The Exemplary Practices of David Griffith,
Part 1:
Establishing Events Historically

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> The task I'm trying to achieve is above all to make you see.
>
> David Griffith[1]
>
> We see nothing 'til we truly understand it.
>
> John Constable[2]
>
> But in fact, nothing do we know from having seen it; for the truth is hidden in the deep.
>
> Democritus[3]

On 29 September 1913 David Griffith announced that he was leaving The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company for which he had worked days, nights and weekends since 1908.[4] He had directed over 425 films and supervised the work of others; his work was known and respected among his peers; he was the highest paid filmmaker in the world.

Why did he leave? Because he wanted to make longer films and had been prevented from doing so. Others were doing so: the French were trying, and the Italians had already shown films in America lasting three or four hours to startling acclaim. Griffith could wait no longer: he believed that he could do better – a conviction that deepened

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[1] Quoted in Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), page 119.

[2] John Constable as quoted in a lecture entitled "Landscapes of England, Part 6" by W. G. Hoskins, BBC II, 20 February 1976.

[3] DK, B 117 (translated by Karl R. Popper, "Back to the Presocratics", *Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 3rd Edition, Revised (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), page 153.

[4] Lillian Gish claims that the practice Griffith established for himself at Biograph of working fourteen to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, persisted throughout his filmmaking career. See Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me*, written with the assistance of Ann Pinchot (New York: Avon Books, 1970 [1969]), page 59.

after seeing CABERIA. So he left Biograph, secured the rights to Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* and began late in 1914 to make a film of it.[5]

With the release of THE BIRTH OF A NATION a year later, Griffith had established at a single stroke, by common consent and emulation of his peers, the prototype for international feature filmmaking – an exemplar of the practice of a natural art. A year later he completed INTOLERANCE, the most ambitious project in the history of filmmaking, and the film that was to entice a young Russian, Vsevolod Pudovkin, to explain what was going on and thus complete the paradigm.

> To understand filmmaking, one must understand it *historically*.
>
> To understand it historically, one must understand how its practices and precepts evolved.
>
> The evolution and refinement of the Griffith-Pudovkin paradigm encompasses the artistical core of the dominant traditions of international filmmaking, whether fictional or otherwise.

We shall begin by examining Griffith's practices before and during the making of THE BIRTH OF NATION. What had he done? How had he done it? Indeed, how was it *possible* for him to have done it, working as he did without screenplay or production notes? And what were the virtues and limitations of his achievement?

We shall then in a second lecture look at INTOLERANCE, for therein, unnoticed by its maker but perhaps not by one of his assistant directors, lay the roots of a contrary yet complementary practice.

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[5] Griffith always denied having seen CABIRIA (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914), much less having been influenced by it, despite the obvious borrowings evident to every filmmaker within the strike scenes in INTOLERANCE, for example. Unfortunately, he saw the film in the company of actress Mae Marsh who later spilled the beans. (I apologise to readers for being unable to cite my source for this remembrance.)

When making THE BIRTH OF A NATION, Griffith borrowed freely from Dixon's other novel, *The Leopard's Spots*, as well, though we have no record of a transfer of rights. See David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd Edition (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996 [original edition, 1981], page 76. Within his 'Course Guide' to the 3rd Edition, Cook cites Thomas E. Dixon, Jr., *Southern Horizons: The Autobiography of Thomas Dixon* (Alexandria, Virginia: IWV Publishing, 1984) as a general source to the page cited, so the claim may be Dixon's.)

The lectures to follow will then be devoted in larger part to coming to understand, with Pudovkin, the singular importance of what Griffith had achieved, for the tradition deriving from the archetypical existence and practices of THE BIRTH OF A NATION encompass to this day the working tools of makers of enacted films, and the counter-practices of INTOLERANCE were to undergird the traditions of those making documentaries. The paradigm has since been refined and rearticulated, and we shall be tracing the watersheds of its reformations; but its centrality has been thereby only reaffirmed.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION:
Extending the Habits of Historical Explanation

> Practice does not make perfect. *Perfect* practice makes perfect.
>
> Derek Smith[6]

By 1915 David Griffith, as desired, had lengthened his films. The thirteen reels of THE BIRTH OF A NATION required more than two-hundred minutes to view, while INTOLERANCE ran nearly 4 hours in its original release – a twenty-fold lengthening of the average twelve-minute run of the four-hundred one-reelers that he had earlier directed. Yet, so far as we can tell, Griffith worked without a screenplay or production notes throughout his career.

How was this possible? Griffith could not have worked without tangible plans if the events being constructed, reformed and reworked were not of a kind to be easily imagined and remembered – if films, that is, did not permit us to encounter events *naturally*. In this simple observation lies the key to understanding the fundamental constraint on filmmaking and its adequate maxims.

> The working judgments of filmmakers when making movies must accord with the most common perceptual patterns of our human encounters with the *natural* world.

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[6] Advice given to me and fellow bandsmen in the late 1960s by Derek Smith, internationally renowned cornet soloist with the Royal Horse Guards (the 'Blues') in England and later with the Salvation Army in England and the United States, and Bandmaster of the New York Staff Band of the Salvation Army from 1972 to 1986. His son, Phillip Smith, taught early on by him, played trumpet within the New York Philharmonic Orchestra from 1978-2014 (principal trumpet during the later part of his appointment).

