

Broken Blossoms

By Ed Gonzalez

No dialectic approach to film form would be complete without discussing the innovations cultivated by D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein in the early 1900s. Just as Eisenstein's radical principles of montage would forever inform the way films were cut and consumed, Griffith's equally essential narrative and aesthetic innovations were becoming overshadowed by the controversy surrounding his epic Civil War reconstruction epic "The Birth of a Nation." Coincidentally, "Intolerance" would irrevocably inspire budding Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Kuleshov when the film was shown in the USSR in 1919, and if Griffith's legacy remains tarnished to this day, it's impossible to fathom the state of modern cinema without the influence of his artistic advances, such as his refinement of such techniques as the iris shot, the mask, or the simple flashback.

Between 1908 and 1913, Griffith made over 450 films for the New York-based Biograph Company, perhaps none more memorable than the 17-minute one-reel "The Lonedale Operator," about a substitute telegraph operator (played by Blanch Sweet) who must fend off a group of bandits. The film's technical innovations were then unheard of, and upon its release the film was considered by some to be the most thrilling picture ever produced. Griffith is still mostly remembered for "The Birth of a Nation" and "Intolerance," but many rightfully recognize 1919's "Broken Blossoms" (also known as "The Yellow Man and the Girl") as his towering achievement.

"Broken Blossoms," which stars Lillian Gish as a poor girl from London's seedy Limehouse district who's brutally abused her father and later falls in



Richard Barthelmess watches a sleeping Lillian Gish with adoration.
Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

love with a Chinese man, is often regarded and dismissed as Griffith's apology for his celebration of the Klu Klux Klan in "The Birth of a Nation." Because "Broken Blossoms" is so earnest a portraiture of an impossible love between the races, it's tempting to accept Griffith's claims that he didn't mean any harm with "The Birth of a Nation." Griffith, of course, was too smart to allow a film like "Broken Blossoms" to be taken as a simple blanket apology. Via the film's poetic intertitles, Griffith not only addresses the complicated love between Lucy Burrows (Gish) and Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), but the critics who accused him of racism with "the whip of unkind words and deeds."

Though they weren't financially successful, films like "The Musketeers of Pig Alley" and "The Mother and the Law" were largely concerned with the plights of poor working people. The love story at the center of "Broken Blossoms" is deliberately overstuffed, but unmistakably colored with infinite shades of biting irony and social critique. Griffith painstakingly evokes China as a serene Buddhist paradise, but Cheng's philosophy of life is really no different than that of any good Christian. (Cheng tells a group of skylarking sailors: "What thou dost not want others to do to thee, do thou not to others.") Cheng arrives in the godless streets of London and is soon seen as just another "chink storekeeper." He's handed a book about the perils of hell from a group of missionaries leaving for China on their way to convert so-called heathens, though they're clearly oblivious to the horrors that reside within their own "scarlet house of sin."

The film's feminist appeal lies in Griffith's photojournalistic evocation of the Limehouse district as a deathtrap for women. Lucy is advised against marriage by a woman who washes clothes for a roomful of sweaty children and later bumps into a couple of prostitutes outside. Just as Griffith felt he was falsely accused of racism, the film's heroine constantly suffers the scorn of her vicious father. Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp) is a monster, but Griffith understands the man's frustrated desire to lash out against something (here, his own daughter) in the face of economic and masculine defeat. So horrible is Lucy's torture at the hands of her father that she has to literally sculpt a smile from her perpetually downtrodden expression using the tips of her fingers. Beaten to a pulp by Battling, Lucy seeks refuge inside Cheng's shop. She faints on the rug like a broken flower and awakens as his White Blossom.

"Her beauty so long hidden shines out like a poem," declares one of the film's intertitles, and Griffith recognizes the simple yet incredible power of an unforced smile. Cheng feeds this beauty with the rays he steals from the lyric moon. Because cinematic convention forbade physical contact between his actors, Griffith had to settle for grand poetic gestures and dramatic artifice to evoke the rapturous, nurturing love between Lucy and Cheng. For Griffith, "Broken Blossoms" was intended in part as a supreme act of reconciliation, but the film works less self-consciously as an ode to misdirected contempt, selfless love, and various modes of worship. Just as the film's extended boxing sequence is an act of brutal masculine reverence, Griffith recognizes Cheng's love for Lucy as an act of holy worship. Because social convention forbids their love, Lucy and Cheng persevere in death. And Griffith lovingly and hauntingly evokes this transcendence via a shot of a man worshipping in a Buddhist temple and ships dancing in the distant horizon.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Ed Gonzalez is the film editor of Slant Magazine, which he co-founded in 2001. His writing has appeared in City Pages, The Village Voice, and the Los Angeles Times. He's a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and a member of the New York Film Critics Circle, the Online Film Critics Society, and the New York Film Critics Online.