The Exemplary Practices of David Griffith,
Part 2:
INTOLERANCE – 'A Drama of Comparisons'

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Part 2:
INTOLERANCE, 'A Drama of Comparisons'[1]

All that is best in the Soviet Cinema has its origins in INTOLERANCE.

The school of Griffith before all else is a school of *tempo*.

Sergei Eisenstein[2]

To filmmakers, the practices that Griffith had used when making THE BIRTH OF A NATION were revelatory. Someone had for the first time done something far better than other filmmakers had been able to do and better than they had been planning to do. Almost at once Griffith's peers retrained themselves. The practices of a new art had been established.

To many filmmakers and viewers, however, THE BIRTH OF NATION was important for other reasons as well, for the events of the film were not only cinematically startling but a virulent, anachronistic and racist southern parable of the Civil War and its aftermath. The anger of many viewers, especially in northern cities, was unmistakable. Griffith, however, was astonished! Audiences, as he saw it, were not objecting to his racist ways (for which he never apologized nor seems ever to have recognized as abhorrent, compounding the racism inherent in the film) but were rather behaving *intolerantly* to the events he had shown.

Here, at the paradigmatical beginnings of filmmaking, we witness an aspect distinguishing it from all other artistical endeavours and reconfirming yet again its unique *naturalness*.

> Filmmakers, like other artists, must know *how* to do what they do, but, unlike other artists, knowing *how* seldom if ever entails knowing *what* they have done having done it.

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[1] The subtitle "a drama of comparisons" was Griffith's own for the film. See the lead titles of INTOLERANCE.

[2] The first sentence is taken from Yon Barna's *Eisenstein* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1973), page 74; the second from Eisenstein's *Film Form* as translated by Jay Leyda (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), then reprinted by Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company [Cleveland, Ohio and New York, New York], fifth reprinting, 1963), page 235.

Filmmakers, unlike playwrights, directors or actors in the theatre or authors, poets, composers or painters, are almost always the worst people to ask if one wishes to come to understand what they have accomplished. Why? Filmmakers, like other artists, must be highly adept in the handling of the tools that they use to create their works, but they require no more than commonplace sophistication during their making to distinguish success from failure, for the events being generated and recorded for presentation to viewers, however uncommon, are as *naturally* accessible as those of everyday life.

Makers within other arts must bring to the 'act of creation' a heightened awareness of how the events that they are making *differ* from those of our world as commonly encountered. Novelists and poets must acquire a keen eye for nuances of how words and sentences of their languages will appear as texts, playwrights, theatrical directors and actors must develop a secure sense of how the sights and sounds of their productions on stage will resonate within their auditoria, and composers of string quartets or sonatas, for example, must learn to recognise the merits of shadings of musical change. Viewers and listeners of their works benefit from them, in turn, in proportion to their own developed capacities to sense the same subtleties.

Makers of movies, on the other hand, must often strive hard to restrain their inclinations to over-assess the events that they are occasioning before the camera, for those events, to be powerfully encountered by viewers, must will be encountered by viewers as "in life itself".[3] The events of powerful movies need never have been understood by their makers in any other sense. No wonder so few of them can speak with insight thereafter of what they have done or how they have done it, especially when they have done it well.

I was first struck by this difference when Michelangelo Antonioni came to New York upon release of RED DESERT. A reporter at the press conference described an event in the film and then asked Antonioni whether the character played by Monica Vitti within a notable scene was motivated in a certain complex way that he proceeded to describe at length. Antonioni listened attentively, paused for what seemed an eternity and then said, "That's interesting, I hadn't thought of that. Maybe that *is* what's bothering her."

If one had queried Tolstoy about what was bothering Anna Karenina as she threw herself beneath the train, or asked Shakespeare what was bothering the blinded Lear as he thought himself about to go over the imagined cliff, either author would have had a clear and coherent answer. Perhaps not definitive; perhaps other answers were possible; but the events could not have been *described* without at least a single coherent account in the mind of the author. The gulf separating either from Antonioni,

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[3] The phrase is Eisenstein's when WI , page 18

one of the more sensitive filmmakers of the 1960s, is remarkable! Antonioni was no less sensitive a human being nor less an artist. He simply did not need to know, given the tools of the cinema, what Tolstoy or Shakespeare would have had to have known to have caused us to attend to the event if envisaged by them.

Despite having made the film, Antonioni was never, and never pretended to be, an expert on the events that he had enabled us to encounter. Moreover, had he tried to become an expert on such events prior to making his film, he quite likely would have failed when making it, and had he tried to so thereafter, he might well never have made an important film again.

> The distance that one must keep from the events that one is constructing as a filmmaker when working 'on location' – the 'view from the margins' that one must maintain to be able to distinguish more from less useful events – is most often incompatible with expert analysis.