The histories of filmmaking, contrary to those of any other art, are replete with examples of powerful works having been created by filmmakers who had never before made a film, for as Douglas Sirk was later to remind Rainer Werner Fassbinder, filmmakers make films *with* people and events rather than *about* them and can thus bring to bear upon their creations all of their capacities for imagining and remembering natural things.[7]

Nevertheless, Griffith could not have constructed THE BIRTH OF A NATION had he come to film fresh off the farm in 1913. Griffith was no theorist manufacturing events to comply with manifestos, and he had no mentors to guide him. All he had were the *habits of practice* to which he had accustomed himself in five years of hard filmmaking and the natural base upon which they had been established.

Griffith, after all, had directed over four-hundred films in five years, all but two of them a single reel in length, and all of them, thus constrained, similarly shaped and structured. However natural the process, he had accustomed himself as well through thoughtful testing and repetitive practice to think and act when making a film in ways by now nonconscious and habitual.

> If he wished to extend the length of his films and solve the problems that would bring, he had to do so by enlarging and reforming the *habits of practice* to which he was accustomed.

What were those habits? And how did he enlarge them? To trace the evolution we must first look more carefully at how Griffith wished to lengthen his films, for by so doing he was to encounter a two-fold problem to which he had previously paid scant attention. How he solved both aspects of it, and why he had never before had to attend to it, will be enlightening.

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[7] Douglas Sirk: ". . . you can't make films about things, you can only make films with things, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood . . .", as recalled in 1971 by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Cited within an article entitled "'Douglas Sirk: From the Archives' by Manuel Betancourt, December 22, 2015" as reproduced on the website of *Film Comment* on 03 March 2019 [https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/sirk-from-the-archives/]. Betancourt says that . . . "the 1972 edition of the Edinburgh Film Festival programmed a 20-film retrospective, which Sirk attended as a guest. . . . The retrospective] led to the publication of a book of essays edited by Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday. Featuring mostly new materials, the collection also reprinted a translated version of Fassbinder's 1971 tribute to the German director whom he'd admired and emulated throughout his own work." The quoted phrase is from a paragraph in translation of Fassbinder's tribute that follows.

The Problem

By 1913 Griffith was determined to make longer films. Innovation, however, was not part of the goal. It never occurred to him to conceive of his task as other than to lengthen the kind of film to which he was accustomed to making and hence to expand the scope of his prior practices. What kind of films had Griffith been making?

Every film Griffith had ever made, and indeed every film he was ever to make, consisted of a causally intelligible sequence of events encompassing people interacting with one another. A film of this kind could therefore be lengthened in two ways: either by including more events or by including within each event more details of it. Griffith did both – and thereby encountered a problem with two aspects to which he had never before had to attend.

> **Strategical Aspect**: When one begins to think of a story involving interesting people, one soon finds oneself imagining fascinating and even enlightening situations in which the people might find themselves – encounters with their environment, often encounters with each other – and weighing how they would act, how others would react to them, and what would come of it if prolonged. Unfortunately, the imagined situations are frequently redundant or incompatible with one another: many would require diverse precedents and consequents to be intelligible.
>
> **Tactical Aspect**: Similarly, if one begins subsequently to think of any one of the situations envisaged above, one soon begins to imagine diverse possible ways of encountering it as well – diverse subevents, many redundant or incompatible with others, encompassing diverse details that might or might not be worthy of attention.

We must trace Griffith's answer to both aspects of his problem, for they appear distinct in practice. Nevertheless, his solutions are at root aspects of identical practices, just as the questions are at root aspects of an identical problem, namely, how to choose from among a proliferation of imaginable events those worthy of inclusion within the film? Or succinctly, since the wheat comes already mixed with the chaff,

How to eliminate the garbage?[8]

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[8] Maxims of craft, as Leonardo da Vinci affirmed in 1566, can only be used by working artists to determine better what to avoid, for artistic creation accrues to the reformation rather than the origination of works. Origination accrues to hard work, immersion in the problem and pinwheel generation of material. Art then comes from the reforming of it. Leonardo's

Over five years of directorial choosing, Griffith had, of course, solved many instances of this problem every working day. Until 1913, however, he had never before had to *attend* to this problem! Why not? How had he been able to solve it unintentionally before? And how now was he to solve it in general? Let's look at Griffith's pattern of causal sequencing prior to 1913.

Causal Sequencing in the Biograph Era

> I want a film which begins with an earthquake and works up to a climax.
>
> Samuel Goldwyn[9]

Every Griffith film began by introducing us to a group of people in an historical context (however imaginary) within which they had been acted upon and were about to act in response. Every Griffith film ended with a climactical event that had been precipitated in larger part by the actions of the people to which we had been introduced at the beginning and in whose result each of them had a culminating interest. (The climax

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admonitions are worth remembering. From Section 18 of the "General Introduction to the Book on Painting", Volume 1 of the two volumes of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, compiled and edited by Jean Paul Richter (New York, New York: Dover Publications, 1970 [1566], page 18:

> "These rules are of use only in correcting the figures; since every man makes some mistakes in his first compositions and he who knows them not, cannot amend them. But you, knowing your errors, will correct your works and where you find mistakes amend them, and remember never to fall into them again. But if you try to apply these rules in composition you will never make an end, and will produce confusion in your works.
>
> These rules will enable you to have a free and sound judgment; since good judgment is born of clear understanding, and a clear understanding comes of reasons derived from sound rules, and sound rules are the issue of sound experience – the common mother of the sciences and the arts. Hence, bearing in mind the precepts of my rules, you will be able, merely by your amended judgment, to criticise and recognise everything that is out of proportion in a work, whether in the perspective or in the figures or anything else."

