

# BROKEN BLOSSOMS (1919): GRIFFITH AND CONSCIOUS EXPRESSIVENESS IN THE EARLY DAYS OF CLASSICISM

CARLOS GÓMEZ  
ENRIQUE URBIZU

In 1921, a young Jean Epstein praised D. W. Griffith's film *Broken Blossoms* (1919) in the same article in which he asserted that "cinema is true, a story is a lie" and that "the cinema assimilated the rational armature of the feuilleton badly" (Epstein, 2015: 37-38). An exponent of the artistic avant-garde, Epstein advocated a cinema based on *photogénie*, the capacity to provoke sensations in the spectator and sustained more by situations than by the structural legacy of the literary narrative. Reading the French theorist and filmmaker's text today, his description of Griffith's film as a "true film" might seem paradoxical, as Epstein's view seems to contradict the understanding of the American director developed by film historians, which identifies him as the father of film narrative and responsible for the transfer of literary narrative techniques to the specific codes of the cinematographer. This was an idea that was endorsed in a study by another filmmaker, Sergei M. Eisenstein (1986), when he analysed the rela-

"No texts. The true film does without them.  
*Broken Blossoms* could have."

JEAN EPSTEIN

tionship between the novels of Charles Dickens and Griffith's films. Several decades later, Jacques Aumont would reassess this historiographic narrative of Griffith as the inventor of "classical narrative cinema" and of "cinema of transparency", shifting the focus from the narrative device in his films to his work with *mise-en-scène* (Aumont, 1990: 348-349). According to the French theorist, his intention is not to question Griffith's contributions to the development of film narrative, but to study another aspect of his work that has been surprisingly ignored. Because it is precisely in his work with *mise-en-scène* that we find a whole series of features that are quite at odds with the ideas of "invisibility" and "transparency" associated with the classical narrative model.

## GRIFFITH AND CLASSICAL CINEMA

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This apparent contradiction at the heart of the American filmmaker's work was first brought to

light in Tom Gunning's research into the short films that Griffith directed for the Biograph Company<sup>1</sup> in the years 1908-1909. Gunning's study sought to break with the teleological notions of film history, which viewed it in terms of a linear progression leading *inevitably* to narrative cinema and the hegemonic model that Noël Burch defined as the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR). To this end, Gunning describes a "cinema of narrative integration", which, in contrast with the "cinema of attractions" represented by Georges Méliès (a kind of filmmaking not interested in telling stories but in offering a series of images that are fascinating for their spectacular nature and illusory power), "subordinates film form to the development of stories and characters" (Gunning, 1994: 6). On the historiographical level, this "cinema of narrative integration" offers the advantage of identifying a gateway between the Primitive Mode of Representation (PMR) defined by Burch (1987: 193-204) and the Institutional Mode of Representation, two modes that coexisted and overlapped for several years and whose excessive temporal compartmentalisation results in numerous contradictions when analysing specific films. These contradictions are present not only in Griffith's work for the Biograph Company, but can also be found, as Javier Marzal Felici has pointed out, in the feature films he directed after 1917, the year generally identified as the beginning of the era of classical cinema (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985). Griffith's style in the different stages of his filmography would thus exhibit "numerous contradictory elements that simultaneously place this filmmaker closer to and further away from the classical paradigm" (Marzal Felici, 1998: 33), giving validity to the notion of narrative integration for his work as a whole. Marzal Felici's research, focusing firstly on the period from 1918 to 1921 (Marzal Felici, 1994) and subsequently extending to his entire filmography (Marzal Felici, 1998), also challenges the idea that the filmmaker's work after *Intolerance* (D. W. Griffith, 1916) was largely

irrelevant, as the films Griffith made after 1918 exhibit many interesting features, despite the fact they are "quite unknown even by historians and critics" due to their deemed to belong to his period of decline (Marzal Felici, 1998: 36).

