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# Disciplinary Descent: Film Studies, Families, and the Origins of Narrative Cinema

Jennifer M. Bean

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> *Griffith… is to the various histories of the cinema what Abraham is to the Bible – the necessary Patriarch*
>
> (Aumont 1990: 348)

> *The laws governing inheritance are for the most part unknown*
>
> (Darwin 1996: 39)

What differentiates one period or phase of film history from another? How small or large must the differences be in order to determine where one element or stage leaves off and another begins? These are questions that any discipline must ask if it is to reflect on its historical parameters, which means that disciplinary knowledge is intrinsically bound to the construction of "families," to the process of retrospectively organizing observable phenomena into what Charles Darwin calls "genera, families, sub-families" (1996: 562). What is intriguing from the perspective of Euro-American film historical discourse is the apparently irreducible equation linking the origins – the originality – of a properly *narrative* cinema to the Biograph films of D.W. Griffith (1908–1913), and beyond that to the metaphorical and ideological values associated with the nuclear family unit.[1]

When Jacques Aumont describes Griffith as the "necessary Patriarch" of cinema's "various histories," he refers to a critical genealogy that relentlessly reiterates Griffith's name as the signature stamp of narrative cinema's artistic and cultural patrimony, even while the core or essence of what that patrimony means has altered over time. But even as we repeat Griffith's name as the bastion of our field's secular theology (the canon!), other more revolutionary

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alterations are currently on the rise. Indeed, given the broader reach of archival and historiographic methods emerging in the digital age, the rash of encyclopedias and reference tools now being written, and a roaring wave of insightful work from scholars of varying political, regional, and aesthetic perspectives, it seems clear that we have only just begun to explore the films and figures that constitute narrative cinema's ascendance and ongoing transformations in the early to mid-1910s. As Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (2004) observe in their introduction to the fine collection, *American Cinema's Transitional Era*: "The sheer diversity of changes experienced by the American film industry and within American filmgoing culture during these years [1907–1915] renders any attempt to encompass such developments within a uniform historical narrative problematic at best" (2). Anticipation mounts as newly restored or discovered prints mock revered critical assumptions, raising questions that remain as yet unanswered, the ultimate question being whether a positivist film history will ever again be possible or desirable. Then again, in the midst of such intellectual ferment and vitalizing possibilities, the most immediate question becomes quite simply: in the face of a substantial body of work about the man and his films, why write on D.W. Griffith *again*?

I have two contrary attitudes or inclinations. On one hand, I am firmly committed to the necessity of writing a new film history, of redrawing the cultural and aesthetic lineages of narrative cinema in accordance with whatever "genera, families, sub-families" one seeks to organize and classify and why. At the same time, I consider it imperative to move cautiously toward revisionist conclusions in an intellectual moment as volatile as ours, to remain wary of writing in reaction to, or against, an assumed critical norm, lest we run the risk of too quickly replacing bad old truisms with equally problematic new ones.

In rendering with some precision the role Griffith's name and films have played in our field's critical legacy, I do not aim to provide a comprehensive survey. Instead, I will sketch the diverse inflections this particular name and group of films have undergone when viewed through the lens of various critical categories. From classical to revisionist historical discourse, from structuralism's imperatives to genre studies, we find a sort of disciplinary descent, a series of perspectives through which the name, "D.W. Griffith," and its correlate, "the origins of narrative cinema," undergo constant modification

Before proceeding, let me clarify that the myth of origins is always just that: a myth. Any claim for a discernible, locatable "first" or moment of beginning inevitably eclipses the complexity of overlapping and often competing elements and forces necessary to galvanize change. At the same time, I agree with Gilles Deleuze (1997) that the creation of a new concept (Darwinian evolution, for instance) can be marked by a proper name that serves to locate a generalized origin but does not limit its use or value: a concept begins by becoming visible and may therefore be attributed a proper name, the name of its most recognizable or marketable inventor. The meanings associated with that concept, however, depend on the uses to which it is put, the variables that develop

out of or through it. Insofar as this volume puts the meaning of the name "D.W. Griffith" to new and future uses, then my effort here is retrospective – a study of this name's descent by modification.