We never comprehend natural events as we encounter them, and filmmakers must strive to protect that open-endedness when working with them. One of the goals of sequencing events cinematically, indeed, is to ensure that avenues of understanding remain unrestricted by the structuring of them, for to do otherwise is to create illustrated lectures without the lectures – to have placed events within sequences that reduce rather than augment their potential meaningfulness, to have created wholes of lesser weight than their parts and thus to have committed cinematical suicide slowly!

Nowhere was Griffith's sureness as a filmmaker more apparent, therefore, than in his bewilderment at the angry responses to THE BIRTH OF NATION. He had managed to make an engrossing film *within his control yet beyond his understanding!* And that, in the deepest sense, is worth pondering, for within no other art is such incomprehension a common concomitant of greatness. Therein lies a clue to the very identity of the cinematical endeavour.

Unfortunately, Griffith decided to confront his critics by giving them an illustrated lecture on *intolerance* – a film of colossal scope and intricacy showing the evil consequences of intolerance throughout history. One year and an estimated two million dollars after he made THE BIRTH OF A NATION, Griffith released INTOLERANCE in 1916 to the universal yawns and puzzlement of nonfilmmakers. Even the acknowledgment of filmmakers was guarded. Although INTOLERANCE was examined frame-by-frame by many filmmakers (in the Soviet Union especially), it simply confirmed to most what THE BIRTH OF A NATION had already shown, namely how shots and scenes should be sequenced *within* 'stories' to preserve causal continuity. Most filmmakers remained as

puzzled as others by Griffith's attempt to tell multiple 'stories' within a single film. No wonder few bothered to assess the novel *strategy* that he had contrived to do so!

Had they done so, their understanding of the possibilities of filmmaking would have jumped several generations, for, despite himself, Griffith had once again worked through a strategical problem ahead of its time, though neither he nor his audiences would be aware of it.

Strategies of Comparison

Griffith's contemporaries failed to comprehend how singular and significant the structural innovations of INTOLERANCE were to prove. I remain to this day puzzled by their incomprehension, for the nature and scope of the *strategical* problem Griffith had taken upon himself to solve in INTOLERANCE was unprecedented and, one would have thought, of obvious oddity.

> How to establish a culminating continuity within a film encompassing causally *unconnected* events?

Within THE BIRTH OF A NATION, Griffith had shown how to sequence causally connected events of extensive length and, long before, had become notorious for his ability to maintain strategical momentum while cutting back-and-forth between spatially disparate yet causally *connected* events. What kind of strategy, however, could one possibly use to unify events in a film which were causally *unconnected?* Or, more generally construed, what kind of continuity could there be in a film if not *causal?*

Inexplicably to me, the *strategical* puzzle of INTOLERANCE passed unnoticed by filmmakers, and hence its deeper lessons went unlearned. Had filmmakers thought carefully in 1916 about what Griffith had attempted to achieve strategically in INTOLERANCE, and how he had tried to achieve it (whether successful or not), many later innovations in film design would have come earlier. But no one looked carefully, ignorance reigned, and misconception abounds to this day.

Everyone 'knows', for example, that INTOLERANCE consists of four interwoven but causally unconnected sequences of events, or 'stories'.

>   The fall of Babylon;
>   The later life of Jesus;
>   The persecution of the Huguenots; and
>   A contemporary (1916) melodrama
>   (later released on its own as THE MOTHER AND THE LAW).[4]

Except that it doesn't, as even a cursory glance at the screen time allotted to the 'stories' will confirm!

INTOLERANCE, as one would expect, is a film of five parts: a *quasi* exposition-development-crisis (Act I, as the titles inform us), followed by a *quasi* reexposition-climax (Act II), the first Act occupying about 3/5 of the whole.[5]

>   [Why do I speak of *quasi* units? Because, as we shall see, what are being
>   'exposed', 'developed', brought to a 'climax', etc. within them are the
>   four 'stories' themselves rather than the characters or events integral to
>   each of them.]

If, however, we examine the print of INTOLERANCE that Griffith himself gave to the Museum of Modern Art and compare the screen time that he allotted to each of the four 'stories' (timed at 16 frames per second), we discover wondrously that neither of the two Acts of his film encompassed four 'stories' of *equivalent* dramatic weight.

	Act I:	Act II:
1916:	40 minutes	24 minutes
Babylon:	38 minutes	24 minutes
Huguenots:	8 minutes	10 minutes
Jesus:	9 minutes	(80 seconds)
Total:	94 minutes	59 minutes[6]

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[4] I shall abbreviate the names of the 'stories' within the tables to read 'Babylon', 'Jesus', 'Huguenots' and '1916'.

[5] See page 12 below.

[6] The timings within the tables given in minutes *and seconds* are accurate; those given in minutes alone are subject to the slight discrepancies inherent in rounding off. Note, as well, that Griffith's print ran 158 minutes (2 hours and 38 minutes) rather than the 153 minutes indicated by the 'Totals' of the tables, for it included explanatory titles introducing each of the two Acts and the concluding 'heavenly epilogue' omitted from my accounting of the comparative screen time allotted to the 'stories' alone.

