Suspense and Resolution in the Films of D.W. Griffith

Suspense and Resolution in the Films of D.W. Griffith

By

George Pavlou

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Suspense and Resolution in the Films of D.W. Griffith

By George Pavlou

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1323-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1323-5

Dedicated
to my wife Liana
for her support
and encouragement

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the Museum of Modern Art in New York City for providing me with the majority of D. W. Griffith's films used in this publication

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

D. W. Griffith is considered one of the greatest innovators and directors that the film industry has known. His significance in the history of film is his innovations and contributions especially in the area of editing. Film editing, as we know it today, is the technique or process of cutting film, a powerful way of creating an illusion of reality relating things which have occurred separately. Editing film is "… the dynamics of converting bits of space into a single sequence of time."[1] There are certain principles in editing which are important and necessary in showing how editing can affect rhythm, time, space, and theme.[2] Though each editor has a personal style and approach to film, his style is largely a reflection of the director. Editing techniques generally conform to the director's approach to a film.

Griffith's editing techniques are best illustrated in his chase scenes. A filmic chase scene is a group of shots with continuous action involving a person chasing another or more specifically a pursuer and a pursued, whether human or not. A filmic chase can range from an "actual" chase where one is physically pursued by someone or something, to a "thematic" chase where one is non-physically pursued by someone, an idea, or something non-concrete such as revenge or hate. Chase scenes have been used in films since the beginning of cinema to serve different purposes. Such purposes include: showing action; giving continuity; following the script or storyline; developing filmic space and time; revealing a certain area of space; providing humor; distinguishing between the good and the bad; or establishing empathy, suspense or excitement so as to maintain the attention of the audience in order to reach a climax.[3] There can be a rather complicated network of combinations of pursuers and those pursued. In other words, in a chase there must be a "pair" (pursuer and pursued)

---

[1] Raymond Spottiswoode, *Film and its Techniques* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 106.

[2] Bernard F. Dick, *Anatomy of Film* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 44.

[3] The author has found this to be true by viewing and analysing the chase scenes of several films of the silent period.

whether it involves people, vehicles, objects, animals, or even unexpected supernatural forces. Generally, the pursuer or the pursued is a person or an animal for a more realistic sequence. Chase scenes involving monsters or unexplained supernatural forces, excluding the human element, seem to be in many cases, less believable because they appear as unrealistic. The most common pairs of pursuer and pursued used in chase scenes are: people v. people, people v. moving vehicles, vehicle v. vehicle, people v. supernatural forces, people v. animals, people v. monsters, and at times, vehicle v. animal.[4] Chase scenes can take place anywhere, whether on land, sea, air, or in space.

As it will be documented later, Griffith's editing techniques are directly associated with his chase scenes. While Griffith was experimenting with editing techniques, he must have realized that there is more depth behind editing and a greater range of possibilities when combined with other film elements than what was obvious until then. His basic mechanics in editing are the following:

1. Filmic time and space. Unlike real time, filmic time can violate the exactness of time in terms of the length and in going backwards or forwards. The actual size of space can be made to seem smaller or larger — a relationship to keep harmony and logic for the viewer.[5]
2. Parallel editing. Parallel editing is the repetition of the identical moment of time to connect two separate activities.[6]
3. Referential crosscutting. Referential crosscutting is cutting back and forth when parallel editing is used to express psychological concepts.[7]
4. Decomposition. Decomposition is the cutting to significant details in order to depict the environment in a more comprehensive manner.[8]

One of Griffith's most predominant techniques of editing is his parallel crosscutting technique: a series of shots edited in such a way so as to "depict simultaneous actions in such a manner as to bring out their

[4] Ibid., this will be further discussed and documented later within the book.
[5] Joseph Feldman and Harry Feldman, *Dynamics of the Film* (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), pp. 59, 74.
[6] Ibid., p. 75.
[7] Ibid., p. 95.
[8] Ibid., p. 95.

relationship, their meaning, their significance…" a way not only to present reality but interpreting it.[9]