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**BROKEN BLOSSOMS HAS AN OBVIOUS, SYSTEMATIC EXPERIMENTAL QUALITY AND CONTAINS MANY OF THE EXPRESSIVE INNOVATIONS THAT APPEAR SPORADICALLY IN GRIFFITH'S EARLIER FILMS**

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It is in this context that we would like to locate our analysis of *Broken Blossoms*.<sup>2</sup> Despite the aforementioned ignorance of Griffith's filmography after *Intolerance*, *Broken Blossoms* has been lauded as one of the few masterpieces Griffith directed in these later years. Jean Mitry, for example, describes it as "the truest work of poetry that has come to us from America since Whitman's odes" (Mitry, 1978: 483). This assertion is particularly interesting for its classification of the film as "poetry", a description also given to it by Paolo Cherchi Usai (2008: 314), who adds that *Broken Blossoms* engages in "modernist experimentation". It is our view that *Broken Blossoms* has an obvious, systematic experimental quality and contains many of the expressive innovations that appear sporadically in Griffith's earlier films. These innovations basically relate to the organisation of the *mise-en-scène* and of the framing, and generally involve: alterations to the aspect ratio of the image and the adaptation of the geometry of the framing to the motif represented; the use of de-centred and unbalanced compositions to establish equivalences between the place occupied by the characters in the frame and the place they occupy in the diegetic universe; and differences in the lighting and cinematographic properties of shots even within the same scene, in consonance with

the emotional treatment of each character. In this way, while *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) and *Intolerance* represent the synthesis of all the narrative innovations developed before them (cross-cutting and alternating shots, the “last-minute rescue” motif and the hierarchical arrangement of shot scales), *Broken Blossoms* plays a similar role in relation to the expressive potential of the image. As Jacques Aumont has pointed out in another study, a historically determined formal convention “becomes expressive as soon as it moves beyond what is strictly necessary for realistic representation, which is itself defined by convention” (Aumont, 1997: 158). The form would thus claim our attention for its own sake and go beyond the use of devices that are functional strictly for the readability of the story and its syntactic progression. Based on this notion of expressiveness, it is hardly surprising that there should be a certain degree of consensus with respect to the poetic qualities of *Broken Blossoms*. In short, it is these expressive devices in *Broken Blossoms* that come into conflict with the stylistic parameters of classical cinema which Griffith himself had contributed to developing, as they would give rise to a kind of “autonomy of the frame” by privileging the elements of the *mise-en-scène* (Marzal Felici, 1998: 232). In this article, we will offer a textual analysis of *mise-en-scène* and framing in *Broken Blossoms*, focusing on the elements (the layout of the different spaces where the action unfolds, the aspect ratio and composition of the frame and the cinematographic treatment of the shots) which, in a quest to make the image more expressive, push beyond the merely functional and resist classical norms, placing Griffith’s work in frontier territory between two different modes of representation.

### **BROKEN BLOSSOMS: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Broken Blossoms* is a rather simple drama with a plot that can be summed up easily in a few sen-

tences. Cheng Huang (Richard Barthelmess) leaves his native China on a mission to bring a message of peace to the West. Years later he finds himself in the London district of Limehouse. His noble mission has failed, as he has now become an anonymous immigrant running a shop in a seedy neighbourhood. Also living in Limehouse is Lucy (Lillian Gish), a girl abandoned by her mother and trapped in a home with a violent father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). After a minor household accident, Lucy is beaten brutally by her father. She runs away from home and collapses in a faint in Cheng Huang’s shop. Cheng, who has always thought of the girl as the one glimmer of beauty in Limehouse, gives Lucy refuge in a room above his shop. He builds a sanctuary there for the two of them, and their relationship takes on a transcendental quality. Meanwhile, Burrows finds out that Lucy is living with Cheng. While Cheng is out, Burrows destroys the place and drags Lucy back home. Enraged over her relationship with Cheng, Burrows beats Lucy to death. Cheng arrives too late to save her, and he kills Burrows with a handgun. He then returns with Lucy’s body to the room they had shared together and commits suicide.

The film is a free adaptation of Thomas Burke’s short story “The Chink and the Child”,<sup>3</sup> the first story in his collection *Limehouse Nights* (1917). In terms of the picture’s production, it is worth noting that this was Griffith’s first feature film shot entirely in studio.<sup>4</sup> On the narrative level, Griffith himself highlighted in interviews that it was a “thematically different” story and that he had conceived it as an experiment along more tragic lines (Slide, 2012: 111-112). The plot alone marks a notable difference from his previous films, with the absence of both the “last-minute rescue” and the happy ending that had always been such essential features of the director’s work. In this respect, the most relevant reading of the film has been offered by Paolo Cherchi Usai (2008), who views nihilism as the central core of *Broken Blossoms*, a

nihilism that denies the social utopianism identifiable in Griffith's other pictures and that overturns many of his usual themes and motifs. We need only consider the story's inversion of the layout of spaces that Griffith had been articulating since the short films for the Biograph Company (Brunetta, 1993); while the home is normally presented as a sacred place and the protection of the family as a quintessential value (the product of many of the ideological criticisms of Griffith's work), in *Broken Blossoms* the home is, on the contrary, the epicentre of a universe dominated by violence. In the story, rather than the usual external threat against established values, we have an enemy within—the father—who denies any possibility of order. In this way, the *siege motif* of an external threat to the household that provokes disruption is replaced by a *confinement motif*, which will find its ultimate expression in the climax, when Lucy locks herself in a closet to escape from her father's violence. Far from being merely secondary matters, all these questions seem to be at the heart of the expressive exploration undertaken by Griffith in this film.

