

THE 300 FILM CLUB

Imperial Institute, Kensington. Thursday May 18. Programme IX

"OUR OF A CHINESE PAINTING BRUSH" (U.S.A. 1945)

Directed and photographed by Dr. Wango Wong, for the China Film Institute of New York.

This unusual little colour documentary is the second of a series of films on Chinese art, the first, "Painting a Chinese Landscape" having been shown by this society earlier in the season. It is a simple, straightforward but thoroughly pleasing little short, photographed in effectively restrained colour. Particularly interesting are the sequences showing how the artist utilises several colours on his brush at the same time.

"INTOLERANCE" (U.S.A. 1916)

So much has already been written about the tremendous photographic and dramatic innovations of this film, and its great influence on Eisenstein and other leaders of the Russian cinema, that repetition at this stage would be both pointless - and, in the space at our disposal, impossible!

Undated (apart from some of Griffith's flowery and poetic subtitles!), the film remains without any doubt at all one of the all-time classics. Certainly its production today would be an impossibility; production costs of the Babylonian sequences alone would be prohibitive, and in any event it is doubtful whether there is any one man now of Griffith's calibre capable of handling such a vast undertaking. The idea of four separate - but inter-related through common theme - stories being unfolded on the screen at the same time, is still a revolutionary one, and it is significant that since this film nobody has even attempted a subject based on such a foundation. (We are not of course overlooking the various "omnibus" films - but there the technique is vastly different, for it is sequences that are united by a connecting motif rather than that motif being the foundation upon which a parallel flow of stories is built).

Intolerance, states Griffith, is the emotional basis of history, the cause of wars, and probably the deadliest menace in all world history. To illustrate this philosophy, he utilises four stories, separated in time and geography, but united by a common theme and developed through cross cutting in parallel sequence. The four stories consist of Religious Intolerance - the Huguenot-Catholic war in 16th. century France; Ecclesiastical Intolerance - the life of Christ; Economic and Social Intolerance - the Labour vs. Capital struggle in the modern sequence; and the Imperialistic-political and racial intolerance of the Babylon episode (Cyrus the Persian vs. Babylon in the reign of Nebuchadnessar).

The symbolic figure of the Woman who Rocks the Cradle is utilised as liaison between the various episodes; in the later sequences, the lighting in this shot changes and the figures of three old women - The Three Fates, seated at their cosmic spinning wheel, appear sharply visible in the background. The Woman continues in the foreground, unaware of their presence. However, towards the climax as the tempo rises and the cutting becomes more abrupt, this shot is dispensed with; the transitions become more direct, quick, and violent; it is freed of all and any intermediary shots. In other words, there is no recourse to wipe-offs, fades, lap-dissolves or other devices - one story cuts simply to another, all four now being markedly parallel in action and essential content. This climax is probably one of the most impressive single sequences that the cinema has ever given us; for 30 minutes history pours across the screen like a cataract, building in tempo without pause until the final shot leaves one exhausted.

