

DW Griffith: Cinema's Great Pioneer



Thursday 30 April 2015, London

Throughout June **BFI Southbank** will host a month-long season dedicated to **DW Griffith**; described as the 'Father of Film' and the 'Teacher of Us All' by Lillian Gish and Charlie Chaplin respectively, Griffith was one of the greatest filmmakers of the silent-era. The season will re-examine his complex legacy, including his most famous film ***The Birth of a Nation*** (1915), a three-hour epic which was rightly accused of racism. Also screening in the season will be his first film as director ***The Adventures of Dollie*** (1908), the influential ***Intolerance*** (1916), his first talkie ***Abraham Lincoln*** (1930) and a three-part documentary from celebrated film historians Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, ***DW Griffith: Father of Film*** (USA-UK, 1993).

As the 'Father of Film' Griffith pioneered film language which audiences now take for granted, from the use of close-ups for dramatic effect to parallel cutting (alternating two or more scenes that often happen simultaneously but in different locations). As the centenary of ***The Birth of a Nation*** (1915) is marked by a major international conference at University College London (UCL), the season will offer audiences a chance to re-evaluate Griffith's most famous film with ***The Birth of a Nation at 100: A Roundtable Discussion***. The roundtable will gather highly regarded keynote speakers from the UCL conference to present a contemporary assessment of this highly controversial and racist film a hundred years on. The season will also include a number of films starring Griffith's favourite actress Lillian Gish. As well as ***The Birth of a Nation***, Gish also starred in ***Hearts of the World*** (1918), ***Broken Blossoms*** (1919), ***A Romance of Happy Valley*** (1919), ***True Heart Susie*** (1919) ***Way Down East*** (1920) and ***Orphans of the Storm*** (1921). Griffith's repeated casting of Gish contributed to her becoming known as 'The First Lady of American Cinema' and helped create one of the first 'movie stars'.

Films from slightly later in his career which will be screened will include ***Isn't Life Wonderful*** (1924), a film which, although unsuccessful at the time of its release, was hailed by directors Roberto Rossellini and Jean Renoir as a model for neo-realism; ***America*** (1924) in which Griffith, a self-proclaimed Anglophile, presents the American Revolution as a civil war between Englishmen; and ***Abraham Lincoln*** (1930), Griffith's first talkie, telling Lincoln's life story from his log-cabin birth to his assassination. Although he didn't adapt well to sound, (***Abraham Lincoln*** was his penultimate film) and was mostly forgotten toward the end of his career, Griffith remains a fascinating figure whose films demonstrate ground-breaking skills in storytelling.

– ENDS –

NOTES TO EDITORS

Press Contacts:

Liz Parkinson – Press Officer, BFI Southbank
liz.parkinson@bfi.org.uk / 020 7957 8918

SCREENING IN THE SEASON:

DW Griffith: Father of Film

USA-UK 1993. Dirs Kevin Brownlow, David Gill. 3 x 52min. Video

This three-part documentary from celebrated film historians Kevin Brownlow and David Gill is narrated by Lindsay Anderson and covers the whole of Griffith's life and career. The three films include vivid accounts of the director from actors Lillian Gish and Blanche Sweet, cinematographers Karl Brown and Stanley Cortez and many others, and provide a comprehensive look at the controversy sparked by *The Birth of a Nation*.

SUN 7 JUN 14:45 NFT2

Judith of Bethulia

USA 1913. Dir DW Griffith. With Blanche Sweet, Henry Walthall, Mae Marsh. c.62min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

In Griffith's first four-reel film, Judith tries to save the city of Bethulia by seducing Holofernes, the leader of the besieging Assyrians.

+ The Adventures of Dollie

USA 1908. Dir DW Griffith. c.12min. Film

This melodramatic tale of a baby girl kidnapped by a gypsy was Griffith's first film as a director.

+ The Battle at Elderbush Gulch

USA 1913. Dir DW Griffith. c.29min. Film

Indians besiege a ranch house. The rescue of those inside by cavalry would become a trope of the 'classic' Hollywood western.