### **DIFFERENT ASPECT RATIOS AND ALTERATION OF THE PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES OF THE FRAME**

During the silent period, filmmakers and camera operators often altered the aspect ratio of the image through the use of different masking techniques, the most common being the iris. This trend of changing the physical boundaries of the frame would be brought to an end in the 1930s, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences established what became known as the "academy ratio", with a fixed proportion of 1:1.33 (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993: 202). Griffith and the cinematographer Billy Bitzer used such masking techniques repeatedly in the films they made together. The primary function of a mask is to focus the centre of attention on the area framed, facilitating

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### **IN BROKEN BLOSSOMS THE IMAGE IS ORGANISED METICULOUSLY, SHOWCASING GRIFFITH'S COMPLETE MASTERY OF THE EXPRESSIVE CAPACITY OF GEOMETRIC SHAPES**

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its interpretation by concealing any secondary elements. However, the use of different masks in *Broken Blossoms* goes beyond this function to become another of Griffith's expressive devices. There are several shots worthy of analysis in this respect. One of the first changes to the aspect ratio takes place during the final lessons that Cheng Huang receives in a Buddhist temple before leaving China for the West: in a medium-long shot of the character, a vertical mask is used on either side of the frame, modifying the aspect ratio to present a vertical rectangular image (Image 1). Conversely, when we find him in the London district of Limehouse several years later, in the first medium shot that introduces the character again—where he has become known "only as a Chink store-keeper", as an intertitle tells us—the vertical mask is replaced by a circular mask (Image 2). In both shots, the technique does much more than merely enhance the spectator's reading of the story: through the modification of the boundaries and geometry of the frame, it also reinforces the body language of the character and the lines of his figure. His gestures denote the psychological transformation that Cheng has suffered in this unspecified lapse of time elided by an intertitle. While his upright figure and raised head back in China were framed using a vertical mask, underscoring the character's fortitude and idealism, the iris shot in the second image matches the slightly curved body, shown at a right-angle to the spectator (in contrast with Griffith's more common frontal views), hunched in on itself.

The style of the film itself is consciously pursued through this use of masks. This is made clear



Images 1 to 4. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919).

by the fact that the vertical mask is also used in some of the shots showing Battling Burrows, but never for the character of Lucy. In *Broken Blossoms* the image is organised meticulously, showcasing Griffith's complete mastery of the expressive capacity of geometric shapes. The visual presentation of Lucy walking along the docks of Limehouse before entering her home denotes her insignificance and the indifference to her of the world around her, conveyed through the opposition between straight and circular forms. Lucy appears stooped over in a landscape marked by wooden posts and the inexpressive figure of a sailor, whose verticality contrasts with the girl's

frailty (Image 3). Later, Lucy sits down on the dock before entering her home (Image 4). The female figure is positioned in an enclosed space, trapped between two vertical lines that form a kind of internal frame—eliminating the need to make use of a mask, which would be inappropriate here—consisting of a wooden post on the left and the corner of the wall on the right. Meanwhile, in the middle of the frame, the character's isolated and fragile figure, her hand gripping her shawl, is composed of curved lines accentuated by the use of diagonal backlighting. The lines of the female figure find accompaniment in the circular shapes of the rope she is sitting on and the barrels behind her in the

background. The composition is completed in a manner characteristic of Griffith's films, with the right border of the frame cropped off.