By combining editing techniques with chase scenes, Griffith achieved a powerful phenomenon. By using his editing techniques, especially his parallel crosscutting technique, with chase scenes, Griffith could achieve a number of combined effects, such as creating excitement and suspense. Also, by controlling the length of each shot he could manage to control the emotions of the audience and achieve his desired effect leading to the climax of the film. In his film *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), for example, Griffith controls the length of each shot when he uses sixty-six shots to build a final sequence. A series of short shots are used ranging from 1 to 1 ¾ of a second to 6 seconds to enhance a feeling of danger. Griffith uses another series of shorter shots, ranging from 2 seconds to 5 seconds, to further intensify the danger. Then, in order to create suspense for a chase scene, Griffith breaks the tempo with a long, 13 second shot, then to a 3 second shot, and back to a longer 10 second shot. He then picks up the tempo again with short shots during a rescue attempt. Again, for suspense, he changes the tempo by using a long 24 second shot. The last shots get progressively shorter: 4 seconds, 3 seconds, 2 ½ seconds, and then 2 seconds. The actual rescue scenes last for 18 seconds. The final shot of the film runs for 15 seconds and holds the suspense at a high degree. The editing of the chase scenes in *The Lonedale Operator* indicates that Griffith's technique of building suspense involves a complex structure.[10]

This book concentrates on Griffith's editing techniques inherent to his chase scenes. Griffith introduced and developed his chase scenes through the development of his editing techniques. Perhaps Griffith's chase scenes reflect a perfection of film editing for his time and place in the history of filmmaking. One can still see aspects of Griffith's work even in films produced today.

In the field of cinema, many scholars have conducted studies on D. W. Griffith. Most research has dealt with his innovative techniques; however, Griffith's chase scenes have seldom been studied as a singular element. Generally, research studies neglect the importance and development of his chase scenes as a new innovation, in itself, a parallel to his editing techniques. These studies attempt to particularize the characteristics of D. W. Griffith that seemed to be of great importance in his career as a director and innovator.

---

[9] Ibid., p. 77-78.

[10] Robert M. Henderson, *D.W. Griffith: His Years at Biograph* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 175-6

> David Wark Griffith has tended to become, in recent years, a figure in cinema history attributed with innovations in film technique; the close-up, the flash back, crosscutting have all appeared in connection with his name. And so, it was that he is now in danger of achieving a widespread reputation merely as a technician: an innovator of cinematography.[11]

Studies have shown Griffith's innovations and how they are used today as the basics of film technique. Though it has been implied by some of the studies that Griffith was not the first to attempt to use the innovations, such as the chase scenes, George Mitchell points out that Griffith was the first to successfully apply them:

> The "chase" technique was also being used by Bitzer (Griffith's cameraman) as well as other filmmakers but Griffith was certainly the first director to successfully exploit these innovations, and this, in the final analysis, is what counted most.[12]

Griffith uses the chase scenes to develop the most climactic parts of his films, especially in the "… closing sequences of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), the climactic moments are expanded to an extraordinary degree of intensity,"[13] Within his chase scenes, Griffith often used music to reinforce the effect of the climax.

> Griffith conceived all such scenes with suitable musical accompaniment in mind… the orchestra that accompanied it raised its emotional temperature here far more effectively than speech alone could have done it.[14]

Griffith's chase scenes have been successfully used as the basics for chase sequences in the films of other major directors. This will be more thoroughly documented in Chapter II.

> They are the type and model for similar climaxes in the works of Eisenstein's…Odessa steppes sequence (chase scene) of *Potemkin* (1925) … and Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926). [15]

---

[11] Paul O'Dell, *Griffith and the Rise of Hollywood* (New York: A.S. Barns, 1970), p. 7.
[12] George Mitchell, "The film Artistry of D.W. Griffith and Billy Bitzer," *American Cinematographer* 50 (January 1969): 89.
[13] Feldman, *Dynamics of the Film*, p. 2.
[14] Edward Wagenknecht and Anthony Slide, *The Films of D. W. Griffith* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970), p. 184.
[15] Feldman, *Dynamics of the Film*, p. 123.

This is a research study of Griffith's chase scenes, a "device" intended to control the emotions of the audience and thus generate the desired impact for the climax. The author proposes that Griffith's chase scenes are unique. This book will attempt to identify editing techniques simultaneously with Griffith's development of chase scenes, one enforcing the other, and will show the building to the climax. The book will relate the direct association and interconnection of editing and chase scenes with the other elements on which Griffith's fame rests. According to Lennig, Griffith

> proved himself a great innovator, a master of editing, a director able to control his viewers passions and evoke their awe: he proved that films could be important.[16]

Although this book will concentrate on the silent period of cinema, it can apply to a certain extent and help one in other studies dealing with contemporary film in relating how Griffith's film techniques are also seen and applied in cinema today. "The basis of film technique as practiced today is to be found in the works of D. W. Griffith."[17]

