

# *Pioneer film director dishonored by those who follow in his footsteps*

By Christopher P. Jacobs  
Movies Editor, *High Plains Reader*

(This article is slightly updated from its original form, which was published in two parts December 23, 1999 and January 6, 2000)

## **The Birth of An Art Form**

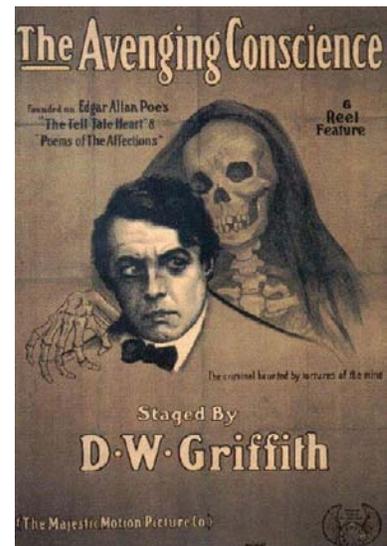
In spite of Hollywood's consistent perpetuation and encouragement of stereotypes--ethnic, racial, religious, and otherwise--the Associated Press has reported that The Directors Guild of America is dumping its prestigious D.W. Griffith Award to dramatize the disapproval of the racial stereotypes its members perceive in the pioneer filmmaker's movies. "As we approach a new millennium," DGA President Jack Shea said in a highly ironic statement in December 1999, "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." The DGA national board voted unanimously to retire the Griffith Award and create a new career achievement award. The name of the new award will be announced later.

It is evident from this decision and the wording of the official statement, that today's active directors have never seen a representative sampling of Griffith's films and are not at all familiar with the director's career, accomplishments, or legacy that in effect created their own profession. Their action appears to be based solely upon reaction to Griffith's best-known film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and very likely reaction to second-hand reports and/or viewing of selected excerpts rather than the film itself. What follows below is some pertinent background on Griffith the director and this nearly century-old film that is still as controversial as at the time of its release. The last section of this essay will cover a number of Griffith films with which the Directors Guild evidently is unfamiliar, films which show the director not only to advocate an opposite position on race relations than he is accused of promoting in *The Birth of a Nation*, but also films that show him to remain far ahead of 1990s, 2000s and 2010s mainstream Hollywood in treating serious social issues within a context of popular entertainment.

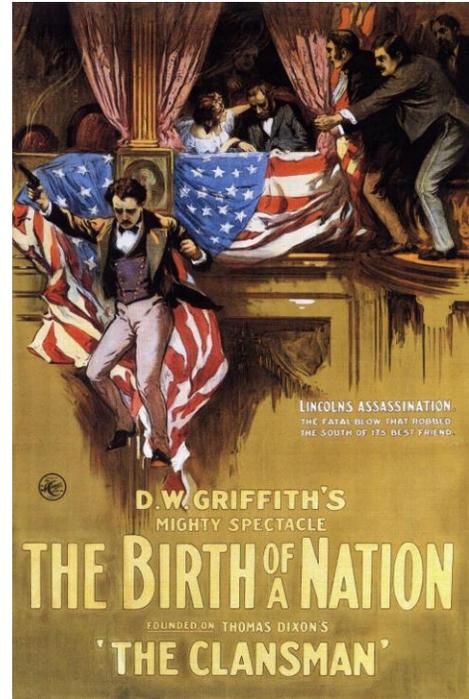
David Wark Griffith (1875-1948) was the first film director who became a superstar in the popular media of his day, his name alone guaranteeing receipts at the box office from the mid-teens through the early 1920s. He was often credited with virtually single-handedly inventing modern motion picture story-telling techniques. He did not actually invent such concepts as close-ups and parallel editing, which had been around for years when he started making films in 1908. But Griffith, unlike many filmmakers of the early years, was quick to recognize and exploit the dramatic impact of these devices, developing them to the point that film became a genuine expressive art form. Unable to make a living at his chosen profession of stage actor and playwright, he accepted a job as a film actor and soon turned to directing. At the Biograph studio he directed well over 400 short films during a period of about five years, experimenting with different techniques, acting styles, and subject matter, and gauging their effect on the audience. With the help of veteran cameraman G. W. "Billy" Bitzer (1872-1944), who had been at Biograph since its beginnings in the 1890s, he explored a variety of photographic effects that were soon copied by other filmmakers. He also helped pioneer filmed stories that lasted longer than about 15 minutes on the screen, which was the amount of film that could fit on one 1,000-foot reel (the maximum capacity of most projectors of the time). Over the initial objections of his employers, by 1911 he began making some two-reel films, with increasingly more complex stories, characters, and editing. In 1913 he secretly planned to make his production of *Judith of Bethulia* into a biblical epic that ran an hour, or four reels. It was not the first film of such a length, nor even the first four-reel American film (the French *Queen Elizabeth* and the American *Richard III* and *Cleopatra* are four- and five-reel productions from 1912 that have survived). Movie patrons were starting to develop a taste for "feature-length" attractions and Biograph officials were finally realizing this, but for defying their authority they demoted Griffith to a "supervisor" and delayed releasing the film for several months.