Nöel Burch discusses this cropping of the corners of the frame and the consequent "artistic vignette" effect, beginning with the story that Billy Bitzer told of his invention in his autobiography. In response to Bitzer's idea, taken ironically by Burch, that the discovery of this technique was accidental and that the reason behind its use was to give elegance to the image, Burch defines its use as part of a widespread trend in the cinema of the 1910s to escape the "flatness" of the primitive image by giving it the quality of a relief, while also breaking with the visibility of the surface resulting from the rectangular frame (Burch, 1987: 186). While this reduction of the idea to surface could be applied unproblematically to other films of Griffith's, in *Broken Blossoms* it fails to account for all the expressive possibilities that the American director finds in the use of different masking techniques. One clear example is his use of a horizontal mask, already evident in certain frames in *Intolerance*, placed across the top and bottom boundaries of the frame, to give the image a proto-panoramic aspect. The use of this masking technique can also be found in *Hearts of the World*

(D. W. Griffith, 1918), where a wide shot scale is used in battle scenes accompanied by the horizontal mask (Image 5). The appropriateness of the technique in these scenes is undeniable, not only because the other compositional elements of the frame, such as the presence of the line of the horizon, necessitate this modification of the boundaries of the frame, but also because of the pronounced tendency towards spectacularisation in Griffith's films. However, the use of this technique in *Broken Blossoms* proposes a very different reading. The horizontal mask is used here for a specific setting: one of the streets of Limehouse that connects Lucy's house to Cheng's shop (Image 6). The pro-filmic space does not justify any reinforcement through the use of this horizontal mask; on the contrary, the absence of any horizon, sky or vanishing point in the image, along with the profusion of vertical lines provided by the buildings, expose rather than conceal the surface of the frame, clashing visually with the horizontal lines of the mask. The meaning produced is thus the claustrophobia of the context in which Lucy lives and the oppressive nature of the space for the characters. This will also be reflected, as will be discussed below, in the indoor setting of the house where the girl lives with her father.

Image 5. *Hearts of the World* (D. W. Griffith, 1918). Image 6. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)



## SPACE, FRAMING AND DECENTRING

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For David Bordwell, the fundamental principle of classical cinema is centrality; so much so, that any de-centring is strictly forbidden: “This center determines the composition of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups, as well as the grouping of figures. [...] Classical filmmaking thus considers edge-framing taboo [...]” (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 51). It is in relation to centring that we find the biggest deviations from classical norms in *Broken Blossoms*. Far from representing merely a random deviation, space, decentring and compositional imbalance are played with systematically in the film. Javier Marzal Felici (1998: 226-227) has already pointed out the presence of decentred framing in Griffith’s filmography. These off-centre compositions, along with other devices, would form part of a strategy to underscore the more dramatic moments of the story. However, the other examples present in the director’s filmography do not seem as well articulated and productive in terms of meaning as the cases we will describe below. Moreover, in these examples decentring is not merely a strategy appearing in scenes that are key to the development of the story but is also used in extended expositions that describe characters. The strategies employed in *Broken Blossoms* require us to consider the decentring technique not only from a compositional perspective, but from a narrative perspective as well.

The first example of decentring takes place during the presentation of Cheng’s life in Limehouse. After seeing him outside his shop, an intertitle reads: “Broken bits of his life in his new home.” The film then cuts to a series of recent flashbacks offering us different situations in Cheng’s day-to-day life in Limehouse, returning recurrently to the medium shot of the character to anchor them. The first flashback is a frontal composition of the den where Cheng goes, along with other immigrants, to smoke opium (Image 7). In the shot, the figures are placed at different depths, constituting

multiple points of focus. The composition is practically static and the organisation of the image has a painterly aspect. This shot poses a problem of interpretation for the viewer because, despite the careful arrangement of the figures and the work with the lighting, we don’t know exactly what it is we’re being presented with or where “the important part” of the scene is. We don’t even recognise the character sitting on the floor in the foreground of the frame, or the woman lying on a divan in the more brightly lit geometric centre of the image. No other *mise-en-scène* strategy, such as the exchanges of gazes between characters in the shot, will help us to make sense of the information offered; the gazes all point in different directions, making it impossible to identify the centre of attention that constitutes the reason for the scene. On a first viewing it is highly unlikely that the spectator will identify Cheng—who up to this point has been guiding the narrative perspective—smoking a pipe near the wall in the background, slightly to one side of the central vertical axis. In its own way, this wide shot evokes the notion of the primitive frame described by Noël Burch and the need for a topological reading, as the multiplicity of signs requires a review to properly understand the content of the shot (Burch, 1987: 161-162). Yet even the notion of the primitive frame proves problematic here: the composition is too carefully organised, and Griffith had already mastered the wide shot years earlier. In his films, despite the excessive number of extras, the actions are arranged carefully so that they can be easily understood by the spectator. The answer to the problem posed by this shot is found, however, in the aforementioned intertitle that precedes it:

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**IT IS IN RELATION TO CENTRING THAT  
WE FIND THE BIGGEST DEVIATIONS  
FROM CLASSICAL NORMS IN *BROKEN  
BLOSSOMS***

