

1916, the year Babylon got into Hollywood:
An historical analysis of David W. Griffith's *Intolerance*

Maria de Fátima Rosa*

RES Antiquitatis 2 (2020): 35-57

Abstract

This paper aims to study how Babylon was portrayed in the 1916 film by David W. Griffith – *Intolerance*. This motion picture reveals a Babylon which is the direct result of the diverse visions and ideas the different historical actors had over the centuries. Through a historical analysis of *Intolerance*, a film that reached vast audiences at the time, one may be elucidated about the way the ancient capital was envisioned in the beginning of the 20th century, and which were the visual and textual sources used by the director to portray the city and its final fall.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, Film *Intolerance*, Reception of Antiquity, Babylon, Belshazzar.

Date of submission: 3/5/2018

Date of approval: 22/7/2020

* CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Universidade dos Açores. E-mail: frosa@fcs.unl.pt.

1916, the year Babylon got into Hollywood: An historical analysis of David W. Griffith's *Intolerance*

Maria de Fátima Rosa
CHAM e Departamento de História, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

1. Understanding Babylon in the beginning of the 20th century

In 1916 the famous Polish-American orientalist, Morris Jastrow, made the following observation about a film that had just premiered and which focused on the city of Antiquity that had always fired the imagination of Westerners – Babylon: «You have succeeded in conveying to the audiences a remarkably vivid picture of the art, architecture, costumes, public and private life of Babylonia» (Hanson 1972, 502). The film was *Intolerance*, by the North-American director David W. Griffith, released on August 6 of that year.

In line with the prevailing idea of that remote capital of the Euphrates, the film stood out for its grandiosity, having the biggest cinematographic sets ever seen until then. Nothing less would be expected, if we take into consideration that Griffith intended to portray a picture of the «gold cup in the LORD's hand» which «made whole earth drunk» (Jer. 51, 7). Jeremiah's words suggest an atmosphere of grandeur, power and majesty – an impression of mythical Babylon which has endured until today. Although the architecture and customs of that city are now known in some detail, in 1916 myth and legend overshadowed its history. In fact, what were the sources David W. Griffith and his team use to produce *Intolerance*?

Seventeen years had passed since the beginning of the archaeological excavations by a German team led by Robert Koldewey on the site of ancient Babylon. The results of the excavations were published by the archaeologist in a book entitled *Das Wiederstehen Babylon*, in 1913. In the following year, was published an English translation, so that English-speakers could envision the main discoveries *in situ* (Koldewey 1914). The excavations had uncovered the architecture of the city of Nebuchadnezzar II and his successors. Its treasures included the huge Gate of Ištar, the processional avenue, the royal palace and some tiles with inscriptions.

It is not possible to ascertain whether Griffith consulted this work for the production of his motion picture. We do know, however, that the producer's research was meticulous and wide-ranging, focusing on aspects like the architecture, clothes, sculptures, furnishings and art of the Babylonian capital. The evidence for this is in the scrapbook used during the filming, provided with valuable information about the Near-Eastern antiquity. This scrapbook is presently in the Museum of Modern Art in New York¹.

¹ Griffith Archives, *Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA), New York.

Based on the various images, reproductions and notes in this record, it is possible to get a more precise idea of the sources (Hanson 1972, 502) available at the time and the materials used by the producer². In fact, one of the chief works that were consulted regarding Assyrian and Chaldean culture was *A History of Art in Chaldea and Assyria* (in two large volumes by Perrot and Chipiez, 1884), written around 15 years prior to the excavations on Babylonian soil. Not having access to the archaeological and architectural reality of the city, Perrot and Chipiez had to refer to ancient accounts, e.g. the Old Testament and classical authors, such as Herodotus. Nonetheless, as the actual authors indicate in the pages of their work: «The validity of these statements (referring to the Old Testament) has been confirmed by architectural and other remains found in Mesopotamia» (1984, 14).

Perrot and Chipiez do not call into question the biblical accounts, nor the words of the historian from Halicarnassus who wrote his *Histories* over a century after the fall of Babylon, in 539 BCE. Although they recognize some degree of exaggeration, they accepted them as portraying a reality long since vanished, to which the only access was in trusting the accounts left by the ancient scholars.

While Babylon, the famous capital of that great region which the authors called Chaldea, was bound to the Old Testament and the classical works, neighbouring Assyria was revealed through the vestiges exhumed by French and English explorers. We can say that there was a certain precociousness in Assyria. In fact, over half a century before Koldewey uncovered the city of Nebuchadnezzar, French and British explorers had already broken ground at Khorsabad, (the former Dûr-šarrukîn), Nimrud and Nineveh.