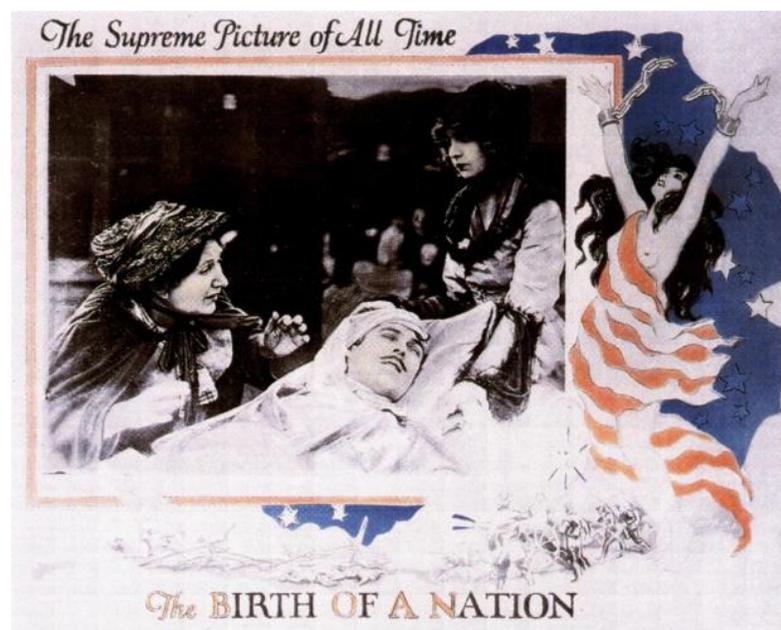
In the meantime Griffith left Biograph to become production chief at Reliance-Majestic. There, in 1914, he directed four films, including *The Avenging Conscience*, which blended several stories by Edgar Allen Poe, especially "The Tell-Tale Heart," and featured several of the same actors he would cast in a massive project close to his



heart. At the same time he was privately planning his own independent epic production that would change the movie industry forever - *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915. Again, feature films and even American epic feature films (such as Selig's 1914 eight-reel *The Spoilers*) were not entirely new. But the unprecedented success of Griffith's 12-reel Civil War and Reconstruction melodrama demonstrated the power of motion pictures to engage the thoughts and emotions of viewers from all social and economic classes. Its popularity also appears to have affected other filmmakers' approaches to directing and editing. With a few notable exceptions, most features released before 1915 use consistently longer takes, fewer close-ups, and limited editing within scenes, whereas most films made after 1915 show markedly more sophisticated understanding of editing possibilities.

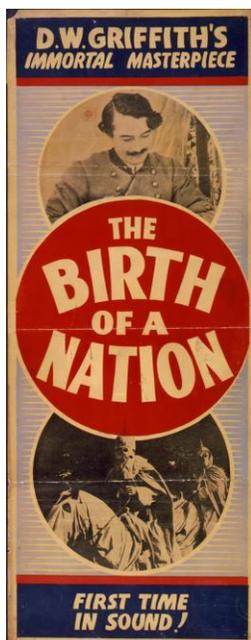
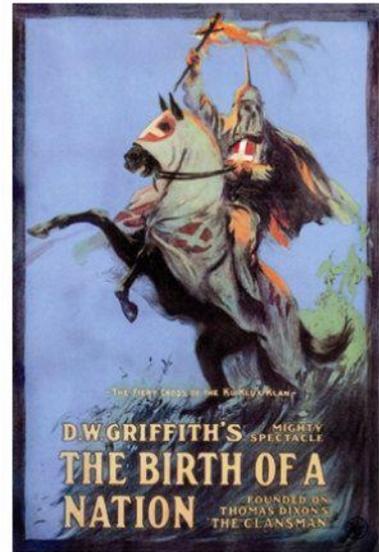