## The rise of the mythical father and the fall of the realist text

One can certainly find an historical basis in the status ascribed to David Wark Griffith, who postulated himself as a film artist/author *sine qua non* in 1913. Shortly after he left the Biograph Company (where he had been working as a "director" for five years), Griffith placed an advertisement in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, blowing his own horn, so to speak, for "revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art." Listing in particular "[t]he large or closeup figures, distant views as represented first in *Ramona*, the 'switchback,' sustained suspense, the 'fade out,' and restraint of expression," Griffith also lists over 100 film titles, retrospectively "crediting" himself as director in an era when credits as such rarely appeared onscreen (Jacobs 1968: 117). The novelty suggested by this attribution to the individual self as the site of creativity zooms into focus when one considers a similar commentary published in the same journal in 1912. Ascribing inventiveness of artistic techniques to the Biograph Company *qua* company, one anonymous reporter pronounced:

> Biograph's influence on picture production has been important. It was the first company… in America to present acting of the restrained artistic type, and the first to produce quiet drama and pure comedy. It was the first to attempt fading light effects. It was the first to employ alternating flashes of simultaneous action in working up suspense (qtd in Jacobs 1968: 117).

Leaving aside this writer's qualifying emphasis on national location ("in America"), the nigh-uncanny resemblance this list bears to Griffith's broadsheet reveals that the consideration of acting style, lighting effects, or suspenseful editing techniques was hardly new to the discourse surrounding cinema in 1913. Remarkably new, however, was Griffith's loud claim to *individual* creativity and originality.

In other words, Griffith's 1913 posting heralds the origins of the "author function" in film historical discourse, a critical function that Michel Foucault (1980) describes as "result[ing] from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author… [in which] we speak of an individual's 'profundity' or 'creative' power" (127). To speak of a *film* author, especially one working in a commercial context, most often involves a humanistic operation employed to elevate the individual's films above the grimy morass of the marketplace, to efface the rude machinery of production. That this civilizing gesture often summons familial metaphors proves particularly

intriguing, although hardly unique to film studies. As Roland Barthes (1977) reminds us, the conception of the Author as a figure of originality and creativity, a figure designed to ensure the homogeneity and unity of a text, emerges in post-Middle Age culture as a crucial tenet in the growing emphasis on individuality, privacy, and selfhood in the Western world. That the historical construction of selfhood as such is buttressed by a positivism that finds its epitome in capitalist society, the same society that invents and privileges the nuclear family unit, generates a set of interrelated issues that emerges in the common, now naturalized use of parental – or more specifically, *paternal* – analogies for speaking of authorship. As he observes:

> The Author, when believed in… is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as *a father to his child* (Barthes 1977: 145; last emphasis mine).

Barthes's assessment of authorship as a figuration of paternity attains acute visibility in classical film historical discourse, which rapidly enshrined Griffith as "the father of classical narrative cinema and inventor of narrative filmmaking" (Elsaesser and Barker 1990: 293). In Terry Ramsaye's 1926 history of American cinema, *A Million and One Nights*, for instance, we find "Griffith Evolves Screen Syntax," a chapter dedicated to Griffith's years at Biograph, in which the biological idiom of evolutionary growth images the cinema as a child maturing under Griffith's tutelage: "The motion picture spent the years up to 1908 learning its letters. Now, with Griffith it was studying screen grammar and pictorial rhetoric" (508). By reprinting in part Griffith's *Dramatic Mirror* posting (636), Ramsaye's account initiates a line of descent embellished in Lewis Jacobs's 1939 study, *The Rise of the American Film*, which reproduced the 1913 ad in full (1968: 117). Passed from the self-professed progenitor of Motion Picture Art to the founding "fathers," so to speak, of American film history, Griffith's legacy crossed the Atlantic in 1951, gaining pride of place in George Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinema* and shimmering across Jean Mitry's prolific writings throughout the 1960s. "Without exaggerating in the least," Mitry effectively summarized,

> …one can say that if the cinema owes its existence as a means of analysis and reproduction of movement (and therefore as an entertainment form and an entertainment industry) to Louis Lumière, it is to Griffith that it owes its existence as an art form, as a means of expression and of signification (1985: 68).

One easily discerns Griffith's name attaining mythical status through this critical genealogy, especially if we understand myth as a story told in reverent tones, with broad plot strokes and with little care for empirical data. The remarkable adaptability of this myth to differing critical contexts surfaces in the work of Christian Metz, whose semiotic approach to cinematic language

in 1964 has come to emblematize, in Dudley Andrew's terms, the "weening of modern film theory from Mitry's paternal embrace" (1984: 58). But Metz, for all the "weening" he accomplished, remains in full accord with Mitry's elevation of Griffith. Directly quoting his predecessor, and allowing that certain expressive techniques could be discerned among the "primitives" (Georges Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, George Albert Smith, James Williamson), Metz observes:

> It was Griffith's role to define and to stabilize – we would say, to codify – the *function* of these different procedures in relation to the filmic narrative, and thereby unify them up to a certain point in a coherent "syntax"… Thus it was in a single motion that the cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language (2004: 67).

