Joanna Russ and D. W. Griffith

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[I]

MY CLAIMS FOR JOANNA RUSS ARE LARGE. SHE IS ONE of the finest—and most necessary—writers of American fiction to publish between 1959, when her first professional short story, "Nor Custom Stale," appeared in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and 1998, when St. Martin's Press published her overview of feminism *What Are We Fighting For? Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism.* Between these dates fall six novels—seven if we count her children's book *Kittatinny: A Tale of Magic* (1978). All but one are either science fiction or one or another mode of fantasy. The exception, *On Strike against God* (1980), is a moving and meticulously crafted story of a young lesbian academic's coming out in the early days of the women's movement, a book that has been all but ignored in a body of work that, despite a book-length study, *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ / Feminism / Science Fiction*, by Jeanne Cortiel (1999), deserves far more attention.

Aside from her second novel, *And Chaos Died* (1970), all the books grow directly from feminist concerns, with which Russ was deeply involved from the second half of the 1960s on. In that second novel, a gay man, Jai Vhed, encounters a telepathic woman on a far world, who "cures" him of his sexual deviation. (It was written when homosexuality was still classified as a pathological condition.) She also teaches him her telepathic skills, thus rendering him unfit for human society. On his return to Earth, the world that to us would appear normal appears to him a dystopian nightmare, because of his new knowledge. At the end, he can only leave Earth once more and rejoin his mentor. Here the feminist concerns are indirect, and in the extraordinarily rich text a range of in-

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teresting ideological problems ring in resonance with Russ's fiction written before and after it.

The problems of feminism no more limit the meaning of Russ's fiction, however, than the problems of slavery limit the meaning of, say, *Huckleberry Finn*. Rather, feminism provides a structure for her arguments, which range over everything from music to mysticism, from the direct perception of matter at a distance to the problems of running a late medieval convent besieged by Vikings. This is not to imply that Russ is other than perfectly serious about her feminism—or that, somehow, her work "goes beyond" it or engages it only accidentally. Feminism plays a role in Russ similar to the one that Marxism plays in the theatrical works of Bertolt Brecht. Indeed, another reason Russ's work may have escaped its due recognition is that her feminism has a decidedly Marxist leaning.

Alongside her novels, Russ has written a book-length study, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983); two collections of essays; the aforementioned overview of feminism (*What Are We Fighting For?*); and three books of short stories, the second of which, *Extra(Ordinary) People* (1984), includes "Souls." Besides winning the Hugo Award in 1983, this novella easily stands on the same shelf with James Joyce's "The Dead," Willa Cather's "My Mortal Enemy," Glenway Westcott's "The Pilgrim Hawk," and Guy Davenport's "The Dawn in Erewhon." Russ belongs to a collection of modern stylists who excel at descriptive vividness—a collection one has to work at to extend it to include a dozen: William Gass, Guy Davenport, Virginia Woolf, David Foster Wallace, Richard Hughes, William Golding, G. K. Chesterton, and Vladimir Nabokov. At Cornell University Russ studied under Nabokov, who, along with S. J. Perelman, is a dedicatee of *And Chaos Died*. From time to time Lawrence Durrell, Angela Carter, John Updike, Eugene Garber, Jeannette Winterson, or James Dickey may flicker at the group's edges. Russ should be placed at its center.

And Chaos Died contains such sentences as this delicious description of a starliner: "The Big One was obviously one of those epoxy-and-metal eggs produced by itself—the Platonic Idea of a pebble turned inside out, born of a computer and aspiring towards the condition of Mechanical Opera" (93). With its intertextual sweep, the sentence takes in everything from H. P. Lovecraft's pulp ponderosities ("the Old One") and the instructions on a cardboard backing from the hardware store ("This epoxy can be used with aluminum") to the Nicene Creed ("born of the Virgin Mary") and Walter Pater's obiter dictum from his 1877 essay "The School of Giorgione" ("*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*"). But these hypogrammatic resonances can make us forget how pleasurable such a sentence is simply as a mouthful of sound. Any extended consideration of Russ's works without a section devoted to style alone would be as radically incomplete as such a consideration of the works of Pater, Nabokov, or Joyce. In Russ, as in Nabokov, again and again the most precise observation breaks through the sumptuous euphony, the most vivid description, the coruscating wit, to produce an electric version of the ordinary that is anything but.

