalistic racism throughout his life, he was horrified by the Second Ku Klux Klan and resented his film's association with it. More significantly, however, Griffith was wounded by any charge that his work was immoral and hateful. Accusations that *Birth* encouraged lawlessness and reflected German militarism were particularly distressful to Griffith in 1915, when most of the country sympathized with the Allies and remained fiercely opposed to either preparedness or intervention. Nevertheless, Griffith proved unable to control viewers' interpretations of the film and unwilling to accept that once he released a movie it no longer belonged to him, but to the public.

Many prominent individuals in the American Peace Movement allied themselves with *Birth's* opposition. Social reformer and president of the Women's Peace Party (WPP), Jane Addams, famously spoke out against the film as a tasteless distortion of history. Fellow WPP leader and progressive reformer, Lillian Wald, likewise protested *Birth's* presentation in New York City. Also joining the National Association for Colored People's (NAACP) crusade against the film was founder of the American Anti-Imperialist League, Oswald Garrison Villard, and president of the League of Small and Subject Nationalities, Frederic C. Howe. The most notable members of the American Union Against Militarism condemned *Birth* as an inaccurate portrayal



of the past, a vicious sermon of race hatred, and a danger to public safety. Progressive luminary and spokesman for American Reform Judaism, Rabbi Stephen Wise, called the film “a deliberate attempt to justify...instinctive prejudices which...enlightened [democracies are meant] to challenge and combat.” *Birth*, Wise continued, made the same “inflammatory appeal” that fomented “the initial causes [of] the war that is now upon us [in Europe].” In other words, by inciting race hatred among Americans Griffith’s film imperiled peace at home and stimulated the same sentiments that devolved into full-blown war abroad.<sup>70</sup>

Other peace activists explicitly linked *Birth*’s portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan to an affirmation of Germany’s crimes against neutral Belgium. Unitarian leader Reverend Frederick R. Griffin condemned the film for justifying Germany’s worst offenses, “not their...submarines...[or] poison gas, but rather their trampling over defenseless Belgium.” Griffin identified “the Negro problem...[as] the greatest problem...the U.S. [faced],” and argued that it mirrored the larger, global problem of powerful states “disregard[ing] the rights of small and weak nations.” Therefore Griffith’s film not only heightened domestic strife but marred the U.S.’s international reputation as a model republic. Academic and former Harvard president Charles W. Eliot made a similar claim. Early on in the war Eliot characterized the stakes of the conflict as a contest between the “German ideal of the state [and] the Anglo-Saxon ideal,” between authoritarian or democratic principles. He rightly understood *Birth*’s interpretation of the Ku Klux Klan’s emergence during Reconstruction “as [being] an inevitable, and on the whole, a righteous thing.” Such an assertion was practically the same “argument of German

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<sup>70</sup>“Mayor Mitchel Hears Protest,” *Afro-American* (Baltimore), April 3, 1915, 1. “Major Jackson Arouses Legislators by his Masterly Address,” Special to the Chicago Defender, *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, May 29, 1915, pg. 1.

rulers today that a contract may be torn up and utterly disregarded because of military necessity.” Eliot not only charged *Birth* with glamorizing “lawlessness” but with perpetuating a national origin story that smacked of Germanic principles.<sup>71</sup>

A letter to the editor of the *New York Times* perhaps best summarized war-related opposition to *Birth*. Titled “A Woman’s Protest,” the letter claimed that by over-emphasizing the “mistakes of reconstruction” and exalting “the Ku Klux Klan,” Griffith’s film reignited hostilities that almost destroyed the nation fifty years prior. “This film is particularly untimely,” she continued, when presently “the nations across the sea are at each other’s throats [and] the worst passions of men are [being] unleashed.” Her fear about *Birth*’s impact seemed to be confirmed when other individuals cited the film as an argument for preparedness. One Illinois paper claimed *Birth* visualized the “great deeds and great sacrifices” that transformed the United States into “the foremost nation...[that is] worth protecting and defending.” As such, “[*Birth* made] an appeal for preparedness.” Other publications reprinted a Union veteran’s insistence that because *Birth* so effectively displayed “war’s tragedies” it represented “a strong argument for preparedness.” Specifically, “since facts, not fiction are its basis,” *Birth* revealed the necessity of “the Government to have sufficient armed power, to enforce, without protracted warfare, the policies agreed upon” by national leaders.<sup>72</sup> For some, Griffith’s film appealed to their desire to preserve the nation’s peace by convincing them it needed to build up its military defenses.

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<sup>71</sup>“‘Birth of a Nation’ Travesty of Truth: Rev. F.R. Griffin Describes Picture Play as Consummate Artful Description,” Dr. Chas. H. Pollona, *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, November 13, 1915, pg. 1. “Not Sure it is Best to Stop it: Dr. Eliot Discusses ‘Birth of a Nation.’ Negroes Need Not Worry, He Says at Tremont Temple,” *Boston Daily Globe*, May 3, 1915. Neiberg, *Path to War*, 13-14.

<sup>72</sup>“A Woman’s Protest,” Annette Wallach Erdmann, *New York Times*, March 21, 1915. “War Drama Continues,” *Morning Oregonian*, May 8, 1916, 16. “Stuff and Noises,” *Rockford Morning Star* (Illinois), December 19, 1915, 18. “Made Old Soldier Weep: ‘Birth of a Nation’ at Ford’s, Gave him Southern Viewpoint,” *The Sun (1837-1987)*; March 28, 1916.

As the country moved from neutrality to intervention in the First World War, *Birth* would come to symbolize, more than anything, justification for a U.S. military presence abroad. Between 1915 and 1917 Griffith's film anticipated Woodrow Wilson's call to make "the world safe for democracy." Ben Cameron's vision of a new millennium of peace and concord between the nations—of a world without war—would also become the president's. But Wilson would have to heed Ben Cameron's and the Ku Klux Klan's example—millennial peace required triumphal warfare. More specifically, righteous violence in the service of democracy needed to be directed against autocratic regimes in order to rescue white civilization from barbarism and degeneration.<sup>73</sup> At the same time *Birth* visualized what would become official U.S. foreign policy, it also embedded the mythical principles that underwrote that policy into the American war film genre. Griffith's subsequent World War I films would perfect *Birth*'s generic structure as an antiwar war film in ways that would never fully disappear from Hollywood treatments of war. In particular, Griffith's films would simultaneously lament war while insisting on its necessity as an avenue to lasting peace. Furthermore, he would propagate the view that the U.S. military involved itself in world affairs only reluctantly and that its global presence was inherently benign.

For the moment, however, *Birth* delineated many of the formal conventions of the antiwar war film. First, it ushered in the narrative practice of obscuring the causes of whatever conflict a war film treated. By emphasizing national reunion, *Birth* discouraged Americans from reflecting on the larger social and political reasons that led to their Civil War. As such, *Birth* assumed a premise that the war's inevitability, however regrettable, justified the fighting and

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<sup>73</sup>Lloyd Ambrosius draws these parallels as well in "Woodrow Wilson and *The Birth of a Nation*," 706-707.

thus focused its moral questions on an individual's conduct during wartime. Second, *Birth* placed a premium on achieving realistic effects in war films to the end that viewers believed they were witnessing unmediated glimpses of authentic war. The standard of realism Griffith set involved not only putting the most cutting-edge technology to use in filming battle but regularly publicizing (and exaggerating) the measures taken during production.

Finally, *Birth* determined that thrilling depictions of combat needed to be balanced against images of war's grittier aspects. Portraying war as both ugly and sensational, tragic and heroic, was arguably the most critical feature of the antiwar war film as Griffith developed it. But he had not yet perfected it with *Birth*. A *New York Tribune* review captured its shortcomings. While apparently *Birth*'s "purpose...[was] to stress universal peace," the reviewer remarked, "our impression was...that [it will be popular] chiefly *because* of its tremendous...war scenes and...exciting raids of [the KKK]." Nevertheless, some Americans understood the seemingly paradoxical elements of Griffith's film as mutually constitutive: *Birth* thrust on viewers a "thrilling sense of the horrors of war." Another publication aptly suggested *Birth*'s impact on European audiences would be a veritable "peace invasion." Regardless, as Griffith turned to his next project he would look more explicitly to the war itself for inspiration and further tie his ambitions for motion pictures to the cause of world peace and the U.S.'s global influence.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>"A Stirring Film Drama Shown: 'The Birth of a Nation Presented at the Liberty Theatre,'" *New York Tribune*, March 4, 1915, 9.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Why All of Europe is Slaughtering”: *Intolerance* and Griffith’s Antimilitarism

This chapter examines the grand ambitions behind D.W. Griffith’s second massive feature, *Intolerance*, and analyzes how it reflected the nation’s changing politics concerning World War I. I argue that Griffith conceived *Intolerance* (1916) to be a pacifist epic whose elaborate message of peace would both generate support for President Woodrow Wilson’s reelection and further demonstrate the movies’ unmatched potential for social and moral uplift. In the end, I contend, Griffith made a film firmly rooted in the American anti-militarist tradition, which, unlike American pacifism, allowed for war’s justification as sometimes necessary and even inevitable. Specifically, *Intolerance*’s anti-militarism decried war as the enemy of human progress while simultaneously declaring the United States the rightful heir to western civilization. Consequently, the film condemned the current war as a product of the Old World and suggested that America, as a beacon of the New World with its long history of “peaceful democracy,” needed to shape the world’s postwar future.

Ultimately, *Intolerance* evoked the possibility that American idealism *and* militarism could be mutually directed toward rescuing Europe, and the world, from modern wars generally. For that reason, it mirrored the logic of many progressives who, by early 1917, had converted from favoring neutrality to embracing war. Emphasizing how the country might positively influence the peace made the war more palatable to Americans and encouraged mounting popular support for U.S. belligerency. *Intolerance* therefore echoed President Wilson’s consistent urging since 1915 that Americans take a long view of the war and consider the

nation's place in a world that was undoubtedly being transformed by the European conflict.

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According to Kevin Brownlow, Griffith began working on his next project before *Birth* had even premiered as *The Clansman*.<sup>1</sup> Quite different from *Birth*, this next Griffith picture was a modern melodrama of contemporary urban life which he was calling "The Mother and the Law." The story followed a young woman, played by Mae Marsh, as she struggled to navigate city life after a violent strike in a company mill town. She met and married a fellow displaced person, played by Bobby Harron, who later was condemned to death for a crime he did not commit, leaving his wife and their newborn baby defenseless in their tenement conditions. The wife's frantic appeals to the governor for clemency resulted in a thrilling climactic chase sequence that showcased diverse modes of modern transportation. The picture recalled familiar themes of Griffith's Biograph films but on a much grander visual scale. In particular, the story both lamented violence and maligned urban reformers whom Griffith's films frequently criticized. Not unlike *Birth*'s abolitionists, Griffith viewed reformers as misguided members of the upper classes whose work actually worsened the lives of individuals that they claimed to be "uplifting."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Brownlow states this in a note in Karl Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 114.

<sup>2</sup>For a review of Griffith's Biographs that similarly attacked reformers see Scott Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), particularly chapters 2, 3, and 5. True to Griffith's insistence on his films' authenticity, he was inspired by real events. In particular Simmon claims Griffith's staging of the mill town strike was based on the "Ludlow Massacre," that occurred in April of 1914, wherein John D. Rockefeller's private militia attacked thousands of strikers and their families, killing and wounding several, see Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith*, 142. Griffith himself claimed that his tale of the boy's wrongful conviction reflected a case in New York wherein a young man named Charlie Stielow was wrongfully convicted of a crime and faced execution four different times before Governor Whitman finally commuted his sentence and released him from prison. "The Real Story of Intolerance," by Henry Stephen Gordon, *Photoplay*, November 16, 34, 27-40.

By the time he had almost completed “The Mother and the Law,” however, Griffith decided to significantly expand the project. Rather than comprise its own picture, Griffith determined “The Mother and the Law” would instead constitute a single chapter in a four-part history of intolerance “through the ages.”<sup>3</sup> For the three additional episodes he elected to reconstruct the fall of Babylon, the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in France, and Christ’s crucifixion. Although the film would portray four distinct stories, Griffith believed its unifying theme would lend it coherence as a single film experience. Several factors likely informed his decision. First, in light of *Birth*’s continued success, a modern urban melodrama seemed too simple and inadequate a follow-up. Insofar as he decided to reconstruct ancient Babylon, Karl Brown remembered, Griffith was inspired by the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, which Brown, Bitzer and Griffith passed through on their return from a tour of San Quentin (a research trip for Griffith’s reconstruction of the aesthetics of capital punishment).<sup>4</sup>

But Griffith was also clearly motivated to expand the film due to the recent Supreme Court ruling that movies were “a business, pure and simple,” and were therefore ineligible for the First Amendment protection of free speech. *Birth* had launched Griffith both as “the movies’ grandest showman as well as the most prominent defender of film’s legitimacy as art.”<sup>5</sup> Thus he would use *Intolerance* to further demand recognition of the movies as art by once again achieving a level of spectacle that the live stage could never reproduce. At the same time, by

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Photocopy of interview in D.W. Griffith Papers (*DWGP*), Reel 3. Also reprinted in Anthony Slide, ed., *D.W. Griffith: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 63-70.

<sup>3</sup>*Intolerance* Souvenir Program, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Photocopy of program for motion picture, *Intolerance*, 1917, Box 53, Folder 17, Lillian Gish Papers, \*T-Mss 1996-011, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for Performing Arts.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 114-120, 150.

<sup>5</sup>Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith*, 137. For more on the 1915 Supreme Court ruling see Edward De Grazia and Roger K. Newman, *Banned Films: Movies, Censors, and the First Amendment* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1982), 3-25.

making the film a sermon of peace and compassion, *Intolerance* would launch an attack on censors who argued the cinema represented a social ill. Griffith hoped to exploit his newly acquired Washington connections in order to realize these goals.

Indeed, well before Griffith finished production on *Intolerance* he wrote President Woodrow Wilson directly proposing a new film that would subtly but effectively accomplish both men's political objectives. Griffith explained that the president's praise for *Birth* the previous year "gave me hope that you held the motion picture in some esteem as an educational agency for the masses." That said, Griffith suggested he make an elaborate biography of George Washington that would allegorize Wilson's current policies. Specifically, Griffith would portray Washington as the father of Wilson's foreign policy by making the American Revolution a metaphor for Wilson's efforts to avoid European entanglements. Such a story, Griffith suggested, would meld "the aspirations of the people into one central channel of Americanism" without offending "any [particular] class." Only a feature film made by him, Griffith argued, could so thoroughly unify national sentiment. But Griffith needed Wilson's guidance, and fast. He offered to work in complete secrecy if Wilson would only make known to Griffith the precise "opinions and thoughts" the president wanted to "sledge hammer home...into the very hearts of the American people."<sup>6</sup> Griffith likewise believed his efforts would strengthen his relationship with the U.S. government in ways that would benefit his crusade against censorship.

Given the specific themes Griffith suggested, he apparently suspected Wilson would want to capitalize on the campaign slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." However, despite the president expressing interest in Griffith's idea and Griffith making tentative arrangements for

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<sup>6</sup>Letter from D.W. Griffith to Woodrow Wilson, May 4, 1916. *Woodrow Wilson Papers (WWP)*, Microfilm, Library of Congress, Reel 199.



production, nothing ultimately came of the project.<sup>7</sup> Wilson presumably found himself much too busy to continue their correspondence. So Griffith re-immersed himself in *Intolerance*, spending two more months finishing filming and editing. Even if the ideal moment for the George Washington project may have passed, Griffith nevertheless believed *Intolerance* could still help generate support for Wilson and demonstrate the movies' educative power. Indeed, he timed the film's premiers on both coasts to be well in advance of the election, telling Lillian Gish, "Wilson kept us out of war. I would rather him be re-elected than have *Intolerance* be a success."<sup>8</sup> This statement was among a handful of offhand remarks that indicated Griffith's express opposition to U.S. involvement in the war throughout 1916. Yet it also revealed his apparent isolation from the contemporary political climate—an isolation that some scholars argue explained his earlier "oversight" concerning *Birth*'s inevitably controversial subject matter.<sup>9</sup>

By all means, during *Intolerance*'s production, Griffith became consumed with his newfound freedom as a director. Those who were on the set remembered the distinctive leisurely pace at which Griffith worked on his latest project. Indeed, his apparent lack of urgency to complete filming, combined with the secrecy surrounding his intentions for this increasingly massive picture, frustrated many of his underlings. But Griffith could hardly be bothered with such complaints. On the one hand, he did not understand the hurry; once they finished this

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<sup>7</sup>Griffith set his research team to work on sets and costumes and optioned a treatment of Washington by the suffragist and temperance advocate Ada Van Pelt. Letter from Ada Van Pelt to D.W. Griffith, July 1, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. For more on Wilson's campaign slogan see A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 2013), 393-5.

<sup>8</sup>Gish, *The Movies*, 163.

<sup>9</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 187, 212-214. I agree that Griffith was capable of isolating himself from the broader culture when he was immersed in big projects, but I take issue with the idea that he was so out of touch he simply never suspected *Birth* would be controversial. In fact, much evidence suggests that during this phase of his career he sought out controversial topics.

picture they would “only start another one.”<sup>10</sup> And the several years during which he was forced to churn out two- and three-day productions for Biograph against his better artistic judgment made the time currently afforded Griffith something he fully intended to savor—as well he should have. In addition to the vastness of his undertaking, as Richard Schickel notes, Griffith’s process of making *Intolerance* remains a near anomaly in film history. While directing this particular production Griffith was permitted to work “as a novelist or poet does, with his general theme sketched in but with the creative centers of his intelligence, and his freely associating, freely roaming unconscious responding to it with stroke after stroke of apt improvisation.” In other words, *Intolerance* grew organically, as any work of art should.<sup>11</sup>

In allowing his latest film to evolve naturally, however, Griffith also problematically granted himself new distance from his audience. From the beginning of his career Griffith prided himself on anticipating what themes spectators desired and gratifying those desires in powerful and unexpected ways. *Birth* had proven Griffith was the master of cinematic innovation and had made him the most commercially successful director in the world. Consequently, Griffith approached his work on *Intolerance* with a feeling he had finally “arrived,” and with an eagerness to showcase new ideas that the constraints of time and money no longer prevented him from realizing. However, this meant that he did not quite gear *Intolerance* toward satisfying the appetites of the new mass audience he had created with *Birth*, appetites which were already rapidly evolving. In fact, *Intolerance*’s experimental construction remarkably contradicted what

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<sup>10</sup>Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 148. Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: an American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 317.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: an American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 317.

*Birth* had fundamentally taught audiences to expect from the movies—a coherent and well-developed story, suitable as an entire evening’s entertainment.

Griffith’s singular focus likewise compromised his ability to make the film relevant to political discourse about the current world war. The sheer ambitiousness of *Intolerance*, it seemed, kept Griffith absorbed in the world he was putting on film at the expense of fully engaging the world around him. His 14-hour work-days in then still sparsely populated Los Angeles exacerbated this distance. In particular, Griffith apparently took little notice of or interest in the debates between peace activists and preparedness agitators that erupted in 1915 and had intensified in the months leading up to Wilson’s re-election. Furthermore, by believing his film was fundamentally a call for peace, he apparently overlooked the president’s own changing views on the war.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, *Intolerance*’s broad condemnation of both female progressive reformers and big business tycoons obscured any clear identification of Griffith’s stance between the two poles of peace and preparedness. On the one hand, *Intolerance*’s female reformers represented those progressives who favored film censorship and had attacked *Birth*. Yet many of those same reformers, like Jane Addams and Rabbi Stephen Wise, were also prominent individuals in the peace movement. Moreover, Griffith regarded himself as a kind of progressive reformer—his task was to reform the movies and prove their moral and educative value to the public. He also, like the peace activists, claimed to prefer continued neutrality in the conflict and supported

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<sup>12</sup> For more on these debates and Wilson’s changing views, see David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31-36 and Michael S. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), particularly Chapters 2 & 3, 39-95.

women's suffrage.<sup>13</sup> With regard to preparedness and preparedness lobbyists, primarily men connected with the nation's leading banks and commercial institutions, Griffith's views were similarly ambiguous. Beyond his preference for peace, Griffith had long been suspicious of big capitalists like Cornelius Vanderbilt and Henry C. Frick who bankrolled the preparedness movement. Although he received substantial financial and verbal support from men of their ilk, he nevertheless feared capitalists' influence on movie-making and believed cinema's growing dependence on their money ultimately endangered artistic freedom.<sup>14</sup>

For the time being, however, Griffith focused on ensuring *Intolerance* demonstrated a vast technological and dramatic improvement on *Birth*. As a much more extravagant sermon against war and testament of peace, Griffith believed *Intolerance* could even more effectively capture the power and possibilities of the new medium than had *Birth*. From the outset of his career Griffith's enduring vision for the movies rested on their potential to become a "universal language." As a primarily visual medium, he believed films could foster empathy and understanding among different peoples and nations. Thus if allowed to evolve without regulatory interference, the cinema itself could embody the very essence of peaceful democracy. As it was, the ideal of peaceful democracy acquired new importance during the two years of American neutrality in World War I. The European conflict encouraged many Americans to perceive their country as a unique haven of harmonious liberalism in a world currently ravaged by war.<sup>15</sup> Griffith himself held this view, although he remained troubled by what he saw as shades of Old

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<sup>13</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D.W. Griffith*, ed., James Hart (Louisville, Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 74. "D.W. Griffith Discovers Woman Suffrage in Babylon," *The Sun*, May 18, 1919, 6A.

<sup>14</sup>For more on individuals who comprised both movements see David Kennedy, *Over Here*, 31-36.

<sup>15</sup>David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 42-43, 49, 88-92.

World corruption and coercion in American society in the forms of film censorship and later the prohibition of alcohol. But the war in Europe also placed control over the cinema's development as an art form and commercial institution firmly in Americans' hands and, more than anyone else, Griffith held the reins. Thus with *Intolerance* Griffith linked the fate of the movies to the fate of American democracy, and the fate of American democracy to the fate of human race.

Griffith articulated his conviction that an indictment of film censorship merged easily into an indictment of war in an interview about *Intolerance* he gave to *Photoplay* in the spring of 1916. Bemoaning the increasing power of censors over filmmakers, Griffith described the movies as "less free now than ever" and threatened his own early retirement after *Intolerance* as a result of this repression. Griffith argued explicitly that censorship resembled the kind of Old World traditions against which America defined itself. Curtailing and regulating what could be projected on the screen, he insisted, foreclosed free thinking and free discussion and was therefore un-American. In fact, Griffith claimed such insistence on uniformity of thought was "why all of Europe is slaughtering." "That is why 'Christian' nations will murder Turks and crucify pagans and slay with zest foreigners," he explained. After all, he continued, "A 'foreigner' is always a man with a head so dense that he will not think as we think." For Griffith, the war in Europe sprang from combatant nations' unwillingness to engage and inability to tolerate differences among their fellow humans. This base "intolerance [has always been] one of the weak spots of civilization," he argued, and had, he believed, caused most of the violence and suffering throughout human history.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>"The Real Story of Intolerance," by Henry Stephen Gordon, *Photoplay*, November 16, 34, 27-40. Photocopy of interview in D.W. Griffith Papers, Reel 3. Also reprinted in Anthony Slide, ed., *D.W. Griffith: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 63-70.

As merely a modern permutation of this same kind of intolerance, film censorship's prevalence in America was particularly disheartening to Griffith. "What race...can continue to exist that is afraid of discussion?" he asked, insisting that the expression of an idea hardly ensured its acceptance. Rather, censors were targeting what might prove to be the most democratic of all art forms. On the one hand, the movies made knowledge and ideas previously limited to the educated elite accessible to a mass public. Griffith's expert-sanctioned historical reproductions and dramatic adaptations of classic literature had already shown this. What is more, the movies provided an avenue for the development and articulation of new ideas that did not currently exist in the nation's cultural and intellectual institutions. As Griffith saw it, universities were beholden to the beliefs and values of their donors, and religious leaders were slaves to their denominations' doctrinal histories. By contrast, moving pictures created a vast opening for independent thought on the part of their creators and consumers. They could disseminate more or less "established truths" to an uneducated public while simultaneously introducing new concepts and ways of seeing the world to every class of viewer. Consequently—and most importantly for Griffith—the movies could foster empathy and understanding between the different peoples who populated the globe. Such a capacity, he believed, might help put an end to war altogether. In light of the cinema's almost miraculous potential to further the causes of peace and democracy, then, film censorship mirrored the kind of repression responsible for the outbreak of the war in Europe and for the majority of wars in world history.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>"The Real Story of Intolerance," by Henry Stephen Gordon, *Photoplay*, November 16, 34, 27-40. Lillian Gish quotes Griffith making this explicit connection as well in Lillian Gish and Ann Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco: Mercury House Inc., 1969) 163. Griffith also elaborated on his ideas that the movies were the art form of the future, particularly suited to modern life as an outgrowth of modern technology, and superior to the live theatre for several cultural and artistic reasons in the article, "Pictures vs. One Night Stands," by David Wark Griffith, *The Independent*, December 11, 1916, 447-8.

If Griffith's second major feature film began as an elaborate meditation on the director's ideals concerning the movies, by its completion it had become a complex visual treatise on peace and war, democracy and human progress. Griffith left posterity no precise statement explaining his attitude toward World War I during *Intolerance*'s production. Rather, he only addressed the conflict directly in select interviews and to members of his inner circle. Even in those instances, Griffith's position remained inextricably, and often incoherently, tied to his defense of the cinema and artistic freedom. Thus by fall of 1916, *Intolerance* itself emerged as the director's clearest articulation of the director's views on contemporary geopolitics.

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### ***Intolerance, Antimilitarism, and the Eugenics of War***

*Intolerance* developed into a visual encapsulation of Griffith's wartime politics through its illumination of ideas and arguments espoused by diverse peace advocates in the decade leading up to the Great War.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on eclectic sources, Griffith infused *Intolerance* with a smorgasbord of sentiments decrying war. In true Griffith fashion, this involved blending graphic violence with pacifist overtures. Whether Griffith intended to or not, or was even aware, *Intolerance* projected an indictment of war firmly rooted in the American antimilitarist tradition that dated back to the nation's founding. As it was, most Americans who opposed preparedness and U.S. intervention in World War I identified as "antimilitarists" as opposed to "pacifists."

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<sup>18</sup>For more on the growing popularity of peace advocacy in the decade preceding the Great War see Kazin, *War Against War*, 4-16. Although he lacked a formal education, Griffith was an avid reader of history and current events, and regularly kept up with what he termed "little-read" publications. Gish, *The Movies*, 163. "The Real Story of *Intolerance*," by Henry Stephen Gordon, *Photoplay*, November 16, 34, 27-40. Photocopy of interview in D.W. Griffith Papers, Reel 3. Also reprinted in Anthony Slide, ed., *D.W. Griffith: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 63-70.

Both antimilitarists and pacifists supported policies geared toward avoiding or abolishing war, but only absolute pacifists categorically opposed the use of force to settle disputes. By contrast, antimilitarists perceived every war as a tragic failure to resolve meaningful differences of interest and ideology, but they did not preclude armed conflict as a sometimes necessary or inevitable evil. Rather, antimilitarists shared a common rejection of large military establishments that permanently readied nations for war.<sup>19</sup>

*Intolerance* visualized anti-militarists' conviction that war was the enemy of human progress. By draining nations of their best racial stock, antimilitarists argued, wars inherently imperiled popular democracy, which could only be sustained by the survival of a superior race. What is more, war diverted energy and resources away from domestic reforms that might further strengthen the nation from within.<sup>20</sup> *Intolerance* demonstrated war's tragic consequences for the human race throughout history by pointing to the persistence of certain character traits in civil society. In particular, Griffith's film posited that a base, capricious and sometimes contradictory concept of "intolerance" generated the continued use of violence and repression to settle disputes and misunderstandings among individuals. Such intolerance was not only responsible for the current world war, but had deprived the world of Jesus Christ himself.

Just as Griffith stood as the towering figure in the world of the movies—its foremost showman and most prominent defender of its legitimacy as art—former Stanford University President David Starr Jordan embodied the state of America's antimilitarist tradition during World War I. Jordan had been an officer of the Anti-Imperialist League, and the American

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<sup>19</sup>I found the most thorough account of American antimilitarism in this period to come from Blanche Wiesen Cooke, "Woodrow Wilson and the Antimilitarists, 1914-1917," Ph.D. dissertation, (John Hopkins University, 1970).

<sup>20</sup>Kennedy, *Over Here*, 88-92.



Union Against Militarism; he served as president of the World Peace Organization from 1910 to 1914 and president of the World Peace Conference in 1915. He was also a founder of the Emergency Peace Federation, a hurriedly formed peace coalition directed toward curbing the U.S.'s drift into war.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Jordan's name was synonymous with the peace movement. He was also incredibly prolific, developing and articulating his intellectual framework for arguing against war and imperialism in various publications spanning the previous twenty years.<sup>22</sup>

A deep concern for the preservation of American democracy lay at the heart of Jordan's ideas about peace and war and motivated his actions as a peace advocate throughout the war period. According to historian James L. Abrahamson, Jordan's antimilitarist philosophy contained a curious "blend of science, sociology, and history." To the antimilitarist intellectual tradition of opposing a large standing army, Jordan added the principles of Spencerian evolutionary individualism that were the vogue of his generation. Specifically, Jordan developed a eugenic argument against war that he linked to the survival of American democracy and his faith in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. The central tenets of Jordan's analysis were first, that individuals inherited genetic traits that were both physical *and* moral, and second, that only a polity composed of racially and morally superior individuals was capable of democratic self-government.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> James L. Abrahamson, "David Starr Jordan and American Antimilitarism," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (1976): 76-87.