More than simply a vestigial remnant of earlier mythmaking histories, Metz's peculiar turn of phrase reveals the evolutionary concept implicit in the critical genealogy we have been tracing. In the sudden timelessness of Metz's "single motion," there exists no development, no growth, and no history, only an instantaneous and inexplicable break with the past.

Even so, salient elements of this discourse transformed as the meaning of Griffith's legacy descended from one critic to another. An increasing focus on crosscutting techniques as the salutary mark of originality, for instance, develops in tandem with critical investment in editing's capacity to produce a self-sufficient, filmic space capable of absorbing the viewer into a remarkably detailed fictional world. What Jacobs refers to as "the device of parallel and intercutting," which could "catch and control the emotions of the spectator," (1968: 98) becomes, in Mitry's account, a technique capable of "introduc[ing] the audience 'into' the drama… making them participate in the action as though actually experiencing it themselves" (1997: 98). In 1972, Jean-Pierre Baudry explained the origins of cinematic language thus:

> …that which the short films of D.W.G. inaugurate and *Intolerance* rearticulates, is, roughly speaking, the formation of a rhetorical machinery which uses the cinema for effects analogous no longer to those of photography and the theatre, but of the novel (qtd. in Aumont 1990: 348).

Irony stains this account when we recognize that Griffith's achievement of an avowedly novelistic technique both forms the bastion of his privileged status as "the father of narrative cinema" and proves the basis of his later fall from grace, a critical reversal of terms whereby the spectator's interpolation in filmic space comes to be perceived negatively – as trap, delusion, or lure.

Treated as an extension of the realist tendency in the nineteenth-century novel, the emergence of a self-sufficient narrative discourse in film was increasingly understood by theorists in the 1970s to satisfy a social appetite or demand

for verisimilitude and illusory mastery, to recapitulate the "oedipal" pleasures that Roland Barthes identified in his 1970 study of Balzac, *S/Z*, as typifying the realist or "readerly" text. The ubiquity of this model, known as Hollywood "classicism," gained explanatory power by eschewing specific or local examples in favor of outlining a broad set of traits shared by the realist novel and the dominant mode of commercial cinema (Barthes 1975). As Stephen Heath wrote in his 1981 *Questions of Cinema*: "In its films, cinema reproduces and produces the novelistic: it occupies the individual as subject in the terms of the existing social representations and it constructs the individual as subject in the process" (127). I quote Heath in particular since his readings remain among the most far-sighted in the field, although the assumptions governing his project are far from idiosyncratic. Hence Dudley Andrew would summarize in 1984:

> This [cinema] is an art born in, and as part of, the age of realism. It has known no other norm. Even today, despite the struggle of modernist filmmakers, realist cinema dominates our screens. Semiotics of cinema has, then, felt obliged to deal with the issue over and over. Film semiotics is virtually synonymous with the study of codes of illusion (63).

These "codes of illusion," in turn, virtually confirmed that American narrative cinema functioned as an apparatus calibrated to induce the ideological effects that thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, and Louis Althusser stress: the coercive character of identity, the entanglement of subjectivity, and subjection to a dominant norm.

The thinker who has perhaps done most to fix the interrelations of the realist text and Griffith's work at Biograph is Raymond Bellour, whose structural reading of *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) also remains a celebrated instance of what close textual analysis can reveal about the operations of any one film's "rhetorical machinery." The film's plot is relatively simple: a female telegrapher (Blanche Sweet), left alone in an isolated station when her boyfriend/engineer departs for work, is threatened by two bandits attempting to invade the station and subsequently saved when her boyfriend learns of her plight and rushes to the rescue. Bellour focuses on the ways in which this film moves forward through a system of repetitive echoes that structure and unite the narrative level (with its emphasis on sexual difference) and the formal level (different patterns of symmetry and asymmetry in the composition of the frame, in figure movement and in visual rhymes). As he explained in an interview with Janet Bergstrom,

> From the very beginning we see the setting up of a diegetic alternation: he/she/he … And so it continues: the text of the film goes on dividing, joining up and redividing its elements through a succession of varied alternations over 96 shots, until the final joining up which shows us in a single last shot the majority of the elements involved (1979: 77–79).