Little or none of the pyrotechnically accomplished rhetorical surface of Russ's prose is explored in Cortiel's study—or, indeed, even mentioned. Cortiel does note that several of Russ's heroines kill men—and even devotes a chapter to the topic (ch. 2, "Acts of Violence: Representations of Androcide"). What Cortiel avoids, if not suppresses, in her study is any mention of the heroines in Russ who kill other women. However paradoxical it may appear, these deaths are central to Russ's feminist vision. Whether the four anonymous duels fought by Janet on Whileaway in *The Female Man* ("I've killed four times") or her hunting down of the renegade philosopher Belin above the forty-eighth parallel—presumably the fourth time Janet has killed another woman, since only three of her duels resulted in death (55): "Whileawayans are not as peaceful as they

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sound" (49)—these deaths occur in situations in which women have achieved enough power that their removal is worth it or even necessary.

In what for me is Russ's most perfectly crafted novel, *We Who Are About to . . .* (1975), the narrator (whose name *might* be Elaine) murders Valeria Graham. Among those castaways out of touch with Earth, the Graham family—handsome and urbane Victor, bright, spoiled twelve-year-old daughter Lori (whom the narrator will also murder), and Valeria Graham herself—initially appears as the quintessential upper-middle-class social unit. As the story unfolds, however, we learn that the money—and there is considerably more of it than we might have supposed—is all Valeria's. Presumably she has made it herself. "How much money have I got? . . . You don't even know . . . I'll tell you. Six mill a month. Eurodollar. That puts me in the top one-tenth of the top percentile, I believe . . . with a credit level-one you can have anything you want in this world, anything at all" (91). In the course of getting to where she is, Valeria has purchased for herself both a consort, Victor, and a daughter, Lori. "And maybe you think it's foolish and strange and rich to buy a man and strange and foolish and rich to buy a child. But one gets sick of renting people and even sicker of renting pets—it's dull—and I don't enjoy politics and there's one thing about bought people if you're wise: they stay bought" (92). The polysyndeton climaxed by the simple and singular clause "they stay bought" is a figure for Valeria's entire worldview, an interconnected and undifferentiated totality in which her dictum alone is the controlling factor, shaping all around it, like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee.

Victor, who has taken Valeria's name, instead of her taking his, not only is happy with the arrangement but actively strove for it before he met his fabulously wealthy wife. "I worked on myself," he tells the narrator. "Made myself good looking, you know: clothes, accent, the works. Spent a lot on surgery; no whore could have done better . . . I can satisfy anyone." No polysyndetons for Victor. His statements come out in the telegraphic rapid fire of both the dying man and the sexual self-fashioner with an all-but-industrial commitment to the enterprise.

"Did you practice?" asks our narrator.

Answers Victor, "Of course."

"*What a way to spend a life*," thinks the narrator, who goes on to comment, "*Here is the kernel of Victor Graham. I can satisfy anyone. Myself, I eat potatoes*" (66–67). We learn that Mrs. Graham purchased Lori to give Victor something to do, presumably while Valeria was making her multimillions. Lori was selected from a crèche specifically because she was sickly and not expected to live. Keeping her alive was a challenge to Victor's time and Valeria's wealth. "She needed money like mine," Valeria tells the narrator. "Do you know how many operations that child's had? She was hooked to a kidney machine when I first saw her and she needed a heart implant. And dozens of other things." (The *and*s let us know we are again listening to Valeria.) Through PD, psychic displacement, Lori has lived much of her life in the rented (or possibly purchased) bodies of other children, so that she did not have to undergo the trauma of so much medical intervention, which would have killed her had she experienced it all herself. "That child," Valeria tells the narrator proudly, "cost as much money as a small New England state" (93). The narrator sneaks back to the camp with the intention of murdering Valeria and her daughter, but the murder actually occurs during a struggle for the gun in the midst of an argument between the two women about which of them knows "how to live" (91), the spinsterish, drug-dependent, but coruscatingly observant narrator or the megalomaniacal Valeria.

Russ's point here is that man the oppressor and exploiter of women is not—another insight I sorely miss in Cortiel—defined by biological sex but rather ("by St. Marx and St. Engels," as Russ swears in at least one of her essays) constituted by socioeconomics as a power structure at work on what Foucault would call a biopolitical field.

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That is the significance of the hostility between the narrator and Valeria, fatal unto murder.