Within Act I, two *major* 'stories' (those of 1916 and of Babylon) are distinguished by their screen time from two *minor* ones (those of the Huguenots and of the late life of Jesus); and most astonishingly,

Within Act II, one of the two minor 'stories' of Act I (that of the late life of Jesus) has *vanished* (or, more exactly, having an allotted screen time of only 80 seconds, has disappeared as a dramatically effective component of the Act)!

Why did Griffith eliminate the events of the late life of Jesus from Act II of INTOLERANCE by allotting only 80 seconds of screen time to it within an act lasting more than an hour? We cannot be certain, and more than one reason may have constrained him (he may perhaps have run short of money or came to believe that he need not show a story that everyone knew, or both). All we know for sure is that, as he recut the film recurringly, paring it down step-by-step in response to persistent dissatisfaction, he found it convenient to maintain the durational integrity of only three of his four sequences.[7]

Strategically, however, as we shall see below, Griffith derived an enormous advantage from having dropped one of the minor 'stories' prior to attempting to conclude such a film!

Griffith was therefore remarkably attuned to the strategical game that he was playing, regardless of whatever compulsions compelled him to play it. Let's see how.

The structuring of INTOLERANCE required the allotting of screen time to four causally unconnected 'stories'. Griffith selected one of them to serve as the keystone of the film – the 1916 melodrama with whose contemporary events he could expect his audiences to engage most directly. He was to use it to open and close the film, having used the other 'stories' in larger part as contrasting means toward understanding it.

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[7] Because of Griffith's continual pruning of the film, there never was a definitive version of INTOLERANCE. Early prints reportedly ran over three hours; later ones substantially less. Griffith donated several prints of the film to the Museum of Modern Art, and the one that I used for my timings, etc., has two virtues: it was assuredly one of the versions in which he himself had more rather than less confidence, and, although containing fewer scenes than the print available to Theodore Huff from which he prepared his 'shot-by-shot' analysis, it contains all of Huff's sequences in order. The print herein described is thus a later version of Huff's print, and one refined apparently by Griffith himself. [See for comparison Theodore Huff, *INTOLERANCE: The Film by David Wark Griffith – Shot-by-Shot Analysis* (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966]

The goals of Griffith's durational strategy with respect to the screen time of the parts and whole of the movie may therefore be summarized as follows:

> 1.   To distinguish the screen times allotted to the three major parts of the film to accentuate the overall tripartite dramatic structure to which he was accustomed (the longer first and third parts bracketing a shorter second part with the main division of the movie – the conclusion of its 'crisis' – occurring about 6/10 of the way through).

> 2.   To distinguish within the three major parts of the film the screen times allotted to the major and minor 'stories', thereby accentuating their status as major or minor; and

> 3.   To contrast recurringly and appropriately the screen time and placement of the 1916 melodrama, the keystone of the structure of the film, with each of the other 'stories', thus ensuring its cumulative priority.

Griffith decided, in other words, to structure INTOLERANCE primarily by comparing and contrasting the *relative screen time allotted to each of its four 'stories'*(!) rather than by comparing and contrasting them with respect to the nature or importance of the events comprised within them.

How did he do it? Let's look at each act in turn.

Act I

Griffith begins Act I with a quasi 'exposition' in ABA form.[8] The opening and closing A sections 'expose' and contrast the two major 'stories' (those of 1916 and of Babylon) bracketing a section B within which each of the minor 'stories' (those of the Huguenots and of Jesus) are introduced in contrast to the keystone 1916 'story'.[9]

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[8] When summarising the structuring of the screen times of the movie on page 12 below, I shall for comparative clarity refer to this 54-minute section as 'Part I'.

[9] The durations in the table are given in minutes:seconds.

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         1916:      5:00
         Jesus:     2:40     }   12:00
    Huguenots:      4:25

         1916:      3:05
       Babylon:     9:10
         1916:      7:00     }   30:00        }   54:00
       Babylon:    10:35

         1916:      6:40
         Jesus:     3:35     }   12:00
    Huguenots:      1:45
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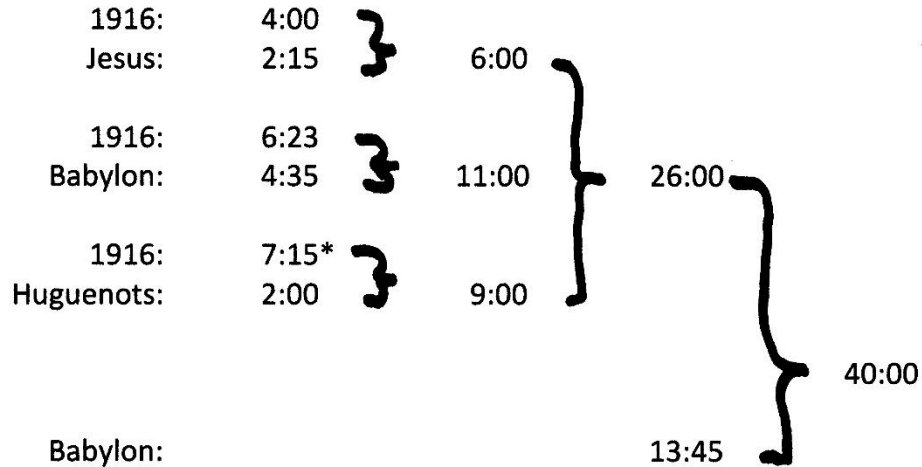
From the time of the Greeks, artists of the western world have used ABA forms when structuring works that unfold in time, and it is unsurprising that Griffith should in turn have done so. It is remarkable, however, how precisely he has balanced the screen times of the major sequences.[10]