[9] Reputed to have been said by Samuel Goldwyn. See page 100 of "Part Two: The Hollywood mode of production to 1930" by Janet Staiger in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985)

consisted often of a chase and its aftermath within which every principal was either chasing, being chased or awaiting its outcome, or sometimes two or all three of them). The middle of every film showed us how the events of the beginning led to the ending.

Unexceptionally, therefore, a Griffith film prior to 1913 consisted in order of the following events.

An Exposition ... a Development ... a Climax.

Recalling that his movies were only a single reel in length, we may now understand why Griffith's problem had never required much thought before either by others or by himself. The shortness of the films, given the constraints of causal continuity, filtered out garbage automatically.

After all, the events of a film of one reel could take no more than twelve to fifteen minutes to encounter depending upon how quickly the projectionist cranked the projector in action scenes. Simply to show the continuity of *any* plausible climactical event required four to five minutes; simply to introduce *any* group of principal persons required another four to five minutes; and to show *any* credible development from the latter to the former required another four to five minutes.

Given the constraints of causal continuity, therefore, one simply hadn't time enough within a one reel film to accumulate garbage through subtle errors of selection. Were even ten percent of a one reel film to be contiguously slack, at most ninety seconds of dullness would occur, a gap easily traversed by even those members of the audience with the shortest attention span.

> Were ten percent of a two-hundred minute movie to be contiguously slack, however, the twenty monotonous minutes could stop the film dead in its tracks.

By 1914, however, Griffith was about to lengthen his films fifteen or twenty fold. How could he do this without encompassing garbage?

> What patterns of practice could he use when deciding which scenes to shoot to ensure that only necessary events would be encountered?
>
> What patterns of practice could he use when shooting scenes to ensure that irrelevant detail was excluded?
>
> What patterns of practice could he use when interweaving independent stories to ensure culmination of effect?

Let's look firstly at Griffith's strategy for selecting and sequencing scenes and secondly at his tactics for photographing them, concentrating on THE BIRTH OF A NATION. We shall then look to INTOLERANCE to see what we can learn of Griffith's techniques for interweaving stories.[10]

The Strategy for Sequencing Scenes

Prior to 1914, Griffith had taught himself to sequence the scenes of a film so that his audiences might encounter the causal precedents of an event prior to its consequents. An event, in short, was to be preceded by all and only those events necessary to comprehend it causally.

But now a deeper sense of the necessity of the strategic patterning to which he was accustomed becomes clear. Prior to 1914, a Griffith film consisted of a climax rendered causally comprehensible as simply as possible. It consisted, that is, of a climax preceded by *all and only* those events necessary to enable the viewer to explain it causally. Since the sequence of events within the film had to begin somewhere, it opened with an *exposition* encompassing characters and events whose immediate causal situation and import could be registered 'at a glance' as quickly and readily as possible. The causal lines opened within the exposition were then refined and extended within the events of a *development* to culminate in the *climax*.

By 1914, that is, Griffith was accustomed to designing films having a beginning, a middle and an ending – causally construed with sequencing intact – in accordance with the traditional terms of dramatic construction.

Exposition ... Development ... Climax.

Crucially, the beginning and middle were *means* to the end. The climax of a Griffith film, as in every 'well-made' drama, the standard against which all possible prior events were to be tested. No matter how fascinating or enlightening an imagined event might be if conceived on its own, it could have no place within the film unless it were causally necessary to our understanding of the climax.[11]

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[10] See "The Exemplary Practices of David Griffith, Part 2: INTOLERANCE, 'a Drama of Comparisons'" elsewhere within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

[11] To ensure the causal relevance of every event within a drama, Ibsen had recommended long before Griffith that playwrights begin their work by writing the 'climax' of whatever drama they were trying to construct. One needn't do so, of course, and we have no

To Griffith, therefore, the events of a film had to culminate causally in a climax with all others being encountered beforehand – as simply and directly as possible – as means to that end. It was the ending toward which one was driving and with which the fullest attention of one's audience must be engaged were it to derive fullest benefit from experiencing the unfolding of the film, for as Pudovkin would later remind screenwriters when designing their screenplays,

> A scenario has always in its development a moment of greatest tension, found nearly always at the end of the film. To prepare the spectator, or, more precisely, preserve him, for this final tension, it is especially important to see that he is not affected by unnecessary exhaustion during the course of the film.[12]

Griffith's strategic problem is now apparent. In a short film he could be assured that the full attention of his audience would be brought to bear on the climax, for the events it had encountered were insufficiently long and detailed to be fatiguing. Were he to lengthen his films to several hours, however, he could not guarantee sustained and culminating attention by relying simply upon the short-form sense of design to which he had become accustomed.

How, then, did Griffith solve the problem? By extending the limits of the strategic habits of thought to which he was accustomed to encompass a key feature of theatrical design long practiced by playwrights.