The sociopolitical controversy generated by *The Birth of a Nation*, a film he considered to be basically an antiwar statement, both surprised and upset Griffith. Its story was set during the 1860s. The American Civil War interrupts the friendships and budding romances between members of a southern family whose patriarch is a proud colonel and a northern family ruled by an anti-secessionist U. S. senator. During the war, younger sons from both families meet on the battlefield, fighting on opposite sides, and die in each other's arms. Another southern son is wounded in battle, rescued by his northern friend on the opposing line, and taken to a hospital, where he meets his



friend's sister, a nurse there. After the war the south is plagued by self-serving politicians led by the father of the southerner's new sweetheart. The young southerner, meanwhile, founds a night riding terrorist group known as the Ku Klux Klan to reassert the rights of southern landholders against the white northern carpetbaggers and the new black puppet government the vindictive northern whites have set up to crush any future rebellion.

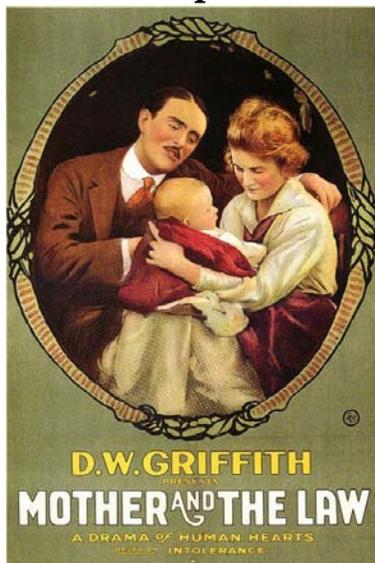
*The Birth of a Nation* is rightly credited with being the single motion picture from the medium's formative years that established film as a method of artistic self-expression, a means for political propaganda, and a form of mass entertainment that would soon become one of the country's major industries. It was not the first feature-length film, nor was it the first widely popular feature film. It was not the first film to use many of the now commonplace techniques it is sometimes said to have pioneered. But no film ever captured the public's imagination or created such an effect on the industry like *The Birth of a Nation*. Director D. W. Griffith was able to use the film medium so well and manipulate audience emotions so effectively that the picture quickly became a "must-see" production among all social classes, whereas previously (at least in the United States) film attendance was largely by lower income people. Griffith's rhythmic use of editing and cross-cutting to build excitement, his emphasis of small details in characters' mannerisms, and his painstakingly authentic-looking recreation of the period he portrayed impressed viewers immensely. These aspects remain remarkable today, although Griffith's flair for floridly worded explanatory intertitles now seems intrusive and dated. Increasing the impact upon its initial release was the film's specially commissioned musical score and the "roadshow" manner of presentation with its own traveling orchestra and stage effects crew, printed programs, reserved seats at live theatre prices, and much advance pre-publicity, all of which turned it into an "event" rather than just a typical movie.



So powerful was its effect on audiences that Griffith's parochial and condescending racial attitudes incited violent protests about racism, pickets, widespread print campaigns against the film, and demands for censorship. Even today the film's continuing controversy has all but eliminated screenings outside of controlled classroom settings. Griffith's naïve assertion was that he was merely recreating historically documented events and did not intend to provoke or cast aspersions upon any present-day people, yet his picture inspired a national revival of the KKK. In addition, ironically, it also strengthened the fledgling National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and created public awareness of African-American concerns. *The Birth of a Nation* set both production and exhibition trends, and had a significant impact on America's sociopolitical and historical consciousness for decades to come. *The Birth of a Nation* is undeniably biased in its historical recreation, as is any work of art. Yet despite its obviously demean-

ing portrayal of blacks, blacks are not presented the villains of the story. Careful attention to the film reveals that the true evil in Griffith's story (a drastic change from the hideously racist source novel *The Clansmen*) to be the hypocritical white political bosses of the north, who ruthlessly exploited the newly freed blacks as their dupes and expendable pawns in order to terrorize the southern aristocracy. Unfortunately many viewers saw (and continue to see) the film as a glorification of the KKK, just as an unfortunate number of viewers readily interpret many of relatively recent major films (e.g. *Fight Club*, *Natural Born Killers*, or even *Menace II Society* and *Do The Right Thing*) as glorifications of violence even when the directors specifically intended them as strongly anti-violence messages.