Griffith has now introduced us to his four 'stories'. Equally importantly, however, he has shown us by the tripartite ABA pattern of his *quasi* 'exposition' *how* he intends to structure the movie in whole and part by balancing the screen times of their appearances, as he confirms immediately by sequencing of the *quasi* 'development' that follows.

Wishing to conclude INTOLERANCE with the multiple chase that resolves his keystone 1916 'story', Griffith uses the principal battle scenes from his *other* major sequence (Babylon) to effect the *quasi* 'crisis' of the film, saving the climactic actions of 1916 for its end. The *quasi* 'development' is then structured as a condensed mirror-image of the ABA pattern with which he opened the film.[11]

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[10] For further ponderings on the use of ABA structures by filmmakers, see in particular the section entitled "The Practice Reconstrued" of the essay "Stroheim's Tactics of Comparison" within the 'Screenwriting, 1905-1930A Griffith & His Students' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, and the relevant essays within the sub-section 'Screenwriting, 1940-1960 Uncoupling Movies from Novels, Plays, Poems & Stories' of the same Collection.

[11] In the midst of the fourth of the 1916 sequences lasting 7 minutes and 15 seconds and marked with an asterisk (*) within the table on page 9 below, Griffith inserts a single shot lasting only 18 seconds of Jesus with little children that, from its brevity, is being used solely as a

1916:   4:00   ⎫
Jesus: 2:15   ⎬   6:00 ⎫
                                              ⎪
1916:   6:23   ⎫   ⎪
Babylon: 4:35   ⎬   11:00 ⎬   26:00 ⎫
                                              ⎪   ⎪
1916:   7:15*   ⎫   ⎪   ⎪
Huguenots: 2:00   ⎬   9:00   ⎭   ⎬   40:00
                                                         ⎪
                                                         ⎪
Babylon: 13:45   ⎭

Act I consists, therefore, of a *quasi* 'exposition' in ABA form, followed by a *quasi* 'development' of condensed but identical form and an lengthy *quasi* 'crisis' devoted exclusively to Cyrus's initial futile attempt to storm the walls of Babylon.[12]

Act II

Were Griffith mimicking the strategy of THE BIRTH OF A NATION, we would now expect him to begin Act II with a quasi 're-exposition', reintroducing us to each of his 'stories' before moving toward the climax of the film. And so he does – *except* that he has now eliminated one of his minor 'stories', the story of Jesus, leaving only the Huguenot 'story' to be contrasted with the two major 'stories'. The problem is obvious: how structurally to contrast the two major 'stories', and to contrast each of them with the one remaining minor 'story' of the Huguenots? scant bare scanty

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comment upon the prior events of 1916 rather than as an integral durational unit. I have therefore omitted it to clarify the overall ABA structural strategy of the encompassing sequence, as I shall do with the bare 80 seconds of such shots from the 'story' of Jesus that Griffith inserted without dramatic import into three of the 1916 scenes of Act II marked with asterisks on tables on pages 10 and 11 below.

[12] When summarising the structuring of the screen times of the movie within the table on page 12 below, I shall for comparative clarity refer to this 40-minute section of Act I as 'Part II'.

Griffith solves the problem by inverting the minor-major-minor pattern of the initial *quasi* 'exposition' of Act I to major-minor-major, while contriving to begin and end the *quasi* 're-exposition' of Act II with the keystone 1916 story – as he did in each of the sections of the *quasi* 'exposition' of Act I and as the film itself will begin and end, reminding us once again that the overall aim of the design of the film is to focus upon it. Note, again, the durational balancing achieved!

1916:	1:45		
Babylon:	10:00	11:45	
Huguenots:		4:30	28:00
Babylon:	4:25		
1916:	7:45	12:10	

To conclude the film, Griffith will again compare and contrast his three remaining 'stories'. Before doing so, he allows them to 'develop' one last time by expanding the pattern given above.