The perfect balance operating at multiply embedded levels in this film, all geared toward a harmonious equilibrium and goal-oriented resolution, thus discloses a historical locus for "the systematicity at the heart of the great American classicism" (Bellour 1990: 360) while revealing that system's origins in the "socio-historical situation opened up by the simultaneous development of the bourgeoisie, of industrial capitalism and of the nuclear family." This situation is shared, Bellour explains, by "the nineteenth century novel" (Bergstrom 1979: 89).

## Griffith's melodramatic imagination and cinema's mother tongue

Such semiotic-structural approaches to narrative cinema as this one have lost their purchase in contemporary film studies, just as the self-same tenets of a doctrine that shone across the fields of literature, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s have, with varying degrees of submission, met their demise in humanistic inquiry more generally. We now recognize that even the best of narratological readings derive from an assumption that all meaningful questions are synchronic ones, and that the axiom that any one film or instance reveals the larger system's governing principles betrays a methodology that necessarily produces, rather than identifies, homogeneity in its object of inquiry. As film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s sought alternatives to classical cinema's purported homogeneity, melodrama, a tradition associated with theatricality and hyperbole, with excessive spectacle and overt parallelisms, emerged – unsurprisingly – as psychological realism's most virulent competitor. What warrants scrutiny here is the critical shift through which Griffith's films came to emblematize a cinema rooted in melodrama's theatrical traditions rather than the nineteenth-century novel. Now this "father of cinema's cinematic language," rather than embodying the patriarchy of capitalism's investment in novelistic narrative, was associated with the feminine – the realm of sentiment, fantasy, domesticity – and ultimately with an *embodied semiotics*, a sort of mother tongue. If, previously, scholars had understood Griffith's filmed stories as expressing eventfulness, linearity, and causality, they now viewed them in terms of experience, feeling, the body, and moral imperatives.

This shift from Griffith as realist to Griffith as melodramatist took place gradually, buoyed by relatively new historical methodologies. In 1981, voicing a perspective lauded as "revisionist," Tom Gunning chastised earlier mythmaking histories: "D.W. Griffith, the mythical 'father' of film as art, haunts films history. All too often Griffith has been an excuse for a lack of scholarship on early film" (1990: 336). Rather than exorcizing the paternal ghost per se, Gunning fleshes out a more historically informed view of Griffith's narrative experiments in the initial 1908–1909 period. Establishing a perspective that

would later inform his well-known recovery of the erstwhile "primitive" period as a "cinema of attractions" fully commensurate with fin-de-siècle culture and the medium's locus in technological/industrial modernity, Gunning argues for a view of the Biograph films as determined by the local effects of industrial and cultural mores. Linking the onset of Griffith's career in 1908 to the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), Gunning reveals that the initial objective of the "Trust" to achieve greater economic stability among its ten allied companies found a corollary by seeking the stability promised by social respectability. This aggressive "wooing of a middle-class audience" materialized in two ways: by improving theatrical conditions (providing better lighting, comfortable chairs, and proper ventilation) and by improving film content (eliminating "gruesome melodrama or vulgar comedy" and "lobbying for the happy ending as a requisite for all films") (1990: 338–339).

The textual effects of this stress on "family values," so to speak, emerge with vivid precision in Gunning's 1991 study, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Cinema: The Early Years at Biograph*, where a micro-archival methodology informs rigorous close readings of key films. Deftly excavating the myriad sources for Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* (1909), for instance, Gunning reaches back to a one-act play by André De Lorde, *Au Téléphone* (1901) and forward through multiple pre-Griffith film incarnations: *Terrible Angoisse* (1906, Pathé), *Heard Over the Phone* (1908, Porter), and *A Narrow Escape* (1908, Pathé), among others. As he observes, each of these productions shares the story of a domestic order shattered by outside intruders; each turns on the husband's absence from the home; and each dramatizes a pivotal moment in which the threatened housewife telephones her husband, thus emphasizing the physical separation of the couple as the news of danger is relayed. Endings, however, differ dramatically. Whereas the 1901 play ends with the husband listening on the phone as his wife and child are murdered (a Grand Guignolesque-style finale repeated in *Terrible Angoisse* and *Heard Over the Phone*), the husband in *The Lonely Villa* races to the rescue, arrives in the nick of time, and effectively restores the sanctity of the hearth and home. More than simply showing male impotency and gruesome horror transmuting to the period's requisite happy ending and the symbolic reassertion of familial-social order, Griffith's ending articulates suspense through a triangulated editing pattern – victimized women, aggressive thieves, noble rescuer – that provides the basic armature for what Gunning terms cinema's "narrator system," a specifically filmic variation of literary and theatrical narrational strategies. The editing weaves into one harmonized form distinct moments in different spaces and from different times.