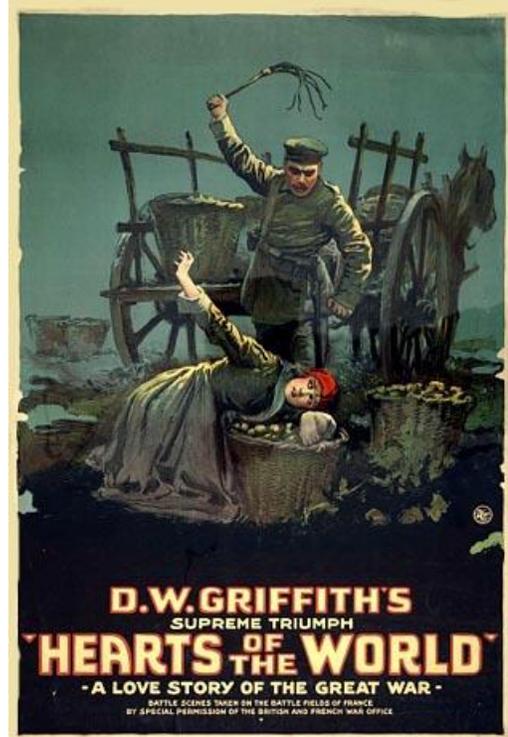
## *D. W. Griffith the social conscience of early Hollywood* Griffith Responds to Critics



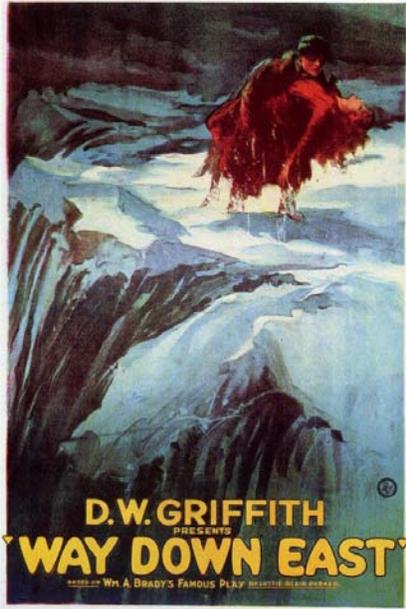
After both the overwhelming success and public controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith decided to turn his next film into what many have called his masterpiece. An intimate little pro-labor and anti-capital punishment drama called *The Mother and the Law* soon became *Intolerance* (1916), a gigantic cinematic experiment using four separate stories set in separate historical eras, cutting back and forth from one to the other. The unusual structural technique is still ahead of its time, and has only rarely been attempted since then. Simultaneous stories gradually develop and build to one frenetic climax depicting of the fall of Babylon to Persia, the crucifixion of Christ, the massacre of the French Protestant Huguenots by royal decree in 1572, and a complex modern (1914) tale of a young working-class man framed by gangsters and wrongly condemned to death while social workers seize the baby from his struggling wife, whom they claim is "unfit." In ironic counterpoint the factory's owner cuts wages in order to give more money to his own wife's social charities, which include funding orphanages and closing down dance halls and other gathering places of the poor. The

parallel themes presented Griffith's argument against bigotry, intolerance, and self-serving dogooders who insist that their own values are the only correct ones. He even published a pamphlet advocating the right to free speech.

His attempt at a World War I propaganda film, *Hearts of the World* (1918), actually comes across more as an anti-war story with parallel romances set against the horrors of war and Griffith re-edited it after the armistice to emphasize this. More than once the wording of the intertitles comments that in wartime "men of all races" commit the terrible atrocities depicted. War itself and the militarists responsible for it are the villains and the common people, civilian and soldier alike, are the victims. Although his post-war revisions to *Hearts of the World* might well be seen as being politically correct with the coming of peace, Griffith was more concerned with filming stories he believed were cinematic, entertaining, and portrayed inner human truths than with maintaining a consistent politically correct attitude. This characteristic has troubled many of his supporters and earned him the ambivalence of critics who find it difficult to reconcile Griffith's obvious social consciousness with the equally obvious racial insensitivity that was a product of his southern upbringing and the mainstream American attitude of his era.



