D.W. Griffith and the Power of Film: His Quest to Utilize Film to Attain a Utopian Society

By

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ ii

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: D.W. Griffith – The Beginning of His Ideology ........................................ 11

  Griffith's Move ‘‘Into a Brainy Circle Indeed’’ and His Pursuit of the ‘‘Everlasting Lights of Fame and Glory’’ .......................................................... 20

Chapter Two: D.W. Griffith and His Idealism .................................................................. 30

  ‘‘A Power That Can Make Men Brothers and End War Forever’’ ................................. 31

  ‘‘It has come, this new weapon of men, and by faith and a study of the signs we proclaim that it will go on and on in immemorial wonder’’ ..................... 39

  ‘‘That is the beauty of this work. It makes dreams come true.’’ ................................. 45

Chapter Three: The Birth of a Nation, The Manifestation of D.W. Griffith’s Ideology and Idealism ................................................................. 50

  ‘‘I hoped at once that it could be done, for the story of the South had been absorbed into the very fibre of my being’’ ...................................................... 50

  ‘‘Dare We Dream of a Golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead – the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace’’ .............................................................. 55

  ‘‘War’s Peace’’ ............................................................................................................... 58

  ‘‘... his scenes flash the story at you with never a rest. You sit overpowered by the beauty and the magnitude of the pictures’’ ........................................ 59

Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 62

Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 64
Introduction:

The study of film is the study of history. The silvery glow of the phantasm projected on the screen draws the viewer into another time and place. They have been used to tell stories, record historical events, and as tools for propaganda. Through the lens of a director’s camera, historians and scholars may observe and study societies, cultures, politics, and ideologies from the time of film’s infancy to the present. One director that left an indelible mark on film was D.W. Griffith, who is considered one of the greatest directors and pioneers of the early film industry. His films and innovative techniques have influenced the evolution of the motion picture for over a hundred years. Griffith possessed his own personal ideology of the power of film and utilized this medium to change society. Through the study of his most well known film, *The Birth of a Nation*, it becomes evident how he imposed his social and cultural commentary on his viewers.

Even though over a hundred years have passed since he began directing moving pictures and came into the public consciousness, Griffith and his work have continuously fascinated, shocked, angered, and inspired millions of people and historians and scholars never seem to tire or falter in studying Griffith one way or another. Besides, it is practically impossible not to do so, since Griffith had such an important influence on the early film industry. One cannot study the history of film without Griffith making an appearance – if not a star role, then at least a cameo. And yet, despite the century of study, have we come any closer to understanding the man and his work? Perhaps not, but that does not inhibit historians and scholars from steadfastly striving in their quest to attain that perfect “picture” of the man.

It is necessary to study Griffith, the man, in order to begin to understand his works and the ideology exhibited within those works. Richard Schickel’s well-respected biography of the
director, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life*, provides a comprehensive overview of his life. Schickel is well aware of the difficulty of providing a truly “truthful” account of his subject’s life, since Griffith was very secretive on such matters — “. . . about almost every significant aspect of his activities — he maintained a profound silence, which he later covered with an excess of explanations that nearly always tended toward the grandiose and the improbably noble.” Despite this, Schickel offers his work, not only to those who care about the history of film, but to everyone who cares about the life of our century as it was refracted through the work and life of one of the figures who, as much as any politician, thinker or artist in the traditional forms, shaped the way vast numbers of us perceive its course, and perceive ourselves.\(^1\)

Through the utilization of a variety of sources, including the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) collection of Griffith’s personal papers and multiple interviews of those individuals who worked with and knew Griffith, Schickel attempted to assemble the pieces of Griffith’s life in order to provide an insight into who he was and how he contributed to film history. Also, as the quote above implies, Schickel acknowledged the various ways Griffith influenced how people perceived history and themselves.

*The Birth of a Nation* was a cinematic phenomenon that truly propelled Griffith, an already respected director, into the consciousness of American society. While the film was an innovative masterpiece, the perceived racism and subjective portrayal of history leaves scholars highly critical of the story’s content and potentially influential message, blatant or otherwise. In his article, “Hollywood’s Reconstruction and the Persistence of Historical Mythmaking,” Ron Briley focused on the issues of racism and how film can influence people’s understanding of history, and conveyed his point through the utilization of *The Birth of a Nation*. Briley pointed

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out, “Despite revisionist scholarship led by [Eric] Foner, the myth of Reconstruction continues to exercise a strong hold on American popular culture. In explaining the persistence of this mythology, it is important to examine the role played by Hollywood in the formation of the nation’s historical scholarship.”\(^2\) Briley illustrated how Griffith perpetuated the Reconstruction myth within \textit{The Birth of a Nation} as well as presents to the public viewer “his fears of miscegenation and black sexuality.”\(^3\) Briley’s focus on racism is a familiar theme within the study of \textit{Birth of a Nation}, but his observation that the Reconstruction myth persists (through the influence of \textit{The Birth}), even after revisionists have pointed out the contrary, is important to consider within the study of the iconic film.

Cedric Robinson in his article, “In the Year 1915: D.W. Griffith and the Whitening of America,” recognized the elements of racism as well as the political and economic influence of Griffith’s films on the viewing public. Robinson argued that 1915 was a noteworthy year in film history since the appearance of Griffith’s film coincided with other historical events. Robinson believed this “suggests that it was a moment during which the mapping of American culture was re-inscribed, when the contours of the social practices which came to characterize 20\(^{\text{th}}\)—century American society were fixed.”\(^4\) The immigrants that were fleeing from Europe because of the World War were ignorant of the history of slavery and were more susceptible to Griffith’s interpretation of history. According to Robinson,

\begin{quote}
What had distinguished Griffith was that he extended a fantastic history of America into the most profoundly significant mass media art form prior to television. His timing was accidental but no less determinant since he offered his
\end{quote}


\(^3\) Ibid., 456.

vision to an audience largely uninformed of America with the collaboration of producers, exhibitors, and financiers equally ignorant of America except as a market.  

Jack Temple Kirby in his work, “D.W. Griffith’s Racial Portraiture,” furthers the arguments of Griffith’s portrayal of blacks, and the prevalence of racism within his films including The Birth of a Nation. Kirby argued, “Griffith – gushy sentimentalist, paternalist-style racist, and master of montage – was a consummate communicator for his times and place. He helped fellow Americans to synthesize old attitudes about race with new patterns of life and law, and in the doing he enthralled millions with his ingenious innovations in the new medium.” Finally, Michael Rogin in his work, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation,” also discussed the racist message in the film and how Griffith used the film to convey his beliefs to the public. Rogin also pointed out how the film was perceived by Griffith, Thomas Dixon, and Woodrow Wilson. They did not all agree with the meaning of the film, “But they shared a common project. They offered The Birth of a Nation as the screen memory, in both meanings of that term, through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future.” Through their focus on racism, Briley, Robinson, Kirby, and Rogin, provide an insight into how Griffith’s film influenced the American public on the subject.

The public response and political activity after the release of The Birth of a Nation is important to consider in order to understand Griffith’s own response through the production of Intolerance. Josh Glick in his article, “Mixed Messages: D.W. Griffith and the Black Press, 1916-1931,” discussed the response of the black press to Griffith’s films during a fifteen year span. Glick discussed two themes. The first considered the reception of The Birth of a Nation

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5 Ibid., 186.
around the time of World War I, during the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the part it played in bringing sound to film. The second considered the black press’s reception of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* and his works that followed afterward, including *Intolerance*. Glick pointed out, “Examining how Griffith and his films surfaced on news and entertainment pages both expands and complicates an understanding of the critical function and socializing power of the black press during this period.” The response and the influential power of the black press on its readers provides an insight into the public and political environment Griffith was contending with during and after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*.

The issue of censorship that centered on *The Birth of a Nation* became a topic that Griffith fought against in various ways. As Paul McEwan argued in his article, “Lawyers, Bibliographies, and the Klan: Griffith’s Resources in the Censorship Battle Over *The Birth of a Nation* in Ohio,” Griffith fought against it legally and politically in a long drawn out battle that spanned decades. Ohio was unique in its response to the film by enforcing a statewide ban. Through his research of the Ohio State Archives and Griffith’s papers, McEwan pointed out that Griffith’s effort to build a case by compiling an annotated bibliography, gathering endorsements from notable individuals, and the clear evidence of correspondence between Epoch and the KKK, in undermined “Griffith’s repeated contention that the racial politics of *The Birth of a Nation* belonged only in the past.”

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the Mutual Film Corp v. Industrial Commission of Ohio case, which stipulated that film was not “protected speech under the First Amendment.”

D.W. Griffith’s desire for historical accuracy has been studied by a number of scholars. Bernard Hanson, in his work, “D.W. Griffith: Some Sources,” discussed in length how Griffith used the fine arts to aid in the accuracy of his films. He stated, “Not only were paintings used as sources for the mood of a scene or actually incorporated into the pictures, but Griffith began to see the fine arts as sources for archaeological accuracy.” This was evident in one of his earlier films, Judith of Bethulia, but interest increased in The Birth of a Nation, and was a major concern in Intolerance. Floyd Martin, in his article, “D.W. Griffith’s ‘Intolerance’: A Note on Additional Visual Sources,” discussed Griffith’s effort for historical accuracy in Intolerance, but pointed out “that the director only occasionally slavishly copied any since source.” Martin also stated, “Griffith exuberantly combined and transformed collected research and reinvented the past.”

Scholars have noted and studied the correlation between Griffith’s past experiences and his work as a director. The study of his life before film is significant as it imparts a greater understanding of how it influenced his ideology of film, directorial style, and fodder for his films. Russell Merritt, in his article, “Rescued from a Perilous Nest: D.W. Griffith’s Escape from Theatre into Film,” argued that Griffith’s period as a theatre actor influenced his future work as a director. According to Merritt, Griffith was experiencing a psychological turmoil

10 Ibid., 358. This is significant since Griffith adamantly argued that censorship of films was an act that went against freedom of the press and speech, which he expounded upon in his publication, The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America.


during his theatrical career, which was made manifest within his written work. In general, Merritt summarized Griffith’s work as revealing, “the broodings of a mind possessed by a single, controlling subject: the fear of disgrace and the need for forgiveness.”\(^\text{13}\) Merritt went on to illustrate this point through his analysis of Griffith’s play, “War.”\(^\text{14}\) He believed it was Griffith’s “most nakedly autobiographical work,” up to that time and was the most revealing among his writings of his “fear of sexuality, his dread of failure, or his fetishization of his father. . . .”\(^\text{15}\) Finally, Merritt stipulated that Griffith’s early silent films served as a therapeutic outlet as evidenced through his reversal of “the stories, character types, and dramatic motifs he had used in his stage writings.”\(^\text{16}\) This new medium and the formula stories he developed and directed “gave him the opportunity to control, redirect, and sublimate the erotic and familial obsessions that threatened to overwhelm him in the theatre.”\(^\text{17}\) Merritt provided a compelling argument of the significance of Griffith’s theatrical career, but this was accomplished only through the utilization of evidence pulled from Griffith’s upbringing and relationship with his family, and most particularly his father. It is imperative to study Griffith’s childhood and familial relationships in order to attain a significant understanding of his later works as a pioneering force within the film industry.

Lary May was another scholar who found a correlation between Griffith’s childhood upbringing and his work as a director. In his essay, “Apocalyptic Cinema: D.W. Griffith and the Aesthetics of Reform,” May argued that as American society was moving away from the old

\(^{14}\) A melodrama set during the American Revolution
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 18.
societal norms in the early 20th century, a counter-social reform movement was striving to hold back that tide of change, to which Griffith contributed his directorial prowess. He would utilize the techniques already in use by other directors, such as the close-up and parallel editing in innovative new ways. May stipulated that though he was utilizing a new medium in such a way, his motives, “flowed not from a vision of the future but from a desire to give emotion to the folk culture of American Victorianism. Film was to be a great revival instrument for a threatened culture, inspiring viewers with a new instinctual strength.” According to May, Griffith would accomplish this by infusing his Protestantism and Victorianism within his films, which were directly rooted in his childhood. Griffith was a social reformer, but one who wished to uphold and maintain the Victorian ideal of society he was taught from his parents, religion, and culture as a young boy in Kentucky.