Prior to 1914 a few filmmakers, Griffith among them, had tried to make films of two reels, sometimes more. Distributors resisted, however, and the reels were at first distributed one-per-week. When the companies began finally in 1911 to release all if the reels at once, theatre owners would typically show them a reel at a time with a break in between, a custom that continued into the mid-teens. Filmmakers, in turn, responded by structuring each reel to have a point of highest interest at its end, thus sustaining audience attention. As Capt. Leslie Peacocke, an experienced scenarist wrote in 1913,

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evidence of where Griffith began when first envisaging his movies, but he assuredly worked hard to encompass within them and in causal order all and only those events necessary to registering the climax as powerfully as possible, realising in practice that until one has determined how one's movie is to end, one has no tool with which to test earlier events for relevance.

[12] V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique & Film Acting*, translated by Ivor Montagu (London: Vision Press, 1968 [1929, 1933]), page 74.

> The plot of a two-reel must necessarily be stronger than that of a one-reel story and must carry a big "punch" to close the first part of the story and then work up stronger and stronger toward the climax.[13]

Griffith had worked in the theatre, written plays and knew full well that a play of several hours had to be carefully wrought to sustain audience interest throughout and then culminate at the climax. The theatre was an art requiring audiences to perceive causal events unfolding in time. In was in this sense comparable to the cinema, and its strategies for sequencing of scenes were therefore appropriateable. Griffith took from theatre the answer to this problem.

What was theatre's answer to the problem of sequencing scenes? If a playwright wished to ensure that an audience was attentive at the climax of a long drama, it was necessary to restructure the drama to permit the audience to *relax* momentarily prior to its experience of the climax – to permit it, as it were, to withdraw from the drama momentarily and regather its attentive energies in preparation for the finale. But how could this be done without breaking irretrievably the audience's sense of the causal and thus emotional continuities of the drama?

By Griffith's time, theatre's answer was clean and direct.

> Prior to an audience's experiencing the climax of a drama, an *intermission* was scheduled during which time the members of the audience could relax more-or-less completely: they could talk of other things, have a drink, perhaps smoke – clearing their minds of concentration.

Following the intermission, the audience, refreshed, would then be able to confront the climax fully attentive.

Where, then, should the intermission fall in the causal sequencing of the drama? and what would have to be done to the events of the drama itself to accommodate the interruption? Given the three-part sequence of a causal drama, the intermission had to come between the end of the Development and the Climax if it was to serve its purpose of relaxation before the latter, for the audience would have no need of an intermission following the Exposition but every need of one prior to the Climax.

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[13] From a quotation found in William Lord Wright's "For those who worry o'er plots and plays", *Moving Picture World/Motion Picture World*, Volume 8, Number 13 (27 September 1913), page 22, as reproduced by Kristin Thompson on page 176 of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, op. cit..

an Exposition . . . a Development . . . [an Intermission] . . . and the Climax.

The interpolation of an intermission, however, required of playwrights a rethinking of the internal sequencing of scenes, for one had to ensure that the members of the audience would not become so completely disengaged by it that re-entry into the experience of the drama was thereafter precluded. The simplest answer available to playwrights was two-fold.

> Conclude the Development just prior to the intermission with an intermediary climactical event, a *Crisis*, containing such portents of impending action that the members of the audience would rush back into the theatre after the intermission to see what would happen; and then
>
> Restart the drama just after the intermission with a *Re-exposition* – a reintroduction to each of the principal characters enabling the audience, quickly yet deeply, to reengage with them.

The Crisis, therefore, was an event drawing together the causal threads that had been exposed in the drama to that point, but inconclusively so. By experiencing the Crisis, an audience was to anticipate the scope and limits of the coming Climax of the play, gathering a sense of what it would encompass but without as yet being able to grasp what shape it would take. Who would be meeting whom, where, for what cumulative reasons and to what conclusive effects would come clear only as the Climax unfolded. As Francisque Sarcey had insisted long before,

> An audience by means of the Crisis of a play ought for the first time to sense the coming of an 'obligatory scene' of the play – the Climax of the play as *anticipated* inexactly rather than as it will later and conclusively be experienced.[14]

As Griffith began work on THE BIRTH OF A NATION, the paradigmatic sequencing of the scenes of a drama had long and for good reason exemplified a tripartite structure.

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[14] See William Archer's commentary in Chapter XIII ("The Obligatory Scene"), pages 225-259 of his renowned *Playmaking: a Manual of Craftsmanship* (Boston, Massachusetts: Small, Maynard and Company, 1912], and also John Howard Lawson's later exposition in Chapter IV ("The Obligatory Scene") of his *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (New York, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936. Archer encapsulates Sarcey's notion of the 'scène à faire' as ". . . one which the audience (more or less clearly) foresees and desires, and the absence of which it may with reason resent", adding (page 227) "Sarcey says 'It is precisely this expectation mingled with uncertainty which is one of the charms of the theatre'.".

Exposition through a *Development* into the *Crisis*

[Intermission]

Re-exposition into the *Climax*

(the audience experiencing by the Climax
the realisation of the 'obligatory scene'
whose promise had been anticipated
through the Crisis)

Griffith, to solve the strategical problem that he faced when making longer movies, assimilated the working solution of playwrights. Though never insisting that the presentation of a movie be interrupted by an actual intermission, he nevertheless structured his films as if one were occurring, permitting the experience of his audiences to culminate, relax and culminate again as required.