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what we are being shown are “broken bits”, a space of shared solitude and alienation. The strategy of signification reinforces the idea of Cheng’s anonymity, just one immigrant among many who have ended up in this London district. This wide shot is subsequently broken down using an analytical editing technique. Each shot offers one of the characters languishing in the space, in scales ranging from medium-long to medium shots. Cheng will be the subject of the seventh and last of this series of shots. Analytical editing, another procedure that Griffith had mastered in earlier films, has a peculiar effect here, as it renders it impossible to put together the fragments of the scene shown in the wide shot based on the gazes of the different characters. This is because the expressive value here lies precisely in the disjointed nature of these fragments, the absence of communication between them. This operation is a clear deviation from the norms of classical cinema, not only because of the absence of centrality and compositional highlighting, but because, as Bordwell explains (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 12, 19), the character is the source of causality in the classical story, and is therefore an important causal factor that must be seen clearly, and yet this sequence does exactly the opposite, imposing the spatial context on the character and weakening his capacity to guide the narrative. On this point, it is worth considering Jacques Aumont’s analysis of Griffith’s short films. Aumont identifies in these films an excessively limited number of settings, a “figurative closure” of the *mise-en-scène* that seems anti-naturalist and violates the classical principle of narrative transparency by repeatedly aligning the characters in the frame according to the dictates of the set (Aumont, 1990: 350). This figurative closure is similar to the universe of *Broken Blossoms* and

effectively represents the motley appearance of the opium den, a space which, quite deliberately, has no contiguity or connection with any other.

To understand the decentring techniques described in the following paragraphs, we first need to take a moment to consider the spatial layout of Lucy’s house (Image 8). In a clearly primitive approach, Griffith continues to work with a conception of space that owes a great debt to the theatre. The layout of space presented in *Broken Blossoms* is similar to the rest of his films: the camera is positioned to capture a frontal view of the set, at eye level, thus occupying an external position similar to that of a theatre patron in the stalls. Moreover, the lateral borders of the frame are also the physical boundaries of the set, reinforcing the idea of equivalence between the profilmic space and the theatrical stage. In the case that concerns us here, the front door of Lucy’s house is located in the right corner, while to the left there is another door: the one to the closet that will play a key role in the film’s climax. The lighting is in keeping with the principles of realism and readability that typify Griffith’s work (Marzal Felici, 1998: 216), although there are nuances, like the gas lamp that traces a diagonal line and serves to explain the lighting in the home that is effectively

Image 7. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)



Lucy's prison. Perhaps more significant is the fact that this readability and visibility in *Broken Blossoms* contributes to the sense of claustrophobia conveyed by all the spaces that Lucy inhabits or passes through: in a place where everything is visible, there is nowhere to hide. This is made clear in the choreographed movements around the table located in the foreground—almost as a kind of gravitational axis for the characters—that Lucy and Burrows engage in when the father is threatening his daughter. The space of the house, far from being neutral, constrains the female character and defines the positions that she is allowed to occupy in it. Thus, in the first scene in the house,

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**THE SPACE OF THE HOUSE, FAR FROM BEING NEUTRAL, CONSTRAINS THE FEMALE CHARACTER AND DEFINES THE POSITIONS THAT SHE IS ALLOWED TO OCCUPY IN IT**

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with a gesture Burrows explicitly designates the place by the stove that is Lucy's (Image 9). The foreground of the shot is reserved for Burrows and the table; Lucy can only occupy this space when she is standing to serve her father. When Burrows leaves the house, Lucy can have lunch, but

Images 8 to 11. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)



not in the foreground; instead, she sits in a chair in the background, next to her bed (Image 10). The character does not have a room of her own, and in the set her bed and the modest kitchen are aligned on the same plane of action. While she is eating, Lucy is already positioned off-centre in the frame, but in the next shot of the girl in her house this decentring technique will be even more pronounced. After an ellipsis, we see Lucy darning a sock (Image 11). This framing is the most representative of the decentring dynamics used by Griffith: Lucy is positioned at the bottom of the frame, displaced to the left, so that the composition leaves a marked “open space” above and to the right of her. In relation to the figure, the composition is totally unbalanced and creates a very specific effect: the compositional weight of the kitchen and the shelves—the weight of domestic duties—looms over Lucy. There is no similar example of this kind of framing in Griffith’s previous films. Gian Piero Brunetta identifies the peak of Griffith’s period with the Biograph Company as the famous *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D. W. Griffith, 1912), whose notable features include “the displacement of the centre of interest to peripheral positions” (Brunetta, 1993: 132). But there is a fundamental difference. While in this short film there is still an equivalence between a room and a frame, in *Broken Blossoms* the space has been fragmented and actively altered through the framing to offer a deconstruction that goes beyond displacement, as the usual rule of positioning the camera at eye level is broken and the view is on a slight angle.