May utilized *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* to illustrate Griffith’s efforts to stay the tide of change as he conveyed his Progressive political views. According to May, Griffith’s ability to reflect within *The Birth of a Nation* the political machinations of the Wilson administration had the potential to influence the viewing public by giving “credence to the events on the screen” and “to make history relevant to the present.” Griffith’s intention to forward unity within *The Birth of a Nation* was overrode and destroyed by the racist portrayal of blacks within the film. He again attempted to influence the public through the use of *Intolerance* by using it as a tool to assist President Wilson and the Democratic Party in defeating the Republicans in the 1916 election. Ultimately, Griffith’s efforts were fruitless and the very

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18 May focused on the years 1908-1914. He stipulated that the social reform movement began to fall apart, beginning in 1915, when Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*.
20 Ibid., 45-46.
21 Ibid., 47.
event he strove to prevent came to pass. The argument May forwards in his essay is quite impressive and he does makes a valid point of Griffith’s childhood influencing his ideology, but I disagree in his belief that Griffith looked toward the past with the intention to uphold the Victorian ideal. Indeed, I believe that Griffith looked beyond the past and present toward an ideal future. He promoted an agenda of change that was contrary to the conventional perception of Victorian idealism.

Though scholars have studied how Griffith utilized his films to bring about social change, their scholarship has significantly concentrated within the perimeters of political machinations and racial tensions. My thesis seeks to contribute to previous scholarship by arguing that Griffith forwarded the agenda of utilizing the new medium of film as a tool to convince the masses of the possibility of a utopian society. His utilization of film to forward this agenda will be illustrated within his most famous work, *The Birth of a Nation*. Furthermore, the study of Griffith’s personal papers and publications provide insight to Griffith, the man, and his visionary message to the public. The published works of Lillian Gish and Karl Brown who knew and worked with Griffith, in particular, during the production of *The Birth of a Nation*, provide an invaluable first-hand account of Griffith and his vision of film in action. The utilization of the writings of contemporary authors who shared elements of his vision of film further supports the thesis.

D.W. Griffith recognized film as a powerful vehicle of change. It was a new art form that would change the world by stirring “the hearts of the world” with a “universal language” that had the power to “make men brothers and end war forever.” Film was a tool that could reach the global masses quickly, efficiently and divest them of their established and traditional understandings into new universal values. Under the guise of an educational tool, Griffith chose

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the form in which an incalculable number of people over multiple generations would be indoctrinated with his “truths.” Griffith had a powerful tool that would change the hearts and minds of the masses and guide their footsteps toward his vision of the future.

In Chapter 1, I shall focus on the people and events within Griffith’s life, shortly before the production of *The Birth of a Nation*, that provide an insight into how his ideology was influenced at an early age and would contribute to his vision of how the medium of film should be used. Furthermore, Chapter 2 will follow with a discussion of Griffith’s idealism of film as a tool to assimilate the masses to bring about a utopian society – as conveyed through his own words, those who worked closely with him, and those who were his contemporaries that shared his vision. In Chapter 3, the film, *The Birth of a Nation*, will be studied to illustrate how he utilized film to forward his agenda of convincing the masses of the possibility of a utopian society.
Chapter One: D.W. Griffith – The Beginning of His Ideology

“‘About myself?’ he replied when asked for details, ‘the public can not care about that topic; you cannot improve on what was written about a real man of note once: ‘He was born, he grew up, he slept a little, he ate a little, he worked a little, he loved a little – and then he died.’’”

D.W. Griffith

In order to understand D.W. Griffith and his use of film to convey his ideology, it is necessary to study his history. The influence of an individual’s childhood upbringing is profoundly significant, and this truism applies to Griffith as well. Before he became the forward thinking director of film he passed through the stages of childhood to adulthood, all the while experiencing the trials and hardships of growing-up. But instead of upholding and perpetuating the past, the world he knew in his own time and that which was recounted to him of bygone days and eras before him, he looked towards the future and worldwide societal change. He dreamed of a global utopian society, where there was no war, only peace upheld through the brotherhood of the masses. One can see this vision, once one studies the seeds within Griffith’s life, in particular his childhood, from which his ideas sprung. Into adulthood, his written works convey his idealistic thinking, but his film, The Birth of a Nation, became a phantasmic manifesto of his utopian dream.

David Wark Griffith was born in Kentucky at the family estate, Lofty Green, on January 22, 1875 to Jacob Wark Griffith and Mary Oglesby Griffith. The family had known prosperity, but their fortunes and circumstances had diminished after the Civil War. He believed his family was “of good stock,” as he claimed his mother was of the Shirley-Carter family and his father was a colonel of the Confederacy. Until the time of his father’s death, the family lived

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24 Schickel, An American Life, 16.

25 A Virginia family from which General Robert E. Lee was a descendant.

26 Gordon, David Wark Griffith: His Early Years, 31, 35.
“in a very small outhouse surrounded by an orchard, wheat fields, pastures and the usual things pertaining to a farm. This was an old house left from the estate. That’s what we call it down South, it’s supposed to show you mean something, quite important as it were.” Among those who lived on the estate were ex-slaves that remained with the family after the war. This was the setting of the first ten years of Griffith’s life, where occurred the sowing of the seeds of his ideology.

As the age of childhood is a significant period in an individual’s life, so it is that within that period the individual’s parents are the most important in their development – as their thoughts, words, and actions have the greatest influence on the developmental outcome of their offspring. The elements from his childhood that he absorbed from his parents and were later found in his written and cinematic compositions. The piecing together of these various elements, from his reminiscences and anecdotes, reveals the significance of Griffith’s parents in his life.

Jacob Griffith was a man of strong character and charm, but was often distant in relation to his son. He was not known to show any outward expression of affection toward others, but Griffith suspected that his father possessed “a deep emotional nature behind his sternness,” as evidenced through the occasional placing of his hand on his son’s head and inquiring, “‘Son, how are you this day?’” Griffith understood that it was his father’s desire to maintain “an old soldier’s reserve and dignity” that he did not show many signs of affection. His father had “fought as a young man in the American Army against Mexico” and served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Young Griffith was regaled with the stories of his father’s heroism and bravery in the Civil War, which contributed toward his profound respect and adulation of him. For example, one Civil War veteran who served under

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28 Mexican-American War, which was fought from 1846-1848.
the Colonel told Griffith, “I believe if your father thought he had a drop of cowardly blood in his veins, he’d knife it out.” Griffith saw himself as the son of an exceptional man, therefore, he was satisfied if his father deigned to acknowledge him in someway or not at all, for it was enough to be near him, his hero.

One particular anecdote of Griffith’s childhood reiterates this devotion to his father; but, more notably, it takes on a prophetic nature concerning his future endeavors. The story is of Griffith’s first magic lantern show. Of all the significant elements within the story, the one constant and overarching unifier is the presence of the father. On one cold, dark night, as snow laid on the ground and glistened in the lantern light, young Griffith and his father entered a small schoolhouse along with others eager to see the show. Once inside, the magical entertainment began as views of a “mostly educational or religious” nature were shown to the audience. As Griffith watched this exciting display, he contentedly sat next to his father. Once again, there was no outward sign of affection but he was happy nonetheless –

I didn’t hold his hand because he always preserved an old soldier’s reserve and dignity. Just the modulated tenderness, however, that came into his commanding voice when he called me ‘Son’ seemed to bring all the glory and happiness there could be for me. To sit close to him and feel the warmth of his great body was as much rapture as a childish heart needed.30

This one magical scene in the schoolhouse was the springboard of what was to come in Griffith’s life. It provides an insight into how the film industry could appeal to him as well as where his idealism of film as an educational tool began to develop and grow – all with the “blessing” of his father.

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29 The magic lantern consisted of two slides, one of which was manipulated by a projectionist, thereby giving the impression of movement. The image was projected onto a screen or wall.

But, how was this a seminal event? How does this story pertain to later events within Griffith’s adulthood? As noted above, Griffith had enjoyed the projected views from the magic lantern as he sat with his father, but did not realize its significance at the time. It was only later, in hindsight, that he could acknowledge the significance of the magic lantern within the progression of his life – “Of course, I didn’t dream that the heir of this magic lantern was to make me fairly widely known around the world.”\(^{31}\) However that may be, did he ever think of this moment as he watched a film short in a nickelodeon, or when he came to the Biograph Studio as a struggling actor who needed work, or after he went behind the camera and began projecting his own visions and dreams? It must have occurred, if the impulse to remember this story later in his life was occasioned by his consideration of how much wealth and luxury was attained by individuals within the film industry in comparison to its humble predecessor, the magic lantern – “For after all, this ‘marvelous, stupendous’ motion picture is only an improvement on the old magic lantern.”\(^{32}\) Above all, it was a cherished memory involving his father – a pleasant evening spent watching “magical” images in a lone schoolhouse – and as such, he could not easily forget it. At the time the memory was created a positive connotation was developed within Griffith, so that on an unconscious level, he saw his father’s act of travelling to and attending a magic lantern show with his son as a form of approval for that form of entertainment or, the very least, its descendant – film.

One could reasonably assume that Griffith’s glowing memory of the magic lantern show provides a glimmer of insight into where his idealism of film as an educational tool began to develop and grow. The show took place in a small country schoolhouse and its repertoire consisted primarily of religious and educational subject matter, both of which Griffith

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
incorporated within his idealism of film to change the education system of his utopian society. Just as the magic lantern was utilized as a type of educational tool within a place of learning, Griffith would advocate a similar function of film. Griffith envisioned that the medium of film would help to mitigate what he felt was an underlying cause of war. He believed the sin of ignorance, particularly of history, perpetuated discord in the world. Ignorance enabled, “the terrible waves of hatred that have caused our many wars and murders, inspired by politics, religion, and the various other causes.”33 The remedy was to teach history and the most thorough and efficient means of accomplishing this was to instruct through the utilization of the medium of film. Instead of months of schooling, students would learn in hours by watching films –

We force our children to spend many years in school. At least a few months of this time in an average education are spent in the study of history. Six moving pictures would give these students more knowledge of the history of the world than they have obtained from their entire study. Besides these, the vast majority who cannot spare the time for this study, could in a few hours get an excellent idea of the history of the world since its beginning, from moving pictures.34

Furthermore, public libraries of the future would house these educational films for patrons to watch and learn. The repertoire of the films in their subject matter would be an impressive novelty, “Everything except the three R’s, the arts, and possibly the mental sciences can be taught in this way – physiology, chemistry, biology, botany, physics, and history in all its branches.”35 So, instead of a lengthy, mundane curriculum of reading and memorizing, history and other subjects may be learned in an enjoyable format in a fraction of the time.

The death of Griffith’s father was a heartbreaking moment in his life. Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Griffith had received various bullet wounds during the Civil War, but Griffith attributed his father’s death to one particular wound and the circumstances surrounding it. During one

34 Ibid.
engagement with the Union army he was shot in the belly and “lay on the ground for several hours with his insides hanging out on the ground until a surgeon came out . . . and found him. He put his insides back in and sewed him up.”  Though the surgeon was able to save the colonel’s life, he was required to resort to inferior catgut to sew him up since a Union blockade was preventing access to necessary medical supplies such as morphine and catgut. The inferior catgut “after the lapse of years . . . rotted and broke and nothing could be done for him so he lay in the darkened room dying from a blow out of the past.”  When ten-year-old Griffith heard the country doctor declare there was no hope and death was imminent, the boy hid himself away and wept. Later, he was found and brought inside to his father’s deathbed. As was an old Southern tradition, Jacob Griffith spoke a goodbye to each person present and when it came time to speak to his son, he spoke a few simple words that remained with Griffith the rest of his life –

He looked at me for quite a long time with those brave eyes that now seemed so soft and tender. Finally he said, as I drew close to him, ‘be brave my son, be brave’. But I am afraid he knew me only too well and knew I needed this advice. Since then there has never been a crisis in my life that that hasn’t come to me – ‘be brave, be brave’. But I am afxxid [sic] I was not born to live up to this advise [sic] for afterwards I never was really brave and never have been. Of course I could fight a little with my fists and that sort of stuff but I could seldom say ‘no’. I mean morally speaking. I have been going on ever since saying ‘yes’ to most everybody about business and other things. Occasionally, however, it has helped me.  