While Russ is contemptuous of Victor for what he has had to excise from his personality to fulfill his role, she is as understanding of the socioeconomic conditions that force him to do it as she is sympathetic with Cassie—her portrait of an ordinary working-class young woman trapped in the same deadly matrix as the other survivors of the spaceship crash on the lost world out of touch with Earth.

Victor Graham is the only person in the group of eight whom the narrator does not directly or indirectly kill. He dies because the heart medicine that would keep him alive is presumably no longer available. Though the narrator offers him a suicide pill from her extensive pharmacopoeia so he can avoid a protracted death, he declines it. Russ's refusal to avoid the realities of death, both as a social and personal fact and as a rich discursive field for metaphysical elaboration, is one of her major writerly strengths. Again and again, it takes her ironies beyond the place where we can easily resolve them into comedy or preachment.

In her essay-memoir *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), Jane Gallop gives a portrait of Russ in 1971, when Gallop was a student and most of Russ's novels were yet to be published:

> Earlier that evening [at the first all-women's dance at Cornell University, which male students tried to crash; the women physically kept them out and, elated at their victory, took off their shirts and danced], two women had made a spectacular entrance. One of them taught my first women studies course, which I was taking that semester. One of the campus's best known feminists, an early leader in the national movement for women's studies, a published writer over six feet tall, this teacher was a woman whom I looked up to in every way. She walked into the dance accompanied by a beautiful girl I had seen around and knew to be a senior. The teacher was wearing a dress, the student a man's suit; their carefully staged entrance publicly declared their affair.
>
> I thought the two of them were the hottest thing I had ever seen. I profoundly admired the professor; I found the senior girl beautiful and sophisticated. I wanted both of them. Although I would have loved to have an affair like theirs, I didn't feel left out and envious. I felt privileged to be let in on their secret. I felt it as our secret, the secret of our women's party.
>
> The couple could no more safely appear around the campus together like that than we could walk around with our shirts off. But the relation could be revealed within our women-only space . . . because we as a community could recognize them as our sexuality, could affirm them as part of the new possibility opened to us as women by feminism. The couple was performing for us; we were not only their special, exclusive audience, but they presented us with the spectacle of our daring communal possibilities. (13–14)

The charismatic six-foot-plus professor was Joanna Russ. Russ has noted that she is actually only five ten; the extra three inches Gallop allots her may be taken as an index of how impressed the young Gallop was, as well as of Russ's general aura of presence.

[II]

When David Wark Griffith turned from the controversy following hard on his filmic masterpiece *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to his epic historical exploration *Intolerance* (1916), I do not believe that in any way, shape, or form he set out to make a feminist film. No suffragist is visible anywhere in the epic's complex four-layered historical interweave. For this paper I watched two versions of the film: the 118-minute Black Hawk laser disc and the 178-minute Image DVD (1997), which restores various passages omitted in the earlier and general release version. A number of these passages occur in the climactic battle between the Persian leader Cyrus and Prince Belshazzar of Babylon, as well as in the subsequent Babylonian victory celebration,

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which distracts the Babylonians from Cyrus's surprise attack the next morning. Many were too licentious even for a pre–Hays Code audience.

We know of four versions Griffith himself released in 1916 or shortly thereafter. Some longer, some radically truncated, they played around the country over the next few years. But only the most inattentive viewer of either version I saw could fail to notice that women are the agents of most of the film's significant actions. In the person of the actress Josephine Crowell, Catherine de Médicis engineers the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre of the Huguenots—and seems to go all but mad because of it. The lovely Margery Wilson loads her musket and, in her nightgown, fires on the French soldiers, only to be killed by one of Catherine's mercenaries, as others of them kill Wilson's true love, Prosper Latour, when he emerges in the doorway with her body in his arms.

Five centuries before the time of Christ, after having been found "incorrigible" by the Babylonian court for rejecting the tasteless advances, however sincere, of the rhapsode of Inanna, the Hill Girl (played by Constance Talmedge), dragged before the Babylonian marriage market's auctioneer by her brother, eats raw onions to render herself unmarriageable and threatens to scratch out the eyes of one of the bidders, who is in the market for a wife and makes the mistake of handling her skirt.

When the Prince, on whom the Hill Girl has previously fixated, comes by, Talmedge pleads from her knees on the very block where she has rejected her bidders, No one will marry me—what am I to do? In 1916, four years before the Nineteenth Amendment, at least while she is in Griffith's hands, our Hill Girl is incapable of explaining, Yes, I'd like a husband, but I also want my say in the matter; I don't want to be sold to the highest bidder from an auction block. Certainly the post–World War I audience took her inability to offer such a synthesis as comic.