[16] Arthur Lennig, "D. W. Griffith and the Making of an Unconventional Masterpiece," *Film Journal* 1 (Fall – Winter 1972): 2.
[17] Feldman, *Dynamics of the Film*, p. 39.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON D.W. GRIFFITH

The purpose of this section is to lay a theoretical basis for this study as well as to present the studies related to it. In this section, the author shall present a review of the methods of some of the research on D.W. Griffith while expanding further, where applicable, for the purpose of a comprehensive understanding on the subject. The main observation in this review will be the consistent lack of concentration on D.W. Griffith's chase scenes singularly. A number of studies have centered on D.W. Griffith. These deal with different aspects of Griffith, namely biographical; and historical comprehensive accounts, case studies on selected films, and the mechanics of the film technique. Many of these studies combine these aspects. Although the studies are somehow specialized in their content, there is no single study, which has specifically dealt with Griffith's chase scenes and their editing.

Griffith's significance in the history of film has been observed and noted by several authors. Since Griffith's background is really theater, it is proper to first present a study done by A. Nicholas Vardac, titled *Stage to Screen*. This study concentrates on presenting how cinema originated from theater—nineteenth-century theater—and how the aesthetic roots of the film technique are nothing other than theatrical methods, specifically those of melodrama. The study clearly indicates how the nineteenth-century melodrama employed certain episodic techniques, which were more compatible to the new medium of cinema, and which were later adopted within the film technique.

> The cinematic characteristics of the popular stage of the century were most evident in stock melodrama. This form required the presentation of a series of stage pictures for the development of the narrative, managed either through a continuous flow of these pictorial episodes in a single line of action, or, more frequently, depending upon a cross-cutting or flash-back

> between parallel lines of action, and employing methods of scene changing analogous to the film dissolve or the fade-out and the fade-in.[18]

This editorial pattern was done at the expense of time and space limitations and was more suited to the cinema syntax as proved by Porter and even more so by Griffith. These techniques of the stage melodrama resulted in such basic film techniques as the cut-back, fade-out and fade-in, the dissolve, the change in the point of view, the close-up, and the pan. As Vardac states,

> During these years the art of the motion picture lacked the development and refinement brought by D.W. Griffith, yet its acceptance as a medium of theatrical entertainment was immediate. If a connection exists between the nineteenth-century stage and the screen, it may be found in these early years.[19]

Though Vardac's study concentrates on historically tracing the origins of cinema syntax back to the nineteenth-century melodrama and relating theater and cinema in a comprehensive manner, it is not the intent of this study to concentrate or investigate this area. But, Vardac's study is useful in specifically tracing the origins of the cinematic chase and eventually Griffith's chases, back to the nineteenth-century melodrama. Vardac indicates how the chase was an important element in the nineteenth-century melodrama in terms of building suspense and excitement, necessary for the climax.

> But the chief spectacle of the play [Dion Boucicault's melodrama, *After Dark* (1900)] was the scenic innovation of the railroad scene. Needless to say, the conception itself as well as the manner by which it was exploited in the script was cinematic. Chumley has been secured to the rails outside a stone cellar in which Old Tom has been incarcerated. Suspense arises from the obvious chase sequence: will Tom rescue Chumley before the train arrives? The editorial pattern of the stage pictures is rudimentary. Chumley is lashed to the tracks. Then the scene is flashed to Tom on the forestage frantically striving to break through painted cellar flats. "Cellar in 1st grooves; dark circular hole center in Flat, showing through it to the platform on which train of cars cross R. to L.; only the wheels of them are visible from front," Chumley is on the other side. After a single speech, Tom breaks through the wall and the scene is run off, "dissolving" into a fresh angle of the same episode. The underground railroad is shown from

[18] A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p.237.
[19] Ibid., p. 165.

> the other side of the wall, which Old Tom has just penetrated. As the lights come up, Tom squirms through a hole in the wall to rescue Chumley on the rails.[20]

Also, concerning Boucicault's play *The Octoroon*, Vardac says,

> The McCloskey-Wahnotee chase sequence reaches its climax immediately after the death of Zoe and is shown as a tableau, pre-set behind the flats of The Parlor at Terrebonne. "Stage becomes dark, the scene opens and discovers the scene of the landing. Paul's grave R. the River at back. McCloskey is stretched across the grave, with his neck traversed with blood. Indian Wahnotee standing over him. Red fire. Slow curtain." The sensational fifth act has been developed with parallel lines of action forming two chase sequences which build into and are resolved by two pictorial climaxes, the self-poisoning of Zoe and the knifing of McCloskey by Wahnotee, the whole business of being mounted into a kaleidoscopic fashion suggestive of motion-picture montage.[21]