Then, shortly after Jacob Griffith said his last goodbye to those in the family, “he lay still forever. And then they took him away – that which I loved more than anything I have ever loved in my life.”  The course of logic for a ten-year-old was simple – war killed his father, for if there had never been a war he would still have his father. Therefore, in a changed world full of peace there would never be an occurrence of war – but how to make this a reality? It is

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36 Griffith, Autobiography MS, 5.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 6.
39 Ibid.
impossible to pinpoint the moment Griffith adopted the idealized conception of film as an instrument of peace, but it is evident from this poignant scene of death how Griffith’s blaming of war could later transform into a hope that war would no longer be a reality in a utopian society of the future. Furthermore, even on his deathbed, Jacob Griffith continued to leave an indelible mark on his son’s psyche. The most masculine, bravest man he knew showed something of his fatherly tenderness as he instructed his son to the last, though Griffith felt he never lived up to his final counsel of being brave. After his father’s death, Griffith never again experienced the strong guidance he needed that only his father could provide him.

Mary Oglesby Griffith became responsible for the Griffith family at her husband’s death, a feat she was unfamiliar with as she was “raised in the easy conditions of the rich in the South”\(^{40}\) and it had always rested on her husband’s shoulders. In her own quiet, distant way she influenced the development of her son’s ideology and idealism of film. Interestingly, the women in his life and their reliance upon religion for support after his father’s death and the bullies he encountered at the new schoolhouse he attended when his family moved to another farm in a neighboring county influenced his opinion of religion and contributed toward his utilization of film to revolutionize the instruction of Christian precepts and morality. As will be illustrated below, his difficult childhood experiences of trying to live by Christian precepts through traditional means, such as going to church or being a member of a church-going family, contributed toward Griffith viewing film as a way to more efficiently and consistently teach such precepts.

The Griffith family moved to another farm soon after it was discovered that there were far too many mortgages on Lofty Green for them to remain on the estate. The new farm was in the neighboring county of Shelby and Griffith believed it “was the most useless farm in the entire

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 6.
world . . . Until I was twelve, we waged a losing fight against rocks, roots, bugs, and worn-out soil, in a desperate attempt to pay an $1800 mortgage."

The unpleasant consequence of this move was his attendance of a new schoolhouse where he became the victim of bullying by the local schoolboys. The strong masculine guidance of his father was replaced by the guidance of his mother and the other women in his family. Though his mother and the other women were religious before her husband’s death, afterward they “clung in their despair more earnestly than ever to religion.”

They raised him to be a Christian young man and he admitted that he “had acquired a good Christian spirit and actually strove to follow the teachings of nonresistance” that they had impressed upon him. This nonresistance particularly pertained to “the idea that if I was hit on one cheek I should turn the other.”

A moment in which he attempted to live by this precept found him disappointed with the outcome. One boy “once socked me on the cheek. Following my religious training, I actually turned the other one. He whooped and walloped that side, too.” He showed some form of bravery, but only when he lost “a struggle with my conscience.” The same boy, who had accepted Griffith’s invitation to hit one and then the other of his cheeks, in a later instance, kicked Griffith in the pants. Once his conscience lost the struggle, Griffith “started in to repay him in worldly fashion.” As they were fighting, Griffith pulled the boy’s hair and became revolted when he noticed it was infested with lice. He quickly dislodged himself, but was rebuked with ‘He can’t fight nuthin.’”

Though he attempted to follow the wholesome Christian precepts of his mother, he found that the other boys at school did not reciprocate, and, even when he ignored the precepts, he continued to remain the underdog in the tussles and fistfights.

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42 Ibid.
43 Griffith, Autobiography MS, 9.
Through hindsight, Griffith utilized these childhood memories of the religious precepts of the women in his life and the schoolyard bullies to doubt the high hopes and certainties of those leaders during World War I, such as, Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Lord Beaverbrook who – seemed to believe that the war then going on would end all wars, at least for a long term of years. Looking back over my youth, however, I am inclined to believe that the chance for a permanent peace in this crazed world is slight, indeed. There seems to be inherent in all of us the liking for a good fight.45

The stories of his youth and comparing them to what he saw as an adult were enough to allow him to come to the bitter conclusion that peace was not a natural inclination of humanity.46 He saw the hypocrisy of the fact that the schoolyard bullies “came from what is termed ‘good, clean American stock’ and “came from families of allegedly high moral principles and, of course, churchgoing people,”47 but found ways to commit unchristian acts of tormenting the new boy in school. Furthermore, in that one particular instance when he resisted their abuse, he fell into their game of war and “got the worst of it” as “to the great joy of the other boys of this young Society of the Brotherhood of Man, who looked on gleefully while we tore up the turf.”48 He saw, firsthand, how rare and difficult it was to prevent or control the natural human inclination toward destructive behavior. His attempt to be a God-fearing young man and follow the Christian precepts taught to him by his mother was thwarted by his interactions and observations of the bullies in the schoolyard. Though they shared a similar background of being children of churchgoing families, Griffith was appalled that they did not strive to live according to the same honorable precepts.

Through the study of Griffith’s personal observations from childhood it becomes evident how they could have played a part in his utilization of film to infuse a form of religious morality.

46 Ibid., 36-37.
47 Ibid., 36.
48 Ibid.
In retrospect, as noted below, he felt that he made a contribution toward inculcating virtues which were lacking within contemporary religious methods from his childhood days. He particularly addressed this point through the comparison of the immorality of the country boys of his youth and those in later years who were spectators in movie theaters –

Today the movies are accused of corrupting the morals of youth and contributing to the ‘degeneracy of modern adolescence.’ This is all so much baloney. The sex morals of some of these country youths of my day were lower than a snake’s belly. They had never read obscene books, certainly had never seen a motion picture, yet their conversation and actions were unprintable. While I am not in an authoritative position, I believe from observation that the youth of today is a much better class.49

Even though time had past, Griffith upheld his conviction that film would serve as a tool in moving the world toward a higher ideal. The morality that was missing in his childhood among his peers was comfortingly evident among later youths. Consequently, Griffith indirectly accredited himself, through association, in this feat of influencing the morality of later generations – something he could not do in his youth under the old strictures of society.

49 Ibid., 37.
was the subject of literature in his education that played a part in Griffith’s eventual gravitation to the stage and, ultimately, to film. Literature may manifest itself in various forms – books, scripts for plays, and film scenarios – all of which Griffith utilized within his lifetime. Griffith did well in the subject in school and chose the two venues of stage and screen as employment, both of which often rely on it for writing plays and scenarios. In fact, at the time Griffith went to the Biograph Studio to inquire about an acting job and possibly sell some of his scenarios, he knew the scenarios were good because “most of them were borrowed from the very best authors.”50 Furthermore, it is unknown for certain when or how he developed his belief in utilizing film as an educational tool, but the importance of education permeated throughout his childhood and remained with him into adulthood. Indeed, it was after the release of The Birth of a Nation that Griffith expressed his belief that one of the causes of war was ignorance and film served as “war’s greatest antidote”51 by teaching history. Griffith attempted to utilize the new medium of film as an educational tool to increase the knowledge of his audience in order to prevent war from occurring in the future.

Griffith’s education was spread through various venues, whether in the home, schoolhouse, or employment. In general, the family was “all somewhat studious,” but his father, in particular, “was a highly educated man.” Griffith credited his parents for always directing “our studies and our thoughts toward the noble, the great in literature.”52 The family’s inclination toward literature would naturally influence Griffith’s own gravitation towards the same. From an early age, Griffith had determined that he wanted to be a writer –

My first, and my last ambition, until Fate turned me into a picture man, was to be a writer. I determined on that when I was six years old. My father’s sword and its early effect on my mind, his noble career, his wounds, for he was shot all to

50 Griffith, Autobiography MS, 79.
52 Gordon, David Wark Griffith: His Early Years, 35.
pieces, did impart a martial trend to my character, but there was no war, and the scholarly atmosphere of my home, I suppose, was responsible for my inclination to become a great literary man.⁵³

Furthermore, Griffith’s love of literature contributed toward helping him through the difficult time he had in transitioning to academic life in the city. Prior to attending school in Louisville, Griffith claimed he “was a great success at school” in the Shelby County schoolhouse. However, once he began school in Louisville he began to struggle and felt he was “in a haze.” The haze started to lift at the appearance of a new teacher and the nightly tutelage of his sister, but he truly began “to see a light” when the school curriculum advanced “to the school book editions of Tales of Homer.”⁵⁴ He did so well, that after examinations he advanced two grades and found himself in high school. This proud moment was short-lived as he soon made the decision to find a job to assist in supplementing income toward the family’s difficult financial situation.⁵⁵ The subject of classic literature was a powerfully comforting and familiar presence. This episode within his formal education, illustrates how his interest in literature continued into adolescence and even assisted in alleviating the “haze” he was experiencing when he changed schools. Perhaps, he was able to glean fodder for future film scenarios from his experience of reading the Tales of Homer.

One of the significant employment opportunities Griffith found for himself was working in *Flexner’s and Staadecker Stationers*, a bookstore owned by the Flexner family⁵⁶ and headed by one of the brothers, Bernard Flexner. Griffith found that he had “moved into a brainy circle

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⁵³ Gordon, *David Wark Griffith: His Early Years*, 37, 162.
⁵⁴ Ibid., 35; Griffith, *Autobiography MS*, 8,12.
⁵⁶ Griffith, *Autobiography MS*, 13; Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 42. The Flexner family consisted of a number of siblings who became well known for their future medical and societal contributions. For example, Bernard Flexner was a lawyer by profession and a founding member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Simon Flexner became director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, and Abraham Flexner wrote the “Flexner Report,” which led to the reform of medical education.
indeed,“57 as the store welcomed a significant number of “people intellectually bent,” including Mary Johnson and James Whitcomb Riley.58 When these notable individuals came to talk in the back of the store, Griffith would find excuses to stay and work instead of going home – “I think I did my best work then. I would dust industriously [sic] and find something to do in order to stick around and listen to people talk who had something to say.” Though it can only be speculated as to what kind of insightful information he was able to glean from their conversations, Griffith acknowledged the significance of the hosts of those conversations – “I owe much to the Flexners and treasure many gentle memories of them.”59 If nothing else, the Flexner’s were father figures who in some way filled the void that was left after his father’s death, by giving him gentle guidance while he worked with them. Griffith, through his fond remembrance, showed his appreciation –

They were kindly people. About the only repremand [sic] I remember receiving was ‘David, don’t you think you would do better if you spent less time in reading the books and more time in trying to sell them. A little more attention to the customer, and perhaps if the shelves were dusted a little more frequently, it might be a step in a better direction.60

The bookstore provided a safe, mentally stimulating place for him to work. There was a plethora of books for him to read to broaden his literary repertoire which, once again, may have provided further inspiration for more play and film scenarios.

At the relatively young age of fifteen, Griffith determined he wanted to be an actor61 as “the business of treading the boards offered the best means of making a living without running into any danger of prostration from overwork.”62 It was not until he was seventeen that he

58 Mary Johnson was an American novelist who penned To Have and to Hold and James Whitcomb Riley was a writer and poet who wrote the poem Little Orphan Annie.
60 Griffith, Autobiography MS, 13.
61 Coincidentally, this was the same time he left school to find a job to help support the family.
attained his first opportunity to act on the stage by joining the acting troop, *The Twilight Revelers*. Griffith’s announcement to his mother and family of his becoming an actor was a shock, as they did not consider it “right to attend a theatre much less become an actor.” His mother took him aside and explained to him how his becoming an actor would lower the Griffith name, for the family lore related that they were direct descendants of the Griffiths who ruled Wales from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries and intermarried among the royal families of Europe. Even after they were conquered by England, “Doubtless they had committed variously assorted villanies [sic] – but none of them were on the record to having fallen so low as to become an actor.” Griffith knew there were only a few respectable occupations available to youths – “gentlemanly farming, ministry, and the law. The law, of course, was considered a stepping stone to ‘statesmanship.’ Writers, if they didn’t slip their traces, might amount to something.” The stage was another matter and especially off limits to someone with Griffith’s family background. Even if they had fallen materially in society, they knew where they came from and still had their pride. Even though he lacked the support of the family or the family lore, he believed he was wise beyond his years and proceeded on his way toward “the everlasting lights of fame and glory.”

