

The Museum of Modern Art

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NEW YEAR MARKS D. W. GRIFFITH CENTENNIAL MUSEUM PLANS MAJOR FILM RETROSPECTIVE TWO-PART CYCLE COMMEMORATES AMERICAN FILM MASTER, INCLUDES LECTURES AND EXHIBITION OF MEMORABILIA

During 1975, to mark the D. W. Griffith Centennial, The Museum of Modern Art will undertake a major retrospective of the complete works of the esteemed motion picture director who influenced filmmakers the world over: Eisenstein and Pudovkin in the Soviet Union, Abel Gance in France, G. W. Pabst in Germany, Alfred Hitchcock in Great Britain, and numerous others in this country, among them Cecil B. DeMille and Frank Capra. Film historians and scholars agree that Griffith's contribution to the art of film is unequalled, that he more than any other pioneering director developed those means of expression peculiar to the cinema and distinct from the theatre and the novel.

The D. W. Griffith Centennial: 1875 to 1975, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, has been divided into two parts. Part one, starting January 23 in observance of Griffith's birthday, will continue through February 25, during which time the early works, one and two reelers, will be presented, accompanied by two lectures* on Griffith's Biograph period. Of the 500 films Griffith made between 1908 and 1913 at the Biograph Studios at 11 East 14 Street in New York City, 100 will be shown, many for the first time in sixty years.

The second part of the Griffith Centennial, beginning May 15, will include the features made by the director from 1914 to 1931. These include the classics "The Birth of a Nation," "Intolerance," "Broken Blossoms," "Way Down East" and "Orphans of the Storm," among others. In addition, the director's late work will conclude the program, which runs through June 29. These lesser-known works, dismissed at

*Thursday evening lectures at 8 o'clock: "Film History in the Making -- The Early Career of D. W. Griffith," by Ron Mottram (February 6) and "From Shot to Image -- On the Formal Aspects of Griffith's Biograph Work," by Tom Gunning (February 20).

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the time, are presently undergoing reevaluation by serious film students.

The Griffith retrospective, which will include a substantial wall exhibition of memorabilia from Griffith's career, has been organized by Eileen Bowser, Associate Curator of Film in charge of the Museum's film archive. Mrs. Bowser is a Griffith scholar, responsible for editing and writing the introduction for Biograph Bulletins: 1908-1912, the official record of Griffith's earliest work. She also reedited and contributed an annotated list of Griffith films to the Museum publication D. W. Griffith: American Film Master, written by Iris Barry.

While the Museum has presented Griffith series in the past in 1940 and 1965, it has never utilized its elaborate Griffith collection as fully as in the forthcoming centennial tribute, of which Ron Mottram, Assistant Professor of Film at the State University of New York at Purchase, is Guest Programmer. Mr. Mottram points out that the centennial program offers the largest number of Biograph films ever assembled anywhere. As a result, Mottram adds, "a more accurate picture of the first five years of Griffith's career should emerge. This period, crucial not only to Griffith's own development, but to the development of the cinema in general, is only beginning to be fully appreciated."

The 100 films compiled for the Biograph program, Mottram believes, will illustrate the fact that by 1913 Griffith had fully developed his style and had already explored the major themes he would expand upon in his features. According to Eileen Bowser, these one and two reelers "were not as ambitious or famous as his master works, but in them Griffith made all the discoveries for which he is remembered today and which made his later films possible. It is only necessary to view films made by anyone else in the world during the years 1908 to 1913 to realize the importance of Griffith's achievements," the curator declares.

In the year of his centennial, the Museum considers it appropriate to survey

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in depth the man whom Lewis Jacobs, film historian, claims "justified the medium of motion pictures to the world." No one has had a greater influence on film technique," wrote Ernest Lindgren of the British Film Institute. Robert Gessner, distinguished author and professor of film called him the "godfather of cinematic language." "Except for Frank Lloyd Wright," said Iris Barry, "no such eminent American as he has arisen in the arts since Whitman."

Experts agree, while Griffith's reputation spread internationally, in this country he became the cornerstone of the American cinema. He introduced unknown players, in those days unidentified, including Mary Pickford, Lionel Barrymore, Blanche Sweet, Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall, Lillian and Dorothy Gish and Douglas Fairbanks. He also initiated the directing careers of Erich von Stroheim, Raoul Walsh, W. S. Van Dyke, and Mack Sennett. Some of his actors also turned directors, notably Donald Crisp, who directed Buster Keaton in the famous film "The Navigator." Charles Chaplin, too, was influenced by Griffith when he made his classic, seldom-seen drama, "A Woman of Paris."

Griffith's own career was stormy and dramatic. His reputation soared and declined in his own lifetime when he was subject to contentious attacks by contemporaries and critics. He died in modest economic circumstances July 23, 1948, in the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel. His memory was cherished by his colleagues, and he is still revered by adherents who recognize that the techniques he used with such originality have furthered the fictional, narrative film and development of motion pictures.

The Griffith retrospective will benefit from The Museum of Modern Art's film archive which has become the world's central repository for Griffith material. It not only owns the largest collection of Griffith films, but also has amassed an enormous body of Griffith artifacts: personal papers, diaries, accounts, letters,

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sketches, and business reports, including the original records of the Biograph company, as well as valuable data on the making of individual films. All the available Griffith films and documents have been catalogued and indexed by Mrs. Bowser.

David Wark Griffith was born in Kentucky on January 23, 1875, according to an inscription in the family bible, though his tombstone lists the date as January 22, 1875. His father, known as Roaring Jake, was a Colonel in the Confederate Army and, besides his military accomplishments, was famous for reading aloud from the bible and Shakespeare. He reputedly attracted crowds from distant parts, and his eloquence may have influenced his son to become an actor.

Previously a cash boy in a dry goods store, he ran errands for the Louisville Courier and sold subscriptions to the Encyclopedia Britannica. As a young man Griffith joined traveling stock companies under the pseudonym of Lawrence Griffith. When he was stranded on the road, he worked at odd jobs; in Portland, Oregon, he sailed on lumber schooners, already having picked hops and worked in construction between acting assignments.

Hoping to become a playwright, Griffith finally sold his first play, "A Fool and a Girl," for which he received a thousand dollars. The play did not enjoy the success he anticipated and he abandoned the stage. He experimented with a new career in motion pictures.

NOTE: SPECIAL SHOWINGS OF RARE, EARLY GRIFFITH FILMS HAVE BEEN ARRANGED FOR THE PRESS. INFORMATION ON SCREENINGS FOLLOWS UNDER SEPARATE COVER.

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