Similarly, Vardac indicates in another part how Wilson Barrett's Edinburgh and London theatrical production of *Quo Vadis* reached a climax in the third act through an "elaborate chase sequence developed with seven scenes."[22]

Vardac in his study goes on to indicate specifics about certain techniques, which existed prior to the coming of cinema. What came to be known as "tempo increase" in cinema, is a technique, which was attempted before the motion picture. Vardac says,

> Prior to the arrival of the film, Belasco made certain attempts, in his presentation of melodrama, to increase the speed of scene changes. He saw the possibility for developing greater suspense and climax through more rapid pictorial cross-cutting between parallel lines of action. In this connection his production of Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1863) at the Baldwin Theatre, San Francisco, June 12, 1881, is an interesting case. To develop maximum climax in the chase sequence between Wahnotee and McCloskey, he sought a staging technique, which would facilitate rapid pictorial cross-cutting.[23]

Similarly, what came to be known as "panning" in cinema, is a melodrama technique. Vardac says,

---

[20] Ibid., p. 48.
[21] Ibid., p. 46.
[22] Ibid., p. 78.
[23] Ibid., pp. 122-123.

> In a film, *Personal* (1904), directed by Wallace McCutcheon, Sr., the "chase," a clumsy technique of nineteenth-century melodrama theater was, according to F.J. Marion of Kalem Pictures, accidentally filmed for the first time…The actor personating the Frenchman, confronted by this tidal wave of impassioned femininity, disregarded the script and turned tail in his first bid for freedom. The girls madly after him, spurred in the frolic by laughter of the studio crowd, over hedges under park benches, all over the place. Director McCutcheon seized the moment, "panorama'd" the camera, and followed the chase—now the girls, now the Frenchman. The unrehearsed pursuit was kept in and the film's length extended to 675 feet. The free "panning" of the camera throughout the chase, adding to the realism and the sensationalism of the picture had unwittingly attempted a technique of the melodrama stage.[24]

In a general sense, Vardac says that the melodramatic editorial pattern of film, which derives directly from the editorial pattern of nineteenth-century stage melodrama,

> was supported by photographic realism and pictorial sensations, the first by means of location shooting and the second through the use of such fluid and spectacular cinematic techniques as pictorial continuity, forward cutting, cross-cutting, or flashing back. These devices and the simultaneous development of a number of parallel lines of action became the platform upon which the feature of the film was secured.[25]

Also, "according to the customary melodramatic film structure, it became necessary to deliver a closing emotional punch, a chase sequence was introduced."[26]

Vardac in his study dedicates a whole chapter on Griffith. He briefly elaborates on Griffith's beginning as an author and actor who entered motion pictures in 1907. He then explains and gives examples from films, how Griffith made extensive use of the pictorial-cutting technique, which originates in stage melodrama, in his chase sequences (especially during the last-minute rescue technique) for the same purpose, to create suspense climax. Vardac also explains how "music, an integral part of nineteenth-century melodrama and spectacle…"[27] was utilized by Griffith in his films in the same manner." …to heighten the intensity of the scene,"[28]

---

[24] Ibid., pp. 171-172.
[25] Ibid., p.184.
[26] Ibid., p.217.
[27] Ibid., p. 209.
[28] Ibid., p. 209.

Vardac concludes the chapter on Griffith by saying that Griffith in his film *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) (his first attempt at a feature-length film) used the techniques of the stage. Vardac says,

> He [Griffith] took his material directly from the stage and surpassed the stage in its production. In this way, presenting a romantic historical spectacle in an authentic and lavish fashion within the melodramatic cinematic structure, Griffith produced the first American four-reel photoplay. He appears, then as the strongest and most successful of the early screen continuators of nineteenth-century melodrama and spectacle, of realism and romance.[29]

Robert M. Henderson's dissertation, "The Role of David Wark Griffith in the Development of the Dramatic Motion Picture, 1908-1913,"[30] is one of the most comprehensive studies done on Griffith and has proved to be very beneficial to this study. This original research covers the five years (1908-1913) that Griffith worked for the Biograph Company making hundreds of films. Although Henderson's study concentrates on a period which this study does not specifically investigate, it provides significant details of Griffith's early experiences as a film director and descriptions of the films themselves, thus offering a clear understanding of this developing stage of film as art. Henderson's study is especially helpful to this one in that it provides specific information about Griffith's early innovations and technical contributions from a historic perspective. It gives valuable information about specific techniques that had been used before him, but, which were either accidental or not used for the same reason or effect as their predecessors used them. This information has helped this author to understand and fill some gaps in establishing the categories necessary for analysing Griffith's chase scenes.

