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| **Griffith, David Wark (1875-1948)** |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| American film director D.W. Griffith was a pivotal figure in cinema's ascendance as a mass media and modern art form. He is best known for developing editing techniques, such as montage, that brought a new fluency and excitement to cinematic storytelling. He is also remembered for directing the racist blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation*, a filmthat has become an iconic in prejudiced circles for its anti-African-American message. |
| American film director D.W. Griffith was a pivotal figure in cinema's ascendance as a mass media and modern art form. He is best known for developing editing techniques, such as montage, that brought a new fluency and excitement to cinematic storytelling. He is also remembered for directing the racist blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation*, a filmthat has become an iconic in prejudiced circles for its anti-African-American message.  File: Griffith  Photograph of Griffith and cameraman Billy Bitzer on location in the snow filming *Way Down East* (Griffith, 1920). <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=68787>  Born in rural Kentucky, Griffith came of age in the bustling popular theatre as an actor and aspiring writer. Economic necessity led him to the Biograph Company, a film studio in New York City, where he would direct hundreds of films from 1908 to 1913, a period in film history known as the ‘Transition Era.’ Cinema grew from a fairground attraction to a self-conscious art, exemplified by the feature-length fictional works that arose and were screened in dedicated theatres, with star actors and artists, during this time. The first wave of film historians gave Griffith credit for inventing the montage technique: a modern set of editing methods unique to cinema, the most notable of which was ‘parallel editing’, which created suspense or drew meaningful contrast by cutting from one line of action to another. Montage allowed cinema to mature into a rival of the novel and of the theatre, telling complex dramatic stories with distinct visual styles. Griffith also discovered and cultivated young star actresses such as Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford, and publicized his own authorship while the industry refrained from displaying credits. He participated in the formation of a new cartel of studios that shifted American industry to Hollywood, California in the mid-1910s.  *The Birth of a Nation* became a paragon for the new blockbuster feature film. Artistically, it addresses a serious subject of national history: Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South. Its epic scale blends sentimental family melodrama and thrilling action with a last-minute rescue climax. Economically, its blockbuster success encouraged major investment in this new form of middle-class mass entertainment. Politically, its pretentions to history demonstrated cinema's power for propaganda—unfortunately an epic tale of Ku Klux Klan heroism that fuelled contemporary racial tension. The young NAACP led an effort to ban the film city by city, prompting Griffith to defend cinema's right to free speech under the U.S. Constitution's first amendment, which already allowed those same rights to literature and drama. Spurred to defend his historical and artistic legitimacy, Griffith's next film *Intolerance* interweaves four parallel stories across world history. Although its box office failure would reduce Griffith from independent pioneer to director-for-hire, the film's radical montage had direct influence on European avant-garde filmmakers, notably Sergei Eisenstein and Abel Gance. Griffith went on to direct several classic melodramas of the silent era, but a changing postwar culture followed by the advent of sound technology passed him by.  Later film historians have confirmed Griffith’s importance to cinema’s transition, but have downplayed his role as central inventor. *Birth* now appears as an exception among his films, which were widely popular, even among black audiences. Typical for the Progressive Era, they express working-class sympathy, deceptively conservative gender codes, and an uplifting humanist sentiment (especially in an early series of temperance films). Griffith’s deft composition integrated experimental montage with precise staging, minimalist acting, and script compression. Although his works barely appear modern today, their forward-thinking and enduring richness is evident to the connoisseur. Selected Filmography: (Selected from over 500 films, all 35mm, black & white, silent):  *Adventures of Dollie* (1908, 12min)  *A Drunkard’s Reformation* (1909, 13min)  *The Lonely Villa* (1909, 13 min)  *The Country Doctor* (1909, 14min)  *A Corner in Wheat* (1909, 14min)  *The New York Hat* (1912, 16min)  *Birth of a Nation* (1915, 192min)  *Intolerance* (1916, 178min)  *Broken Blossoms* (1919, 95min)  *Way Down East* (1920, 149min)  *Orphans of the Storm* (1921, 121min) |
| Further reading:  (Barry)  (Eisenstein)  (Schickel)  (Mottet)  (Gunning)  (British Film Institute)  (Mayer)  (Keil) |