A Thesis

Entitled

D.W. Griffith's Biograph Shorts: Teaching History with Early Silent Films, 1908-1922

By

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Submitted as a fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts Degree in History

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D.W. Griffith capitalized upon already existing theories and social positions in order to present audiences with entertaining plots and dramatic antagonists. Often these subjects consisted of individuals that were potentially marketable regarding public opinion and sensationalism, allowing him to make a name for himself in the film world as a source of artistic and technical innovations. Perhaps known best for his controversial film, Birth of a Nation, he has been applauded and crucified by modern historians and analysts regarding his creative practices and basically, spread of racial stereotypes to early film audiences. The denigration of his work by modern scholars lies mainly within the characters and racial tensions that were perpetuated on-screen as a result of his conceptual character options. However, in many of his early films that were produced at the Biograph Company, Griffith initiated exposure for gender, racial and ethnic groups that were largely ignored and propelled these issues to the

1 The Birth of a Nation in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002/ 1915).
forefront of the public eye. Griffith should be celebrated as a filmmaker that used controversy to provoke thought regarding issues of race, class and gender, and certainly his other films have the teaching capability that *Birth of a Nation* is commonly utilized for. There are several other pieces that were produced by Griffith that are symbolic of public attitudes and accurate representation of society near the turn of the twentieth century. These works should be celebrated as primary resource materials, and therefore used in classrooms to teach political, racial and social issues to students that wish to study such concepts. The evidence for this theory lies not only in his films, but in the behind-the-scenes production occurrences, character references, personal anecdotes and various current and past media sources. The documentation that will be employed in order to support this thesis follow in the form of original film reviews, newspaper articles detailing public reaction, governmental law, biographical and autobiographical information, periodicals, essays and finally this author’s examination of the gender, moral, racially and ethnically based films released under D.W. Griffith from 1908 to 1919 that have survived through documentation or independently.
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Introduction

The utilization of visual aids in a classroom is invaluable as a result of the different learning styles preferred by individual students. Before documentaries and fictional films, students were relied upon still photographs, drawings, maps and words in order to link a visual impression with a body of text. Throughout the twentieth century, film has emerged as an important teaching tool that allows students the experience of actually seeing an occurrence or event either as it happened, or they are able to view a creative representation of the occasion, in regard to fictional depictions. Despite the immense body of work that D.W. Griffith produced between 1908 and 1940, educators usually focus on one controversial film in particular. Birth of a Nation is a widely-taught piece in upper-level history courses throughout the U.S. Several reputable institutions, including Virginia Tech’s department of Teaching and Learning use this in various parts of their curriculum to impress upon those that are studying to become teachers the importance of visual aids in instructional situations. At Virginia Tech, Dr. Dave Hicks uses Birth of a Nation to satisfy the National Social Studies Content Standards/ expectations and indicates that the film is an apt tool to satisfy the standards that fall under the “Time, Continuity and Change”

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category, as well as provide insight for students as to general media influences on individuals throughout time.³

The film is memorable for its graphic violence, alleged glorification of the Klu Klux Klan, and notoriously anti-African American portrayals and stereotypes. Interestingly enough, until the aftermath of World War II, despite the controversy that this film caused, Griffith was applauded for his innovative film techniques, and credited with establishing Birth of a Nation as the first feature-length film.⁴ As a result of growing intolerance at the turn of the twentieth century regarding race, gender and ethnicity in the United States, as well as the civil rights movement, recent public and critical opinions regarding Griffith's character have gone sour. Birth of a Nation, is primarily viewed as an appropriate teaching vehicle for adult or high school education purposes, due to the graphic and emotional scenes that are presented. Sadly, Griffith's other films, mainly the short subjects that he produced while at The Biograph Company, are often lost in comparison, but are potentially just as valuable regarding instructional utilization.

There are several areas within National Content Standards that are specifically geared toward older students that are applicable to the study of film

The National Content Standards for history instructors not only drive curriculum subjects, but guide teachers of all ages in the classroom regarding presentation, resources, technology and other materials that are vital to the education of students. Various media forms, including early film could prove vital to the examination of an earlier time, and should be counted as a primary resource to serve as a reflection of the time in which the film was released/produced. Ideally, the films studied will project common dress and behavior as well as common social, political and economic aspects of social history. In short, the extensive filmography of D.W. Griffith would be an ideal teaching tool that will provide insight into an era as well as a multitude of social and political issues that are key when called to define or illustrate the era of the early twentieth century.

Birth of a Nation is often viewed by historians and film students alike, not only to examine the stereotypical views of the turn of the twentieth century, but for its early film contributions. However, there are several works that bear the Griffith name that are largely ignored. These films should be considered important positive contributions to society, particularly regarding educational tactics. They were produced earlier than Birth of a Nation, and problematically remain unmentioned in their relation to the study of history, by Griffith critics, teachers and historians.

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The impact of Birth of a Nation was so great, that not only have Griffith’s other works been overlooked, the director’s reputation in modern times has suffered to such an extent that his technical and artistic contributions to the film world are overshadowed by the now racist image that he carries. Recently, one of Hollywood’s highest honors was renamed due to Griffith’s reputation as a bigot, due to his representations of African Americans in Birth of a Nation. In December of 1999, the board of the Director’s Guild of America chose to rename one of its highest honors, The D.W. Griffith Award, based upon the racial controversy that the director is accused of stimulating. Director’s Guild Award President Jack Shea submitted this response regarding justification for the removal of the award’s name:

As we approach a new millennium, the time is right to create a new ultimate honor for film directors that better reflects the sensibilities of our society at this time in our national history... There is no question that D.W. Griffith was a brilliant pioneer filmmaker whose innovations as a visionary film artist led the way for generations of directors. However, it is also true that he helped foster intolerable racial stereotypes.6

D.W. Griffith did write, produce and direct other film works that attempted to spread a positive message regarding race, class and gender prior to Birth of a Nation. This thesis will examine the social trends that led to Griffith’s dramatization decisions regarding issues of the early twentieth century, and comparatively analyze them with Griffith’s finished works, interactions with

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coworkers, reviews and laws that may have influenced his directorial choices. All of these factors will prove that other films, mainly through the Biograph Film Company are valuable resources that may be utilized for teaching purposes and particularly as primary social and economic documents. An examination will also be made regarding the study of his extensive filmography, and its positive contributions to society and the study of historical and social issues. The bulk of the evidence for such exists within the film products themselves.

Birth of a Nation created a public stir that centralized upon racial tensions and the question of fairness among races. It also managed to propel the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to the forefront of public controversy, and ultimately promoted the fight toward racial equality and the recognition of a growing national problem in relation to ethnicity, gender and race. The outcry that the NAACP generated and the negative exposure to Birth of a Nation in 1915, aided in Griffith’s recent character demise. Prior to World War II, he was hailed as an artist. Presently, virtually all proof of Griffith’s prowess and knowledge as a filmmaker and business entrepreneur, are generally grouped with the negative criticism that is associated with Birth of a Nation. In all of his films, he created antagonists that paralleled the views of society in general and explored issues that were exploding onto everyday headlines. The problem with the popular theories regarding Griffith’s psyche, is that they are based upon modern day film theory and political views; a far cry from the popular, though perhaps misguided, opinions of the nineteen-teens. He
bent the constrictions of gender in his films as well in his professional career, addressed racial issues that were considered taboo and often created sympathetic characters of color on-screen.

In analyzing the scope of film, there lies a need for a protagonist and an antagonist. As of 1915, it was common practice to assign the role of villain in dramatic vehicles to those individuals that were considered to be outsiders. These seem to include any deviation from the hard-working white American, or nativist ideal. Examples of specific issues that were a part of Griffith’s notable film shorts include temperance, incest, political corruption and abuse. Racial tension perhaps topped this list as a result of industry-related and occupationally inspired riots after the Reconstruction period incited anti-ethnic attitudes.7 Griffith’s Biograph films reflect all of these issues, and often replicate common public views of the early twentieth century, thus making these fictional dramas, worthy of the title primary resource.

Hollywood, even in its infancy, was filled with a bevy of individualized personas, including those whose sexual orientation, racial background and class structure varied. For years, D. W. Griffith was the authority on filmmaking.

Essentially, his career depended on supplying paying viewers with dramatic vehicles that would stir their imagination and conform to modern character and conceptual ideals. Modern academia provides an analysis of Griffith often based upon present-day theories of what is publicly acceptable as to issues that were considered delicate, such as race, class and gender.\footnote{Donald Bogle, 
              Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammys, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, 4th ed. (NYC, N.Y.: Continuum, 2001), 9-10.}

Dozens of his films, aside from Birth of a Nation, prove that he evolved as a film maker and supported cultural diffusion between traditional white values and new emerging ethnic and gender-based traditions. He hired women as actors, writers and directors, consulted with and compensated Native Americans for advice on western productions, and inadvertently helped society recognize the ethnic and racial issues that it was being plagued by, thus causing a greater awareness of inequality throughout the U.S.

There are several stances that one could take on the subject of D.W. Griffith as a man, ranging from racist to misunderstood. As a filmmaker however, one cannot fail to recognize his vast contributions to a medium that emerged initially as a crude and unacceptable art form.\footnote{Bonnie Currie, "The Nickel Madness," Harper's Weekly, (August 14, 1907): 1247.} All personal interpretations regarding his motive for producing controversial films may be labeled as subjective. Birth of a Nation is taught world-wide in undergraduate and high school classrooms as both a filmmaking tool and social learning experience. The film represents the political upheaval, immigration, gender and...
racial issues that made-up the cultural mix of the period in which Griffith was at his height. Although this again does not excuse the racist message that was perpetuated on-screen, today, such directors are often granted leniency; this may be attributed to artistic licensure and individual creativity. Spike Lee is one such director, and films such as Do the Right Thing\textsuperscript{10} and Jungle Fever\textsuperscript{11}, contained racial connotations that were perceived as satirical by critics. In 1989, when Do the Right Thing was released, Washington Post staff writer Desson Howe wrote, “This is radical filmmaking at its best; it'll have you arguing -- and laughing -- all the way home. You'd be doing the right thing to bring your posterior on down to catch it.”\textsuperscript{12} This statement indicates popular public preferences including controversy. Just as Spike Lee's tendencies to lean toward thought provoking issues, D.W. Griffith presented satirical and divisive works in his day. Griffith has been quoted as stating, “The camera is an agent of Democracy. It levels the barriers between classes and races.”\textsuperscript{13} All of the films that D.W. Griffith produced support this statement, and represent the era surrounding their creation, thus sustaining the theory behind their immense value as visual teaching aids.

\textsuperscript{10} Do the Right Thing, DVD, directed by Spike Lee (Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 1989).
The motivation for this thesis was prompted by the study of popular historical theory in association with film. The America that exists today is known stereotypically as the melting pot of the world; a nation that encourages diversity and acceptance. Yet, Americans need realistic villains both in their entertainment venues as well that of their actual lives in order to create an accountability for the negative circumstances that surround them both fictionally and realistically. In a 1926 interview, Griffith was quoted as stating:

Most motion-picture producers hesitate about going too near the limit of popular approval. Naturally. With so much invested in a single film, it is obvious that only disaster could attend the making of many photoplays that failed to please. And since no one knows exactly what the limit of approval in any particular instance is, the tendency of producers is, of course, to broaden the appeal, even if it means cheapening the character parts and story value of the production...That is where those of us who make a practice of trying pictures out and studying audiences with almost scientific care have a great advantage. For, since the really great returns are those which come to the photoplays that combine the greatest amount of worthwhile material and leadership with genuine popularity, that knowledge pays big dividends...We learn, for example, that it is not necessary for the picture to have "everything."\(^\text{14}\)

Despite the “cheapening” of a picture, the representation of the times is still evident. For example, due to the negative reception and the false representations in Birth of a Nation, Griffith is better known as the epitome of a “racist,” within American culture today. Yet to assume that filmmaker is projecting a personal conviction using one single piece, such as Birth of a Nation,

\(^{14}\) Myron M. Stearns, “How Do You Like the Show?” Collier’s Magazine, (April 24, 1926); 8-9.
is presumptuous without delving further into his/ her body of work. The film may be utilized in three ways; one as a study of Griffith himself, secondly as a chronicle of early film technology, and finally as an examination of the issues within the time period depicted, or the Civil War. Finally, a study may be procured regarding “modern” 1915 opinions reflective of the social topics of the 1860s. Regardless of differing opinions of Birth, the racial overtones are there, and should not be ignored in relation of a wide-angle view of society in general. The film is representative of several attitudes toward race that were circulating throughout the U.S. in 1915, and it should be studied. From an academic standpoint, it is judgmental and hazardous to ignore the other works Griffith produced based upon the reputation of one film. This exemplifies the theory that Griffith’s early Biograph works will only promote historical understanding and should be utilized in conjunction with such films as Birth of a Nation.
Historical Background, Impact, and Griffith Theory

Most nativists, or those that considered themselves true Americans, including D.W. Griffith, operated under the theory that the modern United States really did not exist until after the end of the Civil War. Their presumption followed the theory that the origins of the real United States emerged when masses of former slaves were forced to sustain themselves and compete with newly arrived immigrants for jobs, homes and a place within society. “The Public Be Damned: A Thematic and Multiple Intelligence Approach to Teaching the Gilded Age,” describes the tensions that defined the social Darwinist theory at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as outline just what a nativist’s perception of an outsider was. The two authors, Nina Mjagkij and D. Antonio Cantu offer a brief account of some of the social tensions in the U.S. throughout the Gilded Age due to job competition, racial tensions and social mobility issues.

While many urban residents migrated to the cities from rural areas in the United States, the majority of the newcomers were immigrants. The concentration of these new arrivals in select urban areas led to the emergence of distinct ethnic neighborhoods and fueled nativist fears. Many native-born white Americans, fearing job competition and race suicide, demanded immigration restriction in an attempt to limit the influx of non-Protestant immigrants.15

Essentially, those that thought that they were the true Americans after the Civil War, were by their own view, definitely not those of an African origin, nor were they generally recent European arrivals. Really, the individuality of this country only came about after the mixing of various races. This attitude may be attributed to the immigration wave and a self-promoting attitude and assertion of just what was “American.” Undoubtedly, these “Americans” did not massively lay a claim to this term until after 1865 and well into the Industrial Revolution/Factory Age. Films were figuratively a part of this, not only arriving as a new invention, but a new venue for written and demonstrated expression that encompassed a variety of individuals of different class tiers, genders and ethnicities.

Modern film historiographers characterize D.W. Griffith in several ways. Most of those that are accredited and not amateurs, understand that as popular opinion sways, so do the trends regarding film subjects. Case in point, Charles F. Altman, relates film history to the field of art history and demonstrates how an often misguidedly fanatic attitude can damage the reputation of those once considered great.

This nineteenth century positivist approach is now slowly receding in the world of art history, as it must in the field of film history as well, lest we succumb to the temptation to reduce all films to the sum of their innovations. Reputations have in fact been ruined by the overzealous application of this approach...One wonders whether the patronizing attitude often exhibited today toward early Griffith or Maoulian will one day extend to Welles and Altman: we keep them around somewhat like senile grandparents,
not for what they are not but because long ago they spawned the splendid present generation.\textsuperscript{16}

Altman has not failed to recognize the changing opinions of American society. At the same time, he summarizes a valid point regarding past directors that are still hailed as geniuses for their on-screen innovations, yet there still lies the possibility that their methodology will be proven inept or unacceptable in the film community, and they too will be susceptible to public opinion that is based upon limited resources or representations, such as D.W. Griffith.

Noted film historian and Griffith essayist, Gerald Mast summarizes the backlash that Griffith received in 1915 and the years following as:

Although Birth of a Nation provoked the anger of antiracists and it still does, it remains an essential document in American cultural history. Most white Americans in 1915 shared Griffith’s antipathy toward miscegenation and regarded social reformers as meddlesome cranks.\textsuperscript{17}

In one his more renown works, A Short History of the Movies,\textsuperscript{18} Mast consistently provides a concise and competent history of film, its contributions to society and the speculated categories into which certain films may fall. What is puzzling however, is that Mast generally groups films of all time periods together and picks and chooses which works to include in his analysis. An example of this

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would include an artistic evaluation of the Griffith film *Intolerance*, released in 1916, and Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, released in 1941. The issue with Mast’s film correlations, is that although they all relate and discuss controversial issues, the films represent a rather large time gap. Consequently, there are different expectations for the version of society in each era, along with a bevy of varied individuals responsible for producing such works. Logically, films that originate from similar production periods should be analyzed together, as well as those from one single party. Griffith’s large body of work is represented through Biograph Studios. It is ideal due not only to the volume that is present, but also conceptual phases that are evident throughout his work. It provides a clear indication of popular opinion, stereotypes and theory that are represented through these films. These are the concepts that should be utilized as proficient teaching tools as primary historical sources.

Tom Gunning has authored an impressive body of literary works focusing on the pioneering qualities that Griffith possessed in the direction and production of film. In February of 2002, Gunning hosted a survey course on the web where several of his articles provided insight for students and scholars to absorb and challenge. Gunning devoted many of these articles to Griffith’s impact and historical consequence, and that of his films. He also delves into the

20 *Citizen Kane*, VHS, directed by Orson Welles (Los Angeles, CA: RKO Pictures, 2000).
area surrounding the director's psyche and his tendency to catch "themes," and
go with them for months or years at a time. For instance, between 1909 and 1911,
Griffith had a Civil War infatuation that appeared throughout his shorts long
before the controversial Birth of a Nation was made. Gunning attempted to
compare the emerging social trends with Griffith's decisions on screenplays.
However, he does not go into this subject in-depth. He merely touches on this to
provide a background for his technological analysis of the films, often using a
shot-by-shot narrative. Gunning delved into the issues regarding the
development of Griffith's narrative styles and decisions, through the usage of his
Biograph short film subjects, and their impact on future films. He attempts to
reason with Griffith's subject matter choice, and largely based upon issues such
as women's rights, temperance, immigration, labor, racial and ethnic stereotypes
and family spheres. Gunning associated these decisions with their contributions
to the film world, yet he merely touched on their place in history as legitimate
sources. Only in recent history, has film been recognized as credible historical
documents, as well as primary resource material with teaching potential.

The modern volumes (1945 to present day,) that attest to the racial
prejudice of D.W. Griffith, are unfortunately based mainly on Birth of a Nation.
Undoubtedly this work has gathered a generous amount of publicity, and thus

\[ Gunning, Making Sense of Films, Internet. \]
\[ Tom Gunning, Film as History [article/ class on-line] (George Mason University, VA: George Mason University, 2002, accessed 30 March 2007); available from: http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/film.pdg; Internet, 4-10. \]
created less of a unique thinking process for reviewers, students and experts alike. Pierre Sorlin, a modern film historian states:

I have often observed that [modern] audiences are disturbed by the Negroes in Birth of a Nation, and that they react with very violent criticism. Too many discussions on the cinema consist of only obvious remarks and hasty judgments. It is easy to say that Birth of a Nation is a racist film which condones lynching and violence. This may be true, but it is far too obvious a comment to serve any purpose. If we want to understand the reason for this racism, and its place in American life, we cannot be content with such general remarks. We must get a grip on the film and analyze it more deeply. …We must choose a middle way between discussing the obvious and losing ourselves in a maze of largely unanswerable questions.\textsuperscript{24}

Griffith’s most criticized film deals with historical accuracy, race, class and gender. These are all contemporary controversial film issues that plague the viewing audiences even today. Birth of a Nation, is often considered by educators the quintessential Griffith/ race film. The film supported the accusation that he poisoned the nation through an entertainment venue.\textsuperscript{25} Yet again, there are dozens of shorts made by D.W. Griffith that exemplify that he had either an eye for the dramatic or constantly changing attitudes regarding race. Griffith was at one time, valued for a range of other films that exemplify his artistic and business talent for entertainment and aesthetic value.


