

*From: "Dickens, Griffith,
and the Film Today," by
Sergei Eisenstein (1944)*

When Griffith proposed to his employers the novelty of a parallel "cut-back" for his first version of *Enoch Arden* (*After Many Years*, 1908), this is the discussion that took place, as recorded by Linda Arvidson Griffith in her reminiscences of Biograph days:

When Mr. Griffith suggested a scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband's return to be followed by a scene of Enoch cast away on a desert island, it was altogether too distracting. "How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won't know what it's about."

"Well," said Mr. Griffith, "doesn't Dickens write that way?"
"Yes, but that's Dickens; that's novel writing; that's different."
"Oh, not so much, these are picture stories; not so different."³

But, to speak quite frankly, all astonishment on this subject and the apparent unexpectedness of such statements can be ascribed only to our—ignorance of Dickens.

All of us read him in childhood, gulped him down greedily, without realizing that much of his irresistibility lay not only in his capture of detail in the childhoods of his heroes, but also in (that spontaneous, childlike skill for story-telling, equally typical for Dickens and for the American cinema,) which so surely and delicately plays upon the infantile traits in its audience. We were even less concerned with the technique of Dickens's composition: for us this was non-existent—but captivated by the effects of this technique, we feverishly followed his characters from page to page, watching his characters now being rubbed from view at the most critical moment, then seeing them return afresh between the separate links of the parallel secondary plot.

As children, we paid no attention to the mechanics of this. As adults, we rarely re-read his novels. And becoming film-workers, we never found time to glance beneath the covers of these novels in order to figure out what exactly had captivated us in these novels and with what means these incredibly many-paged volumes had chained our attention so irresistibly.

Apparently Griffith was more perceptive . . .

But before disclosing what the steady gaze of the American film-maker may have caught sight of on Dickens's pages, I wish to recall what David Wark Griffith himself represented to us, the young Soviet film-makers of the 'twenties.

To say it simply and without equivocation: a revelation.

Try to remember our early days, in those first years of the October socialist revolution. The fires *At the Hearthsides* of our native film-producers had burnt out, the *Nava's Charms* *

* *Nava's Charms* (by Sologub) and *At the Hearthside*, two pre-Revolutionary Russian films, as is also *Forget the Hearth*. The names that follow are of the male and female film stars of this period.—EDITOR.

of their productions had lost their power over us and, whispering through pale lips, "Forget the hearth," Khudoleyev and Runich, Polonsky and Maximov had departed to oblivion; Vera Kholodnaya to the grave; Mozhukhin and Lisenko to expatriation.

The young Soviet cinema was gathering the experience of revolutionary reality, of first experiments (Vertov), of first systematic ventures (Kuleshov), in preparation for that unprecedented explosion in the second half of the 'twenties, when it was to become an independent, mature, original art, immediately gaining world recognition.

In those early days a tangle of the widest variety of films was projected on our screens. From out of this weird hash of old Russian films and new ones that attempted to maintain "traditions," and new films that could not yet be called Soviet, and foreign films that had been imported promiscuously, or brought down off dusty shelves—two main streams began to emerge.

On the one side there was the cinema of our neighbor, post-war Germany. Mysticism, decadence, dismal fantasy followed in the wake of the unsuccessful revolution of 1923, and the screen was quick to reflect this mood. *Nosferatu the Vampire*, *The Street*, the mysterious *Warning Shadows*, the mystic criminal *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*,* reaching out towards us from our screens, achieved the limits of horror, showing us a future as an unrelieved night crowded with sinister shadows and crimes. . . .

The chaos of multiple exposures, of over-fluid dissolves, of split screens, was more characteristic of the later 'twenties (as in *Looping the Loop* or *Secrets of a Soul* †), but earlier German films contained more than a hint of this tendency. In the

* *Nosferatu* (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau; *Die Strasse* (1923), directed by Karl Grune; *Schatten* (1923), directed by Arthur Robison; *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), directed by Fritz Lang.

† *Looping the Loop* (1928), directed by Arthur Robison; *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (1926), directed by G. W. Pabst.

over-use of these devices was also reflected the confusion and chaos of post-war Germany.

All these tendencies of mood and method had been foreshadowed in one of the earliest and most famous of these films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), this barbaric carnival of the destruction of the healthy human infancy of our art, this common grave for normal cinema origins, this combination of silent hysteria, particolored canvases, daubed flats, painted faces, and the unnatural broken gestures and actions of monstrous chimaeras.

Expressionism left barely a trace on our cinema. This painted, hypnotic "St. Sebastian of Cinema" was too alien to the young, robust spirit and body of the rising class.