Of course, the recovery of specific theatrical influences renders moot any theorization of cinema's narrative discourse as a direct or simplistic extension of the nineteenth-century novel. In a heuristic move that bears affinity with Gunning's approach, Rick Altman (1992) observes that Biograph films like *Ramona* (1910), often identified as coming from novelistic originals, might

best be viewed in terms of the text's intermediary adaptation for the stage. For Altman, one need not think of a stark division between novelistic realism and spectacular melodrama; instead, one can view them in complementary terms, as two aspects of a single phenomenon. Significantly, Peter Brooks's study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, often cited as the most influential work for scholarship on screen and stage melodrama, takes the late nineteenth-century novels of the presumably *ur*-realist author Henry James as a key example. Brooks shows that elements of dramatic periptery and the increasingly polarized and oppositional choices that characters such as Isabelle Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* are forced to make produce a psychic drama closer to the language of dreams than to that of the social world. Geared to express a hidden or repressed meaning, a moral occult, this melodramatic mode originated, Brooks (1985) says, on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European stage as a response to the period's unsettling revolutionary violence and as a mode particularly appealing to a newly secularized middle class, a public for whom the moral coherence afforded by a sacred Being no longer had purchase.

The preeminent status Brooks grants to the body in melodrama's system of signs proves particularly pertinent in the present context, not least because this semiotic system strives to resuscitate an *original* language rather than mimic (however "realistically") an ordinary one. Brooks hence turns to the aesthetic theory of gesture in eighteenth-century writers like Denis Diderot, whose *Encyclopédie* claims that gesture was "the primitive language of mankind in its cradle" and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Essai* construes gesture as "a kind of pre-language, giving a direct presentation of things prior to the alienation from presence set off by the passage into articulated language" (1985: 66). Yet, as Mary Ann Doane observes in her study of the 1940s woman's film, Brooks seems relatively unaware of the gendered implications underlying this conceptual move. Locating its expressive register in the "cradle" of "mankind," trumpeting its relation to the natural world, to bodily plenitude, and to non-differentiated signs, melodrama, she argues, theoretically resembles a "maternal tongue" (1987: 84). Adopting this perspective offers a partial explanation of the genre's association with the feminine.

Whether or not Brooks familiarized himself with Doane's analysis is anyone's guess. But in 1992 he turned to melodrama's "inevitable" encounter with silent-era cinema, specifically to the mode's renewal in Griffith's films, and elaborated a "convergence in the concerns of melodrama and of psychoanalysis." Both "conceiv[e] psychic conflict in melodramatic terms," he writes, and both understand the body to be the privileged site on which repressed matter is acted out, brought to visibility and hence legibility (1994: 22). Moreover, the body most prone to the production of meaning as such is the victimized, often hysterical, suffering female body. And in Brooks's analysis this body proves to be Griffith's most salient representational sign. Attending to Griffith's historical epic *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), specifically to the static pictorial tableau

where Henriette, on her way to the guillotine, bids a final farewell to her sister, Louise, Brooks writes:

> It is a pure image of victimisation, and of the body wholly seized by affective meaning, of message converted on to the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation (1994: 22–23).

Routed through and across the suffering, feminized body, melodrama's expressive register differs dramatically from the "realist" norms presumed by Bellour, the "Grand Syntagmatique" sought by Metz, or the "syntax" alluded to by Ramsaye. Its ideological emphasis differs as well from the generalized "narrator system" outlined by Gunning, although scholarly attention to the female body's symbolic potency in the Biograph films depended on the textually and historically sensitive revisionist perspective that Gunning's analysis, among others, rendered imperative by the mid-1980s. Through the work of scholars as diverse as Shelley Stamp, Aumont, and Altman, it became clear that Griffith not only staged the hysterical reactions of his many female victims in interior spaces or domestic dwellings; he also developed and relentlessly rehearsed a specifically cinematographic expression of feminine space.