Robert Rosenstone, a leading film historian explains the difficulty in presenting history on film as a straight depiction that does not deviate from only the facts. Essentially he surmises that each individual will be his or her own judge as to historical events, specifically those that are represented through visual history. Rosenstone’s point here is well-explained in relation to the films of D.W. Griffith. As an early film pioneer and showman, it is safe to say that perhaps one of the most controversial directors was most definitely not a historian. However, his films are valuable as insight into attitudes that were emerging during the early twentieth century, not as factual historical representations. His movies were created to motivate emotion and spark artistic appreciation. Interestingly enough, he did feel that film would eventually step into the role of educating the public. In this respect, he spoke futuristically. In April of 1915, he predicted the following in an article entitled Five Dollar Movies Prophesized:

The time will come, and in less than ten years...where the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures...Imagine a public library of the near future, for instance. There will be long rows of boxes or pillars, properly classified and indexed, of course. At each box a push button and before each box a seat. Suppose you wish to “read up” on a certain episode in Napoleon’s life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through what did happen, you will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button and actually see what happened.

D.W. Griffith was not a Ken Burns. He was not known for his documentary pieces that present what is often claimed as a strictly informational and unbiased view of history and its causes and effect. Yet, the shorts that he produced at Biograph studios have a genuine teaching potential regarding the issues and opinions surrounding the era in which they were produced. Birth of a Nation is already being used to teach social history, gender and racial studies and other courses geared at incorporating and teaching tolerance. Robert Rosenstone also considers written history just as subjective as that of film, thus begging the question of historical legitimacy in general. Essentially, he puts dramatic film on an even playing field as that of written history.

First, stories with beginnings, middles, and endings are constructed by historians as part of their attempts to make sense of the past. Second, the narratives that historians write are in fact, “verbal fictions”; written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself. Third, the nature of the historical world in a narrative is in part governed by the genre or mode (shared with forms of fiction) in which the historian has decided to cast the story—ironic, tragic, heroic or romantic. And fourth, language is not transparent and cannot mirror the past as it really was; rather than reflecting it, language creates and structures history and imbues it with meaning.²⁸

Today, there seems to exist an unwritten protocol regarding what is considered socially acceptable within popular film, due in part to the censorship movement of the last eighty years that was generally sparked by Birth of a Nation. Lee Grieveson’s essay entitled “Not Harmless Entertainment: State Censorship

and Cinema in the Transitional Era,” details the public’s outcry for rules concerning film concepts. The author stresses that films were a business, and thus the stories that were presented were capable of becoming corrupted for the sake of profit. Therefore, in the article, Grieveson concludes that films that are made with an aim of audience amusement should be kept within “nonpractical” and fictional guidelines.  

Certain words are not used and contentious themes are often reserved for works that carry an Indie label and cater to those that are seeking controversy and are usually educated enough to see the questions that film makers would like to incite among those that they foresee as qualified viewers. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, individuals were less educated than in the present day. The films of the silent era are often characterized as melodramatic, crude and simplistic regarding production methods and social views when compared to the films of today. Yet at the same time there were originally implied rules, censorship “norms” generally to adhere to throughout the early teens as there are today. In his biographical account regarding D.W. Griffith, Robert Henderson explained the reactions of audiences after viewing a new conceptual film in 1915 such as Birth of a Nation. He concludes that “Griffith played on the fears of the white audience, appealed to their prejudices, and perpetuated the Southern myth of Reconstruction that had grown since the 1890s. Above all

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Griffith showed that an audience would accept fiction as a reality.”

Rules generally are not set until they are broken. D.W. Griffith was a rule maker and thus a rule-breaker. He popularized a media genre which was new, and managed to create a stir among the masses that kept tongues wagging, presses printing and ultimately created the first movie blockbusters with his Biograph short subjects and ultimately paved the way for films that are presently considered epics, such as Birth of a Nation.

Film historian, George E. Custen has studied the demographics chosen for film representation and has written several works on the subject, thus exemplifying a basis for the theory that early films are valuable as primary teaching resources regarding social issues. Custen states:

Ethnicity is an issue larger than its mere representation in a script. “...ethnicity is culturally ubiquitous and textually submerged, thus challenging the widespread approach to ethnicity as limited to ‘content’ analysis.” Where a character often had a few options but to submit to a kind of ethnic dry-cleaning.

The films that were produced throughout the silent age predated method acting and intense study. Actors and directors merely had to assume what they knew of a type of individual and this included analyzing what they already knew. Unfortunately, most of the time these early methods were based upon early

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media devices that consisted of biased and stereotypical periodicals, political
cartoons and characters created in novels or picture books.

This thesis is structured with the author’s intention and the studies of
other historians as a basis for a direct argument, contending that D.W. Griffith’s
early films are valuable instructional tools, and that it is irresponsible to ignore
Griffith's earlier works based only upon Birth of a Nation. Griffith’s entire body
of work should be considered significant among academic institutions and
individuals, and he should maintain his status as an artistic and technical film
pioneer. Several aspects of D.W. Griffith will be connected in order to prove that
his other works are just as socially and politically meaningful, and able to create
an impact upon students of a mature aged status. Included will be a study of the
biographical information related to D.W. Griffith, along with the inclusion of
information and background regarding the surrounding time period. An
analysis follows and contains film reviews, articles and accounts of the films of
Griffith, and everyday occurrences that shaped the time period in an effort to
support the presented thesis. More importantly, this work will not refute the
negative issues perpetuated within Birth of a Nation, but promote other works
that bear Griffith’s name in order to supplement the persistently negative views
that haunt the amateur film historians of today.
The Life of D.W. Griffith

D.W. Griffith’s life was ironically like one of his films. It contained satire, drama and several instances of extreme circumstance. A brief examination of Griffith's past as well as the era that he existed within, will provide insight regarding his influences, directorial decisions and popular social issues of the time period. All of these pieces contribute to the finished body of film that was produced while at the Biograph Company, and it is from these that educators, historians and students are able to examine valuable political and cultural ideals that were prevalent throughout the early twentieth century.

David Warwick Griffith’s love for his southern surroundings is further evidenced in his many choices to direct short subjects that focus on the romance of the old South. However, until Birth of a Nation, he managed to keep the actual racial issues that were raging throughout the turn-of-the twentieth century generally at bay, mainly through his focus on family and gender conflict throughout the Civil War in his productions. As the South was in the process of trying to rebuild its empire, the man who would become one of the earliest, and most controversial directors was born on January 22, 1875, in LaGrange Kentucky. The son of staunchly self-proclaimed Methodists, his early life was

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32 Birth of a Nation in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
shaped through the influence of his parents and ultimately their church. The myth of the South dominated much of Griffith’s childhood; influenced by the recollections of his father, Jacob Griffith, a Confederate-veteran turned farmer.33

As if from the mind of his highest-paid writer, melodrama struck the Griffith family and the head of the household died supposedly due to one fateful night. Apparently a deadly combination of an overindulgence of whiskey combined with pickles led to his demise. The whiskey habit seemed to be a daily occurrence, and more-than-likely was the main cause of his death.34 As a result of poverty, the family was forced to move to a more affluent relative’s farm. (Several of Griffith’s shorts were based upon a sudden poverty-stricken family losing its assets.) It was after this move that Griffith’s sister and teacher Mattie, introduced him to classic literature, where it may be concluded that his passion for historical drama became ignited.35

Along with his newly-found literary awareness, as a teen, Griffith began to express an interest in the theatre. After a series of fledgling positions ranging from elevator boy to salesmen, at about twenty-years old, D.W. Griffith joined a touring company under the pseudonym of “Lawrence Griffith.” Unable to scrape by through merely acting, he began to write works for the stage.36 This is an early

36 Ibid, 67-70.
sign of his abilities as an entrepreneur, as the vaudeville concept seemed to be the prevalent form of entertainment throughout the U.S. during the later half of the 1800s. Never one to miss an opportunity, he began to compose and sell poetry and other shorts pieces that could earn enough to make a living.\(^\text{37}\)

As more nickelodeon theatres began to appear in the early 1900s, the demand for entertaining and diverse plots also increased. Throughout his career, D.W. Griffith stated on several occasions that he was no fool, and whether it was socially acceptable or not, he indeed took advantage of the newest artistic and economically profitable medium to sweep the country. He married Linda Arvidson in 1906, and realized through first-hand experiences that living hand-to-mouth was something that he did not want to dabble in for long. They lived in the bowery of New York, along with other aspiring actors and actresses and he often scraped through writing poems, plays and other works that he originally peddled. Many of his works were purchased and sold throughout the magazine realm and what was then considered to be the legitimate theatre district for stage productions.\(^\text{38}\)

Due to economic necessity, Griffith composed a script based on La Tosca, and arrived at the Edison Moving Picture Company in 1907 to sell his work. It was rejected. However, he was hired as an actor, and gained entry to an industry that was still new and still labeled as primitive compared with the drama of the


stage. The average running length of the films that Griffith acted in usually ranged from seven to fifteen minutes.\textsuperscript{39} As film was still in an extremely primitive form, significant artistic pieces and moralistic films were not yet an actual concept. The main subjects of early pictures were brief, dramatic and comedic pieces that did not carry much weight with audiences intellectually, and were solely used for amusement.

Entertainment, was the main priority of the pioneer studios, and writing talent often was not a requirement to work at a studio. Griffith proved to be the exception. His first acting role was aptly suited to his future career. In his first acting vehicle, he played an officer of the court and in order to display evidence for the judge, he sets-up a screen and runs a live capture of the murder in question.\textsuperscript{40} There is no question of Griffith’s demonstration of competence as an actor, yet a contract from Edison was not created, and D.W. Griffith’s paychecks did not reflect his early popularity as an actor. Just as any economically unsatisfied individual, he took his scripts to other studios in an attempt to provide for himself as well as his wife. Eventually, Biograph Studios, Edison’s archrival expressed interest in his work and purchased several of his stories in anticipation of production in 1908. Mainly due to his lack of validation as a writer with Edison’s Company, Griffith’s allegiance swayed, and he began to

\textsuperscript{40} John Fell, Film Before Griffith (Berkeley, Calif.: University of Berkeley Press, 1983), 367-73.
support Biograph exclusively as an actor and writer in this year, although no contract was yet presented.\textsuperscript{41}

The Biograph and Mutuscope Company was founded in 1895 by W.L.K. Dickson. He was actually a part of Thomas Edison’s laboratory team, and helped to aid in the discovery of moving pictures. Dickson and Edison saw a potential market for the new medium, but Dickson decided to go his separate way and formed his own studio company that eventually would rival Edison. Dickson invented the Biograph projector, and although the company did not invent moving pictures, it was the first to project them to actual screen audiences, in turn, propelling Biograph to the forefront of the entertainment industry and allowing Thomas Edison to realize the potential income that leisure films presented.\textsuperscript{42}

Griffith’s experience as an actor was a direct influence on his wish to become a director and producer. At this early stage in film development, studios employed regular directors that frequented their respective studios for the duration of the short film shoots. Most of these early films were shot in two to three days. The title of “director” at that time was not as developed as a profession in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. When Biograph’s Wallace McCutcheon Sr. became ill Griffith was invited to step in and take over. Until this time, D.W.

\textsuperscript{41} Iris Barry, D.W. Griffith: American Film Master (N.Y.: The Museum of Modern Art Press, 1940), 12.
Griffith was known mainly as a character actor and had virtually no directorial experience. The result was The Adventures of Dollie, a film originally thought to be lost due to deterioration. It has only recently reappeared as a result of a Library of Congress conservation effort. Prior to the conservation effort, first-hand accounts written during filming indicated that Griffith exhibited great promise, and not only accomplished what was expected of him as a director, but actually implemented an artistically engaging view to this action/adventure.

Upon the completion of his directorial debut, Griffith was offered a contract of $50.00 per week and commission of no less than $50.00 per year as a director. To a once struggling actor, this sum seemed astronomical, but he commenced directing and produced one film per week, thus cementing his commission and his economic status as an upper-middle class citizen. In the two years that followed, his salary increased from $50.00 per week to $75, with his commission promised at no less than $200 per year, a direct indication of his contribution to Biograph Studios and its gratitude for his dedication.

As the times progressed, so did the demands of motion picture storylines. Due to the everyday situations that were publicized through periodicals and word-of-mouth regarding political, economic and social issues, the studios began releasing parodies that involved such issues, and although they resided in the

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43 The Adventures of Dollie in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
45 Barry, American Film Master, p. 12-13.
fantasy world of studio creation, a variety of subjects was necessary in order to appeal to several groups of individuals. Griffith as well as others were motivated by the sheer instinct of survival; the film industry opened a new door to those that were creative and were struggling for social and economic mobility. Griffith describes increase in film interest as:

The relatively low costs of production and high demand for film also allowed for a wide variety of groups outside the industry to gain access to the screen... Movies portrayed the evils of child labor, the unfair competition caused by the use of prison labor, the hardships faced by widows and mothers, the unsafe conditions of factories, tenements and the injustices suffered because women were denied the right to vote... All of these helped to publicize and facilitate remedy to these problems.46

D.W. Griffith’s career as a director seemed to parallel the issues of the day, and he rose to fill the demand created by his consumers. Comedies were replaced by dramatic vehicles. These were actually more suited to his talent. Remembering his passion for Dickens, Griffith tended to focus on the general repair of the dysfunctional family and centered his attentions on the evils that plagued society such as drinking, immorality, the preservation of purity among women and the malevolence of industry. Robert Richardson has made an attempt to analyze D.W. Griffith’s literary link.

His favorite author was Charles Dickens, and although he produced only one Dickens film, he seemed to have found inspiration for his narrative film style in the British writer’s novels. Criticized for using a “cut back,” he cried, “well doesn’t Dickens

write that way?” “Yes, but that ‘s Dickens,” he was told, “that’s novel writing, that ‘s different.” “Oh, not so much,” insisted Griffith, “not so different.”47

His switch from the lighthearted was indeed prodded by the demands of movie audiences, but it was also conceived through an increase in censorship. In 1909, Chicago city leaders expressed their disapproval for the moral depravity that was occurring on the screen. Sexual taboos and inane comedic situations with what was then considered low-humor, were being used to extract laughs and money from film consumers. Examples included situations involving women changing and love scenes and the occasional glimpse of a rogue ankle. These things were unheard of in decent public society. However, they were commonplace within film and attracted audiences. Things were considered so morally deteriorated that the mayor of Chicago expressed his interest in banning moving picture shows on Sundays, the biggest box-office day of the week. Griffith was not phased, and profited immensely from the newly set rules regarding censorship, both artistically and monetarily. He had a passion and flair for historical storytelling and his public was not disappointed. He was quoted as saying:

“A great wave of reform was sweeping the countryside at the time...You could tell how sincere the papers were by the way they were working from the ground-up in spreading these pictures across the front pages. There were campaigns against everything.” He added sarcastically, “So I decided to

Griffith presented controversial issues that also served as dramatic vehicles to the public. Essentially, these consumers were living these various scenarios. Social Darwinism was a prevalent theme throughout the Industrial Revolution. In a world with survival as the main objective, individuals and businesses alike had to adapt to the new rules of social conformity that were constantly changing as fresh concerns perplexed the leaders of the U.S. Temperance, suffrage, political and social equality, economic status and labor practices were constant sources of consternation for the nation as a whole. The questions of what was right continually plagued the population. This concept was different for each individual and family. Griffith naturally conformed to the expectations of the officials that were governing motion picture concepts and what essentially equaled economic survival for the studios, and managed to personally and professionally profit.49

After his short stint with comedy, and as a result of various censorship guidelines, Griffith moved into a genre of films that were dominated by themes of pursuit, essentially the chase, and sympathetic vehicles that featured wronged and often vulnerable Native Americans from 1908-1911. In keeping with the most commercialized and modern issues for this time period, he paralleled the Western Expansion of the U.S., the thirst for settlement and the film industry’s

49 Slide, Early American Cinema, 101-105.
general relocation to California. The year 1911 marked a prominent change in subject matter for Griffith as public interest in fluff films began to wane. The filmmakers of this era were clamoring for realistic stories, and many studios began to shoot social justice pieces that proved sympathetic to the blue-collar, laboring class. Among those that were spending money for an afternoon of entertainment were women, and Griffith’s turn to Civil War shorts in 1911 was definitely no accident. Two of the films that were produced throughout this period often focused on cowardly male soldiers that relied on women in various forms to rescue either themselves or the honor of their family.50

As movie theatres became a socially acceptable form of entertainment among all classes, the hunger for dramatic vehicles increased. Griffith found his calling. The years of fantasizing about Dickens’ novels and Victorian plots paid-off as studios drifted toward longer films and serious situations that could scare and captivate audiences simultaneously. D.W. Griffith reached the pinnacle of controversy after he read Thomas Dixon’s The Clansman51 and decided to turn this romantic view of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK,) and the South into a film.

Griffith had no qualms about risking the reputation of others for personal gain; a practice that today’s artistic directors use commonly. Now this concepts is considered merely expressive. Legitimate concerns regarding the negative

50 In Old Kentucky and The House with Closed Shutters in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
spread of racial stereotypes and hatred were raised by the NAACP and other concerned groups. Ironically, as a result of his highest grossing and most memorable film, D.W. Griffith's modern reputation now carries the racist label that his involvement in Birth of a Nation created. He would never again reach the audience popularity that he had attained before and during Birth of a Nation. Upon its release, it was the longest running film to date, and actually set a precedent and became known as the first full-length feature film. Audiences were awed by the chases, abductions, and generally thrilling circumstances that were new to many average Americans. Initially, newspapers understood the difference between Thomas Dixon's rhetoric and contribution to the film and Griffith's artistic additions, mainly because Birth of a Nation existed in an earlier dramatic form called The Clansman. Here is a portion of the original New York Times review, 1915.

The civil war battle pictures, taken in panorama, represent enormous effort and achieve a striking degree of success. One interesting scene stages a reproduction of the auditorium of Ford's Theatre in Washington, and shows on the screen the murder of Lincoln. In terms of purely pictorial value the best work is done in those stretches of the film that follow the night riding of the men of the Ku-Klux Klan, who look like a company of avenging spectral crusaders sweeping along the moonlit roads. A great deal might be said concerning the spirit revealed in Mr. Dixon's review of the unhappy chapter of Reconstruction and concerning the sorry service rendered by its plucking at old wounds. But of the film as a film, it may be reported simply that it is an impressive new illustration of the scope of the motion picture camera. The "Birth of a Nation," which was prepared for the screen under the direction of D. W. Griffith, takes a full evening for its unfolding and marks the
advent of the two dollar movie. That is the price set for the more advantageous seats in the rear of the Liberty's auditorium.\textsuperscript{52}

Recently, D.W. Griffith represents controversy among filmmakers. On December 15, 1999, the Director's Guild of America's National Board made a quick and cutting decision to rename the award that they had originally deemed the “D.W. Griffith Award,” which celebrated veteran, innovative and pioneer directors. After more than forty-five years as a staple in the film industry, and without the vote nor even the consultation of members, this change was implemented, and the reason given was that Griffith “helped to foster intolerable racial stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{53} Just as the quotation indicates, America's earliest innovative director is currently carrying the racist label that he acquired after the release of 

Birth of a Nation from prominent African American leaders and equal rights lobbyists. The renaming one of the most prestigious awards in Hollywood, exemplifies the unforgiving attitude of modern society. It also serves as a reflection into the past.