In *Broken Blossoms* (1919) an idealistic young Chinese man comes to England to preach his eastern philosophy of peace, but soon finds himself a disillusioned shopkeeper in a London slum. There he befriends and helps shelter an abused, illegitimate adolescent girl who is regularly beaten by her prizefighter father. When the father learns of the situation his narrow mind and violent temper lead to a terrible and fateful confrontation. Acclaimed by many critics from the time of its release through the present day as Griffith's greatest film, *Broken Blossoms* may well be the first tragic masterpiece of the cinema. Far more intimate than the epic *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, it is a delicate story of characters and ideals caught up in an inexorable destiny. Modern-day critics who acknowledge Griffith's contribution to cinema also



find the eloquent plea for racial tolerance less embarrassing to embrace than the controversial *The Birth of a Nation*.

The next huge popular hit for Griffith was *Way Down East* (1920), an old nineteenth-century stage melodrama that he elevated to near epic proportions yet was able to develop intimate, human characters amidst the stereotypes. Once more Griffith stresses the intolerance of "moral majority" figures in the story of a young woman tricked into a fake marriage and quickly abandoned. She has a baby out of wedlock, but it dies in an emotional scene. Later she is driven out of the house into a snowstorm by her indignant employer when he learns of her "sordid" past.

Griffith's massive melodramatic epic *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) was one of his last masterpieces before his career declined. It shows his work at its creative peak, interweaving human emotions of sisterly love with political commentary on oppressive governments. In eighteenth-century France, two poor orphans raised as sisters, one of whom is blind (and unknowingly the daughter of a disgraced aristocrat), but are forcibly separated during a trip to Paris. They then must survive in vastly different surroundings amidst the excesses, terrors, and turmoil leading up to and during the French Revolution. Technically dazzling in its photography and editing, it also features his style of storytelling at its romantic best.



Griffith's last film of major importance is not a large scale epic or action-packed melodrama, but rather a simple tale of humanity. Its avowed intent is to portray how the power of love can conquer despair even against overwhelming misfortune. *Isn't Life Wonderful?* (1924) was filmed on location in Germany during one of the worst depressions in history and vividly depicts the situation of the common citizens. In a



This simple story shows:  
 That LOVE makes beautiful  
 all that it touches;  
 That when we LOVE, no trials  
 are ever grim;  
 No disappointments make us  
 morbid;  
 Our struggles, however tense,  
 are never depressing;  
 For where there is LOVE  
 there is HOPE and TRIUMPH  
 — which is what  
 MAKES LIFE WONDERFUL.

Berlin suburb following World War I, an extended family of Polish refugees struggles to survive amidst the widespread famine, crippling unemployment, and rampant inflation. The elders discourage Inga and her sweetheart Paul from marrying under such conditions. Paul, after recovering from war injuries, finds a job that provides him with a small garden plot that would yield plenty of food for the whole family. However, the young couple must contend with roving bands of hungry and displaced workers who attack anyone they believe is profiteering from food. Beneath certain faults of obvious moralizing and sluggish pacing lies a moving portrait of common people scarred by a war they did not create, driven to extremes of behavior by distant actions of a privileged few. There are echoes of the modern story from *Intolerance* in its elements of social commentary, although the conclusion of *Isn't Life Wonderful?* is more simplistic and naïvely sentimental, particularly the tagged-on epilogue Griffith was forced to add.



At his heart, Griffith was an unashamed romantic with a fondness for often overstated moral allegory. This is in greatest evidence in the lesser films he rushed through in order to support the major productions he was planning. At his best, in films like *Hearts of the World*, *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East*, *Orphans of the Storm*, and *Isn't Life Wonderful?*, he was able to combine technical brilliance with emotionally moving artistic vision and cathartic popular entertainment. In *America* (1924), an impressively mounted story of the Revolutionary War, he had the surface appearance of his old touch but was falling into a standard formula. Even when his films were reasonably popular his insistence on continuing elaborate and expensive roadshow engagements made them unprofitable. By the early to mid-1920s his personal taste and portrayals of ideal

womanhood no longer appealed to the mass population, who now were attracted to more worldly modern stories of the "jazz age." His didactic style did not fit in with the more matter-of-fact presentation of looser lifestyles becoming commonplace on the screen. When his films started to lose money, Griffith lost his independence and signed on to work for Paramount. The studio system of mass production clashed even further with his customary methods, and with his reduced input on what and how he could film, his productions suffered all the more.