Griffith’s career as a stage actor was not a glorious one; in fact he often found it a disappointing experience. During this time, he remained true to his desire to be a writer and discovered it was possible to “earn a living by writing. I had been writing more or less all my life but had entertained little hope of making any money from it.” He submitted a few works that were published, but his truly red letter day as a writer came in 1907 when James K. Hackett,

a famous theatre actor and producer, wanted to produce Griffith’ play, “The Fool and the Girl.” Mr. Hackett was on vacation in Canada and read the play to a few New York critics staying as his guests. They enjoyed the play, so Hackett sent Griffith a $1000 check and soon began rehearsals in Washington, D.C.

The euphoria of selling his play, however, quickly turned into a nightmare. The play was a love story set in the unromantic slums of San Francisco with its characters utilizing the slang and crude behavior associated with that area of the underworld. Mr. Hackett’s stage director faulted Griffith for writing a play containing characters that “talk and behave like real people.” The director’s solution was to “improve” the play; thereby, depriving “it of the sin of picturing real men and women on the stage and changed them into people of the theatrical mind.”

Griffith was often “ejected into the alley behind the theatre for objecting to changes in the script” and it was too late to fix anything by the time Mr. Hackett saw the results of the revision. Despite the stage director’s revisions or, in Griffith’s opinion because of it, the play was a flop. In hindsight, Griffith saw the dramatic experience as “good training” and believed, “I learned how to suffer, a knowledge that often has come in useful to me in the picture business.” This episode in Griffith’s life reveals, through his desire to change the standard style of the theatrical play, that even then he was aware of the power within the act of performing before an audience – the power to influence them as they simply watched an “innocent” diversion. The stage stimulates all the faculties – see, touch, taste, smell, hear – as the audience sees and hears the action, the dialogue and movements of the actors trigger the other faculties. The play may have been seen as a failure, but it cannot be denied that there was an audience that witnessed it and was affected by it in some way. Griffith was already developing and refining his understanding

68 Gordon, David Wark Griffith: His Early Years, 164.
70 Gordon, David Wark Griffith: His Early Years, 164.
of how a performance of some kind could influence an audience. He would take his experience, learn from it, and soon recognize the superiority of film to the stage.

The fateful day in which he came to work at the Biograph Studio in New York City and embark on his career as a director occurred in 1908 during a difficult interlude as an unemployed actor and playwright. An acquaintance suggested that Griffith go to the Biograph Studio to find an acting job and perhaps sell a scenario or two at the same time. Griffith made his way to the studio with his scenarios in hand and met with the Biograph director, Wallace McCutcheon. The meeting did not look promising as McCutcheon only took Griffith’s name and scenarios, agreeing to read the scenarios and to let him know if his services as an actor were needed at the studio. Griffith informed McCutcheon that the stories were good and “was secretly quite sure of this because most of them were borrowed from the very best authors.” As it turned out, he was indeed hired as an actor and was able to periodically sell a number of his scenarios for five dollars. Even then, literature played a significant part in his life. He pulled from his affinity toward and knowledge of literature to assist in his attempt to attain employment and extra funds.

Though he started as an actor for the studio, in June of 1908 he attained the position of assistant director through the suggestion of Arthur Marvin to his brother Henry Marvin, president of Biograph Studios. His directorial debut was “The Adventures of Dollie,” which “made him a Biograph fixture, and his work was begun.” However, at the time of production, there was a “terrible protest” made by the chief director. According to Frank Woods, Griffith’s colleague, the chief director “was positive it meant a ridiculous fizzle; it would never do; people would laugh at it, and it might kill the whole picture game; why, the players were behaving like

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72 Ibid.
73 Arthur Marvin was a Biograph cameraman.
real human beings; how absurd! It was sure to be a failure.” The studio decided to let Griffith finish his film and prove “that he was incompetent,” instead of stopping production and losing everything. The predicted outcome failed to come true. The film was a success and “made Griffith, for it sustained his contentions.”75 Once again, Griffith strived to reflect the real world in his work, instead of the exaggerated gestures of a melodramatic play, and this time was successful. Through the new medium of film he was able to portray a world of his own creation, to a greater audience base beyond what he could ever hope for in a stage play.

Griffith bestowed further significance to “The Adventures of Dollie” by identifying its completion as a prophetic moment in which his destiny was irrevocably intertwined with film – “The night “The Adventures of Dolly” [sic] went into the can, I went upon the roof of my cheap hotel to watch Haley’s Comet flash through the sky. Down the street gypsy fortune tellers were predicting a new era.”76 Though Griffith’s vignette is a fabrication – “The Adventures of Dollie” was finished in 1908 and the return of Haley’s Comet would not be visible to the naked eye until 1910 – it provides a valuable insight into his psyche and, therefore, should not be rejected on the basis of it being an invention of his imagination. As prophecies consist of symbolism and require interpretation, so it is that Griffith spoke on an unconscious level in code. For thousands of years comets have been viewed as signs and omens of future events. The “new era” prophesized by the gypsy fortune tellers had actually begun at that moment by Griffith and the completion of his first cinematic creation, “The Adventures of Dollie.” At the completion of the film Griffith knew what his life’s work entailed, but he utilized the classic portent of a shooting star to give symbolic credence to his assertion that he would accomplish great things through

76 Griffith, Autobiography MS, 80.
The medium of film was still considered a new phenomenon whose true potential was only just beginning to be explored by the infant film industry. It was the advent of a promising future and Griffith believed he was in the forefront of that event.

Griffith worked with Biograph for five years, but as he developed as a director he wanted more directorial freedom especially to make longer, more epic films. This became a point of friction, since a longer film required more money for production—a scenario not perceived as favorable to the interests of the studio. His last production with Biograph, Judith of Bethulia, was four reels long and cost $13,000. In Griffith’s mind, “Judith had double-crossed me. She had cost too much money and the company, I knew, was reaching for the ax.” The moment came when Griffith confronted Jeremiah J. Kennedy, another studio president, and “asked for more authority and a percentage of the profits—or else.” Kennedy decided to take his chances on “or else.” Griffith left Biograph in 1913, but was able to recover rather quickly. He joined the Reliance-Majestic Studios from which the Mutual Company was created to produce his films. The studio was in California, so Griffith headed West, but not before attaining some form of revenge on Biograph by “stealing away” Billy Bitzer, his cameraman, and a number of faithful actors that he had made popular in his films with Biograph, such as Robert “Bobby” Harron, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Blanche Sweet, and Miriam Cooper.

The study of Griffith’s life from childhood to just before the making of The Birth of a Nation provides insight into where and how he developed his ideology and idealism of film as well as how he came to film in the first place. The human psyche is complex and that of each

77 Judith of Bethulia was a biblically themed film centered around the Old Testament story of the Jewish woman, Judith, and her heroic endeavor to save her people from Holofernes, the invading general of Nebuchadnezzar, by beheading him while he was in a drunken stupor.
78 Griffith, The Man Who Invented Hollywood, 87. Also, according to Griffith, the studio had begun to expand and conduct business with “Klaw & Erlanger and the tycoons who controlled the regular theatre to get their best stage plays . . . . They procured real stage-play directors. I was only a movie man, they would let supervise, but not direct any more.”
79 Ibid.
person is a unique entity, therefore, it is impossible to compose a truly complete portrait of any one person, including Griffith. The anecdotes Griffith shared during his lifetime provide clues as to the persons and events that affected him, consciously or unconsciously, and would contribute toward his future utilization of film as an educational tool to end war and make the world a more peaceful place for humanity. There were three themes focused upon above – Griffith’s parents, education, and acting/early-directing career. Griffith’s parents, in their own way, contributed to how he saw the world and how he wanted to make it better, by ending war and teaching morality. The education he received from his parents inspired a love of literature in which he found inspiration and was able to utilize for composing play and film scenarios. Finally, the focus on his acting/early-directing career illustrates how the two previous themes contributed towards his becoming an actor and director and, ultimately, lead him to strive for a higher good through the utilization of film. In order to understand in greater detail Griffith’s vision and how he strived to make it a reality through the utilization of film, it is imperative to study his idealism of film.
Chapter Two: D.W. Griffith and His Idealism

_Fortunes are spent every year in our country in teaching the truths of history, that we may learn from the mistakes of the past a better way to the present and future._

_The truths of history today are restricted to the limited few attending our colleges and universities; the motion picture can carry these truths to the entire world, without cost, while at the same time bringing diversion to the masses._

_As tolerance would thus be compelled to give way before knowledge and as the deadly monotony of the cheerless existence of millions would be brightened by this new art, two of the chief causes making war possible would be removed. The motion picture is war’s greatest antidote._

D.W. Griffith

After years of “wandering the desert,” Griffith finally knew his purpose and the outlet necessary to fulfill that purpose. Griffith pulled from his life experiences, particularly his childhood, to develop what would become his idealism of film. In order to bring about his dream of a utopian society it was necessary to instruct the masses in a new way that would inculcate morality and virtues. Griffith recognized film as the tool that would most quickly and efficiently accomplish this tremendous task, he saw that, “It is capable of conveying a given message in many ways enormously more effectively than any mode of expression the world has ever possessed.”

It would be sent throughout the world and “speak” the “universal language” that would be shared and understood by all who witnessed it, however, at the same time, as they watched the “innocent” entertainment, the masses would be subliminally affected by the information projected on the screen. Also, film would be utilized as an educational tool for social uplift through teaching history, morals, and ideals. Finally, the movie theater would become the new venue for teaching Christian precepts and morality – where to learn a film’s message of world peace and brotherhood entailed simply to enter and witness the phantasmic visions projected upon the screen.

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80 Griffith, Rise and Fall, 10.
81 Griffith, The Motion Picture and the Witch Burner.
Griffith was on the crest of the gliding wave of advocates and enthusiasts of the new medium of film. These advocates and enthusiasts were Griffith’s contemporaries who acknowledged the present and future uses and benefits of film. They, as did Griffith, strove to disseminate to the masses through various media – including, books, pamphlets, and periodicals – the greatness of this unique, new art form. These intellectuals and scholars are significant in the fact that they support and extrapolate on Griffith’s vision of film; thereby, showing that Griffith was not alone in this vision. The commentary that follows will focus on Griffith’s idealism of film, will show how his contemporaries shared and extrapolated upon this vision, and will illustrate the effect film had on the masses as an audience.

“A Power That Can Make Men Brothers and End War Forever”

The significant characteristic of film that contributed to its power and efficiency toward world peace was its silence. Griffith saw film as a “universal language” since it provided a common language for all its viewers. It was not necessary to read and comprehend the words on the screen; anyone could observe and understand the joys, pains, and suffering conveyed by the actors. It reverted to the most basic form of communication and comprehension through projecting pictures onto the screen, thereby, making words inferior – insignificant, even. Lillian Gish, one of Griffith’s most famous actresses and protégés, was greatly influenced by Griffith’s idealism of film as “He inspired in us his belief that we were involved in a medium that was powerful enough to influence the whole world.” She saw him as a “zealot of a new uncorrupted art” and witnessed this zeal a number of times. Once, as they were working at the Biograph Studio, Griffith told Gish and her fellow actors –

82 Gish, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me, 88.
‘Do you know . . . we are playing to the world! What we film tomorrow will stir the hearts of the world – and they will understand what we’re saying. We’ve gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We’ve found a universal language – a power that can make men brothers and end war forever. Remember that. Remember that, when you stand in front of a camera!’

Griffith felt so strongly about his idealism that he was compelled to enlighten his own actors of the greatness of film as well as the part they were playing toward ushering in his utopian world.