The Prince is something of a mind reader, however, and because of the services that the Hill Girl has already rendered him, he grants her a special clay seal that gives her (alone among women . . . ?) the right to marry or not to marry as she wishes, despite her brother or—doubtless more important—the Babylonian court.

After returning to her house and putting a loaf of bread on a wooden paddle into her Babylonian oven, the Hill Girl decides, "Enough of this!" She dons armor, loops a sheaf of arrows over her shoulder, and takes up a bow in order to spend the rest of her brief life fighting for the Prince's honor. In her subsequent adventures, she *almost* manages to prevent the fall of Babylon to the Persian king, Cyrus. She fails only because the Prince is too busy with the Princess Beloved to listen to a report about Cyrus's renewed predawn attack that Talmedge has risked life and limb to deliver.

Thus Babylon falls, and they all Die in the End.

Once the revels of Babylon have provided the film with its most spectacular sequence, a modern tale proffers the film's melodramatic resolution. Looking like a younger sister of Margaret Hamilton from *The Wizard of Oz* twenty-five years before the fact, the aging Miss Mary Jenkins (played by Vera Lewis) realizes she is too old for the world of youthful upper-class delights. Instead of giving balls at which no one asks her to dance anymore, she decides to spend her millions on the Women's Reform League, a quartet of demonic dowagers who, with her backing, will now be powerful enough to seize Mae Marsh's infant, since they have decided Marsh is an unfit mother.

Marsh—the Dear One—and the Boy (played by Robert Harron) have been driven to the city in the aftermath of a workers' strike, in which the Boy's father was killed. For the film's first viewers, the strike's powerful presentation, however cleaned up and sanitized, must have recalled the Ludlow massacre of recent memory, where the National Guard, called out to defend the property of John D. Rockefeller in Ludlow, Colorado, fired into a crowd of men, women, and children.

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In the strike's wake, the town's poverty also drives the Friendless One—played darkly on the edge of psychosis by Miriam Casper—into the city, where she becomes the mistress of the crime boss.

The Boy falls in with a gang and eventually spends a stint in jail because the crime boss wishes to punish him for pulling out of the life of crime to be a good father and husband (the Boy is now married to Marsh); the boss frames the Boy by planting a stolen wallet on him during a tussle with the boss's toughs in the street. While the Boy is in jail, the Women's Reform League comes by and finds the child alone just as Marsh returns with some whiskey that she is taking purely for medicinal purposes. The whiskey is enough, however, for the busybody dowagers to run off with her child.

The crime boss takes a shine to Marsh and lures her with promises of getting her child back—just as the Boy is released from jail. A struggle involving all three takes place. Goaded by the fires of jealousy, the Friendless One (recall, she is the crime boss's mistress) creeps along a second-floor ledge, fires through the window, and kills her lover (who is manhandling the fainting Marsh). The Friendless One throws the gun inside, and the Boy unwittingly picks it up just as the police arrive. Meanwhile Friendless Miriam Casper makes a spectacular leap down into the alley and staggers away, having somehow avoided breaking a leg.

Mae Marsh has fainted. The crime boss is dead.

The Boy is of course convicted of the murder and is sentenced to hang. The climax grows from Marsh's (one almost wants to write "manful") struggle to obtain her husband's freedom.

The entire film's rather diffuse point would seem to be that, while Babylon, with all its brightness and bravery in the person of the Hill Girl (Talmedge also plays Marguerite de Valois in the French sequence), falls before the forces of intolerance in the form of Cyrus's army and the city's own glamorous decadence and while the Huguenots are slaughtered by the intolerance of Catherine and her son Charles IX, two people triumph over adversities: Christ—in the skimpiest of the four interwoven tales, which restricts itself pretty much to the miracle of the water turned into wine during the Wedding at Cana, the Woman Taken in Adultery, and the Crucifixion—and Marsh, who shows unflagging, even hysterical, energy as she speeds in trains and motorcars to catch the governor to get a stay of execution. Brilliantly edited in briefer and briefer intercuts with the execution's preparation, Marsh's race against time produces an all-but-unbearable sense of velocity and hanging-by-the-fingertips suspense. Finally she drags the conveniently repentant Miriam Casper to the scaffold's very foot, where, with not a second to spare, her husband's hanging is averted.