Preserved by the Library of Congress

FRI 5 JUN 20:40 NFT2

SUN 7 JUN 18:10 NFT2

The Birth of a Nation at 100: A Roundtable Discussion

As a conference is held at UCL marking the centenary of *The Birth of a Nation*, we welcome its highly regarded keynote speakers to BFI Southbank to share their thoughts on this controversial film. Chair Melvyn Stokes (UCL) will be joined by Jane Gaines (Columbia University), Robert Lang (University of Hartford), Paul McEwan (Muhlenberg College), Cedric Robinson (University of California, Santa Barbara), Jacqueline Stewart (University of Chicago) and Linda Williams (University of California, Berkeley).

THU 25 JUN 18:00 NFT1

The Birth of a Nation + intros

USA 1915. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Henry Walthall, Ralph Lewis. 191min + interval. Digital. With Joseph Carl Breil score. 15

The Birth of a Nation deals with the experiences of two American families during the Civil War era, one from the South (the Camerons) and one from the North (the Stonemans). After facing a devastating defeat in the war, the Camerons place their support in the Ku Klux Klan, who claim to defend white women from black men. The film is remarkable for its aesthetic power, and the controversy stirred by its racism. Sergei Eisenstein's comment (1940) still seems convincing today: '[*Birth's*] disgraceful propaganda of racial hatred... cannot be redeemed by the purely cinematographic effects of this production.'

* Introduced by author and UCL film historian Melvyn Stokes

** Introduced by Kunle Olulode, Director, Voice4Change

THU 25 JUN 19:30 NFT1*

SUN 28 JUN 14:00 NFT1**

Intolerance

USA 1916. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Douglas Fairbanks, Spottiswoode Aitken. 169min. Digital. With Carl Davis score. PG

Intolerance includes four stories from distinct time periods, tied together by a woman (Lillian Gish) rocking a cradle. They explore the fall of Babylon in 539 BC, the life of Jesus, the massacre of French Huguenots in 1572, and the unexpected consequences of modern social reform. Critic Pauline Kael thought *Intolerance* 'one of the two or three most influential movies ever made.'

WED 24 JUN 19:50 NFT1

SAT 27 JUN 14:30 NFT1

Hearts of the World

USA 1918. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Robert Harron, George Siegmann. c.146min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

World War One interrupts the romance of the Girl (Lillian Gish) and the Boy (Robert Harron). The Boy is wounded fighting for France and the Girl is threatened with rape by a brutal German (George Siegmann), but hope arrives with the American troops. As propaganda for the Allied cause, *Variety* declared *Hearts of the World* 'second to none.'

Preserved by The Museum of Modern Art with support from the Lillian Gish Trust for Film Preservation

SUN 14 JUN 16:15 NFT2

TUE 16 JUN 17:30 NFT2

A Romance of Happy Valley

USA 1919. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Robert Harron, Kate Bruce. c.76min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

Jennie (Gish) waits eight years for her childhood sweetheart John (Harron) to return from New York. John, now wealthy and successful, reappears just as his family farm is about to be sold, and his father resorts to desperate measures to save it. Griffith set the drama in rural Kentucky, surely evoking memories of his own youth.

+ The Cricket on the Hearth

USA 1909. Dir DW Griffith. c.6min. Film. U

Adapted from a short story by Charles Dickens, this film tells the story of a seaman returning home to claim his sweetheart.

SUN 7 JUN 20:30 NFT2

FRI 12 JUN 18:20 NFT2

Broken Blossoms Yellow Man and the Girl

USA 1919. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Donald Crisp, Richard Barthelmess. c.91min. Film. With live piano accompaniment. PG

Broken Blossoms is based on a tragic love story by Thomas Burke. When an East-End girl (Gish) is abused by her prizefighter father (Crisp) she takes refuge with Chinese immigrant Cheng Huan (Barthelmess), a poet. When the girl's racist father pursues her Cheng attempts to save her. A story of impossible love transformed into beautiful art.