The next case of decentring occurs in one of the most dramatic moments of the film and reinforces the basic idea proposed up to that point. In the second domestic scene between Burrows and Lucy, the girl accidentally spills food over her father’s hand. In response, Burrows beats Lucy with a whip. This scene exposes the full signification of the space. While the master shot presenting the

Images 12 to 15. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)



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**THIS ENCAPSULATES AN EQUIVALENCE THAT THE STORY HAS BEEN ARTICULATING IN DIFFERENT DECENTRING TECHNIQUES THROUGHOUT THE FILM; AN EQUIVALENCE WHEREBY THE PLACE OCCUPIED BY THE CHARACTER IN THE FRAME ACTS AS A SIGN OF THE PLACE HE OR SHE OCCUPIES IN THE WORLD**

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action highlights the idea of confinement represented by the fact that the space and the frame share the same boundaries (Image 12), during the action the space is fragmented into medium shots of the father, in which Lucy is left off-screen. When the brutal beating is over, the scene cuts to a frame with a vertical mask showing Burrows' back, in contravention of the principle that only characters of no importance to the action should be shown this way (Image 13). Here, however, the actor's unnatural position, which represents a break from the match on action that we saw during the beating in the master shot and the medium shots, simply underscores his physical brutality and violent aggression in the scene. Burrows leaves the scene and, in a surprising decision, instead of offering a close-up of the girl, we cut back to the master shot: Lucy is alone, barely visible, in the lower left corner of the frame (Image 14). This is not a feature of primitive cinema, but the establishment of a new use for the primitive wide shot to depict the disappearance and nullification of the female character. This encapsulates an equivalence that the story has been articulating in different decentring techniques throughout the film; an equivalence whereby the place occupied by the character in the frame acts as a sign of the place he or she occupies in the world. This idea reinforces the sense of desolation and squalor of the world inhabited by the characters in *Broken Blossoms*. The last case of imbalanced framing

worthy of note is presented as a symptom of the insanity to which the characters are driven. In this scene, when Burrows brings Lucy home after the time she has spent with Cheng, the girl takes refuge in the closet, through the door which has barely been visible until now. Burrows begins to knock down the door with an axe. Terrified, Lucy screams while looking in vain in every direction for a way out (Image 15). Once again, the excessive "open space" above her head results in an unbalanced composition, thus imbuing the image with the madness of the moment. Lucy will find no way out because she is, symbolically, inside a coffin.

**CINEMATOGRAPHIC AND EMOTIONAL TREATMENT OF THE IMAGE**

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*Broken Blossoms* is known for its cinematographic innovations, and particularly for the use of what would subsequently come to be known as soft focus. The use of this technique was not the work of Billy Bitzer alone; Hendrik Sartov, Lillian Gish's cinematographer, also contributed to the film. The close-ups of Gish in the film are heavily blurred due to the use of black cotton mesh over the lens. Sartov also worked with the first long focal length lenses, which had very poor definition (Salt, 2009: 142). Beyond the development of a new technique, what is significant about the film is its cinematographic treatment of each character, always seeking a correspondence with an emotional treatment of the image. At the same time, this treatment is inseparable from the fragmentation of space in the master shots through analytical editing, as this would result in discontinuities in the lighting between shots that should not be viewed as errors but as systematically expressive choices in the text.

This difference in the cinematographic treatment of the image is evident from the first scene that takes place in Lucy and her father's house. The scenes here follow a similar and widely recognised design scheme: after the master shot