The details are telling. Almost without exception, as Stamp (see Lindsey 1994) notes, a single, consistent camera set-up frames the interior space represented in these films. If there is a variation in the camera set-up – the shot of Blanche Sweet telegraphing for help in *The Lonedale Operator*, or the housewife on the phone in *The Lonely Villa* – it tends to be a closer view along the same axis as the initial camera position. The stability of the frame, and the consistency of viewpoint, is reinforced by the visual linkage of walls and other architectural features that often double the edges of the frame so that screen space and room coincide, generating what Aumont (1990) terms "the prison of the frame." In *An Unseen Enemy* (1912), for instance, the orphaned sisters played by Dorothy and Lillian Gish remain trapped in a single room throughout their ordeal, while the "slatternly maid" and her cohort rob their house and hold the girls at gunpoint. Here the girls' confinement in an enclosed "space" is rearticulated by the repetitious use of a confining frame, a medium-close shot of the girls' physical immobility and expressions of terror, which Aumont (1990) tallies as reoccurring fifteen times in the cutting sequence that relays their brother's race back home to the rescue. In other suspense-laden rescue films of the same period, however, Griffith dramatizes the female victims' mobility among rooms in an interior dwelling. As Rick Altman notes in an eloquent reading of *The Lonely Villa*, the mother and her daughters successively retreat from the front parlor to an inner library as the thieves penetrate the mansion from the outside. But, Altman argues, the match-on-action cuts that link the laterally contiguous rooms, as well as the horizontal character movement between the two rooms, emphasize the similarity of the spaces more than their succession

in a larger space. The point is crucial: rather than enlarging the space available to the female characters, the progressive movement to narratively "different" spaces actually refutes linear progression and heightens the sense of interior confinement (1981: 129).

The emphatic stress on the female body's symbolic equation with space does not render temporal dimensions insignificant. On the contrary, the emotional reverberations of feminine space become intimately bound up with the dramatic significance of temporality; indeed, the very crux of the rescue paradigm remains its emphasis on time: the last-*minute* rescue. As Stamp (see Lindsey 1994) summarizes, the logic of parallel editing, that of simultaneity, would seem to imply that the alternating scenes of returning rescuer and victimized womanhood transpire in a comparable amount of time. Yet this pattern builds suspense by *expanding* the time of the events in the space under siege, while accelerating and eclipsing the rescuer's frantic return. Accentuating this spatial-temporal dynamic in one of the boldest studies of melodrama to date, Linda Williams returns to Griffith's reiteration of crosscutting techniques in the climactic scenario of *Way Down East* (1920), observing that even as

> …a rapid succession of shots specifying the physical danger gives the effect of speed, of events happening extremely fast, the parallel cutting between the breaking ice, David's pursuit, Anna's unconscious body, and the churning falls prolongs time beyond all possible belief. Actions *feel* fast, and yet the ultimate duration of the event is retarded (2001: 33).

Of particular relevance to what Williams is getting at here is the wildly asymmetrical form of Griffith's rescue scenario, which is commensurate with the tense and contradictory nature of the viewer's emotional experience. "The 'main thrust' of melodramatic narrative, for all its flurry of apparent linear action, is thus actually to get back to what *feels* like the beginning," Williams explains. Offering "the hope… that there may still be an original locus of virtue," Griffith's melodramatic mode links itself to the moral imperative and "maternal tongue" of the broader mode outlined by Brooks. At the same time, Williams reasserts Griffith's primacy in the production of a cinematic form of expression: "This teasing delay of the forward-moving march of time has not been sufficiently appreciated… as an effect that cinema realized more powerfully than stage or literary melodrama" (2001: 35).

## Coupling space and time: Technology's family

When Williams refers to melodrama as an "expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast" (2001: 35), she might be articulating an aesthetic-ideological impulse born from melodrama's roots in late eighteenth-century European culture. But narrative cinema's capacity to defy time, to subvert or pervert its quickening, attains privileged status in the context of early twentieth-century

culture's flagrant affair with technological modernity. Associated with momentary shocks and unprecedented speed, modernity fostered an anxious fascination with ever more powerful and equally unruly machines. It also fed a capacious public appetite for spine-tingling thrills, for sensational stimuli capable of breaching the body's integrity. With the concurrent development of technological inventions like the train in the early to mid-nineteenth century and the large-scale construction of urban centers, the threat to individual selfhood suggested by technology's sensory pummeling finds itself reinforced by the incursion of a mass public, emblematized by the unruly crowd. By extension, the wildly indiscriminate body of the public mass threatens the stability and cultural privilege previously assumed by the integrated and hierarchical structure of the private family or heteronormative couple.

