

The evolution of the cinematic world and d. w. griffith

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Changing the Cinematic World

Like many others at the time, D. W. Griffith ventured to California in order to make feature length films at a great distance from Edison and the Trust. Having previously worked for Edison, he joins Biograph, the first studio in America and the only independent studio at the time. After some time Griffith leaves again to join Triangle Film Corporation and releases *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and *Intolerance* in 1916. D. W. Griffith has been called the Father of Film, Hollywood, and Modern Cinematic Language, due to his part in the formation of Hollywood and his numerous cinematic advancements. These include longer films, focus on the shot instead of the scene, moving camera, cross cutting, invisible editing, and accelerated montage. Griffith also emphasizes production values, creates wardrobe control, and starts the flow of capital into Hollywood. *The Birth of a Nation* is considered the first feature length film and was a huge success commercially, while *Intolerance* was a flop. This being rooted in the problems of segregation, social classes in America, and the international climate at the time. In 1914, basically coinciding with the beginnings of Hollywood, World War I began, destroying the film industry in Europe. This presented a huge opportunity for Griffith and Hollywood to seize the market.

When *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915, and *Intolerance* in 1916, segregation was in full effect in the United States. Based on *The Clansmen*, a novel by Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Birth of a Nation* was released with a pre existing audience. Though the novel had been written in opposition to the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and therefore in favor of slavery, Griffith was

ignorant to his film's racist portrayal of African Americans until after its release. Since its formation, there has always been an African American presence in Hollywood. Though African Americans had been present in Hollywood since its formation, practices in the film industry perpetuated segregation and the Jim Crow era. *The Birth of a Nation* is noticeably racist and would have been upsetting to some audience members, while others would have supported the portrayal of the classic American society in which slavery and racism were the norm. In the wake of its release, the film was accused of glorifying and rallying the KKK by African Americans, the NAACP, and liberal Americans. However, that did not stop others from calling it the greatest film ever made. Legal battles surrounded the film's release, especially spurred on by the NAACP. *The Birth of a Nation*'s uncensored portrayal of American society, the buzz surrounding its release, and its being the first feature length film in America, result in arguably the most successful box office performance of all time. *Intolerance*, on the other hand, was a failure commercially and financially ruined Griffith. Released just one year after *A Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* was highly anticipated and initially seemed successful. However, after a few months, attendance had fallen dramatically and the film had failed financially. Possibly due to the film's cinematic advancements, as the film was ahead of its time in terms of editing and even the storyline. Particularly in *Intolerance*, Griffith experiments with new forms of narration, as well as parallel editing four stories throughout the film. Additionally, these four stories occur in different historical time periods in different physical locations, confusing some of the audience. The film was shot both inside and outside, while also incorporating

close ups. Griffith emphasized the importance of the shot, opposed to the scene, and developed the practices of long shots, medium shots, close ups, and the use of the moving camera. Griffith's films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, put a great expense on lighting, sets, and costumes, something that had not been paid much attention to in other previous films. All of Griffith's filmatic advancements made by Griffith are culminated in his *The Birth of a Nation*.

Edison's Trust was broken by 1914, and D. W. Griffith was free to make his feature length film, having left Biograph the previous year. Previously, films in the United States had been shown in Vaudeville Houses, which were typically considered to be of low class. Influenced by Italian and French feature films, Griffith sought to raise production values in films. While this included the development of more elegant theaters and increased flow of capital into Hollywood, it also meant greater cinematic advancements. Again influenced by the Italian and French, *The Birth of a Nation* featured a symphonic orchestra and an extravagant set. The increase in production values of this film and *Intolerance* tried, and succeeded, to capture a middle class audience. By examining a very important historic event through the eyes of a love story, and incorporating elements from various genres, Griffith pioneered a change in American film from Vaudevilles to movie theaters. By creating narratives that would resonate with his intended audience and creating an entirely new viewing experience for that audience, Griffith formed a box office hit. The same can not be said for *Intolerance*, which was a failure financially. This was a result of its change of genre, perception, and

editing. While *The Birth of a Nation* had been a love story, war, and drama that middle class audiences could relate to, *Intolerance* was a three and a half hour film consisting of four entirely different stories. This made the progression of the film and its plot less comprehensible and relatable to that same middle class audience that Griffith had wanted to attract. On top of that, many saw *Intolerance* as a weak apology by Griffith for his blatant perpetuation of racial stereotypes in *The Birth of a Nation*. Though that was not the case, he was viewed in a different light after the release and reception of the first film. The editing of *Intolerance* further contributed to its commercial failure, with the parallel editing of four stories, in four different time periods, across four separate geographic locations. Middle class audiences found this film to be much more difficult to follow and less relatable to their personal lives. *Intolerance* did create quite a bit of publicity before its release, boosting box office sales initially. That did not last though, partially also due to the novelty of some techniques not being as intriguing after already seeing them in *The Birth of a Nation*. Though acclaimed by critics, *Intolerance* was commercially a flop and caused D. W. Griffith to go broke and fade from the spotlight.

World War I began in June of 1914 and lasted until November of 1918. Over the course of those three years, all the talk and news was related to the War, since nearly five million people served. With around sixteen million casualties, it is easy to imagine that death was a common topic and a sense of despair existed. As a result, films became an outlet for many people, as the audience could escape reality, if only briefly. In a time of such despair, it

was important for an audience to relate to the film in order to feel like they were not alone. In addition to World War I, there were a lot of things happening across the world, leading to even more uncertainty. *The Birth of a Nation* relates to the audience through its storylines, *Intolerance* was not able to do the same. Though Griffith had perfected the technique of parallel editing, it was incorporated too much in the latter film, making it more difficult to follow for audiences. He also perfected the techniques of invisible editing and accelerated montage. Invisible editing refers to moving one angle to the next without noticing, while accelerated montage is many short pieces of film juxtaposed next to one another giving the feeling of movement. This inability to relate to *Intolerance* for many audience members, compared to the many relatable aspects of *The Birth of a Nation*, may have been a key factor in their difference in commercial success. While both films occurred during the difficult time of World War I, only one succeeded in being an outlet for its audience. At the same time, the film industry in Europe and across the world was destroyed by the War, resulting in a major opportunity for Griffith and others involved in American film. World War I marked a challenging time for Americans, a time in which Griffith perfected his various techniques and produced the historic films *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

In 1915 D. W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation* to commercial success, followed by *Intolerance* in 1916 which was a commercial failure. Griffith perfected the techniques of moving camera, cross cutting, parallel editing, invisible editing, and accelerated montage. Rooting in his Italian and French

influenced and in order to attract the middle class, Griffith emphasized production values and wardrobe. He was the first to control what the actors wore on set, and created extravagant sets reminiscent of Italian Opera houses or symphony halls. Combined with racism in America and World War I internationally, this created an audience perfect for *The Birth of a Nation*. As World War I destroyed the film industry in Europe and other countries, Griffith was presented with a huge opportunity to seize the market. Taking advantage of this, Griffith used the various cinematic advancements that he perfected, to produce *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. Through these two films, D. W. Griffith demonstrated his perfected cinematic advancements and changed the cinematic world on a global scale.