<sup>22</sup>Jordan published a complete list of his works on antimilitarism in David Starr Jordan, *For International Peace: List of Books, Reviews, and Other Articles in the Interest of Peace, Friendship, and Understanding Between Nations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1927), 1-3.

<sup>23</sup>Abrahamson, "David Starr Jordan," 79.

I argue that, however unconsciously, Griffith's visual appropriation of Jordan's interdisciplinary attacks on the "war system" in *Intolerance* cemented its function as antimilitarist doctrine. In particular, *Intolerance* mirrored Jordan's philosophy of the eugenics of war which he expressed most fully in his 1907 book *The Human Harvest*. In it, Jordan argued that throughout history war consistently diluted the strength of the human race. By summoning the best stock of men to fight and die on the battlefield, war left behind the weakest and least fit members of the population to procreate and perpetuate the species. War's biggest crime was robbing the human race of its possible future: "More than all who fall in battle or are wasted in the camps," Jordan wrote, "the nation [that's been through war] misses the 'fair women and brave men' who should have been the descendants of the strong and manly." Worse, the exact cost of war could never be measured, only imagined. "We can never know what might have been [or] how great is our actual loss," he wrote, "nor can we know how far the men that are fall short of the men that ought to have been." Even wars that had been unavoidable or "righteous" corrupted human progress, "its effects [still]...most baleful."<sup>24</sup> Because so frequently those left behind after war carried the genetic strains that had caused war in the first place, war enabled a process that Jordan called "reverse selection," or the "survival of the unfit." Therefore war should be avoided at all costs.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Case of France**

*Intolerance's* French episode most straightforwardly reflected Jordan's ideas concerning the long history of war's costs and consequences. In particular, it depicted one among many

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<sup>24</sup> David Starr Jordan, *The Human Harvest: A Study of the Decay of the Races Through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 93.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

instances when the course of France's future was shaped by rulers who chose violence over peace. The story opened with the announcement of the betrothal of Catholic Princess Marguerite of Valois to Protestant Prince Henry of Navarre, a union which promised to finally end France's decade-long civil war. King Charles IX was responsible for arranging the marriage as a gesture of good will toward Protestant leader, Admiral Coligny, "to insure peace in the place of intolerance." The prospect of peace, however, threatened the influence of the King's mother and the story's chief villain, Catherine de Medici, who quickly began scheming to thwart the impending truce. Catherine represented what Jordan lamented as leaders "who rule by force and fear [and] have their fits of madness when their power begins to wane." Indeed, what followed in the French story demonstrated Jordan's maxim that "Dread of the loss of power is the mainspring of the bloodiest follies in history."<sup>26</sup> Citing a recent attack by Huguenots on Catholics, Catherine insisted to her son that the family's continued existence "depended upon [the Huguenots'] extermination." While reluctant at first, the King eventually sanctioned his mother's scheme to massacre the Huguenots the following morning, echoing the principle, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance: Or, Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* (Wark Producing Corporation, 1916). For my summary and analysis of the film I draw on a handful of versions that represent different prints and varying running times. From the UCLA Film and Television Archive's Motion Picture Collection: 134 min. version with organ track added, c. 1916, Videocassette copied from 16mm film, VA12555M; 126 min. version produced by Republic Home Video, 1991, copied from unknown source to videodisc, M116362; 169 min. version produced by Kino on Video, 2002, DVD, DVD2628. I also views the outtakes, special features, and Russell Merritt's commentary on the 2-disc Image Entertainment version released in 1991, M116361. When I needed to refer back to the film after my archive trip I relied primarily on the version available on [archive.org/details/intolerance](http://archive.org/details/intolerance). Contact Info: [www.k-otc.com](http://www.k-otc.com), runtime: 2 hr. 56 min.

"The War of 1914—The Crime of the Century," David Starr Jordan, *The Advocate of Peace* (1894-1920), Vol. 76, No. 10 (November 1914), 232-233.

<sup>27</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

The dramatic thrust of *Intolerance*'s French story centered on a lay couple, "Brown Eyes" and "Prosper," who found themselves in the midst of the looming carnage. The couple came to Paris with Brown Eyes' family to partake in the celebrations and festivities surrounding the royal engagement. Once there, they decided to announce their own engagement the following morning. After leaving Brown Eyes for the evening, Prosper headed to his lodgings on the other side of town. Along the way, he encountered several indications that a violent scheme was afoot.

Prosper's attempt to warn and rescue Brown Eyes once the attack began marked the French episode's climax—a chase sequence that ended in tragedy. Although Prosper had earlier procured badges to mark them as "Catholic" and presumably keep them safe, Catherine's swords had already labeled Brown Eyes and her family's dwelling as "Huguenot." Consequently, Brown Eyes' family was readily identified in the onslaught. They had already been victimized as Prosper struggled to reach the other side of town amid streets now filled with chaos and violence. Indeed, a mercenary who had earlier set designs on Brown Eyes seized the opportunity of the massacre to kill her family and rape her. Following the sexual assault, the mercenary brutally stabbed Brown Eyes and fled. Prosper arrived just in time to find his lover slain. He carried her body to the doorway, cursing the soldiers outside who then promptly executed him. In the final scene of the story, Catherine de Medici looked proudly on the streets she successfully blanketed with dead Huguenots.<sup>28</sup>

The French episode applied David Starr Jordan's philosophy of the eugenics of war to its illustration of the film's theme that historically "hatred and intolerance" often triumphed over "love and charity." As the protagonists of the story, Brown Eyes and Prosper embodied both

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

familial and romantic love, essential virtues for the endurance of the best of the human race. Yet these humble individuals' lives were senselessly snuffed out by rulers concerned with maintaining their power and influence at all costs. The best of the "breed," as Jordan would term it, perished in violent conflict and left the future in the hands of those responsible for the carnage in the first place. Catherine de Medici embodied an almost primal intolerance because she relied relentlessly on the law of retaliation, insisting that two religious factions could not coexist, that the existence of one threatened the existence of the other. Such logic impeded human progress and stunted the potential development of the human spirit.

As a major participant in the current world war, France had acquired renewed significance in the American imagination. For his part, David Starr Jordan devoted an entire section of his 1911 study on the decay of the human race to the history of France. Jordan argued that French history illustrated the powerful role "social repression, religious intolerance *and* the intolerance of irreligion and unscience (sic)" played in destroying "the best" of the human race.<sup>29</sup> In the centuries leading up to the French Revolution, which included the period depicted in Griffith's film, Jordan explained that France's leaders "burned the heretic at the stake, banished the Huguenot, destroyed the lover of freedom, [and] silenced the agitator." Yet rather than eradicate this tradition of intolerance, the Revolution merely changed its form: *The mob* became intolerant. Jordan therefore concluded that while "the political changes which arose may have been for the better," the violent means that were employed to that end still altered France's racial stock for the worse. Indeed, some of the best of the human race, including many of Jordan's intellectual forbears, either died or were displaced as a result.<sup>30</sup> Thus the trajectory of French

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<sup>29</sup>David Starr Jordan, *The Human Harvest*, 60, emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup>Jordan, *The Human Harvest*, 60.

history up to the present day had been characterized by irretrievable racial dilution. It is hardly surprising that following a trial screening of *Intolerance*, Jordan wrote Griffith to praise his fidelity to history. Calling the film “an amazing piece of work, involving enormous difficulties,” Jordan claimed to be particularly impressed by Griffith’s “reproduction of the massacre of St. Bartholomew and of the hatred and intolerance which brought about this and other horrors of history.”<sup>31</sup>

*Intolerance*’s French story also suggested Griffith was attempting to take his mastery of violent spectacle in new directions. For instance, his decision to make the episode’s climactic sequence a *failed* run-to-the-rescue marked a deliberate departure from the redemptive resolutions to violence in *Birth*. In fact, depicting a massacre instead of a war allowed Griffith to sidestep the theme of redemption altogether. The St. Bartholomew’s Day slaughter nevertheless represented some of Griffith’s most graphic portrayals of human carnage to date. As had become his custom with such large-scale scenes, Griffith alternated between panoramas, long and medium shots of the assault from a distance and close-ups of individuals struggling with one another. Yet setting the action in a town square rather than a battlefield caused Griffith to stage the massacre with heightened intensity and intimacy. By frequently positioning the camera in the middle of the village streets, Griffith literally placed spectators in the thick of the bloodshed. The result was a more claustrophobic and chaotic viewing experience. Shifting perspectives from the village to inside victims’ homes, Griffith put new horrors on the screen—as when soldiers dangled infants by their ankles while their comrades threw the baby’s mothers into the thoroughfare. All the while the camera reminded viewers that the purveyor of these crimes,

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<sup>31</sup> Letter to D.W. Griffith from David Starr Jordan, August 6, 1916, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

Catherine de Medici, was herself a mother whose children remained safe from the butchery in their extravagant palace. More than that, the scenes of Catherine and her sons emphasized her role as a ruler-mother, sanctioning the mass killing of people she was meant to protect, annihilating the society she was supposed to nurture.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the sharp aesthetic contrasts between the royal palace and the village streets underscored the distinction between the individuals who sanctioned mass violence and the ordinary people who either carried it out or to fell victim to it. For instance, while the massacring men wore Spaniards' helmets, they were only vaguely coded as Catholic. Griffith deliberately distanced Catholics from blame for the massacre in a title card explaining Catherine de Medici "*covers her political intolerance under the cloak of the great Catholic Religion.*" Significantly, it was a *mercenary* who raped and killed Brown Eyes. In another scene, a very young girl, no more than twelve years old, barely escaped a mob of attackers who had started ripping at her clothes. With her torn dress baring her entire shoulder and collarbone, the girl crawled to the steps where a Catholic priest stood somberly observing the mayhem in the streets. She pled for the priest to help her and he did; he hid the little girl under his robes and pointed inquiring soldiers in the opposite direction. Such scenes further stressed the distance between the select powerful people who ordered war and the diverse masses who suffer its consequences. These themes had been recurrent in popular Civil War memory (even in *Birth*) and foreshadowed the dominant motifs that would similarly characterize mainstream memory of the First World War.

Perhaps Griffith's most striking statement that the royalty who ordered the massacre represented an "unfit" strain of the human species lay in his depiction of Catherine's sons. One

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<sup>32</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

prince was unmistakably effeminate, shown playing with toys or small animals (gestures Griffith typically assigned his young female protagonists) when he was not otherwise immediately by his mother's side. The other brother, the King, while also effeminate, became animal-like when he decided to sanction the massacre, foaming at the mouth and flailing his arms wildly. Thus a decadent family of inhumane, ineffectual, and intolerant individuals determined the fate of future multitudes. This depiction jibed with David Starr Jordan's assessment of French history and helped explain the contemporary crisis of France's racial weakness. For Jordan, decadence and war were mutually reinforcing; "the warlike nation of today is the decadent nation of tomorrow," he wrote. Beyond France, Jordan pointed to what he saw as the present degeneracy of Greece and Italy as the result of a long cycle of petty wars and subsequent regression.<sup>33</sup>

### **Babylon and the Lessons of Ancient Culture**

Although it drew on similar themes as the French episode, Griffith's account of the fall of Babylon conveyed a much more clear-cut war story. As such, it became a more ideal vehicle for Griffith to espouse his particular strand of antimilitarism. Specifically, the Babylonian chapter captured Griffith's signature paradoxes that became standard narrative practice in the American antiwar war film. On the one hand, *Intolerance's* Babylonian chapter was a lesson in how forces from an older, more intolerant world destroyed an enlightened civilization whose future held untold promise for all of humankind. In that sense, Babylon was a cautionary tale about the magnificent and terrible destructive power of war as a manifestation of intolerance. On the other hand, much of what helped make Babylon such a precocious society rested on its technological

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<sup>33</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916. David Starr Jordan, *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of the Races Through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1910), 62; also quoted in Abrahamson, "David Starr Jordan," 79.



advancements, which translated into military prowess. In Griffith's telling, Babylon might never have fallen to Persia had it been prepared for the attack. Rather, internal political corruption led to a conspiracy between Cyrus and Babylon's High Priest that enabled the Persian Army to charge the city by surprise. In fact, the film's first act revealed Babylon defeating Cyrus's forces when they faced off on equal terms. This initial battle helped establish Babylon as the more advanced, sophisticated civilization.

*Intolerance* presented Babylon as a metaphor for the United States. The film introduced the ancient city as a religiously tolerant society wherein new ideas and individual expression were allowed to thrive. Its ruler, Prince Belshazzar, the "very young king of Babylon" was particularly enlightened, an "apostle of tolerance and religious freedom." In direct contrast to Catherine de Medici's principle of retaliation, Belshazzar ruled by "protecting the weak from the strong." In fact, a title card claimed the city created "the first known court of justice in the world"; it thus towered above all other communities as a beacon of human progress.<sup>34</sup> Ruling in his father's stead, Belshazzar was making changes to further advance the city as a haven of peace and prosperity. In particular, he welcomed the worship of a new god, Ishtar, a deity of love and charity. Yet from the outset Belshazzar's forward-thinking met with hostility from older factions of leadership. Specifically, the city's High Priest, Bel, resented the growing popularity of Ishtar and "angrily resolve[d] to re-establish his own god—incidentally himself." Nevertheless, Belshazzar and the woman he loved, "the Princess Beloved," were poised to determine the city's

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<sup>34</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916. Actually, part of Griffith's agenda in telling the story of Babylon's fall was to challenge the city's typically pejorative connotations in the popular historical imagination. "Dreams That Have Come True," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1917. SM2.1

future. The Princess Beloved was Belshazzar's muse whose status he elevated from commoner to royalty because he perceived in her remarkable goodness.

Belshazzar demonstrated his idealism when he made his way through the city to survey his peoples' wellbeing. As one of his first acts of benevolent paternalism, Belshazzar exempted the story's heroine, "The Mountain Girl," from participation in the marriage market. Her raucous independent spirit prompted The Mountain Girl's brother to take her to court for being "incorrigible," after which she was sentenced to the market to find a husband. While displayed on the market podium, the Mountain Girl aggressively chomped onions and physically threatened potential bidders who groped at her. When Belshazzar and his entourage appeared, however, she immediately collapsed in prayer-like reverence. The Mountain Girl explained her plight to the Prince who then issued her a seal allowing her the freedom to determine for herself whether or not or to whom she would marry. In light of this kindness, the Mountain Girl pledged eternal allegiance to Belshazzar. As he continued through the city, the Prince came upon the High Priest proselytizing to the poor on his own behalf. He claimed Ishtar's worshipers risked losing their souls and summoning Babylon's downfall. Belshazzar scolded the Priest for such intolerance, further earning his peoples' love and devotion. By securing citizens' liberty, Belshazzar ensured their loyalty.

In the midst of his character's development, viewers also learned that Belshazzar was anticipating an attack from Cyrus, "a known foe of Babylon." Confident that his men would easily repulse Cyrus's forces, Belshazzar promised to continue revitalizing the city afterward. His confidence that Babylon would triumph was justified. The city was incredibly well fortified, boasting a 300-foot tall "gate of Imgur Bel which no enemy has been able to force." What is

more, Belshazzar was a battle-tested soldier. During Cyrus's attack, he likewise proved himself to be a supreme military commander. Indeed, Belshazzar, clearly not above the fray, took "charge of the city's defenses" himself. Perhaps most importantly, he had the love of his people and the love of The Princess Beloved behind him. As Cyrus's forces reached the city, The Princess Beloved, devastated, bade Belshazzar a tearful farewell, vowing to kill herself if he did not return. While the Princess Beloved led prayers inside the temple, The Mountain Girl equipped herself for battle and took her place among the other archers readying for the city's defense.

Although the Babylonians were immaculately prepared to defend their city, Cyrus, "that great world conqueror," still represented a formidable enemy. He and his people differed sharply from Belshazzar and the Babylonians. In contrast to Babylon's beauty and refinement, Cyrus's settlement was crude and makeshift. Rather than share the value Babylonians placed on art and science, Cyrus's people were dedicated to war. They engaged daily in compulsory military training, which Cyrus mandated so that he could continue conquering neighboring civilizations and expand his rein. Griffith did much to emphasize Cyrus's villainy, even detailing the racial makeup of his military, which included "Ethiopians" (portrayed by real African Americans!) and "Barbarians." Several title cards further impressed upon viewers that the battle between Cyrus and Belshazzar was essentially a struggle between war and peace. Cyrus moved upon Babylon wielding "the sword of war, most potent weapon forged in the flames of intolerance." As "Head of the War Machine," Cyrus evoked "the world-old prayer to kill, kill, kill—and to God be the glory, world without end, amen."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

When the two armies finally faced off in the first act, viewers were bombarded with an immense spectacle of violence. The camera focused intently on the “ancient instruments of war” used in the battle, lingering on every detail of their form and function. For instance, several of Cyrus’s men were required to load and shoot an enormous crossbow, while other men tried to penetrate the city by operating a massive battering ram. Still others exerted themselves via Cyrus’s gigantic moving siege towers, which were used in the army’s attempt to breach Babylon’s heavily fortified wall. The camera panned out to expose these men as they were repulsed by Babylonian soldiers, their ladders flung from atop the towers, then zoomed in to capture their violent crash to the ground hundreds of feet below. For their part, Babylonians deployed rock throwers, shot arrows, and launched burning oil against their assailants. Griffith treated viewers to several close ups of men being crushed with the rocks from above, as well as various shots of hand-to-hand combat once some Persians successfully infiltrated the city. Men stabbed each other with spears and knives, their faces contorting as blood gushed from their wounds. One shot presented a man ferociously biting his enemy’s neck; in another, a man pulled a knife out from where it had been stabbed down his throat. Cyrus’s catapult launched stones that struck one elderly soldier in the head, killing him instantly before another one immediately killed his son who was fighting next to him.

The battle raged into the night, and the morning brought “fresh assaults and towers.” So far it looked as though Babylon was going to fall. News of impending defeat reached the Princess Beloved, who, “frenzied with war’s terrors, watched the battle from afar.” Civilians inside the city walls intensified their prayers to Ishtar, while Cyrus’s devoted personal bodyguard, a massive barrel-chested soldier wielding two equally formidable swords, led his

legion on a separate charge. Right away the two-sworded man singlehandedly killed five Persians and decapitated two others. In his final attempt to repel the invaders, Belshazzar commanded the opening of the city's gate to release "a new and flaming engine of destruction [to attempt] to burn the towers of Cyrus." This tank-like device was the most impressive instrument of war depicted. It consisted of a large turret propped up on enormous spiked wheels that shot out an enormous stream of fire. Below the largest turret were smaller, rotating turrets that continued to shoot flames in all directions. It proceeded nonstop through the opposing forces, crushing any soldiers not already destroyed by the flames. This apparatus secured Belshazzar's victory, and the city rejoiced.

The first half of Griffith's Babylonian story established Babylon as an ideal civilization founded on peace and progress whose tolerance of individuality made it more advanced than Cyrus's, even in warfare. Although Cyrus clearly believed that ruling with a singular focus on militarism would give him the upper-hand in battle, Belshazzar's emphasis on art and invention proved the opposite. It allowed his people to develop a weapon more destructive than any of Cyrus's, one that corresponded to Babylon's already unparalleled fortifications. Consequently, Griffith suggested that *because* Babylon was a fundamentally peaceful and tolerant society it likewise proved itself more capable in war. As part of his eugenic attack on war and armies, David Starr Jordan similarly argued that, in fact, "the nation which has known the least of war is the one most likely to develop the 'strong battalions' with whom victory must rest." In other words, a policy of peace biologically prepared nations to win wars.<sup>36</sup> Such was the case with

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<sup>36</sup>Jordan, *Blood of the Nation*, 63-64. Quoted in Abrahamson, "David Starr Jordan," 79.

Griffith's Babylon, which never sought war, but rather was forced to defend itself militarily.

Incidentally, Jordan gushed in his letter to Griffith that the Babylonian story was his favorite.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, Babylon's fall came not from military defeat but from the corruption and selfishness of its elder generation of leaders. While the city celebrated its victory, the High Priest, Bel, conspired against its leader. Resenting Belshazzar's popularity and youth, Bel met with Cyrus to coordinate a subsequent, secret attack. Specifically, the High Priest would clandestinely grant Cyrus's army access to the city via the otherwise impenetrable gate. Belshazzar's most devoted follower, the Mountain Girl, happened to learn of this treachery and spied on Cyrus's camp for more details. As Cyrus's men prepared their second march, the Mountain Girl hijacked a chariot, hoping to warn the Prince before the attackers reached the city. Belshazzar was preoccupied with the Princess Beloved and several other couples in the massive banquet hall, preparing for a series of weddings to take place the next morning. Beset by all the "revelers" in the city streets, The Mountain Girl never reached Belshazzar. He was warned about the secret attack by someone else just as Cyrus's men entered the gates. Only twelve guards were able to defend the palace. Thus the Mountain Girl herself began shooting arrows into Cyrus's hordes while the two-sworded bodyguard rushed to take on as many soldiers as he could on his own. When an arrow finally struck and killed the Mountain Girl, two doves flew down and rested on her fallen body, signaling the defeat of peace and love. Belshazzar's bodyguard passionately kissed him on the mouth before returning to the fray, determined to die fighting for his city and his King. Belshazzar and the Princess Beloved killed themselves, preferring death to

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<sup>37</sup>Letter to D.W. Griffith from David Starr Jordan, August 6, 1916, *DWGP*, Reel 2.

enslavement. As they lay dying, Cyrus assumed the throne, screaming “To God the glory! Long live Cyrus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords!”

Babylon’s fall embodied the long cost of war on the progress of the human race. In particular, Cyrus’s triumph over Babylon in Griffith’s film reflected the process of reverse selection through intolerance and war that was so crucial to Jordan’s antimilitarism. Jordan’s reasoning in this regard always began with the precept that standing armies drained societies of their best racial stock, thereby diluting a society’s breed of people with every succeeding generation. Cyrus went far beyond a standing army—his entire civilization was based on military service and war. (It was no wonder that “Ethiopians” and “Barbarians” swelled his army’s ranks, as faith in Anglo-Saxon supremacy underwrote both Jordan’s and Griffith’s racial views).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Jordan insisted that absolutism thrived in racially deficient societies because those “men of character” who remained after a war would inevitably dominate the weak. And “It is the weakness of the weak, rather than the strength of the strong,” Jordan wrote, “from which spring tyranny and injustice.”<sup>39</sup> Such was the case with Cyrus, whose incessant and exclusive breeding of soldiers ensured his despotic rule.

Babylon, by contrast, represented the kind of strong racial characteristics that Jordan demanded were necessary for future generations to create and sustain peaceful democracies. Belshazzar himself came from ample racial stock. Upon his retirement as ruler, Belshazzar’s father devoted himself to scholarship that would further advance the city; in particular, he

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<sup>38</sup>Abrahamson, “David Starr Jordan,” 77. Griffith’s worldview was more firmly rooted in religion than Jordan’s, and he seems to have ascribed to the belief that Anglo-Saxon’s were God’s chosen people. For more on this concept’s history in American thought see, Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), esp. Chapter 8, “The Social Gospel and Race,” 176-198.

<sup>39</sup>David Starr Jordan, “The Human Harvest,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 65 (January-April 1906), 68-69. Also Quoted in Abrahamson, “David Starr Jordan,” 79.

labored in the development of “a universal written language (the cuneiform),” which became a casualty of the city’s destruction. Belshazzar and his father were independent-minded and encouraged similar freethinking among their people. The movement to instate Ishtar, an emblem of love and peace, as the city’s principal deity reflected this progressive bent. Moreover, despite the High Priest’s propaganda to the contrary, Babylon’s citizens were free to worship whomever and however they wished; Ishtar was not forced upon them.<sup>40</sup>

According to Jordan’s eugenics of war, the combined prevalence of tolerance and absence of militarism in Babylon facilitated the creation of a superior genetic strain. Religious and intellectual freedom was critical to such an evolutionary process. Indeed, Jordan reasoned, “While not all agitators are sane, and not all heretics right-minded...no nation can spare from its numbers those men who think for themselves and those who act for themselves.” Intolerance toward change or difference of any kind (as represented by the High Priest and Cyrus) weakened the race because, Jordan argued, “All movements toward social and religious reform are signs of individual initiative and individual force.” “The country which stomps out individuality,” he concluded, “will soon live in the mass alone.” Societies that disallowed individual expression doomed their progeny to eventually possess no distinctive spirit at all. Such circumstances would inevitably generate populations of soldier-contrivances.<sup>41</sup>

Critically, a nation’s ability or inability to sustain a “healthy human harvest” bore global consequences. To begin with, as Jordan and many of his contemporaries believed, democratic institutions could only take root in societies that evolved from prime racial stock. Sustained peace and individual liberty were essential ingredients in developing a morally and physically

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<sup>40</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

<sup>41</sup>Jordan, *The Human Harvest*, 60.



superior strain of people. Individuals with such constitutions would never tolerate a despot. Thus the possibility of world peace lay in the proliferation of democratic societies across the globe. The spread of democracy promised fewer wars because the parties typically responsible for militarism would cease to hold positions of power. “In the normal world democracies do not fear each other,” Jordan wrote. War would therefore perish when the global public unequivocally rejected absolutism in its many forms.<sup>42</sup> For his part, Griffith argued that motion pictures were fundamental to the creation of a modern global public. By giving powerful expression to an antimilitarist version of world history through a new language based on the alleged universality of images, *Intolerance* further tied American-style democracy to a future without war.

### **America and the Future of Western Civilization**

*Intolerance*'s penultimate historical example of the harm militarism exacted on humankind resided in its Judean episode. This was the shortest and least linear of the film's narrative threads, containing a series of disjointed scenes that offered a vague account of Christ's crucifixion. More than anything else, the Judean episode's function was to punctuate and further allegorize the film's three other stories. Its relatively brief description in *Intolerance*'s souvenir program indicated its subliminal purpose. While the program devoted several paragraphs to the other three stories' plots and their place in the film's unconventional design, four simple lines described the Judean chapter:

In the second tale you see the MAN OF MEN, the humble NAZARENE, walking and teaching among His people.

You see Him teaching His law—the law of love—and always kind tolerance.

You see Him fall beneath the flash of the Roman soldiery.

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<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Abrahamson, “David Starr Jordan,” 80.

You see Him perish on the Cross of Calvary.<sup>43</sup>

Significantly, Jesus himself, hailed in the film as “the Man of Men,” and “the greatest enemy of intolerance,” likewise fell victim to military violence in his own day. Indeed, Jesus Christ was familiar symbolic shorthand for intolerance’s evils, the human embodiment of the enduring struggle between love and hate, charity and malevolence. Thus the Judean episode emerged in the form of brief vignettes that contrasted Christ and his persecutors with the heroes and villains of the three other stories. Such comparisons emphasized the film’s lesson that the recurring triumph of intolerance over peace unleashed untold damage on humanity and imperiled its progress. The appearance of Biblical scenes in the middle of *Intolerance*’s more developed narratives served to remind viewers of the perennial questions on which Christianity was based: “What did the world lose when Christ was crucified?” and “What might the world be like had Jesus Christ lived?” As such, the Judean episode, like the woman rocking the cradle, visualized the thematic coherence between ostensibly disparate storylines.

The Biblical vignettes appeared most frequently as analogues to *Intolerance*’s modern story. The modern story portrayed the dangerous persistence of bigotry and injustice in contemporary American society via the work of insincere and unscrupulous female reformers. The episode followed three central characters—“The Boy” (Bobby Harron), “The Dear One” (Mae Marsh), and “The Friendless One” (Miriam Cooper)—who were each uprooted from the same mill town following a labor strike. Their lives became intertwined as they each tried to make new lives for themselves in the city. Although the results of their efforts varied, all three

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<sup>43</sup> *Intolerance* Souvenir Program, 1916, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Photocopy of program for motion picture, *Intolerance*, 1917, Box 53, Folder 17, Lillian Gish Papers, \*T-Mss 1996-011, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for Performing Arts.

were profoundly affected by the actions of “certain ambitious ladies banded together for the supposed ‘uplift’ of humanity.” These female reformers were led by Miss Jenkins, sister of the “autocratic industrial overlord,” Mr. Jenkins, whose mill had once been the source of the three main characters' livelihoods.

Miss Jenkins' reasons for becoming a reformer were purely sordid. After chaperoning a dance for her brother's workers, she grew embittered by their mirth in light of her status as an aging spinster. (At least twice Griffith used the title card: “When women cease to attract men, they often turn to reform as a second choice”). Miss Jenkins subsequently determined to enforce her ideas of moral behavior on the mill's laborers. Eventually the cost of her reform activities exceeded those allotted to her from the mill's profits, so she ordered her brother to cut workers' wages. This wage cut catalyzed the strike that displaced The Boy, The Dear One, and The Friendless One.