Griffith did produce several artistically and critically successful films yet nearly all were considered public flops later in his career. All failed to support him in his old age, and live up to the egotistical legend that he had built himself


to be within new Hollywood culture of the 1920s. It is obvious to conclude that along with the dawn of talkies several individuals and studios could not adapt to the new Hollywood expectations. As talkies began to dominate film, silent film actors became passé. Many did not survive the new sound technology and had unacceptable accents, ungodly pitched voices and those that needed music to be moved into emotion faded into virtual nonexistence. As this new film movement swept the country after 1927, D.W. Griffith became one of the unfortunate victims of aging ideals and generally anti-progress. The Jazz Age not only supported liberated women, but an artistic movement for those of color. Griffith’s attitudes that are presented in earlier films and attempted historic epics were old news to audiences. The vamp, flapper and free spirit were the new vogue in Hollywood; regardless of ethnicity or gender.

D.W. Griffith’s career began to slip throughout the pinnacle of the Jazz Age. Griffith and the Biograph Company split in 1912. The years 1913-1919 were an artistic but not financial success. He independently produced and directed such masterpieces as *Broken Blossoms* and *Intolerance*, yet he did not meet with the financial success he expected. The new generation of the 1920s clamored for modern film topics, and on-screen representations of youth, Jazz and freedom. Griffith was unable to adapt, and sadly, he would never again entirely control his pictures as he officially became responsible to others.

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54 Broken Blossoms in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).

55 Intolerance in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
Although Griffith was considered a master in an artistic sense throughout the late nineteen teens and early 1920s, studios were afraid of the backlash that they may have experienced if Griffith was given free reign.\

Hollywood and New York completed the link from factory to corporate offices, and the new studio system and censorship codes dictated what subjects films could explore and the methods that were used to do so. D.W. Griffith, although humbled by the poor box office reaction to films after Birth, continued to carry and assert that he was the “father of the modern motion picture,” and that he knew what was best for his pictures. The studios disagreed. Griffith all but disappeared after 1931 and only resurfaced when consulted about a past film or individual that he had worked with. The remainder of his life was spent virtually alone and living in a Hollywood hotel until his death from a brain aneurism in 1948. It is ironic that alcoholism and temperance became the focus of several of his silent short subjects; he died with true alcohol addiction and without a soul to comfort him in his old age, ending his life as what could have been a virtual subject for his directorial expertise. Later, all of Hollywood turned-out for his public funeral, yet many were not sincere in their grief, and few actually mourned him. His eulogy was stated as such:

It was the tragedy of his later years that this active, brilliant mind was given no chance to participate in the advancement

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57 Schickel, An American Life, 560-561.
58 Schickel, An American Life, 604.
of the industry. Difficult as it might be for him to have played a subordinate role, I do not believe that the fault was entirely his own. I cannot help feeling that there should have always been a place for him and his talents in motion pictures...  

He was recognized personally and professionally, and at the time of his death was still credited with his pioneering methodology regarding film. It was not until several years after his death, that the very film community that he aided to establish, stripped him of his coveted father-of-modern film title.

Contrary to adverse publicity and criticism, Griffith is still remembered as an innovator both technically and artistically within the world of film. He became a director just as the new concept of film began erupting throughout the middle and lower classes as a distinct form of leisure, as well as an entertainment venue. It propelled many economically and socially throughout the early days of the motion picture industry, and D.W. Griffith was one of these fortunate individuals, and during his lifetime, he was hailed as, “the father of the modern motion picture.”

As the Progressive Era struggled to sustain the vocal and action-filled world of politics, the period in which D.W. Griffith existed coincided with the U.S. immigration wave and labor conflict interactions. This also coincided with the nickelodeon and movie house boom. Just as more and more working class individuals were able to view this new venue, immigrants were given the opportunity to capitalize within this new and profitable business in several facets

59 Ibid, 605.
60 Henderson, D.W. Griffith: His Life, 23.
including acting, directing, and running the studio. Opportunity knocked and as early films paralleled the difficulties of true life in the early nineteen teens, and doors opened for those of non-traditional American backgrounds such as Fox, Mayer and Loew; all immigrants that eventually became puppeteers to future Hollywood royalty. The aforementioned studio heads began their careers before 1920, and just as Griffith, they often practiced exploiting sensitive political and social issues that would attract audience reactions, however adverse they may have been.  

The difference between Griffith and the kings of the cinema was that he was originally considered a true American based upon the previously mentioned nativist concepts and ideals. These include being white and having a generation or so of residency, the ability to speak clear English and a reasonable amount of education. Most of these qualities were not encompassed by incoming immigrants, racial or other ethnic groups. He also fancied himself a scholar, in part based upon his independent education of literary classics and other volumes detailing history’s most notorious occurrences. David Warwick Griffith was a student, director, artist and entrepreneur. A top priority for Griffith was his love for larger-than-life historical epics. He was openly criticized for his implementation/inclusion of controversial subjects including racial, gender and social issues, and by various social and political groups that were seeking to

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promote equality among the masses. Many of these issues are the very same obstacles that filmmakers are plagued by today.
D.W. Griffith furthered the art of filmmaking during a turbulent time in the U.S. His Biograph short subjects provide a glimpse into the development and progression of the tail end of what has been known as the Gilded Age. The disorder of the social and economic strata regarding class within the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century supplied the background for several of the themes of Griffith's shorts, and allows a possible insight into his filmmaking choices and generally the circumstances of society. Life during the early twentieth century was generally fast-paced and competitive. As the concept of industry, mass production and social Darwinism began to become popularized among the rich, the lives of the lower-classes became more and more industrialized. Andrew Carnegie, one of the most prominent businessmen of the Gilded Age theorized:

The problem of our age is the administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship. The conditions of human life have not only been changed, but revolutionized, within the past few hundred years. In former days there was little difference between the dwelling, dress, food, and environment of the chief and those of his retainers. . . . The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization.\textsuperscript{63}

Wealth in the Gilded Age was the ultimate key to survival, and those individuals that discovered themselves within the groups that were serving as manual laborers found that the specific talents that they had to offer were overshadowed by big business’ concept of the assembly line and the creation of the model worker. Although craftsmen and artisans were still valued for their contributions to society, the masses that were a part of the middle and lower class tiers of society had to conform to the ideal that was expected of them; long days, low pay and immense pressure through the forces of labor competition.64

New immigrants and those of the middle and lower classes were seeking refuge at the turn of the twentieth century, from the monotony of their everyday activities. Cities were forming throughout the North and the South as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which caused millions of non-Americans to filter into the U.S. from other lands. Rural space was becoming more and more a rarity in the East as cities expanded and grew populated to the point that the rich were seeking other areas of living space, eventually leading to the creation of several types of suburbs. In “The Public Be Damned,” the authors summarize the changing statistics of the city and its general population increase as:

The unprecedented growth of industrial production during the Gilded Age also sparked demographic changes. Attracted by factory jobs, large numbers of rural migrants and immigrants flocked to the industrial centers of the Northeast. The resulting urbanization led to an increase in the number and size of American

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cities. The urban centers of the Gilded Age were larger, more densely populated, and ethnically more diverse than any previous urban settlements.\textsuperscript{65} Industrialization had a large impact upon development of cities and drew masses of individuals looking to better themselves through work opportunities that were not found in rural areas. Roger F. Riefler performed a study on urbanization patterns in the nineteenth century. He summarized that manufacturing had the greatest impact upon cities; it not only provided goods and services that rural individuals could not receive in remote places, but it provided increased income opportunities as well.\textsuperscript{66} Individuals were essentially drawn to places that would provide them with advantages, and thus the cities began to grow. Essentially, as urban centers grew, economic opportunities expanded both in the labor markets, and leisure activities that could appease the tastes of differing individuals.

Within these urban centers, initially, the wealthy that remained in the cities lived in parts that were almost segregated from those of the lower classes. There the rich could distinguish themselves on separate social tiers, and the lower class dwellings were typically tenement homes and crowded apartments. Due to dire economic situations, large and extended family groups resided in closed and cramped living spaces in order to survive. In 1890, Jacob Riis wrote a


book that demonstrated the general attitude toward immigration and the individuals that were forced to live in poverty. The author also questioned the disappearance of the original inhabitants of the once one-family buildings that evolved into tenement homes.

When once I asked the agent of a notorious Fourth Ward alley how many people might be living in it I was told: One hundred and forty families, one hundred Irish, thirty-eight Italian, and two that spoke the German tongue...there was not a native-born individual in the court...The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community. There is none; certainly not among the tenements.67

In rural areas, small farmers struggled to make a living. The Northern areas developed at a greater rate of speed than that of the South, thus although at one time city-living was deemed fashionable by the wealthy, it was considered passé as more and more immigrants began to settle there. Eventually a changed America emerged as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries melted together.

Individuals that migrated toward America's cities were a variety of races and ethnicities, and were drawn by the prospect of making money. Many people that considered themselves true Americans began to resent the newcomers, and in turn recognized the threat of job competition in these individuals. The opinions of those that supported the theory that the U.S. consisted of legitimate Americans, and not those of a recent arrival, presented a negative view of the city in their consensus. They were generally preoccupied with preserving the old

way of life, essentially, that of their childhoods and of those from previous
generations. Oftentimes, negativity toward new individuals was spurned by a
general fear of change, as well as a resistance to abandon rural ways of the past.

Ultimately, the average American was not a wealthy, urban socialite. In
fact, the laboring classes were faced with a daily strife that stemmed from
laboring issues and the need to survive. In the era before labor unions and the
initiation of fair wages and working hours, time for leisure activities was scarce;
many workers labored as much as their employers thought necessary in order to
keep their low paying jobs or feed their families. Upon the enforcement of
shorter work days there was more time for relaxation and entertainment
activities. Early film houses, or nickelodeons, provided a brief refuge for those
that could not afford to go on vacation to various resorts, or those whose
occupations limited their time away. Thus, this venue became popularized, and
the concept of popular film was born. In a 1907 article, Barton W. Currie, a
women’s vote activist and early feminist observed:

In some vaudeville houses you may watch a diversity of
performances for hours for so humble a price as ten cents, provided
you are willing to sit among the rafters. Yet the roof bleachers were
never so popular or profitable as the tiny show-places that have
fostered the nickel madness.

68 The Library of Congress, America’s Story: The Progressive Era [teaching resource on-line]
http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/progress; Internet.
69 The Library of Congress, America at Work/America at Leisure (Washington D.C.: The
Library of Congress, 2007, accessed 6 June 2007); available from:
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhtml/awleis.html.
70 Carrie Barton, “The Nickel Madness: The Amazing Spread of a New Kind of
Amusement Enterprise Which is Making fortunes for its Projectors,” Harper’s Weekly (August 24,
1907): 1246-1247.
The rationale for film’s newly found popularity was that the economically challenged were socially excluded from dramatic stage theatre. These individuals simply could not afford to patronize such entertainment venues. In its infancy, film was considered a cheap version of the theatre according to the upper crust that could afford to attend operatic and dramatic showcases. These outings for the rich allowed for socialization with those among similar economic backgrounds. The “legitimate” theatre was bred in New York City, and as time went on, the actors and actresses that proved themselves successful, rose to parallel the families that became royalty in the U.S., such as the Rockefeller, Carnegie and Vanderbilt clans. Dramatic theatre patronization was an expensive habit, and the poor masses certainly could not afford this luxury. As the cities began to expand and become increasingly crowded and dirty, the wealthy began to leave what they considered the ethnic and economic pollution of the cities and drift toward the suburbs. Upon their exodus, the working class became dominant and began to dictate the popularity of specific leisure activities that would occupy their time.\textsuperscript{71}

The poor were among the millions that lived and survived in these cities, and they needed recreational activities that they could afford that were near to their homes as well as economical. In 1910, the population in New York City

was an astounding 4,766,883\textsuperscript{72} and the average family income was accrued through two-working parents and quite often, the support of children as well. Thus, affordable leisure activities became necessary among the working class;

Vaudeville was originally one way to alleviate the stress of work, and later film served as the answer for a brief transportation into the world of fantasy.\textsuperscript{73} Originally most vaudeville shows were held in small, stark venues. Eventually however, as its popularity rose, the theatres became more and more elaborate and accessible to those of all classes.\textsuperscript{74} One original spectator, merely known as “Evans,” was quite awed by the luxury of the new theatres:

The age of luxury seems to have reached its ultima thule. The truth of this has never been impressed upon one so forcibly as in a visit to Keith's dream palace of a theatre . . . It is almost incredible that all this elegance should be placed at the disposal of the public, the poor as well as the rich.\textsuperscript{75}

The popularity of film may be attributed to its integration into the vaudeville shows and theatres. Originally films were integrated with vaudeville shows, as a means to reinforce the newly discovered movie trend. Joseph Mendill Patterson,


\textsuperscript{12} Rick Easton, Vaudeville, a Dazzling Display of Heterogeneous Splendor, (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia, accessed 6 June 2007); available from: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/easton/vaudeville/vaudeville.html; Internet.

\textsuperscript{13} Albert F. McClean, American Vaudeville as Ritual. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 197.
an early sociologist, speculated upon the easy access that the average working
American was able to experience regarding films in 1907:

Civilization, all through the history of mankind, has been chiefly
the property of the upper classes, but during the past century
civilization has been permeating steadily downward. The leaders
of this democratic movement have been general education,
universal suffrage, cheap periodicals and cheap travel. To-day the
moving –picture machine cannot be overlooked as an effective
protagonist of democracy. For through it the drama, always a big
fact in the lives of the people at the top, in now becoming a big fact
in the lives of people at the bottom. Two million of them a day
have so found a new interest in life.  

Moving pictures became a sensation in the early 1900s. The first nickelodeon
theatre opened in Pittsburgh in 1905. One year earlier William Fox, the first true
movie mogul began the Greater New York Film Rental Company; consequently,
Fox opened several theatres throughout New York.  
New movie houses
provided a stark contrast to legitimate stage productions; the average worker
could scarcely afford to attend them. Strictly dramatic vehicles of the stage were
often tailored for the upper class. The issues that were the topics of popular
films such as abuse, temperance, social, gender and racial issues, also mimicked
the headlines, and generally the “Average Joe” could understand and
sympathize with the storylines. At the close of World War I, the concept of the
movie palace became popular among the upper and middle classes, and it was
assumed the development of these elegant settings would assure social

76 Joseph Medill Patterson, “The Nickelodeons: The Poor Man's Course in Drama,” The
Saturday Evening Post (November 23, 1907), 10.
77 Steven Ross, “Beyond the Screen: History, Class and the Movies”, in The Hidden
Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class, ed. David James (Minneapolis: University of
acceptance in movie theatre attendance. However, before WWI, most moviegoers were generally economically challenged and of the laboring class. A 1912 New York survey confirmed this conclusion, indicating that 95% of the audiences in primitive movie houses were “blue-collar” workers.\textsuperscript{78}

Moving pictures became a means for the common individual to glimpse places that they often would not see throughout their everyday lives, yet at the same time, there were filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith, that were dedicated to the real issues that plagued society. For a small fee, the screens were placed in various locations; the surroundings were inconsequential, as the patrons reveled in the exaggerated plots and characters. Ultimately, film served as a cheap source of enjoyment for those that could escape through vicarious fantasies with characters that were fictitious. This media form was new, cutting-edge and extremely successful. As a result, a new form of big-business began to take shape; the studio, and the movie mogul. Joseph Mendill Patterson continues to observe the emerging trend in 1907 as:

\begin{quote}
The nickelodeons are merely an extension course in civilization, teaching both its ‘badness’ and its ‘goodness.’ They have come in obedience to the law of supply and demand; and they will stay as long as the slums stay, for in the slums they are the fittest and must survive.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

Just as New York was a haven for dramatic theatre, and as film became popularized, the newly formed studio companies and corporations formed a

\textsuperscript{78} Patterson, Post, 10.
base there as well. Business was booming, and this new industry exploded onto the banking scene, and what used to be known as nouveau riche in all business areas including that of the film industry, became fashionable. Ann Douglass, a New York and theatre historian, has written about Manhattan’s evolution throughout the Progressive era and into the Jazz Age. She describes the public’s attraction from the stage to film as:

New York had supplanted London as the world’s banker by the end of the Great War, and as the movie industry developed into the conglomerates of production facilities, New York provided the backing; shares of the “Big Eight,” as the leading studios were called, were traded on Wall Street…

Film studios were able to essentially produce films at an extremely low cost, and yet amass a vast profit largely from those seeking a brief relief from everyday life. Yet after the initial lightness and simplicity of the earliest plots, the studios created those that played upon the sympathies of their patrons, in turn creating an even more profitable commodity. Film and audience tastes eventually evolved, as did audience expectations. As a result, plots and stories escalated and the more outrageous the storyline, the more the viewers seemed to embrace the subject.

In the early days of the silent film, the average cost per reel for a film was approximately $400 to $1,000. This seemingly was an astronomical amount in

\[\text{19 Patterson, Post, 10-11}\]
view of the average salary of the middle and lower class. Yet, when compared to the profits coming in weekly it truly seems like a piddling sum to the studios, which owned many of the early movie venues. Joseph Mendill Patterson continues his study in the Saturday Evening Post article, published in 1907, which specified the average operating costs of a similar venue.

Incredible as it may seem, over two million people on the average attend the nickelodeons every day of the year, and a third of these are children. Let us prove up this estimate. The agent for the biggest firm of film renters in the country told me that the average expense of running a nickelodeon was from $175 to $200 a week, divided as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expense Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage of manager</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage of operator</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage of doorman</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage of porter or musician</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent of film (two reels changed twice a week)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent of projecting machine</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent of building</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music, printing, &quot;campaign contributions,&quot; etc.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Merely to meet expenses then, the average nickelodeon must have a weekly attendance of 4000. This gives all the nickelodeons 16,000,000 a week, or over 2,000,000 a day. Two million people a day are needed before profits can begin, and the two million are forthcoming. It is a big thing, this new enterprise.62

The average net per picture was generally anywhere from the minimum of $25,000 to the nearly $400,000 for the studios throughout the early 20th century until about 1915. Initially, the studios owned the movie houses, thus, the profit

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62 Abel, Americanizing the Movies, 14-16.
collected could still be considered a tidy sum in the early 20th century. Generally, these amounts are significantly small compared to the net profits that the studios collected.\textsuperscript{83}

Moving pictures were not only a source of enjoyment for those that could not afford to leave the city, but it opened the doors to struggling actors, writers, set-designers and individuals of different social backgrounds, gender and oftentimes race. Thomas Edison has often been credited with inventing the motion picture camera. The concept did indeed belong to Edison who stated: “I am experimenting upon an instrument, which does for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear.”\textsuperscript{84} However, the actual instrument was developed with a partner and associate, William K.L. Dickson in 1889.\textsuperscript{85} Edison then went on to form his own motion picture company which ultimately merged into Biograph Studios; the site of D.W. Griffith’s most acclaimed, controversial and monetarily successful films.

