

The Griffith Tradition

by John Dorr



WAY DOWN EAST. Lillian Gish

all photos: John Dorr

The first strain of the American filmmaking tradition grew directly from the all-pervasive influence of the early work of D. W. Griffith. This essentially nationalistic tradition of dramatic narrative was rooted in the simple, direct montage principles that Griffith evolved in his Biograph one- and two-reelers. In 1915, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* became the official lexicon of these principles.

The Griffith Tradition was the dominant style of the silent American film and was evolved to a classical perfection by the mid-Twenties. Later, emasculated by the transition to sound, this tradition became a recessive approach to direction best suited for keeping track of uncomplicated narratives over which a performer's personality could easily dominate. It is doubtless because the Griffith Tradition lingered well into the Thirties that the star system came to prevail over the art of the director. When, in the late Thirties, a second approach to filmmaking (the Murnau Tradition) began to unify the potential of the sound medium, the legacy of the Griffith Tradition became the history of the B-picture—until its transfer to television in the Fifties. Even today, when a director wants to analyze simply and quickly the dramatic content of a straightforward narrative, he will fall back upon these principles, now referred to as "television style."

The glory and limitation of the Griffith Tradition, as explained by Griffith himself, was that "Ideas are alright for stage people, but pictures prefer simple straight stories of facts." In the montage tradition, each shot becomes a fact whose meaning is determined by its juxtaposition to another fact. Since the first goal of this tradition was effective storytelling, it was a virtue that each shot retain its singularity of meaning.

The evolution of these montage principles was thus a product of necessity. The camera came to be placed at varying distances from the action for purely utilitarian purposes—namely comprehensible narration. The resulting method of dramatic analysis was an economi-

cal, rational, and above all unambiguous response to the challenge of telling a story with a movie camera.

America at this time was not a particularly sophisticated country. Mass communication was limited to the printed word, and storytelling was the folk art most accessible to a nation of immigrants in need of a new heritage on which to rebuild their self-identity. The qualities inherent in the Griffith Tradition embraced such basic American virtues as simplicity, practicality, rationality, straightforwardness, and nonverbalism. The silence of the silent film was not a problem, but a virtue, because it was universally comprehensible.

It was thus that the cinema became the rallying medium of a distinctly American mythological heritage. As an indigenous American folk art, the cinema provided a form and set of conventions perfectly suited to the expression of American themes, folklore, and landscape. Griffith had fused the traditions of American literature to those of American painting. With the addition of parallel-action cutting and the resultant techniques of suspense (added to the basic analytic vocabulary of long shot, medium shot, and close-up), the cinema was fully equipped to evoke the fundamental emotions of the melodramatic and action-adventure genres.

The Griffith Tradition became the medium of the genres—ideal for narratives based on rather strict conventions and animated with mythologies of the American heritage and American dream. These narratives became rituals leading through physical confrontations and complications to the obligatory cathartic endings. The montage tradition was a moralist tradition and the ready instrument of cultural propaganda—in that certain ways of life were portrayed as virtuous, and virtue was invariably rewarded. The action was ritualized, and the characters tended to become types: heroes or villains, virtuous or fallen women. The classical stability of this medium must have been a sustaining influence implying order in the cultural chaos that followed the First World War. For it was the decade of 1918 to 1928 that was the Golden Era of the Griffith Tradition.

In regarding the silent film form as a folk art (as

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contrasted with personal art), we acknowledge the existence of certain beauties inherent in the medium itself, common to the expressions of all those artists who worked in this medium, and *dominant* over the personal idiosyncrasies of these otherwise diverse artisans. As in the classical period of Greek art, there existed in this classical period of silent filmmaking a formal ideal (a clarity of narrative) toward which all works strove. Also, like classical Greek art, the artisans of the Griffith tradition valued order, balance, graceful proportions, symmetry—ideals of structure and geometry. There were a limited number of elements (types of shots) with which to build a narrative. Thus it was in the graceful ordering of these elements that the skill of a master director was evidenced.

Perhaps because many of the early cameramen had their origins in pictorialist still-photography, a tendency toward pictorialism was added to the rudiments of this montage structure. The High Griffith Tradition movie became a series of largely frontal, largely static, shots, each classically well composed and balanced. The overall movie had a formal grace that distanced the viewer from the characters and the action, mythologizing the narrative. Like the sonnet, the High Griffith Tradition was a rigid form; but it was the form itself that lent beauty and dignity to the work of those who adopted it.