Indeed, the modern story's first act established the strike as a martial event whose violent consequences continued to be felt in its aftermath. Griffith staged the strike as a battle-turned-massacre: the workers, armed only with their fists and some small pistols, were quickly overpowered by their adversaries, a police-militia equipped with rifles and cannons. The Boy's father was killed in the strike along with the Friendless One's male relative and caretaker. The families of the workers watched fearfully from their homes as plumes of smoke rose and sounds of gunfire erupted from the mill below. The camera contrasted the carnage in the streets with Mr. Jenkins, who ordered the first shot, alone in his massive austere office. Despite the workers' justification in striking, “Hungry ones that wait to take their places” lined up outside the gates

draining the demonstration of its power. As punishment, the strikers who survived were forced to find work in the neighboring city.

The Boy and The Friendless One were among the castaways. Unable to find work, The Boy fell into the local street gang. Finding herself equally if not more destitute than him, The Friendless One joined several other women in becoming a paramour of The Boy's new boss, the "Musketeer of the Slums." Although the Dear One's father survived the strike and initially found work in the neighboring city, his "inability to meet new conditions" brought about his "untimely death." In spite of their misfortunes, The Dear One and The Boy met and fell in love; she taught him how to pray, and he vowed to pursue a crime-free life as her husband. But the Musketeer would not accept The Boy's resignation and, as a warning to other gang members, framed The Boy for a crime he did not commit. While her new husband was imprisoned, The Dear One bore their child. The Friendless One remained the Musketeer's helpless object. Meanwhile, "at the Jenkins home the uplifters celebrate[d] righting a world that was all wrong."<sup>44</sup> Oblivious to the misery they caused, female reformers nevertheless reveled in their power to do as they pleased.

Transitioning between Biblical vignettes, the film explained that in becoming a reformer, Miss Jenkins "align[ed] herself with the modern Pharisees." Indeed, the Pharisees who were responsible for Jesus's crucifixion were historically analogous to Griffith's "uplifters," and title cards identified the two parties as interchangeable breeds of "hypocrites." Just as the modern day reformers frowned upon the workers' leisure, the Pharisees were similarly "intolerant of youth and laughter." They began plotting against Jesus during the Marriage at Cana, where they

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<sup>44</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

observed “too much revelry and pleasure-seeking among the people” and where they grew jealous of Christ’s miraculous transformation of water into wine.

Next, the film established the modern-day reformers’ ascendance as the “most influential people in the city” before cutting to “Equally intolerant hypocrites of another age.” The Biblical scene depicted the Pharisees’ condemning Jesus for fraternizing with social outcasts. Following Jesus’s rescue of an adulterous woman from public stoning, Griffith switched back to the modern story with a title card that asked, “Now where shall we find the Christly example followed in our story of today”? The visual reply portrayed the reformers boasting that “they’ve cleaned up the city” while the camera revealed a workshop with no workers, and an empty dance hall. They listed among their accomplishments the recent police raid on a local brothel, which Griffith again reminded viewers was driven by their own inability “to attract men.” The camera zoomed in on reformers’ demonic expressions of pleasure as they watched countless women be marched out of their only home. Not only did modern “uplifters” lack Christ-like compassion for society’s least fortunate, but worse, they claimed their actions were on such people’s behalf.

The final Biblical tableau in the modern story’s first act occurred after the reformers, having unjustly declared the Dear One an unfit mother, cruelly and violently seized her baby. While the Dear One struggled intensely to wrest the baby from the women’s grasp, she failed and, falling to the floor, the scene ended with a close up of her helpless hand clutching her child’s knitted bootie. The film then cut to Jesus instructing his followers, “Suffer little children,” underscoring the visual contrast between the reformers’ behavior and Christ’s teachings. Indeed, the phrase would have been readily known to Christian viewers as Psalm IX: IV from the Gospel of Matthew, wherein Jesus said, “Suffer little children, and forbid them not,

to come to me: for such is the kingdom of heaven.” Griffith and his contemporaries likely interpreted this verse to be Jesus’s declaration that his followers should aspire to the simple humility and ideal love that infants symbolized. At this point in the film, *The Boy and the Dear One* unconsciously manifested that aspiration. In the face of treacherous forces beyond their control, the couple sought perseverance through basic love and pure goodness. That their child was borne of such traits suggested hope for all humankind. Yet the unremitting presence of powerful prejudices, represented by the reformers, continued to imperil the future of the human race. It was on such a prospect that *Intolerance*’s first half concluded and intermission was announced.<sup>45</sup>

Circumstances further deteriorated for *The Boy and The Dear One* in the film’s second half. As the Boy languished in prison, the Musketeer—who framed him—convinced the naïve and “unsuspecting” Dear One that he could retrieve her child from the “uplifters.” Not only did viewers learn that in the mill town she harbored unrequited love for The Boy, but she now witnessed and grew jealous of the Musketeers’ designs on the Dear One. Not long after these developments the Boy was released and reunited with the Dear One and shares her sorrow over their newborn’s fate. One day, while the Boy was out with friends, the Musketeer returned to the couple’s apartment to call on the Dear One. The Friendless One followed him again, this time carrying a revolver. When the Dear One answered the door the Musketeer asked her for the address where the child was being kept. As soon as she turned to fetch it, however, he forced his

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<sup>45</sup>This was indicated on a section of one souvenir program explaining “The Story-Form of the Play.” *DWGP*, Reel 3.

way inside and closed the door behind him. He then attacked The Dear One, his hand over her mouth, kissing her neck passionately as she struggled against him.<sup>46</sup>

The Friendless One, who had been eavesdropping from inside the apartment building, took the fire escape outside to obtain a view of what was happening. Meanwhile, a fellow tenant alerted The Boy to the Musketeer's presence in the building. The Boy kicked down the apartment door and began to brawl with The Musketeer. As the two men fought, the Dear One lay motionless on the floor near the bed while the Friendless One continued to watch from outside. The Musketeer gained a decisive advantage and held a chair above The Boy, threatening a fatal blow. Just then the Friendless One shot the Musketeer with her revolver. Panicked, she tossed the weapon into the apartment and fled the scene. Upon finding the dead Musketeer and the gun, the police charged the boy with murder.

Despite only circumstantial evidence against him, The Boy was found guilty and sentenced to death. A title card explained, "Universal justice, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a murder for a murder" and the camera revealed the jury handing their decision to the judge. Following a shot of the modern courthouse, a title card announced a flashback to Biblical times: "Outside the Roman Judgment Hall, after the verdict of Pontius Pilate: 'Let Him Be Crucified.'" A scene then emerged of Jesus carrying the cross through throngs of vicious onlookers who beat him when he collapsed under its weight. The camera returned abruptly to inside the modern courthouse where the Dear One had just fainted after hearing the judge condemn The Boy to "be hanged by the neck until dead, dead, dead!" Amidst these tragic events, the reformers continued to celebrate their supposed successes.

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<sup>46</sup>This attack evoked Gus's attempted rape of Flora Cameron in *Birth* and was portrayed by the same actors, Walter Long and Mae Marsh.

The Friendless One, racked with guilt after The Boy's sentencing, began trailing The Dear One's whereabouts as she wrestled with her conscience over whether or not to come clean. Meanwhile, viewers learned that The Boy's scheduled execution coincided with the governor's visit to the city. A friendly neighborhood police officer, convinced of The Boy's innocence, appealed to the governor unsuccessfully on his behalf. On the morning of the execution, however, the police officer and the Dear One found evidence that a fourth party was present during the murder. The Dear One hurried to appeal to the governor herself before the state wrongfully killed her husband. As the Dear One's sped to city hall in the officer's automobile, the Friendless One followed behind in a taxi cab.

Despite the Dear One's presentation of new evidence, the governor again refused to pardon The Boy. Meanwhile, the police officer noticed the Friendless One following them and demanded an explanation. By the time the Friendless One confessed, the governor had already left to catch his train home. The three of them raced to the train station only to watch the governor's train depart as soon as they arrived. While all of this was going on, The Boy walked his final route to the execution chamber, while a priest administered his "Last Sacrament," and title cards excerpted Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Goel."<sup>47</sup> Fortunately, the train station was next to a race track. The policeman convinced a driver who was practicing to help them try and overtake the governor's train. With the cop and Friendless One in the rear, and the Dear One in the passenger seat, a great chase sequence ensued as the racecar ferociously pursued the train.

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<sup>47</sup>Oscar Wilde wrote "The Ballad of Reading Goel" (pronounced "Redding Jail"), after his release from the prison in the spring of 1897. The poem was about the execution of a man who had been hanged during Wilde's incarceration and emphasizes the brutality and inhumanity of capital punishment.



A close-up of the driver's foot pushing the accelerator to the floor emphasized the frenzied nature of the pursuit. Finally, the racecar screeched parallel in front of the train, forcing it to stop.

Once the train halted, the frantic party hurried inside the governor's car and explained the true nature of the crime that was committed. The governor immediately ordered his aide to phone the prison and issue a stay of execution. Griffith then alternated between shots of the aide rushing to the train station telephone and The Boy being led to the top of the execution scaffold, wrists bound and ankles strapped. A prison guard received the phone call just as the executioner ordered the nooses fastened; the guard finally caught the executioner's attention as a black hood was being placed over The Boy's head. Three men held knives over strings that, once cut, would open the platform and hang the Boy. As those men waited for their signal, the rescue party broke through the execution chamber doors. They arrived just as the executioner was about to call off the proceedings. The Boy's bindings were removed and he and The Dear One, hardly believing their luck, embraced in the film's final shot.

The modern story's chase sequence coincided with the fall of Babylon, Christ's crucifixion, and the deaths of Brown Eyes and Prosper in the St. Bartholomew Day massacre. Critically, only the modern story's climactic chase sequence resulted in rescue and redemptive resolution. By setting the modern story alongside historical episodes that documented patterns of personal and political betrayal, Griffith placed the United States in the global context of human civilization. Specifically, *Intolerance* positioned America as the inheritor of western civilization, while it simultaneously warned against the dangers that had befallen civilizations past, namely militarism and autocracy. Following the main stories' conclusions, Griffith inserted an epilogue that underscored the cost of war and intolerance for humankind. Its similarities to *Birth's*

postscript of peace triumphing over war were unmistakable, albeit far more visually elaborate and conceptually encompassing.

The epilogue opened with a title card that read: “When cannon and prison bars wrought in the fires of intolerance--” before introducing a montage of images depicting violence and human suffering. The first scene portrayed a modern battlefield from a distance as bombs exploded and two armies charged each other. The lens then closed in on hand-to-hand combat between soldiers and the elaborate firing of a cannon. The camera moved from the battlefield to an aerial view of a city being bombed, then to inside a prison where a crowd of inmates knelt before a wall that kept them confined. Wringing their hands, the prisoners appeared to be pleading with something that lay behind the wall. Back on the modern battlefield, soldiers raised their bayonets, poised to deal a final blow to their fallen enemy, when they stopped suddenly, weapons mid-air, and looked up to see a mass of angels hovering above them.

A second title card—“And a perfect love shall bring peace forevermore”—completed the clause that opened the postscript. Another series of images followed, this time anticipating a future wherein love and charity prevailed. The soldiers on the battlefield dropped their weapons and succumbed to the angels still floating above. An ethereal airship glided through the sky, its smiling passengers dropping flowers instead of bombs through a chute in the vessel. Another intertitle forecast, “Instead of prison walls—Bloom flowery fields.” A powerful light penetrated the room of the kneeling prisoners and dissolved the wall in front of them. A longer shot of the prison compound showed the buildings disintegrate into a peaceful pasture. The modern battlefield transformed into a park where friends and family gathered. From a close up of children playing the camera panned out to show a couple perched atop a cannon now overgrown

with vines and plants. The only remnants of war in this world were relics of a bygone era. One more glimpse of the angels and soldiers waving to each other on the battlefield of the past faded into a final shot of the mother rocking the cradle of civilization.<sup>48</sup>

*Intolerance* suggested that the possibility of a future without recurring violence and human suffering rested on the survival of American-style democracy. For antimilitarists like Griffith and David Starr Jordan, the U.S.'s lack of involvement in the Great War demonstrated its superior institutions and racial stock. Nevertheless, the same forces that had destroyed past civilizations and led to the current conflict persisted in modern American society. As such, they threatened the nation's ability to establish and subsequently lead a New World order based on its ideals. With *Intolerance*, Griffith bound the health of American cinema to the health of American democracy, and contended that both bore heavily on the prospect of world peace. From his earliest days as a filmmaker Griffith insisted motion pictures had a vital role to play in resolving the kind of differences between nations and peoples that had led to wars throughout human history. Yet film censorship threatened to impede the medium's development before artists could adequately demonstrate its power to foster peaceful relations among Americans at home.

What is more, the war in Europe created an opportunity for American filmmakers to profoundly shape the direction of cinema's growth across the globe. If permitted the First Amendment protections accorded other art forms, the movies might embody American democracy in comprehensive and transferrable ways. In other words, the cinema could become a distinctly American art form that upheld citizens' faith that theirs was a uniquely peaceful and

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<sup>48</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916.

ideal democracy. Furthermore, harnessing the power of motion pictures would fortify the U.S.'s capacity to act as an agent of peace and a model for the rest of the world to follow. Thus censorship and similar civic ills not only imperiled American democracy but also jeopardized the possibility of a world without war.

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### **Reactions to *Intolerance***

*Intolerance* could hardly achieve all that Griffith hoped it would. His lofty ambitions for the project had multiplied as he continued to expand it, making a seamless marriage between the two less plausible. During production, Griffith overlooked the fact that despite *Birth's* incredible success, the cinema remained in a nascent stage of development. So did film audiences. While *Birth* had indeed elevated the movies to new respectability, it even more so demonstrated films' commercial viability. The sheer vastness of *Intolerance's* conception rendered it decidedly noncommercial by comparison. In particular, the American public proved simply unready to embrace an experimental motion picture that executed a non-linear narrative on an epic scale. Of course, some especially sophisticated viewers, like poet and pioneering film theorist Vachel Lindsay, recognized *Intolerance's* advancement of the young art.<sup>49</sup> The film's popularity among mass audiences, however, became relatively short-lived.<sup>50</sup> Initially, the mystery surrounding *Intolerance's* massive set and public anticipation over how Griffith—the “superman of the

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<sup>49</sup> Lindsay praised *Intolerance* as a prime example of motion pictures' capacity as serious art in his review of Hugo Munsterberg's *The Photoplay, A Psychological Study* (1916) which was published in *The New Republic*. “Photoplay Progress,” by Vachel Lindsay, February 17, 1917, *The New Republic: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 10, No. 120, 76-77. Lindsay also wrote *The Art of the Moving Picture* (Macmillan 1915), which was the first American study of movies as an art form.

<sup>50</sup>The film achieved more commercial success internationally. According to Kevin Brownlow, British audiences viewed the film as a reflection of their battle against Prussianism. Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 177.

movies”—would follow up *Birth*, drew enormous crowds. In several cities, attendance at *Intolerance* premieres exceeded those at *Birth*'s. But audiences steadily waned after opening night. By far the main criticism of *Intolerance* revolved around its unconventional narrative structure. Spectators grew frustrated by the constant interruptions between storylines. The film also met significant opposition for its negative portrayal of social reformers, its unremitting depiction of violence, and its graphic sexual content. These latter criticisms nevertheless also pointed to *Intolerance*'s most enduring success. If the film did nothing else, it reinforced Griffith's reputation as the master of spectacle and the paramount cinematic authority on historical and military realism.

Insofar as Griffith intended *Intolerance* as an attack on film censorship, he succeeded in significant ways. One particularly influential organization, the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (NBRMP), received Griffith's message with stirring clarity. Initially formed in 1909 under the auspices of the People's Institute of New York, what became the NBRMP began as a committee of prominent citizens from the community whose purpose was to make recommendations to the mayor regarding controversial films. After several name changes, the organization decided on the NBRMP in 1916. The name represented their confidence in the artistic potential of the new industry, which faced criticism from every angle. Comprised of influential individuals from the fields of social work, religion, and education, members of the NBRMP shared the conviction that no one had the right to impose standards of morality on the public. As such, the board opposed censorship as a means of dealing with controversial films.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>“Intolerance,” Undated, No Author, Controversial Films, Box 105, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, 1907-1971, The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

It was undoubtedly *Intolerance*'s violence that landed it on the National Board of Review of Motion Picture's (NBRMP) list of "Controversial Films." Nevertheless, the board's findings reflected a collective faith in Griffith as the leading figure in improving the moral and artistic quality of films. Calling *Intolerance* "the greatest argument against censorship as a repressive function," the NBRMP praised its achievement as the first time "the screen has been used in a really great way as a focus point of social vision, presenting a vital human tendency needing correction." "To do this," the board explained, "Mr. Griffith has had to show things that are not pleasant either to look upon or consider; things that the people representative of the intolerance he rails at do not wish to have their attention, or the attention of others, called to...the very things that censorship, itself a symbol of intolerance, has ever in mind to suppress." Griffith *had* to show "the brutality of the Crucifixion, the barbarity of persecution and war, the gruesomeness of hypocritical interference with personal rights," the board argued. Such "unsavory details in its mode of revelation" were necessary in order for spectators to grasp its "sum total" which was "clashing with significance of far-reaching moral forces."<sup>52</sup> If censors succeeded in banning *Intolerance*, they would be halting the progress of a new art form that was just beginning to demonstrate its social utility.

In its conclusions about *Intolerance*, the NBRMP also retroactively condemned *Birth*'s censorship in different states. Indeed, the Board lamented *Birth*'s fate at the hands of people who overlooked its profound moral purpose and consequently butchered its presentation. *Birth*'s critics erred in viewing the film "not [as] the drama of war and [of] the injustice done to all

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<sup>52</sup>"Intolerance," Undated, No Author, Controversial Films, Box 105, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, 1907-1971, The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

people under a state of war,”—which was the purpose of the film—“but [as] a narrow argument against one particular race.” Such misreadings of *Birth* and subsequent cuts to the film, the board argued, powerfully demonstrated censorship’s repressive nature. Rather than permit audiences to judge for themselves “Mr. Griffith’s conception of the Civil War,” audiences “were asked to pass judgment upon a work which was incomplete...as far as the author’s whole idea was concerned.” The board insisted that such “arbitrary” censorship was undemocratic and endangered the role of art in American life. “Only the people at large,” it implored, “have a right to decide...the ethical and moral value [and the meaning]” of motion pictures. Censors consequently stymied the social and cultural nation’s advancement by foreclosing the opportunity for “free discussion of those vital forces...which it has always been the right of art...to illumine and arraign.” So long as censors maintained the power they currently possessed, national treasures like D.W. Griffith faced imminent extinction. Because “censorship does not recognize art and vision and genius and enthusiasm,” Griffith and directors like him might be forced to express themselves in some other, inferior way. As a result, they concluded, “Not only the world of art will lose, but the world of thought as well.”<sup>53</sup>

A number of published reviews shared the NBRMP’s assessment of *Intolerance*’s merits. For instance, Burns Mantle of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* acknowledged that perhaps viewers “see too much of men being stabbed and women massacred” as “frequently there is much spurting of blood to add horror to the spectacle.” Nevertheless, he insisted *Intolerance*’s social and moral impact rendered its violence only momentarily bothersome.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, *Current*

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<sup>53</sup>“Intolerance,” Undated, No Author, Controversial Films, Box 105, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, 1907-1971, The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

<sup>54</sup>*Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1916 F1.

*Opinion* regarded Griffith's use of "crowds and violence" as a charming expedient for conveying his message that "the spirit of intolerance...[wrought]...*avoidable* human tragedy [throughout history]." <sup>55</sup> *The Sun* likewise determined that the Griffith's realism heightened the intensity of his film's moral instruction. By conveying the historical episodes as though "they existed yesterday," the contemporary story effectively reminded viewers of "who and what we are in the big scheme of things." Thus *Intolerance's* demonstration that "through all the trials and turmoils of war and politics...love has ever struggled against intolerance" became more compelling than its spectacular presentation. <sup>56</sup> For Reverend W.H. Jackson and Professor Hardin Lucas, the combined value of Griffith's ideas and their execution demonstrated that the movies had outgrown censorship. The vivid imagery that might disturb some viewers nonetheless "command[ed] the attention world which has suffered and is still suffering from...intolerance." As such, the film represented "a lesson in the classroom, a sermon in the church, [and] a revelation in the social order." <sup>57</sup> Indeed, those spectators who most appreciated *Intolerance's* moral impetus tended to regard its violence as a justifiable instrument of communication.

Despite such instances wherein audiences evidently grasped *Intolerance's* intended broader significance, few reviewers suggested it lifted movies into the realm of high art. Critics consistently maligned the film's narrative construction, even when they offered otherwise positive assessments. It proved difficult enough for movie-goers to follow four distinct stories being told concurrently, but the fact that each one was also so elaborate simply overwhelmed

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<sup>55</sup>"The Greatest Achievement of the Superman of the Movies," *Current Opinion*; November 1916; VOL. LXI, No. 5; American Periodicals pg. 321. Emphasis mine.

<sup>56</sup>"At the Parkway," *The Sun*, December 2, 1917, S2

<sup>57</sup>"Intolerance Reviewed Educationally," by Rev. W.H. Jackson and Prof. Hardin Lucas, October 16, 1916, *The Moving Picture World*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 238.



viewers. Many publications remarked that the Babylonian episode and the modern story would have been sufficient films in their own right. Instead, wrote the *New York Times*, the French and Judean episodes especially “do nothing but add...general confusion and might well be eliminated.”<sup>58</sup> Another newspaper compared the experience of viewing *Intolerance* to being a “one-eyed boy at the three-ringed circus. The feeling is pleasurable and exciting, but there is regret that so much has to be missed.” *Life*’s James Metcalfe similarly applauded Griffith’s efforts to infuse the movies with intellectual concepts, but determined they were ““completely smothered in the complexity of the pictures.””<sup>59</sup> The *Moving Picture World* accurately predicted that because the film was “cast in a very high sphere...[demanding]...the full measure of man’s mind” it would not reach the masses.<sup>60</sup> Columnist and friend of Griffith, Louella Parsons, wrote that although remarkable, *Intolerance* was emotionally and mentally draining, and W.K. Hollander agreed that its “bigness, greatness...massiveness...make it impossible for one sitting.”<sup>61</sup>

The harshest rejection of *Intolerance* as an accomplishment in formal style came from famed theatre critic Alexander Woollcott. Woollcott deplored the film’s “grotesque incoherence of design and utter fatuity of thought,” and ridiculed Griffith’s attempts to articulate a philosophy of history on the screen. He characterized Griffith’s intellectual method as “a bland misuse of words and their meanings,” which the director assembled into “an extraordinary jumble under

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<sup>58</sup> “‘Intolerance’ Impressive: D.W. Griffith’s New Picture is a Stupendous Spectacle,” *New York Times*, Sept 6, 1916, 7.

<sup>59</sup> “The Greatest Achievement of the Superman of the Movies,” *Current Opinion*; November 1916; VOL. LXI, No. 5; American Periodicals pg. 321.

<sup>60</sup> “Intolerance Reviewed Educationally,” by Rev. W.H. Jackson and Prof. Hardin Lucas, October 16, 1916, *The Moving Picture World*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 238.

<sup>61</sup> “Chicago News Letter” section, by JAS. S. McQuade. “‘Intolerance Wins the Praise of Chicago Critics,’” *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 30, No. 11, December 16, 1916, 1630.

one magic name.” Woollcott found it even more incredulous that Griffith of all people chose “intolerance” as his purported theme, given “the offensively bigoted Simon Legreeism of [*Birth*].”<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to imagine such a scathing review not affecting Griffith. To begin with, in many ways Woollcott represented Griffith’s target audience for *Intolerance*. The director had hoped the film would further encourage critics of the live stage to classify motion pictures as a new mode of fine art.<sup>63</sup> Griffith also followed and admired Woollcott’s dramatic criticism.<sup>64</sup> That Woollcott not only scrutinized but mocked the work on which Griffith had spent months of his life and most of his money undoubtedly replayed his years of rejection as an actor and playwright. Worse, Woollcott’s review suggested Griffith was not taken seriously as an artist by those individuals who took art most seriously.

However much it succeeded as “art for art’s sake,” *Intolerance* was generally conceded to have surpassed *Birth* in proving the movies were a superior vehicle for spectacle. Furthermore, the film solidified Griffith as the unrivaled master of spectacular cinema. Even Woollcott acknowledged Griffith as a genius of the camera, predicting he was the most likely filmmaker to “the great motion picture of this generation.” In fact, Woollcott claimed that taken by themselves, *Intolerance*’s historical reproductions defied criticism. “Griffith waves his wand,” Woollcott wrote, “and, after many centuries...ancient [cities] rise from [their] ashes.” Indeed, “the imagination and personal force represented in such an achievement suggest a man of stature.” He concluded that with more dramatic focus and sophistication, each episode might

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<sup>62</sup>“Second Thoughts on First Nights,” by Alexander Woollcott, *New York Times*, September 10, 1916, pg. X5.

<sup>63</sup>“Pictures vs. One Night Stands,” by David Wark Griffith, *The Independent*, December 11, 1916, 447-8.

<sup>64</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: the Autobiography of D.W. Griffith*, ed., James Hart (Louisville: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 83. Gish, *The Movies*, 35.

comprise an individual film that would be “worth going miles to see.”<sup>65</sup> *The New York Times* similarly surmised that in spite of its dramatic deficiencies, *Intolerance* affirmed Griffith as “a real wizard of lens and screen.” Notwithstanding “its utter incoherence, the questionable taste of some of its scenes, and the cheap banalities into which it sometimes lapses,” *The Times* continued, “the stupendousness of its panoramas [and] handling of its great masses of players” rendered *Intolerance* superior to any other picture yet produced.<sup>66</sup>

If there was vague consensus that at the very least Griffith had outdone himself in terms of spectacle, there was near unanimous praise for his war scenes specifically. Almost all critical praise in this regard was devoted to Griffith’s Babylonian sequences. As Burns Mantle explained, it was “natural that Mr. Griffith should attempt to outdo the battle scenes of...[*Birth*]...and reasonable that he should succeed...But one still marvels at the completeness of its success.” Mantle described the attack on Babylon as an intense, visceral experience: “From the orchestra chairs you look down literally upon *thousands of men* in battle and follow the advance of the army of Cyrus in not one *but a hundred* chariot races toward the stricken city.” Mantle marveled that viewers could both see and *hear* Cyrus’s towers fall outside the city because of the sound effects accompanying the scenes off stage. As the towers crashed to the ground, viewers could still glimpse the “white, staring faces of the defeated soldiers” trapped inside.<sup>67</sup> *Current Opinion* asked rhetorically, “who could see [the battle at Babylon] without longing for still closer intercourse with the past?” The writer gushed over each aspect of the

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<sup>65</sup>“Second Thoughts on First Nights,” by Alexander Woollcott, *New York Times*, September 10, 1916, pg. X5.

<sup>66</sup>“‘Intolerance’ Impressive: D.W. Griffith’s New Picture is a Stupendous Spectacle,” *New York Times*, Sept 6, 1916, 7.

<sup>67</sup>“David Wark Griffith Screens the Intolerance of the Ages,” Burns Mantle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sep 17, 1916, pg. F1.

staged combat: “a rush of armed hordes; the shining armor; the barbaric engines of war; the scaling ladders and siege towers flung down in dust and blood; sword and flame hurtling through the air; night vision of a fire-topped city; and *crowds, crowds, crowds, battling crowds, the thousand details of primeval combat.*” By all means, “Mr. Griffith...splashes crowds, cities, battles and races on his celluloid as other artists might splash color on canvas.”<sup>68</sup> The director simply could not be outdone when it came to putting war on the screen.

As in *Birth*, Griffith’s ability to realistically depict war in *Intolerance* went beyond his staging of combat. As *Pictures and the Picture Goer* observed, although “we see the most gripping and realistic war scenes ever conceived...Mr. Griffith has not overlooked the personal touches for which he is so famous.” Indeed, with *Intolerance*, the director continued to hone his signature method of alternating between scenes with epic sweep and detailed, intimate scenes between individual characters. One reviewer characterized the effect as a perfect blend of “[spectacular] historical pageants...and...[powerful] emotional acting.” Nothing like it had ever been “achieved on stage or screen.” Indeed, *Intolerance* ran the gamut of genres and sentiments—“Moments of deepest tragedy” were portrayed alongside “the most delicious comedy.” The film therefore offered something to every kind of viewer, “thrills for the man who enjoys the spectacular, [and for] the lover of simplicity...[charm] in equal measure.”<sup>69</sup>

Without a doubt, Griffith’s deft transitions between crowds and individuals, broad historical contexts and personal narratives, constituted *Intolerance*’s realistic impact. The *Boston*

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<sup>68</sup>“The Greatest Achievement of the Superman of the Movies,” *Current Opinion*; November 1916; VOL. LXI, No. 5; American Periodicals pg. 321. Emphasis mine.

<sup>69</sup>“The Film’ World’s Greatest Achievement,” *Pictures and the Picturegoer* [London], April 28-May 5, 1917, 102-4. Reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 73. “Chicago News Letter” section, by JAS. S. McQuade. “‘Intolerance Wins the Praise of Chicago Critics,’” *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 30, No. 11, December 16, 1916, 1630.