Images 16 to 18. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)

that presents the beginning of the action, the unfolding events are fragmented in medium shots of the two characters. The difference lies, however, in the fact that while the shot of Burrows respects the realism of the lighting in the master shot (and in some cases even intensifies it), the shots of Lucy are subjected to the techniques detailed above. The differences are easily identifiable (Images 16 and 17) and reflect a technique that not only dramatises the use of lighting but vests it with all manner of connotations. Thus, in the shots/reverse shots between Lucy and her father, the interaction between them is expressed not only in their gazes, but in the properties of the two shots: in the shots of Burrows, realism, harshness, depth and clarity; in the shots of Lucy, dramatisation, softness and a lack of depth—the background lighting switches off. The connotations go further than highlighting Lucy’s fragility and beauty, as the break with realism in her individual shots conveys the idea that she does not belong to the space she inhabits, thus dissociating her delicate figure with the arid atmosphere of the house—in contrast with the severity that Burrows brings to the scene. Lucy’s alienation within her own home finds its clearest expression at the moment when, after lifting up a tile in the floor to take out the few objects her mother left her, she re-reads a letter from her. In this shot, the background of the set is totally dark, with the use of backlighting to outline Lucy’s silhouette and separate it from the

setting (Image 18). This elimination and abstraction of the space that Lucy inhabits conveys her longing for a different, impossible reality in which she would have the motherly care she lacks.

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**IN THE SHOTS/REVERSE SHOTS BETWEEN LUCY AND HER FATHER, THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THEM IS EXPRESSED NOT ONLY IN THEIR GAZES, BUT IN THE PROPERTIES OF THE TWO SHOTS**

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So far we have been able to read one meaning into the techniques used to eliminate the background from the image, but this is not the only one, as indicated in one of the most famous moments of the film: the scene in which Burrows finds Lucy at Cheng’s home. In a medium-long shot that presents both characters (Image 19), the father is threatening his daughter. At this point, there is a POV shot from Lucy’s perspective, with the camera positioned on the axis of the gazes between the two characters (Image 20). We then cut to a POV shot focusing on Lucy’s eyes, highlighted by a masking technique (Image 21). Returning to the shot from Lucy’s point of view, Burrows moves closer to the camera, his eyes fixed firmly on the lens (Image 22). Griffith’s innovation here is notable, not only in terms of articulating a POV



Images 19 to 22. *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919)

shot but of highlighting the subjectivity of the image beyond the camera's ability to position itself as the eyes of the character. It is, in short, a mental image that distorts the physical reality that the character perceives. This is made clear for two reasons. Firstly, the background is eliminated completely in the close-up of Burrows, so that his threatening expression is framed in a blackness that alters its original meaning to convey its full symbolic power. It is a moment of pure terror, and the violence of the father's expression consumes the fleeting sanctuary built for Lucy by Cheng. But secondly (and perhaps most importantly), when the close-up of Burrows ends, the scene

cuts back to the medium-long shot of both characters to show us that Burrows' distance from Lucy has not actually changed, revealing that he never got as close to her as the previous shot suggested. The moment effectively conveys Lucy's terror, not just because of its innovative elements, but because the effect relies to a great extent on the use of devices that could be classified as primitive. For example, the movement over the black background weakens the three-dimensional appearance of the image, resulting in an effect similar to the "enormity" described by Noël Burch in relation to the use of close-ups by Méliès (Burch, 1987: 175). In addition, the gaze to camera, contravening

the principles of the Institutional Mode of Representation, is still unsettling despite being justified as Lucy's point of view. Burch (1987: 251-253) has also analysed the contradiction suggested by this gaze to camera for the dual identification articulated in classical cinema, in the sense that the narrative identification, when conveyed through a POV shot from a character's perspective, would create a short-circuit with the primary identification with the device. This would occur because if such primary identification protects the spectator, rendering them invisible and invulnerable to the diegetic universe, a moment like the scene in *Broken Blossoms* analysed here would undermine the spectator's immunity, forcing them to suffer the same violence that Lucy is subjected to.

## CONCLUSION

Pushing beyond the norms of classical narrative, the last scene analysed above effectively portrays the invisible and communicates abstract emotions in a physical manner. As can also be seen in other moments of the film, the innovation represented by *Broken Blossoms* for D. W. Griffith's work is underpinned by the new uses he gives to features that could be considered primitive. These features carry strong connotations for the overall meaning of the film and reflect a departure from the logic of the Primitive Mode of Representation, suggesting that they should be interpreted not as a feature of primitive cinema, but as a fully conscious re-conception of the use of primitive elements. The presence of these features, together with the decentring techniques and the discontinuities in lighting between cuts, do not reflect an intention to transgress the norms and strategies of classical cinema in its incipient stages; rather, they constitute a manifestation of Griffith's constant exploration of the possibilities of cinematographic language. This exploration marks his entire filmography and reflects his position on the threshold between two modes of re-

presentation which are all too often excessively compartmentalised, overlooking the expressive potential of their coexistence. If Griffith's work continues to be relevant today it is not because of the boundaries he contributed to establishing, but because of the paths he opened up for the filmmakers of the future. ■