It has been well documented elsewhere that almost all American directors who began their careers previous to 1920 either worked directly under Griffith's personal supervision or openly acknowledged their formal debt to him. Among those who personally apprenticed with Griffith were John Ford, Raoul Walsh, Erich von Stroheim, Allan Dwan, Sidney Franklin, and Donald Crisp, while certainly no less influenced were King Vidor and Cecil B. De Mille. In the early work of these directors can be detected not only the Griffith form, but many of the Griffith mannerisms dutifully copied from the master's example. It was through the work of these (and many, many other) directors, and *not* through Griffith himself, that the Griffith Tradition flourished and evolved into its classical form. It is interesting to note that during their silent careers, Ford and Walsh, in particular, were known more as competent genre directors (i.e., folk artists) than as innovative personal directors. And when Buster Keaton wanted to tie his gags into coherent feature narratives, he would hire a graduate of the Griffith school as co-director to supply this dramatic unity. There was a single, accepted approach to dramatic narrative, and this was the Griffith Tradition.

Because the Griffith Tradition was appropriate to the expression of a vision suited to the needs of a mass American audience (i.e., because these films made reliable money), Hollywood, as the film *industry*, undertook the institutionalization of that tradition. This process of institutionalizing forced the crystallization of the form, at once eliminating error and stifling experimentation. By the mid-Twenties, the only exploratory art of the Griffith Tradition was to be found in the refinement of studio-bound techniques.

In these mid-Twenties, a second strain of the American narrative cinema began to exert its presence. This was the Murnau Tradition, which rallied around the rather advanced expressions of F. W. Murnau's *THE LAST LAUGH* (imported in 1925) and *SUNRISE* (1927), it would not be inappropriate to call this strain the Murnau Tradition. This is the tradition ostensibly of the moving camera, but more broadly (as defined by Andrew

Sarris) the aesthetic which "implies the continuousness of a visual field outside of the frame of the camera." Whereas the Griffith Tradition *constructs* an emotion, the Murnau Tradition *records* it; and whereas the Griffith analyzes drama, the Murnau synthesizes.

By way of clarification, it should be pointed out that the Griffith Tradition is a specific development of the more general category of the montage aesthetic. For example, Eisenstein's use of montage, while not unrelated, would not be described as part of the Griffith Tradition, which was specifically a development of the American cinema. On the other hand, in the context of the history of the American cinema, the Griffith Tradition has been roughly synonymous with the montage aesthetic as variously expressed over the years. (See André Bazin's "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.")

After the Thirties (except in the B-pictures, where the Griffith Tradition remained relatively pure), it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the montage aesthetic from the moving-camera aesthetic; both coexisted in the collaborative-adaptive tradition that predominated in Hollywood's production from the late Thirties through the Sixties. Also, in defining the Murnau Tradition as representative of the moving-camera aesthetic in the evolution of the American narrative form, we refer more to a point of view (a way of seeing) than to any specific set of directorial techniques. Two directors might make use of the same technique with polar aesthetic implications.

Thus, though we might polarize the two traditions as the battle of the cut versus the shot, we wouldn't attribute absolute meanings to either the cut or the shot. A spiritualist director like Frank Borzage cuts frequently, but so imperceptively as to imply continuity instead of disjunction. Borzage's cuts within a scene will involve only slight changes of camera angle or distance from subject, such as to avoid those large emotions implied by the usual Griffith Tradition vocabulary of long shot, medium shot, close-up. On the other hand, a formalist like Fritz Lang will make extensive use of the moving camera, yet not lose that sense of an isolating destiny that predominates the montage ethic. Instead of following his characters, Lang's camera pursues them.

Young directors entering the cinema in the mid-Twenties looked to Murnau, and not to Griffith, as the model on whom to build their visual style. For instance, Howard Hawks, in his third film *THE CRADLE SNATCHERS* (1926), seems completely oblivious to the Griffith Tradition vocabulary. Hawks is clearly a sound director making a silent film. The titles are not descriptive, but transcripts of dialogue. The pace is fast; but the speed is in the physical action, as recorded in full shots, pans, and dollies, not in the speed of the cutting.

The technological development of synchronized sound fulfilled the Murnau Tradition, but was superfluous to the Griffith Tradition. The ever-multiplying complexity of modern life could be captured (in a poetic sense) with ease through the Murnau Tradition, whereas the frantic pacing of those wonderful special montage sequences of the late Twenties and the Thirties demonstrated the ever-increasing difficulty of dramatic analysis to deal with this complexity. By the late Thirties, screenwriters had learned that a single well-chosen line of dialogue could quickly and less obtrusively express a passage of time than these montages.