Leisure was a large subject for the working class at the turn of the twentieth century. As the concept of film was making drama accessible to all classes, a multi-million dollar industry was erupting into the crowded cities and serving to entertain the masses. As this industry became popularized, it began to gain more and more credibility within the category regarding artistic presentation. A unknown filmgoer in 1910 wrote:

\textsuperscript{84} Matthew Josephson, Edison: A Biography (NYC, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1959), 386.  
The cinematograph is doing for the drama what the printing press did for literature, bringing another form of art into the daily life of the people. Plays are now within reach, literally, of the poorest as are good books and good pictures...But once on a celluloid film, a spectacle can be reproduced indefinitely, the good as cheaply as the poor, and superiority is no longer handicapped. 

The above passage enforces the theory that film provided stories that were accessible to those from all areas of the social spectrum. Early films often appealed to immigrants, and other individuals that were that were not well-versed in English, or were illiterate, and seeking an escape venue for their daily frustrations.

Early film pioneers realized that they had to resort to the spectacular in order to capture audiences, and it was through the use of sensationalism that they were able to draw individuals into the newly born movie house experience. New York was the first home for the film studios, including Biograph Studios. It was not until after D.W. Griffith became fascinated with the West and dragged his crews there regularly, that a trend among filmmakers began to develop and the companies began to migrate. New York indeed was the perfect place to promote the filmmaking industry’s daring new concepts. The daily occurrences of those that inhabited this metropolis were indeed the stuff that made the motion picture plots believable and therefore appealing. Griffith and the other film pioneers were able to recognize this concept, and produced hundreds of

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86 Quoted in Douglas, Mongrel Manhattan, 10.
short films yearly and to their credit, they entertained, inspired and amazed a public that often considered their lives monotonous and common.\textsuperscript{87}

Thus, the film industry was born and the theory of mass production that was occupying other areas of industry spread to the newest and what would soon be most profitable entertainment venue. On the sidelines of such developments were individuals ready to pounce upon opportunity. They were future the producers, directors, actors, writers and others that would be destined to profit through the production of fiction in a seemingly real form that could appeal to all social and economic tiers. The motion picture industry was born and like others, and D.W. Griffith took advantage of these new opportunities.

It is important for students to understand the link between urbanization and the development of new technologies at the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, these new innovations provided individuals with social mobility opportunities that would not be available in rural areas. Early films provide an opportunity for students to view the different social/class issues that plagued society, as well as an example of positive strides for otherwise economically challenged individuals regarding labor and moneymaking opportunities. Finally, the new film medium gave a voice to several issues that were broadened through the sheer exposure that they received by a variety of individuals of all races, ethnicities and class. D.W.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 10-11.
Griffith and the Biograph Company produced so many shorts, that many contemporary issues were explored across the spectrum. Although these were not documentaries, they still provide insight into different areas through the eyes of the characters on screen. This could prove invaluable in the classroom.
Analysis

Social Reform Films

Recently, academics have made several attempts to defend and justify D.W. Griffith’s questionable judgments both on and off the camera, again, predominantly in reference to Birth of a Nation. However, the early works of D.W. Griffith, the Biograph short subjects, contain evidence to combat Griffith’s controversial reputation, and often embrace new twentieth century ideals, including social, racial and political concepts that encompass the true melting pot spirit of the U.S. The primary ethnic and racial groups included in the early short films are laborers, women, African Americans, the Chinese, and Native Americans. These individuals encompass the social turbulence within the U.S. in the early twentieth century, generally regarding class and job competition; providing ample material for early silent film subjects that are worthy of present primary resource consideration and study by secondary students in present day classrooms.

One of the primary resources utilized to examine D.W. Griffith and his contributions at the Biograph Company include a series of releases called The Biograph Bulletin. A curious aspect of this collection of publications is that there is not an author credited with their composition. However, they clearly bear the Biograph name and thus represent the thoughts, ideas and viewpoint of the
studio. The Biograph Bulletin gives a plot description of each short made by D.W. Griffith, and adds a commentary that may be assessed to the time period; meaning that various verbiage and concepts are written and therefore represented within to allow the reader a further glimpse into the early days of the film company. It further allows the student/reader to speculate as to motivation and other aspects of the creative process and will provide insight regarding Griffith’s directorial decisions and processes.

Social Reform Films: Family Issues and Labor Messages

D.W. Griffith’s sophistication regarding filmmaking techniques seemed to develop with storylines. Several of his films featured religious ideals of reform, generally those represented within groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, (WCTU). Ultimately, these subjects often became fuel for Griffith’s storylines. Women were seeking the right to vote, and various political groups were playing for an advantage in recruitment through their promotion of nativist ideals, that included the real American; mainly those that were white, Christian and hard-working. Griffith’s rise to fame paralleled this political and social revolution. Ideals that involved temperance, immigration, labor and industrial practices and leisure activities were being targeted as the root of society’s problems. These issues often conflicted with the old school philosophy of observing the rules that have governed civilized society for over a century. Political groups were often at the heart of a changing and modern America. Theodore Roosevelt was a large champion of fair labor practices and encouraged
individual well-being among workers. D.W. Griffith projects these issues through his Biograph shorts. Damon W. Root, a political historian and author of the article, “When Bigots Become Reformers: The Progressive Era’s Shameful Record on Race,” describes the Progressive movement as:

The Progressive movement swept America from roughly the early 1890s through the early 1920s, producing a broad popular consensus that government should be the primary agent of social change. To that end, legions of idealistic young crusaders, operating at the local, state, and federal levels, seized and wielded sweeping new powers and enacted a mountain of new legislation, including minimum wage and maximum hour laws, antitrust statutes, restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol, appropriations for hundreds of miles or roads and highways, assistance to new immigrants and the poor, women’s suffrage, and electoral reform, among much else.

The Progressive Era encompassed individuality and capitalism, the very essence of the film industry at its birth. The era exemplified ideals that were largely publicized and spread prior to and surrounding the 1896 election, a time that closely paralleled the film boom. Modernization was a great symbol of the era and concepts including suffrage, immigration, industrial matters utilized media to attract those that were potentially sympathetic to their various platforms. Inadvertently, film production, was one of these ways. Although perhaps unintentionally, filmmakers found themselves representing

90 Ibid, 60-61.
characterizations of specific racial, ethnic and gender based groups rather than a realistic interpretation based upon definite research. Film was a main component that was instrumental in spreading rhetoric regarding social issues. These concepts were so broadly represented through film and other media forms that they appealed to many individuals across the social spectrum.

Often the subjects that were explored on film disturbed the public and reformers. The outcry over the exposure of various controversial ideas to a paying audience was so immense that as early as the 1910 decade, Chicago had a censorship board in place. Louis A. Erenberg, of the Chicago historical society writes about the negativity that films were often up against in major urban areas across the country:

Moralists found the impact of the “nickel theater” extremely troubling. A mass art form because of electricity, the movies were introduced as educational devices, but they soon became cheap pleasure machines when they opened in working-class areas as nickelodeons. The movies’ reach threatened traditional notions about sex and class. Women went unchaperoned, young couples petted in the dark, and immigrant children saw dramas of crime, sexuality, and challenges to authority. These themes discouraged middle-class patronage and spurred the reform efforts of civic groups and settlement house workers concerned that movies promoted vice among city migrants, especially women.91

Prohibition was a large issue for political platforms, and early filmmakers such as Griffith capitalized upon these plots. The end results resembled issues taken directly from the headlines and mirrored the platforms of those that sought

to rid the country of the evils of drink.\textsuperscript{92} The new wave of incoming immigrants that needed leisure time after working long hours and performing often dangerous tasks were again seen as potential clients. They required a release and often this meant a visit to the corner saloon; this group seeking an escape through drink mostly consisted of men. Much to the chagrin of the wives and mothers waiting for paychecks at home, it was common for a substantial chunk of their funds to be missing after payday as a result of a late night out on the town. Thus the temperance leagues of various cities were formed and the crusade for sobriety began.\textsuperscript{93}

There were several different ways that temperance and prohibition were promoted. Among these were visual tools such as posters and cartoons, in addition to early silent film that added to these concepts. These aided those that lacked fluency in the English language, and helped them understand and support the cause. Leah Rae Berk, a prohibition and temperance historian at Brown University, speculated:

Temperance and Prohibition era posters described alcohol as the source of society's individual and social problems. Alcohol was the cause of laziness, inability to concentrate and other impediments to the ideals of success and the Protestant work ethic as noted in the posters: "Drink Impaired Scholarship," "The Better Chances of the Sober Workman," "Alcohol Impairs Muscle Work" and "Daily Drinking Impaired Memory." Like the scientific pamphlets, these

\textsuperscript{92} What Drink Did and A Drunkard’s Reformation in D.W. Griffith Volume 2, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Grapevine Video, 2002).

posters used charts, percentages, results from studies and quotations from scientific and medical experts.\textsuperscript{94}

The filmmakers of this era, including D.W. Griffith incorporated the issue of temperance into their films to add a new angle to the role of the villain. Using the character flaw of alcoholism or the inability to refuse drink or seek entertainment in taverns, male characters often faced the prospect of drying out or ruining their families. This is the very platform that various temperance groups used to impress their ideals on the growing nation. The thoughts of Francis Willard in 1893 carried over into the next century as temperance issues grew more and more support among those of the laboring social classes. In Willard’s 1893 speech as president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, she points out her personal and organizational views:

\begin{quote}
The Temperance cause started out well night alone, but mighty forces have joined us in the long march. We are now in the midst of the Waterloo battle, and in the providence of God the Temperance army will not have to fight that out all by itself. For Science has come up with its glittering contingent, political economy deploys its legions, the woman question brings an Amazonian army upon the field, and the stout ranks of labor stretch away far as the eye can reach. As in the old Waterloo against Napoleon, so now against the Napoleon of the liquor traffic, no force is adequate except the allied forces…The great world-brain is becoming saturated with the idea that it is reasonable and kind to let strong drink alone.\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

Francis Willard used the theory of change to appeal to those of the industrial world. Filmmakers utilized their medium as a means to entertain using these


issues due to their dramatic nature and potential for a good plot. Reformers such as Willard saw this as advantageous and harmful to society.

Moving pictures were the illegitimate child of the dramatic stage at this time, meaning that upon their arrival into conception, films were not considered an art in comparison. “Many of the early film actors were quite content to stay anonymous, reasoning that the new flickers were a novelty and would damage their reputation on the legitimate stage.”96 Thus, theoretically, if most original film viewers were of the lower classes, raw data could not have been entertaining to a nation that was largely uneducated; their background would negate the prior knowledge needed for comprehension if a medium such as the documentary had existed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the conclusion that these viewers would need the artistic interventions directors such as Griffith provided in order for the film to appeal to them would then prove logical.

Historian Tom Gunning maintains that, “The notion of an objective representation of events, a recording of the way things actually happened, is no longer a goal of history. In addition, Griffith should have known that no picture of past events could be indisputable.”97 Just as Griffith sparked racist rhetoric as a result of Birth of a Nation, he attempted to battle this image with the film

Intolerance\textsuperscript{98} in 1916, which presented a bevy of moral vices throughout the course of time, including the decision to crucify Christ, the fall of Babylon, The St. Bartholomew Massacre in France, and the American labor system that he believed was founded on the Protestant work ethic. Although it was made in retaliation to critics, it bore reminders of his labor short subjects that were produced earlier while at Biograph Studios. Thus, the continuation of this path indicates Griffith’s inclination toward presenting festering social issues within his leisure films.

D.W. Griffith’s life contained elements that would have enhanced any fictional plot. After losing his father to alcoholism and near to poverty-stricken, he became over-protective of his mother and older sister. This close bond that he forged with the women of his family was positively reflected on film. His perception of the “weaker sex” was often just that. His on-screen heroines were often threatened by violence and impurity through men, and drinking was one such threat that plagued not only women but their children as well.\textsuperscript{99}

On April 1, 1909, \textit{A Drunkard’s Reformation}\textsuperscript{100} was released and it starred his then wife, Linda Arvidson and John Wharton. The Biograph Bulletin declared

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{98} Intolerance in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002/1916).  
\textsuperscript{100} A Drunkard’s Reformation in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).}

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the film “The most powerful temperance lesson ever depicted.” ¹⁰¹ The newsletter further links the film to the Bible through direct quotations and adjectives such as “moral sermon.” The film sided with ancient views of society conformation and was largely supported by those that supported the anti-outsider theory, a message that was prevalent throughout the early twentieth century due to labor, social and industrial conflicts.

The plot of the film depicts a family man that befriends a group of “ruffians” through his job and proceeds to sink deeper and deeper into the depths of alcoholism and depravity. As a result, he begins to traumatize his wife and eight-year old daughter. In a moment of lucidity, he agrees to take his child to see a production that chronicles the life and situation of an alcoholic man. It is essentially a show within a show, and prompts the man to reform his errant way. Mainly, A Drunkard’s Reform helped to move temperance films into the mainstream due to the controversy that they caused.

Griffith continued with his quest to legitimize film through moral issues with another temperance film called What Drink Did¹⁰² that was produced in 1909. Similar to earlier shorts that he directed, this film preached the evils of drink and focused on an underprivileged family of the working class whose funds were diminished by the father’s unfortunate habit. The distinction between the classes is well noted here, in that the woodworkers goad the

normally responsible father into taking one swig, causing him to indulge from
that moment forward.\textsuperscript{103} In 1909, the New York Board of Motion Picture
Censorship, was formed by the actual distributors (Loew, Biograph, Pathe,
Gaumont and Edison) in order to maintain creative freedom and sustain a
control over the finished products. Later, the group name was changed to the
National Board of Review for Motion Pictures, and the group had begun to limit
the scandalous depictions of vice, including drinking, in motion pictures.\textsuperscript{104}
However, films continued to display such images. At this point in Griffith’s
career, his status at Biograph was extremely valuable, and to risk unsettling the
censors would be an extremely poor business decision that could possible affect
the outcomes of future films. Temperance films were also easy to digest at
Biograph, because D.W. Griffith was hedging more toward dramatic vehicles
that appealed to audiences that were beginning to tire of the short and boring
comedies that were prevalent in the early nineteen teens. Drunken fathers and
desperate children were an ideal formula for a plot; they also appealed to the
popular issues of banning drink and working class leisure activities that political
candidates craved. Griffith dealt with a family drinking problem in the form of
his father throughout his early lifetime. He could perhaps sympathize with the

plight of a child affected by such an addiction and it proved invaluable throughout his temperance films.

As the unfairness of the factory system was publicized by various media sources such as magazines and newspapers, the questions of wage and safety came into play. Workers began to attempt to fight the big business concept through labor strikes and other production prevention methods. These strikes began in the mid nineteenth century and continued on well into the twentieth. Until policies changed, the question of fair labor practices proved an exceedingly popular topic throughout the Industrial Revolution among individuals and reform groups alike.

Griffith seemed to be influenced by the labor issues that were present in the early twentieth century. Griffith released Song of the Shirt, a film that directly criticized big businesses and their labor practices, and ventured into the realm of labor, another issue that plagued the increasing lower-class population. In an era where the big city was symbolic of the new melting pot of ethnicity, where different racial groups were forced to toil together for next-to-nothing, Griffith viewed this as an opportunity to present his Dickens-like views to a sympathetic audience as well as make a profit.

\[105\] Song of the Shirt in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
The Song of the Shirt\textsuperscript{106} was originally a poem written by Thomas Hood and it celebrated the inadequacies and unfair working conditions of the factory in England, and managed to mirror increasingly popular attitudes in the U.S. Written in 1843, it preached against the evils of the sweatshop environment and big business.

Oh, Men, with Sisters dear!
Oh, men, with Mothers and Wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch--stitch--stitch,
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt.

D.W. Griffith's 1908 film, Song of the Shirt, is similar to Hood's poem, and compared and contrasted the lush life that the corporate moguls were living to the squalor the laborers worked and lived in daily. Lines from the actual poem were inserted throughout the film, and the utilization of this indicates Griffith's education regarding literature including poetry. In the film, two nameless sisters toil in the factories, while the owners are shown in lavish surroundings and merry circumstances. One sister dies of sickness and neglect, while the other is enraged at the unfair circumstances of life. In an attempt to save her younger sister, the elder sews garments which are accepted, yet never paid for, causing the tragic loss of life that makes the picture interesting as a

Although perhaps exaggerated, the same situations were occurring throughout the constant turmoil of the late Industrial Age, and as immigrants, those of color and lower-class whites competed for jobs, they sunk to new lows regarding tasks and wage.

Another Biograph production that figures prominently in the labor category of films that Griffith directed was *A Corner in Wheat*. Released in November of 1909, this film examined controversial issues that favored farmers and agriculture as opposed to Industry and the city. The Biograph Bulletin stated:

> ...and the Wheat King stands majestically amid the debris of wrecked fortunes. Here is the gold of the wheat. He is lauded for his acumen, wined and dined and regarded as a man among men, little thinking of the misery and suffering his so called genius has induced. Ah! That is the chaff of the wheat...The cry is heard and as the King is showing his friends through the elevators into the bins which are flowing the steady stream his golden grain, he trips and falls into one of the bins and is buried. He has been called before his God to answer. Our thoughts are carried back to the bend and knotted forms of the sowers trudging along, ignorant of the vengeance of the wheat.

Although fair labor ideas had been popularized years earlier, strong politicians such as William Jennings Bryan, paved the way for Progressive era thinking; he and others urged individuals to fight for fair labor and earning practices. Griffith and Biograph attempted to put this notion into perspective through the usage of film, thus exposing such ideas to the masses, and

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instigating concepts of social justice. Definitely a dramatic subject, D.W. Griffith allowed such popular labor issues to work their way into such films as A Corner in Wheat, perhaps to induce common laborers to view the films and empathize with his nerve-striking plots.

A Corner in Wheat, serves the purpose of supporting individual labor rights at a time when Marxist theories were being tossed about political circles. The “Wheat King” symbolizes big business and the two sisters reflect the common man. The film is a satire playing up the negative aspects of U.S. labor. This began with the creation of large industrial entities early in the Gilded Age and well into early twentieth century; essentially a machine that utilized blue collar workers in unfair manners. Practices included low pay, long hours and unsafe working conditions. It is interesting to compare the fictional film to actual labor conditions. Although the system worked for those that were able to rise economically, the majority of laborers could barely survive. H. Wayne Morgan surmises capitalism’s faults as:

...The era’s chief fault was the transfer of power from the people to the economic masters...with this, the Jacksonian agrarian frontier of freedom and mobility disappeared, and in its stead came the monolithic and oppressive grandeur of an industrial system producing many goods, but devouring labor and wasting materials while building fortunes and power for the wrong men. ¹¹⁰

These business practices continued on well past the twentieth century mark. In addition, the early years of the twentieth century saw an increase in

anti-foreign tensions in the U.S. This coincided with the time of the film’s release. The negativity may be attributed to past and resurfacing issues of Reconstruction and the immigration wave that was sweeping throughout the Eastern portion of the country. Although these tensions propelled capitalism and individual competitiveness to the public forefront, A Corner in Wheat also warns about the overindulgence that a society of this nature may face and the struggle of the poor to survive. In the end, there is not a winner, and the economic system that should have allowed individuals the freedom to earn a fair living ultimately became a device of oppression. “The Wheat King” perished at the hand of the very commodity that he relied upon to butter his bread, and his underlings that worked on his farm and those individuals that toiled in the factories did not profit from his death positively. If anything, had a sequel been released, the farm workers would have been forced to seek a new employer and work in the same terrible conditions, while the city dwellers that rely upon the wheat for different productions may suffer massive job losses in general. Due to the turbulent social and political issues of the early twentieth century, D.W. Griffith’s Biograph shorts are able to maintain a positive primary resource position that reflects the very images and feelings of various social reform issues that were plaguing the United States. Although the plots were fictitious in theory, generally, they are able to mirror some semblance of reality based upon the current events of that era.
Gender

Among the more forward thinking theories that exist within Griffith’s Biograph short subjects is the concept of the strong woman/ female heroine. Often these women carried the film within the compass of an actress, or they were instrumental to the actual production process behind the scenes at Biograph studios. These early works could be perceived as a forward movement for women, and thus would be greatly valued as teaching tools in modern history classrooms. The Biograph shorts are a veritable chronicle of the rise and rebellion of women and their traditional spheres within the home. These early works are largely ignored by instructors and would demonstrate to students the issues that women at that time were facing within their places of business, home and society.