## NOTES

- 1 The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, commonly known simply as the Biograph Company, was one of the most important American studios in the early days of cinema. It was incorporated in 1895 and was active until 1916. Griffith joined the company as an actor and script writer in 1908, but by June of that same year he had already directed his first short, *The Adventures of Dollie*. Griffith became the Biograph Company's star director, working for the studio until 1913.
- 2 For this analysis we have used the DVD edition of the film released by Kino Video, digitally remastered from a copy on 35mm film.
- 3 An account of the changes that Griffith introduced to the text can be found in the study by Cherchi Usai (2008).
- 4 For other aspects of the film's production, as well as some peculiar features of its exhibition, see Marzal Felici (1994; 1998).

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## BROKEN BLOSSOMS (1919): GRIFFITH AND CONSCIOUS EXPRESSIVENESS IN THE EARLY DAYS OF CLASSICISM

### Abstract

The films D. W. Griffith made after *Intolerance* (1916) usually attract little interest. However, in 1919, when the so-called classical cinema era had just barely begun, the American filmmaker released *Broken Blossoms*, a film that is characterised by a systematic and deliberate experimental quality, which encapsulates and at the same time amplifies many of the expressive innovations that appear sporadically in his earlier films. This article offers an analysis of the different elements of the *mise-en-scène* in *Broken Blossoms*, which, in a quest for a greater expressiveness of the image, go far beyond a purely functional role and break with classical norms, thereby placing Griffith's work in frontier territory between two different modes of representation.

### Key words

D. W. Griffith; *Broken Blossoms*; *Mise-en-scène*; Expressiveness; Classical Cinema; Primitive Mode of Representation.

### Authors

Carlos Gómez (b. Benidorm, 1979) holds an International PhD in Audiovisual Communication. He currently lectures in the Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid and is also a member of the TECMERIN (Television-Cinema: Memory, Representation and Industry) Research Group. He is the author of the book *Por una mirada ética. Conversaciones con Alicia Gómez Montano* (Cuadernos Tecmerin, 2012) and has contributed to various anthologies and academic publications. Contact: cagomez@hum.uc3m.es

Enrique Urbizu Jauregui (b. Bilbao, 1962) is a filmmaker and scriptwriter. He holds a degree in Information Sciences from Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, has lectured on *mise-en-scène* at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid, and currently coordinates the major in filmmaking at Escuela de Cinematografía y del Audiovisual de la Comunidad de Madrid (ECAM). He also participates in the master's program in scriptwriting at Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (UPSA).

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## LIRIOS ROTOS (1919): GRIFFITH Y LA AUTOCONSCIENCIA EXPRESIVA EN LA EMERGENCIA DEL CLASICISMO

### Resumen

A pesar del escaso interés que suelen despertar las películas que David Wark Griffith dirige tras *Intolerancia* (1916), en 1919, apenas inaugurado el llamado cine clásico, el cineasta norteamericano estrena *Lirios rotos*, un film que presenta un sistemático y autoconsciente componente experimental, que condensa, a la vez que amplifica, gran parte de los hallazgos expresivos que aparecían dispersos en su filmografía anterior. En este texto se realiza un análisis de distintos elementos de la puesta en escena de *Lirios rotos* que, en su búsqueda de una mayor expresividad de la imagen, desbordan lo meramente funcional y contrastan con la normatividad clásica, situando al cine de Griffith en una posición fronteriza entre distintos modos de representación.

### Palabras clave

D. W. Griffith; *Lirios rotos*; puesta en escena; expresividad; cine clásico; Modo de Representación Primitivo.

### Autores

Carlos Gómez (Benidorm, 1979) es doctor internacional en Comunicación Audiovisual, profesor del Departamento de Periodismo y Comunicación Audiovisual de la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid y miembro del grupo de investigación TECMERIN (Televisión-Cine: Memoria, Representación e Industria). Ha publicado el libro *Por una mirada ética. Conversaciones con Alicia Gómez Montano* (Cuadernos Tecmerin, 2012) y ha participado en varios libros colectivos y publicaciones académicas. Contacto: cagomez@hum.uc3m.es

Enrique Urbizu Jauregui (Bilbao, 1962) es director de cine y guionista. Licenciado en Ciencias de la Información por la Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, ha sido profesor de Puesta en escena en la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid y actualmente es coordinador de la especialidad de Dirección en la Escuela de Cinematografía y del Audiovisual de la Comunidad de Madrid (ECAM). Colabora, asimismo, con el Máster de Guion de la Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (UPSA).

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