TUE 9 JUN 18:20 NFT2

SAT 13 JUN 20:50 NFT2

True Heart Susie

USA 1919. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Robert Harron, Clarine Seymour. c.93min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

In this comedy-drama, Susie (Gish) loves William Jenkins (Harron) and secretly pays for his studies to become a minister. But after graduation, he spurns her to marry the frivolous Bettina Hopkins (Seymour). Tom Gunning, author of *DW Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, describes *True-Heart Susie* as 'Griffith's masterpiece... incandescent in its emotional power.'

THU 11 JUN 18:20 NFT2

MON 15 JUN 20:55 NFT2

Way Down East

USA 1920. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Richard Barthelmess, Lowell Sherman. c.149min. Film. With live piano accompaniment. U

When Anna (Gish) is tricked into a fake marriage she has a baby out of wedlock. Anna then struggles to pick up the pieces of her life, until her ex-employer's son (Barthelmess) falls for her and becomes her champion. This box office triumph is particularly memorable for its stunning shots filmed on the ice floes of Vermont. *Preserved by The Museum of Modern Art with support from the Lillian Gish Trust for Film Preservation*

+ In Old Kentucky

USA 1909. Dir DW Griffith. c.11min. Film

A Kentucky family, divided by the Civil War, strives for reconciliation.

Preserved by the Library of Congress

FRI 12 JUN 20:00 NFT3

SUN 14 JUN 13:00 NFT2

Orphans of the Storm

USA 1921. Dir DW Griffith. With Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Joseph Schildkraut. c.154min + interval. Film. With John Lanchbery score

Henriette (Lillian Gish) and the blind Louise (Dorothy Gish) are orphans during the French *ancien régime* and Revolution. In Paris, they become separated amid the chaos and each girl finds a new path in life. This historical drama is the last Griffith film to feature both Gish sisters.

+ Friends

USA 1912. Dir DW Griffith. c.12min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

Two friends compete for the love of the same girl.

THU 18 JUN 17:30 NFT1

SAT 20 JUN 17:10 NFT1

Isn't Life Wonderful Dawn

USA 1924. Dir DW Griffith. With Carol Dempster, Neil Hamilton, Erville Alderson. c.115min. Film. With live piano accompaniment

Unsuccessful at the time of its release, *Isn't Life Wonderful* was hailed by directors Roberto Rossellini and Jean Renoir as a model for neo-realism. The film follows the romance of Polish refugees Inga (Dempster) and Paul (Hamilton) as they struggle to survive in the postwar Germany of 1923, yet it ends on an improbably upbeat note.

+ A Pueblo Legend

USA 1912. Dir DW Griffith. c.13min. Film

A love story set among Native Americans, starring Mary Pickford.

FRI 19 JUN 20:30 NFT2

SUN 21 JUN 14:30 NFT2

America

USA 1924. Dir DW Griffith. With Carol Dempster, Neil Hamilton, Lionel Barrymore. c.175min. Film.

With live piano accompaniment Griffith, a true Anglophile, presents the American Revolution as a civil war between Englishmen. Nathan Holden (Hamilton) and Nancy Montague (Dempster) romance each other across the political divide, while Captain Walter Butler (Lionel Barrymore) leads savage Native Americans against the British with ambitions to build his own empire.

+ The Redman's View

USA 1909. Dir DW Griffith. 11mins

A sympathetic film about the displacement of Native Americans by white settlers.

WED 10 JUN 17:30 NFT2

SUN 14 JUN 19:20 NFT2

Abraham Lincoln

USA 1930. Dir DW Griffith. With Walter Huston, Una Merkel, Kay Hammond. 93min. Film. U

Griffith's first talkie has a strong performance by Walter Huston in the title role and tells Lincoln's life story from his log-cabin birth to his assassination. It features his lost love Ann Rutledge (Merkel) and his marriage to Mary Todd (Hammond), and shows a folksy Lincoln who leads the North in the Civil War and emancipates the slaves.

+ The Rose of Kentucky

USA 1911. Dir DW Griffith. 17min. Digital

A rural romance in Griffith's (and Lincoln's) home state of Kentucky, with Klansmen as villains.

FRI 26 JUN 20:40 NFT3
SUN 28 JUN 15:45 NFT3

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- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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