The Griffith Tradition was a noble tradition when the dramatic analysis implied order in the universe. The



Allan Dwan:
THE WOMAN
THEY ALMOST
LYNCHED
(1953).
The shooting
of the
jealous
lover.

acceleration of montage (Eisenstein notwithstanding) was an ever less satisfying attempt to find a pattern of order in a complexity of events that were evolving faster than man could keep up with. As montage practices broke away from the stability of the Griffith Tradition, the frantic energy of the cutting reflected man's initial inability to cope with the complexities of modern life.

This essentially neurotic use of montage reappeared in the Sixties as an expression of man's violent despair at his inability to construct meaning in his environment. Fragmenting montages isolated diverse elements that refused to unify, refused to offer any hope of order. The rational tools of analysis were not adequate in explaining the phenomena observed. Carried to its logical extreme in such films as Russ Meyer's *BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* and *THE SEVEN MINUTES*, the lingering presence of the Griffith Tradition has been viewed as reactionary and simplistic; and yet the lesson of the futility of this extreme analytic violence does aptly and artfully pinpoint the logical crisis of an unbendingly rational approach to modern life.

Allan Dwan

Of all the directors of the Griffith Tradition who maintained careers well into the sound period, Allan Dwan was the least affected by the emergence of the Murnau Tradition—perhaps because his theme of temporal resignation was so totally unassailable by either social or cultural evolutions. Dwan's visual style was the purest expression of the Griffith Tradition; and it was certainly the purity of this style (and its thematic implications) that sustained Dwan's creative energy throughout a long B-movie career. In Dwan's later work the mathematical perfection of his visual style best illustrates the primal power inherent in the Griffith Tradition. It is precisely in these films, burdened with the most hopeless scripts and populated by the most crippled performers (projects in which "personal involvement" seemed most out of the question) that Dwan relied most exclusively and abstractly on the beauties of the filmmaking tradition itself, and proved himself the master craftsman of the Griffith Tradition.

Such films as *BELLE LE GRAND* (1951), *I DREAM OF JEANIE* (1952), and *ENCHANTED ISLAND* (1958) become textbook exercises in the American montage tradition. These films are realized with a cinematic precision as intuitively perfect as Eisenstein's montages were calculatedly accurate. Dwan's images are beautiful not so much as formal entities unto themselves, as in their existence as cinematic units. The world captured in the frame is never as important as the relationship of one shot to the next. In ordering these units, Dwan is concerned with those qualities central to the montage tradition rather than that deceptive pictorialist prettification of individual shots that became fashionable in the late silent era. If the craft of directing can be compared to that of writing, then Dwan is the master of cinematic syntax.

Economy, simplicity, and directness characterize the Dwan approach. Each image is selected as a utilitarian response to a narrative challenge. Compared with Dwan's straightforward decisions, the cinema of Howard Hawks looks mannered and expressionistic. Thematically and visually, Dwan is one of the least neurotic of all filmmakers—even in his visualization of such a totally neurotic subject as *SLIGHTLY SCARLET* (1956).

To understand the current nostalgic response to Hollywood B-pictures—and to the dubious personalities who acted out the rituals of these films—one must

understand those properties of the Griffith Tradition as brought out in the purity of Dwan's use of these practices. The performers in B-pictures were rather unextraordinary people in bigger-than-life roles, unable to summon up emotions as mythic as those suggested by the characters they played. But the conventions of the Griffith Tradition (and the conventional responses evoked by these clichés) were oblivious to the incompetence of these performers. A cut-in to a large close-up, or a cut-back to a long shot, in the primal power of the change in image size alone, suggests a nobility of emotion that is direct and effective. Furthermore, the sympathetic incompetence of the B-performer suggests the essential innocence of the human condition. Vera Ralston's close-ups in *BELLE LE GRAND* are among the most moving images in the American cinema, and yet simultaneously are a mockery of the traditional process of mimesis we call acting.

The innocence of Allan Dwan's response to such blatant incompetence—his total acceptance of inane situations and performers—transcends our conventional evaluations of theme and character. Dwan's style is characterized by a benign grace that allows his camera to observe and analyze without passing judgment. Because he introduces no element of tension by trying to evoke performances of which his actors are incapable, or to insert deeper meaning into scripts that were not structured to sustain much meaning at all, Dwan avoids the sense of artificiality that can hover over the ambitious aspirations of talented directors contending with incompetent collaborators. As folk art, Dwan's best films are his most dramatically purposeless. They become objects of meditation.