Although the earliest cinema's position as a crucible in this constellation of terms may seem transparent to us now, it has not always been understood thus. Once the bastion of a critical theory debated by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer among others in the 1920s and 1930s, cinema's bawdy affair with modernity vanished in the wake of a humanist tradition emblematized by the mythmaking histories of Ramsaye, Jacobs, Sadoul, and Mitry, just as a pre-Griffith cinema languished in the face of a heuristic poised to privilege artistic refinement and the humanizing touch of an individual author-Father. Nor could the homogenizing theoretical models preached by Metz and Bellour permit detailed scrutiny of modernity's historical exigencies. But in the late 1980s, concurrent with a revisionist methodology proselytized most powerfully by Gunning, the conjunction of the terms "modernity" and "early cinema" rushed into critical purview. Without opening up once again the illuminating and often competing perspectives of a fin-de-siècle "cinema of attractions," in which Lumière's one-shot actualities, Méliès's trick fantasy films, or the popular "phantom rides" (in which a camera was hooked to the front or back of a moving train) become fully commensurate with social and subjective upheavals of modernity, we can ask how this historical perspective reframes once again analyses of Griffith's films and the elaboration of a properly narrative cinema.

Noticeably, parallel editing techniques reemerge as the *locus classicus* of Griffith's narrative system, even as the explanatory rationale for editing's mechanisms and effects shifts. Editing's capacity to disassemble and reassemble elements of space and time, to manufacture the illusion of continuity out of fragmented and otherwise discontinuous moments, allows editing to be recast as an active participant in the technological culture to which cinema contributes. As Gunning notes, when revisiting his reading of *The Lonely Villa* in an essay that highlights the period's "terrors of technology," the confusing leaps in space produced by parallel editing depended for their sensibility on plots that incorporated communication technology's capacity to instantaneously link one space or another. Hence, the telephone in *The Lonely Villa*, like the telegraph in *The Lonedale Operator*, gets coded for narrative purposes, "naturaliz[ing]

film's power to move through time and space" (1998: 219). When the isolated housewife telephones her husband to relay the news of impending danger, or the endangered telegrapher frantically types her message to the station down the line, the image of the phone or telegraph makes sensible the cut to an entirely different space.[2] For Lynne Kirby, however, whose 1993 study details the disorienting fascination both pre-1908 cinema and the nineteenth-century train elicited for "out-of-control" bodies and things, Griffith's narrative mechanisms do not draw from an already naturalized technological function. Rather, editing normalizes or "tames" an otherwise unruly technology. Speaking specifically of the purposeful race of the engineer back to the station in *The Lonedale Operator*, Kirby claims that "the train in Griffith became an agent and an object made to serve human agents… his engineer-driven trains are a far cry from out-of-control early train films" (1993: 108). Ultimately, what cinematic technology naturalizes in these films, says Mary Ann Doane in her 2002 study, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, is the illusion of a meaningful, directed, energized time (196).

Although differing in style and scope, these analyses together foreground the uneasy alliance Griffith forges between modern technologies and the family, between a mass public and the private sphere. Trains, telegraphs, and telephones, like editing, earn privileged status by virtue of the capacity to bring together, or "couple" as Kirby says, husbands with wives, sisters with brothers, or girl telegrapher with sweetheart engineer. But that same technological prowess bears with it the capacity to annihilate interpersonal connections, to disperse both families and publics. In her 2008 study of silent-era cinema's affair with the new forms of "traffic" wrought by industrialization and urbanization, Kristen Whissel probes this paradox relative to the train's status as a transportation technology crucial to the efficient circulation of commodities and capital. As she writes, the orchestrated system of mechanized transport enables it to function as a host for an unlawful system, a parasite that feeds on the system's efficiency. Two shots in *The Lonedale Operator* visualize the point with precision:

> In the middle of this film the camera provides us with an image of passengers, a payroll bag, and other cargo being loaded on a locomotive and thereby offers a glimpse at the efficient circulation of capital, populations and commodities by the railway system. An ensuing shot of the same train arriving at the Lonedale station appears to repeat this image. Yet in this second shot…two rough-looking transients emerge from the undercarriage of the train unbeknownst to the operator or anyone else… This shot make the transients both dangerous by virtue of their undetected mobility and sinisterly illegitimate by virtue of the space from which they emerge – itself a materialization of modernity's dark underbelly (170).

The promises and perils of modernity prove inseparable at multiple levels. Gunning points out the deliberate way Griffith bases his rescue dramas on stories determined by absence and separation: more often than not, the

husband's or male sweetheart's departure from the isolated home or railway station inaugurates the dramatic action. More than simply fueling the plot, the threat that the family or couple may be sundered irreparably, the recognition that the sanctity of the private sphere is neither immutable nor natural but fragile at best is, ironically, the most meaningful dramaturgical element here. Viewed in the context of a technologically altered and disorienting modern world, the paradoxical and irresolvable dilemma at stake in these films lies in the simple fact that the restoration of the family or couple depends on the same technologies that would otherwise destroy it, on the message relayed via telephone or telegraph and on the rescuer's fast-paced automobile or train ride.