1916:	2:10*		
Babylon:	0.35		
1916:	2:00	8:00	
Babylon:	0.57		
1916:	2:25		
Huguenots:		1:10	14:00
1916:	1:40		
Babylon:	0.55		
1916:	1:30	4:75	
Babylon:	0.20		
1916:	0.20		

One can now understand the suggestion made earlier, namely that dropping one of the four 'stories' encompassed within Act I of the film from Act II would prove useful to Griffith when ending the film. To wrap things up, Griffith must pair off each of his three remaining 'stories' in a final pattern of contrast while maintaining the relative durational priority of his two major 'stories', the positional priority of one of them (the keystone 1916 story) and the culminating momentum of the causal events within each. Had Griffith four 'stories' left rather than three, he should have had to establish *six* sequences to accommodate the possible pairings while satisfying the above constraints – a nearly impossible task. Having dropped one of the 'stories', however, he needs to contrast only the remaining *three*, ordering them to preserve the major-minor contrast between them and concluding with the keystone 1916 story as the 'climax' of the movie.
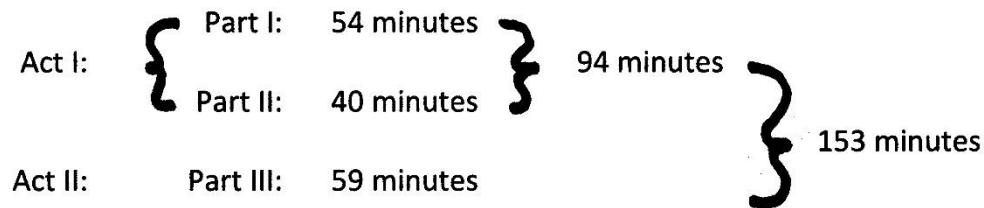
Firstly, therefore, he contrasts his remaining minor 'story' (of the Huguenots) with each of the major 'stories' (with 'Babylon' first then '1916'), after which he concludes the movie by contrasting for the last time his two major 'stories' ('Babylon' and '1916'), culminating with his keystone 'story' of 1916.

Huguenots:	0.45			
Babylon:	1:15			
Huguenots:	0:45		4:00	
Babylon:	0.40*			
1916:	0.30			
Huguenots:	0.35			
1916:	0.42		3:00	17:00
Huguenots:	1:04			
Babylon:	0.40			
1916:	0.30			
Babylon:	6:20		10:00	
1916:	2:20*			

Act II consists, therefore, of two movements, a *quasi* 're-exposition' of 28 minutes balancing a *quasi* 'development-with-climax' of 31 minutes, having a total duration of 59 minutes.[13]

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[13] When summarising the overall structuring of the screen times of the movie within the table on page 12 below, I shall for comparative clarity refer to the 59-minutes of Act II as 'Part III'.

The overall design of INTOLERANCE rests upon the comparative screen time of its parts. units. Strategically speaking, therefore, the film is an ordering of ABA sequences mirroring in its smaller parts the balanced ABA durational structuring of the whole.

Act I: { Part I: 54 minutes } 94 minutes } 153 minutes
        { Part II: 40 minutes }

Act II: Part III: 59 minutes

How aptly Griffith apportioned the screen times of the 'stories' of INTOLERANCE! Using neither stopwatches nor footage counters, he balanced the relative durations of his 'stories' intuitively, adjusting as he watched and trimmed the footage. What is so astonishing, of course, is how precisely he managed to align them. Note in particular:

> The pairing of the screen times of the first and third sections of the *quasi* 'exposition' of Act I (page 8 above) before and after a contrasting second section, mimicking formally the structuring of the comparable sections of the *quasi* 're-exposition' of Act II (page 10 above);

> The balancing of the screen times of Part I (of Act I, page 8 above) and Part III (Act II, pages 10 and 11 above) before and after a contrasting Part II (of Act I, page 9 above), as summarised in the table atop this page; and most remarkably,

> The consequent placing of the main division of the film (the *quasi* 'intermission' between Acts I and II) at *exactly* the 'Golden Mean' of its length [the 94 minutes of Act I being .614 of the 153 minutes of the movie as a whole] .[14]

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[14] I shall say nothing here of how and why artists have found the 'Golden Mean' to be so useful throughout the evolution of painting, architecture, drama, musical composition, literature and filmmaking, though I have discussed it elsewhere. See the enquiries under the subject within the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York. [https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35202]

The Hints of INTOLERANCE

We now know *how* Griffith sequenced INTOLERANCE. But what kind of cinematical 'continuity' is this? What purpose did it serve? When the movie ends, the events *within* each of the 'stories' have come to a causal close, but to what structural 'conclusion' have we come by way of Griffith's careful balancing of the unfolding screen times of the 'stories' themselves? Indeed,

> How within a movie could a sequence of events *causally* independent of one another *culminate*?

I shall address this question when discussing the later comparative tactics of Stroheim, the one filmmaker who just might have cottoned on to what his former boss was doing in INTOLERANCE.[15] But the core of the answer may be simply summarised.

Imagine, for a moment, that you and I have paused to observe a pair of elderly human beings seated side by side on bench in a park – an event of a kind commonly encountered by us all. Two kinds of questions are interlinked within our minds, however unwittingly.

> How are they comparable to other human beings whom we have or might have encountered instead? (How do they appear to be similar or distinct from them? Older versus younger, richer versus poorer, healthier versus more sickly?)
>
> How and why have they come to be sitting on the bench, appearing as they do? and what may be the consequences of it? (What events before and after, that is, caused them to be where they are as, and what events may follow from it?).