*The Sorrows of Satan* (1926), originally designed at Paramount for Cecil B. DeMille, still looks as much or more like a DeMille picture than a Griffith picture and is almost embarrassingly simplistic in its allegory. While it has some notable visual flair, the story too often seems to combine the worst of DeMille's flamboyant excesses with the worst of Griffith's more heavy-handed preachiness and peculiar stylistic trademarks.



*Battle of the Sexes* (1928), in contrast, despite some overindulgence and occasional pacing flaws, shows that Griffith really could do an effective "modern" picture about human foibles set against a background of the new "roaring 20s" morality. Its style is unmistakably Griffith, yet it has all the slick polish of the popular Hollywood product from the late 1920s. It even has some of the fashionable cynicism that would become still more prevalent over the next few years and takes note of society's hypocritical double standard regarding sexual affairs of men and women.

Unfortunately for Griffith, critics seemed to expect another grand historical epic from him and blasted the film as a "thoroughly third-rate sex drama."

Griffith made only two sound films, *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) for United Artists, and *The Struggle* (1931), produced independently. *Abraham Lincoln* pleased many critics and audiences of its day, but except for an opening crane dolly and a few tracking



shots it now appears technically crude by comparison to his other works, with lower production values. Budget limitations are most evident during the Civil War sequences, especially in comparison with the spectacular battles Griffith had staged for *The Birth of a Nation* some fifteen years earlier. The only strong performance Griffith was able to obtain was from star Walter Huston, who remains worth watching and pretty much carries the film along with the reasonably good (although dialogue-heavy) script, which was co-authored by poet Stephen Vincent Benet.

*The Struggle*, on the other hand, shows Griffith with a freedom of camera movement, confidence in editing, and gritty location realism that he had not shown since *Isn't Life Wonderful* or his "street" films for Biograph over a decade before that. Unfortunately audiences and critics alike wanted something else from Griffith and were turned off by its moralizing melodrama on the evils of alcohol, despite its cinematic flair and its sincere performances. Plans for future directing projects never materialized. Griffith never made another picture.



During the 1930s, with an eye toward the future, he deposited prints of all his films with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, making him one of the few film artists of the silent period whose output has almost entirely survived. He was hired by Hal Roach to consult on the production of *One Million B.C.* (1940), in some ways a remake of his own short, *Man's Genesis* (1912). Some researchers believe he may even have directed a few scenes. After a brief, ill-fated marriage to a much younger woman, he lived the remainder of his life in hotel rooms contending with his own struggle with alcohol. Although never reduced to poverty, he was all but forgotten by the industry he helped create. He died July 23, 1948, in Hollywood, California. Throughout the "golden years" of Hollywood, the major directors from Cecil B. DeMille to John Ford and others acknowledged their debt to Griffith in the way he demonstrated how movies could do more than simply reproduce the performances of actors on film.

Members of the Directors Guild of America, which had once recognized the origin of their art in D. W. Griffith's work by naming its career achievement award after him, now not only have ignored Griffith's overall career because of one specific film, but also prefer to turn their backs on their own heritage rather than address it. Whatever Griffith's faults, there simply is no other director whose lifetime film output and overall contributions to motion picture storytelling are worthy enough to consider using any other director's name than Griffith's for a "career" achievement award. It is unfortunate

(and perhaps not coincidental) that the American Film Institute chose *The Birth of a Nation* for inclusion among its misnamed and highly unbalanced list of the "100 Best American Films of the Century." While it is certainly Griffith's best-known and most influential picture, few who have actually seen Griffith's films would rank it either as his best or as the title most representative of his career.

D. W. Griffith's 125th birthday was on January 23, 2000. People in the Grand Forks area had the opportunity to judge some of Griffith's work first-hand at a free film series that ran from January through May of 2000 at the Grand Forks Public Library, all screened on 16mm film. His 1909 short *The Lonely Villa* was included with the first feature of the series, *Regeneration* (1915), which was directed by Raoul Walsh, a man who trained under and was heavily influenced by Griffith. *Regeneration* shows this both in its filmmaking style and socially conscious subject material. In later weeks both *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm* were featured on the series. All of these (and most of Griffith's major films) are now available on one or more of the various home video formats, including Blu-ray, DVD, VHS, and online streaming. All film enthusiasts seriously interested in the motion picture as a storytelling medium and art form owe it to themselves to seek out the work of this movie industry pioneer.