Cecil B. De Mille

Surely the best-known practitioner of the Griffith Tradition was Cecil B. De Mille. De Mille was everything that Griffith refused to become; consequently, he enjoyed the successful career that Griffith was denied. De Mille was happy to be a moralist, happy to be a storyteller, happy to parade the spectacle of man's folly, happy to pander emotionalism, happy to give the public everything it thought it wanted. If Dwan fulfilled the Griffith Tradition by seeking its highest implications, De Mille exploited that tradition by seeking out its logical extremes. While Dwan's films best demonstrate the glories of the Griffith Tradition, De Mille's films best demonstrate its limitations.

De Mille's films are wonderfully satisfying as far as they go, but they lack the transcendence of high art. The earthboundness of the visual style makes mockeries of the religious themes, but is ideally suited to the detailing of human folly that is so central to most of his work. De Mille reminds us that, when we speak of the Griffith Tradition as folk art, we are looking at the cinema primarily in its function as entertainment. It could be said of De Mille's films that they have no content at all: they are exercises in pure narration. Certainly, De Mille has little involvement in his stories except as a raconteur. Like Otto Preminger, De Mille seeks out large issues and contexts for his narratives and avoids overtly choosing sides in depicting conflicts. But, unlike Preminger, De Mille is not interested in a discussion of the issues. The issues and contexts are merely the canvas on which he illustrates the great American adventure.

De Mille's heyday was the late Twenties and early Thirties, when his outrageous romanticism was synonymous with the folly of the Hollywood ethic. His visual style during this period shows the Griffith Tradition at its most rigid, its most institutionalized, and its most



WAY DOWN
EAST.
The dinner
sequence.

relentlessly formal. De Mille may have been a rather limited craftsman, but he had *total* control over those few elements the Griffith Tradition put at his disposal. His characters have little depth, but they are described with total economy, equipped with only those dimensions of personality that are necessary to the telling of the story. While the tendency of the early sound film was to allow narrative to illustrate characterization, De Mille relentlessly deployed characterization only to illustrate narration.

In De Mille, there is no sense of the profound, no "penetration into the realm of the immaterial." Everything is order. He is the total montage director, with only one associational meaning aligned with each image. In a film like *THE VOLGA BOATMAN* (1926), he never moves the camera and strenuously avoids depth of focus. Most of his story takes place in medium close-ups with his characters focused in a single plane in the foreground, while the backgrounds function only pictorially. Everything is very flat: long shots have no foregrounds or middle distances, and all objects are focused equidistant from the camera. De Mille has a strong sense of the pictorial. Characters are strictly posed within the frames. Even spectacular long shots have the feeling that every extra has been exactly placed and controlled by the director. Nothing is pictorially or narratively extraneous. The actions are stylized, and the emotions are wildly extreme. The staging is as high style as the plot elements are ridiculous.

Of course, more than any other element, it was De Mille's use of spectacle that sustained his career. Griffith had used spectacle to make concrete the exterior forces over which his characters' love was challenged to triumph. Griffith's spectacle was all the more overwhelming in its relegation to the background of his story. De Mille was interested in spectacle per se. De Mille defines the Griffith Tradition as the exploitation and institutionalization of elements that were at best peripheral to the driving force of Griffith's vision.

D. W. Griffith

After establishing its initial concepts, Griffith himself did not play a major part in the evolution of the Griffith Tradition. After *INTOLERANCE* (1916), his own visual style moved progressively farther away from the elemental montage aesthetic.

Almost all the misunderstanding of Griffith's later work stems from the assumption that Griffith remained a part of this montage tradition. On the contrary, the essential driving force behind much of Griffith's later work was his very conscious desire to find a visual style through which the medium of film would have the potential to become a personal (as opposed to folk) art form, comparable to the other established forms of high art.