From our *Gedenkenexperiment* a simple lesson may be drawn.

> To comprehend more fully the events that we encounter,
> we must register and revise recurringly how we may
> better *identify* them as distinct from others and, having
> done so, how we may better fit them within the *history* of
> the world causally construed*.

Griffith's two-fold aim when structuring the events of INTOLERANCE ought now to be apparent. By accentuating structurally the similarities and contrasts between his four

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[15] See footnote 8 above.

'stories', he hoped to deepen our understanding of *intolerance* itself while concurrently 'telling' the tale of each of them to cumulative causal effect.

The step beyond THE BIRTH OF A NATION that Griffith took when making INTOLERANCE, however unwittingly, is remarkable. The events in part and whole of THE BIRTH OF A NATION were intended to be narratively construable. So were the local events of INTOLERANCE, each construed narratively within its one of the four causally unconnected 'stories'. The 'stories' of INTOLERANCE were themselves, however, causally unconnected. No event in either of them was a cause of an event in any other.

Griffith had shown strategically, therefore, that films could encompass causally unconnected events. The practical implications of his showing went unrecognized, however, both by Griffith and by his peers, for each of the causally unconnected events were themselves causal sequences.

> 1.   Griffith never imagined, therefore, that a film could be tactically noncausal as well as strategically so, and hence never foresaw that a film could be *both tactically and strategically noncausal*, and hence uniformly so. The notion of making a film whose events were comparatively encounterable, and cumulatively so, with no causal interconnections between them at all, never entered his mind.

> 2.   Consequently he never foresaw as well that a film might be uniformly and cumulatively *both causal and comparative* – its events might satisfy simultaneously and sequentially the constraints of both construals. He didn't notice that each of the local events of INTOLERANCE, after all, were being encountered both causally and comparatively. Each was being narratively placed within its story and yet was serving as part of larger event serving a comparative purpose. It would have taken but a further small step to realize that every event encounterable by means of a film, large or small, like every event encounterable in any other way, may be construed as a means to causal or comparative ends, and indeed simultaneously so.

Slowly but with increasing assurance filmmakers were to rediscover and expand both of the above possibilities. Documentarists were to pursue comparative strategies while makers of feature films were to refine causal ones, and eventually films were to be made integrating both.

Looking backward, however, the possibilities were inherent in INTOLERANCE. Had Griffith's goals obliged him to use *tactics* of contrast and comparison within scenes, he might have foreshadowed the whole of the core practices of documentary as well as

feature filmmaking and therewith an integrated approach to the making of both causal and comparative films.

But he came close enough as it is, opening a window onto the construction of noncausal continuities and therewith onto two of the root problems of film design in general.

Problem 1.   Balancing the Screen Times of Scenes

As every film editor can attest, a shot having too few or too many frames can impede or even destroy the continuity of a sequence. Much of what editors do, consequently, is to assess the opportune screen time of shots, remaining aware as well of how long a film – as cut – is running. (Nothing quite focuses the minds of its makers as realising that a film running one-hundred-and-ten minutes must be reduced to ninety-minutes by tomorrow morning!)

Few filmmakers or editors of my acquaintance, however, are aware when making a movie of the relative screen time of its scenes, and this to me is astonishing. The events of a film, like those of a piece of music or a drama, take time to encounter, and editors, as noted above, re-assess often the screen time of shots. Surely, or so one would think, the relative screen time of scenes would be of equal importance. Indeed, how is it *possible* for powerful films to be structured without gauging how much time its scenes are running relative to one another?

Griffith had shown filmmakers by the making of THE BIRTH OF A NATION how to approach in general the problem of allotting screen time to the events of movies, and his example brought with it an almost automatic solution to the question – with respect to *causal* movies, that is. Partitioning a movie into five-parts, echoing the traditional five-part sequencing of a drama, will almost always bring with it a five-part equivalence of their screen times.[16] And if, when making a causal movie, one adheres firmly to the establishing structure of its scenes when trimming them to fit within its five parts, their screen times will be determined almost automatically by the events within them.

By making INTOLERANCE, however, Griffith went a step further, though few filmmakers noticed, for implicit in the strategic structuring of the movie were two hints about the proportioning of the parts of movies that were later to be great consequence.

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[16] See the first of the lectures on Griffith, "The Exemplary Practices of David Griffith, Part 1: Establishing Events Historically" within the 'Screenwriting 1905-1930A Griffith & His Students' sub-section of 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35753]

1.   The problem of allotting screen times to scenes when making *non-causal* films will lie at the very foundation of how to construct them with culminating power.

2.   Solving the problem of how best to sequence the scenes of a *non-causal* film, unlike those within a causal movie, will never in itself determine how much screen time to allot to them.

Griffith, in short, glimpsed the extraordinary structural possibilities of noncausal filmmaking and of the central problem that would accrue to the making of them, namely how to allot screen time to their parts. When one sheds the constraints of causality, one enters a world akin to that of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms wherein not knowing the relative durations of one's parts, large or small, is a prelude to disaster.