Among several innovations, Henderson emphasizes the use of the close-up—but in the way that Griffith meant it. As already mentioned, Griffith was not necessarily the first to use some of the techniques or innovations of pioneer filmmaking. The close-up specifically, attributed to Porter in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), "was not even an accepted technique within the structure of the dramatic story."[31] In his film *For Love of Gold* (1908) during a card game scene Griffith wanted to show the reaction of the card players. The traditional medium shot did not show the

---

[29] Ibid., p.210.
[30] Robert M. Henderson, "The Role of David Wark Griffith in the Development of the Dramatic Motion Picture, 1908-1913" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1965).
[31] Ibid., p.96.

faces clearly, so he moved the camera closer until the expression on the faces was captured. Griffith used the close-up dialectically and managed to communicate visually the thoughts of a character and do away with the cartoon balloons with titles, a very graphic form of communication, which up until then was the method to show the thoughts of a character. By doing so, he had two shots in the scene rather than one, providing that the scene and a shot were not synonymous.[32]

Also, Griffith's use of the close-up in this dialectic manner brought the actors closer to the viewer in an emotional sense. Not only could the audience 'read' their thoughts, but also get closer to their emotional state, a totally new definition of the close-up which other directors soon followed. As Griffith said in 1921: "When I first photographed players at close range, my management and patrons described a method that showed only the face of the story characters. Today the close-up is employed by nearly all directors to bring a picture audience to an intimate acquaintance with an actor's emotions."[33]

As Henderson quotes Wagenknecht

> One might say that the Griffith technical devices were most validated by the fact that others had used them; if this had not been so, their use would have been freakish and arbitrary on his part. This was the right way to tell a story in film, and Griffith had the wit to discern it. He built on the foundations his predecessors had laid and took up everything of value that they had often accidentally and incomprehensively discovered. All this he had deliberately, intelligently manipulated and developed.[34]

Henderson indicates how Griffith's cameraman, Billy Bitzer, helped Griffith in some of his innovations, such as the vignette mask and the semi-fade-out. The vignette mask, for example, was accidentally discovered by Bitzer, and Griffith realized that it can be used for emphasis on a figure.

Similarly, Griffith used the flash-back to build suspense (a different purpose than the obvious one to remind the viewer of a past event and /or reveal an actor's thought visually). As Griffith himself said, "I adopted the flash-back to build suspense, which till then had been a missing quantity in picture dramas. Instead of showing a continuous view of a girl floating downstream in a barrel, [as was the case in *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908)] I cut into the film by flashing back to incidents that contributed to

[32] Ibid., p. 84.
[33] Ibid., p.228.
[34] Ibid., pp. 223-224.

the scene and explained it."[35] A good example of this exists in Griffith's film *Way Down East* (1920), during the sequence where Anna is lying unconscious on a chunk of ice floating downstream towards the falls, Griffith cuts the film and flashes to previous incidents that contributed to the present situation for the purpose of building suspense.

Among other Griffith innovations and contributions that Henderson lists and elaborates on and which are significant to this study are: the switchback—cutting back and forth to shots of two different actions; sustained suspense by expanding time; a greater variety of camera positions and camera angles; the moving camera contribution; increase of tempo; and the contribution towards film content in terms of the emotional, dramatic, intellectual and aesthetic.

As Henderson shows through his book, chase scenes (in their literal meaning) in Griffith's films were more or less a must. In fact, when *After Many Years* (1908) (a film without chase scenes) was to be directed by D.W. Griffith, Linda Griffith commented: "It was the first movie without a chase. That was something, for those days, a movie without a chase was not a movie. How could a movie be made without a chase? How could there be suspense? How action? [36]

Henderson elaborates on Griffith's editing, saying that it was an entirely new dimension with which Griffith had experimented extensively, parallel to his other film techniques and innovations, and his fame as the 'father of American cinema' results largely on his great contributions in the area of editing especially because "…there was no theory of editorial process to guide the development of the production"[37] at the time. It is important to mention here that at this time when there was not a definite editorial process to follow, Griffith shot and edited his films without a prepared shooting script, thus depending largely on his memory. Henderson quotes Albert R. Fulton,

> Now that the making of motion pictures has become a specialized but diversified process, a director is favored if he is permitted to edit his own films. That part of the process is usually assigned to a specialist in editing. But Griffith…was his own editor. It is difficult to imagine how his films could have been edited otherwise, for not only did he shoot his pictures without a prepared script, but only he knew how the parts were to be fitted together.[38]

---

[35] Ibid., p.228.
[36] Ibid., p.39.
[37] Ibid., p. 225.
[38] Ibid., pp.224-225.