*Transcript* concluded that the film proved only Griffith could register an authentic past on screen: “He is reconstructing other worlds for us with a realism that makes their common humanity as fascinating as their bizar (sic) variation from our life to-day.” According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, Griffith’s dedication to both the grand and the granular made “Age [slip] into age and time [leap] with such interesting flight that you seem to live it all and know it all and to get a *world grasp* of events and human emotions that were never thought possible before.”<sup>70</sup> *Intolerance* once again showcased Griffith’s ability to translate the foreign into the familiar; to bring the past into the present and make it knowable.

*Intolerance* also registered as authentic to American audiences because, as with *Birth*, the press relentlessly reported the details of its production. Public fascination surrounding Griffith’s elaborate sets had grown steadily during filming. His replica of Babylon alone included the Great Wall, which stood at around 1,000 feet tall along with a 5,300 feet wide complex of pillars and statues. Griffith employed at least 3,000 extras. Indeed, adjusted for inflation, the film’s entire set cost roughly around \$47 million dollars.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, reports of Griffith on the set of *Intolerance* once again cast him as a military mind in his own right, coordinating armies and directing their offensives. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* dedicated its entire coverage of *Intolerance* to the daily risks the actors faced when filming its immense battle scenes. Although Griffith was ostensibly reproducing *ancient* warfare, several “dangers...constantly menaced actors,

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<sup>70</sup>“The Greatest Achievement of the Superman of the Movies,” *Current Opinion*; November 1916; VOL. LXI, No. 5; American Periodicals pg. 321. “‘Intolerance’ Booked By Criterion Theater: D.W. Griffith’s Second Great Production Coming Here Week February 18,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 3, 1918, D2.

<sup>71</sup>I determined this figure by comparing different accounts. In particular, I looked at the 1915-1917 cash account book kept by Wark Producing Corporation, the company that distributed *Intolerance*. Volume I of Bound Financial Records, *DWGP*, Reel 20. These records ostensibly account for expenses that were charged to production cost and records of the road shows. For additional means by which D.W. Griffith financed the picture I consulted Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 325-326, and James Hart’s section on *Intolerance* in Hart and Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 114.

cameramen, and even the director of 'Intolerance.'" This became obvious when one realized that "Mr. Griffith's ancient warfare...employ[s]...liquid fire, flaming engines, catapults that throw rocks of 50 pounds or more in weight." The director also made regular use of "mighty crossbows that discharge arrows thirty feet in length, battering rams and pair horse chariots that dash madly among throngs of spear-armed men."<sup>72</sup> For *Intolerance*'s participants, reenacting ancient warfare required *living* ancient combat.

Although intended as historical reproduction, the dangers of staging war in *Intolerance* were distinctly modern. The set became a veritable minefield for accidents and sudden deaths. Evidently, danger was so pervasive that Griffith was forced to provide "his warriors [a] benefit that their ancient prototypes never heard of--a modern field hospital, with surgeons, nurses, stretchers, and ambulances." The hazards of filming a Griffith epic were even more apparent when one considered the daily calamities wrought by modern life—"even a department store has its daily grist of accidents," remarked the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. That said, it was less remarkable that people were injured than it was so few (less than one hundred) reported injuries.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, even if Griffith's actors were not employing modern weapons—"the means of wholesale slaughter in vogue today"—they nevertheless proved that ancient battle "could scarcely be considered child's play." It was nearly impossible for *Intolerance*'s combatants on the ground not to meet the business end of the opposing army's spears and swords. During one of the scenes when rocks were being hurled from Babylon's towers to the encroaching Persians below, an assistant director forgot to signal for the actors to disperse before the rocks actually hit.

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<sup>72</sup>"Reproducing Ancient Warfare," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 1916, 6.

<sup>73</sup>"Reproducing Ancient Warfare," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 1916, 6.

Consequently Cyrus himself (George Siegmann) was struck in the head. Thankfully he was wearing a helmet, but he was nevertheless incapacitated for several hours afterward.<sup>74</sup>

Ever deft at self-promotion, Griffith played no small part in characterizing himself as a general-of-movie-warfare to the public. One of the most famous aspects of *Intolerance*'s production, which continues to fascinate film students today, was Griffith's directing of the Babylonian war scenes from a hot air balloon. Some of the most remarkable images from the film came from Bitzer's filming alongside Griffith in this balloon. Griffith loved to tell interviewers the story of the balloon almost crashing into one of Babylon's pillars during filming. Notorious for working without a script, Griffith explained, "The only time I was ever at a loss was when I was producing one the Babylonian war scenes—bloodcurdling, aren't they!—from a balloon." Something with the balloon malfunctioned and those inside almost crashed into a siege tower. "I confess that...I shouldn't have minded a few notes to keep things going while I recovered my imagination," Griffith explained. Griffith's cast and crew also contributed to the lore surrounding the set. Constance Talmadge, who played "The Mountain Girl," bragged that she actually drove the horse-drawn chariot she was seen commandeering in the film, incurring several injuries in the process. Billy Bitzer and Karl Brown claimed to have each acquired life-long scars from their work on the set.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>"The Call Boy's Chat," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 24, 1916, 6. Vol 175.

<sup>75</sup>"The Film' World's Greatest Achievement," *Pictures and the Picturegoer* [London], April 28-May 5, 1917, 102-4. Reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 73. "The Wild Woman of Babylon," Grace Kingsley, *Photoplay*, Volume 11, no. 6, May 1917. 80-81. Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 142-173. G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 130-180.

Although they were intended as antimilitarist epics, both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* appealed to Americans as authentic depictions of modern war. As such, both films suggested a reality about the war raging overseas, and stimulated public fascination with the technology of combat. Where *Birth* seemed to offer viewers a glimpse of contemporary European entrenchments, *Intolerance* underscored World War I's essentially primitive nature. As columnist Frank Morse observed, *Intolerance* "pictures phases of ancient warfare that are today being copied on the battlefields of Europe." For *The Washington Post*, *Intolerance* demonstrated that "modern war is not such an advance on ancient conflicts as some war correspondents would have one believe."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, reactions to *Intolerance* tended to blur any distinction between war as a thrilling spectacle and war as a deplorable institution. Thus its fusion of sensational violence and pacifist overtures marked a subsequent phase in the development of the American antiwar film. By 1916 Griffith's public image embodied the genre's paradoxical foundations—he represented himself as an antimilitarist, while continuing to tower over his competitors as the paramount director of spectacular military realism. As the United States inched toward war in 1917, it became increasingly difficult for Griffith to balance those dueling aspects of his reputation.

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<sup>76</sup>“Submarines, Liquid Fire, 'Tanks' and Guns Figure Prominently in Film Spectacles that Dominate the Theatrical Situation this Week,” by Frank Morse, *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1917. “Clickings from The Movie Camera,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 1916, MT2.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### “Even the Pacifist is Persuaded”: D.W. Griffith’s *Hearts of the World*

This chapter traces the making of Griffith’s third World War I epic, *Hearts of the World* (1918) which became the most popular and the most profitable film about the war during the war period. I argue that Griffith’s invitation to visit the front firsthand as well as the U.S.’s eventual entry into the conflict encouraged him to reverse his opposition to the war. Furthermore, the chapter shows that in struggling mightily to build a narrative out of what he saw of the Western Front and the footage he obtained there, Griffith staged much of the resulting film in Los Angeles. With minor exceptions, the few authentic images of the war that appeared in *Hearts of the World* were not Griffith’s. They were culled instead from film he purchased from second parties. Nevertheless, Griffith insisted *Hearts* was filmed almost exclusively amidst the war and American audiences accepted his footage as the most credible narrative film about the conflict. The degree to which American audiences believed *Hearts* brought the war home to them increased their growing demand for realism in war films that began with *Birth* and *Intolerance*. The film also brought new power to Griffith’s consistent framing of war as a regrettable but sometimes inevitable enterprise. By visually enshrining President Woodrow Wilson’s characterization of the conflict and America’s role in it, *Hearts* consecrated national mythologies about the U.S.’s global influence. In particular, it reinforced the notion that the U.S. only reluctantly engaged in world affairs, and that its international presence was inherently and invariably benign.

The idea to have D.W. Griffith make a film about the war came from two millionaires concerned that British-American relations were worsening after the failure of the 1916 American peace initiative. One of these men, Otto Kahn, was a German-born, New York-based investment banker who helped bankroll Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. After receiving huge returns on his investment, Kahn became a stockholder in Griffith's newest production company. *Birth* had convinced Kahn that the movies were a powerful new vehicle that could influence the masses and that Griffith, in particular, possessed a distinctly American brand of persuasive idealism. Kahn consequently contacted British newspaper proprietor Max Aitken—soon to be Lord Beaverbrook, England's first and powerful Minister of Information—with the idea of sending Griffith to England to make a film that would persuade Americans to join the fight. In this scheme, Griffith would “dramatize the meaning of the war...[for]...people who are in the greatest need of enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup> Beaverbrook agreed that a motion picture might do more to convince Americans of the need to fight the war than any of his other publicity efforts through the *Daily Express*. With that, Griffith sailed to England in early March of 1917 to meet Beaverbrook on his estate and work out the details of the project.

In agreeing to collaborate with the Allies, Griffith appeared to be reversing his previous views on the war. His muse and confidante Lillian Gish recalled, “it seemed strange that Mr. Griffith, who so fervently supported President Wilson because of his promise to keep us out of the war, should now be involved in a film to sell war.”<sup>2</sup> His audiences also noticed. Once *Hearts* was released the following year, the film editor for *Ladies Home Journal*, Helen Duey, wrote

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Russell Merritt, “D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War: the Making of *Hearts of the World*,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981). 48.

<sup>2</sup>Lillian Gish with Ann Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco: Mercury House Inc., 1988), 187-88.

Griffith expressly asking about his “changed attitude toward the subject of war.” Citing *Birth’s* anti-war message, Duey suspected that because “now war has proved inevitable,” *Hearts* must be Griffith’s way of “showing us the deep purposes of the present struggle for liberty.”<sup>3</sup> Duey suspected correctly. By the time Griffith sailed to England, American entry into the war seemed imminent. The United States continued to supply the British with their material war needs under the justification of “armed neutrality,” aiding the Allies to such a degree that by January 31, 1917, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare. A few days later President Wilson severed all diplomatic ties with Germany. The discovery of the Zimmerman Note the following month—a week before Griffith’s departure—further suggested there would be no limit to German provocation.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the U.S. formally declared war on Germany the day after Griffith arrived in England.

America’s formal entry into the war changed the nature of Griffith’s project. It was no longer necessary that his film convince Americans to join the conflict. Now Griffith proposed to convey the meaning of the war to Americans and to set the tone of national involvement. But what was the meaning of the war and what role was America to play in it? What had persuaded Griffith himself, whose films so disparaged war, that this conflict was worth joining?

To begin with, Griffith remained unshakably loyal to President Woodrow Wilson. He publicly declared his support for Wilson’s decision to enter the war at the London premiere of *Intolerance* that May. In a short speech delivered before a Drury Lane audience that included a

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<sup>3</sup>Letter to D.W. Griffith from Helen Duey, April 4, 1918. *DWGP*, Reel 3, 1918.

<sup>4</sup>David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Jennifer D. Keene, *The United States and the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Michael Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

veritable who's-who of the British theater world, Griffith expressed that in addition to his pride in the occasion, he was even “prouder to be upon this historic platform...[because of]...the decision of Mr. Wilson...to enter the great struggle now progressing.” He concluded by stating, “I am happy to think that my country will soon be taking part with yours in this greatest fight for freedom.” (His purported disappointment at not witnessing any U-boat activity on his voyage further suggested he was now firmly in the spirit of the war).<sup>5</sup> In other words, Griffith likely took Wilson himself as his first cue in determining the war's meaning and America's role in the fighting.

As it was, Wilson's War Message to Congress—for which he received a two-minute standing ovation—contained themes that were already deeply familiar to Griffith. In particular, Wilson described war as a fundamentally grievous and undesirable enterprise that was nevertheless sometimes inevitable and occasionally even necessary. Indeed, Wilson justified U.S. belligerency by claiming that the stakes of the war were so consequential for humankind that Americans had no choice but to participate. Critically, the president stressed that the nation's enemy was not the German people but war itself: the “perpetual menace to peace and freedom” currently embodied in the German government. Kaiser Wilhelm's regime was only the most recent manifestation of the perennial sins of the Old World whose “autocratic governments” fueled a militarism “controlled wholly by their will, not the will of the people.”<sup>6</sup> *Birth and Intolerance* characterized war in fundamentally similar ways. Both of Griffith's films traced the

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<sup>5</sup>A few noted guests were Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Lady Paget, and Hall Caine. “Griffith in London: ‘Intolerance’ Packs Old Drury and Makes New Record in London Box Office Picture Receipts,” *Moving Picture World*, May 26, 1917, Vol. 32, No. 8, 1270.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 6 vols. (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1925-1927), V, 11. Hereon *PPW* followed by volume and page number.

historical causes of war to antiquated practices in Western Civilization. Power-hungry Republicans and abolitionists in *Birth* pitted the nation's (white) people against each other for their own ends, while *Intolerance's* historical episodes portrayed instances wherein autocracy and militarism robbed the human race of further progress, even killing Jesus Christ himself.

Griffith's previous films also echoed Wilson's assertion that the United States was uniquely qualified to influence the peace and shepherd the postwar world. Wilson only dared lead such a "great peaceful people" into this "terrible, and most disastrous of wars" because they would be fighting for "the principles that gave [America] her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured." The United States would lead a righteous crusade to establish "such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the *world* at last free."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *Birth* concluded that the country's own ghastly experience of war transformed the United States into a beacon of unity, peace, and democracy. The Civil War endowed (white) Americans with lessons about the cost and futility of modern war that European nations were only beginning to learn in the present war. For its part, *Intolerance* pointed toward a future without war via U.S. leadership in world affairs and the expansion of its international influence through the global reach of American cinema. Griffith's present assignment provided an opportunity to further realize that possibility. Perhaps translating the meaning of the war to international film audiences might at last demonstrate the cinema's ability to communicate universal truths.<sup>8</sup>

At the very least, Griffith's trip abroad appeared to elevate his sense of his own cultural significance. To begin with, many of the individuals that gathered to view *Intolerance* at Drury

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 16. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup>See chapters 2-4 for Griffith's vision for the movies' ability to convey "universal truths."

Lane were prominent figures in the so-called “legitimate” arts, a category in which Griffith always wished to belong.<sup>9</sup> Presenting one’s work at Drury Lane was an artistic coup for anyone, but especially for an anglophile like Griffith. That *The Birth of a Nation* had been the first movie ever shown there was surely a source of immense pride for a man who already believed he possessed singular talent.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the *Moving Picture World* reported that the *Intolerance* premiere convinced Londoners that Griffith was not only “no ordinary American” but “no ordinary fellow” at all. Rather, he was “a living dreamer of dreams, an idealist continually idealizing” who somehow managed to make his ideals “pay to the tune of over a million a year.”<sup>11</sup> Now, in being charged with representing the war cinematically, Griffith found himself, like Woodrow Wilson, charged with disseminating distinctly American ideals.

The invitation to make a film about the war in the first place set Griffith apart. Only a select group of luminaries, including Griffith’s idol, pioneering theater impresario David Belasco, had been invited to see the front firsthand.<sup>12</sup> Griffith was doubtless still embittered by the success of his rival Thomas Ince’s pacifist epic *Civilization* (1916). That film not only made more money than Griffith’s *Intolerance* but was credited with aiding in Wilson’s re-election—the very thing Griffith had hoped *Intolerance* would do.<sup>13</sup> But it was Griffith, not Ince, who was

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<sup>9</sup>Beecham was an orchestra impresario, Forbes-Robertson an actor and theater manager, and Cain a novelist and playwright. Although not in the art world per se, Lady Paget was a prominent humanitarian and intimate of Queen Victoria.

<sup>10</sup>Seymour Stern, *D.W. Griffith’s 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: The Birth of a Nation* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2014), 200-201.

<sup>11</sup>“Griffith in London: ‘Intolerance’ Packs Old Drury and Makes New Record in London Box Office Picture Receipts,” *Moving Picture World*, May 26, 1917, Vol. 32, No. 8, 1270.

<sup>12</sup>Russell Merritt, “D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War: the Making of *Hearts of the World*,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981), 49. Merritt’s essay is still the most comprehensive account of Griffith’s experience making the film. For more on Belasco’s influence on Griffith see Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 106, 129, 175, 181-2.

<sup>13</sup>See Chapter 4. Also Kevin Brownlow, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 89-96.

invited to England to see the real war; and as the nation's poet laureate of film and the movies' chief spokesperson, Griffith felt entitled to represent the war to Americans. As cameraman Billy Bitzer explained, "Griffith, the world's foremost director, was the *one* man who could tell a story that all—Americans especially—would understand."<sup>14</sup>

In order to show Americans the war, however, Griffith first needed to see it for himself. Beaverbrook initially intended Griffith to witness part of the then current spring offensive, a massive assault against the Hindenburg Line east of the French city of Arras. Remarkably confident in the imminent success of this campaign, Beaverbrook hoped Griffith would capture and utilize footage of the victorious armies. "Your films will be a great trophy for posterity," Beaverbrook wrote Griffith, "The new generation will see the battle as though we saw the Egyptian Wars of the '80s; and our generals will be as vivid to them in fact as any of the great events of history are to us in imagination."<sup>15</sup> These words surely appealed to Griffith, who believed his *The Birth of a Nation* came very close to realizing the past on film. Furthermore, Griffith was invested in showcasing the motion picture camera's ability to blend newspaper-like documentation with dramatic spectacle.

Ultimately the Battle of Arras achieved its strictly limited objective of drawing German reserves away from the Aisne River, but for the moment Beaverbrook and his advisors did not think any part of the spring offensive suitable material for Griffith's movie. For one thing, far from a victorious exhibition, the campaign was so far an embarrassing failure for the Allies. At Arras, one-hundred and eighty-seven thousand men had been slaughtered in the process of gaining fewer than 600 yards. The offensive proved particularly disastrous for the French Army,

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<sup>14</sup>G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 180.

<sup>15</sup>Merritt, "D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War," 49.

whose high casualties sharply contradicted their leaders' promises. The stalemates caused such a decline in French morale that France's 2<sup>nd</sup> division eventually refused to fight, initiating a mutiny that threatened the disintegration of the entire French army.<sup>16</sup> Griffith likely had no idea of the Allies' desperate position—his movie later depicted the Sixth French Army (which by that point was almost completely wiped out) heroically leading the Allied offensive. Regardless, by the end of May 1917 talk of newsreel footage ceased.

Griffith and Beaverbrook worked out a remarkable new plan. Griffith could make any kind of war movie he wanted, no longer financed by the British government, but through his Artcraft contract which provided funding for one big picture. Now that the film was a mostly private enterprise, the British government also withdrew any authority in determining its content. Rather, in exchange for a 50 percent share of the film's United Kingdom profits, the War Office would provide Griffith extensive use of its armies, training camps, and weapons. With the terms of the new arrangement outlined, Griffith left for his first tour of the front on May 15, 1917.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the details regarding Griffith's tour of the battlefields remain unclear and difficult to verify. Moreover, Griffith's own accounts of his experience visiting the front frequently changed in the years and months ahead. What existing evidence does make clear is that most of Griffith's sight-seeing took place in the Belgium city of Ypres. As an early site of German invasion, Ypres had witnessed one of the first significant collisions between Allied and German forces during the fall of 1914. The town became an important strategic landmark that

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<sup>16</sup>J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17. Keegan, *The First World War*, 9, 325-326. Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War*, 275-276. Hew Strachan, *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 238-9.

<sup>17</sup> For details regarding the final contract see Merritt, "D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War," note 15, 62. Letter to D.W. Griffith from the British Embassy, Paris, 5 May 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3.



determined who controlled the northern sector of the Western Front. Ypres blocked access to French and Belgian coastal ports that would give the German Imperial Army control of Belgium and provide quick routes to Dunkirk and Calais, which were, in fact, their objectives. Although the city never did fall into German hands during the war, it remained a target of constant bombardment by German artillery. At the time of Griffith's visit, the British Army had evacuated all of the local civilians, and much of Ypres lay in ruins. By the end of the war, no building was left untouched and only a handful remained intact. Thus, while the Brits managed to keep Griffith away from the current Allied debacle, Ypres would have nevertheless provided him with an accurate sense of the war's texture and its destructive capability.<sup>18</sup>

The footage of Griffith in Ypres was both peculiar and revealing. Save for the few title cards inserted afterward, the reel consisted of an otherwise unstructured series of random images. For his part, Griffith behaved self-consciously in front of the camera, emerging as something of a cavalier spectator whose affect noticeably contrasted with his bleak surroundings. Scenes of the actual town included shots of a monastery-turned-casualty-clearing-station, a Red Cross outpost, and the recently shelled historic Cloth Hall. In each scene Griffith appeared aware of the camera, sometimes actually resetting it before resuming a contrived position of casual wonder. For instance, in the hospital sequence Griffith and two British officers emerged from behind the building and glanced at the camera, poorly feigning surprise and happenstance that they were being filmed. The camera remained stationary as Griffith and his guides entered the hospital behind a stretcher and exited shortly after.

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<sup>18</sup>John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War I* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 149, 281-284. John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 129-137; 355-357; 359-368.

The scenes of Griffith touring the actual battlefields were equally graceless and apparently served a similar purpose of merely proving he was there. Indeed, although the title cards stressed Griffith's close proximity to live combat, no one in the film—especially Griffith—seemed to be in imminent danger. Rather, at one point Griffith strolled leisurely along a ridge, and, peering down to observe the men digging the trench, smiled at the camera while he made mock digging motions. His demeanor did not change once he was actually inside a trench. As Kevin Brownlow put it, “Griffith, dressed for a grouse shoot, appears to be on a thoroughly pleasant afternoon outing in the midst of the bloodiest war in history.”<sup>19</sup> To be fair, neither did the soldiers in the trench appear distressed. One of them even read a book as he leaned against the trench wall. Then, climbing a small ladder, Griffith peered through a camouflaged periscope and shortly afterward the camera cut to pan the cratered and barbed-wired landscape of No Man's Land.<sup>20</sup>

The rest of the Ypres footage captured Griffith exploring the new technologies of modern warfare. As it was, Ypres became a locus of experimental warfare in 1915 when the Germans introduced the use of chlorine gas, killing thousands of Allied soldiers. The first uses of flame throwers and mustard gas were likewise associated with offensives surrounding the Ypres Salient.<sup>21</sup> It was no wonder that at one point in the Ypres reel Griffith sat in a shallow trench and fastened a gas-mask on his face, evidently per the instructions of the guide seated next to him. The same sequence caught him awkwardly meandering around an abandoned pillbox in

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<sup>19</sup>Kevin Brownlow, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 144.

<sup>20</sup>The trenches Griffith was shown visiting were on Wystchaete Ridge, south of Hill 60, and in Houlthulst Wood. The footage of No Man's Land, however, was from Polygon Wood, which became the site of an important battle during the second phase of the Third Battle of Ypres (or Paaschendaele) that took place in the fall.

<sup>21</sup>Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War*, 159, 282. Keegan, *The First World War*, 197-198. Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914-1918* (London: Pearson and Longman, 2007), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 60, 73-4, 305; 236-237.

Shrewsbury Forest, northeast of Ypres.<sup>22</sup> In another scene, Griffith observed men firing 6-inch MK VII guns around the Elverdinge area, just outside the city. The film never clarified at what target or for what purpose the guns were being fired, nor did the individuals firing them appear to be in a hurry, much less in any real danger. At one point Griffith casually walked in front of the camera toward the guns that were being fired and briefly glanced over his shoulder at the camera, as if to announce his presence. The only moment in the entire eleven-minute film during which Griffith appeared candid and unrehearsed was when he was shown meeting official war correspondents in Cassel.<sup>23</sup>

Griffith's curious behavior in front of the camera came across as an attempt to *perform* his recently acquired status as a dignitary. His outfit alone—classic English-cut tweeds and a bowtie—suggested a desire to visually identify himself with the select coterie of luminaries permitted to see the war zone. So far the only other Americans given tours were novelist Edith Wharton and war correspondent Richard Harding Davis, both of whom possessed a kind of cultural cachet that Griffith craved for himself. As it was, just before his special trip to the front Griffith hobnobbed with the likes of J.M. Barrie, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, and G.K. Chesterton at a heavily-publicized dinner party. So proud was Griffith to have been in attendance that it later became the basis of his mythological account of *Hearts of the World's* origins. In his telling, Griffith just so happened to be in England

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<sup>22</sup>D.W. Griffith and F.A. Bassill, *Griffith at the Front* (War Office Cinema Committee, 1917) 35 mm of film, from Imperial War Museum, IWM 122, video, 11:00; 685 ft., [http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/europeana/record/08622/IWM\\_122](http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/europeana/record/08622/IWM_122);

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060008187?bt=europeanaapi>

<sup>23</sup>D.W. Griffith and F.A. Bassill, *Griffith at the Front* (War Office Cinema Committee, 1917) 35 mm of film, from Imperial War Museum, IWM 122, video, 11:00; 685 ft., [http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/europeana/record/08622/IWM\\_122](http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/europeana/record/08622/IWM_122);

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060008187?bt=europeanaapi>

promoting *Intolerance* when Prime Minister Lloyd George summoned him and the “most gifted men of Britain” to brainstorm “the best and quickest way to stiffen the nation’s morale.”

Together he and these eminent individuals determined that Griffith’s particular medium and artistry were best suited to the task.<sup>24</sup> Although not the true source of the project, the dinner nevertheless raised the personal and professional stakes of Griffith’s assignment considerably by the time he left for the front.

Indeed, the spirit of adventure, duty, and authority, that characterized Griffith’s later recollections—as well as his frivolous behavior in the Ypres reels—concealed serious unease. In fact, from the outset Griffith struggled to build a suitable story for American audiences out of what he saw of the war. Chief among Griffith’s difficulties was his realization that this war visually defied the wars he had staged in the past, particularly in terms of combat. As he lamented to one journalist, “Everyone is hidden away in ditches.” “The armies do not [even] maneuver anymore...the modern gunners usually do not know what they are shooting at, seldom see...their target...and sight their guns with mathematics.” That soldiers were so alienated from their enemies made it impossible to capture the kind of action—“the dash and thrill of [past] wars”—which Griffith had grown accustomed to putting on film. Rather, soldiers mostly remained stationary in a cold and muddy trench. At some point they might toss grenades over the ridge toward the opposite German lines or chance a rifle shot through a tiny peephole. More often soldiers simply waited out indeterminate periods of time, either to be relieved by other

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<sup>24</sup>“Motion Pictures: The Miracle of Modern Photography,” by D.W. Griffith, *The Mentor*, July 1, 1921, Vol. 9, No. 6, 3-12. Although relatively easy to disprove, this remained the accepted version of events regarding the origins of Griffith’s film *Hearts of the World* (1918) until the 1970s. Kevin Brownlow suggests that the dinner was a calculated publicity effort by Beaverbrook to quell any criticism that the government’s chosen filmmaker was not British. Brownlow, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness*, 152.

troops or to go over the top toward an “obstructing wall of steel and fire and [certain] death only a few yards away.”<sup>25</sup> Such observations revealed Griffith’s inability to effectively document battle in this war, let alone glimpse it for himself.

Not only did the nature of the fighting disappoint Griffith, but the battlefields as a whole seemed to lack cinematic effect. Whether one was up close in the front lines or observing from a distance, it was difficult to gauge what was going on at a given moment. For instance, no writer could describe let alone any filmmaker film something like Haig’s advance, insisted Griffith, because “nobody saw it. No one saw a thousandth part of it.” Instead, he reported, “[Looking] out across No Man’s Land, there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness—of torn trees, ruined barbed wire fence, and shell holes.” Neither “romantic nor picturesque,” this conflict suggested to Griffith that “all the glamor [of war] has gone.” Yet from this war of stalemate and attrition, aesthetically drab and characterized by pervasive banality, Griffith needed to cull material that he could turn into a conventional (and spectacular) movie drama. He made his disillusionment clear when he told a reporter, “Viewed as a drama, the war is a disappointment.” It was too vast, too diffuse, “too colossal to be dramatic.” Griffith claimed he was more impressed with the ruins of *Intolerance*’s Babylonian set than with “anything I saw in war-torn France or Belgium.”<sup>26</sup> The Western Front evidently blunted the filmmaker’s narrative and visual instincts.

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<sup>25</sup>“Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” by Harry Carr, *Photoplay Magazine*, March 1918, 23-28, 119. Reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 94. “War, Shorn of Romance, is Sounding Its Own Knell: So Declares D.W. Griffith, the First American Movie Man to be Admitted with Cameras Into Front-Line Trenches,” *Current Opinion*, April 1918, Vol. LXIV, No. 4, American Periodicals, pg. 0\_004.

<sup>26</sup>“Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 94, 97. “War, Shorn of Romance,” *Current Opinion*, 0\_004.