One cannot help noting that in the production Christ, who rises now to preside over the finale, rather resembles Marsh: Mae with only slightly more manageable hair and a neat beard.

[III]

What suggests a relation between Griffith's confused if spectacular undertaking (a commercial flop, it broke Griffith and his studio, and he was never able to create another epic) and a number of Russ's works, specifically her first and third novels, ranges from content to context to specific textual moments. My description of *Intolerance* above is to establish the field that might have interested the young Russ, perhaps during her years at the Yale Drama School after her graduation from Cornell—a field that shows a shared concern with women even as it leaves ample room for Russ to criticize what remains of Griffith's post–World War I vision. That, I am convinced, is the structure necessary for the process that criticism so frequently speaks of as influence to take place.

Any reader of Russ who views the adventures of Talmedge as the Hill Girl, a woman who chooses to become a soldier rather than a wife,

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must think of Russ's adventuress from her early story series that includes her first novel, *Picnic on Paradise*, and that was collected as *The Adventures of Alyx* (1978): Alyx the Barbarian. In the second of the Alyx stories ("I Thought She Was Afeard Till She Stroked My Beard"), the seventeen-year-old Alyx is married to a gruff husband who believes in using the whip on his rebellious wife. Shortly before she dispatches him, while he is trying to prevent her from leaving, he thinks, "That is what comes of marrying a wild hill girl without a proper education" (31). The use of the words "hill girl" is the first textual moment that recalls Griffith's "Hill Girl," as the name is indicated on more than a dozen of the film's intertitles. Alyx's adventures (she is soon enlisted by the far-future Trans Temporal Agency) take her through the far past, then into the far future, till finally one of her descendants, who might even be her incarnation, arrives in Greene County, USA, in 1925, in what, along with "Souls" (1983), is one of Russ's two great novellas, "The Second Inquisition" (1970).

Another textual connection appears with the first and third intertitles after the main title in Griffith's film:

> Our play is made up of four separate stories, laid in different periods of history, each with its own set of characters.
>
> Therefore, you will find our play turning from one of the four stories to another, as the common theme unfolds in each.

These statements describe exactly the structure of Russ's third novel, *The Female Man* (1975), which deals with four women from four parallel universes, the story cutting back and forth between them. For those who wish to up the intertextual ante, at about a quarter of the way through act 1 of *Intolerance* (a film that consists, its titles tell us, of a prologue and two acts), the Hill Girl, after getting her seal of liberty from Prince Belshazzar and deciding to fight for him, runs into the rhapsode of Inanna, whose unwanted attentions initially helped to get her declared incorrigible by the Babylonian court. She tells the young man, who is apparently still taken with her, in a clearly worded intertitle, "Put away thy perfumes, thy garments of Assinnu, the female man. I shall love none but a soldier." Not only is the fundamental four-part structure of Russ's most overtly feminist novel all but identical with that of Griffith's film, but also the rather unusual title of Russ's novel appears as a textual fragment in one of Griffith's intertitles.

Some differences suggest that the similarity of the Russ title and the Griffith intertitle might be happenstance or at least an inadvertent borrowing. The Assinnu, holy officers in the service of the goddess Inanna (whom the rhapsode serves), traditionally dressed in women's clothing as they attended the goddess. The historical assumption has been that the Assinnu were transvestites, possibly even eunuchs. They are figures of gender ambiguity, and Talmedge's remark, in keeping with the time of the movie's making, is clearly meant as a more or less lighthearted insult.

The title of Cortiel's study *Demand My Writing* (Cortiel tells us in her introduction [2]) comes from her mishearing of a line in a lecture by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, subsequently published as "The Pink Guitar," a riff on Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Wrote DuPlessis, "All the signs that emerge on the page (I put them there) (some were already there, in the weave of the paper, no tabula rasa) / demand my reading." But, attending the lecture, Cortiel heard "demand my writing" and took that misprision as the name of her book-length study of some of the plots in Russ.

Possibly Russ read Talmedge's homophobic jab in Griffith's intertitle as something else.

The rhapsode (played by the handsome Elmer Clifton) takes Talmedge's exhortation to heart and a few scenes later presents himself to Talmedge in armor—like her. But he has come under the influence of the priest of Bel, who (for

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no clear reason other than that he is just "evil") hopes to betray Babylon and its prince to the invading Cyrus. Now willing to be more feminine and seductive, Talmedge learns about the plot along with the password to get through the great gates of Imgur Bell, which close Babylon's walls against invaders.