Every film of his from THE BIRTH OF A NATION onward consisted of five distinct movements, articulated and distinguished in accordance with the above sketch. The five movements, thus construed, came in two parts.

> The first part consisted of a CRISIS preceded by whatever it took to render it intelligible:
>
> an Exposition . . . a Development . . . a Crisis.
>
> The second part consisted of the Climax as anticipated within the Crisis, and thus preceded by whatever it took to render it intelligible.
>
> a Re-exposition (developing into) . . . the Climax

Simply put, Griffith had extended the simple structure upon which he had earlier relied when making shorter films into a longer one having two parts of identical form, the first a means to the second, each designed to establish causally its culminating event, and all events in either part were necessary to that end.

We shall summarize below some of the virtues of Griffith's strategy and also some of the difficulties that it entails from which Griffith was not immune. Generally speaking, however, its cardinal virtue was transparent:

> A lengthy story, if causally encountered and experienced with utmost elegance and power, will encompass in order five moments.

I hear an echo: 'But surely, this is only a convention! Godard said so!' To this contention we shall return. But first we must look at Griffith's tactical practice.

The Tactic for Photographing Scenes

To have uncovered the causal paradigm for encompassing scenes solved half of Griffith's problem. The other half remained to be resolved.

> How ought one to photograph the scenes themselves if one wished to enable audiences to attend increasingly to significant parts of them?
>
> How, for example, could one enable an audience to attend to the expression on a person's face as they watched a parent die without destroying the spatial and temporal continuity of the larger causal event of which the person's facial response was but a part?

Griffith answered the question by developing a routine when shooting scenes from which he seldom varied. The routine was to be amplified, simplified, condensed by later filmmakers, but at its heart lay the core of all later causal tactics to achieve similar ends.

What did Griffith do? Imagine that Griffith was to direct a typical scene that began with a single person in a room into which others were to enter, all were to interact and then some and thereafter all were to depart. Imagine further that the person in the room was to be embodied by Lillian Gish, and that her sister, Dorothy, was to be among the actors entering later. Griffith would first rehearse the actors, integrating and solidifying their movements and achieving a unified continuous performance within the space exactly as a theatre director would have done. In the back of his mind, however, was a simple constraint: how could the action be arranged to permit the entire scene to be photographed in long shot from a single camera position?

> When satisfied with the performances, Griffith photographed the scene in a single long shot.[15]

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[15]Lillian Gish notes that Griffith had become accustomed to this practice during his first days at Biograph when only one take of a scene had been permitted to save filmstock. Gish, op. cit.. [Page number missing. TBA]

If most of the scene involved only two or a few actors moving within a more restricted space, Griffith might then re-photograph that portion of the scene, again from a single camera position but now from a closer position encompassing only the subspace within which the two or few actors were performing (that is, in medium long shot).

Griffith then sent his actors home and had his cameraman (Bitzer, usually) develop, process and print the roll of film. In the evening he then projected the long shot print of the scene for himself (and the medium long shot, if taken), noting where his attention was being drawn as the scene unfolded. If, for example, he found himself attending in part of the scene only to the interaction between Lillian and Dorothy Gish, the remaining aspects of the event being registered only peripherally, he kept note of it; and if he found himself during parts of the scene attending solely to the responses of Lillian, those of Dorothy remaining unobserved, he noted that as well.

> The next day he recalled his actors and had them re-enact only those parts of the scene to which he had found himself attending in detail the previous evening, photographing them in closer medium shots, or even close-ups, matching the restricted compass of his earlier experience of them.

By the end of the second day, Griffith had accumulated not only a long shot of the entire scene but medium shots of parts of it, closer shots of parts of the latter and, rarely but crucially, close-ups of parts of these — all but the long shot reflecting, in order of detail, parts of the whole to which he had testably had his attention drawn while experiencing an unfolding of the scene as projected. When editing the footage later, Griffith simply removed from each shot those parts of the scene photographed in closer shots, inserting the latter where the former had been. The result when projected was remarkable!

> Audiences were introduced firstly to the event from as broad a perspective as possible, enabling them to establish immediately its spatial, temporal and hence causal identity. Then, as the event unfolded, they were enabled to attend in increasing detail to narrower aspects of it, as the unfolding of the event itself would have drawn their attention to those aspects, without loss of causal identity, for they had seen nothing in detail to which their attention had not already been drawn within a wider perspective.

The typical sequencing of a Griffith scene, therefore, moved from an establishing long shot into closer shots as the space narrowed within which the attended action took place, back into wider shots as the space required widened, and eventually back into the long shot as the scene closed, re-establishing the broadest causal identity of the situation prior to transferring our attention to a subsequent scene.

ES (LS) . . . MS . . . CU . . . ES (LS)

For evident reasons, the task to which Griffith put the long shot – the task of *establishing* a broad causal perspective on an event to enable us later to attend to parts of it without causal discontinuity – was immediately captured in the vocabulary of filmmaking: a long shot became known, aptly and precisely, as an *establishing* shot.