As it was, Griffith's responsibility went beyond merely showing Americans what the war looked like and how it was being fought. Just as critically, Griffith's film needed to convey the war's symbolic meaning and artfully express the higher purposes of national involvement. Where he struggled to find the war's inherent drama, however, he likewise strained to identify its universal significance and redemptive value. To begin with, Griffith doubted soldiers' experiences were particularly ennobling. Rather, as he explained, "the life of a modern soldier is the life of an underpaid, overworked ditch-digger...as tedious and dull as the dullest civilian."<sup>27</sup> Worse than the monotony of soldiering life were the appalling conditions: "nothing but filth and dirt and the most soul-sickening smells." The tedium and discomfort of the trenches were only interrupted by the intermittent shrieks of exploding artillery shells and "the awful sickening feeling of death near at hand" when men were forced to go over the top.

If nothing else, the plight of the modern soldier obscured any obvious redeeming features of this war. Indeed, Griffith anticipated, "This war will do a great deal toward squeezing the romance out of army life." No amount of decorative honors or expressions of public appreciation could ever lessen the horror of trench warfare. Returning soldiers would never escape the nightmare of the trenches. "When the military band escorts him down the Linden," Griffith prophesied, "he will [only] remember how, on another day, he was escorted into a trench that crawled with lice and gave forth reeking, vile odors, that was horrible with filth and mud." Thus the growing "shell-shock" phenomenon among returning veterans scarcely surprised Griffith.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

His own brief experience of dodging shellfire instilled in him “something beyond common fear.” The sound of exploding shells alone seemed to shatter every nerve in one’s body.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, if the conduct of the war upset Griffith’s visual expectations it also affirmed some of his assumptions about the timelessness of war. Griffith understood that what he saw was but a fragment of the larger war, a fraction of a single front in a war fought on multiple continents over land, sea, and sky. That said, the suffering and terror he witnessed on the battlefield was not new, but rather the terror campaigns were being carried out on a vaster scale, with newer and more murderous technology, and more carnage. Furthermore, the coordination required for such an enormous enterprise reinforced a persistent feature of war Griffith conveyed in *Birth* and *Intolerance*—that a troubling chasm existed between those who waged war and those who fought and endured it. He observed that in this war the material sacrifices demanded of soldiers and civilians financed the construction of lavish instruments of death whose destructive power was rarely experienced by those who ordered their creation or deployment. Griffith told Harry Carr before visiting the Western Front that he believed his “mimic war pictures” were recklessly extravagant. Now he understood that only bona fide modern war furnished “the most expensive stage settings that have ever been or ever will be used in the making of a picture.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike Griffith’s movies, moreover, the real conflict incurred an authentic and staggering human cost.

Taken together, Griffith’s remarks revealed a man who saw World War I for what it was—or at least how it would be remembered—as confusing, wasteful, and senseless. Battle had

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<sup>28</sup>“War, Shorn of Romance,” *Current Opinion*, 0\_004. “Shell Struck Within Ten Feet of David Wark Griffith,” *Sunday Herald*, May 19, 1918, p4E.

<sup>29</sup>“Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 97.

been reduced to “the engulfment of human soldiers in...terrible war monsters men have built in work shops (sic).” According to Griffith, “Shells come out of nowhere and snuff out your life.” And such terrifying, anonymous innovations likewise left their mark on civilians. “All the Germans know,” Griffith declared, “is that somewhere, in some bright and happy little home that shell will fall. Somewhere innocent children will be mowed down in their tracks.” Lillian Gish claimed Griffith actually wept when an air raid in London destroyed an elementary school and killed ninety-six children. Gish remembered Griffith lamenting, between angry tears, ““*This is what war is...Not the parades and the conference tables—but children killed, lives destroyed.*”” Afterward he shook his head and turned away. Others similarly observed that the war seemed to profoundly affect Griffith when he returned to the states. One interviewer described “a more rugged Griffith than the man who went...to London,” while Karl Brown noticed the director had picked up the habit of smoking, chain smoking, in fact, at some point along his journey to the war zones.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever his doubts about the war—as drama or redemptive crusade—Griffith could delay no further if he was to claim the mantle of his reputation. As it was, his roughly eight months abroad were marked by procrastination and indecision wholly uncharacteristic of the

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<sup>30</sup>“Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 95. “Film Shows How Guns ‘That Have No Eyes’ Are Able to Find Target,” *The Sunday Herald* (Boston), April 21, 1918, 4D. For quotation from Gish, see Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 193. In her autobiography and elsewhere Gish claimed she and the rest of the cast and crew experienced upwards of twenty different air raids while they were filming in London. Excerpt from the sixth and seventh installment (or “reel 6” and “reel 7”) of her eight-part serialized story, “Lillian Gish, the Incomparable: Being a True Story of a Great Tragedienne,” by Sidney Sutherland, *Liberty Magazine*, August 13, 20, 1927, in Scrapbook/Lillian and Dorothy Gish 1912-1918, box 1, Lillian Gish Papers, \*T-Mss 1996-011, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. For a more trustworthy account of the air raids during their visit, see Kevin Brownlow, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness*, 148. “Griffith—and the Great War,” by Paul H. Dowling, *Picture-Play Magazine*, March 1918, 23-21, reprinted in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 85. Brown Karl Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 187.



director. By all accounts, Griffith was a tireless workaholic, never short of ideas and never slow to realize them on film.<sup>31</sup> Yet he spent the entire summer making tentative plans and arrangements that, as soon as they were in place, he would suddenly revoke. For instance, Griffith sent for the Gish sisters, Bobby Harron, and his cameraman, Billy Bitzer, only to announce while they were in transit that he actually planned to use all new actors for the project. Later, he proclaimed the film would be about the role of the British aristocracy, but he shelved his footage of the Queen Mother and British socialites shortly after filming them. He scrapped practically all of the film he took of the Gishes and Harron on location in British and French villages. In a final attempt to obtain suitable scenes of the war, Griffith paid the French government \$5,000 for a second visit to the front to see the battle sites Beaverbrook originally planned to show him in May. Rather than an opportunity to capture victorious Allied armies, the location now presented proof of German barbarism and the suffering of the French people. Although he evidently obtained ten thousand feet of film (or two and a half hours), Griffith deemed that, too, unusable, and as with the England scenes, he discarded it.<sup>32</sup> Still lacking direction and growing increasingly impatient with himself, by October Griffith decided it was time to go home. He was back in Los Angeles by mid-month.

Somewhere along his journey West, Griffith evidently turned a corner. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Los Angeles he set to work at his usual tireless pace.<sup>33</sup> On the

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<sup>31</sup>See Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*, 31, 56-65, 70, 100-1, 107-9, 136. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, Chs. 6-10 especially.

<sup>32</sup>Regarding the \$5,000 payment, Letter to Adolph Zukor from D.W. Griffith, 20 November 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Merritt, "D.W. Griffith Directs the Great War," 51-52. See also Tim Travers, "Canadian Film and the First World War," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 101.

<sup>33</sup> For the timeline of Griffith's work on *Hearts*, I rely on Karl Brown's memory which corresponds most with the time frame of production indicated in Griffith's correspondence with his lawyers, accountants, and publicity team in the month's leading up to *Hearts*' release. Lillian Gish claims the filming commenced in late November,

one hand, returning to the familiar, comfortable surroundings of his own studio and trusted employees likely helped Griffith restore his confidence in himself and his skills. Just as significant, Griffith had not been home since America entered the war. Only now did he get a sense of the wartime national climate. Furthermore, President Wilson's soaring rhetoric and the official propaganda coming out of Washington via the Committee on Public Information (CPI) provided a clear and consistent vision of the war's meaning for both Americans and the world. In the months since Griffith left for Europe, Wilson stressed that the U.S. was fighting on behalf of the world's common people who desired the liberty and freedom from autocracy that Americans, having rid their own nation from such corruption, enjoyed. In other words, the U.S. fought to remake the world in its own image; by spreading its ideals across the globe, it would eradicate the Old World institutions that perpetually led to wars in the first place. Such objectives reflected Griffith's own vision that American cinema could foster an international culture based on common humanity. Ultimately, returning home reminded Griffith that his responsibility was to personally showcase the movies' ability to serve the war effort.

As he got to work in California, Griffith set aside any misgivings about the war's dramatic possibilities that had plagued him in Europe. Instead, he focused on the ways in which the war's foreignness might become the source of its absolution. For Griffith as well as for Woodrow Wilson, war could only be justified by its redemptive value. The heroism of individual soldiers needed to transcend the tragedy of their collective deaths; war needed to purify and strengthen the society that endured it; war, however unavoidable, must somehow help move

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which I read as part of her interest in maintaining the mythology, years later, that most of *Hearts* was in fact filmed abroad and only edited and completed in Los Angeles. Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 190; D.W. Griffith Papers, Reel 3; Gish, *The Movies*, 201.

civilization toward a future without war. Consequently, Griffith's descriptions of the European battlefields acquired new optimism. Precisely because mechanized warfare destroyed individual heroism and made the soldier "a speck in a mighty picture...a grain of sand on a vast...beach...an atom," it deprived the "war monster" of its lifeblood: the lure of romance and adventure. "In devoting herself to the glorification of war," according to Griffith, Germany "has destroyed its glories." Moreover, "in seeking to transform a nation into an army, she has made armies forever distasteful," and "in seeking to make warfare the steady diet of mankind, she has given the world a severe case of martial indigestion." To be sure, Griffith insisted, the worst features of this war might ultimately force lasting peace in the future.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time Griffith claimed modern warfare stripped war of its romantic appeal, he simultaneously identified the current war's distinctive charm. While he characterized the battlefields as aesthetically underwhelming at best and outright dull at worst, Griffith paradoxically declared them "more exciting than any drama you ever read or dreamed of." In fact, the "real drama" of the war lay in the "terrible war monsters" and "terrific machinery of battle" that swallowed up individual soldiers. Despite the "fearful anonymity" and "terrible mystery" of combat, new weapons used in this war formed their own "terrific spectacle." They transformed the battlefields into "testing grounds for the souls of mankind." Contradicting his assessment that soldiers' experiences were distinguished almost exclusively by tedium, terror and misery, Griffith asserted the war was molding them "into real men with real minds...implanting...the consuming lesson of devotion, courage, and true patriotism." The trenches served as a leveling agent, eliminating class distinctions and purging "the dross from all

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<sup>34</sup>"Griffith Thinks This War the Last One and Tells Why," *Sunday Herald* (Boston), June 2, 1918, 8E.

humanity and leav[ing] a world wherein to build a new brotherhood.” As such, “This war, terrible as it is,” concluded Griffith, “will, in many ways liberate the world from...its worst self.”<sup>35</sup>

Griffith’s newfound emphasis on the war’s regenerative possibilities lent itself to renewed focus on the aspects of the war that remained timeless and familiar. In particular, Griffith resolved that however different the methods of combat, civilians’ relationship to war had changed little when compared with conflicts past. This war involved the same tearful departures and uncertain reunions attendant in every war: the same “troop trains moving to the front...wives parting from their husbands they were never to see again...wounded men returning to their families...[and]...women, stunned with grief...[clutching] a little paper to tell that the worst had happened.” In fact, concentrating on the role of non-combatants on the home front affirmed Griffith’s creative instincts when it came to putting war on film. In contrast to the battlefields, Griffith’s experience in London and other hamlets in France and Belgium came across as ““old stuff...exactly as I had imagined war in many particulars”” and how he had staged it for the camera “so many times.” If the civilian sector of the war begged the question, ““Why didn’t they get something new?”” then perhaps Griffith did not need to significantly rethink the generic conventions that had proved so successful in his previous war films.<sup>36</sup> Instead, his task would be to show Americans how war itself, as a force and institution, could never really be new.

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<sup>35</sup>“Griffith Returns from the Front with Official Pictures Made under Fire—Will Use Them in a Film Spectacle of War,” *Exhibitors Trade Review*, October 27, 1917, 1644, reproduced in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 83. “Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 95. “Griffith—and the Great War,” by Paul H. Dowling, *Picture-Play Magazine*, March 1918, 23-21, reprinted in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 87. “War Has Made People Serious,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 21, 1918, 22.

<sup>36</sup>“Griffith, Maker of Battle Scenes, Sees Real War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 93, 95.

Just as Wilson declared himself the voice of the “common people,” Griffith determined his film would likewise represent the “common people’s” experience of the war. While his crew erected the set of a French village, Griffith announced that his picture would be a simple story of ordinary people swept up in events beyond their control. The war would provide a powerful setting, but it would not be central to the narrative except insofar as it affected the main characters. Tentatively titled “Love’s Struggle,” the story began in 1912 with a romance developing between two neighbors, The Boy, Douglas Hamilton (Robert Harron) and The Girl, Marie Stephenson (Lillian Gish). A street singer called The Little Disturber (Dorothy Gish) also loved The Boy, but in learning her affection was unrequited entered into a courtship with his friend, Monsieur Cuckoo. When the war broke out in the summer of 1914, both The Boy and M. Cuckoo answered the call to arms and left their loved ones behind. The second half of the movie portrayed The Boy’s contingent failing to defend the village from German invasion and civilian life under brutal German occupation. The story ended with the arrival of American troops making possible an Allied offensive that finally rescued the village.<sup>37</sup>

Armed at last with a story to tell, Griffith resumed the air of unshakeable confidence he exhibited on the sets of *Birth* and *Intolerance*. With that confidence came his attendant secrecy and efforts to keep the specifics of his production confidential. However, Griffith was slow to realize that the country’s mobilization for the war fundamentally transformed the relationship between the federal government and the film industry. Shortly after Wilson’s declaration of war, while Griffith was still abroad, writer-producer and Griffith friend William A. Brady pleaded with the president to consider the movies an essential wartime industry. Wilson assured Brady

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<sup>37</sup>Synopsis, “David Wark Griffith’s War Picture, ‘Love’s Struggle,’” February 23, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

that he not only intended to bring the industry “into fullest and most effective contact with the nation’s needs, but to give some measure of official recognition to an increasingly important factor in the development of national life.” Wilson specifically stated that because the motion picture spoke “a universal language, it lends itself importantly to the presentation of America’s plans and purposes.” To that end, the president asked that Brady chair an effort to coordinate the industry’s various branches “to establish direct and authoritative cooperation with the Committee on Public Information,” headed by George Creel.<sup>38</sup>

Under Creel’s guidance, Brady established the War Cooperation Committee (WCC) on July 5, 1917. The WCC consisted of fourteen different subcommittees tasked with assisting various government departments, as well as the America Red Cross and the Council of National Defense. Its stated purpose was to use “film and screen to . . . broadcast throughout the Nation information regarding the plans and purposes of the Government during the period of the war.” The WCC was run through the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), of which William Brady was already president. NAMPI had been organized the previous year when it became clear that the existing trade association for producers and distributors, the Motion Picture Board of Trade, could not mediate disputes between its members and the Motion Picture Exhibitor’s League of America. NAMPI’s primary goal was to coordinate the different branches of the industry in order to facilitate discussion and mediate disputes, monitor government regulation of their business, and consolidate relations between the industry and the public. It successfully enrolled broad industry representation and large membership, making it a self-

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<sup>38</sup>Letter to Joseph Tumulty from William A. Brady, 5 June 1918, *Woodrow Wilson Papers (WWP)*, Microfilm, Library of Congress, Reel 198. Letter to William A. Brady from Woodrow Wilson, 28 June 1917, reprinted in *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Winter 1918?), 552, *WWP*, Reel 198.

evident organ through which motion pictures could support government initiatives during the war period.<sup>39</sup>

Although a NAMPI member, Griffith remained largely out of touch with the organization's specific wartime functions as well as its more long-term objectives. To begin with, he had not participated in the organization's formation. In fact, despite spanning the various sectors of the movie industry, the interests of NAMPI's members were primarily commercial, not artistic. For example, its board of directors represented individuals whose influence in the industry stemmed from their particular business practices. These were businessmen, not creators, who steadily expanded their companies by acquiring smaller competing firms.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, in coordinating the different industry branches, NAMPI sought to steer it in a certain direction—toward corporate consolidation—that was antithetical to Griffith's vision. Griffith had long resented the power financial backers wielded over directors and was himself a terrible businessman. At the same time, NAMPI promised to better protect the industry from censorship and other unfavorable regulations, which would have appealed to Griffith. Indeed, William Brady hoped that by serving Washington's wartime initiatives, NAMPI would better position the industry to resist "antagonistic legislation...censorship...[and]...unjust taxation" after the war. Ultimately, proving itself indispensable to the war effort would further enhance the cinema's public image overall.<sup>41</sup> Whatever their differences or similarities, neither NAMPI nor Griffith could ignore the other. Griffith had almost single-handedly proven the

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<sup>39</sup>"Film Men Discuss Organization," by George Blaisdell, June 24, 1916, *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 28, No. 13, 2210. "Film Men Form Temporary Organization," July 22, 1916, *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 612. Leslie Midkiff DeBauche also makes this point and provides a detailed summary of NAMPI in *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 105-107.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>NAMPI Brief on WCC's history and contribution to the war effort, 26, *WWP*, Reel 198.

movies' commercial viability. He was the biggest name among the movie-going public. NAMPI, for its part, provided a front of industry unity that made it the industry's sole representative during the war.

Still, Griffith always chafed under any form of supervision or oversight. Even if NAMPI was making the production, distribution, and exhibition processes more coherent and efficient, Griffith was never comfortable having anything less than total control over his work. That meant taking the time and spending the money he felt was necessary to realize his vision. Nevertheless, Griffith was not working for himself. He was still under contract to Adolph Zukor. An early pioneer of the studio system, Zukor was among the most business-minded men in the industry. As such, his sensibilities contrasted sharply with Griffith's. Furthermore, NAMPI had named Zukor chairman of the War Cooperation Committee's subcommittee serving the Treasury Department. This subcommittee was the most visible and active component of the WCC, responsible for mobilizing the motion picture business to promote Liberty Loan Campaigns and sell war bonds. Zukor proved particularly adept at marshalling the industry's resources to that end, enlisting movie stars to speak at loan rallies, making sure film exhibitors encouraged the purchase of bonds in their advertisements, and including slides and short films with the Treasury Department's message during regular theater schedules.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Zukor helped facilitate Washington's approval of all war-related productions before their release.<sup>43</sup>

From the outset Griffith resisted going through Zukor to obtain Washington's approval of his picture or in having Artcraft handle its release. On the one hand, Griffith's resistance issued from his sense that new wartime protocols did not apply to him the same way they did other

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid. Also, DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, 118.

<sup>43</sup>Telegram to D.W. Griffith from Albert Banzhaf, December 18, 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3.



directors. After all, he had gone to the front and collaborated with the French and British War Departments. On the other hand, Griffith fundamentally mistrusted Zukor's appreciation of what went into a D.W. Griffith production and his ability to handle it with appropriate sensitivity and flexibility. In his mind, Griffith was making a film unlike any other war-related product. While he was most clearly not making a newsreel or documentary, neither was he making a "standard" program picture nor even a typical "special." What Griffith planned was far more ambitious and thus required the kind of ostentatious distribution reserved for only the most prestigious of productions—the roadshow. Fortunately for him, the project had evolved so much since his initial agreement with Zukor (before America entered the war) that they were in the process of working out a new contract. For the moment, Griffith still had immediate access to the \$180,000 allotted for his *Artcraft* "special" and the freedom to proceed as he wished until the final cost of the picture determined the new terms of the contract.<sup>44</sup>

By using the war as a backdrop against which to tell a story about ordinary people, Griffith believed his film would simultaneously assist the government and transcend propaganda. That is, he wanted to make a picture that embodied and disseminated Washington's wartime prerogatives without audiences feeling as though that were the case. In order to achieve this, Griffith made it his first priority to ensure that the film's central drama was fundamentally entertaining in its own right. Only afterward would he integrate specific war-related content seamlessly into the narrative. That required keeping things simple and familiar, or, as Karl Brown remembered, "doing everything that ever worked for [Griffith] before...[except]...doing

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<sup>44</sup>For the different production, distribution and exhibition strategies between newsreels, documentaries, "standard" program features and "specials," see DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, 37-41, 44-50. Letter to Frank Garbutt from Price, Waterhouse, July 13, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Letter to D.W. Griffith from Albert Banzhaf, March 5, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

it better.” Rather than caricature the situation in Europe a la Hate-the-Hun propaganda, Griffith’s war story was intimate and relatable: “Where he could have...cast...thousands, he concentrated on a few little people of no national or international significance or grandeur to tell a story of a small town overrun by tragedy, a town inhabited by people everybody could know and understand and take into their hearts.” Designed for the “millions of this country...who do not read...go to ordinary theatres, or hear public speeches,” its contribution to the war effort could easily surpass any “combined effort[s] of the press.” “If properly handled,” Griffith wrote J.J. McCarthy, his movie would simultaneously educate Americans about the war and generate a new collective commitment to winning it.<sup>45</sup>

Griffith spent the fall of 1917 finishing the village scenes, which comprised the bulk of the movie and almost all of which were filmed in Los Angeles. He again worked from a broad narrative outline, allowing details to emerge organically and permitting himself the freedom to experiment. A few fresh faces helped stimulate Griffith’s imagination on the set. Among them was Eric von Stroheim, later cinema’s quintessential Prussian villain in the 1920s. Von Stroheim was a small time film veteran and had previously worked with Griffith as an assistant and in small parts on *Birth* and *Intolerance*. During Griffith’s stopover in New York on his way back from Europe, von Stroheim announced himself as just the Prussian Griffith needed for this production, and Griffith agreed. Although ultimately passed over for the role of chief villain (it went instead to George Siegmann), von Stroheim proved indispensable as an advisor on costuming and other details of the German military. Indeed, as either a token of appreciation or

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<sup>45</sup>Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 192. Letter to J.J. McCarthy from D.W. Griffith, February 28, 1918, Reel 3.

consolation prize, Griffith named the film's villain "Von Strohm," an abbreviation of Von Stroheim's name.

Also new on the lot was set designer Charles Baker. He convinced Griffith that painting directly onto the set, in addition to lighting it, provided richer texture and depth of shading. What is more, Baker introduced the process of what is now called storyboarding, in which specific shots were sketched out before filming. This method satisfied Griffith's dueling tendencies toward perfectionism and improvisation. An additional cameraman, Henrik Sartov, was used exclusively for close-ups. Sartov's particular technique softened the resolution without diminishing the camera's sharp photographic effect. His close-ups produced alluring catch lights in the subject's eyes and diffused imperfections on the skin.<sup>46</sup> Taken together, these new practices resulted in a more visually sophisticated production than Griffith's previous films, demonstrating once again that Griffith remained at the cutting edge of cinema's artistic advancement.

So immersed did Griffith become in the village scenes, however, that he evidently forgot about the war itself. By mid-December he had almost completed filming the central drama and managed to keep the details of the project confidential until closer to its release. Yet in his haste to represent the war without appearing to make a war film, Griffith overlooked battle scenes entirely. As it was, the rampant advance publicity boasting Griffith's exclusive access to the European battlefields demanded he depict modern combat—and that it appear as authentic as possible. Nevertheless, Griffith possessed no worthy footage of the front to speak of, and he

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<sup>46</sup>Telegram to Griffith from Erich Von Stroheim, November 2, 1917. Hologram reply from Griffith on same telegram, no date, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 351-353. Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*, 155. Robert M. Henderson, *D.W. Griffith: His Life and His Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 187. Brown, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, 192-3.

found himself scrambling to acquire anything in the way of weapons or existing negatives that might be inserted into the film. J. J. McCarthy, General Manager of Epoch and manager of Griffith's road shows, offered the director use of a loaned German machine gun "providing you do not want to fire it." Clearly a single not-to-be-fired machine gun would not resolve Griffith's dilemma, and with time running out and pressure from Zukor mounting, he took matters into his own hands. Griffith decided to purchase two sets of German war footage taken prior to American intervention from which he would cull suitable images to inject in his film.<sup>47</sup>

The source and nature of the first set of footage is unknown, although evidently it was purchased under precarious circumstances and insufficient for Griffith's needs. In a telegram to his lawyer, Albert Banzhaf, expressing his impatience at not having pictures of "German guns in action," he asked whether he could at least go ahead and use the film he already purchased in the meantime. Griffith's concern was that the individuals who owned the negative of the film he bought might make trouble later on. Banzhaf returned a lengthy reply, once again reminding Griffith that the picture needed to be pre-approved by Washington and "strongly advising" against using the footage in question for fear of "legal complications and injury to your prestige." Banzhaf suggested Griffith make his own "German scenes," but also urged, "speedy completion growing more important daily on account of European situation." Thus, because Griffith was so hard pressed, Banzhaf offered to acquire for him some as yet unsold negatives of German war pictures from a concern in New York. Griffith seized the opportunity explaining he urgently

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<sup>47</sup>Telegram to Alfred Banzhaf from J.J. McCarthy, November 30, 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

needed “scenes of all kinds[;] artillery[;] also soldiers marching and any actual battle scenes” and asking Banzhaf to ship him the footage as soon as possible, which he apparently did.<sup>48</sup>

In retrospect, the negatives Banzhaf obtained for Griffith were probably as legally risky as the set of positive footage Griffith purchased on his own. The source of Banzhaf’s footage was the impressive arctic explorer, aviator, and war correspondent, Captain Frank E. Kleinschmidt, who had been allowed to film alongside the Austrian Army in the winter and spring of 1915. In August of 1916, Kleinschmidt held a well-received private screening of his footage in Los Angeles, where invited guests declared it the most graphic and diverse images of the war yet presented to Americans. Shortly afterward Lewis J. Selznick bought the rights to an edited version of Kleinschmidt’s film called *The War on Three Fronts*. By the time of its scheduled release in the spring of 1917, however, it had become an undesirable property and Selznick shelved it. American entry into the war raised new questions about Kleinschmidt’s work with the Austrian Army, and he was accused of making pro-German comments in some of his previous lectures. With Kleinschmidt now being regularly questioned by the Treasury Department and monitored by New York police, nobody was going to touch his footage.<sup>49</sup> The quality of the film, which captured authentic frontline involvement, and the fact that it was safely suppressed, appealed to Griffith, who planned to pass it off as his own. Furthermore, that

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<sup>48</sup>Telegram to Banzhaf from Griffith, December 17, 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Telegram to Griffith from Banzhaf, December 18, 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Telegram to Banzhaf from Griffith, December 19, 1917, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

<sup>49</sup>“Views War on Three Fronts,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1916, II3. “Right off the Reel,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 26, 1916, D3. For Kleinschmidt’s experience with the Austrian Army see Merritt, “Griffith Directs the Great War,” 52, 63, n23 and Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*, 20-22. “Austrian Arrested and Weapons Found,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1917, 5. “Arctic Explorer in NY Police Dagnet,” *Boston Daily Globe*, November 25, 1917, 10. “Explorer Arrested on Conspiracy Charge,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1917, IV12.

Banzhaf was physically in New York, where both Kleinschmidt and his film were located, made it easier to safely control the exchange.

Once scenes of the real war were secured, Griffith spent the winter editing and designing the film's promotional campaign. Throughout January and February, Griffith continued to express his unwillingness to obtain Washington's approval via Zukor's position on the WCC. To begin with, he was adamant that his name exclusively be associated with the picture. That Zukor had so ingratiated himself with the Treasury Department as the industry's representative risked Griffith having to share recognition should the picture be a huge success. Furthermore, Griffith had his own contacts in the Capitol as well as a line to the president, so using Zukor as a go-between seemed unnecessary, even insulting. Instead, Griffith suggested his lawyer go directly to their Washington contact—someone by the name of "Patchen"—and over Zukor's head to determine the best route for the film's release. Although it is unclear whether or not Banzhaf did this, a new contract was drawn up in the meantime that gave Griffith the power he wanted over the picture's marketing and exploitation. Because the film would be primarily exhibited as a road show, Griffith had only to answer to Zukor regarding its secondary release as an Artcraft program picture. Acquiring official sanction from the War Department was therefore left to Griffith.<sup>50</sup>

Although pleased to be in command of the publicity, Griffith was immediately plagued by conflicting objectives. First, he wanted to call attention to the film as an invaluable contribution to the war effort and promote it as distinct from any other war-related production.

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<sup>50</sup>Telegram to Banzhaf from Griffith, December 19, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Letter to Jesse Lasky from Ludvigh, March 4, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Letter to Griffith from Banzhaf enclosing new contract, March 5, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

At the same time, he insisted it not come across as official government propaganda. This proved a difficult balance to strike. To achieve the latter goal, Griffith explicitly sought a title for the film that did not mention the words “Democracy, Europe, or Liberty.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, he copyrighted the picture as “Love’s Struggle”—the title under which it was presented to its first preview audiences—before deciding on *Hearts of the World: A Love Story of the Great War*.<sup>52</sup> Still, as the West Coast premiere drew closer, Griffith grew concerned over the absence of some form of government backing for the picture. His fears seemed less about substantiating the film’s claims to authenticity than about protecting it from potential adverse criticism. Americans were well aware that the forthcoming picture would be the result of Griffith’s exclusive access to the European battlefields. Its earliest notices boasted a production made in cooperation with the British and French War Departments. Even so, Griffith felt compelled to ensure that major American newspapers did not approach his film “as an ordinary play, or criticize [it] from that viewpoint.” He subsequently urged a Washington associate, who had “easy access to the owners of the big dailies,” to warn them that this was “a propaganda effort of much value to the government.” In asserting as much, Griffith hoped press syndicates would see publishing anything but support for his movie as putting themselves on the wrong side of the war effort.<sup>53</sup>

Griffith’s attempt to control his film’s reception behind-the-scenes revealed a peculiar mix of extreme confidence and paranoia that characterized the entire publicity campaign. For instance, in exchange for his Washington contact’s cooperation, Griffith suggested that a sum of the film’s profits go to the man’s favorite “pet charity.” In the same breath, however, Griffith

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<sup>51</sup>Telegram to D.W. Griffith from J.J. McCarthy, November 27, 1917, D.W. Griffith Papers, Reel 3.