It is interesting that during those years inadequacies in the field of film technique played a positive rôle. They helped to restrain from a false step those whose enthusiasm might have pulled them in this dubious direction. Neither the dimensions of our studios, nor our lighting equipment, nor the materials available to us for make-up, costumes, or setting, gave us the possibility to heap onto the screen similar phantasmagoria. But it was chiefly another thing that held us back: our spirit urged us towards life—amidst the people, into the surging actuality of a regenerating country. Expressionism passed into the formative history of our cinema as a powerful factor—of repulsion.

There was the rôle of another film-factor that appeared, dashing along in such films as *The Gray Shadow*, *The House of Hate*, *The Mark of Zorro*.* There was in these films a world, stirring and incomprehensible, but neither repulsive nor alien. On the contrary—it was captivating and attractive, in its own way engaging the attention of young and future film-makers, exactly as the young and future engineers of the time were attracted by the specimens of engineering techniques unknown

* *The House of Hate* (1918), a serial directed by George Seitz, with Pearl White; *The Mark of Zorro* (1921), directed by Fred Niblo, with Douglas Fairbanks. The American film released in Russia as *The Gray Shadow* has not been identified.—EDITOR.

to us, sent from that same unknown, distant land across the ocean.

What enthralled us was not only these films, it was also their possibilities. Just as it was the possibilities in a tractor to make collective cultivation of the fields a reality, it was the boundless temperament and tempo of these amazing (and amazingly useless!) works from an unknown country that led us to muse on the possibilities of a profound, intelligent, class-directed use of this wonderful tool.

The most thrilling figure against this background was Griffith, for it was in his works that the cinema made itself felt as more than an entertainment or pastime. The brilliant new methods of the American cinema were united in him with a profound emotion of story, with human acting, with laughter and tears, and all this was done with an astonishing ability to preserve all that gleam of a filmically dynamic holiday, which had been captured in *The Gray Shadow* and *The Mark of Zorro* and *The House of Hate*. That the cinema could be incomparably greater, and that this was to be the basic task of the budding Soviet cinema—these were sketched for us in Griffith's creative work, and found ever new confirmation in his films.

Our heightened curiosity of those years in *construction and method* swiftly discerned wherein lay the most powerful affective factors in this great American's films. This was in a hitherto unfamiliar province, bearing a name that was familiar to us, not in the field of art, but in that of engineering and electrical apparatus, first touching art in its most advanced section—in cinematography. This province, this method, this principle of building and construction was *montage*.

This was the montage whose foundations had been laid by American film-culture, but whose full, completed, conscious use and world recognition was established by our films. Montage, the rise of which will be forever linked with the name of Griffith. Montage, which played a most vital rôle in the creative work of Griffith and brought him his most glorious successes.

Griffith arrived at it through the method of parallel action. And, essentially, it was on this that he came to a standstill. But we mustn't run ahead. Let us examine the question of how montage came to Griffith or—how Griffith came to montage.

Griffith arrived at montage through the method of parallel action, and he was led to the idea of parallel action by—Dickens!

To this fact Griffith himself has testified, according to A. B. Walkley, in *The Times* of London, for April 26, 1922, on the occasion of a visit by the director to London. Writes Mr. Walkley:

He [Griffith] is a pioneer, by his own admission, rather than an inventor. That is to say, he has opened up new paths in Film Land, under the guidance of ideas supplied to him from outside. His best ideas, it appears, have come to him from Dickens, who has always been his favorite author. . . . Dickens inspired Mr. Griffith with an idea, and his employers (mere "business" men) were horrified at it; but, says Mr. Griffith, "I went home, re-read one of Dickens's novels, and came back next day to tell them they could either make use of my idea or dismiss me."

Mr. Griffith found the idea to which he clung thus heroically in Dickens. That was as luck would have it, for he might have found the same idea almost anywhere. Newton deduced the law of gravitation from the fall of an apple; but a pear or a plum would have done just as well. The idea is merely that of a "break" in the narrative, a shifting of the story from one group of characters to another group. People who write the long and crowded novels that Dickens did, especially when they are published in parts, find this practice a convenience. You will meet with it in Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, Meredith, Hardy, and, I suppose, every other Victorian novelist. . . . Mr. Griffith might have found the same practice not only in Dumas *père*, who cared precious little about form, but also in great artists like Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Balzac. But, as a matter of fact, it was not in any of these others, but in Dickens that he found it; and it is significant of the predominant influence of Dickens that he should be quoted as an authority for a device which is really common to fiction at large.