From this patterning of shots in sequence, filmmakers were to develop a range of derivative tactics to achieve the same ends without having to shoot on multiple days. DeMille pioneered the technique of shooting every scene simultaneously from multiple cameras, some recording in long shot, others in medium, closer and close shots, a modification that was to prove especially handy when covering scenes difficult to re-enact (battles, for example, or when using actors like Sinatra who could only get it right on the first take!), or when covering events live that could never by re-enacted. Kurosawa, for example, photographs all of his battle scenes with multiple cameras in this way; and the typical coverage of in-studio television talk shows employs several cameras, even when taped, one covering the set in long shot, others focussed on the host and the guests in closer shots, the director simply returning to the establishing long shot whenever the focus of attention becomes equivocal.

In every instance, the goal is to deliver to editors the materials with which to enable an audience to encounter details of a scene in causal context – extending the technique that Griffith had originated.

The Virtues of Griffith's Practice

> Griffiths' genius lay in his understanding of the interrelationships of separate shots, each contributing to clarity and pace, adding substance, mood, and emotion to the bare story outline.[16]

What had Griffith achieved in THE BIRTH OF A NATION? Let's summarize the virtues of his practice, strategically and then tactically:

1. Griffith's strategy of double establishment (establish firstly a Crisis, then a Climax by means of the Crisis) ensured that no irrelevant scenes would occur within the film. Every scene could be tested against one or the other or both, and if causally unnecessary, would be cut.

[16] Gish, op. cit., page 61.

2. His concomitant five-part sequencing permitted him to solve without ado a problem over which many lesser filmmakers have often stumbled, namely the relative duration of scenes. As Griffith saw, if one measures one's scenes solely against the standard of what is required for the Climax to be causally intelligible (and intermediately the Crisis), each of the five divisions of a film will occupy roughly equivalent screen time. The Crisis of the film will thus conclude roughly 3/5 of the way through.[17]

One may therefore think of a film's structure as flexibly one might a drama: either, with Horace, as consisting of five acts; or of three acts (Exposition-and-Development, Crisis, Reexposition-Climax), the first balancing the last; or of two acts, the first occupying roughly 3/5 of the whole. Nothing important hinges on the differences between them. The important point is the one that Griffith recognised.

> The goal of a film is to establish its Climax causally, and the most elegant way of doing this is firstly to establish causally a Crisis through which the Climax can be anticipated as an 'obligatory scene'.

3. Tactically speaking, every aspect of a scene shown in detail within a Griffith film had been causally established within a prior wider shot, just as every aspect of the events that we encounter in detail within the natural world have been spatially, temporally and hence causally established. Our encounters with the 'subevents' of Griffith's scenes were therefore as *perceptually accurate* as he could make them.

> a. As in a drama by Sophocles, Shakespeare or Ibsen, we never encountered anything *puzzling* by means of a Griffith film – no unidentifiable objects in closer shots awaiting clarification through longer shots – for that is not how we attend to the objects of the natural world. Griffith would have castigated those filmmakers who persist in attracting the attention of an audience to events by rendering them puzzling by presenting them in closer shots prior to longer ones, for the puzzle derives from a trick of presentation rather than from the event itself. Deeply puzzling events may well and usefully be encounterable by means of film (events, that is, that defy easy assimilation even when encountered in accurate causal order), but to confuse these with events whose trivial identities have been masked through perceptual trickery would have been, for Griffith, counterproductive and unethical — and he would have been right on both counts.

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[17] See the essay cited in footnote 10 above for more on the consequences of this achievement.

b. Yet we saw by means of a film by Griffith all and only those things to which our attention would naturally have been drawn in causal order, for Griffith had constructed the ordering by testing it against his own perceptual responses.

c. And we saw everything that we saw, not only in correct causal order but in accurate relative *duration* as well. We were enabled to attend to aspects of events as long as necessary, but no longer than as necessary, exactly as in the natural world.

4. Faces were seen in close-up within a Griffith film only rarely, for only rarely did Griffith find himself attending solely to a face when projecting the longer shots of a scene to himself. Furthermore, as we may now notice in retrospect, a face was almost always presented in close-up within a Griffith movie only when person was reacting to something about them. Griffith was here acknowledging unwittingly an aspect of our perceptual instincts of which I shall elsewhere have much more to say, for, as Dudley Nichols was later to insist when contrasting film to theatre, "film is the medium of reaction. We need only note here that *the reaction shot* was to prove central to filmmaking, as it was to Griffith, and that it has no counterpart in still photography, theatre or the novel. Implicit in Griffith's tactic, therefore, was something fundamental but only later understood.[18]

were seen in close-up within a Griffith film only rarely, for only rarely did Griffith find himself attending solely to a face – and, as we may now notice in retrospect, almost always only when person was *reacting* to something about them. Griffith was here non-consciously reflecting an aspect of our perceptual instincts of which we shall have much to say later, for, as Dudley Nichols was to remark explicitly, "film is the medium of reaction". We need only note here that *the reaction shot* was to prove central to filmmaking, as it was to Griffith, and that it has no counterpart in still photography, theatre or the novel. Implicit in Griffith's tactic, therefore, was something fundamental but only later understood.

[18] See the essays on distinguishing screenwriting from playwrighting, and in particular those listing Dudley Nichols among their 'Subjects', encompassed elsewhere within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

5. Griffith's strategy of double establishment, and his tactic of sequencing shots in causal order, derive their power, not as *conventions*, but as reflections of how events must be encountered to render them causally explicable. Griffith had sensed intuitively perhaps the deepest constraint on filmmaking, namely that such sequences were no more conventional than our instinctive way of perceiving events in the natural world. (I shall address this point below.)