Here the temptation for me to place a call or write a letter to Russ, who lives in retirement in Tucson, becomes almost overwhelming. Why not simply ask, Did any of these ideas in your fiction—the interweaving of the four worlds of Janet, Jeannine, Jael, and Joanna in *The Female Man*; the character of Alyx—have a source in Griffith's film? The first four women, each of whom inhabits a different historical reality, are all genotypically identical. What distinguishes them—and what defines Valeria Graham as the ultimate member of the oppressor class—is the intricate socioeconomic conditions of power that constitute their different worlds. Even this notion of a genetic body shared among them is figured in *Intolerance*, in the visual-verbal leitmotif that initiates the movie and provides more than a dozen transitions during the film's prologue and two acts as we move from epoch to epoch: the image of Lillian Gish seated at the head of a cradle while Walt Whitman's words appear on the accompanying title card, "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking" (from the first of his "Sea Drift" poems in *Leaves of Grass*), and three hooded women in the background spin, measure out, and cut their yarn.

I have *not* yet put this question to Russ because I think it's necessary first to discuss the status of such intertextual relations, especially in the field of science fiction studies, with its highly uneasy connection to the greater enterprise of literature. A hundred fifty years ago, critics such as Edgar Allan Poe and James Russell Lowell regularly tagged far more tenuous correspondences between texts than these as clear signs of influence. Today the most salvageable lessons from Freud tell us that the unconscious part of the mind works by maneuvering the signifier rather than the signified (and discourse controls what might be considered the signified excess). Certainly this seems true of dreams, the revisions of memory through *Nachtraglichkeit*, and imagination in general. (What can be imagined is what can be said or written.) The critical interest of such correspondences does not require a finding of intentional borrowing.

In the precincts of science fiction, Alfred Bester was generous in his citations of Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* as a source for *The Stars My Destination* (1956) and Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* as a source for "Hell Is Forever" (1942). I don't believe that anyone has ever discussed the overwhelming differences between parent text and textual offspring or how each argues with the other. Such a critical relation is what, finally, any aesthetic influence worth the name must be, so that the differences are as much a part of the influence as the similarities.

In my discussion of Russ and of *Intolerance* as the possible source of several aspects of her early work, just such critical tension is figured in the distinction between the nameless Hill Girl, who dies futilely, and Russ's "hill girl"—the clearly named Alyx, who enjoys a series of witty triumphs, each presented with linguistic panache—and in a dramatic analysis of Russ's several milieus vis-à-vis Griffith's that makes both landscapes meaningful.

In his Babylonian sequence, Griffith shows a battalion of Nubian soldiers, played by African American actors; in the modern sequence, when the Boy is set upon in the street and the stolen wallet is slipped into his pocket, among the six street people who crowd around him is an African American man—on-screen for no more than ten seconds—and all six are in physical contact as they crowd around to see. What throws this moment into relief is Griffith's previous film, *Birth of a Nation*, where there are many African American characters but any black character who must have physical contact with a white one is played by a white actor in blackface.

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One turns again to Russ's tale of Greene County, "The Second Inquisition," to examine the discomfort that "the visitor's" (Alyx's) racial ambiguity sheds around her in her American family in the same year (1925) that *Birth of a Nation* was revived at the Capitol Theatre in New York City and provoked picket lines and protests among African Americans, many of whom were arrested, among them W. E. B. DuBois and the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier—a racial ambiguity that would have been present in *Intolerance* had the Hill Girl been played not by Constance Talmedge but by, say, a visibly Middle Eastern woman.

The highlighting and significations that constantly emerge through such comparative gestures do not hinge on intention.

This is why, though I would certainly be interested in Russ's answer to my question,[1] I am suspicious of the too quick establishment of an intention (or a nonintention) to explain away Russ's work (or indeed Griffith's). Such explanation only distracts from the critical construction of new meanings that must fall out of the comparison of individual rhetorical moments from any two or more wonderfully rich and significant texts. The construction of further meanings, I would like to hope, is the proper use of such a critical enterprise.

Note

[1]After I concluded this paper, I wrote Russ, who generously responded that, although she definitely saw both of Griffith's films, *Intolerance* and *Birth of a Nation*, while she was at the Yale Drama School as a graduate student and before writing any of her novels, she retains no conscious memory of modeling her plots or her language on anything in either. Thus, the vanity of general influences and thematic origins.

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