Henderson quotes Lillian Gish with a similar observation,

> "…all his pictures were conceived in detail and carried in his head. The only written words were put down by the cutter, Jim Smith, whose work was to assemble the film in sequence and cut it through length after all scenes were taken. Jimmy came to the final rehearsal and would write a synopsis of what was enacted before him to use subsequently in piecing together the story."[39]

Henderson's comments on specific editorial techniques and his sporadic comments on chases have helped this author in understanding certain technical relationships among his innovations and expanding further in Griffith's chase scenes. Henderson mentions that Griffith's editorial technique of crosscutting (the switch-back) had been more developed in chase sequences and that it was generally used for suspense, reference, and contrast in his films. Henderson indicates that the switch-back is one of Griffith's genuine contributions.

> The switchback, or in its variant the flashback, would appear to be a genuine contribution in developing the editorial process. Its first appearance would seem to have been in *The Fatal Hour* [1908], Griffith's ninth film. Research has failed to demonstrate the use of this device for parallel action prior to this film by any producer. With this Griffith was able to relate two or more actions occurring simultaneously by interweaving shots from both actions [1908], i.e., crosscutting."[40]

Henderson indicates further how sustained suspense was a direct result of the switchback and how Griffith discovered that time could be shortened or expanded and, therefore, the tempo would be altered. Henderson quotes Sergei Eisenstein,

> Griffith primarily is the greatest master of the most graphic form in this field—a master of *parallel montage*. Above all else, Griffith is a great master of montage constructions that have been created in direct-line quickening and *increase of tempo* (chiefly in the direction of the higher forms of parallel montage). The school of Griffith before all else is a school of *tempo*.[41]

Henderson's study has also been important in providing a clearer understanding of certain innovations and contributions of Griffith which

---

[39] Ibid., p.225.
[40] Ibid., pp.231-232
[41] Ibid., p.227

relate to others, such as his crosscutting technique and the increase of tempo for suspense. Henderson indicates that by increasing the length of shots in parallel actions, Griffith discovered that he could expand and contract time, respectively. Although other directors in Biograph started using Griffith's last-minute rescue by 1910, Griffith's supervision and approval were still necessary. Henderson says, "Mack Sennet had joined Frank Powell as comedy director, and Powell was now making standard melodramas using Griffith's last-minute rescue."[42]

But Griffith's last-minute rescue technique also became an integral part of his chase sequences for it had more or less become the most climactic part of his chase scenes. Through the different crosscutting techniques in his chases, Griffith was developing his editing techniques further. As Henderson indicates, "Griffith also improved on the techniques of gaining suspense through delay. The headlong process of arriving in time for the rescue is temporarily halted through some device. In *The Lonely Villa* (1909) this is accomplished by raising a drawbridge in the path of the rescuing automobile. The heroes do, at the last conceivable moment, manage to get through the rising bridge and continue on their way."[43] A similar chase sequence with some deliberate delay device exists in the film *The Lonedale Operator* (1911). In this chase, a telegraph girl at a railroad station is trying to telegraph another station close-by for help when two robbers are trying to break into her office and steal the bag with the payroll. The delay device that Griffith uses here is crosscutting between the girl trying to get help and the other operator on the other end being asleep. Griffith manages to achieve even greater suspense with his very rhythmic crosscutting back and forth. As Griffith does so, he increases the tempo by shortening the shots until the operator on the other end finally wakes up and help to rescue the telegrapher is on the way. When the robbers finally break inside the office Griffith increases the tempo by shortening the shots even more until the last-minute rescue.