The Limitations of Griffith's Practice

The virtues of Griffith's practice in THE BIRTH OF A NATION were extraordinary. We must note as well, however, limitations of which Griffith remained unaware and that subsequent filmmakers were to work hard to remove.

A. Griffith developed his practice by extending those to which he had become accustomed when making his shorter films. The time available within a short film for Exposition and Development rendered complex characterisation infeasible. The 'characters' of the people that audiences encountered by means of his films had to be immediately and consistently obvious. As causal agents, therefore, they had to remain much the same from the beginning of a movie through the middle to its end (the good, good; the pure, pure; the funny, funny; the evil, evil; the mixed, a mixed bag).

Griffith consequently never recognized, much less overcame, his predilection for using only predictable personalities (that is, stereotypes). Unfortunately, a person credibly stable in the short run may become incredibly stereotypical in the long. Much of Griffith's failure to connect with audiences in later life was due, I suspect, not so much to a detachment from the world about him, as some have claimed, but rather to having become accustomed early on to seeing only stable persons as filmable — a working prejudice unsuitable when making longer films of depth.

B. A Crisis had to engage viewers deeply enough to ensure continuity of causal interest upon relaxation of attention, provoking them to anticipate and re-engage with the unfolding narrative immediately thereafter. A Crisis, therefore, had to be a riveting event of causal culmination comparable in this respect to the Climax itself, and the temptation to render it too 'climactic' was often irresistible to Griffith. With the fall of Babylon in INTOLERANCE, for example, or Bastille Day in ORPHANS OF THE STORM, Griffith's crises rendered his climaxes anti-climactical!

C. Griffith's technique of shot selection by previewing was expensive to employ in two senses.

> Firstly, actors had not only to act but re-enact events on subsequent days, and full crews were required for shooting on both days. In Griffith's era, when actors and crew were paid peanuts, this was of little concern. When, however, an industry has degenerated to the point where some actors are earning a million dollars a day (as I write), and the costs of crews prohibit any rehearsals, much less adequate ones, two days work rather than one is frowned upon.
>
> Secondly, the tactic required duplicating events in multiple shots precluded the preselection and photographing of subevents only within the narrower shot later to be used. Was it not possible to predict to which aspects of an event one's attention would be drawn prior to shooting? Griffith would have said 'no' – one must experience the event in long shot to note accurately to which subevents one's attention is drawn. As we shall see, it was upon precisely this point that Pudovkin was to refine Griffith's tactic, permitting the full use of screenplays and the consequent economies of making and eliminating one's mistakes on paper prior to production.[19]

D. Although we have remarked on the perceptual accuracy of Griffith's tactic of shot selection, one must note that his vestigial habit of requiring an entire scene to be photographed firstly in long shot *from one camera position*, and thus his habit of picking narrower shots only as his attention was drawn to their possibility *from that one perspective*, led him – especially within the earlier of his long films – to position the camera when photographing closer shots upon exactly the same axis as it had stood when photographing the long shot. The result was a less natural cut than had the angle of approach varied to garner the clearest aspect. (By the time of ORPHANS OF THE STORM (1922), Griffith had apparently himself noticed the aberration and was varying his angle of approach accordingly – most of the time.)

E. As is everywhere apparent, Griffith's practices evolved without evident reflection. He was able to refine his practices piecemeal and thereby to improve how he did what he did, but unfortunately he seems never to have *known* what he was doing and hence seemingly had little if an idea *why* his practices worked when they worked, or why they sometimes failed. He simply did not work 'that way', and quite possibly resisted doing so. He thought about what he was doing as he was doing it within a

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[19] Note as well that maintaining continuity of costume, action and expression of actors over two days is much more difficult than over one. Mismatches of each were thus common in all of Griffith's films, early and late.

particular situation, but, to the best of our evidence, seldom if ever generalized about it either to others or to himself.

Events and their Narratives

We know now how Griffith did what he did in THE BIRTH OF NATION to lengthen his films. At root, however, what had he done? How ought we to understand it? Why, most broadly construed, were his practices to prove to be so singularly useful to filmmakers thereafter when making movies?

Let me begin with a simple example, thankfully imaginary. I walk at end of day into a parking garage to retrieve my automobile, only to discover that the entire left side of it has been smashed in. Angry and exasperated, I want to know 'why?' Note carefully, though! Although the devastation to the side of my car was caused doubtlessly by the impact of something crashing against it, I am not seeking an explanation of the physics of how large bodies may impact upon one another. Rather, I want to know who did what in what order and for what reason within the garage that resulted in the damage to my vehicle.

> I want to know, that is, the *history* of the unfolding of the events within the garage that resulted in the damage to my car.

In the early 1970s, Arthur Danto convinced me that telling *stories* is the paradigm of how to explain events *historically*.[20] Rather than being one among several models by which to explain changes historically, narrative is *the* model of historical understanding. If we wish to come to understand better how an event unfolded historically – be it the western world during World War I, the institution of slavery in the United States or a life lived – we must come to understand better

> how it was at one time,
> how it was at a subsequent time, and
> how it changed *as it changed* from the one to the other way of being.