<sup>52</sup>The subtitle underwent several variations as it was released throughout the country. *DWGP*, Reel 3.

<sup>53</sup>Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1918, 15. Letter to J.J. McCarthy from D.W. Griffith, February 28, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

claimed that if the man truly had “the interests of the government at heart” that alone should “stimulate him to enormous effort.” He then went on to list grand predictions for the superlative effect his film was sure to have on the war effort.<sup>54</sup> Griffith’s evidently paradoxical feelings about how his latest picture would be received likely resulted from his remembering the inherent risks of roadshow exhibitions. Where roadshows for *Birth* accounted for a great deal of its earnings, showing *Intolerance* via roadshows lost money. Accordingly, Griffith wanted to reproduce the elements of *Birth*’s advance publicity that drummed up mass interest, while avoiding any controversy or criticism of the film whatsoever. This meant hosting special previews of the film for invited guests in important cities like New York, where influential individuals would serve as “representative” audiences. Their doubtless enthusiastic reports to the press would prime ordinary viewers to approach the film a certain way, something he did not achieve with *Intolerance*. Finally, as with *Birth*, Griffith desired a private screening of *Hearts* for the president, which he would aggressively pursue himself.

For the moment, however, Griffith needed to prepare for *Hearts*’ official West Coast premiere at Clune’s Auditorium in Los Angeles (where *Birth* and *Intolerance* also premiered). In Griffith’s experience, the first premiere at Clune’s had the power to set the tone of picture’s reception everywhere. Although he had not thought to have a private screening for influential Los Angelinos in time, Griffith was able to curate a small guest list for the premiere at the last minute, which included members of the local draft board.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, on the day of the screening Griffith found himself answering complaints from Zukor, who had finally received a

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Telegram to Joseph Tumulty from D.W. Griffith, March 29, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199. “Flashes: It’s now Here, Celebrities Who Will View Griffith’s Masterpiece,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1918, I18.



copy of the film the previous week. Zukor and other executives, including Griffith's lawyer, worried over the film's length and demanded it be cut immediately. Coming in at almost thirteen reels, the picture was longer than either a typical program "special" or even a competing roadshow production (of which there were very few). The men also worried Griffith was taking too much time with the film's West Coast exploitation, which they deemed far less significant to the picture's success than its presentation in the East and Midwest. Furious, Griffith responded that while the New York City theater crowd dictated special handling of that premiere, the receipts for both *Birth* and *Intolerance* irrefutably proved that the West Coast was just as consequential as other regions. "If it will go in Pamona [sic] it will go throughout the country," Griffith explained, hence his current preoccupation with securing a successful opening night.<sup>56</sup>

Not only was Zukor hassling Griffith on opening night, but he was insulting Griffith's judgment as an expert, as arguably *the* expert. In addition to doubting the value of Griffith's efforts in the West, Zukor suggested someone other than Griffith cut the film—an idea that struck at the core of Griffith's most deeply held artistic principles. Griffith conceded that the picture could likely be cut from 12 reels down to 10 ½, but insisted this was the job for an "artist." Furthermore, he rejected the assumption that 12 reels was too long on principle, claiming if the story was good enough "12 reels is short enough." More than confident the story was good enough, Griffith warned that someone else cutting the film courted its failure everywhere. Given this was "a story of the heart," not merely another five-cent war picture, Griffith explained a "little duck is as important as the best battle scene." He reminded Zukor that people had balked at his handling of *Birth*, where he fought bitterly to charge the \$2 admission

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<sup>56</sup>Telegram to Banzhaf from Griffith, March 12, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

price that marked its revolutionary returns. For now, Zukor needed to trust Griffith that “Four hundred people in Oshkosh can tell you more about the play than all the projection room critics in the world.” Only Griffith would make any cuts and alterations and he would not even seriously consider doing so until after the film’s L.A. premiere.<sup>57</sup>

Griffith was right to stand firm. So successful was the Clune’s opening that he wired Banzhaf: “No more chance of losing money with this picture than snowball has in Hades.” He further explained that where *Intolerance* was met with “two or three” rounds of applause, and *Birth* received “eight to ten,” *Hearts of the World*’s first showing witnessed upwards of “seventy.” What is more, when Griffith eavesdropped on audience members’ discussions about the play during intermission and as they left the theater afterward—something he always did—he surmised that “fifty seven out of sixty prefer this to *Birth*.” Considering *Birth*’s continued success since its appearance in 1915, this fact was very promising indeed.<sup>58</sup> *The Exhibitors Trade Review* corroborated Griffith’s ecstasy over *Hearts* premiere, declaring it “a spectacular production that is still not a spectacle; an engrossing comedy-drama with the shudders and tears merging into the laughter of sheer joy; a tragic story of the horrors of unbridled conflict; and yet a simple love story, surpassing in its sweetness...”<sup>59</sup> This was precisely what Griffith had aimed to create—a war film that was also *not* a war film, while still always being “the apotheosis of the war [film].”<sup>60</sup> The wild reception at Clune’s sent electrified the country, generating publicity that convinced Zukor to more fully relinquish control over *Hearts* to Griffith.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Telegram from Griffith to Banzhaf, March 15, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

<sup>59</sup>Quoted in Arthur Lennig, “*Hearts of the World*,” *Film History* 23, No. 4 (October 2011), 442-443.

<sup>60</sup>“Another Big Griffith Picture,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 7, 1918, 8.

By all accounts, Griffith's antiwar war film reached its apogee in *Hearts of the World*. To begin with, America's involvement in the war enabled the film to surpass the standards of military "realism" that were first applied to *Birth*. The fact that Griffith ostensibly spent months filming the Western Front lent *Hearts* an unmistakable air of superiority over any other war-related features. And Griffith eagerly exaggerated the extent to which the resulting movie captured the actual war. Indeed, announcements for *Hearts*' opening night claimed it had been "staged in France on the actual locale of the story," and that its "battle scenes [were taken] on the battlefields of Europe." Never mind that combat scenes in *Hearts* had mostly been staged and what authentic footage of the war did appear was not Griffith's. Following its West Coast premiere, Griffith doubled down on claims about the film's documentary qualities and made changes he believed would further substantiate them. In particular, Griffith added more shots from the Kleinschmidt reels and staged new facsimiles of the Allied and German governments on the eve of the war.<sup>61</sup>

With American troops now fully active in the war, *Hearts*' release coincided with a rise in public curiosity about the realities of the Western Front. As such, several news outlets and trade magazines published Griffith's firsthand accounts of his experience abroad in advance of *Hearts*' screenings in different cities. Prior to its opening in Boston, Griffith wrote three articles for *The Boston Herald*, "relating what he saw 'over there' where America's sons are now

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<sup>61</sup> Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1918, I5. D.W. Griffith, *Hearts of the World*, 1918. There are fewer versions of *Hearts of the World* available for contemporary viewing. My summary and analysis of the film come from printed material available in the D.W. Griffith Papers and from screening two versions of the film. Synopsis, "Love's Struggle," February 23, 1918; Title Sheets, 1 page, and "Cutting Notes," July 15, 1918; Title Sheets, Revisions, Suggestions for Cutting, Separate file, n.d. July; All in *DWGP*, Reel 3. D.W. Griffith, *Hearts of the World*, 1918, 123 min., Laserdisc copied from Killiam Shows Version, c.1973, distributed by Republic Pictures Home Video, 1991, UCLA Film & Television Archive, CD2057M. D.W. Griffith, *Hearts of the World* (1918), 116 min, Reel Vault Studio, 2015, DVD purchased from Amazon.com 116. Griffith, *Hearts* (1918), 113 min., accessed through Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/HeartsOfTheWorld>

fighting for world liberty.”<sup>62</sup> Griffith consistently depicted his time in Europe as one during which he and his team faced constant danger in their determination to capture the war for American audiences. These largely apocryphal stories not only testified to Griffith’s intimate knowledge of the conflict but also portrayed him as something of an active participant. One of his favorite yarns was one in which he proved himself more capable than his soldier-guide. Evidently the young man escorting Griffith refused to wade through the muck and dirt for fear of dirtying his new shoes. He thus remained above the trench in plain sight of the enemy and ultimately provoked a German attack. According to Griffith, two shells immediately launched the two men to the bottom of the trench where they were forced to cower for hours while German batteries rained fire on them. “The Kaiser wasted several million dollars on me that afternoon,” Griffith joked before noting, “The British officers...said it was one of the liveliest bombardments...in that sector.”<sup>63</sup> Such stories worked to demonstrate Griffith’s intimate encounter with the real war while simultaneously casting him as a dutiful national servant in his own right.

If he was to be believed, Griffith directly encountered many aspects of the war that had proven to be the most novel and fascinating to a distant American public. For instance, he confirmed the destructive capability of modern weaponry when he claimed to have witnessed Germany artillery destroy his camera and kill eleven men in front of him. Both Griffith and the Gish sisters attested to the new menace of the skies as they reported being present during eight different air raids, four of which occurred when they were out in the open and vulnerable to injury. Griffith also frequently placed himself within reach of the enemy’s poison gas and

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<sup>62</sup>“Shell Struck Within Ten Feet of David Wark Griffith,” *Sunday Herald* (Boston), May 19, 1918, p4E.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

professed to have once “barely missed personal contact with the horrors of liquid fire.” Although in reality only Griffith was allowed at the front, he nevertheless expressed guilt over putting his people in constant danger, claiming he demanded they film in the middle of several bombardments in order to obtain genuine footage. He showed one reporter where he had been injured by shrapnel while accompanying a British scout party through barbed wire mazes until they were just behind the German trenches. So dangerous was this particular expedition that if they had been spotted “there would have been no *Hearts of the World*.” Griffith often insisted that he could not reveal the names of the locations he visited, which added allure to his accounts as well as reinforced his credibility.<sup>64</sup>

Despite containing little footage of the actual war, Americans nevertheless believed that *Hearts* brought the war home to them. Griffith’s drama was presented against such “a solid background of reality,” reviewers claimed, that “the spectator cannot tell when he is witnessing actual war or the staged product.” Most coverage went further, insisting it was evident Griffith’s “battle scenes are not posed...[but] were taken as they happened.” Thus, as “a photograph of the battle-field itself,” Griffith’s film showed Americans “more...of the great war (sic) in all its phases than all the volumes...written on this subject.” *Hearts* “seem[ed] to visualize the official reports from the front.” Advertisements declaring *Hearts* “brings [France] to your very door”

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<sup>64</sup>“Shell Struck Within Ten Feet of David Wark Griffith,” *Sunday Herald* (Boston), May 19, 1918, p4E. “At the Theaters,” *San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 3. Advertisement, *San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 2. “Griffith Returns from the Front with Official Pictures Made under Fire—Will Use Them in a Film Spectacle of the War,” *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*, October 27, 1917, 1644, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 83. “Griffith—and the Great War,” in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 86. “Took Scenes in Trenches,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1917, 11, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 80. “Pictures and Projectiles,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1918, X9, in Slide, *D.W. Griffith*, 98-99. “Lillian Gish, the Incomparable: Being a True Story of a Great Tragedienne,” by Sidney Sutherland, *Liberty Magazine*, August 13, 20, 1927, in Scrapbook/Lillian and Dorothy Gish 1912-1918, Box 1, *Lillian Gish Papers*. Advertisement, *The San Diego Union*, May 19, 1918, 2. “‘Hearts of the World’ Is Here,” *Illinois State Register*, August 11, 1918, 5.

were substantiated by reviews from major critics as well as endorsements from military personnel. Major General Frederick Strong, commander of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army Division (“Sunshine Division”) boasted that *Hearts*’ war scenes “lack[ed] nothing in detail and authenticity,” and he expressed hope that all of his men would see it before leaving for the front. Similarly, the Board of Historians championed *Hearts* as documentation of “how actual battles are fought from beginning to end in...Europe.” For his part, in addition to giving interviews, Griffith included a glossary of terms in *Hearts*’ souvenir programs. It defined phrases such as “barrage,” “hand grenade,” “rifle grenade,” and “shrapnel,” so audiences could better understand the title cards and what they saw onscreen.<sup>65</sup>

While the hype around *Hearts*’ alleged authenticity was critical to Griffith’s vision, most important was that the film convey President Wilson’s formulation of the war’s meaning. Beyond mere approval, Griffith sought the president’s official endorsement of *Hearts* as a distinct contribution to the war effort. Insinuations in the press notwithstanding, Wilson never publicly praised *Birth*, and he likely never saw *Intolerance*. Nevertheless, there was ample reason for Griffith to believe *Hearts* would more directly place him in the president’s esteem. Not only was Griffith confident that it captured the themes of Wilson’s wartime rhetoric, but *Hearts*’ release throughout the country was scheduled to coincide with the Third Liberty Loan Drive. Indeed, Griffith arranged for the film’s arrival in different cities to simultaneously

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<sup>65</sup>“‘Hearts of the World’: Realistic War Play Coming to the Ray Theater, Tuesday Aug. 20,” *Olympia Daily Recorder*, August 15, 1918, 4; “D.W. Griffith Has Done it Again; ‘Hearts of the World’ Proclaimed Greatest of All Film Achievements,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, April 14, 1918, 1. “Great Film is Cheered by Crowd,” by George H. White, *The Evening Tribune* (San Diego), May 21, 1918, 2. “D.W. Griffith’s New Drama Greatest of His Career: ‘Hearts of the World’ is Thrilling Picture of War,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 22, 1918, 6. “Alcazar Screens ‘Hearts of the World’: Tremendous Grip to Griffith Film,” by Walter Anthony, *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 24, 1918, 4C. “What the Press Agents Say: Denver Orpheum,” *Colorado Springs Gazette*, August 18, 1918, 17. Advertisement, *The Boston Herald and Journal*, May 31, 1918, 11B. *Hearts of the World* Souvenir Program, *DWGP*, Reel 3.

function as Liberty Loan events. The link between the film and bond sales would first be established in New York, where its private screening was slated for the eve of the drive's official opening on April 5. In theory, distinguished guests would demonstrate *Hearts'* patriotic impact by making high-profile bond purchases the following day.

Although plans were evidently in motion to have President Wilson attend *Hearts'* ritzy New York preview, Griffith desired an even more exclusive showing for the commander-in-chief. Stopping in Utah en route to New York, Griffith wired Wilson's personal secretary, Joseph Tumulty, about the possibility of privately screening *Hearts* for the president before its premiere in the Big Apple. The film's effect in Los Angeles alone, where it was "hailed by press and pulpit," suggested it was the most powerful "propaganda to stir up patriotism yet put forth." For instance, Griffith claimed that immediately after seeing *Hearts*, "over 800 men" stormed the Los Angeles Exemption Board requesting they be allowed to serve. Similarly, the divisions of Four Minute Men in the West declared *Hearts* "the best ad they could possibly imagine for their work." Immediately following Griffith's request came a telegram from William Elliott who, standing in for Zukor as *Hearts'* East Coast presenter, promised Tumulty any accommodation necessary to secure an earlier showing for Wilson. Influential California Democrat and Los Angeles Customs Collector John B. Elliott also wired Tumulty insisting that the president see the picture as soon as possible. According to Elliott, *Hearts* proved "the greatest picture...yet produced for the purpose of arousing...the country to its duty and danger." As such, earning the

president's endorsement early on might further boost the film's success in helping to sell war bonds.<sup>66</sup>

Despite Griffith's and his supporters' efforts, the New York premiere came and went without any word back from Washington. Undeterred, Griffith contacted the president directly. Griffith assured Wilson that *Hearts* was "accomplishing the purpose for which it was intended," citing a handful of reviews that corroborated this assertion. The *New York Mail* claimed that *Hearts* "'quicken[ed] the patriotic pulse'" more than "'all of the combined effort as yet undertaken by the Allies.'" The *Western Herald* said it was "worth five army corps to the Allied Cause," and *Morning Sun* credited Griffith' film with supplying a "patriotic backbone" the publicly currently needed. Griffith insisted he was not seeking any favor from the president, only to express his hope that *Hearts* provided "some faint help to you who stand in the breach of the broken walls of the half wrecked world." Still, along with his note to Wilson, Griffith sent Tumulty another request that he do everything in his power to make sure the president saw *Hearts*. This time Griffith tempered his entreaty by urging Tumulty himself to see it and insisting he did not wish to "trouble" Wilson in any way.<sup>67</sup>

Wilson would not see *Hearts* for another two months. In the meantime, Griffith took measures to ensure that whatever the president might *hear* about the film would affirm its value to the war effort. He began by more explicitly tying *Hearts* to the Third Liberty Loan Campaign. First, Griffith arranged for the proceeds from *Hearts*' first night in Chicago to cover the cost of

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<sup>66</sup>Telegram to D.W. Griffith from Samuel Rothapfel, March 20, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Telegram to Joseph Tumulty from D.W. Griffith, March 29, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199. Telegram to Joseph Tumulty from William Elliott, March 30, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199. Telegram to Joseph Tumulty from John B. Elliott, April 2, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199.

<sup>67</sup>Letter to Woodrow Wilson from D.W. Griffith, April 10, 1918. Letter to Joseph Tumulty from D.W. Griffith, April 10, 1918. *DWGP*, Reel 3.



the drive in the Midwest. In exchange, Sherman Brown, head of the Central Liberty Loan Committee (which covered the region), promised to attribute the drive's success to Griffith and his film. And there was ample reason to expect a successful loan drive. The Third Liberty Loan was already proving distinct from the previous two campaigns in terms of scale. Two new features—honor flags and war exhibit trains—significantly increased the visibility and fanfare of the third campaign. Honor flags were awarded to communities that reached or surpassed their bond quotas. Towns and cities across the country competed earnestly for the opportunity to fly an honor flag as a marker of their exceptional patriotism. For their part, war exhibit trains enhanced ordinary citizens' sense of participation in the war. Six special trains, equipped with authentic war materiel and accompanied by celebrities and returning soldiers, toured the country to promote bond purchases. Displays of cannon and other weaponry made trench warfare tangible to Americans, and millions of dollars in bonds sales were traced directly back to these exhibits.<sup>68</sup>

Griffith and *Hearts'* arrival in Chicago on April 15 were publicized as an ostentatious Liberty Loan event. As he had in New York, Griffith would oversee a private screening for invited guests the night before *Hearts* opened for the public. All Chicagoans were nevertheless invited to attend the "Special Liberty Loan Rally" that would precede the private showing at the La Salle Theater. Featured entertainment included "the famous Jackie Band" and cast members from the wildly popular off-Broadway musical *Leave It to Jane*. Griffith was the main act. He was to be escorted from the train station to the theater by the local Liberty Loan Committee and a

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<sup>68</sup>Telegram to D.W. Griffith from Sherman Brown, March 20, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. *The Story of the Liberty Loans: Being a Record of the Volunteer Liberty Loan Army, Its Personnel, Mobilization, and Methods. How America at Home Backed Her Armies and Allies in the World War*, by Labert St. Clair, (Washington, DC: James William Bryan Press, 1919), 61.

contingent of returning soldiers. A “military parade with a brass band of several hundred pieces” would lead the procession, and once at the venue Griffith would deliver a speech about his time overseas. In the end, however, Griffith’s train was five hours late, delaying the screening and effectively cancelling the rally (his convoy and the entertainment grew tired of waiting). Griffith arrived at the theater in far less extravagant fashion—in a cab accompanied by a few reporters—and was forced to give an abbreviated speech that barely exceeded the time taken by the Four-Minute-Men before him.<sup>69</sup> Still, if the New York premiere set the stage for *Hearts*’ critical acclaim, the Chicago opening helped secure its popularity with a wider audience. This was due in part to the film’s growing association with the Third Liberty Loan Campaign as well as sustained publicity of Griffith’s trip to the front. Griffith also donated souvenirs from the battlefields, to be displayed in department store windows, as a way to encourage both ticket sales and bond sales.<sup>70</sup>

The playbills that accompanied *Hearts*’ screenings throughout the country further proclaimed the film as a bona fide representation of the world conflict. In addition to the glossary of military terms, Griffith inserted a synopsis of the film that echoed President Wilson’s most recent message to the American public. On the opening day of the Third Liberty Loan Campaign, Wilson reminded Americans of the stakes of the war and the momentous purpose for which the loans served. Germany’s military leaders, “who act for Germany and exhibit her purpose in execution,” sought nothing less than global domination and the subjugation of the

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<sup>69</sup>Telegram to D.W. Griffith from Sherman Brown, March 20, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Telegram to D.W. Griffith from James A. Quirk, (*Photoplay*, Chicago), March 30, 1918, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Display Ad 6—No Title, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1918, pg. 8. “David Wark Griffith: Who Arrives in City Today to Supervise His New Spectacle,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1918, pg. 10. Mae Tinee, “Griffith Makes Impassioned Plea for Liberty Loan,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 16, 1918, pg. 14.

<sup>70</sup>Advertisement for the Jordan Marsh Company, *Boston Herald and Journal*, April 24, 1918,

world's peoples. Should they succeed, "the rights of common men...women, and all who are weak" would perish along with "Everything that America has lived for and loved and grown great to vindicate." Now more than ever, Americans needed to see "the cause is their own, and...if it should be lost...[the]...Nation's place...in the world would be lost with it." Similarly, *Hearts'* playbill declared the film's "heroes and heroines are humanity; the villain, militarism." Although technically fictional, *Hearts* depicted a composite rendering of "things that...have really happened" in Belgium and France. As such, its characters related "the suffering, privations and agony" of the common people embroiled in this "greatest of the world's dramas." By humanizing the war experience, *Hearts* sought to remind Americans of their critical role in ending the conflict. "In the night outside our house anguished voices cry," the program read. "Whatever the darkness holds, we must take the lantern and go out in it."<sup>71</sup>

Just as *Birth* reflected President Wilson's scholarly account of the Civil War and Reconstruction, *Hearts'* echoed his framing of the current war. In particular, *Hearts* recast *Birth's* narrative structure as a family drama to symbolize contemporary geopolitics. That is, instead of dividing the U.S. national family, war in *Hearts* had torn Western civilization asunder and demanded the aid of American ex-patriots and American troops to restore world order. The film's protagonist, Douglas Hamilton (The Boy), was an American citizen living in France when the war broke out. Although not in the country of his birth, Douglas nevertheless determined "the land that is good enough to live in is good enough to fight for" and offered his life to defend France. On the one hand, Douglas's willingness to serve in the French Army acknowledged the large portion of foreign-born American soldiers now fighting overseas. It also gestured to the

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<sup>71</sup>*Hearts of the World* playbill, *DWGP*, Reel 3. Baker and Dodd, eds., *PPWW*, V, 198-202.

growing fear among native-born Americans that immigrants were disproportionately evading military service. More broadly, however, Douglas's circumstances in *Hearts* signified the United States' position in the global conflict. As representatives of the New World, Americans found themselves embroiled in the sins of the Old, and their national upbringing obliged them to aid their fellow humans in achieving lasting peace. Woodrow Wilson said as much when he declared that the war had rendered Americans "provincials no longer," but "citizens of the world" forced to defend "the principles of a liberated mankind." The "essential principle of peace" for which the United States stood now transcended national borders.<sup>72</sup>

*Hearts* also conformed to Washington's characterization of the ideological and political causes of the war. While *Hearts* identified Germany as the "enemy," it emphasized the culpability of German leaders, not the German people, in igniting the conflict. Furthermore, German leaders represented the timeless and ahistorical enemy, militarism. As an opening title card clarified, "the villains of our story are not particularly common to any race or people, but to the world-old institution of war itself." That villain was personified in the character of Von Strohm, who, "serving as finger to the Mailed Fist," first infiltrated the town as a spy and later commanded the town's occupation. The film remained similarly vague in its only mention of Kaiser Wilhelm, introducing him as "representing War's ideal of all races and ages, the ruling of weaker nations and people by the Power of Might." These lines could have come from President Wilson himself who claimed the U.S. had "no quarrel with the German people" because they were not responsible for the war. Rather, the war was "determined...as wars used to be determined...in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and

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<sup>72</sup>Jennifer D. Keene, *World War I: The American Soldier Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 106-107. Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, V, 3.

wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or...ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools.” Furthermore, like Von Strohm in *Hearts*, the “Prussian autocracy” had infiltrated American communities with spies seeking to undermine national unity before the United States even entered the conflict.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, *Hearts*’ first half humanized common peoples’ war experience while simultaneously allegorizing America’s role in the fighting. As with the Americans in *Birth* and the Babylonians and French commoners in *Intolerance*, war *happened* to *Hearts*’ characters. Distant forces beyond their control invaded their otherwise peaceful world and demanded they act on self-preservation. No one *chose* war in *Hearts*; war chose them. Similarly, President Wilson insisted the current war had been “thrust upon” European civilians as well as the United States, for whom German aggression made “neutrality no longer feasible.” Furthermore, like Griffith’s previous epics, combat in *Hearts* occurred within shouting distance of the home front. Douglas and his comrades—the “Three Musketeers”—were stationed in a bulwark of trenches just outside the village, literally compelled “to defend their homes.” Yet, despite vowing to hold the line “until death,” Douglas’s regiment was forced to retreat when the Germans made an unexpectedly rapid advance. The villagers did not receive sufficient warning as the German artillery, sounding “War’s old song of hate,” suddenly moved to bombard the village.<sup>74</sup>

The German assault on the village in *Hearts* powerfully illustrated President Wilson’s declaration that the current conflict was a “People’s War” being fought to secure basic human freedoms across the globe. *Hearts*’ characters’ hometown represented the smaller nations of the world who, because they “could be overwhelmed by force,” became targets of German

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<sup>73</sup>Griffith, *Hearts of the World*. Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, V, 11, 13.

<sup>74</sup>Griffith, *Hearts of the World*. Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, V, 11, 61.

aggression and barbarism. The film depicted a large, menacing contingent of German artillerymen marching toward the village, some forging ahead on horseback, while others set up field weapons along the perimeter. The Germans began firing before most of the townspeople realized what was happening. A title card flashed, “War’s gift to the common people,” before cutting to villagers scrambling to flee among flying debris, grabbing whatever possessions they could along the way. The sequence alternated between shots of the Germans loading and firing their weapons and their exploding shells landing inside the village walls. At one point a mass of fearful families huddled at the village gate trying to evacuate. The camera zoomed in on children clutching their pets and parents clutching their children before panning out to capture the walls and stone archway crumble around them. Another quintessential Griffith scene showed the barrage hitting a tranquil pond on which a family of geese floated peacefully. These were presumably the same geese whose errant wandering before the war established the meet-cute for the film’s principal romance. Such images conveyed, in no uncertain terms, the utter dehumanization of ordinary people by unbridled German militarism.<sup>75</sup>

The crimes visited on villagers during German occupation transformed the meaning of the war in *Hearts* from one of survival into one of vindication. Both Douglas’s and Marie’s (The Girl’s) parents struggled to believe the French lines had been broken and died as a result of their reluctance to flee during the invasion. One explosion killed Douglas’s father instantly as he ran down the street toward his family; the same explosion buried Marie’s mother in rubble. Douglas’s brothers survived and eked out a secret existence on the edge of town where they tended to their mother until she, too, succumbed to her injuries. Griffith underscored the sense of

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<sup>75</sup>Griffith, *Hearts of the World*. Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, V, 61-62.

loss and hopelessness in *Hearts'* most famous scene where Marie, delirious from the trauma, searched the nearby battlefields for her lover. The German invasion occurred the night that should have been Douglas's and Marie's wedding day. As a consequence, while the town fell to German hands, Marie donned her would-be wedding veil and wandered the village streets, now strewn with bodies of her friends and relatives, until she arrived at the trench where Douglas lay wounded. Believing him to be dead, Marie collapsed next to him as a title card explained, "And so they spend their bridal night." As the sun rose the next morning Marie snuck back into the village and joined fellow survivors now being kept in the local Inn. Under German rule she and her neighbors suffered food deprivation and forced labor, while the town's young women were threatened with rape and sexual slavery.<sup>76</sup>

Fearful and unsure of the fate of his loved ones, Douglas emerged from a brief convalescence as a soldier with renewed purpose. Having failed to protect his home from German aggression, Douglas was now more determined than ever to rescue what was left of it. Indeed, his resolve turned him into a warrior with near super-human capabilities, proving his mettle in both combat and reconnaissance. Charged with infiltrating enemy lines, Douglas hid in a shell hole inside a German trench for days before delivering the signal to his comrades. In the process of completing the mission, Douglas single-handedly killed two German officers and disguised himself in one their uniforms before sneaking back into the village. Once inside, Douglas found Marie in front the now-broken wall that once separated their two family's homes. Realizing her lover was alive after all, Marie hid Douglas away in her room at the Inn, where they were eventually discovered by a German soldier. A scuffle between Douglas and the

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<sup>76</sup>Griffith, *Hearts of the World*.