Problem 2.   Deriving Meanings from Contexts

Filmmakers learned from THE BIRTH OF A NATION how to establish later events by former ones, and thereby how to integrate the strategic and tactical practices of making causal movies. A film designed to convey most simply, elegantly and powerfully the *history* of the events within it would consist, as Griffith had shown, of a 'climax' preceded in order by all and only those events required to establish it causally, just as the scenes within it would consist (at the limit) of a 'close-up' preceded in order by all and only those shots required to establish it causally.[17]

THE BIRTH OF A NATION drew the attention of filmmakers to a distinctive feature of how the members of an audience perceive movies that is fundamental to understanding how they ought to be made, but only the non-causal sequencing of INTOLERANCE drove the point home. Contrary, for example, to how one may encounter a photograph apart from others, events within movies acquire *meaning* only within the context of the events that precede and succeed them. A shot, scene or sequence of a movie, if lifted out of context into isolation, can have no meaning (or worse, may seem to have one contrary to the one nuanced by its cinematical environment). Events encountered within movies acquire significance only with respect those encountered before and after them.[18]

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[17] For a fuller discussion of this lesson learned by filmmakers from Griffith, see the lecture cited in footnote 14 above.

[18] For this reason I refused steadfastly throughout my teaching career to show *excepts* from movies within any of my classes. [Note added 03 May 2019]

Many maxims of filmmaking, long familiar to filmmakers, are reflections from the surface of this principle (among the simplest: after action, show reaction), but its depths may perhaps best be sensed from a notable later practice of Robert Flaherty, a documentary filmmaker attuned to its consequences.

Flaherty, after spending many months shooting in distant locations, would hire an editor to assist him in reducing the footage to a film. Frequently he would invite friends and visitors to join him in the editing room to catch a glimpse of the film being structured. If a visitor, when shown a sequence, happened to remark of a shot within it, 'What a beautiful shot!', Flaherty would immediately order the editor to strike the shot from the sequence! Why? Because if a shot stood out from its context for any reason, be it too beautiful or otherwise, it was had lost its meaning.

Any fool can remove a shot that doesn't work (although some of my students have occasionally needed prodding). It takes a bit of filmmaking genius, however, to remove a shot that one may have worked long hours and under difficult conditions to acquire because it is too beautiful to be perceived in context. But that is exactly what follows from the principle of meaning-in-context toward which Griffith's practices were directed, as the remarkable achievements of Flaherty were later to exemplify.[19]

Conclusion

> He achieved what no other known man has ever achieved. To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of a melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of a language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man.
>
> There is not a man working in movies or a man who cares for them, who does not owe Griffith more than he owes anybody else.
>
> James Agee[20]

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[19] By all accounts, Flaherty's insistence drove his co-editors crazy. For more on the nature and limits of Flaherty's practices and achievements, see "Growing Things: the Rural Patience of Robert Flaherty" within the 'Screenwriting, 1905-1930B Uncoupling Movies from Paintings & Photographs' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/36201]

[20] From an article entitle "David Wark Griffith" that appeared in *The Nation* on 04 September 1948; reprinted as pages 313-318 of James Agee, *Agee on Film: Reviews and*

If a teacher is one from whom others have learned regardless of intent, then Griffith was the greatest teacher of filmmaking who ever lived. Among those who worked directly with or under him, learning filmmaking by watching and imitating what they saw and heard, were Erich von Stroheim, Christy Cabanne, Dell Henderson, Frank Powell, Raoul Walsh, Allan Dwan, Tod Browning, Mack Sennett and John Ford; and they in turn taught hundreds of others. Within the Soviet Union the Kuleshov workshop studied both BIRTH OF A NATION and INTOLERANCE frame-by-frame, Pudovkin referred to him thereafter as "my teacher", and Eisenstein, having recurringly attested to the central place of Griffith's work in the evolution of the Soviet film and having returned late in life to rethinking them, devoted one of the few essays that he ever wrote on the work of another filmmaker to an analysis of the his practices. In France, Abel Gance was but the foremost to attest to Griffith's overwhelming influence; and his work was studied everywhere in Germany, Italy and Scandinavia, most notably by Fritz Lang.[21]

To filmmakers, the scope of Griffith's achievement was clear.

> Before the release of THE BIRTH OF A NATION, filmmaking was an endeavour guided by scattered patterns and makeshift maxims. Upon its release, an art had found its classical model.

As Allan Dwan put it, "filmmaking was simple in those days; we went to the cinema to see what Griffith had done, and then tried to do it ourselves"; and Abel Gance, a remarkable innovator in his own right, summed up the common estimation: "Griffith was the giant – the only giant – of the cinema".[22]

Griffith's achievement was unique in the history of art and quite likely unprecedented in any area of human endeavour. With the possible exception of Cervantes, no one has ever exerted comparable influence from the very beginnings of an art, and no scientist has ever compelled the immediate and universal allegiance of peers with fewer precedents, although Copernicus, Galileo and later Newton come to mind.