At the turn of the twentieth century, women were becoming more and more of a force in the workplace due to financial necessity as well as a desire for independence. As women began to aid in the support of their families through performing tasks traditionally known as “men’s work,” the primary argument for equal rights for both genders festered throughout the United States. The melting pot was near boiling as new faces, races and ideas poured into the urban centers already packed with diverse individuals. Upon the abolition of slavery in the South, women began to express their interest in becoming free of their
husbands’ political theories and practices. They also questioned the various roles that they were destined to play and brought about the question of other occupations rather than that of wife and mother. Eleanor Flexner, a women’s studies scholar and activist summarized:

It was in the abolition movement that women first learned to organize, to hold public meetings, to conduct petition campaigns. As abolitionists they first won the right to speak in public, and began to evolve a philosophy of their place in society and of their basic rights. For a quarter of a century the two movements, to free the slave and liberate the women, nourished and strengthened one another.\textsuperscript{111}

Rounding the turn of the twentieth century, the United States became imperialistic, which may be partly attributed to Theodore Roosevelt’s insistence on the United States’ superiority as a political and social superpower.\textsuperscript{112} Many women wished for the right to vote and emancipation from males as a method to combat the increasing anti-foreign and pro-white male attitudes that males often exhibited, both politically as well as within the workplace. Oftentimes, their husbands were using such tactics to exclude specific groups, such as minorities, from areas that were potential threats. It is evident throughout his shorts that Griffith recognized this new cry for independence, and regrouped his characterization of women in order to cater to different classes of women viewers. Some needed the release of the damsel in distress and other women


needed to view the empowerment of a strong female character in order to become revitalized. William Johnson analyzes the balance that D.W. Griffith attempted to create regarding female characters to please his audiences. One example occurs in a 1911 Biograph film short, He and She, as it was related by William Johnson in Film Quarterly:

In He and She (1911) she [playwright Rachel Crothers] presents a husband and wife who are both sculptors; they enter a contest which much to his chagrin, she wins. So far feminist. But then, with her daughter in difficulties, the wife decides that motherhood comes first and withdraws from the contest in favor of her husband...I would agree that Griffith reveals an attitude toward women that is basically sexist—as did most film-makers, playwrights and other men at the time. I merely wish to stress that this was not a blind attitude, but enlightened by his eye for reality.

Political tensions between the sexes were mounting as of 1900. Women were no longer just protesting for the vote, they were ultimately demanding it. New candidates found that women were marketable as potential voters and therefore just as capable to vote as men, if not more informed due to their zeal for the cause. Turn-of-the twentieth century women were essentially modern in comparison to their foremothers; somehow managing to become wife, mother and laborer. Specific aspects that cemented this rationale were their economic freedom based upon their own earnings rather than those of their husbands, and

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113 He and She in Griffith Master Works," DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
the new education opportunities offered to women through universities that encouraged professionalism.\textsuperscript{115}

In the late nineteenth century, more women experienced freedoms outside of their traditional sphere, the home. Therefore, they began to become recognized as consumers with money to spend like their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{116} Their likes, dislikes and fantasies became important to the newly emerging studio systems. In 1910, forty percent of film viewers were women. Filmmakers began to follow new film trends that include productions geared toward the new modern women. The results consisted of films produced by various studios and aimed at working class women.\textsuperscript{117} Many of the trends were established previously through other media venues such as newspapers and magazines that catered to the tastes and interests of women. For leisure purposes periodicals introduced stories that ran sequentially that had heroines of various occupations and walks of life.\textsuperscript{118} Although tales were often fictional, the studios were able to provide lifelike images and retellings in theatres. As studios and publishers began to capitalize upon the spending power that women in the early twentieth century held, it became evident that forward strides were being made in the area


\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 67.
of progress regarding women's issues. The development and production of such vehicles would provide students with visible examples of the advancement of women in society.

In addition to the deference that women began to have with the media regarding their purchasing power, true issues that were gaining public attention, such as women's suffrage were reaching more and more individuals throughout the U.S. Initially, political cartoons, were a way for artists to assert themselves through satire that many struggling groups could grasp through an artistic/visual point of view. These venues were presented in periodicals and meaning could be determined by the increasing number of non-English speaking individuals that resided within the U.S. The following is an excerpt from The Maryland Suffrage News, a periodical specifically aimed at promoting the right for women to vote. The publication of such a document reflected an emerging attitude toward women that encouraged a more modern attitude and acceptance of females as individuals. Pictured on the next page, is an article from the Maryland Suffrage News, and it exemplifies the emerging sympathetic attitudes toward the struggle for equal rights that women were striving for.

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(The growing suffrage movement is pictured above and illustrated by Harry Osbourne in 1914.)

These illustrations provided a visual for the subject matter in the article. Early silent films, such as D.W. Griffith’s shorts also do this. The captions for the films are virtually unnecessary due to the presentations on screen. Periodicals of the early twentieth century are revered for their value as primary resources. Griffith’s films could also be considered such. They chronicle the evolution of women through fictional tales. Women on-screen were developing as the women within society were; they were becoming more than wives and mothers and the plots expanded surrounding the emerging characters within.

Throughout the pre-World War I era women began to take an active role in politics. This occurred through peace demonstrations, and rallies to either support or denounce various political decisions and platforms, the impending war itself, or the shortcomings of the U.S. to accept women as capable
intellectuals. Woodrow Wilson’s administration created the CPI, or Committee on Public Information, with George Creel at its head. He stated that, “The Written Word, the spoken Word and the Motion Picture” were “the three great agencies for appeal in the fight for public opinion.”

The new twentieth century concept of a woman embodied the theory of femininity, mixed with the ability to mother, help support a household, and maintain harmonious balance of all of these tasks well. This is evidenced in the growing number of women that were joining the workforce from necessity, as well as those that were doing so in order to seek independence. Yet the concept of a “mother” was associated with the primary task of a woman, and early twentieth century film female representations often were still required to conform to the traditional ideals. The true task was finding a happy medium between new female concepts and conventional attitudes. Thus, the years before and during World War I on the home front, were surrounded with even more confusion. This is generally due to more women facing economic pressure to work while conservative women’s groups were sending the opposite message; in essence, a guilt trip of sorts, regarding the state of the family and the outcome due to absence of a mother. Susan Zeiger speculates:

The role of self-sacrificing mother was promoted in countless ways and places during the war. But what “sacrifice” for women might mean was sometimes glossed over... Motion pictures were more

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blunt, treating frequently (although nationalistically) the subject of war-time death and its impact on families...Good women could also find a role in wartime policing the behavior of bad ones.\textsuperscript{122}

The classic D.W. Griffith female often faces stereotyping as a waif, and finds herself in situations where she is in need of a rescuer; the direct opposite of the image of the working woman that is assisting in the support of her family. The ironic twist is that women who played the “waifs” on-screen were often the actual breadwinners of their families, just as many of their viewers were. Oftentimes, both the female film players and common laborers were still expected to fill the traditional roles of wife and mother at home, yet the middle and lower class women were often forced to additionally work within their domains taking in sewing or other piecework to add to the family income. These were the very women that reveled in watching these early film females blunder through a film, only to be swept off of her feet by a handsome man that would save the day. Although both groups of women were comparatively of a different social class (actresses earned more than the common female laborer), both held dual roles as workers and that of wife and mother. Ironically, the women of the middle class supported these actresses monetarily, using their hard earned dollars through the pursuit of a leisure escape in the form of a film viewing. Ultimately, they had more spending ability than that of their lower class sisters. Robert Wells, in The Journal of Social History comments:

\textsuperscript{122} Zeiger, Feminist Studies, 22.
Women in the growing middle class shaped a more affluent pattern which echoed the themes of work outside the home, youthful autonomy, and maternal commonwealth. The urban middle classes seemed to be devoted primarily to the elaboration of a life-style focused on domesticity and motherhood...With fewer children, more material resources, and longer lives than earlier generations, they had a modest degree of leisure and enough education to generate ambition. Women's clubs for the most part expressed the unmet needs of middle-class women both for intellectual stimulation and for mechanisms of upward mobility not totally controlled by their husbands.  

These middle class female consumers were educated and armed with the independent income to spend on such leisure activities, and therefore filmmakers were forced to notice their preferences regarding storylines.

Although filmmakers were never concretely sure of what was considered acceptable and popular for audiences regarding gender, Griffith’s professional practices concerning women evolved over time. This is a normal concept for a new industry within a world where big businesses were generally dominated by men. As women were becoming more and more comfortable in their roles as money makers and consumers, Griffith must have realized that having women writers, stars and directors, could be valuable assets to guide and influence his work. This is exemplified as Djuna Barnes, a prominent Jazz Age literary figure and personality, interviewed D.W. Griffith in the mid 1920s. He states:

A tall woman has less chance than a short woman. The public likes to think of itself--if masculine--as defending a small woman; it's easier. And the public--if feminine--likes to see itself coming up to the heart, and no further, in the love embrace. It looks better; there

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is no doubt about it. It is rather difficult to tell what the requirements are. The season's taste changes with the leaves on the trees--at one moment it is the baby doll with a head full of curls; the next it is the vampire with the calculating look. Just now the people are a little tired of both the baby doll and the vampire. They want neither unsophisticated youth nor crafty experience. They are looking with more interest at the woman who is still beautiful but wise, sophisticated, yet tuned by experience.\textsuperscript{124}

To fill on-screen, female roles, Griffith had to hire women, and his most popular actresses were Dorothy and Lillian Gish; often considered the ultimate film damsels. These women were considered the epitome of moral examples and often exemplified Victorian ideals of how women should behave. At the beginning of the early 1920s, the birth of the Jazz Age, Griffith’s opinion regarding women seemed to evolve more positively. Richard Schickel includes a statement made by D.W. Griffith regarding the fluctuation between weak and strong women perceptively, and the expectations of women on-screen:

\begin{quote}
Never since the beginning of time have there been so many beautiful women as there are today, and it is all nonsense about flapperism and the going away from the old morals. Girls were never so straight, so clean, so high-class, and certainly never half so beautiful. They cultivate their beauty, they cultivate their minds, they are graceful, they are sweet—that is the motive that differentiates our civilization from dirty savages.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

Another typical Griffith convention was to allow women to play the roles of young girls. Family was a concept that played a large role in the Biograph

\textsuperscript{124}Juna Barnes, Interviews (Los Angeles, CA.: Sun and Moon Press, 1986), 305-306.
films that he often both produced and directed. Naturally, subjects that were large issues and involved a large portion of the population would receive the most media attention, and films were certainly not any different. As mothers and fathers began to experience the need for a dual income, family functionality in its traditional sense began to crumble and dramatizations of different situations began to come easier to script writers as they occurred in actual everyday situations. The moral of many Biograph films included the reuniting of a family that was separated or under duress from things such as work, alcohol, poverty or other real life afflictions that the viewers could sympathize with. These films often presented a popular starlet. These included Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford, and began with the *Adventures of Dollie*, a film that chronicles the adventures of a young girl, and continued until his later work depicting the social aspects of the French Revolution, *Orphans of the Storm*.

Between 1909-1912, D.W. Griffith directed a string of Civil War films with a twist; many had female heroines and protagonists that were prominent and independent figures within the films. These D.W. Griffith’s early works were not grand Southern epics, nor were they always sympathetic to the plight of the plantation/ slave owner. Actually, the shorts were usually character pieces that moralized the concept of bravery among men and women. These films are where the Griffith formula for the helpless waif is deviated from, and women

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126 The Adventures of Dollie in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
127 Orphans of the Storm in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
actually step to the plate and often save the men that the audience assumed were the heroes.\textsuperscript{128}

At the time of Biograph’s Civil War phase, women were assuming the roles of both parents through daily work and their normally accepted role within the home as well. They were becoming breadwinners as well as household managers. Along with the evolution of women as independent workers, consumers and entertainment seekers, the studios began to release films that portrayed women in several different arenas ranging from helpless to heroine.\textsuperscript{129} Never one to take a back seat to innovation, Griffith stepped-up to the plate and directed several of these shorts that catered to this new audience.

In Old Kentucky,\textsuperscript{130} a southern family is divided by the issue of slavery, and two brothers go to war on opposite sides. One supports the North and the other, his homeland, the South. In this film, the mother actually turns out to be the protector of the household, and shelters Robert, the Confederate son, after he abandons his unit. His father is disgusted, but his mother literally hides him in bed with her as she arms herself with a pistol. The soldier that searches the family home is none other than her other son, Union George. The mother threatens George with his life, and after he flees, Robert escapes also. After the war, the Union brother, George returns a hero and Robert is seen again, as a

\textsuperscript{128} Please see the Griffith Masterworks Collection.
\textsuperscript{129} Silent Feminists, America’s First Women Directors, DVD, directed by Jeffery Goodman and Anthony Slide, (Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema Limited), 1993.
\textsuperscript{130} In Old Kentucky in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2003).
failure. The men are pictured at the end hugging their mother and shaking hands.

Poignant, yet disturbing, the film deviates from the traditional hero formula that Biograph usually assumed and places that responsibility on the mother figure. Of course the boys are young and handsome, yet their character flaws surpass their physical characteristics. Robert is essentially a coward and George is ready to kill or capture his brother, regardless of the circumstances. The father is unsteady also, because he basically disowns the disgraced son, Robert. So far, all of the male characters are unreliable and waver when it comes to predictability. The only constant is the mother, and her unbreakable love for her children. Although the character on screen is presented in the traditional sphere of the home, she carries non-traditional attitudes exemplified through the defiance of her husband in aiding Robert. She literally takes her baby back to its nest when she returns to her role as an early mother with her son and heads back to the very place that he originated; her bed. In her zeal for her wayward son, she threatens her other child, and successfully engineers the survival of her flesh and blood.

The father in the film is really not a major player, and the mother rises to physically and emotionally defend the flawed character of her son. This parodies the changing wave in the perception of women and their once accepted roles throughout the early 1900s. D.W. Griffith essentially had his finger on what seemed to be the tastes of the majority of viewers at that time, and sensed that
women would be prospective film clients. He therefore, gave the paying public exactly what they demanded; more diverse lead characters, including women. This was due largely to the labor movement in which economics necessitated those of various ethnic, racial and genders to work, in turn creating a more diverse group of consumers.

Ultimately, this new film technology allowed a mingling of the classes and provided a means of entertainment for those of all social backgrounds. In addition, viewer trends became so important that new areas within film production were created based upon the demands of the fan basis. Kathy Peiss summarizes the rise of women as consumers at the movies during this time, and their extreme value as patrons resulting in the creation of various branches of marketing.

For these women, movie manufacturers and exhibitors played up the glamour, sensations, and romance of motion pictures. The movies quickly generated a young women’s culture oriented around the adulation of movie stars and being a fan....Film companies responded to this interest with fan magazines as early as 1908...Yet the movie stars, posters, and plots could become an important part of young women’s social life, experienced without the direct intervention of men.¹³¹

This is again exemplified through Griffith’s project choices, in such films as The House with Closed Shutters,¹³² a Civil War epic produced in 1910. Here, a

temperance moral is combined with the cowardly main male role, Charles Randolph. The Biograph Bulletin stated:

What a contemptible type of human animal is the coward. He is totally devoid of all the elements that go to make up a man. Charles Randolph was one such as this, bombastic and haughty, but with no real courage, and what was worse a heavy drinker... he becomes very drunk, and Agnes (his sister) and the mother are horrified at the awful disgrace that threatens the family name. With sudden impulse, Agnes decides to don Charles’ uniform and proceed on the mission in his stead...133

Agnes is shot and wounded. After this event, Charles realizes what a coward he has become due to his fondness for drink. Ultimately, Charles is the one hailed as dying a hero’s death, and long after the war, the men come to the home seeking Agnes. However, the shutters are closed and it is rumored that she is mad with grief over her brother’s death.

Rather than give the traditional heroic male a poor reputation and hail the true hero, Agnes, Griffith placed her in the Victorian role of a woman that cannot bear the terrible situation around her. Many modern and Victorian gothic romance novels focus on a woman that has gone mad due to a specific tragic event, demonstrated by such authors as Charlotte and Emily Bronte. Yet Griffith truly makes the character of Agnes a hero, and relies upon the audience’s ability to make inferences rather than spelling-out the situation on the actual slide. Not only is she androgynous through her portrayal of a woman masking as a man, she contains other qualities that until this time men were only thought to mainly

possess, such as valor, courage and selflessness. Ultimately, Agnes preserves the honor of her brother and family, thus comparing her to the concept of a medieval knight, defending honor. Allusions are also made within the film that paralleled her with St. Joan of Arc. This comparison with a common woman is brilliant on the part of D.W. Griffith, in that every working woman of the nation that portrayed the lifetime roles of spouse, mother, provider and homemaker saw herself as an unsung hero, or essentially a saint. As a result of the widespread views of female free-thinking, women gained momentum in their roles as thinking human beings capable of making intelligent decisions, such as which candidate to vote for.

The impact of Griffith’s films on the women of the U.S. at the start of the twentieth century, was largely subliminal. He impressed new ideas upon them, in story form, and exposed them to new possibilities and concepts. Ruth Prigozy analyzes the transition from traditional female roles on-screen to more modern conceptions.

Moving images seen from afar allowed audiences to keep their distance, to be voyeurs instead of participants. But that protection, as in dreams, broke down defenses and opened a road to the unconscious. The size of the image and its reproducibility, the close-up and film cut, the magical transformations on screen and film’s documentary pretense—all these, Griffith sensed, dissolved the boundaries that separated audiences in darkened theatres from the screen. “Words, after all, are a clumsy method of conveying thought. They close expression in so many ways,” said Griffith...Griffith founded a preverbal art. It pulled viewers back to the condition, before language, of illusory unity with the originary [sic] source or being. Griffith’s imagination, evoked and
made itself the substitute for an ominous, preverbal, maternal power.¹³⁴

Not only did D.W. Griffith respect the work of women behind and in front of the camera, they were a part of his paying audience, and he recognized their need for satisfying films that they could identify with. This is evident in his hiring and promotional practices. Bending the traditional gender roles was a new concept for the viewing audiences to grasp. As a result of the new female heroine storylines and growing technology in film productions, new acting and direction techniques were developed. These could better reflect player reactions and movements. These innovations allowed viewers to delve deeper into character representations and to better grasp plots.