Rollin Lynde Hartt, a Congregational minister and journalist, agreed with Griffith in his assertion that film was a “universal language” –

In the biograph theatre, where the play itself radiates light, how complete and on the whole how grateful the suppression of talk! Its evanishment especially delights foreigners. ‘The rose,’ says Emerson, ‘speaks all languages.’ You may say the same of the biograph. Its very voicelessness makes it eloquent for Letts, Finns, Italians, Syrians, Greeks, and pigtailed Celestials. It has pulled down the Tower of Babel, abolished the hyphenated dictionary, and fulfilled the Esperantist’s\textsuperscript{84} dearest dream. ‘Man, Woman, and Child,’ of whatever breed or birth, sit in concord beneath the gilded vaults of the motion-picture show, touched by identical sentiments, swayed by identical passions.\textsuperscript{85}

The language barrier, represented by the imagery of the biblical Tower of Babel, had been reduced to ruins. All men, women, and children, no matter their ethnic background, were united in their understanding of the messages they received during their viewing experience. Film was the purest language because it did not consist of words and it did not need to be taught, for all people had the innate ability to comprehend it.

Griffith believed the two main causes that made war possible were the absence of knowledge and the mundane, monotonous life. Therefore, the “antidote” for war would be to both to instruct and provide a diversion for the masses – a draught that would be administered

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{84} A speaker of Esperanto, a spoken and written “universal language” that was invented by L.L. Zamenhof in 1887.


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through the educational tool of film. As the audience watched the narrative on the screen, they would be instructed in the history, morals, and ideals that would enable them to be upstanding citizens; while, at the same time, participate in the benefits of social uplift as they lived the situations on the screen they would not have been able to experience, otherwise, such as the beauty of nature or world events.

The subject of history was the cornerstone of the knowledge Griffith believed was imperative in the development of a more informed populace. He had a vision of a future utopian society, but he knew a knowledge of the past was necessary in order to accomplish it –

Nations of today are the result of the experiences of nations of the past. Every human being is made up of his own past experiences. If all the people of today were really educated and knew the history of the world since the beginning of time, there would be no wars, there would be no capital punishments, – there would be much less evil from America’s favorite sins of hate, hypocrisy and intolerance. It is ignorance that makes possible the terrible waves of hatred that have caused our many wars and murders, inspired by politics, religion and all the various other causes. This is the reason for the teaching of history . . . . History is valuable, since through the experiences and mistakes of the past we are able to guide our footsteps into the future.

Current nations and long past civilizations had never attained peace because they lacked the most essential tool – film. The purpose of film was to enable the masses to learn their history, to see the errors committed in the past so as not to repeat them in the future. Griffith saw film as “war’s greatest antidote” and made it relevant to the World War raging at that time in Europe by stipulating that, “If moving pictures properly done of the horrors of war had been inoculated in all the nations of Europe, there would be no bodies of men lying on European battlefields.” An inoculation is a preventative measure against illness and disease; film would serve a similar

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86 Griffith, The Rise and Fall, 10.
87 Griffith, The Rise and Fall, 25.
88 Griffith, The Motion Picture and Witch Burners.
purpose toward preventing the disease of war. People would only need to see war’s horrors and tragedies on film to begin to strive toward preventing such carnage from occurring again.

Griffith envisioned film as an educational tool that would be extensively utilized in schools and public libraries in the near future. It would transform the school curriculum forever, as “children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.”  It would be able to teach in a significantly shorter amount of time what it took weeks and months to learn in a regular school year. Though film would be utilized as an educational tool for instructing those within the world of academia, he also labeled it “the laboring man’s university,” thereby signifying that those who could not attain a formal education would still have access to knowledge. The institution whereby the populace would have access to this knowledge was the public library, and he imagined it thus–

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, waddling laboriously through a host of books, and ending bewildered, without a clear idea of exactly what did happen and confused at every point by conflicting opinions about 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.

There will be no opinion expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression.

Everything except the three R’s, the arts, and possibly the mental sciences can be taught in this way – physiology, chemistry, biology, botany, physics, and history in all its branches.

89 Barry, *Five Dollar Movies Prophesized.*
91 Barry, *Five Dollar Movies Prophesized.*
It would no longer be necessary to read or cipher the information from a book, since a corps of experts already accomplished such a tedious task. The organized efforts of those within the film industry enabled the masses to have access to all knowledge by the simple push of a button. The additional advantage of film was the entertainment value – as it instructed it would make the period of learning easy, convenient, and enjoyable, instead of prohibitive, boring, or mundane.

Others saw the benefits of film as an educational tool and wished to assist the new medium’s further incorporation into society. Dr. Edwin Emery Slosson, an editor of The Independent the “Forward-Looking Weekly of America,” composed an editorial entitled, “The Birth of a New Art,” in which he informed his reading public of some of the virtues of film, but since not all films were created equal there was a noticeable need for an “independent and conscientious criticism from the standpoint of the public.” Therefore, The Independent bestowed upon itself the role of “critic” to assist readers in viewing quality films especially since it was a growing trend to use them “in school, lyceum, church and Sunday school.”

Slosson also assured his readers that the periodical would limit its reviews “to films of educational value such as those in natural history, physical science, travel, industries, hygiene, social reform and the like, and we shall include only such photoplays as have some special historical, literary or religious interest.” Another scholar aware of the educational benefits of film was the psychologist and Harvard professor, Hugo Munsterberg. He advocated the establishment of a Universal Culture Lyceum, an institution with the objective –

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93 Photoplay was one of a number of terms used to refer to films, including moving pictures and biograph.
94 Slosson, The Birth of a New Site, 8-9.
95 Hugo Munsterberg, The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916), 223, https://archive.org/details/photoplayapsycho005300mbp. A lyceum was an institution, popular during the mid-19th into the early 20th century, which provided the populous opportunities to expand their minds and remain informed by attending programs of an educational nature, such as lectures on topics of interest lead by notable speakers of the day.
to make and circulate moving pictures for the education of the youth of the land, picture studies in science, history, religion, literature, geography, biography, art, architecture, social science, economics and industry. From this Lyceum ‘schools, churches and colleges will be furnished with motion pictures giving the latest results and activities in every sphere capable of being pictured.’

Slosson and Munsterberg affirm, through their observation of current trends or advocacy of future endeavors, Griffith’s vision of film as an educational tool within various institutions. Also, their listing of an extensive variety of subjects and topics echo Griffith’s own forward thinking of film supplanting the traditional tools of education. The new medium of film was a breath of fresh air. It seemed to be bursting with infinite possibilities, though it was only just beginning to reveal its true potential. It revolutionized education as demonstrated through its utilization as an educational tool on a variety of subjects and topics within respected institutions, but as it was tapped into as a resource its power to serve humanity would continue to develop and expand worldwide.

Griffith considered film a tool for both educational and entertainment purposes, and the balanced combination of the two resulted in a film that was a powerful distributor of social uplift – “The moving picture is a powerful and growing factor in the uplift of humanity.” As already noted, Griffith believed that one of the major causes of war occurring was a mundane, monotonous life and film would serve as the “antidote,” so that “the deadly monotony of the cheerless existence of millions would be brightened by this new art.” Film would fill a void that perhaps people did not know existed within themselves. Their empty lives needed beauty, goodness, and light and if they could not get to what they needed, film would bring it to them. It seemed as if Griffith’s heart was full when he considered how film helped uplift the masses out of their humdrum life and brought the world and all its beauty and wonder to them –

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96 Ibid., 223-224.
97 Griffith, The Rise and Fall, 24.
98 Griffith, The Rise and Fall, 10.
I thoroughly believe that the principal reason for the popularity of the motion picture is that it softens the hard life of the plain people with beauty and sweetness. It keeps men away from saloons and drink, because it gives them a place of recreation in pleasant surroundings, it brings to the poor who are unable to travel away from their own dingy surroundings, the beauty and poetry of living foreign scenes, of people, of flowers, and waving grasses.

One thing, remember, however unimportant or however crude may happen to be the mannikins that tell the story in our foreground, beneath their feet are green grasses and flowers. Behind this is a backdrop of beauty, of waving seas, curving hills, or crested mountain tops, and this backdrop must express a message of pure and sweet beauty, for if we believe, we must confess that this was done by the hand of God himself.

The audience would see the beauty of nature or the people, places and events on the other side of the world that they would never experience, otherwise. If people were ensnared in the clutches of a certain vice, film would help them to escape and turn toward its visions of wholesome enlightenment. The pull toward film would have been undeniable, since while one was entertained there was the added impetus of improving one’s life.

Griffith’s contemporaries recognized the characteristics of social uplift he described as being present in film. In his editorial in *The Independent*, Dr. Edwin Emery Slosson, as he praised film for its “educational factor” was, at the same time, pointing out its ability to provide social uplift. He mentioned the intellectual heroes of the day as well as heroes of classical literature as examples of the educational importance of film that the movie audience would only be able to experience through film – “with Scott in the Antarctic, with Rainey in Africa, with Curie in the laboratory, with Sienkiewicz in Rome, with Ditmars in the reptile-house, with Dante in the Inferno or with Homer in Ilium.”

This simple list illustrated the social uplift existing in each educational film. As the audience watched the instructional film they were able to travel to other countries or other times, “meet” living and long dead heroes, and be present at scientific

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discoveries. An ordinary individual would not have been able to personally experience anyone of these in a lifetime, but film allowed them to experience them all.

Mary Heaton Vorse, an author and social justice activist, wrote, perhaps, the most eloquently of the benefits of film for the masses all over the world. She saw and reflected on how film brought social uplift to the populace – particularly the poor, working-class – through its ability to provide a respite in their otherwise hard and difficult lives. For example, Vorse related how she witnessed the benefits of film within a small Tuscan town on market day. People came from various isolated, distant locales and while they were there they went to see the pictures. She, too, had gone to see what was showing –

but in the end I saw only them, because it seemed to me that what had happened was a latter-day miracle. By an ingenious invention all the wonderful things that happened in the diverse world outside their simple lives could come to them. They had no pictures or papers; few of them could read; and yet they sat there at home and watched the inflating of great balloons and saw them rise and soar and go away into the blue, and watched again the strange Oriental crowd walking through the holy streets of Jerusalem. It is hard to understand what a sudden widening of their horizon that meant for them. It is the door of escape, for a few cents, from the realities of life. It is drama, and it is travel, and it is even beauty, all in one. A wonderful thing it is, and to know just how wonderful I suppose you must be poor and have in your life no books and no pictures and no means of travel or seeing beautiful places, and almost no amusements of any kind; perhaps your only door of escape or only means of forgetfulness more drink than is good for you. Then you will know what a moving-picture show really means, although you will probably not be able to put it into words.101

Vorse mirrors Griffith’s opinion of film as a powerful tool to bring the wide world to the masses. She believed film was viewed by the poor, working-class as a means of “Opportunity – a chance to glimpse the beautiful and strange things in the world that you haven’t in your life; the gratification of the higher side of your nature; opportunity which, except for the big moving

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picture book, would be forever closed to you.”

It was a means of escape from an unsatisfying world into a beautiful one. The audience was not watching from the inferior perspective of “outside looking in,” but was actually learning, participating, and becoming more fulfilled. Vorse, without naming it directly, described the existence and benefit of film as a universal language. She noted that among the Tuscan audience “few could read,” but they were able to witness balloons rising into the air or pilgrims walking the streets of Jerusalem. It was “the big moving picture book” that provided an opportunity to see beautiful things around the world. Vorse did not relate whether the moving pictures contained title cards, but through her description it is evident that it did not matter whether they did. The mostly illiterate audience was able to “read” the images within the “moving picture book.” Film transformed their ignorance into knowledge while it brightened their dreary lives, which, according to Griffith, would contribute toward preventing war and bring peace to the world.

“It has come, this new weapon of men, and by faith and a study of the signs we proclaim that it will go on and on in immemorial wonder.”