Comments by James Agee (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1964 [second printing]. The passages are from pages 313 and 318 respectively.

[21] The only teacher worthy of comparison would be Lev Kuleshov who, in the estimate of Ron Levaco, taught more than half of the major Soviet directors at some time or other between 1920 and his retirement from the VGIK in 1970, notably including Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Boris Barnet, Mikhail Kalatozov and Sergei Paradzhanov. See Levaco's "Kuleshov", *Sight and Sound*, Volume 40, #2 (Spring, 1981), page 86.

[22] [Citation missing for the commendation of Allan Dwan. TBA] The assessment of Abel Gance is from Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By …* (New York, New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), page 624.

Griffith, with no prior paradigm at hand, had created the model and practices about which an entire tradition of human endeavour would coalesce, for both were to prove testable, refineable and extendable under a precept to be articulated by Pudovkin in 1926 to which we as yet know of no anomalies – the practices and precept encompassing to this day the core of the working paradigm of filmmakers.

Griffith, of course, knew of no precept constraining his work, and even if he had tried a decade later to explain to himself and others why his work had been so uniquely effective, few would listened to him, for by the mid-1920s Griffith had stopped making films of sustained power. Why? Friends, colleagues and commentators have suggested variously that he lost touch with the social realities, that his 'eternally twittering girls' and stable characters were unsuited to the postwar era, that he refused to take suggestions from others, that he wrapped himself too deeply in the affairs and pressures of business and that, as Adolph Zukor put it at age ninety-two, having learned a bit about aging himself, he was simply too old to go on.

He didn't fail. No, the procession passed him by. He couldn't keep up with the pace. It's age, you know. You can only do certain things up to a certain time.[23]

There is some truth in all of the above. Few if any popular artists attuned to pre-war tastes survived the cultural shock of its devastation; Griffith was never an acute businessman, and the business of Hollywood was increasingly a 'business' in senses that many others as well would learn the hard way, and by the time synchronous sound came to filmmaking in 1927, Griffith was already fifty-two years old.

And yet something is wrong with the common explanations, individually and cumulatively. The people in Griffith's films, after all, were no more stereotypical than most others in the post war era, and stable characters are simply the epitome of classical virtue (have you ever watched the characters portrayed by John Wayne or Clint Eastwood evolve in a movie?) Other filmmakers, no more businesslike, were to pass successfully into the sound era. Many were to make good films well into old age. And assuredly Griffith was open to the possibilities of the new: as early as 1924 he foresaw the coming of widescreens and the consequent attempt to eliminate the closeup, the development of film schools, the realisation of colour cinematography, the placing of cinemas on airplanes and steamships and the promise of 3-dimensional film.

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[23] As quoted in Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By . . .* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1968), page 94.

But here we must be careful. Griffith was open to many new things, but there was a notable exception: he wished to have nothing to do with the spoken voice! In the same speculative article noted above he could affirm,

> … I am quite positive that when a century has passed, all thought of our so-called speaking pictures will have been abandoned. It will never be possible to synchronize the voice with the pictures. This is true because the very nature of the films foregoes not only the necessity but the propriety of the spoken voice. Music – fine music – will always be the voice of the silent drama ... We do not want now and we shall never want the human voice with our films … There is no voice in the world like the voice of music. To me those images on the screen must always be silent. Anything else would work at cross purposes with the real object of this new medium of expression. There will never be speaking pictures. Why should they be when no voice can speak so beautifully as music?[24]

And therein, it seems to me, lies the principal reason why Griffith ceased to make good films. He *chose* not to adapt, though I doubt that he realized it. Within five years the rhythms and pace of filmmaking were to be determined by the rhythms and pace of the spoken voice requiring filmmakers to refine their practical intuitions. Griffith, unlike many of his peers who were awaiting the advent of sound with impatience, neither possessed nor was willing to acquire the sensitivities required. The simple fact is that Griffith did not *want* to make the kind of films that he would have had to have made to survive. Having once provoked filmmakers around the world to rise to a standard of his own setting, he was not about to settle for less, as he saw it, and his standard did not encompass talking heads. He would not compromise – and so he *chose* to let the filmmaking world pass him by without ever understanding what he was doing.

Griffith ended his career as he had lived it without understanding what he was doing but doing it unswervingly. He had never understood why or how his practices had worked and had indeed never tried to understand them, failing consequently to sense that the coming of synchronous sound to filmmaking was of a piece with the inherent *naturalness* of the art that he began.

As Agee observed, however, no knowledgeable filmmaker will ever underestimate the breadth and depth of Griffith's achievement.[25]

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[24] *Collier's*, 03 May 1924, pages 7 and/or 28. Reprinted on page 52 of *Film Makers on Film Making: Statements on their art by thirty directors*, edited by Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1969 [1967]).

[25] See the quotations from Agee at the beginning of the 'Conclusion' to this essay, page 17 above.