

D.W. Griffith's *INTOLERANCE* (1916)

### **A Colossal Saga of Hatred and Prejudice**

In 1915 David Wark Griffith directed and produced *The Birth of a Nation*, a visionary silent movie that used ground-breaking techniques, such as fades, close-ups and flashbacks. The public was enthralled by the grandeur, novelty and length of the over 3-hour long show. To this day, this film is studied at Film Academies worldwide. *The Birth of a Nation* also repelled some audiences - only 'some' in 1915 - with its portrayal of African Americans as depraved creatures who lusted after white young women, or as mentally underdeveloped beings. The film also pays tribute to the Ku Klux Klan that "ran to the rescue of the downtrodden South after the Civil War », as D.W. Griffith wrote in his autobiography. The idea was « to tell the truth » about the American Civil War. Although appreciated even today as an outstanding cinematic achievement, *Birth of a Nation* shocks due to its racist content. After its premiere in Los Angeles on February 8, 1915, the film stirred large protests among black communities across America, which started a movement aimed at banning this movie. To ban *The Birth of a Nation* for appearing in theatres, African-Americans had to go beyond showing that the film slandered them and utterly distorted history. The leaders of Boston's NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) argued that the film was a threat to public safety, that it heightened racial tensions, and could incite violence. Despite all their efforts, the film was shown in Boston 360 times over a period of six-and-a-half months. Other cities welcomed and hailed it. And it was hugely profitable. As an example, by the end of 1915 in New York City alone, gross receipts were \$3,750,000 (roughly \$85 mil. today). Although the film's popularity with white audiences was enormous, the protests it generated proved to be a turning point in African American activism.

Director D.W. Griffith was taken aback by the NAACP's mass protests in Boston and other cities across America. He was a Confederate Colonel's son and he considered himself a Southern gentleman. His response to this staunch criticism was producing and directing another film – *Intolerance* – a strong antithesis to *Birth of a Nation*. The movie is regarded today as a great masterpiece of the silent era.

*Intolerance* is a gigantic story about human hatred and prejudice. It spans over two and a half millennia of human civilisation and is 197 minutes long. The structure of this film is unusual and very modern. *Intolerance* is a composite of four distinct stories set in four distinct historical periods: the fall of Babylon, the Passion of Christ, the French Huguenot Massacre (the night of St. Bartholomew), and a 'Modern' (1916) drama. These four stories unfold simultaneously, being intercut at various moments with increased frequency as the movie approaches its climax. All transitions from one period to another

are made through a mother swinging a cradle, representing the continuous rebirth of humanity into countless generations. From this perspective, the message of the film is rather gloomy since wherever one looks in history - 556 BC, 30AD, 1572, or 1916 - humanity doesn't seem to have learned anything from its own mistakes: the fall of Babylon, one of the most influential ancient empires, is shown as the result of petty religious disputes; the Crucifixion of Christ speaks by itself and is the epitome of human bigotry and intolerance; St. Bartholomew's Massacre is also a disturbing example of human hatred and prejudiced triggered by vulgar politics and fueled by religious fanaticism (modern figures estimate the total of victims between 5,000 and 30,000); finally, the 'Modern Story' shows that even 'today' (in 1915) human society was profoundly unjust, torn apart by ruthless businessmen, righteous puritans, crime syndicates and an apathetic, defective justice system.

For the modern viewer, *Intolerance* is still an impressive film on account of three main striking aspects: the colossal sets of Babylon, the complexity of the script, and the originality of its editing. Some very bold special effects are also to be noted, including huge contraptions burning ablaze or collapsing towards the camera and the first 'live' beheading in the history of film.

One of the staple marks of this film is the massive Babylonian setting. Building it requested nine hundred workers and six months of around-the-clock labour. The result was a staggering copy of the Babylonian court which is still impressive today. A small part of these settings are now preserved and adorn the entrance of the Hollywood and Highland Center. On screen, these monumental structures were populated with over four thousand extras in order to reproduce the grandeur of Emperor Belshazzar's court or the ominous approach of the Persian armies led by Cyrus the Great. Above all, on a 100-foot camera-crane, stood Griffith like an omnipotent god of all filmmakers.

Actual costs for producing this incredibly vast visual saga can only be estimate. The initial budget was \$385,907 (roughly \$9 million today). It eventually cost \$2 million (around \$46 million today). It took seven months to complete the shooting, from October 1915 to April 1916. It was the boldest, most complex and most expensive production made at that time.

Unfortunately, the 1916 audiences were not prepared for such a complexity and the film was a fiasco at the box-office. And maybe, the public was not so much 'entertained' by a philosophical mediation on human violence and prejudice as it was by Griffith's previous display of exactly those two human faulty traits. This is how, ironically, one of the greatest directors of all times became the financial victim of "Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages" (*Intolerance's* subtitle). Also ironically, he is now known as the author of both the biggest box-office success and the worst box-office flop.

Griffith himself is today a controversial personality especially because of his overt racist ideas revealed in - paradoxically - one of the biggest box-office successes of the silent era- *The Birth of a Nation*. The director's moral and ethical slip will haunt him forever. For instance, until 1999 the Directors Guild of America called its prestigious lifetime achievement the *DW Griffith Award*. In 2000 his name was dropped.

However, here is what *The Guardian*'s Tom Dewe Mathews wrote on Griffith:

He is called, "the father of film technique", the man "who invented Hollywood", "the first to photograph thought" and even "the Shakespeare of the screen". According to Kevin Brownlow, the film-restorer and historian who introduced a rare screening of Griffith's *Intolerance*, with full orchestra at London's Royal Festival Hall "there were others at the time who were technically better. But none had his artistic bravery... His films altered the whole course of cinema."

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Mathews expresses the thoughts of hundreds of film specialists who praise Griffith as one of the founding fathers of the moving pictures. Although he didn't invent them all, Griffith used all the narrative techniques of modern-day cinema - the close-up, the tracking shot, the flashback, the fade-out and so on – in unprecedented and unparalleled ways. His use of the close-up is unforgettable. The fade-out became his trade-mark.

As mentioned before, regrettably, *Intolerance* was a monumental flop at the box office. Years afterward, it came back with a vengeance and is now regarded as one of the milestones of film history. Griffith not only left us with an indispensable archeological artifact but also with a masterpiece, a riveting visual metaphor of a profound and generous message. *Intolerance* is an enthralling cultural adventure, an almost out-of-body experience, a miraculous time-travel machine. It is also a humbling experience, reminding us of all the great architects who offered both their genius and their human failings to the building of our cultural identity.

It is worth watching, at least once, in a lifetime.

**Dr. Phil M. Ovie**