The new medium of film was a new art form that was struggling to hold its own among all the other well-established arts. No one knew its limits, but many already believed in its power based on what had already been made manifest on the screen. Griffith whole-heartedly believed in film and the part it would play toward bringing about world peace. He saw film as perfectly sufficient tool that would instruct the masses in higher ideals and morality. An instance in which he strongly advocated for film, including its ability to provide moral instruction, was when he argued against the encroachment of censorship upon the new medium. He believed that

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 447.
the censors went too far in attempting to control the content of films, since they desired to take out necessary components in stories which, to him, were necessary to teach history in order to learn from the past, virtues, and morality—

But how is the moving picture art to express these great lessons of history, and convey the morals of the present day, contrasted with their attendant vices, if it is to be muzzled by a petty and narrow-minded censorship, a censorship which can see no valuable message in vice punished, a censorship which refuses to have life portrayed in actuality, with its sins and virtues, its joys and sadness, that we may learn the better way.\textsuperscript{103}

For Griffith, the intention of film was not to teach sin, vice, or immorality. They were pertinent elements in a story in order to show the triumph of good over evil. If someone was in the depths of a vice they could truly “see” the destructiveness of that evil and wish to mend their own ways. He believed film provided uplift by showing “beauty and sweetness” for those living hard lives and kept “men away from saloons and drink.”\textsuperscript{104} Moreover, uplift through film showed the wonders of God, for behind “the mannikins” in the story “is a backdrop of beauty, of waving seas, curving hills, or crested mountain tops, and this backdrop must express a message of pure and sweet beauty, for if we believe, we must confess that this was done by the hand of God himself.”\textsuperscript{105}

Griffith also illustrated the censors’ hypocrisy, for if crime was prohibited from film then the life of Christ could not be shared among audiences. Furthermore, He felt that if the censors of his time had existed in the past then the Iliad of Homer, the Bible, or the works of Goethe would not have been allowed to exist –

They tell us we must not show crime in a motion picture. We cannot listen to such nonsense. These people would not have us show the glories and beauties of the most wonderful moral lesson the world has ever known – the life of Christ – because in that story we must show the vice of the traitor Judas Iscariot. Had the

\textsuperscript{103} Griffith, \textit{The Rise and Fall}, 27.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 25.
modern censors existed in past ages, and followed out their theories to a logical conclusion, there would have been written no Iliad of Homer; there would not have been written for the glory of the human race that grand cadence of uplift called the Bible; there would have been no Goethe.\(^{106}\)

Perhaps when he wrote this, he remembered the importance of his Christian upbringing he received from his mother and the other women in his family or, as a struggling student in Louisville, he started “to see a light” when he began to read the school versions of the Tales of Homer. They had made a positive impact on his own life, so he felt they would be beneficial for the rest of society.

As has been touched upon previously through the writings of Dr. Edwin Emery Slosson and Hugo Munsterberg, the new medium of film was seen as a promising educational tool. Slosson noted it had been used within schools, Sunday schools, churches, and lyceums, while Munsterberg advocated the establishment of a Universal Culture Lyceum where educational films would become widely available. Another scholar, Carl Holliday, in his article for *The Independent* entitled, “The Motion Picture and the Church: What the Churches Are Doing and Hope to Do With This New Educational Agency,” focused on how film was utilized by various churches as an educational tool to teach religion, morality, and social awareness. Holliday pointed out that “many of the prominent leaders in religion and social uplift in America” believed “the motion picture is to become one of the most powerful agencies ever employed in the work of the church.”\(^{107}\) One of these leaders was Thomas A. Edison, who wished to have film utilized in public schools in order to show “‘a little drama – a short one – showing some simple story that will interest the children and will teach a moral; something where the good boy gets rewarded and the bad one punished.’” Holliday believed this technique would appeal to

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 15.
\(^{107}\) Carl Holliday, *The Motion Picture and the Church: What the Churches Are Doing and Hope to Do With This New Educational Agency,* *The Independent*, February 13, 1913, 353, [https://archive.org/stream/independent74newy#page/353/mode/1up](https://archive.org/stream/independent74newy#page/353/mode/1up).
“the average boy” more than reading it in a book because “when he sees the actual deed and rewarding going on before his very eyes, the effect is different; he cannot escape the impression that here is actual life and that right-doing is an admirable thing.”\textsuperscript{108} The impression of witnessing reality is a powerful affect on the viewer, which Holliday believed would result in a positive moral response.

Carl Holliday shared similar sentiments as Griffith pertaining to the power of film. He shared these views when he reassured his readers that film was not meant to replace the Church, but to be utilized as a beneficial tool –

There is, naturally, no claim that this innovation is to take the place of any present activity or department of the Church; it is simply a powerful auxiliary for the machinery already existing and a new attractive force in the hands of a moral worker. Its universality of appeal is strongly in its favor. All preachers are not equally effective or successful as orators or as social mixers; but here is an instrument that speaks the same language and the same lesson to all nations, and has more power in arousing a feeling of kindliness and brotherhood than any one individual or group of individuals.\textsuperscript{109}

Holliday agreed with Griffith that film was a universal language and an instrument that could bring about a brotherhood of humanity. It possessed the power to teach morality, virtues, and other Christian precepts more efficiently and effectively than any number of people at a time. It would serve as a tool, a mechanical partner, for those who wished to make the world a better place for all humanity. Holliday was also aware of its gradual incorporation into society and its use for uplift and he felt that those concerned with “social conditions” needed to be aware of its power and potential as a tool for uplift, “This new form is entering silently but effectively into the character of public education and modern life, and no student of the American social conditions as they really are can afford to be ignorant of its power or ignore its potentialities in

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 353.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 356.
economic, social, intellectual and moral uplift.”110 The true potential of film was only just beginning to reveal itself, but Holliday could recognize it and wished to let others know about it. His desire was similar to Griffith’s, who also wished to inform the masses of the power of film and how it could bring about a better future. Holliday was also able to illustrate how Griffith was not alone in his views of film, as various church groups were already utilizing it across the nation.

Other film scholars of Griffith’s time recognized the religious connotations surrounding film, the physical movie theater, and the important part the director/producer played in the revelations projected onto the screen. The movie theater went beyond existing as only a venue to enjoy an entertaining production. It went so far as to be envisioned as a church or temple in which the masses were to be indoctrinated in the new religion. Vachel Lindsay, a poet and fervent devotee of film, likened it to a church when he wrote, “The half-light wherein the audience is seated . . . is as bright and dark as that of some candle-lit churches”111 and Rollin Hartt described it as “the temple of the drama.”112 Lindsay advocated the utilization of the photoplay to teach the audience in pictures, including the children, and he went so far as to associate it with a religious act –

There is many a babe in the proletariat not over four years old who has received more pictures into its eye than it has had words enter its ear. The young couple go with their firstborn and it sits gaping on its mother’s knee. Often the images are violent and unseemly, a chaos of rawness and squirm, but scattered through the experience is a delineation of the world.113

The act of the young parents bringing their firstborn to watch a film is akin to the act of presenting the firstborn in the temple or church. They were initiating the child in the rite of film

110 Ibid., 356.
112 Hartt, The People at Play, 124.
113 Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, 186.
and so began its indoctrination at a very early age. The imagery Hartt and Lindsay utilized to describe the theater created an association of a hallowed locale requiring a reverent demeanor, instead of a setting for tawdry entertainment, by taking the classic terms of worship sites and transposing them upon a modern venue.

Lindsay also directly addressed the importance of the director/producer of films by assigning them the title “Prophet-Wizard” – “It is only in the hands of the prophetic photoplaywright and allied artists that the kinetoscope reels became as mysterious and dazzling to the thinking spirit as the wheels of Ezekiel in the first chapter of his prophecy . . .”114 These filmmakers would provide visions to the masses and prophesize the wonders of the future. Lindsay assured his audience, that through film biblical “miracles” would take place – “Let him [the reader] also assume . . . that miracles, in a Biblical sense, as vivid and as real to the body of the church, will again occur two thousand years in the future: events as wonderful as those others, twenty centuries back.”115 He desired that the films would show the future; a utopian future and he spoke directly to producers and others, who were involved in providing those prophetic films, his hope for the culmination of their noble task –

Let us resolve that whatever America’s to-morrow may be, she shall have a day that is beautiful and not crass, spiritual, not material. Let us resolve that she shall dream dreams deeper than the sea and higher than the clouds of heaven, that she shall come forth crowned and transfigured with her statesmen and wizards and saints and sages about her, with magic behind her and miracle before her.116

In Lindsay’s mind, the director/producer and film were intertwined in their destiny to bring about a brighter future. Griffith was the penultimate embodiment of Lindsay’s ideal director/producer, because he was a true believer in film’s ability to change the hearts and minds of the masses. Film would instruct a new religion to the young and bring about a long hoped for utopian future.

114 Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, 267.
115 Ibid., 277.
116 Ibid., 288.
“That is the beauty of this work. It makes dreams come true.”

One of the profound virtues of the medium of film is its ability to imitate reality to such a degree that it fools the mind into believing it is actually witnessing reality. Film has such an affect on the audience that it absorbs them to the point where, in their mind, they are actually experiencing what is occurring on the screen; they are no longer isolated from the actions projected on the screen, they are actually in the story and experiencing the action. Lindsay implied this when he described the parents bringing their firstborn to the theater and “it sits gaping on its mother’s knee.” The child, and the parents for that matter, sat enraptured at the visions on the screen and absorbed the subliminal messages, which forthwith become a part of him. Hugo Munsterberg extensively discussed the affect of film on the audience and extrapolated on the particular elements of memory, imagination, motion, and reaction. Film stimulates the memory and imagination of the audience as they watch the screen, but, paradoxically; it also acts like the human mind –

In short, it can act as our imagination acts. It has the mobility of our ideas which are not controlled by the physical necessity of outer events but by the psychological laws for the association of ideas. In our mind past and future become intertwined with the present. The photoplay obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world.\footnote{Munsterberg, The Photoplay: A Psychological Study, 97.}

Also, the motions of the images on the screen instill mental and emotional reactions in the audience. These reactions are essentially mirroring the actions and emotions conveyed by the characters in the film –

Our imitation of the emotions which we see expressed brings vividness and affective tone into our grasping of the play’s action. We sympathize with the sufferer and that means that the pain which he expresses becomes our own pain. We share the joy of the happy lover and the grief of the despondent mourner, we
feel the indignation of the betrayed wife and the fear of the man in danger. The visual perception of the various forms of expression of these emotions fuses in our mind with the conscious awareness of the emotion expressed; we feel as if we were directly seeing and observing the emotion itself. Moreover the idea awakens in us the appropriate reactions. The horror which we see makes us really shrink, the happiness which we witness makes us relax, the pain which we observe brings contractions in our muscles, and all the resulting sensations from muscles, joints, tendons, from skin and viscera, from blood circulation and breathing, give the color of living experience to the emotional reflection in our mind. It is obvious that for this leading group of emotions the relation of the pictures to the feelings of the persons in the play and to the feelings of the spectator is exactly the same.\footnote{Ibid., 122.}

Munsterberg succinctly illustrated the relationship between motion and reaction, the audience and the characters. Film stimulates a participation of the audience, and to such an extent, that it is impossible for them to remain merely bystanders – they become characters, or even more profoundly, they become the characters, themselves.

Similar to Munsterberg’s study above, other scholars of film discussed the affect film had on its audience, but in layman’s terms – the world on the screen became their world and they shared in the joys and trials of the characters. Rollin Lynde Hartt saw film as daring “a return to the philosophy of the old masters, all of whom risked ‘storytelling’ pictures. It carried out that philosophy to its logical conclusion. Instead of catching a mere instantaneous scene in the story, it caught the story entire. It became dramatic, not figuratively, as the painters had done, but literally.” Film utilized all the classic ingredients of a work of art – “the Comic Muse,” “the villains and angelic heroines of melodrama,” and “Tragedy,” –

till the people forgot the film, forgot the scene, and forgot themselves. They were stormed by gusts and tempests of emotion. For myself, I own without shame that my heart has leaped up within me, and that more than once I have shed honest tears while watching those thrilling and even fascinating little celluloid dramas.\footnote{Hartt, The People at Play, 126-127.}
It gave life to a story, instead of one static scene that was forever missing the before and after. The real world disappeared and the celluloid world projected on the screen became the reality for Hartt and other audience members for a fleeting amount of time. Hartt further pointed out film’s ability to create the optical illusion of perceiving reality instead of only a story when he stipulated, “So it comes about that the biograph’s monotone and flat actuality afford us less the sense of witnessing a play enacted than of beholding events truly occurring.”

Mary Heaton Vorse, too, witnessed the total immersion of members of the movie theater audience in the dramas being enacted before their eyes. Vorse with her eloquent style, focused on a young immigrant woman who was so involved in the film that she was oblivious to her own participation within it –

> Behind us sat a woman with her escort. So rapt and entranced was she with what was happening on the stage that her voice accompanied all that happened – a little unconscious and lilting *obbligato*. It was the voice of a person unconscious that she spoke – speaking from the depths of emotion; a low voice, but perfectly clear, and the unconsciously spoken words dropped with the sweetness of running water. She spoke in German. One would judge her to be from some part of Austria . . . . And she had never seen Indians before; perhaps never heard of them.  