Another finding, which appears in Henderson's "conclusions and recommendations for further study," has been especially helpful to this author in understanding Griffith's editorial process and his way of thinking, and eventually understanding his chases. Henderson quotes Griffith: "All drama must of necessity be conflict—battle, fight. How are we to depict the right unless we show the wrong?"[44] Griffith's words of drama being conflict has led this author to realize that the core of Griffith's chases is also conflict. He cuts back and forth from the pursuer

[42] Ibid., p.179.
[43] Ibid., p.114.
[44] Ibid., p.229.

to the pursued during his chases, thus reinforcing the conflict. He amplifiers the conflict even more during his chase scenes when he introduces or interweaves other elements or devices for the purpose of building suspense and impact. But conflict (together with contrast) is also the basis of Griffith's films. He establishes "the conflict" of his story relatively early in his films, and before the final climax of the last chase he introduces semi crises or conflicts (often unresolved), which will amplify the final chase even more. These conflicts range from minor to major and from direct to indirect, which is also the case with his chases. Both his conflicts and chases have the same characteristics and although a chase should be the result of a conflict in a literal sense, Griffith almost uses them and defines them through his films synonymously. Griffith handles the degree of conflict in his films in the same way he does in his chases. The way he establishes a complicated series of conflicts, which collectively accumulate to a greater final conflict, is the same way he establishes his chases. This made the author realize that when Griffith crosscuts in a thematic way, he presents a form of chase—thematic chase—as will be presented later in this book. It is in this context that Griffith's chases started to develop into a powerful multi-device (combining actual and thematic chases), as will be discussed in a later part of this book.

Finally, Henderson's study is helpful to this research in indicating the uniqueness of Griffith's chases at the time. Henderson indicates that Griffith was not afraid to take sides with certain characters[45] in his films for the sake of sentimental and emotional impact. As Henderson says,

> Griffith's interest in giving a fair and honest presentation of the American Indian was unusual for his time, and it is almost as unusual today. The second exception would be Griffith's concern with the relationship between the poor and the rich. Almost invariably, when the two chases came together in the same film, Griffith portrayed the poor sympathetically and the rich scorn with derision…He was not afraid to take the side of social reform…

Joyce Jesionowski's dissertation, "A Visual Narrative: Structure in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908-1913)," deals with Griffith's narrative which is based on the decomposition of a dramatic situation by fragmenting it into shots and rearranging them into a different assembly. Jesionowski has studied filmic space in Biograph films and observed that

[45] The characters with whom Griffith takes sides are among the pursuers and/or the pursued.

although there is a deep field there is a limitation in terms of the continuation of space beyond the frame limits. As a result, she studied and observed Griffith's attempts, through different techniques, to bring out more space. These techniques attempting to bring out more space resulted in certain repeated patterns of action, which were strong in defining the dramatic place in Griffith's films.

Jesionowski also observed that through the use of intercutting from one thing or situation to another, Griffith was able to produce certain relationships among the shots, which also involved the audience more. As she says,

> But audience participation has everything to do with the final impact of a Griffith film. Resistance, facilitation, resolution, tension, clarity, ambiguity, strong graphic orientation, lack of graphic orientation—all were aspects of the experience of a Griffith film, and all are the basis from which the narrative effect of the film emanates.[46] She also observed that in terms of filmic space and film time Griffith's intercutting of repeated shots, produced a certain psychology and emotion.

Jesionowski also observed that the diagonal movement in Griffith's early chase sequences was used by Griffith to create a sense of continuity, while it was done at the expense of "matching" action at entrances and exits. This observation has helped in raising the author's awareness to the different patterns of movement in respect to filmic space in Griffith's later chases.

Processions and chases in Biograh films made before Griffith, she says, "are attempts to organize activity in the frame…The comic effect of the French accumulation farce [such as the chases in Ferdinand Zecca's films after 1904] depended on the gathering momentum of activity as the weight of more and more bodies was thrown into the chase and the spatial limits of the scene were strained to the breaking point with action or speed,"[47]

Jesionowski indicates that although Griffith borrowed ideas from the French comic chase (such as the accumulated effect which was funnier) he redefined the chase by cutting into a series of shots for more impact. Griffith also dealt with more dramatic chases during which he also began to crosscut for the sake of tension.

---

[46] Joyce E. Jesionowski, "A Visual Narrative: Structure in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908-1913)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1981), p.6.
[47] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

Summarizing Jesionowski's observations on Griffith, which pertain to his early chases she comments:

> The turning point in Griffith's career, and the turning point in film history, was the realization that the continuity and impact of action is created in the cinema. The redefinition of screen activity is perhaps one of Griffith's most impressive contributions to the cinema…Griffith arrived at an understanding of the radical nature of the cut in terms of three basic principles: that basic shots are not only units of construction, Porter's basic intuition, but that they are repeatable; that continuous action could be expanded over discontinuous space; and that the transformation of activity into a visual narrative process took place in the relationship between such shots…The effect of such cinema is cumulative to the point of transformation…Griffith quickly reaches for the determination of the duration of action by the cut and the impact of action within the resulting shot. This awareness is founded on the discovery of the power of the relationship between shots…Griffith's contribution to the development of screen action was the creation of drama from the tension between shots, the creation of excitement from the audience's apprehension of relationship between shots as well as from the enjoyment of the activity that occurred within those shots.[48]

Though Jesionowski's study concentrates heavily on the narrative structure in Griffith's films, the observations relating to the early chases of Griffith have been helpful in providing the author with a better understanding of the origins of Griffith's chases as well as indicating certain uniqueness about Griffith's early chases, which is important to this study. These observations have also been beneficial in raising the author's consciousness to certain specifics while reviewing and analysing Griffith's chases.