German ensued, and Marie stabbed the man with a kitchen knife. Left with little time before Von Strohm was on their trail, the couple locked themselves in the attic while outside the town the Allies mounted a new offensive.

The final scenes portrayed a race against the clock as Von Strohm and his men tried to break down the attic door while waves of Allied troops—first Scotch, then British, then French—until finally the Americans arrived to relieve the town of German rule. When at last the attic door gave way to Von Strohm, Douglas was able to shoot him immediately, while outside the Allies rounded up German soldiers and purged them from the village. Although devastated to have lost most of their family members, Douglas and Marie built a new family from the rubble of tragedy. The closing scene showed the couple at the head of a table, breaking bread with the other two “Musketeers,” now also reunited with their sweethearts, and Douglas’s remaining brothers. Through the window, they all waved to a parade of American soldiers now “Returning home after freeing the world from Autocracy and the horrors of war... forever and ever.” The camera then zoomed in on a massive portrait of Woodrow Wilson hanging above the table and the film ended.<sup>77</sup>

*Hearts* visualized the war as a struggle for the rights of ordinary people everywhere to live in peace and security while underscoring the role Americans played in achieving that end. The brutal German occupation in Griffith’s film echoed Wilson’s assertion that “the Central Powers strike straight at the heart of everything we believe in” and employed “methods of warfare [that] outrage every principle of humanity and of knightly honor.” Furthermore, armed with the lofty purpose of “redeem[ing] the world” so that its people may live in freedom and “the

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<sup>77</sup>*Hearts of the World*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1918; Nostalgia Studio, 2015), DVD.



permanent peace of justice,” the United States could scarcely be defeated. “Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way,” Wilson warned, for Americans “can never turn back from a course chosen upon principle.”<sup>78</sup> American movie audiences gleaned a similar message from *Hearts*. Newspapers praised the film’s ability to “[bring] suffering France to our very doors in a manner that...makes one more fully realize what war really is.” Indeed, it forced upon “snugly safe at home Americans the truth of what happens [abroad],” revealing “what it means to be driven from home and country by the guns of an enemy.”<sup>79</sup> At the same time, critics claimed *Hearts* portrayal of civilians’ suffering was so vivid that it left viewers “more determined than ever that this conflict must be won, that the Allies must triumph...and that such grim horrors of war must never happen again in the history of the world.” Deemed by one paper nothing short of “a call to set the world free!” *Hearts* seemed poised to receive Washington’s blessing if not outright praise.<sup>80</sup>

In nearly every region *Hearts* played, it was hailed as a true representation of the war whose compelling drama aroused unmatched patriotism in American audiences. Article after article declared the film the penultimate military spectacle that was simultaneously “not a war play.” Rather, *Hearts* was about “people to whom the war comes—and for this reason it makes the war real.” As one critic explained, “Griffith has seen fit to show how the beauties of life have been destroyed by the world conflict, rather than [focus on] the war itself.” Consequently, “even the...pacifist is persuaded...that fighting the Hun to a finish is civilization’s ‘only way.’” Indeed,

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<sup>78</sup>Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*, V, 67 138, 183, 202-203.

<sup>79</sup>“‘Hearts of the World’—Levy’s,” *Seattle Times*, July 19, 1918, “Great Film is Cheered by Crowd,” *The Evening Tribune* (San Diego), May 21, 1918, 2. “‘Hearts of the World’ Great Cinema Masterpiece,” *Oregonian*, July 21, 1918, 4.

<sup>80</sup>“Grim War Pictured, ‘Hearts of the World’ Spectacular Production,” *Oregonian*, July 29, 1918, 13. Advertisement, *The Evening Tribune* (San Diego), May 22, 8.

precisely because *Hearts* was not “strictly a ‘war picture,’” but simply a love story set against the backdrop of the war, it conveyed the conflict in a manner that “all people [can] understand.” *Hearts* made the war, as one reviewer put it, “personal to us all.” In *Hearts* Griffith combined pulsing nationalism and popular (but sophisticated) entertainment to give the “great[est] stimulus to the patriotic zeal...ever presented.” Indeed, *Hearts*’ love story was “utterly submerged in the cataclysmic struggle of Democracy [over] Autocracy,” convincing Americans “of the absolute necessity of a world democracy which we are fighting for.” Even drama critic Kenneth MacGowan confessed to have never witnessed a piece of artwork that could “make a man or a woman who has hated war, all war, even this war, feel the surge of group emotion, group loyalty, or group hate,” as *Hearts* did.<sup>81</sup>

By all appearances, Griffith had succeeded in making *Hearts* his own distinct contribution to the war effort. In keeping with the official rhetoric coming from Washington, Griffith had visually captured the struggle as one between “Democracy and Autocracy” and in the process galvanized public enthusiasm for U.S. involvement. So confident was Griffith that *Hearts* advanced the Wilson Administration’s wartime prerogatives, he took advantage of wartime legislation to further insulate his film from criticism. Recent amendments to the 1917 Espionage Act, commonly called the Sedition Act, extended wartime offenses to include the use of “disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language” about the U.S. government, flag, or

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<sup>81</sup>“D.W. Griffith’s ‘Hearts of the World,’” *Augusta Chronicle*, September 22, 1918, p 3. “‘Hearts of the World,’ D.W. Griffith’s Latest Masterpiece,” *Colorado Springs Gazette*, August 11, 1918, 15. “‘Hearts of the World’ is Here,” *Illinois State Register*, August 11, 1918, 5. “‘Hearts of the World,’” *Marietta Journal and Courier*, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918, 3. “‘Hearts of the World ‘Sweetest Story’ on Film: Chaplin,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 1918, 3. “Griffith Produces War Pictures All People Understand,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 14, 1918, 4E. “‘Hearts of the World’ is Epic Triumph of the Screen,” *Macon Daily Telegraph*, October 1, 1918, 9. “Alcazar Screens ‘Hearts of the World,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 1918, 4. “Great Griffith Picture Comes to Grand,” *Rockford Morning Star*, July 30, 1918, 2. Kenneth MacGowan, “‘Hearts of the World,’” *New Republic*, July 20, 1918, Vol XV, No. 194, 342.

institutions. It also forbade any acts or “utterances” that might encourage others to criticize the United States.<sup>82</sup> Burned before by local authorities who forced cuts to be made to *Birth of a Nation*, Griffith charged the flashy Morris Gest with stemming any controversy over *Hearts* that might produce similar demands. Gest interpreted his responsibilities both more broadly and more narrowly, capitalizing on mounting anti-German hysteria to silence any criticism about the film whatsoever. Gest organized parades, took out full-page newspaper advertisements, and circulated broadsides that made both seeing and loving *Hearts* a test of national loyalty. The day before its Chicago release, for example, he ran the following inflammatory announcement:

If You Are a Red Blooded American—If you doubt the savagery of German Kultur—If you want to see what the ‘Hun’ does to his victims in conquered territory—What he will do to the United States if we ever let him reach here—don’t fail to be at the Olympic Theatre tomorrow night and—for the cause of liberty and democracy—we hope many other nights.

The notice closed by insisting that viewers who were not moved to either join the army or buy a Liberty Bond after seeing *Hearts* lacked “the spirit of real Americanism and love of freedom.” The message was clear: to criticize Griffith’s latest picture was tantamount to opposing the war.<sup>83</sup>

*Hearts’* Chicago publicity campaign was both a targeted effort and a trial run for Gest’s sensational marketing strategies. A stronghold of radicalism and home to a large German-American population, Chicago possessed something of a built-in controversial atmosphere. Furthermore, it was home to a “Censor of Public Morals,” Major M.L.C. Funkhouser, who had

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<sup>82</sup>The U.S. Sedition Act, United States, *Statutes at Large*, Washington, D.C., 1918, Vol. XL, 553.

<sup>83</sup>Display Ad 5—No Title, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 23, 1918, pg. 6. “‘Hearts of the World’ Opens Week’s Engagement at Atlanta,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 22, 1919, pg. 7. Display Ad 4—No Title, *Detroit Free Press*, July 6, 1918, 6.

gained national notoriety for his rigid interpretation of the city's morality code. Funkhouser regularly banned or cut films that negatively portrayed authorities, ridiculed nationalities, ethnic groups, or religions or deigned to depict criminal activities. The previous year Funkhouser prohibited screenings of *The Spirit of '76* (1917) because it alluded to British crimes against American soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Both Funkhouser and the Justice Department deemed the film too offensive to the British, on whose side the United States just entered the World War, and pulled it from circulation. The Major's attempt to ban *The Little American* (1917) that same summer on the grounds that it offended Chicago's German residents, however, generated widespread backlash. *The Little American* starred Mary Pickford, the country's biggest celebrity, and portrayed a love story that many argued encouraged amity among native and German-born Americans. In it, Pickford's character fell in love with her German neighbor, whose convoluted experience abroad landed him in a prisoner-of-war camp. Pickford's character rescued him and together the couple repatriated to the United States where they were married. "I cannot pass this picture," Funkhouser insisted, "BECAUSE it would offend the Germans here, who did not start this war." Daily *Tribune* columnist Mae Tinee and several other news outlets lambasted Funkhouser's decision and the courts, which typically upheld his findings, overruled him and permitted *The Little American* to play throughout the city.<sup>84</sup>

Given Funkhouser's objections to *The Little American*—which had proven immensely popular and met little opposition elsewhere—Gest feared the censor's treatment of *Hearts*. Immediately following the film's opening night, Gest doubled down on the patriotic angle,

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<sup>84</sup>Mae Tinee, "Proceeding to Censor the Censor," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1917. "When a Chicago Police Censor Ruled Over Films with an Iron Fist," Stephan Benzkofer, *The Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 2015. Accessed online. For more on controversy over *The Little American* in Chicago see DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, 63-70.

running a bulletin that declared: “Chicago Proves Its Loyalty.” Sixteen hundred Chicago residents—“from her social elite to her more humble workers”—showed up to view Griffith’s latest triumph. The audience’s “enthusiastic approval” dispelled any doubts that Chicago was “a truly American city, full of American ideals and American love of liberty and righteousness.” Excerpts from the city’s papers further attested to *Hearts*’ value as both an instrument and measure of patriotism. The *Evening Post* boasted that the city’s most “seasoned theatergoers...[were]...swept to [their] feet and cheer[ed] like mad,” while columnist Mae Tinee claimed the theater physically shook from “enthusiastic applause.”<sup>85</sup>

Despite its unmistakably coercive tone, Gest’s publicity campaign did not stop Funkhouser from objecting to Griffith’s film. He ordered several scenes deleted, including depictions of hand-to-hand combat that resulted in the brutal stabbing of a French soldier by a German soldier. Funkhouser also took issue with *Hearts*’ portrayal of German occupation. In the film, only the town inn had been spared German shelling and so the remaining villagers—mostly women, children, and the elderly—were quartered there, while the Germans set up their headquarters in an adjoining trench. At one point, German soldiers were shown drinking heavily as a live band provided music to which scantily-clad women danced and flirted with the men. Part of the revelry included the introduction by two soldiers of two blindfolded French girls as offerings to their commanding officers. The camera cut away just as the two officers moved to attack the young girls. A moment later viewers saw the two girls dead on the floor--“sacrifices to the lust of the officers”—as all of the men vacated the room. For Funkhouser, if *The Little*

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<sup>85</sup>Display Ad 6—No title, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 26, 1918, pg. 8.

*American* presented material offensive to German-Americans, such scenes in *Hearts* were downright incendiary.<sup>86</sup>

In the end, Funkhouser proved no match against public war fever and the growing buzz around Griffith's film. Chicago residents, it appeared, were not about to be deprived of the most prestigious, authentic film about the war to date. Yet for the moment Gest deemed the arsenal of critical acclaim for *Hearts* insufficient ammunition to override Funkhouser's cuts. He thus joined forces with Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson to remove Funkhouser on the grounds that he was unpatriotic at best—or a spy for the Germans at worst. Gest wrote President Wilson directly requesting that Chicago's District Attorney investigate Funkhouser since he objected to the film "because of his German sympathies." Not only was Funkhouser disregarding the fact that *Hearts* was made on the actual "battlefields of France by special permission of David Lloyd George and the British War Office," but the scenes he wanted to eliminate were based on actual events. The only possible explanation was that Funkhouser wanted to censor an honest indictment of German autocracy. The public agreed, declaring Funkhouser a dictator who, not being "a red blooded American...objected to scenes showing what brutal dogs the Huns are." Within weeks Mayor Thompson suspended Funkhouser for insubordination and continued to cast suspicion on his national loyalty. A shady five-week trial ensued whereby Funkhouser was officially removed from his post.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Some of these scenes do not appear in any of the existing versions of *Hearts* so I have relied on the typed synopsis Griffith wrote laying out all of the original scenes. Synopsis, "Love's Struggle," D.W. Griffith Papers, Reel 3.

<sup>87</sup>"Put Funkhouser up to President," *Moving Picture World*, May 11, 1918, Vol. 36, No. 6, 862. "Theatrical News and Gossip," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1918, pg. T5. "Ask Wilson to Stop War Film Change," *New York Times*, April 29, 1918, pg. 11. J. Novack, Letter to the Editor, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 27, 1918, 8.

Gest's letter to Wilson concerning Funkhouser circulated among the nation's top papers as a thinly veiled warning to censors anywhere who dared propose cuts to *Hearts*. Therefore, when an evidently oblivious Pennsylvania censor launched similar complaints against the film, Gest became even more aggressive. He cancelled the Philadelphia premiere outright. He also initiated injunction proceedings to prevent any altered version of *Hearts* from being screened in the state. In advance of the hearing, Gest flooded the press with vicious accusations against members of the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors, "at least two of whom," he charged, were "strongly pro-German in their activities." Gest then issued an "Apology to the People of Philadelphia" for cancelling the premiere, explaining that censors evidently wanted to keep from "honest, patriotic Americans...the TRUTH" of what was happening in France. Given the circumstances of its production, Griffith's film, argued Gest, was scarcely different from published reports or newsreels, not to mention the photographs depicting German atrocities currently on display at the Vanderbilt Mansion in New York.<sup>88</sup>

The Pennsylvania newspapers agreed, and piled on their own suspicions regarding Board members' national loyalties and commitment to the war effort. "This country needs to be educated into the ways of the Huns," asserted the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "in order...[to]...fully understand the dangers it would face with a German triumph." Thus, in selectively removing scenes from *Hearts*, the censors were behaving like the Germans themselves, pursuing the logic that "right...comes from Might...against [which]...the civilized world is up in arms." In fact, the paper insisted, "the brutalities of the German armies [were the direct] result of the German theory of education which teaches absolute obedience to the orders of military autocracy."

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<sup>88</sup>Advertisement, "An Apology to the People of Philadelphia," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1918, 8.

Coincidentally, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania's State Board of Censors, Dr. Ellis Oberholzer, had received a German-style education. He must be acting on behalf of Germany.

Forced on the defensive, Oberholzer released a public statement defending himself (his name and education, in particular) and other board members as true Americans. But Gest had already won in the court of public opinion. Days later the actual courts barred censors from altering the film in any way.<sup>89</sup>

Gest and company launched similar offensives against potential censorship in Boston, New York, Cleveland, Seattle, and elsewhere. News of the risks involved in challenging *Hearts'* propriety reached every corner of the country, from the mountain hamlets of Montana to plains communities in Nebraska and Oklahoma. Consequently, *Hearts'* blustery promotional strategy became a model for other productions. Within weeks of Griffith's example, campaigns for Screen Classics' *To Hell with the Kaiser* (1918), Theodore Wharton's *The Eagle's Eye* (1918) and James W. Gerard's *My Four Years in Germany* (1918) attacked censors as pacifists or possible German lackeys. Rupert Julian's *The Kaiser, Beast of Berlin* (1918), Chester Withey's *The Hun Within* (1918), and Thomas Ince's *The Claws of the Hun* (1918) were similarly touted as tests of national loyalty. Distributors and theater managers also adopted Griffith's and Gest's method of appealing directly to Washington for pre-emptive clearance that would halt potential censorship or otherwise negative press. In places with substantial German-American populations, for example, exhibitors sought official sanctions from Washington to ease screenings of *Hearts* and other war-related productions.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>“Censors who Need to be Censored,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1918, 12; “Asks Court to Rule on Cut in War Film,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1918, 12.

<sup>90</sup> Handlers of Alan Crosland's *The Unbeliever* (1918) asked Wilson for a brief message of support to be read before the film in order to stifle any challenges to its showing. Telegram to Woodrow Wilson from Anderson



Despite its mounting prominence as *the* motion picture about the war, *Hearts* did not, in fact, have presidential endorsement. However, by early June Griffith had finally secured a screening of his film for the president. Although not the intimate setting of the White House that Griffith preferred (and that Thomas Dixon had arranged for *Birth*), the president and his family would attend *Hearts*' official D.C. premiere at Poli's Theatre. Other distinguished guests included Secretary of the Treasury William Gibbs McAdoo, several U.S. senators and their wives, Speaker of the House Champ Clark, as well as the French, British, Spanish and Italian ambassadors. Artcraft Treasury Secretary and NAMPI liaison to the Food Administration, Arthur S. Friend, arranged the event. Considering the volume with which Wilson received such invitations, Friend evidently convinced Wilson's secretary that *Hearts* was "the greatest piece of propaganda work done since the war began." No man could see the film, insisted Friend, "without wanting very much to go over and do his damndest against the Huns." Furthermore, women who saw it left theaters "feeling that [they want their] men, and all of them, to go to the Front at once." In light of such priming by individuals like Friend, not to mention media coverage of *Hearts*, expectations doubtless ran high among Poli's esteemed guests.<sup>91</sup>

For all intents and purposes, *Hearts*' screening for the First Family would be Griffith's moment of truth. But if Griffith had hoped, or even expected, *Hearts* to further ingratiate him with the president he so admired, he was dreadfully mistaken. The film so offended Mrs. Wilson

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Theatre Manager, Washington D.C., July 3, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199. *Hearts*' exhibitors in Detroit asked the president to issue his own endorsement of the film before its premiere there since he "no doubt, [knew] what a wonderful lesson this production is teaching." Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Arthur S. Hyman, June 7, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199.

<sup>91</sup>Richard Schickel and Russell Merritt assert that there was a screening of *Hearts* at the White House, but there is no evidence of this. Notice of invitation from Arthur Friend, June 1, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199. Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Arthur Friend, June 1, 1918, in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1994), Vol. 48, 315, n2. (*PWW*).

that she walked out of the theater before its conclusion. Whether or not her husband followed her is unclear; what is clear, however, is that *Hearts*' premiere at the Capitol marked an abrupt end to Griffith's relationship with Woodrow Wilson. Shortly after the event the First Lady wired Griffith personally to express her distaste and disappointment. Although her telegram is lost to historians, Griffith's immediate response indicates she took issue with the film's violence. While we cannot know what version of *Hearts* was presented at Poli's, one suspects Griffith did everything in his power to present this particular audience with his complete, unadulterated vision. That vision most likely included the graphic stabbings and scenes of attempted rape and sexual slavery to which censors in Philadelphia and elsewhere objected.

Griffith's lengthy reply to Mrs. Wilson displayed a curious mixture of apology and self-defense, calculated reassurance and desperate pleading. Clearly devastated and reeling from the disastrous reception at Poli's, Griffith professed that after "a sleepless night and restless day" he finally understood where he erred and was "already at work restudying and re-editing" the picture. While conceding that he had perhaps made some scenes too violent, Griffith nevertheless insisted that the real culprit was the American movie-going public. In order to fill theater seats, Griffith wrote, "we must give them what they want and are not always able to play our stories as we would like." Indeed, "the general public...[is]...a very very stolid hard animal to impress," Griffith insisted, and filmmakers were forced "to hit hard to touch them." He thus assured Mrs. Wilson that it was only in his sincere determination to "bring home the truth...[of the war]...in an intimate human way" that he "overshot the mark." He vowed to delete at least

two scenes depicting German atrocities and to “[leave] more to the imagination” in other places.<sup>92</sup>

However unfortunate his mistakes, Griffith was still eager for Mrs. Wilson to understand the ways in which *Hearts* had positively assisted the war effort. He offered proof, for instance, that *Hearts* boosted enlistment and helped sell war bonds and Thrift stamps. Twice (in the same paragraph no less) Griffith repeated that “practically all the press in all the places we have shown and...thousands...have...spoken of its great value.” Despite such unstinting praise from the general public, however, Griffith claimed he himself had never been satisfied with the picture. In fact, only now that he had received “sincere constructive criticism” from a “refined and sensitive spirit” such as Mrs. Wilson could he finally perfect the film. He then asked to follow up on her specific feedback by arranging a meeting between her and his representatives in Washington later that month. If he did not get *Hearts* right, Griffith pleaded, “I shall, indeed, be a very disappointed, broken individual, for my hopes and work and prayers have been so bound up in this that, unless it is pleasing in your household...everything has been in vain.”<sup>93</sup>

There is no indication Mrs. Wilson ever replied.

President Wilson echoed his wife’s silence, and Griffith never heard from him again. Russell Merritt suggests Wilson’s own disapproval of *Hearts* can be gleaned from a letter he wrote to Henry Morgenthau Sr. four days after the *Poli*’s premiere. Morgenthau was compiling a memoir about his experience as former ambassador to the Ottoman Empire which he hoped to turn into a motion picture. Wilson urged Morgenthau against it, having been “much distressed” by former German Ambassador James W. Gerard’s consent to a filmed adaptation of his memoir,

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<sup>92</sup>Telegram to Mrs. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson from D.W. Griffith, June 14, 1918. *PWW*, XLVII, 313-314.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

*My Four Years in Germany*.<sup>94</sup> There were already too many motion pictures devoted to such topics, insisted Wilson, most of which he personally found unseemly. Whatever their artistic merits, “movies I have seen recently,” Wilson wrote, “[portray] so many horrors that...their effect is far from stimulating and...[they do] not, as a matter of fact, suggest the right attitude of mind or the right national action.”<sup>95</sup> Whether or not Wilson was referring to *Hearts* specifically, he nevertheless ordered his secretary to refuse any further invitations to view war films.<sup>96</sup>

Whatever efforts Griffith made to reshape *Hearts* after the Poli’s premiere, the dye had already been cast. Griffith had used his artistic power and influence to make sense of a war that, at his most honest, he understood as senseless. In so doing, Griffith forged the enduring parameters of the American war film genre from which few productions would deviate until the Vietnam War. Building on the reputation for military spectacle he earned with *Birth* and *Intolerance*, Griffith’s treatment of the First World War in *Hearts* enshrined forever realism as the marker of a war film’s legitimacy. Whatever aspect of war a film endeavored to represent—physical, psychological, political, aesthetic—*Hearts* trained American audiences to expect at least an alleged basis in accuracy. Griffith’s well-publicized trip to the Western Front and his repeated claims that *Hearts* presented unmediated glimpses of the actual fighting lent his film an air of unmatched authenticity during the war. Furthermore, by convincing viewers they were essentially witnessing raw footage only molded into a narrative after-the-fact, *Hearts* shaped Americans’ understanding of what “real war” looked like on screen. Specifically, it cultivated a demand that war films provide spectators a visceral, vicarious experience.

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<sup>94</sup>The adaptation of Gerard’s film was notable for being the first produced by the four Warner brothers, Jack, Harry, Albert and Sam.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to Henry Morgenthau from Woodrow Wilson, June 14, 1918. *PWW*, XLVII, 311.

<sup>96</sup> Letter to Joseph Tumulty from Woodrow Wilson, August 8, 1918, *WWP*, Reel 199.

*Hearts* created a space where Americans could experience some of the sensations of war while remaining safely distant from its troubling realities. Indeed, the *New Republic* claimed it was only because *Hearts*' graphic depictions of the war were so technologically mesmerizing that a "practiced movie-goer...[would submit] himself to the nerve-racking business of sitting through [it]." A Minnesota newspaper similarly observed that *Hearts* left viewers with "a feeling of physical exhaustion and of having lived a thousand years." At the same time, complaints from Mrs. Wilson notwithstanding, most Americans felt Griffith stopped short of gratuitousness. When the Allies retook the village during the film's climax, for instance, one reviewer explained they both saved the "cruelly treated inhabitants from further wrongs" and "rescue[d]...the... audience from too much to bear."<sup>97</sup> Griffith's ability to bring war's horrors to life without overly traumatizing viewers rendered a simultaneously palpable and palatable experience of war for Americans. Because Americans were physically removed from the actual fighting in Europe, *Hearts* provided them an opportunity to indirectly participate in the conflict. More profoundly, it elevated the cinema as the chief institution through which Americans would engage war in the twentieth century.

Even the authentic footage that appeared in *Hearts* sanitized the war for American filmgoers and reinforced their distance from the conflict. After all, *Hearts*' scenes from the Western Front did not reflect combat, but they showcased the different weaponry being used to fight the war—namely cannons, artillery, tanks, and grenades. Although real, the placement of these sequences in the film divorced them from the reality of their use in battle. No one in *Hearts*

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<sup>97</sup>"D.W. Griffith Has Done it Again; 'Hearts of the World' Proclaimed Greatest of All Film Achievements," *Duluth News-Tribune*, April 14, 1918, 1. "Great Film Cheered by Crowd," *Evening Tribune* (San Diego), May 21, 1918, 2.

*experienced* modern weapons. Rather, instruments of warfare were presented in exhibition-like fashion, encouraging spectators to marvel at these technical innovations rather than contemplate their toll on human life. The glossary of military terms in *Hearts*' playbill underscored the process of visually abstracting modern warfare from its genuine context. As such, Griffith stimulated Americans' preoccupation and fascination with the gadgetry of war and suggested both could be safely and pleasurably satisfied through film. In the end, *Hearts*' visual and dramatic impact obscured Americans' recognition of film as essentially a simulation. This allowed war itself to become, through film, a malleable fantasy made for consumption and a site from which to derive the terms of U.S. national and international identity.

Indeed, by forging a relationship between Americans and war based on its presumed geographic distance, *Hearts* also fortified the paradox of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy. Specifically, *Hearts* echoed Wilson's assertion that lasting peace in the future *required* war in the present. However much Wilson disapproved of graphic depictions of German atrocities, it was largely Griffith's presentation of human suffering in *Hearts* that aroused Americans' patriotism. Witnessing the horror of what France and Belgium endured over the previous four years drove home "[what] the fighting [was]...all about." In addition to dispelling any lingering doubts about U.S. involvement in the war, *Hearts* also reassured Americans that their "country is doing its full share now toward defeating the beastly Hun." One newspaper went so far as to call *Hearts* the "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" of the war, opening American eyes "to the greatest crime in history." For all of these reasons, Griffith's film reiterated the stakes of the conflict—a "titanic struggle...to preserve liberty for posterity"—and pointed to the "arrival of American troops" as crucial to both military victory and the "future happiness" of the world. Similarly, Woodrow

Wilson argued the European War was “the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance.” It therefore demanded America’s material strength and moral superiority to end the fighting and make the postwar world “safe for democracy.”<sup>98</sup>

Together, Wilson and Griffith cultivated in Americans an abiding faith that the country’s global influence was inherently benign and an understanding that the U.S. military involved itself in world affairs only reluctantly. Through their continued propagation in American cinema, those enduring mythologies would help justify a perpetual U.S. military presence abroad and encourage a remarkable tolerance for state-sponsored violence among the broader public.

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<sup>98</sup>“‘Hearts of the World’ at Levy’s Orpheum,” *Seattle Daily Times*, July 19, 1918, 12. “D.W. Griffith’s Masterpiece ‘Hearts of the World’ Come to the Grand for One Week,” *Augusta Chronicle*, September 8, 1918, 6. “‘Hearts of the World’ Gets Approval Here,” *Wyoming State Tribune*, September 3, 1918, 5. “Wonder Film at Chatterton,” *Illinois State Register*, August 10, 1918, 6. “Grim War Pictured in ‘Hearts of the World,’ Spectacular Production,” *Oregonian*, July 29, 1918, 13. “Local Filmdom Fans Anxiously Awaiting ‘Hearts of the World,’” *Wyoming State Tribune*, August 19, 1918, 10. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14; Zieger, *America’s Great War*, 53.

## EPILOGUE

“I don’t believe Mr. Griffith ever forgave himself for making *Hearts of the World*,” Lillian Gish wrote in her autobiography. ““War is the villain,”” she remembered Griffith repeating, ““not any particular people.””<sup>1</sup> From his earliest days at the Biograph, Griffith believed that motion pictures possessed unmatched potential to bridge misunderstandings among peoples and nations. Cinema’s ability to express a “universal language,” Griffith insisted, might inch the world closer to a future without war. Yet at the height of his fame and his influence, Griffith made a film intended to ennoble and justify a war whose unprecedented horror and carnage he witnessed firsthand. While scholars have long recognized Griffith’s failure to recover the preeminence he enjoyed in the years immediately following *Birth of a Nation*, few associate his career descent with World War I itself. Rather, most accounts attribute Griffith’s decline in popularity to his stubborn Victorian sensibilities, themes that no longer appealed to post-war Americans whose attitudes and sexual mores the war had transformed.<sup>2</sup> On closer examination, however, it seems reasonable and even likely that Griffith’s participation in the First World War marked a profound betrayal of himself, a betrayal for which he never fully forgave himself, a psychic wound that he could never fully heal.