By 1928, he was able to look back upon this first narrative solution as a faulty, incomplete medium. He wrote: *So far I believe all our pictures have been written on sand. The medium is perishable. The medium is far from being equal to the medium of words, written or spoken. I welcome talking pictures because it may be through this medium, where we can use words and music, that in the future it may be possible to produce motion pictures which can be classified with great plays, painting, music and the other proper arts. By their faulty medium, the pictures made so far have become obsolete, while the dialogue of Shakespeare is as beautiful and telling as the day it was written.*

The commercial failure of *INTOLERANCE* can be seen as the first indication to Griffith that the form he had evolved was insufficient for dealing with the themes

he wanted to explore. Griffith wanted to deal with ideas, but he had at his disposal a form suited to deal only with stories. The complexity of the structure of *INTOLERANCE* reinforced the emotions of his narrative, but offered only repetitions and variations, and not the desired deepening, of Griffith's vision. Furthermore, the complexity of *INTOLERANCE* ran contrary to the ideals of simplicity and directness that had so endeared the Griffith Tradition to the American consciousness.

Yet, for Griffith, *INTOLERANCE* was the logical extension of the montage aesthetic. In a formal sense, he had developed a complete medium—and come to a creative dead end. Had Griffith's interests been only in securing a career, he could have rested on his laurels for the rest of the silent period, reworking and refining, with a minimum of creative effort, this narrative solution of dramatic analysis. All other choices involved totally new beginnings. The bulk of Griffith's career in the Twenties can be seen as alternations between new formal explorations and safer refinements of this first narrative solution. The drama of Griffith's evolution as an artist lies in his compulsive search for this new narrative solution.

The crisis that Griffith had to face in finding the montage aesthetic a system inappropriate to the yearnings of his own vision underscores the degree to which the Griffith Tradition was consolidated as a response to a cultural necessity external to Griffith and even antithetical to his vision. Research into the early appearances of the specific elements of this tradition further supports that Griffith did not so much invent these techniques as consolidate them into a workable narrative system. Before he could evolve as an artist along lines dictated by his own interior vision, he had first to secure a medium in which to work. For securing this medium, Griffith has already been appropriately honored.

The point is not to reject the importance of Griffith's editing, but to accept it as a given—the most important given of the silent-film form. But even while Griffith was consolidating the montage principles of the Griffith Tradition, his visual style contained the seeds of a vision that saw beyond the limitations of the montage aesthetic. It is in his unique uses of this montage tradition that we observe a second tendency in Griffith's vision begin to coalesce.

Certainly what distinguished Griffith from the other directors who had adopted the Griffith form, and what made Griffith's work stand apart and above from all his competitors', were those elements of his style which were not integral to the montage tradition and which mere emulation could not duplicate.

Griffith's themes involved subjects which could not easily be captured in simple narratives—thus prompting the poetry of Griffith's title cards. And Griffith's legendary skill in directing actors can be translated, in aesthetic terms, to a preoccupation with the reality of the individual human presence—a concept rather alien to the mythologizing tendencies of the montage tradition. A film like Elmer Clifton's *DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS* (1922) might perfectly have imitated Griffith's narrative structure, his spectacle, and even his staging; but the performances are ludicrous, and a high level of ideas is lacking.

From today's perspective, these are the two elements of Griffith's early work—the acting and the titles—that are most difficult to evaluate, alternating as they do between the ridiculous and the sublime. In either regard, it is clear that these two elements were wedded to the montage tradition in a most uneasy relationship in Griffith's work. The broader acting styles and more



WAY
DOWN EAST.
Lillian Gish



TRUE HEART SUSIE.
Lillian Gish



THE WHITE ROSE.
Mae Marsh



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directly descriptive titles employed by other contemporary directors melded better with the narratives of the montage aesthetic.

Griffith was both a moralist and a spiritualist, and the evolution of his later career can be seen as the battleground between these two tendencies. The vision of Griffith the moralist could be accommodated in the montage system, but the vision of Griffith the spiritualist could not.

As a moralist (like Hitchcock), Griffith's first concern was the effect his film would have upon his audience. The needs of the audience were primary. In the Twenties, the simple, physical reactions created by the suspense of parallel editing gradually became less effective in holding the interests of an ever-more sophisticated audience. Thus, as the needs of his audience changed, so Griffith sought the means of evoking deeper and more subtle emotions. Griffith's vision required a mass audience. If he could not reach the people with his films, there was little reason to make them. The moralist Griffith could hardly indulge in art for art's sake. His cinema eschewed abstraction, humanity being its central preoccupation.

As a spiritualist, Griffith was in no position to make the moral judgments that his montage cinema implied. The spiritualist wanted to record deep emotions, to move the emotions of his audience. For this Griffith, one close-up of Lillian Gish—held while profound emotions subtly animated her body—expressed in a moment all the truths that the moralist Griffith could strive in vain to adequately describe in a lifetime of narratives. The close-up became less a unit of cinematic narration and more the medium of a new intimacy between audience and character that rendered both storytelling and stage-level theatrical observation obsolete.