Deutelbaum's dissertation, "Process and Circularity in Primitive Film Narrative: Narrative Patterns from Optical Toys to D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*"[49], interprets the ways early filmmakers shaped the camera-recorded action into narrative developments through manipulation and camera technique in a need to establish a cinematic structure to the linear approach that existed. Among other early films, from the turn of the century, Deutelbaum analyses and examines some films made by D.W. Griffith, which he describes as circular in their structure because of editing. He finally analyses Griffith's film *Intolerance* (1916), for new

[48] Ibid., pp.90-91

[49] Allen Marshal Deutelbaum, "Process and Circularity in Primitive Film Narrative: Narrative Patterns from Optical Toys to D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Rochester, 1978).

structural insights of film and determines it to be a combination of both linear and circular processes.

Though this study devotes a chapter on Griffith's *Intolerance* and makes a few references to certain techniques, it does not relate any information to chases. Deutelbaum concentrates solely on the narrative and thematic aspects of the film in an effort to determine structural insights.

Deutelbaum's study does not fall within the area of this study but similarly to Jesionowski's study, it has provided the author with a clear understanding of the patterns and structures within film at the time and eventually of chases.

Barry Salt's study, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, [50] is of great importance to this study in that it provides the background of the film style and technology, chronologically, from 1895 to the 1970s. He gives specific details about the film developments, whether stylistic or technical, for each period.

During the period, 1900-1906, Salt discovered the following:

1. The major problem at the time was the action continuity problem.
2. The use and adoption of the Melies dissolve, which was not confined to the United States.
3. The continuous shot-to-shot movement. Salt says,

> The continuation of the development of action continuity through shots cut directly together occurs in James Williamson's *Stop Thief* (1901) and *Fire* (1902). The first of these films is the source of subsequent developments in "chase" films, and it is made up of three shots.[51]

4. The existence of linear direction of movement.
5. The existence of the comedy-chase film involving linear continuity without cutbacks to an established scene and without intertitles between shots.
6. The existence of scene direction (cutting a scene into a number of shots and the point of view).
7. Cuts to other directions (change in camera angle and position).
8. The existence of camera movement; panning and tracking, though tracking was rare.

---

[50] Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983).
[51] Ibid., p.53.

During the period, 1907-1913, Salt discovered the following:

1. Camera movement included pans, tilts, and tracking, though tracking was still rare.
2. The use of foreground including its use by Griffith.
3. Griffith started to use a larger portion of the shots in his film in medium shot, rather than the long and full shot, which was the norm. By 1913, others were also shooting in closer shots.
4. Griffith expanded filmic space for the sake of a greater number of shots (within the same length of film) and for delay and suspense.

> …he developed the practice of transferring part of the action of a scene into adjoining hallways and rooms even when this was not necessary…The other way that Griffith used what we might call "the space beside" was to provide an extra delaying stage in the advance of villains on his helpless heroines in his suspense films—the next room had one more door they had to break down while the rescuers got closer in a cross-cut scene of parallel action.[52]

5. Griffith developed cross-cutting. Although it existed prior to Griffith, it was not developed. Salt says,

> Griffith certainly developed the device much further, gradually increasing the number of alterations between the two, and later three, sets of parallel scenes, and also their speed…It is also important to note that Griffith described cross-cutting indiscriminately as the "switch-back" or "flash-back" technique, and that by the last of these terms he did not mean what we now understand by "flash-back."[53]

6. The existence of dialogue titles, though not extensively used.
7. Griffith made the fade popular, though he did not invent it. He established the convention that a fade-out represents a time lapse between shots.
8. The iris (in/out) begins in 1913, but it still remains uncertain whether Griffith or Thomas Ince started it.
9. Though reverse angles existed, Griffith only used them as point-of-view cuts.
10. Matching cuts were still poor. Griffith was not interested in matching cuts, therefore, in continuity.

---

[52] Ibid, p.109.
[53] Ibid., p.111.