Significantly a similar paradox holds true for Griffith's use of parallel editing, which generates an expressive system predicated on representational instability, including its potential for destroying the very illusion of continuity on which editing's "original" configurations of space and time depend. As Mary Ann Doane shrewdly notes, Griffith's mode of suspense lies

> …on the side of invisibility, and depends upon the activation of off-screen space, or [what Pascal Bonitzer calls] the "blind spot." In parallel editing, when shot B is on the screen its legibility is saturated by the absent presence of shot A, and vice versa (2002: 195).

The viewer's experience of the dramatic rescue in these films hence depends on what is not seen or represented – on what editing edits out. Doane's analysis gets at this point by illuminating the interrelation between editing's dependency on invisibility and the exploitation of space in the Biograph films whereby the victims' entrapment in an interior and their successive retreats to increasingly confined closets, libraries, or bedrooms strain to make the terror of an absent, unseen space, acutely felt. In other words, the representational (what is on the other side of the door, the threshold) becomes a figurative expression of cinema's signifying system (what is on the other side of the frame, the off-screen space). Speaking more generally, the offscreen space is the space between shots, the disfiguration of continuity on which editing depends and which Griffith's narrative system labors to hide. In this unseen space lurks fatality, death, invisibility. It is, says Doane, this "semiotically dense" space that "makes it possible for the cinema to say anything at all" (2002: 195).

## Coda

If the cinema *says* something, this then implies that cinema has a voice and, by extension, that cinema articulates or enunciates a subjective perspective. As I hope to have revealed, however, the metonymy implied in this logic is dubious at best. Returning to where this essay began, we find Griffith noisily casting himself in the role of artistic luminary, precisely because his films

alone could never reveal the self behind the set. Nor does an individual voice resonate in the system delineated by Bellour, for whom dominant ideology occasions both formal system and manner of address, just as the more localized constraints imposed by the MPPC provide Gunning's "narrator system" its axiomatic pitch. Perhaps the suffering female body, as Brooks would say, expresses otherwise ineffable meanings, or the telephone – an emblem of speech conveyed rather than speech itself – allows technological configurations of space and time to form a continuous line of meaningful sense. As we listen to the multiple voices chorusing through this familiar conjunction of terms – "D.W. Griffith," and the "origins of American narrative cinema" – we find little that resembles an epistemological guarantee for fixing the patrimony of our cultural and aesthetic past.[3] We find, instead, a far more provocative disciplinary affair, an ongoing renegotiation of the terms and traditions through which we turn our passing contemporaneity into the signs of history.

## Biographical note

Jennifer M. Bean is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, Cinema and Media at the University of Washington and director of the Cinema and Media Studies program. She has written extensively on silent-era film, including her edited and co-edited collections *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (2002), *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s* (2011), and *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (2014).

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## Notes

1 As this volume attests, one can detect no straightforward, consistent political stance in the Griffith oeuvre. But "there is a theme that runs through his major works," as John Steinle (2006) observes:

> That theme is Family. Family threatened, family torn apart, family reunited, family destroyed, family created. One can only guess at the motivations for this obsession with Family from a man whose father died when he was ten, and who was never able to create a strong family relationship in his real life. But there is no mistaking his affinity for this theme, which occurs time and again.

2 In a detailed study of early cinema's representations of the telegraph, Paul Young adds that if the telephone and the telegraph serve similar formal and textual functions in films such as *The Lonely Villa* and *The Lonedale Operator*, then the historical contexts of the two media reveal quite different *cultural* meanings. The relatively recent introduction of the telephone in the late nineteenth century and its association with the penetration of the private sphere, locate it more squarely in what Gunning terms the "terror of technology." By contrast, the telegraph dates back to the early 1840s, and was associated with the fantasy of an interconnected public sphere. Young (2003) writes:

> The persistence of this "ancient" technology of modernity as a specific kind of mechanical icon – a machine that doesn't break down, one that preserves not only threatened individuals like the Lonedale operator but also bourgeois social order (the valuable mail pouch the operator protects is also saved) – leads me to postulate that such "demonstrations" of the telegraph helped early cinema to position itself as a certain kind of new medium, one that would resemble telegraphy in its public mode of address as well as in its powers over space and time (231).

3 It bears stressing that chapters in this volume by Margaret Hennenfeld and Laura Horak investigate the meanings of the female body in Griffith's *comedies* from the Biograph period and thus dramatically expand the critical legacies I have outlined here.

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