If the moralist Griffith edited in order to separate the elements of his narrative, the spiritualist Griffith would edit to imply unions between shots and characters otherwise separated by space and time. Griffith would intercut between a man at war and his loved-one at home, not so much to indicate simultaneous actions as to indicate a continuing spiritual bond.

In his later work, Griffith moved his emotional involvement from the cut to the shot itself; and the analysis of individual shots becomes more telling than analysis of the relationships of montage. The technology of the matched cut became less a compulsion than before, and sometimes the actions of shots overlap or are mismatched (perhaps purposefully). Griffith also rejected the classically composed and balanced frames of the pictorialist tradition—a fact that indicates the extent to which he wished to free his characters from the determining forces of a structured frame. Even in the Biograph period, Griffith preferred to let his characters move in depth, emphasizing the three-dimensionality of their space, rather than confining them in single two-dimensioned planes parallel to the camera. When he did stage his action in this frontal plane—as in the dinner scene in *WAY DOWN EAST*, when Lillian Gish is banished to her fate on the ice floes—the staging itself implies the loss of freedom, and the limiting morality of *Intolerance*.

Well aware of the traditions of the earlier graphic arts, Griffith would reserve the use of classical composition for special moments when a sense of heightened harmony was desired. Often a static camera would hold on a conspicuously unbalanced composition, only to later have a character enter the frame or move within the frame to complete the composition.

While Griffith always tended to employ a static

camera, one rarely had the feeling that his actors were confined, for purely formal reasons, to any one spot in front of the camera. The freedom of the actor came first, and it is significant that Griffith would choose to show a character exiting one shot and entering another, rather than employ the simple pan that would be standard today. Some of the most interesting effects, especially in the Biograph films, involve the use of the very edges of the frame. In both cases, the camera is set up not in relation to the characters, but to the environment through which they move. Griffith's most harmonious compositions are his landscapes. His camera discovers the harmonies inherent in man's universe, but sees man himself as undetermined and free to move through that universe without external interference. (Andy Warhol's initial explorations of the static camera in the Sixties are remarkably similar in meaning to those of Griffith in his Biograph period.)

For the moralist Griffith, the disappointing response of his audience to *INTOLERANCE* was an undeniable defeat. *INTOLERANCE* succeeded as a film of spectacle and as a film of narrative action, but not as a film of ideas. For all the complexity of its form, *INTOLERANCE* had fallen short of the grandeur of its theme. It was the old story of man's greatest monument being ultimately inferior to the profound perfection of a simple flower. This obvious lesson in hubris was not lost on Griffith, who spent the rest of his career pursuing the beauty of the flower.

The second phase of Griffith's career involved a progressive loss of dependency on analytic editing and an increasing dependency on the presence of humanity within the individual shot. For Griffith, it became less and less possible (or necessary) to take the camera off Lillian Gish. The spiritualist studies that which is within, and the illumination of Griffith's later frames comes from within the performers who populate his visions. Griffith chose to forgo the idealizations of pictorialism in order to record the actual vibrations of those objects of nature he found before his camera.

With the evolution of a cinema that would accommodate first of all the presence of his actors, Griffith declared: *The greatest thing in motion pictures is humanity. (Other objects) are beautiful only if we associate them with humanity in a beautiful way. A street might be recalled to us as a beautiful street. If our dreams of the people we met and knew and loved on that street are beautiful, then the street will be beautiful to us. It is the same with everything else. There is nothing in life but humanity.*

Just as the early sound directors could not capture the complexity of modern life in montage, so Griffith could not describe the complexities of human emotions, deep to the point of transcendence, with montage. Griffith spent most of his later career trying to push the silent medium beyond its inherent limitations, searching for a freedom that only sound could eventually bring. The Griffith Tradition was capable of mythology, but not psychology; archetypes, but not characterization; pageant, but not intimacy; stability, but not immediacy; abstractions of life, but not that full parallel of life to which Griffith's vision aspired.

The prophets of the cinema—Griffith, Rossellini, Godard, Warhol—have always introduced the techniques to make the cinema more immediate; while the institutionalizing tendencies of the industry have undertaken the formalization of these techniques. The tension between these two tendencies has produced some of the highest glories of the medium. The Griffith Tradition was one of these glories, but the vision of D. W. Griffith himself was in pursuit of higher options. ■■■