D.W. Griffith’s gravitation to different characterizations of women was swift and natural. He made sure he fulfilled all expectations regarding females on films, from helpless to heroine. Personally and professionally he was known as a hard-as-nails director among his staff. Actors and actresses had to earn his respect. Griffith recognized females as powerful Hollywood personalities that should be compensated. His first encounter with Mary Pickford demonstrates his ability to discern true star power. At the age of sixteen, she asserted:

“You must realize I’m an actress and an artist,” she informed the great director, “I’ve had important parts on the real stage. I must

have twenty-five a week guaranteed, and extra when I work extra.”

He complied with her wishes.

Later, Mary Pickford was the only female along with D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin and others to form her own film company, United Artists. She was not the only woman to put the director in his place. Often, Griffith was known as a difficult and unforgiving taskmaster for all involved in production. Yet he allowed the players to question his decisions, although he rarely indulged in their suggestions. All actors, regardless of gender, needed to earn creative control and respect. Lillian Gish managed to do this and was one of his strongest supporters. After years of collaboration as a professional actress he allowed her leeway that he would never have permitted those he felt were his “underlings.”

While filming Orphans of the Storm, he and Gish began to argue over the depth of a scene during the French Revolution. He quipped:

“If you’re so smart, get up there and do it better!” [Gish then stated.] Well, I got down on the steps and played it the way I thought it should be played. There were fifty to one-hundred extras there. He got down on both knees and kissed my hand and said, “She’s always right.”

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Not only did the great director recognize the star-power of women, but he employed them in other facets of production as well. After Griffith and Biograph parted ways, he purchased his own studio in 1919, and relocated to Mamaroneck, New York. The business needed a lot of work and he knew he could count on the experience of those that had aided him in years past. He pushed Lillian Gish into becoming a director, and whether or not it was solely for his benefit, he allowed women one more step into the male dominated world of studio production. Lillian Gish’s long life enabled her to provide an insight into many players of the big screen that would have otherwise faded into memory. She recalls one encounter with Griffith in 1920:

He said, “How would you like to direct a picture with your sister? I don’t want to break-up a happy family, but I think you know as much about movies as I do...” Well, I went home and talked about it with Mother and Dorothy to see if it was a good idea. Of course, there was no story...Dorothy thought it was all right and we got a little piece of business Dorothy found out of a funny magazine, and wrote a whole story around that.\(^{137}\)

Griffith, satisfied with his choice actually left Lillian Gish to her own devices as he took most of his regular crew to shoot with him in Florida. She was livid.

When I asked why he did that to me, had me get a studio ready and make a picture when it was the first one and such an awful chore, he said, “Because I needed my studio built quickly, and I knew they’d work faster for a girl, then they would for me. I’m no fool.” And his studio was ready when he came back. He moved right in and took his interiors quickly, and released his pictures.\(^ {138}\)

\(^{137}\) Ibid, 122.

Undeniably, D.W. Griffith was a user and concerned with his own individual economic and social status. Yet, although he may have been interested in personal gain, he could not deny the talent and promise of women. Gish’s film turned out to be over budget by approximately $50,000, but women seemed to gravitate the picture through the novelty of a female director and screenplay. Griffith’s film under the direction of Lillian Gish, grossed nearly $460,000 and Gish had finally broken her standard typecast role as a helpless waif, and moved forward as a director. All seemed to profit in some way, even the patrons that supported film as an industry, especially the working-class woman that identified with the independence of a female director.139

Along with providing women with opportunities in the facets of acting and directing, D.W. Griffith also enlisted them as screenwriters as well. Opportunities for women were presenting themselves more and more as the film industry began to grow. Cari Beauchamp, a historian that specializes in the study of women and their roles in film production states:

Throughout the teens and early twenties, the pages of every new movie magazine announced scenario contests and advertised books like “How to Write for the Movies” by a scenario writer for Essanay studios in Chicago, one Louella O. Parsons. Moving Picture Magazine’s article on a “New Profession for Women” claimed that women were naturals since they were used to writing letters and regarding paper as a “confidante” for their dreams and fantasies.140

139 Slide, Silent Feminists, 130.
Anita Loos, followed this trend, and experienced success as a screenwriter. From 1912 until 1916, she followed Griffith's lead and aided in the composition of several Biograph scripts. In the beginning, Loos sent scripts to Biograph that Griffith found captivating. He accepted and paid for them without questioning their source. In an age where it was common for women to present authorship through pseudonyms, Anita Loos followed suit, and signed her works "A. Loos." For quite some time, Loos submitted stories to Biograph through the mail; she was not introduced to Griffith until well after many of her works were produced by Biograph Studios. Personal accounts given by Anita Loos indicate that she sixteen when she first encountered D.W. Griffith, when in reality she was years older. She was often prone to embellishment, especially when detailing personal anecdotes.¹⁴¹ Her details of the meeting include:

One day in the studio, word was brought to him that A. Loos wanted to see him. He got up promptly and went toward her; on his head was a great flapping sombrero, tied with a black shoestring. Here, waiting in a little railed-off place, were Mrs. Loos and a girl. He approached rapidly and extended his hand to Mrs. Loos. "It's a pleasure to meet 'A. Loos,'" he said in his impressive southern way, with a deep bow. "But I always thought you were a man!"

"I'm not 'A. Loos, '" said the mother. "This is 'A. Loos.'" Griffith looked at the girl stunned. "Are you the one I've been buying stories from?"

"Under the O. Henry influence, I signed them 'A. Loos.' I was a schoolgirl and I thought I was being very professional."

He continued to look at his prize contributor, hardly believing. “I never dreamed it was a girl I tell you,” he said sincerely. “Writing is a great gift. So few have it.”  

Although the story Loos gives is questionable, as well as her age, her gender is female, and the fact that Griffith utilized her in other facets of filmmaking besides as an actress, is testimonial to his faith in her as a writer.

Oftentimes, when D.W. Griffith was called upon to direct a comedy, Loos was invited to write not only the scenes, but the dialogue slides as well. She was involved as a writer with his critically acclaimed, yet financially unsuccessful masterpiece, Intolerance, but only for the slim comic relief portion. Loos recognized Griffith’s talent, yet was not tolerant of his incapability regarding slapstick. Later, as his career began to fade, his writing was contrasted to that of Anita Loos. “Comedy was not his forte…Many of Griffith’s films even at the time of their creation, must have seemed a backward glance at a life fast fading. Whereas, Mrs. Loos’s stories prick the pulse of the unit.”  

This quotation was taken as Loos began to write for the “flapper” films that were becoming popularized in the 1920s and demonstrates Griffith’s waning popularity due to his aging ideals. Anita Loos managed to last throughout the sound transition and maintained her status as a competent and talented writer. Conversely, Griffith did not.

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Ironically just as it is important to teach that women are necessary for the procreation and evolution of man, it is also pertinent regarding film. D.W. Griffith must have recognized this based upon his utilization of women, and continued to have them perform and facilitate throughout the production of his works. At the same time that women were taking steps to politically equalize themselves with the men of the nation, the film industry was allowing them to work in front of and behind the cameras. Griffith’s Biograph shorts should be celebrated for the fictional and professional portrayal and participation of women in the film world, long before it was commonplace for women to be presented as strong individuals.

There are several lessons that Griffith’s pro-feminist films may teach students. For instance, students may examine the tendency for popularity and taste in films to shift according to audience preferences that are based upon everyday life. In 1910, forty percent of film viewers in New York City were female. Logically, more female heroes would be in demand. The shorts produced and directed by Griffith while he was at Biograph provide a perfect example of this taste evolution that parallels a shift in consumerism. Thus, a teacher theoretically could use film to demonstrate economic alterations in the U.S. at the start of the twentieth century.

Secondly, the changing attitudes toward women and their move toward employment outside of their homes could be examined using these films. This

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144 Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 148.
would involve the examination of closely monitored changes of character and plot situations that revolve around various individuals within a fictional film. Griffith’s Biograph shorts were produced from 1909-1912; a time period of immense social, racial, economic and gender upheaval, particularly in urban areas of the U.S. and within several work related domains. The finished product of these films may serve as a virtual timeline regarding the forward movement of women.

Finally, public taste regarding media could be examined through an analysis examining the popularity or lack thereof in specific film works. Preferences in storylines and characters are bound to fluctuate today as greatly as they did in the past, and students could gain a good grasp of public demand as they monitored Griffith’s extensive filmography throughout his time at Biograph.
African Americans

Birth of a Nation/The Clansman takes place in the rural South on a plantation that has indeed seen better days throughout the early period of Reconstruction. Blacks are showcased in a negative light, as conniving, lusty, ignorant and slack-jawed. Those represented in the film become seemingly possessed by their new-found place in society and threaten the family residing on the plantation in several ways. The helpless daughters are victimized sexually and African-American legislatures threaten the stability of white society itself. The Klu Klux Klan rides to the rescue in an upbeat chase that at the time engulfed audiences and created the inexcusable perception of a true hero to those that were ignorant of the Klan’s true views. The film is undoubtedly fictitious, and represents a dramatic vehicle for a public whose lives were encompassed by normal dramas, including negligent wives, husbands, evictions and unpaid bills. The story related through Birth of a Nation, was something that the average industry-ravaged family would not normally encounter within their urban lifestyles, and they turned out in droves to view the production. It earned upwards of 18 million dollars within a few years.\textsuperscript{145}

The film was initially well-received, and audiences were impressed not only by the length, but by the action/chase scenes that were included. All of these elements, until this time, were not common. However Birth of a Nation is officially remembered as the first feature-length film. The New York Times recognized the controversial topic choice and reviewed the film almost at a distance; neglecting to either trash or praise the piece.

A great deal might be said concerning the spirit revealed in Mr. Dixon’s review of the unhappy chapter of reconstruction and concerning the sorry service rendered by its plucking at old wounds. But of the film as a film, it may be reported simply that it is an impressive new illustration of the scope of the motion picture camera...146

The Times also separates the film from Thomas Dixon’s original story, The Clansmen147, from which the movie was adapted. By most accounts, Dixon was indeed a racist. F. Garvin Davenport writes for the Journal of Southern History in retrospect:

Thomas Dixon, a commanding spokesman for American racism and for a Southern mission to preserve what he saw as America’s racial heritage, was one of the first twentieth-century southerners to explore the usages to which this heritage might be put. His efforts were directed at leading American society back to the essential elements of the American Dream, and for Dixon these essentials centered on agrarian simplicity and white supremacy.148


It seems ludicrous to assume that Griffith and Dixon partnered to create social unrest and hard times for African Americans. Whereas Dixon was quite outspoken as to his anti-racial beliefs, D.W. Griffith was passionate about only one thing; his craft. Dixon, was a proud racist.¹⁴⁹

As a result of this film, Griffith was publicly branded a white-supremacist, a role that he could not escape for the rest of his personal and professional life. The film set the bar for filmmaking at a much higher-level and pushed not only the length of the film into new expectations, but essentially created a new genre of movies that viewers loved. D.W. Griffith was attacked for what were considered his personal views regarding race through his directorial interpretation of Birth of a Nation. Although the events of the Civil War were grossly misrepresented, the fact of the matter is that D.W. Griffith, like Dixon, did consider this film to contain important historical elements, as a teaching tool.¹⁵⁰ Russell Merritt stated that, “Griffith told a Photoplay reporter that soon history books would be altogether banished from the classrooms, and replaced with films such as his.”¹⁵¹ Whereas this statement could be viewed as a self-validation of the truth within this film, it conversely could merely indicate that he was referring to film itself as a teaching tool. At any rate, Griffith now had to deal with the negativity and controversy.

Merritt continues:

¹⁴⁹ Merritt, Griffith, Dixon and the Southern Myth, 37.  
¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 28.  
Much of what Griffith filmed is historically accurate, but the illusion of general historical truth and perspective is largely the product of Griffith’s art. The Birth of a Nation is not an historical document any more than are Walt Whitman’s war poems or Shakespeare’s history plays. Whether Griffith knew it or not, the initial and determining impulse behind his film was not historic truth, but the dramatization of familiar legend.\textsuperscript{152}

As a result, there were rioting incidents and adverse media attention. Not only did he have to contend with conflicted audience views, but the NAACP in Boston as well. The group publicly stated, “In further these purposes [to spread a false history of the Civil War and inaccurate view of African Americans] the producers of the film did not hesitate to resort to the meanest vilification of the Negro race, to pervert history, and to use the most subtle form of untruth—a half truth.”\textsuperscript{153} In 1909, the NAACP was formed as a result of racial riots that ensued in Springfield, Illinois. Forty influential individuals were at the head of the foundation, with W.E.B. Dubois heading the crusade.\textsuperscript{154} In 1915, after the group rose publicly to oppose Birth, the group grew into a nationally recognized organization that supported and defended the right for African Americans to pursue equality in the U.S.\textsuperscript{155}

D.W. Griffith was guilty of spreading racist rhetoric, however it is difficult


\textsuperscript{153} The NAACP, History, (Baltimore, MD: 2007 accessed 6 June 2007); available from: http://www.naacp.org/about/history/; Internet.

\textsuperscript{154} The NAACP, Timeline, (Baltimore, MD: 2007 accessed 6 June 2007); available from: http://www.naacp.org/about/history/timeline/; Internet.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
not to recognize his talent as a director while viewing Birth of a Nation. Ida Wells, a member of the NAACP originally protested the film, and yet recognized the immense artistic ability hidden among the ideas that she disagreed with.

Mr. D. W. Griffith, the creator of the film, took the stand and denied that there was anything in The Birth of a Nation which could be objected to. D. W. Griffith was a great artist and one of the leading geniuses in presenting photo plays. That he should prostitute his talents in what would otherwise have had the finest picture presented, in an effort to misrepresent a helpless race, has always been a wonder to me. I have often wondered if his failure to establish himself as a moving picture magnate is not because he chose to prostitute his magnificent talents by an unjust and unworthy portrayal of the Negro race.\textsuperscript{156}

Wells is extremely accurate in her observations, and without films like Birth of a Nation, historical and film interpretations may have been left strictly for the censors to decide what is acceptable. She also insinuates that this film repressed later possible film successes; ultimately an accurate assumption. Thomas Cripps writes in the Journal of Negro History:

> Black leaders knew early in the struggle against Birth of a Nation that blind advocacy of censorship was a dead end. No matter how many new members flocked to the NAACP; how many flagging branches blossomed or new ones sprouted; how many whites were converted or scared by the new black unity; how many producers backed off from the subject of race, in the final battle of censorship was a rear guard action rather than a direct assault on racist attitudes in American life.\textsuperscript{157}

The main reason that Birth of a Nation spawned such a public outcry was that until this film, the “feature” really did not exist. It was three times as long as


the average picture and dealt with an intricate plot that captured the viewer’s both positive and negative attention and response. The films that were released prior to this, similarly only focused on stereotypical views regarding race and ethnicity, and featured a character as either protagonist or antagonist, yet these characters were certainly not complex. Birth of a Nation engrossed audiences and profited immensely at the box office to the point where accountability for dollars was a main question. Richard Schickel, a modern film scholar has provided some insight regarding the comparison of Griffith to the original author of The Clansman, Thomas Dixon. In the following excerpt, he refers to D.W. Griffith:

His spirit, in short, was classically that of an artist-self absorbed, and only dimly aware of the larger political issues of the day, perhaps excessively so. He might have been a naïve and even primitive artist, but an artist he surely was. And that [an artist] is one thing Dixon…was not.158

Popular media venues were indeed guilty of spreading racist rhetoric long before D.W. Griffith directed Birth of a Nation. Racial rioting had begun in the early 1800s, well before the film’s debut. Due to the emotional frustration and competitiveness for survival among various ethnic groups, it became more and more common for such events to occur. Evidence for such is an 1829 racial riot that took place in Cincinnati, Ohio where free blacks were forced to register as such with the Overseers of the Poor, a commission set-up to insure that these individuals were not runaway slaves. In addition, the economic competition presented through free African Americans, particularly on the job front, angered

158 Schickel, Griffith, 81.
poor whites. A racial riot ensued on November 11, of 1898, over 1,000 blacks fled to Canada as a result.\textsuperscript{159} On that same November day, the Brooklyn Eagle covered a story concerning racial riots in Wilmington, North Carolina. The out-of-state coverage is an indication of the seriousness of the surmounting problems, and served to fuel already heated tensions through distributing generalities and stereotypes regarding African Americans. In Wilmington, after an African American newspaper had made negative comments about white women seeking the vote, the newspaper building was burned to the ground by angry white citizens.


\textsuperscript{160} Author Unknown, "White Violence," The Brooklyn Eagle (November 10, 1898): 14
In fact, racial riots were increasing at the dawn of the twentieth century. Top newspapers in New York, Chicago, Washington and Los Angeles were carrying stories of similar attacks. The article above demonstrates the rise in tension between the races adding gender to the mix. As women were fighting to become more and more independent, African American men were working toward greater social and economic acceptance as well. Such coverage of explosive and controversial racial encounters only served to incense various groups and add to the strain among those of all classes, now adding not only wage and jobs in general to the list, but politics and equal rights as well.

Just as race rioting became commonplace throughout the era of Reconstruction, Griffith's most controversial film, Birth of a Nation, caused rioting as well. Russel Merritt gives an account of one such reaction:

Griffith's first full-length film had been arousing controversy since its Los Angeles premiere three months earlier, but his was the first time Negroes actually demonstrated. Minutes after the film began, Negroes in the tenth row threw a rotten egg at the screen and were immediately arrested. Sixty plainclothesmen and uniformed police prevented further incidents until the final curtain. But as the house lights came up, a dozen incendiaries and "stink bombs" poured down from the balcony and rear of the theatre. The audience raced out of the main exits only to meet the crowd of disgruntled Negroes held outside by the police. The wild scene that followed kept two hundred and sixty policemen busy and by eleven o'clock eleven men were arrested...161

One positive aspect of the film is that inequality issues gained nationwide attention, and the public was forced to take notice of unfair or common

stereotyping through media. Now students are able to examine such racial issues through the utilization of visual/films and provide a first-hand analysis of these works. Years before, while at the Biograph company, D.W. Griffith did direct films that were sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, and gave a direct indication that was aware of the conflicting social issues that existed amongst the races. In The Rose of Kentucky, the Ku Klux Klan is represented as a group of antagonists called the “night riders” that terrorize southern families. They are portrayed in a definitely negative fashion. Although the motive for the attacks of the night riders is unclear, such groups did not materialize until after the Civil War, and into the Reconstruction period. In the film, the family does indeed have black workers and not slaves. This is indicated by the verbage used on the slides, thus it is logical to assume that the night riders disagreed with the payment of wages, managerial practices, or some other issue related to the free blacks on the farm. This may be concluded based upon the close resemblance to the Klan that the night riders bear. This film was produced four years before Birth of a Nation, and indicates that Griffith, as well as those that worked on the film, were aware of some of the negative aspects of such hate groups.