Griffith’s mother, Mary, died the same year *Birth of a Nation* was released. Throughout his childhood, she had tried (and largely succeeded) to instill in him her religious pacifism. Although his father’s military service complicated Griffith’s perspective on the subject, he nevertheless alleged a fundamental opposition to war until his death in 1948. At regular intervals

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<sup>1</sup>Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 201.

<sup>2</sup>See for instance, Richard Pells, *Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies, & the Globalization of American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 216-217, 235-236; Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 57.



in his life, Griffith recalled his father's dying admonition to "Be brave, my son, be brave," claiming that those words echoed in his mind whenever he faced a crisis. Griffith believed he had followed that advice when he undertook considerable professional risks to produce *Birth of a Nation*. Such courage seemed confirmed when his mother, dubious about the cinema, expressed pride in Griffith's achievement with *Birth* before her death.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Griffith insisted that far more often he proved incapable of bravery when circumstances demanded it. He directly addressed these self-doubts in at least two of his films, both of which treated war as their subjects. During his tenure at the Biograph, Griffith frequently worried over the social legitimacy and respectability of a career in the movies. He aired that enduring mistrust and intermittent shame in one of his most personal short films, *The Honor of His Family* (1910). The film featured a war-hero patriarch who harbored high hopes for his son's military career. When the Civil War broke out, the father proudly sent his son off to battle with the departing injunction, "Be brave, and fight." But combat proved too frightening for the son, and he deserted his comrades, seeking asylum in the family home. Because such cowardice would forever tarnish the family's honor, the father elected to kill his son rather than suffer the stain on his family's reputation. He surreptitiously placed his son's body on the battlefield along with the other fallen soldiers. The message was clear: filicide was preferable to familial shame.<sup>4</sup>

*Hearts of the World* likewise reproduced Griffith's father's last words, urging his son to "be brave," but Griffith put them in the mouth of the protagonist's dying mother. With the village under German occupation, the mother fell ill in the cellar where she and her sons were

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<sup>3</sup>Schickel, *D.W. Griffith*, 324.

<sup>4</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Honor of His Family*, 1910, Disc 2, Special Features, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, DVD, (New York: Kin Intl. Corp, 2002).

taking refuge. She used her final breath to implore, “Be brave, my boys, be brave.” A title card explained, “The boys, unwilling to suffer profanation of their mother’s memory at the hands of the Masters of War, themselves perform a sacred service.” The sons proceeded to dig a grave for their mother in the cellar, with “No requiem—save the ever-sounding guns.” Such a scene permitted Griffith to symbolically bury his own mother’s memory—and the pacifism she demanded *was* brave—in the service of wartime propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

Following *Hearts*’ release, Griffith fulfilled his contract with Artcraft, which required six more pictures. The first three—*The Great Love* (1918), *The Greatest Thing in Life* (1918), and *The Girl Who Stayed at Home* (1919)—depicted the war and Griffith churned them out rather quickly. *The Great Love* reused footage Griffith had taken of British high society, which he molded around a tale about the war’s leveling impact abroad. It also featured a climactic run-to-the-rescue to avoid a Zeppelin raid. *The Greatest Thing in Life* was more interesting. It conveyed a spoiled, rich American man’s transformation from selfish-and-cruel to sensitive-and-caring, a metamorphosis brought on by his experience in the trenches. The culminating moment of the character’s conversion came when he found himself sharing a shell-hole with an African American soldier, both of them isolated from their troops. When the black soldier offered his last drop of water to his white comrade, the white protagonist’s moral reconstruction was complete.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>As I mentioned in Chapter Five (page 271, n. 61) my reference for *Hearts* comes from printed material available in the D.W. Griffith Papers and from screening two versions of the film. Synopsis, “Love’s Struggle,” February 23, 1918; Title Sheets, 1 page, and “Cutting Notes,” July 15, 1918; Title Sheets, Revisions, Suggestions for Cutting, Separate file, n.d. July; All in *DWGP*, Reel 3. D.W. Griffith, *Hearts of the World*, 1918, 123 min., Laserdisc copied from Killiam Shows Version, c.1973, distributed by Republic Pictures Home Video, 1991, UCLA Film & Television Archive, CD2057M. D.W. Griffith, *Hearts of the World* (1918), 116 min, Reel Vault Studio, 2015, DVD purchased from Amazon.com 116. Griffith, *Hearts* (1918), 113 min., accessed through Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/HeartsOfTheWorld>

<sup>6</sup>“The Greatest Thing in Life,” *Variety*, January 3, 1919, Vol. LIII, No. 6, 38. Gish remembers movie differently, Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 202.

Griffith's final World War I film, *The Girl Who Stayed at Home*, spotlighted two brothers who joined the fighting abroad and the two women who waited for them in America. Released several months after the Armistice, *The Girl Who Stayed at Home* received minimal notices. While all three movies earned positive recognition, their primary box-office appeal rested on the lingering success of *Hearts* and Griffith's enduring notoriety.

After the war, Griffith made twenty-one more feature-length films before he quit filmmaking altogether in 1931. The last decade of his career can best be described as flailing and inconsistent, with scattered breakthroughs of latent genius. Only twice during that period did Griffith return to the subject of war, and he did so twice in the same year with *Isn't Life Wonderful* (1924) and *America* (1924). *Isn't Life Wonderful* depicted a family of Polish refugees struggling to eke out an existence in post-World War I Germany. Lillian Gish claimed the film was meant as an apologia for *Hearts of the World*, a testament to "the multitude of personal tragedies that war brings to both victor and vanquished." Griffith made *Isn't Life Wonderful* after Gish's official departure from him. She maintained that it was Griffith's only film following their professional break worthy of the director's name. Regardless, *Isn't Life Wonderful* found few audiences and lost money. Produced the same year, *America* rendered a family drama set in the midst of the Revolutionary War. Gish evidently found the film so disappointing she was grateful when Griffith did not ask her honest opinion after a personal preview. The box office reflected her disappointment and *America*, too, lost the director money.<sup>7</sup>

Griffith did manage to make one film in the immediate aftermath of the war that combined commercial viability with personal atonement. *Broken Blossoms* (1919) both

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<sup>7</sup>Gish and Pinchot, *The Movies*, 201-202; 261-262.

condemned violence and achieved Griffith's longtime artistic goal of making tragedy sell. Based on Thomas Burke's "The Chink and the Child," from his 1916 *Limehouse Nights* collection, *Broken Blossoms* portrayed an ill-fated relationship between an abused inner-city waif (Lillian Gish) and a sensitive Chinese immigrant (Richard Barthelmess). According to the film's intertitles, "The Yellow Man" migrated to London hoping to bring "the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife." Life in the London slums proved harsher than the Yellow Man anticipated, however, and he quickly slid into opium addiction. His only other respite came from observing Lucy, the motherless daughter of local boxing champion, Battling Burroughs. Despite a life of emotional deprivation and physical abuse from her father, Lucy remained gentle and open-hearted. After one particularly violent beating that ended with Burroughs throwing Lucy out into the street, the Yellow Man took her in and nursed her back to health. The two formed a special bond. When Burroughs learned of Lucy's whereabouts, he drug her back home and beat her to death. The Yellow Man arrived at the tenement too late to save Lucy. Instead, he shot and killed Burroughs before returning home to take his own life.<sup>8</sup>

*Broken Blossoms* offered an indictment of war that departed dramatically from Griffith's antiwar war film. Although the film only alluded to World War I—as when a policeman declared a recent battle "better than last week, only 40,000 casualties"—it clearly presented a dystopic vision of postwar American culture. Griffith's use of Lillian Gish most obviously signified his reversed tone. As Kristen Hatch notes, Griffith's films about the First World War depicted Gish as the emblem of ideal white womanhood. She symbolized civilization imperiled by "a corrupt,

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<sup>8</sup>D.W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1919; New York City: Kino International, remastered, n.d.). Prime Video (streaming online video).

and morally bankrupt, white European masculinity.” Her rescue by a reluctant soldier-hero in those films ensured the survival and continued progress of the white western world. In *Broken Blossoms*, by contrast, carnage and bloodshed triumphed over peace and understanding in a society obsessed with the spectacle of violence. Lucy and the Yellow Man did not survive in order to procreate and establish hope for future generations. In addition to killing off Gish’s character before she reached adulthood, Griffith also stripped Lucy of the standard motifs denoting her maternal value. Absent were the various pets on which Gish-characters always doted; rather, Lucy’s only object of affection was an inanimate doll the Yellow Man gave her—“a substitute for the child the couple will never bear,” writes Hatch. Indeed, purity (Lucy) and pacifism (the Yellow Man) had no place in a world that thrives on brutality and self-destruction.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the rest of his life, Griffith remained skeptical about the possibility of a future without war. Recalling Woodrow Wilson’s and Lloyd George’s faith that the First World War was going to “end all wars,” Griffith declared in his memoirs, “the chance for a permanent peace [remained] slight, indeed.” A few paragraphs later he called the idea pure “hokum.” Evidently by the 1930s, Griffith’s life experiences, which included witnessing the “slaughter” of World War I, forced him to conclude “that the majority of people prefer most anything to peace.” When asked his opinion about the Second World War in 1944, the then-retired director responded, “Of course this war will end, but wars [themselves] will never cease until human beings change their dispositions.” He suggested the soonest such a change might occur would be “within the next twenty thousand years.” Griffith nevertheless encouraged patience. After all, he insisted, the human race had only been “half-civilized for about five thousand years.” “We are

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<sup>9</sup>Kristen Hatch, “Lillian Gish: Clean, and White, and Pure as the Lily,” in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 69-91.

still infants, morally and spiritually,” the director warned.<sup>10</sup> It appeared that in leaving the movies, Griffith also left behind his faith in their transcendent potential to better humankind and usher in world peace. After the First World War, Griffith spoke less and less about the cinema’s magnificent power. The war had certainly disabused him of the notion that war itself could achieve peaceful ends. But whatever his apparent reversals as an old man, at the peak of Griffith’s eminence he had inextricably fused American film and American war-making. That fusion became among the most enduring, if frequently overlooked, legacies of the “Man who invented Hollywood.”

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Griffith’s World War I epics—*Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, and *Hearts of the World*—created a generic formula for American war cinema that remains in use to this day. These films announced the arrival of motion pictures as a respectable form of mass entertainment at the same time they claimed to reproduce to realities of modern warfare. Their coincidence with a distant global conflict joined with Griffith’s preeminence as a filmmaker to establish a standard of “realism” for all future productions that treated war as their subject. The burden to construct elaborate, realistic depictions of battle arguably became the most distinctive feature of the war film genre.<sup>11</sup> In fact, since Griffith, whatever level of experience a war film endeavors to represent—physical, psychological, political, or aesthetic—it must always allege some basis in reality. More than any other individual, D.W. Griffith authored the abiding contract between

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<sup>10</sup>D.W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: the Autobiography of D.W. Griffith*, ed., James Hart (Louisville: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 35-36. “Griffith Back to Live Here for ‘Half a Century,’” by James Warnak, *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1944, 9. Reprinted in Anthony Slide, ed., *D.W. Griffith: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 205.

<sup>11</sup>For standards of realism in war films see J. David Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), passim.

producers and consumers that war films must at least aspire to be authentic. His World War I epics taught Americans what to expect and even crave in representations of war on screen.

Equally important, Griffith's films cemented the basic national mythology that war cinema has drawn on ever since: the U.S. involves itself in world affairs only reluctantly and does so only when violence proves the only means to service the greater good for humankind. *Birth*, *Intolerance*, and *Hearts* made visceral the fantasy that underwrote Wilson's argument for taking America to war in 1917. Wilson argued that precisely *because* the European War was "the most terrible and disastrous of all wars" it threatened to destroy human civilization. Consequently, Europe needed America's material strength to end the fighting and required America's moral superiority to make the postwar world "safe for democracy."<sup>12</sup> The paradoxical reasoning that peace *required* war became the immutable moral logic of Hollywood war films. When a second world war broke out in Europe two decades later, American filmmakers and national leaders once more asserted that U.S. idealism *and* militarism could be mutually directed toward global redemption. Critical to maintaining this narrative is foregrounding an assumption of Americans' fundamental opposition to war, a tradition that Griffith began during World War I and from which few if any filmmakers have departed ever since.

But despite their pivotal historical significance, Griffith and the First World War receive scant attention in scholarly and popular discussions of American war cinema. Rather, World War II and succeeding conflicts dominate interpretations of the Hollywood war film's generic evolution. Film scholars and historians generally accept combat as the genre's most constitutive

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<sup>12</sup>David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14. Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 53.

feature and regard the World War II combat film as the genre's most coherent formulation. Accordingly, academic considerations of American war films recognize that different political contexts, as well as the changing nature of warfare in subsequent conflicts may demand revisions to the World War II combat film—sometimes blending other genres or creating subgenres in the process—but it nevertheless remains widely embraced as *the* generic point of departure for American filmmakers.<sup>13</sup>

The presumed centrality of World War II likewise permeates mainstream critiques of contemporary war films. For instance, in his 2015 review of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*, conservative writer David Franke observed, "These are not the times for... World War II... guts and glory film[s]. We know too much today about the real reasons our leaders drag us into wars." With that single statement, Franke captured the most enduring assumptions about American war cinema among the interested national public. First, he took the World War II combat film for granted as the traditional basis of comparison. Furthermore, by presupposing the Second World War was America's "Good War," Franke suggested it remains the only U.S. military conflict appropriate to depict through triumphalist narratives on screen. As such, Franke implied a turning point—likely a result of the Vietnam War—when American audiences began rejecting simple hero-tales of U.S. war-making and demanded Hollywood war films, at the very least, express ambivalence toward military violence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See for instance, Steven Neale, "War Films," in Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War*, 24. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 10.

<sup>14</sup>David Franke, "Was 'American Sniper' Antiwar?" March 27, 2015, *The American Conservative*, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/was-american-sniper-antiwar/>. For a thorough scholarly treatment of America's World War II "Good War" myth see Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), passim. For a recent example of the assumption that the Vietnam War marked a departure in triumphalist war narratives see Whitney Terrell, "What Should a War Film Do?" *The New Republic*, November 21, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138872/war-movie-do>.



What Franke and others miss is that conveying a basic opposition to war has always been a critical expectation of American war films. Since D.W. Griffith's World War I epics, the social and aesthetic contract between producers and consumers of American war films demands that such productions ground themselves in a fundamental aversion to war. In fact, that aversion frequently manifests itself in achieving the standard of "realism" against which *all* war cinema is measured. Indeed, in her definitive study of the World War II combat film, Jeanine Basinger explains that the genre reached its apotheosis during the war itself when productions took on decidedly darker "attitudes" toward war. She argues that films made between 1941 and 1943 tended to depict real stories about military defeats in order to inspire patriotic optimism about impending victories, while those made between 1944 and 1946 more thoroughly emphasized "despair and death, madness and loss." "Even when we survive and take our objectives [in those later films]," Basinger writes, "the overall sense is one of death and sacrifice." At the same time, such films maintained the primacy of visual realism in pursuing that moral dubiousness. That is, they carried forward the tradition Basinger claims was established in the first wave of World War II productions, of enabling viewers to "vicariously" participate in war while simultaneously educating them about "new combat processes." Taken together, Basinger concludes it was precisely *because* second wave World War II combat films applied the cinematic "creation of reality" to stories about "ordinary men and defeat" that the genre persisted long after the war. Those stories and themes transcended contemporary victories and survived the process of mythologization when the Second World War receded into the past. Consequently, the combat

film could continue to evolve as the United States fought new and different wars and endeavored to represent them on screen.<sup>15</sup>

For Basinger, from the 1940s through the 1980s the World War II combat film constructed a world of characters and situations familiar and flexible enough to teach Americans new things about their nation's military entanglements—past and present—and to address the pressures and concerns surrounding them. As Americans gain critical distance from certain wars, Hollywood tends to re-fight, and thereby *resolve* them through epic historical recreations. While current wars rage on, American filmmakers may reconfigure the genre into a different setting (in movies about professional sports, for instance), or attempt to subvert its conventions. These patterns are all aspects of the combat film's ongoing evolutionary process, begun at various points during the first five waves of the genre Basinger identifies. The point is, according to Basinger, that the nature of World War II remained fundamentally compatible with subsequent wars—even as the genre was adapted to reflect their differences—in ways the First World War did not. To begin with, World War I and World War II were cinematically incompatible with one another. They *looked* too different to belong to the same generic continuum. Battle scenes in World War I films privileged long shots of hundreds of soldiers running, charging, and dying at once, emphasizing a sense of number and impersonal death. In World War II films, by contrast, soldiers are only part of a “total war against everyone, women and children, too.” Basinger also claims “glory” was the primary issue in the first global war, while “survival” became the primary issue in the second. Conversely, my dissertation demonstrates that Griffith made alternating between the soldier and civilian experience a hallmark of his World War I films, and the practice

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<sup>15</sup>Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 122-123; 133-134; 152-153.

became a major reason for their widespread popularity. Furthermore, survival was essential for Griffith's soldier-heroes in order to disabuse future generations of war's supposed "glory."<sup>16</sup>

The World War I films Basinger treats as aberrant, rather than representative, offer some continuity between Griffith's antiwar war film and the enduring cinematic traditions she links to the World War II combat film. Basinger notes a spate of World War I films produced during the 1930s that seemed to share a bipolar attitude toward the war. In these productions "the 'glory of war'...[is] tinged with ambivalences." Without mentioning any specific films, she nevertheless explains that these ambivalent movies were characterized by contradictions: for instance, films that "[said] 'war is hell,' but [made] it thrilling to watch," or films that suggested war was fun but showed "too much violence and death" to make that the case. Ultimately, Basinger describes this "brief period" as one in which the basic antiwar attitude of prior World War I movies was carried forward, but only superficially, something she credits to the transition-to-sound and the lure of new technology to revive military spectacle. Yet that contradictory ambivalence—an apparent hostility to war combined with a celebration of its restorative possibilities for individuals and societies—has been attendant in American war cinema since Griffith. Whether it be in the reluctant hero of World War II combat films, the cynical reckoning with the grittiness and meanness of combat in Korean War films, or the focus on the disillusioned home front in films about the Vietnam War,<sup>17</sup> Americans always enter a generic world in which they comfortably oppose war. Only from the basis of that opposition can war cinema do the cultural work of genre in reconciling Americans to geopolitical realities.

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<sup>16</sup>Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 94-95.

<sup>17</sup>Basinger, 94-95. For her analysis of the combat film's evolution in films about the Korean War and Vietnam War, 176-188 & 212-219.

A look at two recent films about the U.S.'s ongoing War on Terror—now America's longest war and one from which it is difficult to imagine future critical distance—reveal the remarkable durability of the antiwar war film tradition. Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* and Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* both took the War on Terror as their subjects and adapted their narratives from factual accounts. *American Sniper* followed the legendary career of Navy S.E.A.L, Chris Kyle, who earned the title of the nation's "deadliest sniper" for killing upwards of 150 Iraqis. *Zero Dark Thirty* recounted a CIA-operative's dogged pursuit of Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, leading to his killing. From the outset, political writers adapted both films to serve partisan purposes. Yet their arguments derived from the conspicuous *absence* of overt politics in either movie. Save for fleeting references to the 1998 terrorist bombings on U.S. embassies and the attacks of 9/11, *American Sniper* focused solely on a character study of its complicated hero. Explicit political references in *Zero Dark Thirty* were limited to an opening audio montage of frantic calls during 9/11 and scenes of CIA agents watching televised news coverage documenting the transition from the Bush to the Obama Administration. Some liberals argued that *American Sniper* glamorized murder and sentimentalized the Bush era while *Zero Dark Thirty* condoned the CIA's use of "enhanced interrogation" tactics. Conservatives alleged that *American Sniper* honored Iraq veterans' complex sacrifices and that, by covering both presidencies, *Zero Dark Thirty* proved torture worked as a viable method of intelligence-gathering.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Eastwood, Clint. *American Sniper*. Amazon Prime Streaming Video. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2014. Bigelow, Kathryn. *Zero Dark Thirty*. Amazon Prime Streaming Video. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2012. Alan Duke, "Chris Kyle, America's Deadliest Sniper, Offered No Regrets," February 25, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/02/03/us/texas-sniper-killed-kyle-profile/index.html>. Larry Elder, "Zero Dark Thirty Threatens the Liberal Narrative," *Real Clear Politics*, February 7, 2013, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/02/07/zero\\_dark\\_thirty\\_threatens\\_the\\_bush-the\\_incompetent\\_narrative\\_116942.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/02/07/zero_dark_thirty_threatens_the_bush-the_incompetent_narrative_116942.html). David Bromwich, "Zero Dark Thirty and Torture," *The Blog*, January 19,

Reviewers on both sides of the political aisle, however, overlooked the shared assumptions undergirding their critique. Discussions of *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty* revolved around the films' authenticity and capacity to depict war without endorsing it. Liberals and conservatives alike praised Eastwood's unflinching consideration of the psychological and emotional turmoil his complicated protagonist endured on and off the battlefield. For instance, in one of its earliest scenes *American Sniper* placed viewers in Chris Kyle's perspective by revealing, through the his gun's scope, a child wielding a rocket launcher aimed at American troops. Other scenes depicted Kyle struggling to adjust to civilian life after several tours of duty. Both military and nonmilitary audiences commended the film's emphasis on the plight of the American soldier. Many argued such an emphasis rescued the film from conveying any discernible pro-war message. Similarly, positive reviews of *Zero Dark Thirty* highlighted its ambiguous ending. The memorable final shot portrayed the film's CIA-operative-hero, Maya, unusually stoic throughout the film, break into tears. Critics argued that *Zero Dark Thirty's* non-triumphalist conclusion offered an ambivalent and complicated moral statement concerning the U.S. War on Terror.<sup>19</sup>

Coverage of both films also underscored their accurate depiction of real events. Both directors—Clint Eastwood and Kathryn Bigelow—boasted of the measures they took to produce authentic accounts. Working with bona fide military advisors, Eastwood not only remained faithful to the character and aesthetics of the Navy's elite, but also used actual S.E.A.L.s as

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2013, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-bromwich/torture-zero-dark-thirty\\_b\\_2512767.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-bromwich/torture-zero-dark-thirty_b_2512767.html). A.O. Scott, "Review: *American Sniper*, a Clint Eastwood Film with Bradley Cooper," *New York Times*, December 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/movies/american-sniper-a-clint-eastwood-film-starring-bradley-cooper.html>.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. Mark Harris, "Inside Mark Boal's and Kathryn Bigelow's Mad Dash to Make *Zero Dark Thirty*," originally published in *New York Magazine*, December 9, 2012. Accessed via vulture.com, <http://www.vulture.com/2012/12/mark-boal-kathryn-bigelow-on-zero-dark-thirty.html>.

extras. Consequently, military snipers and other veterans called *American Sniper* “the realest portrayal of the war over there so far.” Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal asserted their film’s accuracy with even greater passion, emphasizing their privileged access to CIA memos, documents, and personnel interviews. Bigelow insisted she cast relatively unknown actors, instead of stars, for the purpose of authenticity—so viewers would develop an organic relationship with her characters. Furthermore, the impressive replica of Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound made the filmed raid so realistic that participants likened it to the chaos of actual combat. According to those on set, Bigelow directed the action like a veritable military “captain.” Finally, regardless of viewers’ interpretations, Eastwood and Bigelow insisted their films maligned war, or were at least intended to. Eastwood called *American Sniper*’s sober portrayal of soldierly torment “decidedly antiwar,” while Bigelow, identifying herself as a “lifelong pacifist,” demanded *Zero Dark Thirty* showed that the capture of Bin Laden was “not uncomplicated,” because it left viewers with the dissatisfying question, ““Now what?””<sup>20</sup>

Insisting that commercially successful war films are both true to life and convey morally ambivalent or hostile attitudes toward war is a time-honored ritual of American culture. The tradition was inaugurated not with the onset of the nation’s mythological “Good War,” but with the oft-forgotten Great War, when an American director was given free rein to tour European battlefields for the express purpose of making a motion picture. In the resulting film, *Hearts of the World* (1918), D.W. Griffith drew on familiar narrative tropes and film techniques that

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. Kate Kompas, “Veterans, Advocate, Praise Realism of *American Sniper*,” *SC Times*, January 23, 2015, <https://www.sctimes.com/story/entertainment/movies/2015/01/23/veterans-advocate-praise-realism-american-sniper/22257913/>. “What *American Sniper* Got Right and Wrong, According to a SEAL Who Helped Train Chris Kyle,” January 23, 2015, *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/american-sniper-wrong-seal-helped-train-chris-kyle/story?id=28420783>. Eliana Dockterman, “Clint Eastwood Says *American Sniper* is Antiwar,” *Time*, March 17, 2015, <http://time.com/3747428/clint-eastwood-american-sniper-anti-war/>.

proved successful in his prior epics, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). Griffith's three World War I epics laid the foundations of the antiwar war film, which continues to be the most enduring generic formulation of American war cinema to date. American antiwar war films strive to produce elaborate, realistic depictions of warfare so spectators can vicariously experience war in ways that are both palpable and palatable. The burden of realism helps war cinema continually fortify mythologies that justify the U.S.'s perpetual military presence around the globe. Indeed, one of the antiwar war film's lasting legacies has been to build a remarkable tolerance for state-sponsored violence among the broader American public.

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Both Griffith's films and the war came during profound historical transformations that constituted modern life. By the time *Hearts of the World* was released in 1918, the rise of mechanical reproduction, urban culture, and mass consumption had almost completely restructured the ways individuals perceived and experienced the world. Commercial motion pictures epitomized these changes by using machines to represent distant occurrences, prompting visceral reactions among viewers, and creating publics from these viewers. War films, in particular, and *Hearts* especially, simulated the experience of the modern urban environment as well as the modern military environment, both of which were characterized by physical and psychological "shocks."<sup>21</sup>

Griffith's war films made Americans feel as though they were experiencing war firsthand. As a result, his World War I epics indulged Americans' fascination with the gadgetry

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<sup>21</sup>Ben Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 72-99, 73, 94. See also in this volume, Richard Abel, "The Perils of Pathe, or the Americanization of the American Cinema," 183-227. Slocum, *Hollywood and War*, 16.

of warfare and their attraction to what philosopher Chris Hedges calls war's "bizarre and fantastic universe...[of]...grotesque and dark beauty." In other words, Griffith's antiwar war films helped create a space for Americans to experience some of the thrilling and terrifying sensations of war while remaining safely distant from its physical realities. This process fundamentally shaped the ways in which Americans perceive war as a category of human experience. On the one hand, it helped trigger a preoccupation with war in American life that has never fully disappeared. At the same time, Griffith's films reinforced Americans' primary association with war as a fundamentally distant occurrence. War's assumed distance has made motion pictures and other visual media the principal sites through which Americans participate in and understand war.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, the powerful mythic tropes Griffith employed in his films helped audiences *morally* distance themselves from national acts of military violence. Critical to Griffith's reputation as the pre-eminent authority of cinematic war realism were the gritty depictions of war's "horrors" and the suffering of soldiers and civilians that complemented his realistic battle sequences. For Griffith and his audiences, giving equal visual weight to war's tragic and heroic aspects balanced out or even justified the enjoyment of consuming violent spectacle. Each of Griffith's World War I films foregrounded war's undesirability. The very first title card viewers saw in the *Birth of a Nation* explained: "If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain." *Intolerance*'s premise was that war had proven the most enduring enemy to human advancement throughout history. *Hearts of the World* opened with the admonition: "God help the

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<sup>22</sup>Slocum, *Hollywood and War*, 1-13.



nation that begins another war of conquest and meddling!” and denounced the glorification of “munition makers’ profits and the personal glory of generals fighting at a safe distance in the rear.”<sup>23</sup> Griffith’s heroes were ordinary Americans who never wanted war but whom war nevertheless chose. Under the pressures of combat, they acted bravely and humanely and redirected the purpose of the fighting toward the millennial eradication of barbaric violence.

To this day war cinema offers Americans an opportunity to viscerally yet safely experience war in ways that provide powerful reassurance about U.S. war-making. Graphic depictions of the horrifying situations war creates, and the heartbreaking decisions it forces on combatants, remind Americans that whatever their politics, U.S. soldiers warrant their sympathy and admiration. The diffusion of politics in the antiwar war film similarly diffuses blame or culpability for the conflict. Furthermore, portrayals of current conflicts provide audiences with avenues of vicarious participation, allowing Americans to feel both more informed about and engaged with the human cost of military ventures. Yet, like any well-established genre, the antiwar war film endows war with a timelessness that keeps its moral dilemmas firmly within the world it creates on screen. In all Hollywood genres, even the most troubling questions find resolution. Thus American war films encourage movie-goers to engage in collective emotional torment, followed by release, if not necessarily triumph. This becomes a ritual of catharsis which both reconciles and reinforces Americans’ moral and physical distance from the fighting. The power of the movies is such that, since Griffith, war remains a malleable fantasy that dictates the terms of American national and international identity.

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<sup>23</sup>*Birth of a Nation* Title Sheets, *Hearts of the World* Title Sheets, *D.W. Griffith Papers, 1897-1954*, Microfilm Edition, *36 Reels*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), Reels 2, 3. Slocum, *Hollywood and War*, 19.