[20] Arthur Danto, *The Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1965). [Danto reissued the text later as Chapters I-XII of his *Narration and Knowledge* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

To explain an event historically, therefore, is to provide an adequate narrative account of a *change* in something – to tell one of its possible *stories*.[21]

Every film that Griffith ever made consisted of a climactical event preceded by all and only those events required for us to understand how it came to be. But we must be more precise. A Griffith film began by exposing us to all and only those events that would suffice to enable us to identify the complex historical situation within which his principal people found themselves. By the end of the film the situation had changed, and we, by means of the middle, had witnessed how it had changed as it changed. Precisely put,

> Griffith was enabling us to encounter in order all and only those events required for us to construct upon later reflection *an historical explanation* of how and why a situation had changed.

When witnessing THE BIRTH OF A NATION, we are encountering neither a narrative nor a story. Rather, we are perceiving and therewith attending to a *sequence of events* that has been structured to enable us, upon reflection, to construct for ourselves diverse narratives by which to explain the changes of situation and character that we have encountered.

Whether or not the narratives that we construct to explain the events that we have encountered when witnessing THE BIRTH OF A NATION are adequate to the task, or whether or not the narratives that we construct are adequate to explain anything of the histories of related events we have not encountered (for example, the historical changes wrought in the United States by its Civil War), are questions of deep and abiding interest. To ask such questions, however, presupposes the point to which we are here attending.

> To witness THE BIRTH OF A NATION is to encounter a sequence of *events* rather than a *text about* those events!

Griffith structured the events that we encounter, and because he structured them as he did, we can construe them narratively and hence construct explanations of their history. Griffith's structuring of the events, however, was constrained as *events* must be constrained rather than *texts* about them.

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[21] One may bring to bear upon the telling of it, of course, whatever masses of fact may contribute better to it (thus the diverse schools of historical research and writing). But the story is what distinguishes the facts relevant to the explanation from others.

We may therefor drive yet another nail into the coffin of *conventionalism*. A Griffith film, broadly viewed, encompassed three parts — the first expositional, the second developmental and the third climactical. It encompassed, that is, a beginning, a middle and an ending. Neither the substance nor the sequence of those events was accidental or conventional, however, politically or otherwise (Godard to the contrary notwithstanding), for by means of a movie we encounter a changing event. And to observe a changing event as it changes is to observe earlier aspects before later ones, and a first before the last. As Virginia Woolf sagely said, "Without beginnings and endings there can be no stories", and she was not referring to the beginnings and endings of the stories but rather of the events of which the stories tell.[22]

We may therefore drive yet another nail into the coffin of *conventionalism*. A Griffith film, broadly viewed, encompassed three parts – the first expositional, the second developmental and the third climactical. It encompassed, That is, it encompassed a beginning, a middle and an ending. Neither the substance nor the sequence of those events was accidental or conventional, however, politically or otherwise (Godard to the contrary notwithstanding). Both inhere in the *natural fact* that we humans, able only to encounter events finitely, were to be enabled thereby to witness *a changing event as it changed*. And to observe a changing event *as it changes* is to observe earlier aspects before later ones, and a first before the last. As Virginia Woolf sagely said, "Without beginnings and endings there can be no stories" – and she was not referring to the beginnings and endings of the stories but rather of the events of which the stories tell.

Well-prior to 1914, therefore, Griffith had begun to sense how films must be constrained if we are to be able to witness by means of them changing events as they change. He with others had thus begun the evolutionary task of understanding and manifesting how films must be constrained nonconventionally if they are to enable us to encounter changing events as they change. Put bluntly,

> How filmmakers have constrained themselves when structuring their films to enable us to encounter *changing events as they change* is no more *conventional* than the structured yearly changing of the seasons, the daily rising and setting of the sun or our dying after being born.

Many recent commentators upon filmmaking have presumed from political prejudice that filmmaking must be a linguistical endeavour. Convinced beforehand that linguistical behavior is conventional, they have wanted to believe so with respect to filmmaking as well, for both competencies would then be matters of choice subjectively determined by political whim. As Eisenstein learned long ago, however, it is a mistake to believe so

[22] Citation missing. [TBA]

with respect to the making of movies, and, had he thought with sufficient care about the linguistical behavior that he had once tried mistakenly to impose upon it, he might well have realised that the latter is no more conventional than the former.[23]

> For how I must speak to be understood by other speakers of English, for example, is no more a convention of my world than the colour of the leaves on the maple trees in autumn. Both are unavoidable and equivalently *natural facts* of my world, and I can no more unilaterally change one than the other.

Yes, of course, how one ought to speak English may change over time through the concerted activities of the lot of English speakers, intentioned or otherwise, just as the evolving activities of humans, intentioned or otherwise, are sadly changing the colour of the autumn leaves of the maples of Ontario and elsewhere. Neither the one nor the other, however, are conventional, and the constraints imposed by the tools and materials of their crafts upon artists at work in the world, filmmakers among them, are no more conventional than those imposed upon us by other aspects of the natural world within which we 'live, move and have our being'.

How quickly filmmakers comprehended in practice the correctness of this aspect of Griffith's work! One can only marvel at the *conventional* prejudices that have prohibited comparable comprehension by so many commentators upon filmmaking who have never bothered to learn how to use the tools and materials of the art of which they speak. No wonder the histories of thinking about filmmaking are replete with misapprehensions of it.

[23] See the two essays on Eisenstein elsewhere within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.