Two other Biograph Company films that presented an interesting slant on African Americans are His Trust, and the sequel His Trust Fulfilled. Although

\footnote{162 The Rose of Kentucky in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).}
\footnote{163 His Trust in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).}
D.W. Griffith plays upon an old stereotype of unquestioned service by an “Uncle Tom-like” servant, he also manages to extract an admirable loyalty and moral justice regarding his black characters. In both of the films, a wealthy southern family is terrorized during the Civil War. The family is killed, except for a small girl and her mother, who believe that they are penniless and end up homeless as a result of the cruel events of the war. They have no one to help them but a former slave, Old George. The Biograph Bulletin describes the first part of the film as:

THE FAITHFUL DEVOTION AND SELF-SACRIFICE OF AN OLD NEGRO SERVANT.

In every Southern home there was the old trusted body-servant, whose faithful devotion to his master and his master’s family was extreme to the extent of even laying down his life if required...George now realizes the sacredness of his trust, and taking the heartbroken women by the hand, leads her and the child to his own humble log cabin, where he gives his all for their comfort, he being content to spread a blanket on the ground outside the door on which to lay his head. Thus far, has the servant been faithful to his trust.\(^{165}\)

The title reflects the popular stereotype that existed in the nineteenth century.

The film industry was fairly new at Griffith’s height, thus it may be suitable to find that small steps were taken in light of political and racial issues regarding fictional films. The portrayal may not be progress, and although Old George is projected in a typical loyal servant light, it is still reasonable to assert that he is indeed the protagonist of the film regardless of his color and typecasting. Thus

\(^{164}\) His Trust Fulfilled in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).

the focus of the movie was on an African American subject; essentially the star of the film.

Although sparse, the Biograph Company under the direction of D.W. Griffith did produce films that presented some positive images regarding African Americans. The time period that surrounds the birth and development of the film industry was socially conflicted and to present radical social transitions regarding race would have been an extremely risky business venture. While the characters maintain the stereotype of slow-wittedness, and Uncle Tomisms, it may still be said that the films listed above presented African Americans as morally just and capable of making proper decisions regarding ethical situations. History and film students are thus able to take the selected Biograph Civil War shorts and compare and contrast them to the Birth of a Nation, a film responsible for the gross on-screen representation of racial stereotyping and Griffith’s demise in regard to reputation.
The Chinese

The Chinese were an additional racial group that Griffith touched upon in his early career. Social upheaval was a prevalent theme among racial and ethnic groups after Reconstruction, and the silent shorts that were produced at Biograph and other studios, often reflected such turmoil among the masses through the creation and evolution of their dramatic storylines. The study of such attitudes on film would be unduly beneficial to students and scholars alike, in that again comparisons may be made regarding past and present acceptance standards for social and political issues could be compared to that of the issues of the early twenty-first century. Further, immigration trends are evident. Film historian Terry Christianson explains the political attitudes of such movie moguls as Fox, Goldwyn, Mayer and Loew who were once poor immigrants. Their rise and success in the film industry served to provoke such works:

Attitudes about race and ethnicity were more ambivalent in the silent era. The Progressives were mostly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle-or upper-class citizens who felt threatened by the immigrant masses. Their fear show [sic] up in movies in which minority characters were lazy, evil men who lusted after white women...Filmmakers’ attitudes about America were also shaped by their experience as immigrants. For them, the American dream had come true...Perhaps it proved how American they had become and thus diverted the kind of criticism that might have led to government control of the film industry...166

Former slaves, former soldiers and incoming immigrants often lacked the skills or were generally unable to obtain jobs that would enable them to survive in the harsh urban atmospheres where they could afford to basically live. Skilled white laborers were generally at the top of the working pyramid, with unskilled whites at second and immigrants and blacks at third. Of course, there are sub levels, yet generally, all were fighting for competitive wages that would allow them to feed and house themselves and their families.\textsuperscript{167} As a result of this rigorous competition, nativist attitudes began to abound, especially among those that considered themselves to be truly American. Naturally, this did not include former slaves that were born here or immigrants of either a first, second or even third generation. Thus when new groups began to arrive in the mid 1800s, exclusionary attitudes began to become popular and were even introduced into the U.S. as law. Examples would include limits on immigration such as the Chinese Exclusion Act\textsuperscript{168} or job hiring practices of those involved in big business.\textsuperscript{169}

D.W. Griffith briefly represented the Chinese during and after his career at Biograph through such films as \textit{The Yellow Peril} and \textit{That Fatal Hour},\textsuperscript{170} and later


\textsuperscript{170}The \textit{Yellow Peril} and \textit{That Fatal Hour} in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
Broken Blossoms\textsuperscript{171} through the United Artists production company. The Chinese were a controversial subject among Americans during Griffith’s time at Biograph, to the point where their immigration into the U.S. was forbidden. Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act first in 1882. It banned all Chinese laborers from entering the country for a ten year period, based upon the theory that it “endangered the good order of certain localities.”\textsuperscript{172} This was predominantly an issue with mining laborers in the West and railroad workers. Most of the time, the jobs were deemed too dangerous by other ethnic groups, such as whites, and yet there were still complaints about job competition and a general distinction between the races that was marked enough to be uncomfortable for U.S. residents.\textsuperscript{173} As European immigrants began to gradually assimilate, those of an Asian descent found it harder to fit-in and willingly diffuse their culture and replace it with that of a true American. Yet, it is easy to conclude that those that understood themselves to be the true Americans wanted to mark this difference and use it to the fullest advantage. The following depicts a common nativist opinion of the late 1800s.

\begin{quote}
The European easily blends with the American, but the Asiatic remains an absolute alien. This is a radical difference, and as we have an undoubted right to regulate the coming of strangers, the question is first, whether the Chinese are a desirable accession, and second, if not they are to come
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{171} Broken Blossoms in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\textsuperscript{173} McKee, Pacific Historical Review, 167-168.

Griffith often played upon social, racial and ethnic tensions within his Biograph shorts. This is evidenced in the hundreds of short subjects that were produced from 1909-1912. Yet, these entities did not always take on a non-American perspective, and he delved into areas of film representations that were until his influence, yet untouched. This directly applies to the Chinese-American and Chinese immigrant population.

While at Biograph, Griffith tended to avoid films with an African American focus and rode the bandwagon of popular and unexplored issues such as Westward expansion and newer issues such as Chinese immigration.\footnote{175}{Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).} D.W. Griffith mirrored the public’s fixation with Manifest Destiny and became fascinated with the West, and its inhabitants. He aped the actions of the U.S. government itself and sought to expand the film industry’s borders just as the country began to populate the area west of the Mississippi. In fact, Griffith’s Biograph Company, was the first to be credited with shooting in what was later known as Hollywood.\footnote{176}{Schickel, Griffith, 154.} Until the early twentieth century, the film industry had not yet discovered the ideal climate and possible storylines that the West inspired; D.W. Griffith modified previous literary works and modern-day
occurrences for the screen. This is a direct correlation with the issues regarding Chinese immigration. The fact that Griffith featured these new immigrants alone is enough to conclude that they had somewhat of an impact upon society and thus are of a scholastic value socially and on early film prints.

The Chinese were an issue that both mystified and confounded self-proclaimed Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. The Chinese Exclusionary Act had gone through various drafts for years, and several stereotypes had been set into the minds of true Americans, before films spread this concept further.\textsuperscript{177} The popular concept of a “yellow man,” consisted of a long braid, long mustache, baggy suit and slurred/improper speech. The cartoons of Thomas Nast were widely read and publicized throughout newspapers and magazines, and created a set public stereotypes of what they could expect from the average Chinese individual.\textsuperscript{178} Griffith’s evolution again began with this primitive and preconceived notion found in an early film called The Yellow Peril, a parody on the name given to the period where citizens were actually afraid of incoming Chinese immigrants and created a widespread hatred and prejudice. Although Griffith did not direct this film, he played a role as Mr. Phillip. The main character is “the Chink,” and he is perceived as a goldfish eating and bumbling servant that wreaks havoc on a wealthy Western.

\textsuperscript{177} McKee, Pacific Historical Review, 166-167.
household. He particularly likes to torment and instigate situations with the
Irish maid, who comes off as staunch and witty. Yet the ultimate issue is that the
maid knows her place and the “Chink,” continually acts-up and does what he
pleases. This film allowed audiences to laugh, yet sadly and typically, Griffith,
like Nast was a part of the spread a negative physical and mental stereotype, in
the eyes of exploiting popular immigration and industrial job competition issues
of this time period.\textsuperscript{179}

The Fatal Hour, was directed by D.W. Griffith in 1908, and dealt with the
seedier side of what the Chinese immigrant was assumed to be; specifically,
those involved in the white slave trade. In the end, a female heroine and
detective (who is nameless,) foils his plot and the antagonist, Pong Lee and his
assistant, Hendricks are captured, and the white female victims are liberated.\textsuperscript{180}
Generally, D.W. Griffith played upon the fears of Americans to portray his
villainous characters. However, Griffith’s characterization of the Chinese as
criminal masterminds leads to the assumption that they were not the bumbling
foreigners that they were often presented as and generally capable of higher-
level thinking skills. The Chinese controversy in the U.S. at Griffith’s time was
multi-faceted and essentially, the Chinese boycott of 1905-1906 helped to feed the
many unfounded misconceptions due to heightening tensions between the social
strata. Along with the stages of exclusionary laws came harsher regulations in

\textsuperscript{179} Griffith, The Yellow Peril.
accordance with immigration for the Chinese. By 1900, all but Chinese officials
and visitors to the U.S. were banned.\footnote{McKee, Pacific Historical Review, p. 172.}

It is interesting to note the evolution of the Exclusionary Act itself as well
as the evolutionary phases that the law passes through. The near absence of the
Chinese on film throughout this period may be symbolic of their virtual denial
into the United States. D.W. Griffith manages to briefly represent this race on
film, although he does so with connotations common to those that were thought
to be Chinese. When compared to other media venues, Griffith’s experience at
Biograph with the Chinese and Chinese-American ethnicity makes an interesting
representation into the scholarly world. Again, their representation at all is
symbolic of the issues that were present among society at the turn of the
twentieth century, and thus demonstrates that early silent film representations
should be portrayed in a favorable light as instructional classroom utensils.

Newspapers, magazines, illustrations and other forms of media,
represented not only the perception of the Chinese and the assumed threat that
they posed to whites in America, but also the responsibility that various
periodicals have regarding the spread of hatred throughout the U.S. prior to
Griffith’s directorial debut. The contention here is that there were preconceived
notions regarding the Chinese. Griffith, capitalized upon these already
implanted notions within his films, and presented a depiction that had been a
part of the American conception of the Chinese for over a decade. It is
inexcusable that he perpetuated the stereotypical presentation of this particular
ethnicity on-screen, however he did at least provide representation of the
Chinese on screen.

Political cartoons had potential to reach a variety of individuals.
Periodicals relied upon them to not illustrate contemporary issues to the public,
but to entertain those that could understand the articles within the periodicals as
well.

The above cartoon shows a popular character created by Richard Outcault in the
mid 1890s.182 The character was a typical representation of a Chinese immigrant,
as a child in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was deemed
the “Yellow Kid,” and although he ran in a typical comic strip format, he had
anti-Chinese message written on his chest and actually was a political satire

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182 Unknown Author, R.F. Outcault [journal on-line] (Unknown: Lambiek, Inc., 2006,
accessed 6 March 2006); available from http://www.lambiek.net/artists/o/outcault.htm;
Internet.
regarding the immigration and job competition throughout the U.S. In present times, such a representation would be considered heinous. Yet, in the early twentieth century, such depictions were commonplace within the scope of the media and often welcomed by those that were in competition for jobs with such immigrants. It was essentially an easy way to get a leg up through the usage of public opinion. Griffith did not even start to make films until 1909, long after the debut of the Chinese controversy.

One interesting aspect of the Chinese immigration controversy is that individuals were beginning to react negatively in the name of this cause, adding to African American and labor riots. However, the anti-Chinese riots mainly took place out west. Griffith’s earliest film did not even take place until well after 1900. Harper’s Weekly, a periodical dedicated to informing the U.S. on controversial topics, held items describing such riots as early as 1886:

A deliberate and determined effort—an effort, too, without immediate provocation—was made on Sunday, February 7, to expel the Chinese from the town of Seattle, Washington Territory...a mob invaded the Chinese quarter...dragged the occupants from their beds, forced them quickly to pack their personal effects, and marched them to a steamer... The next morning, guarded by two companies of militia, all the Chinamen were marched from the dock and the boat to the court-house, where every one was asked by the judge whether he wished to remain.183

One of Griffith’s most acclaimed films, Broken Blossoms, details the hero as a Chinese immigrant that smokes opium, is lazy and falls in love with a lily-

183 Harper’s Weekly (March 6, 1886): 72.
white Mary Pickford. Pickford’s character is abused by her father, and the “Yellow Man” steps in to protect her and house her in his abode that is ethnically decorated as an American or non-outsider at the time would assume a Chinese den would be. The contrast between Mary Pickford and her surroundings is striking, and the main character referred to as “Yellow Man,” indeed makes a strange hero, as the dialogue slides project language on the screen that would today be projected as racist. One example includes a scene where the father abuses his daughter, and she runs. The dialogue slide reads, “Battling discovers parental rights - A Chink after his kid! He'll learn him!...Above all, Battling hates those not born in the same great country as himself.”184 His costume is complete again with baggy suit, long mustache and pony tail. In the end, the male lead pays for his love with his life, and the father also perishes as a result of his wickedness and abuse toward his daughter.185

The film was based upon a novel, Limehouse Nights, written by Thomas Burke and Griffith’s films was based upon a chapter called, The Chink and the Child. This an indication of the common insensitive language used to describe the Chinese. Griffith changed the name for reasons that are unknown. The New

19 Griffith, Broken Blossoms.
20 Ibid.
York Times reviewed the film in 1919, and generally gave it a glowing recommendation:

Mr. Griffith chose a tragic story of impossible love, love impossible in a world of passions and prejudices and brutal forces...Broken Blossoms came to the screen, a masterpiece in moving pictures...The spectators, among whom were many well-known persons, applauded enthusiastically after the presentation and refused to leave until Mr. Griffith had answered their calls for his appearance on the stage.187

Due to the outrageous portrayal and assumed dialect of the “Yellow Man,” contemporary audiences may take offense. The evolution of Griffith’s Chinese characters from The Yellow Peril, in which he participated as an actor, to Broken Blossoms mark his steps in maturing from an actor to a director, as well as society’s changing view on Chinese immigrants. Essentially, Griffith began to see heroes in many forms such as women and those of color.

Griffith did not originate the common early twentieth century stereotypes regarding Asian Americans, nor was the first to popularize it. However, his brief experience with the Chinese and Chinese-American concept demonstrates their sporadically acknowledged existence within society throughout the period of early silent film. When compared to early illustrations, periodicals and other media venues, a comprehensive study may be procured regarding the metamorphosis of the various exclusionary acts that were specifically designed

to keep the Chinese out of the U.S. Therefore, Griffith’s Chinese oriented films would be a positive contribution to any social science or humanities classroom.
Native Americans

Native Americans were also lumped into the mix of groups that Griffith utilized as characters for his films. Thus, there is a value to viewing his early Biograph shorts in order to compare common stereotypical views of the early twentieth century that were presented through this new medium. Theoretically, if presented in conjunction with later pieces of a similar subject matter, useful comparisons should be able to be made, and logical conclusions may be drawn after study regarding various social subjects.

Manifest Destiny found pushed the boundaries of the U.S. westward and therefore individuals were needed to explore and divide unknown territory. Imperialism at the turn-of-the twentieth century was a growing controversy among politicians and activists. The desire settle new areas in the U.S. and overseas, as well as to civilize the individuals indigenous to these places was a growing trend. Social Darwinism/survival of the fittest coincided with a term that Kipling coined called “White Man’s Burden.”\textsuperscript{188} A common attitude among nativists, cultural ideals belonging to non-white groups were considered simplistic and primitive were prevalent. In addition, it was often considered the

United States’ responsibility as a world power to intercede and improve the lives of the individuals living in culturally backward places. An example of such occurs in a speech given in support of U.S. imperialism by Senator Albert J. Beveridge in 1900:

It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples... We are trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace.¹⁹⁹

Although U.S. interventions were prevalent overseas in the early twentieth century, Native Americans were susceptible to such actions as well.

Griffith’s fascination with the West mirrored the public’s attitude, so did their demand for new settings and plot lines. American Indians have long struggled to maintain territory that was gradually being taken by the whites, and in early white settlements such as Virginia, seemed initially to misunderstand the concept of land for exclusive and not communal usage.²⁰⁰ In the nineteenth century, as tribal lands were settled by those of European descent, Natives were pushed further west. In 1830, Andrew Jackson culminated this move through

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²⁰⁰ West Virginia Division of Culture and History, “Native American Clashes with European Settlers,” West Virginia Archives and History, (WV: West Virginia Division of Culture and History 2007 accessed, 6 July 2007); available from: http://www.wvculture.org/history/indian.html; Internet.
the Indian Removal Act; a law that exchanged Native lands east of the Mississippi for those of west of it.\footnote{Indian Removal Act, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government, Civics Online, 1830); available from: \url{http://www.civics-online.org/library/formatted/texts/indian_act.html}; Internet.}

Although at the time silent films were becoming popularized, there were large cities in the West, they were still few in comparison to the eastern portion of the U.S. The area still was reputedly known as wild and vast areas still remained unsettled. At a time when imperialism was at its height, Native American culture eluded the average working class American and the conception of these individuals became romanticized in both literature and film. D.W. Griffith, was attracted to the concept of the American Indian and through his search for new scenery, was taken West and captivated by the myth of the Native American. Griffith, a noted fan of classic literature utilized James Fenimore Cooper’s legends of heroic “Indians,” as the muses for his Native American characterizations.\footnote{Andrew Jackson, “Indian Removal: Extract from Andrew Jackson’s Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 7, 1835,” Archives of the West, (Bethesda, M.D.: Lifetime Learning Systems/ PBS 1996, accessed 7 July 2007); available from: \url{http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/two/removal.htm}; Internet.}

Griffith began a string of Native American films in 1909 that continued on well into 1911. His films reflected his interest in westward expansion for sets as well as the characterization of the American Indian. It is interesting to watch the transformation from his naïve early conceptions of Native Americans evolve into\footnote{John McWilliams, The Last of the Mohicans: Civil Savagery and Savage Civility (NY, Twayne Press, 1995), 36.}
an attempt at accurate portrayals as summarized in the Biograph Bulletin. Examples of this include the first film featuring a Native American as the protagonist called The Redman and the Child. This film was copyrighted on July 28, 1908, and featured a Sioux Indian that befriends a white child that is eventually kidnapped for hidden gold by evil whites, until he is rescued by his friend the “Redman.” This was the first of a series of “good” Indians on film. The main character, Redman, is labeled as “as kind-hearted as a woman, and as brave as a lion.” The value of studying such films is immeasurable because later in film’s evolution Native Americans were synonymous with negative connotations and generally were placed in the role of the villain. John A. Price, a Native American film historian comments:

Many of the basic film stereotypes of Indians were formed in the period of silent movies. The movie story was told by white American producers and directors to a white North American audience assuming and building the plot from anti-Indian attitudes and prejudices. Indian life was seen as savage and at an earlier stage of development, and therefore rightly vanishing as Indians are exterminated or assimilated into white society...Indians were usually portrayed as villainous, but in the silent days they were often individualistic, intelligent, and culturally diverse adversaries.