Vorse believed that as the young woman watched the adventure story of the young Indian girl, Yellow Wing, and her love, Dick the Trapper, the story became a reality in her mind. And as she spoke to the screen she was the voice of everyone else sharing that moment, since they too were enraptured with the life and love of the two characters in the film –

> But to the woman behind it was reality at it highest. She was there in the fabled country full of painted savages. The rapidly unfolding drama was to her no make-believe arrangement ingeniously fitted together by actors and picture-makers. It had happened; it was happening for her now . . . .

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120 Ibid., 131.
121 Vorse, *Some Picture Show Audiences*, 443.
“Surely, surely, she will save her beloved!” it was almost a prayer; in the woman’s simple mind there was no foregone conclusion of a happy ending. She saw no step ahead, since she lived the present moment so intensely . . . .

Outside the iron city roared; before the door of the show the push-cart vendors bargained and trafficked with customers. Who in that audience remembered it? They had found the door of escape. For the moment they were in the depths of the forest following the loves of Yellow Wing and Dick. The woman’s voice, so like the voice of a spirit talking to itself, unconscious of time and place, was their voice.\textsuperscript{122}

The scholars, Munsterberg, Hartt, and Vorse, provide evidence of how a movie theater audience is influenced as they watch a story flicker across the screen. Though it seems as if it is only an innocent form of entertainment, it completely involves the mind and body of the audience and puts them in the vulnerable position of being susceptible to any subliminal messages hidden within the story. This provides credence to Griffith’s belief in film as a powerful tool to bring about his vision of a utopian society, since the story he conveyed within his films also contained the mind and body stimuli that encouraged the audience to connect on various levels with the content of the film. As they were taken in by the images on the screen, they, on some level, absorbed the subliminal messages implanted within the storyline of the film. The messages may have contradicted the audience members’ established credos or upheld new ones they had newly adopted; but, whichever the case, the overall goal was to influence their mental functions toward a new common outlook. The goal was plausibly attainable through film’s uncanny ability to manipulate the mind into believing that what it witnessed on film was reality. Since what the mind perceives as reality strongly influences its act of judgment and decision-making, the images the audience sees on the screen and believes is real, though actually a creative fiction, will, therefore, be incorporated within the mental processes and affect the outcome.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 445.
Griffith was once quoted as stating, “I am not a dreamer in the sense that I see fantastic things unlikely of realization. I haven’t dreamed an impossible thing in seven years – since I started in pictures. That is the beauty of this work. It makes dreams come true.” He had a dream and he believed it would come to pass, but in order to make it happen he had to make his audience dreamers. Film allowed Griffith to dream and manifest his idealized visions to the masses, so that they too would dream the same dreams. The peace and brotherhood that seemed barred from humanity only a relatively short period of time before became an incredibly plausible ambition through film. It had the capability to influence and change the mental processes of the masses, from their world outlook to their decision-making, in a swift and efficient manner all under the guise of providing educational information or innocent entertainment. Griffith’s famous film, The Birth of a Nation, illustrates how he suffused his idealism within his films to influence the masses. As he told his stories, he was attempting to touch “the hearts of the world” so as to bring about his dream of peace.

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123 Barry, Five Dollar Movie Prophesied.
Chapter Three: The Birth of a Nation, The Manifestation of D.W. Griffith’s Ideology and Idealism

If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain.

The Birth of a Nation

Griffith’s iconic film, The Birth of a Nation was the filmic manifestation of his ideology and idealism. Since Griffith put so much of himself into the film, it became the personal window to his soul. It hailed back to his past where he was inspired by the heroic deeds within his family, particularly, of his father, and served as the phantasmic dream of its creator. The underlying thread within the film was to showcase the destructive nature of the various embodiments of war, and juxtapose this with the ideal images of it having been eradicated from society in the future. As the audience experienced Griffith’s visions of the past, they would desire those of his idealized future. He would show the audience what it would look like and how it would be done and they would believe his vision because they saw it with their own eyes. This discourse will illustrate how Griffith utilized the medium of film to indoctrinate the masses in his new world outlook in order to bring about his vision of a future utopian society.

“I hoped at once that it could be done, for the story of the South had been absorbed into the very fibre of my being”

Before the production of The Birth of a Nation, Griffith had left the Biograph Studio and became an independent director when he joined the Reliance-Majestic Studios. He was able to fulfill his desire to produce films that were more of feature length, such as The Escape and The Avenging Conscience, but it was The Birth of a Nation that surpassed them all and skyrocketed

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124 The Birth of a Nation, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; New York, N.Y.: Kino Lorber, Inc., 2011.), DVD. The quote was taken from one of the titles at the beginning of the film. A “title” was the name of the inserted text within the film that served for narrative and/or indoctrination purposes.
its director to fame. *The Birth of a Nation* centers on the relationships between the Stoneman and Cameron families before, during, and after the Civil War. The Stoneman family hailed from the Northern State of Pennsylvania and consisted of the patriarch, the Honorable Austin Stoneman, a powerful politician in Congress, and his three children, Elsie, Phil, and Tod. The Cameron family was from the Southern State of South Carolina and consisted of Dr. and Mrs. Cameron and their five children, Ben, Flora, Margaret, Duke, and Wade. The film began with the depiction of life shortly before the war, but once the threat of war became a reality the sons of both families were found joining the Union and Confederate armies to fight for the cause. The experience of the families at home and the sons on the battlefield are witnessed until the climatic scene of the Battle of Petersburg and the surrender of the South to the North. The second installation of the film continued the story of the relationships between the two families as the Reconstruction era began as well as depicted the formation of the Ku Klux Klan.

*The Birth of a Nation* was based on the books written by Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, but it was predominantly Griffith’s reverent bow to his father and his family heritage. When it was suggested to him to make *The Clansman* into a film he “hoped at once that it could be done, for the story of the South had been absorbed into the very fibre of my being.” Griffith, though praised for his film, believed his father was owed most of the credit. It was the stories he learned from his father, the soldiers that served with him, and those of the trials the family experienced during the war that really inspired the creation of the film –

The stories told of my father, particularly by veterans who had fought under his command, were burned right into my memory. I remember particularly one old

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soldier, Josh Long, of Crestwood, Kentucky. He said, ‘I believe if your father
thought he had one drop of cowardly blood in his veins, he’d knife it out’ . . . .

The tears of The Birth of a Nation were sprung in watching my mother on many a
lonely night standing by a window waiting for someone’s arrival – the arrival that
would never be – and knowing of the thousands of other Southern women who
waited in vain for the return of their loved ones. Its drama was but an echo of the
stories told of the gallant soldiers who fought one of the most brilliant wars
known to history. Underneath the robes and costumes of the actors playing the
soldiers and night riders, rode my father – on his head the crested cap of courage.
This is what I mean by saying that that picture owed more to my father and his
gallant comrades than to myself. 126

He was impressed by other stories told by his father “about fighting day after day, night after
night and having nothing to eat but parched corn and about your mother staying up night after
night sewing robes for the Klan,” as well as of “where young girls used to wear cotton for ermine
and where the boys imagined it.” 127

As Griffith pointed out, he was greatly influenced by the deeds of his father, which were
incorporated into the film. Griffith took the Dixon stories and metamorphosed them into the
story of his father. In the film, Ben Cameron, the hero, was the son of a plantation owner and
joined the Confederacy at the outbreak of the war and attained the rank of Colonel. Cameron is
shown bravely fighting and leading his men in the Battle of Petersburg, in which he suffered
severe wounds and was taken to a war hospital in Washington, D.C. Once the war was over,
Cameron saw how the war ravaged and left destitute his home and family. He was also depicted
as the creator and leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Jacob Griffith’s experiences mirrored Ben
Cameron’s fictitious life in many ways. He owned property with slaves and at the outbreak of
war he joined the Confederacy, eventually becoming a Lieutenant Colonel. He was an inspiring
leader to his men and sustained severe wounds in battle that nearly killed him. After the war, he

127 Griffith, The Birth of a Nation, DVD, “Spoken introductions by D.W. Griffith and Walter Huston,”
transcribed by author of thesis.
returned home and the family never knew the life it had known before the war. Though it is uncertain just how far was his involvement in the Klan, Griffith strongly implied this when he described his father’s influence on the creation of the film – “Underneath the robes and costumes of the actors playing the soldiers and night riders, rode my father – on his head the crested cap of courage. This is what I mean by saying that that picture owed more to my father and his gallant comrades than to myself.”\textsuperscript{128} Also, from the stories Griffith was told he believed “The Klan at that time was needed. It served a purpose.”\textsuperscript{129} Furthermore, the stories Griffith remembered being told of the Southern women were included in the film and added significance, as all of those scenes featured Ben Cameron, the cinematic manifestation of his father. Griffith noted his mother’s involvement with the Ku Klux Klan by sewing their robes – in the film Cameron secured the help of his mother and sisters to sew the robes. Finally, the wearing of bits of cotton as ermine by young Southern girls was depicted through Cameron’s youngest sister, Flora, as she prepared for his return home at the end of the war. She, in her threadbare dress, placed pieces of stretched cotton along her dress and applied soot from the fireplace. Flora was disappointed she could not look finer for her brother’s homecoming, and he was sad that she had to resort to such decoration.

Through his direction of \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, Griffith desired to tell of a world he knew only from stories – “I felt driven to tell the story – the truth about the South, touched by its eternal romance which I had learned to know so well.”\textsuperscript{130} The heroes and heroines within his childhood stories were his father, mother, and others who played a part in the epic events that took place long before his birth. He was raised in an environment, which looked upon the years

\textsuperscript{128} Griffith, \textit{The Man Who Invented Hollywood}, 27.  
\textsuperscript{130} Gordon, \textit{David Wark Griffith: His Early Years}, 91.
following the Civil War as tragic and unjust for the South as well as felt as greatly needed those efforts of Southern men and women to preserve their ideals and way of life, even going so far as to organize the Ku Klux Klan. Griffith believed he was telling the story of the South, but in the end his stereotypical depiction of blacks and the heroizing of the Ku Klux Klan’s vigilantism assisted in regenerating racial tensions and perpetuating the negative associations of the Southern regions of the nation. Though the controversial film only exacerbated racial and societal issues, it was a film that spoke to everyone, no matter their race, ethnicity, social background, or even, whether they were from the North or South. This was evidenced through the emotional responses it evoked, including anger, hatred, sadness, joy, fear, patriotism, etc. Therefore, its ability to speak to everyone through pictures demonstrated Griffith’s belief in film as a universal language. Though, it may not have had the overall public response he desired, it does serve as an example of Griffith’s belief in film as a universal language and as a medium that had the potential to influence its audience.

There is a deeper significance within Griffith’s attempt to tell his father’s story through the film and its hero – Griffith desired to resurrect his father and live vicariously through the characters within the story. He believed the work of film “makes dreams come true” and The Birth of a Nation allowed the dream of a young boy of ten to come true – reverse the irrevocable judgment of death and return to him his father, his own true hero. Griffith once reflected that he “thought what a grand invention it would be if someone could make a magic box in which we could store the precious moments of our lives and keep them with us . . . and later on, in dark hours, could open this box and receive for a [sic] least a few moments a breath of its stored memory.” The camera was this magic box and recorded his “precious moments,” but beyond this, it allowed him to manifest his dreams of his father. Through the act of directing, he made

his dreams a physical reality – a phenomenon existing in real time and space. Just as the masses were in the movie and experiencing it so, too, was Griffith, but from the slightly different perspective that came from directing on the other side of the camera.

“Dare We Dream of a Golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead – the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.”