Yet other Biograph/ Griffith films of the time inadvertently mirror the actual 1830 plight of the Native Americans under Jackson’s 1830 Removal Act, as

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194 The Redman and the Child in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
196 Griffith, The Redman and the Child.
well as the General Allotment Act of 1887. The General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) under Grover Cleveland broke up community lands and allotted smaller parcels to individuals in an effort to assimilate the group into white American culture, as well as discourage the continued practice of tribal unity. D.W. Griffith integrated these situations into his films through the utilization of various plot innovations.

Another Native American vehicle was Song of the Wildwood Flute. Gray Cloud and Dove Eyes were in love. Gray Cloud has a magic flute that he played according to native rituals, to make Dove Eyes fall in love with him. He marries Dove Eyes in spite of a jealous rival, and while hunting, fell into a pit. The tribe thinks that he is dead, when in really, her nameless rival knew where he was and refused to come to his aid. After Dove Eyes threatens to die of a broken heart, the rival finally helps Grey Cloud and the couple were reunited.

The film is interesting because of its early 1910 debut date, as well as the time and effort that Griffith placed into making sure that the film was authentic regarding customs and traditions. The Biograph Bulletin stated:

The Biograph has always endeavored to depict the redman as he really is, and not as cheap literature would portray him. Hence it is that a moving picture of this work becomes more convincing than

200 Song of the Wildwood Flute in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
201 Ibid.
text books, histories or historical novels. In this subject are incorporated several traditional customs with as lifelike portrayal as possible, engaging in the production the services of a number of the decedents of the aborigines.²⁰²

Although Griffith dedicated himself to authenticity regarding costumes and settings, he utilized only one Native American actor, Dark Cloud (Gray Cloud) in a lead role.²⁰³ Native Americans did work on this film however, in the role of creative consultants and guided D.W. Griffith as he attempted to provide true representations of American Indian conventions.

In *The Redman’s View*,²⁰⁴ Griffith portrays the dilemma that several actual tribes were facing through constant and deliberate relocation tactics forced upon Natives by the government. Griffith’s company, Biograph, provides a summary of the conception of Native Americans as well as the plot of the film below.

> It shows how this poor redskin was made to trek from place to place by march of progress which was ever forging its way into the West. Tranquil is the existence of the Kiowa tribe, which our story involves, until the approach of the conquerors, the white men, who claim the land that has long been possessed by the Soshone family.²⁰⁵

The film is actually a love story, but Griffith draws attention to the displacement of this tribe and adds it to complexities of the plot. Griffith’s films aided in supporting public sympathy for these displaced individuals, and at the same time helped to spread the stereotypes and inaccuracies such as passivism

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²⁰² Usai, Volume 4, 218.
²⁰³ Ibid, 218.
²⁰⁴ *The Redman’s View* in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
²⁰⁵ Usai, Volume 3, 123.
that are still common regarding Native Americans today. Although early film may be partially responsible for the spread of negative racist connotations among various groups, other individuals such as James Fenmore Cooper, created the aura of mystery and misconception regarding Native Americans long before Griffith was a director. Thus, the study of early films featuring the Native American perceived persona would be invaluable regarding literary works and concepts as well.

The Massacre, 206 produced by Griffith in 1912, took place in the old South and portrayed a nameless heroine that chose between two men; ironically best friends. Only one has a name; Stephen, the jilted individual that ultimately decides to head west as an army scout. On the flip side, the couple was married and her husband decides that they should head west take advantage of the opportunities that new land held. Ultimately, the wagon train that they joined was attacked by savage Indians in response to an earlier attack that Stephen (the husband’s best friend) participated in. Stephen arrives on the scene to save the couple and ends up throwing himself off of the cliff in the heat of the battle. 207

The Massacre is interesting because it exemplifies the savage representation of Native Americans. In addition, it reflects the lack of authenticity regarding Native American casting; a white man, Alfred Paget, was cast as the Indian Chief in this film. Extras were made to look like American Indians, however, they were

206 The Massacre in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
207 Usai, Volume 6, 86.
costumed appropriately due to the research the Griffith did for the background of the film.\textsuperscript{208}

Nineteenth and early twentieth century Native American stereotypes were conflicted; they ranged from submissive to savage, and flaws were often attributed to the race as a whole, not the individual.\textsuperscript{209} Teddy Roosevelt actually included Native Americans in overseas indigenous groups in an attempt to support his imperialistic nature and promote their savage nature:

\begin{quote}
The Most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him. American and Indian, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori,--in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people.\textsuperscript{210}
\end{quote}

As film became popularized, the average urban American did not have the opportunity to interact with Native Americans; thus they had to rely on text and on-screen depictions. They were simply not a large part of mainstream society, and therefore their race became romanticized from one extreme to the next.

The Biograph Bulletin recorded that Native Americans were employed on the sets of Biograph/Griffith films, including actors, and creative consultants.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid, 89.

\textsuperscript{209} Steven Railton, “Mark Twain in his Times,” Special Collections, University of Virginia, (Charlottesville, VA: The Electronic Text Center, 2007 accessed 6 June 2007); available from: \url{http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/projects/rissetto/intro2.html}; Internet.

One example of this occurs on the set of *The Mended Lute*.\textsuperscript{211} Here, Griffith hired and actor that could claim actual Indian descent, Young Deer.\textsuperscript{212} In addition, he utilized Sioux Indians to provide traditional dance instruction that was used in some scenes, as well as consultations regarding costume and mannerisms. The *Biograph Bulletin* stated:

> Much thought and time were given to the many details, and we claim that as to costume, manners and modes of living it is more than reasonably accurate, these details, having been supervised by an expert in the matter.\textsuperscript{213}

The expert alluded to above was a member of the Sioux tribe that was able to effectively communicate with Griffith and the Biograph staff regarding cultural aspects to add a realistic touch to the storyline.

It is important to note that film historians such as Gregory S. Jay have made a point in mentioning that D.W. Griffith and Biograph may not have represented Native American accurately, yet their inclusion indicated their existence as well as contemporary issues regarding Native Americans were emerging at the time that many of these films were produced.\textsuperscript{214} Stereotypical depictions of Native Americans and their culture were common at this time period. Among typical stereotypes are their passive attitudes toward the white

\textsuperscript{211} The *Mended Lute* in *Griffith Masterworks*, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).

\textsuperscript{212} Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, (NY: Knof, 1978), 330-334.


man on screen, and a gentleness that allowed the viewers to sympathize with their characters and ultimately race.\textsuperscript{215}

Although Griffith’s works were fictional, their presence has value in classroom. This is based upon the presentation of land loss for natives, the stereotype of a passive attitude, and the authenticity of various cultural aspects including dress and customs. In his essay, biographer Richard Schickel, describes many of the Native American shorts:

...were set in various vanishing American Wildernesses and reflected the prevalent nostalgia...about the loss of these unspoiled lands to civilization. Some of these films were notable for their extremely sympathetic treatment of the Indian as a natural nobleman, and that, too, represented a recognition of shifting popular attitudes, a first, guilty observation that the Red Man had been ill used in the century just past...No doubt [Griffith] was influenced toward these subjects by the romanticizing of the savage and of the natural environment which coincided, in this period with the nation’s first awareness that the frontier had finally closed, that it had just lost something it had always taken for granted-untamed, untouched lands to the West.\textsuperscript{216}

Here, Schickel attempts to explain early white attitudes toward Naïve Americans as well Griffith’s attitude toward the subject. The passage also chronicles changing positions toward the frontier as well as D.W. Griffith’s new emerging trend toward western film settings/shoots. Griffith was among the first directors to utilize the climate and scenery of this territory.

The value of D.W. Griffith’s Native American short subjects is virtually immeasurable, because the passive presentation of the race is evident of a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{215}\textit{Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media}, (NY: Routlege, 1994), 118.  \\
\textsuperscript{216} Schickel, A n A merican Life, 119 and 139.
\end{flushright}
common representation of that period. In addition, several cultural representations are evident throughout. The appearance of this group on film may be traced from the silent era to present-day twenty-first century works. In short, the developments and transformation of this race on-screen could be examined through a study of these short subjects, and compared to contemporary films thus creating valuable theories within the world of scholasticism for the Native American race.
Conclusions

D.W. Griffith has been hailed as a master filmmaker, egomaniac, racist and at the end of his life, a failure. The era that he existed in was marked with violence, racial and gender unrest and economic uncertainty. Naturally, when all of these elements are combined, tensions are created. Rather than point the finger at Griffith, regarding the spread of racial hatred as a result of one film, scholars should value his early films as primary resources and valid representations of life at the turn of and during the early twentieth century.

Due to the bigoted representations that Birth of a Nation projected, oftentimes, D.W. Griffith’s name is synonymous with racial hatred. In many ways, the evolution in his career parallels the public’s tastes, problems and social and political demands. Therefore the early works that were produced are of an extreme value within the historical and film community not because they are D.W. Griffith works, but because they are symbolic of what were at that time perceived to be true representations of life. D.W. Griffith was a product of a capitalistic economy/society. He seized opportunities through specific film subjects that others did not venture to take advantage of, and his reputation is presently suffering as a result of Birth of a Nation.

\[^{217}\text{The Birth of a Nation in Griffith Masterworks, “The Birth of a Nation,” DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).}\]
Essentially, the film world will never come to a general consensus regarding D.W. Griffith as a person. There are those that view him in the worst possible light, yet, there are those that have chosen to go further and delve into his vast filmography, only to realize that he was a pioneer regarding conflict issues that lurked within his contemporary society. He projected these issues on-screen, and he used these concepts as fuel for his plots and characters. Thus, Griffith created exposure to what was then considered controversial, in turn creating valuable historical resources that the public are able to actually view. Although the films that he produced and directed did not always have a happy ending, or an accurate representation of the groups presented, they served their original purpose; to provide an entertainment venue that could appeal to a different economic and social array of film patrons, at a time when they were seeking a release from the situations that plagued their everyday lives. Ironically, D.W. Griffith predicted that film would eventually serve as an educational tool for later generations.

The National Content Standards are intended to drive curriculum and provide a checkpoint system to ensure that instructors are providing an appropriate curriculum for their students. The focus of this thesis is the importance of D.W. Griffith's Biograph shorts and their valuable potential as teaching tools in the classroom. The National Standards are broken down into

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different content areas; for the study of history, this focus in on grades five through twelve. The four main concepts in the U.S. History category that the films would fall into would be “U.S. Expansion and Reform, (1801-1861),” 219 “Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877),” 220 “The Development of the Industrial United States, (1870-1900)” 221 “Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930.” 222

Standard one in the “U.S. Expansion and Reform Era” indicated that teachers should cover the area of “United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.” 223 In addition, this would be tied into the “Development of the Industrial Era in the U.S. (1870-1900)” 224 standard which states that students should understand how “Federal Indian policy and United States foreign policy after the Civil War.” 225 Films such as The Mended Lute, 226 The Massacre, 227 The Red Man’s View, 228 and The Red Man and the Child, 229 all demonstrate the effects of U.S. westward expansion on Native Americans as well as common white stereotypes

219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
226 The Mended Lute in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
227 The Massacre in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
228 The Redman’s View in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
229 The Redman and the Child in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
toward this group including temperament, customs and appearance. In addition, it also reflects the imperialistic views that were common among politicians and nativists. The various federal laws urging Native Americans west, the forced assimilation into white culture as well as the allotment of individual territory could be studied in parallel to these shorts. Although the films were made well after 1861, they may be shown to students in order to provide a visual for these concepts.

The second standard in the "Expansion and Reform Era," that could be utilized, maintains that teachers instruct the students as to "How the industrial revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed the lives of Americans and led toward regional tensions." Naturally Birth of a Nation should be used to illustrate the slavery issue, but Griffith's other Civil War shorts such as In Old Kentucky, and The House with Closed Shutters, provide visuals of regional issues, specifically the American Civil War and different fictional plots surrounding the actual event.

The applicable standard for "Civil War and Reconstruction Era" indicates that teachers and students should examine "The course and character of the Civil

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230 Please see the Appendix.
231 The Birth of a Nation in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
War and its effects on the American people.”234 Again, Birth of a Nation, In Old Kentucky and The House with Closed Shutters all may be used to demonstrate family and community issues throughout the Civil War. It is important however, to stress to the students that they are fictionalized depictions and that again, stereotypes were rampant throughout these films, and the historical epics were certainly biased. Yet the films are usable for these aspects alone. Students need to understand that nearly all presentations of history both factual and fictionalized have a bias. The value also lies in the explanation regarding racial tensions and gender issues at the time that the films were made, not when the works took place.

Perhaps the largest era that could be explored is “Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900).”235 Standards one and three explore the area “How the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed the American people, as well as the rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes.”236 In Addition, the era labeled “The Emergence of Modern America”237 standard that may be applied indicated that students should grasp “How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption.”238 The labor and social reform shorts made by D.W. Griffith would

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234 Please see the Appendix.
235 Ibid.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
fit into these categories and support the theory that society was deeply impacted by industry and labor. *Song of the Shirt*\(^{239}\) and *A Corner in Wheat*\(^{240}\) are two films that allow the viewer to see the negative aspects of the labor industry through the eyes of both the laborer and the corporate honchos. It also will allow a connection between the proposed reforms of the Progressive Era and other significant issues that affected politics. *Song of the Shirt* describes the apathetic attitude of big business toward the small time worker. Again although fictionalized, it forces the viewer to realize that the average employee was suffering at the hand of big business, a true-to-life issue around the turn of the twentieth century. *A Corner in Wheat* parallels this theory, but actually has the greedy corporate boss dying at the hands of his own equipment. A comparison between the two films will illustrate the evolution of attitudes toward industry. *A Corner in Wheat* is the latter of the two films, and the most extreme. Thus it demonstrates the changing attitudes within a short period of time toward big business. *Shirt* merely has a lowly main character die, indicating a need for action on this subject. *A Corner in Wheat* takes it to a new extreme indicating an extreme need for a change in big business.

Standard two under the “Development of the U.S. Era,”\(^{241}\) states that students are to delve into “Massive immigration after 1870 and how new social

\(^{239}\) Song of the Shirt in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).

\(^{240}\) A Corner in Wheat in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).

\(^{241}\) Please see the Appendix.
patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity." The topic of immigration could be explored using the Chinese films that Griffith produced and starred in. The Yellow Peril and That Fatal Hour, and Broken Blossoms are visual representations once again of several racial misconceptions and race relations among whites and the Chinese. In addition, various immigration exclusionary policies of the surrounding the turn of the twentieth century could be incorporated in this lesson. In addition, social patterns involving the presentation of African Americans in Griffith's shorts may indicate growing cultural diversity and the conflicts that arose on the path toward unity as a nation. Films such as Birth of a Nation, The Rose of Kentucky, His Trust and His Trust Fulfilled all exemplify common stereotypes of African Americans. From savage to faithful, these portrayals again indicate the general attitude toward at that time period. However, other materials should be used to supplement these films in order to negate the false concepts that are presented. The films are important however, because they indicate emerging

\[242\] Ibid.
\[243\] The Yellow Peril in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\[244\] That Fatal Hour in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\[245\] Broken Blossoms in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\[246\] The Rose of Kentucky in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\[247\] His Trust in Griffith Masterworks, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
\[248\] His Trust Fulfilled in Griffith Masterworks," DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (NY: Kino Video, 2002).
nativist attitudes and generalizations that helped to hinder progress for minorities.

The final era indicated in “The Emergence of Modern America,” and the standard, “The changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I.” Here again, imperialism may be paralleled with films such as The Mended Lute, Broken Blossoms, The Massacre, The Redman’s View and The Redman and the Child may add to other materials in order to present evidence of the U.S.’ imperialistic attitudes toward the American Indians within the nation itself, as well as common attitudes toward other groups such as the Chinese.

It is important to realize that the films themselves cannot be the only materials presented to students. If this is the case, then biased and unfounded views of history will be conceived. These shorts should only be used as supplements in addition to federal law and other primary and secondary source materials so that the student has the opportunity to rationalize events as they really occurred.

D.W. Griffith was a great director and filmmaker. He is regarded as a racist in present-day society. Although he will possibly remain one of the most notorious pioneers of early film techniques, his racial beliefs are destined to be questioned by those that choose to remain uneducated and judgmental regarding his early film works, largely based upon Birth of a Nation.

Please see the Appendix.
Griffith’s Biograph Shorts would be a valuable tool to teach social and political topics with a true representation of not the events as they happened, but common public opinions and depictions at the beginning of the twentieth century. The films represent collective nativist attitudes, manner of dress, technological and artistic innovations, language, and other attitudes of society that should be used by students and teachers. Visuals are typically an excellent way for learners to grasp meaning; rather than focus on the negative aspects of D.W. Griffith the films should be used in conjunction with other works such as texts, primary resource documents and hands-on activities, in order to provide students with the best possible learning experience.

Although it is impossible to look into the soul of this long-dead individual, the evidentiary basis regarding these popular theories may be easily rebutted after viewing his vast Biograph library of existing films, employing various studies regarding the demographics of Americans and film surrounding the turn-of-the-century, and the opinions of educated film historians. Griffith should be celebrated as a technical pioneer and artist, not condemned based upon one film. His contributions to the historical community and film world remain strong and should be utilized within those educational capacities that they have the great potential to serve. Although Birth of a Nation was a monumental film regarding race, class and gender, the general public should be educated regarding D.W. Griffith’s other positive contributions in conjunction
with various other branches of historical research. In short, his entire body of work should be analyzed and studied in relation to the time period that these works were created. Ultimately, this will create new areas of scholarship that scholars and students alike will be able to examine in the future regarding past and present issues in relation to the inner-workings of society and human behavior in general.

Appendix A: National Content Standards for History: Grades 5-12

Standards in History for Grades 5-12
| Era 1 | Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620) | Standard 1: Comparative characteristics of societies in the Americas, Western Europe, and Western Africa that increasingly interacted after 1450  
Standard 2: How early European exploration and colonization resulted in cultural and ecological interactions among previously unconnected peoples |
|---|---|---|
| Era 2 | Colonization and Settlement (1585-1763) | Standard 1: Why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies, and how Europeans struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean  
Standard 2: How political, religious, and social institutions emerged in the English colonies  
Standard 3: How the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies, and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas |
| Era 3 | Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s) | Standard 1: The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory  
Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society  
Standard 3: The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights |
| Era 4 | | Standard 1: United States territorial expansion |
| Expansion and Reform (1801-1861) | between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans  
**Standard 2:** How the industrial revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed the lives of Americans and led toward regional tensions  
**Standard 3:** The extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800  
**Standard 4:** The sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period |
|---|---|
| Era 5  
Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877) | **Standard 1:** The causes of the Civil War  
**Standard 2:** The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people  
**Standard 3:** How various reconstruction plans succeeded or failed |
| Era 6  
The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900) | **Standard 1:** How the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed the American people  
**Standard 2:** Massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity  
**Standard 3:** The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes |
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<tr>
<th>Era 7</th>
<th>Era 7 The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)</th>
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<td>Federal Indian policy and United States foreign policy after the Civil War</td>
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<td>Standard 1:</td>
<td>How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption</td>
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<td>Standard 2:</td>
<td>The changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I</td>
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<td>Standard 3:</td>
<td>How the United States changed from the end of World War I to the eve of the Great Depression</td>
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<td>Standard 2:</td>
<td>How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state</td>
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<td>Standard 3:</td>
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