In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith utilized certain scenes to convey educational elements that he believed would instruct audiences in history and morality. As has been noted above, Griffith believed it was important to teach history in order to prevent it from being repeated in the present and future. The film was released in 1915, the year commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. There is little doubt audiences were well aware of the subject matter, since many people would have had personal connections to the war with family members having fought on either side as well as the whole nation honoring the historical event. Through film, Griffith was able to bring the past alive again and provide social uplift. The men and events that had occurred long before were witnessed once again by those who were there decades before and even by those who had not even been born yet. It provided an opportunity to “meet” and experience individuals and events that would not have been possible, otherwise. One such historical figure that was known to all was President Abraham Lincoln. Griffith utilized the figure of Lincoln to convey historical events, but also to instruct in morality and virtues. One scene, towards the beginning of the film, depicted the historical event of Lincoln signing the proclamation requesting 75,000 volunteers from state militias to assist in suppressing the rebellion at Fort Sumter. Once the proclamation was signed and Lincoln was left alone in his office, he took a handkerchief from his hat and dabbed at his eyes. He proceeded to look up and
begin to pray as he folded his hands in prayer. The scene conveyed Griffith’s interpretation of an historical event, but he also utilized it to show the honor and virtue of the president. Lincoln strived to maintain the unity of the nation and grieved that he had to resort to such deeds that would lead to brother fighting brother. He was depicted in the act of prayer to show the audience his sadness and that he desired divine guidance.

Another scene showing the virtues and saintliness of Lincoln was when Ben Cameron was in a war hospital in Washington, D.C. after sustaining wounds in the Battle of Petersburg. When his mother came from South Carolina to see him, she was told of her son being wrongfully accused and condemned “to be hanged as a guerilla.”\(^{132}\) Elsie, Austin Stoneman’s daughter, who served as a nurse and was taking care of Cameron, suggested going to see Lincoln – “We will ask mercy from the Great Heart.” The two women went to see the president and were allowed admittance. When Mrs. Cameron first made her appeal Lincoln adamantly said “no,” and she put her head down in resignation. Lincoln, the “Great Heart,” could not keep to his unmerciful judgment and proceeded to comfort the Mother by putting his hand on her shoulder and wrote a pardon for her son. Once he handed Mrs. Cameron the pardon he turned around facing away from her at his desk, and though she wished to show her gratitude by hugging him, she refrained and left. The “distance” that is conveyed between Lincoln and Mrs. Cameron after he handed her the pardon symbolically represented his saintliness but also the loneliness of being president. He had the weight of the nation on his shoulders and he had to carry the burden alone. Also, to show too much familiarity would have degraded the dignity of his office and person. The proper sign of respect was to keep a respectful distance and admire from afar. Through his example, the audience would learn how beneficial it would be to show mercy and kindness to

\(^{132}\) Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, DVD.
others. They witnessed the joy of Mrs. Cameron as she was given the pardon, therefore, they too would want to imitate the president’s actions toward the same outcome.

Griffith utilized religious imagery he believed would contribute toward bringing about world peace and the brotherhood of man. This was strongly depicted in an allegorical scene that juxtaposed the god of war, a man on horseback brandishing a sword above the masses pleading for mercy and those already slain, to Jesus lifting he hands out and blessing an assembly of happy people. The title card Griffith utilized before the scene stated, “Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead – the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.” Though the film is at an end, Griffith once again takes the opportunity to encourage his viewers to abhor war and desire peace, just as he had done with his first title card that read, “If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain.”

The entreaty is more powerful because it visualizes the beauty and reward of such a venture. It prophesized that if mankind united in destroying the power of war, then Christ “the gentle Prince” would reign and bless those “in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.” Griffith took on the role of Prophet-Wizard, thereby, through the utilization of film, prophesized an ideal future to the masses. Though it is only a projection on a screen it is perceived as a reality – that it is true, it can be true, it will be true. They have seen the overthrow of war and the enthronement of peace and the long desired brotherhood of all men. As the audience visually takes in the prophecy, it becomes their own vision, their own dream. Therefore, if the prophecy takes root in the audience then the desired result would be their conversion and their allied efforts of bringing about world peace.

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133 Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, DVD.
“War’s Peace”

Griffith always blamed the battle wound his father received in his belly for killing him ten years after the end of the war. Though Jacob Griffith survived the war, he could be considered one of the million of its casualties. The loss of his father created a wound that never healed and began a strong desire to eradicate war, forever. *The Birth of a Nation* centered on the affects of the Civil War and featured a number of battle scenes. The most iconic scene was of the Battle of Petersburg where Ben Cameron bravely led his men in an attempt to rescue a food train belonging to the Confederacy that was trapped behind enemy lines. The battle entailed the opposing sides resorting to trench warfare and “separated by only a few hundred feet.” As Cameron “leads the final desperate assault,” he and his men raced towards the opposing side’s trench. But as they did so, a standard bearer fell. Cameron grabbed the tattered flag, ran to the other side and thrust the standard’s poll down the mouth of a Union cannon. The battle continued and as soldiers fell others took their place. Amidst the scenes depicting the war raging on, Griffith inserted the title card “War’s Peace.” As the living continued to fight, the lifeless bodies of soldiers showed that the only peace war could provide was through death. Griffith’s interpretation of the battle poignantly conveyed the horrors of war, and reflected his belief that true peace was unattainable through war.

The camera shots of the fallen that accompanied the title card “War’s Peace” mimicked contemporary Civil War photography. In so doing, Griffith provided an element of historical accuracy that identified it as an educational tool that would give the masses a convincing impression of actually witnessing an historical event. If, according to Griffith, the purpose of film was to enable the masses to learn their history by witnessing the wrongs committed in the

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134 Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, DVD.
past so as not to repeat them in the future, then he utilized *The Birth of a Nation* for just such a purpose. He attempted to educate the masses through their experience of witnessing the destructiveness of the Civil War so that they would be repulsed and strive to never allow such horrors to occur again. Consequently, the World War that was raging in Europe at the time of the release of *The Birth of a Nation* strongly mirrored the Civil War. Just as the Union and Confederate soldiers – Americans fighting Americans – fought trench warfare at close proximity in the Battle of Petersburg so, too, were Europeans fighting Europeans in trench warfare at close proximity. As he saw film as “war’s greatest antidote, Griffith believed that if film had be properly utilized to “inoculate” all the nations of Europe to the “horrors of war” then “there would be no bodies of men lying on European battlefields.”

*The Birth of a Nation* came too late to prevent the war then raging, but Griffith may have hoped that if American audiences witnessed war’s horrors then they would strive to not join in the fray.

“...his scenes flash the story at you with never a rest. You sit overpowered by the beauty and the magnitude of the pictures”

*The Birth of a Nation* had a profound affect on the millions of audience members who came to view the first epic film. It produced within the audience the psychological characteristics of memory, imagination, motion, and reaction, as described by Hugo Munsterberg, and those who watched the film manifested these characteristics in varying degrees. Karl Brown, a young cameraman who worked for Griffith on the film, eavesdropped on audience members during the intermission and found that many people were very enthusiastic about the film with the consensus being that, “It had been exactly as grandpa had described it . . .

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135 Griffith, *The Motion Picture and Witch Burners*. 
only more real.” A newspaper film critic in Little Rock, Arkansas witnessed the exuberant response of war veterans in the audience and credited it to the realism of the scenes –

It is a wonderful picture, so much so in fact, that it scarcely deserves the name motion picture. The scenes are so real and blood-stirring at times that the Civil War veterans . . . could scarce restrain themselves. Many did not. Frequently in the battle scene or in the spirited dashes of the Ku Klux Klan, shouts would burst forth – the battle cry that these veterans of the Blue and Gray perhaps have not uttered since the days of the Sixties.137

James Agee, an author and film critic, wrote a tribute to Griffith at the director’s death in 1948. Among his reflections, Agee described the impression he had of the battle charge in *The Birth of a Nation* when he watched it as a young man –

It seems to me to be a perfect realization of a collective dream of what the Civil War was like, as veterans might remember it fifty years later, or as children, fifty years later, might imagine it. I have had several clear mental images of that war, from almost as early as I can remember, and I didn’t have the luck to see ‘The Birth of a Nation’ until I was in my early twenties; but when I saw that charge, it was merely the clarification, and corroboration, of one of those visions, and took its place among them immediately without seeming to be of a different kind or order.138

The three authors, in their own way, illustrated how film influences the audience by overriding their memories or imaginings of the Civil War. Karl Brown’s observation revealed that the retelling of grandpa’s war stories was inferior to the shadows projected onto the screen. The eyewitness loses his authenticity to a reinterpretation of historical events. The Little Rock film critic witnessed the veterans, themselves, giving their yells of approval. The scenes that affected the veterans were acting upon their memories and bringing them back into the forefront of their minds, so that they were experiencing them, again, fifty years later. They, and even those in the

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137 “Little Rock Sees Birth of Nation Is Not Flattered,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, Arkansas), December 8, [1915].
audience who never experienced such events, were in the action, in that moment – so that their shouts and battle cries were their genuine responses. Finally, James Agee’s account showed how the images from the film transposed and replaced his imaginings of the war. His thoughts of it being a collective dream of the war and of how the veterans might remember it or children imagine it fifty years later, encapsulated the two previous quotes. The film was how the veterans remembered the war and it influenced how the youth imagined it. The various responses also provide evidence that the viewing audience puts itself in a receptive position to whatever is depicted on the screen. The projections are more material, more a reality than the previous memories and imaginations of the individuals in the audience.

The Birth of a Nation was truly a manifestation of Griffith’s ideology and idealism because it depicted the world of his childhood that was the most significant in his development. It was a world that could only be imagined in his mind but finally, through film, he could make it a “reality,” and as he shared it with the world, he made it their “reality,” too. The affect the film had on the audience, through supplanting their memories and imagination, provides insight into how it could be useful in influencing their outlook of the world. Griffith’s depictions of war and heavenly visions of peace gave visual images that he believed would excite the masses toward ending war and creating world peace. The idealized “City of Peace” was a type of utopian future he dreamed of and wished to instill in the hearts and minds of his audience.
Conclusion:

D.W. Griffith was a forward thinking pioneer of the new medium of film. He believed it was more than a vehicle of entertainment, but a viable tool that could be utilized toward convincing the masses of the possibility of a utopian society. Griffith had a vision of an ideal future in which war was only a memory, the world was in peace and was maintained through a brotherhood of man. A powerful aspect of film that enabled the accomplishment of this task, quickly and efficiently, was it served as a “universal language.” As films were silent, there were no spoken words to interfere with understanding the emotions and actions conveyed by the characters on the screen. In Griffith’s mind, ignorance and a mundane life were the two main causes that brought about war, therefore, film would rectify this by educating the masses in innumerable subjects, but particularly history, and providing social uplift by bringing the world and all its beauty to those unable to witness it, otherwise. History was the most important subject to be taught through film, because it was the ignorance of the past that had caused the hatred and wars throughout the millennia. Another powerful aspect of film was the psychological effect it had on the audience. Film’s psychological effect was that it fooled the mind into believing it was witnessing reality, thereby, making the audience feel as if it were actually participating in the story. All of these powerful elements of film formed the basis of Griffith’s ideology and idealism of film.

The development of Griffith’s ideology and idealism of film began in his childhood and continued into adulthood. The most influential person in his life was his father, Jacob Griffith, whose death from his old Civil War wound led a young Griffith to dream of a world without war. Furthermore, the Christian upbringing from his mother and the other women in his family and
dealing with bullies in the schoolyard may have contributed toward his future desire to utilization film to teach morality and virtues. Griffith’s ideology continued to develop as he grew up, but it was not until he directed his first film that he knew what was his purpose. Griffith understood the power of film and its ability to make his vision of a new future a reality, therefore, he fused his ideology, which had been influenced and developed from childhood, into his idealism of film.

_The Birth of a Nation_ was a cinematic manifestation of Griffith’s ideology and idealism of film. It was a depiction of a world that he knew best, from the stories of his father and family to what he saw and experienced as a young man. It also contained the powerful elements that were necessary to create an impressionable film. As a silent film, it naturally “spoke” the universal language that would enable its story to be understood by all who witnessed it on the screen. It fought against ignorance and enabled social uplift, since while teaching about an important historical event it also enabled the audience to see a world that was beyond their natural capabilities to ever behold. The psychological effect of film was ever present as it entailed the audience being pulled into the story and, for at time, believing they were witness to the reality of the characters’ lives. Ultimately, Griffith was able to bring the past, present, and future together in order to teach his vision. He brought alive the past in order to teach the audience of the present his dream of a utopian society of the future.
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