Despite the lack of general knowledge concerning the ancient city of Hammu-rabi and Nebuchadnezzar, still prevalent throughout the 19th century, according to Perrot and Chipiez «The Assyrian (architect) invented nothing. His language and his writing, his religion and his science, came from Chaldea, and so did his art. When the kings of Resen, of Calech, of Nineveh, took it into their heads to build palaces, they imported architects, painters, and sculptors from the southern kingdom» (1884, 122). This supposition was accepted to some extent by Griffith and his team. Consequently, throughout the film there is a strong presence of Assyrian art and architecture in a space that was supposed to be Babylonian.

The Assyrian collections displayed in European museums³ had much to say in this respect; they were the first to arrive in the West. In consequence, the art of Assyria became an expression of identity of the ancient Orient and of the distant Mesopotamia, thus diluting its singularities and the complex socio-cultural network. Assyria became the mirror of Mesopotamia, blurring its frontiers, blurring the culture of the north (Assyria) with that of the south (Babylonia).

It should be noted that, contrary to what happened with Assyria, whose antiquities were exposed to the public some five years after the first excavations were initiated, the main

² Besides Jastrow and Perrot and Chipiez, another source used for the movie was the book of the German author Friedrich Hottenroth (1884), *Trachten, Haus-, Feld- und Kriegsgeräthschaften der Völker alter und neuer zeit*. Stuttgart: Weise.

³ The first exhibit of Assyrian antiquities in the Louvre dates from 1847.

Babylonian relics⁴ only arrived in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, where they are exhibited today, in 1917, some thirteen years after the first excavation campaigns.

So, although in 1916, when *Intolerance* premiered, the main structures, buildings and wealth of Babylon had been recognised and studied in detail, the city was enveloped in an aura of mysticism, the result of the romantic fantasies of the classical authors and the theological considerations of the Old Testament account.

Griffith's Babylon is, in short, a complex interlacing of different narratives compiled over the centuries, revealing the reception created over a long time, subjected to the interpretations, influences and vicissitudes of different cultural agents. The film of the American producer gives us a more accurate idea of how the different notions of Babylon were constructed, overlapped, and interwoven, from Antiquity until the 20th century. It also reveals how, to some degree, it is still viewed by contemporary authors⁵.

2. Intolerance and the visual arts

The year 1916 is also part of an important era within the cinematographic world. Griffith, who is considered one of the fathers of North-American cinema, embodied a turning point, initiating a period of great innovation in cinematographic techniques, and in Hollywood. His film, *The Birth of a Nation*, released the previous year, was applauded by the public, making it the most famous film ever produced. However, the director was accused of being a reactionary, and of portraying slavery and the Ku Klux Klan too light heartedly. In response to the criticism of *Birth of a Nation* and the dark aura that surrounded him and his film, Griffith produced *Intolerance*. The director addressed the themes of intolerance and prejudice, the struggle for affection and fraternity, creating a masterpiece which involved four separate stories, and to which he gave the title *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages*.

This epic film is divided into four episodes: a) a contemporary story about a young man falsely accused of murder; b) an episode about the Huguenot massacre in France in the 16th century; c) the well-known biblical story of the crucifixion of Christ; d) the story of the fall of Babylon in 539 AC.

In the following short study, we will focus only on the last segment (the fall of Babylon). We will analyse the daily life, and the fall of the capital of the Euphrates independently, although the four stories were interlaced in the film, an innovative technique introduced by Griffith. This "parallel montage" implied the articulation of different periods, and the common thread was the absence of moral values and lack of tolerance. This is present in the Babylonian universe in the characters of the Persian king, Cyrus, and the high priest of

⁴ We refer to the Gate of Ištar and the glazed tiles in the processional avenue, which would only be reconstructed and exhibited in 1930. On this subject see Michael Seymour 2008, 57.

⁵ Today, Babylon is still dependent on the images portrayed in ancient art and literature, and specially by the words expressed in the Bible account. Oliver Stones' *Alexander* (2004) is a good example of this.

Bel, who together plotted treason, leading to prince Belshazzar's downfall. We are thus presented with the final days of the Neo-Babylonian empire.

As mentioned above, the cinematographic team did extensive research and analysis, proof of which is the attention to detail evident in the sets built for the film. This research was based not only on books about the Chaldean and Assyrian civilization, written in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, but also on the film sets and on artistic work from previous decades. There was, at that time, an intrinsic connection between the world of cinema and the world of visual and performing arts. The use of old photographs and paintings to reproduce scenarios was common practice. Griffith, in fact, had already made great use of historical photographs to recreate the iconic moments in *The Birth of a Nation*, as described by Lillian Gish, the leading actress in the film (Lillian Gish and Ann Pinchot 1969, 136-137).

In the director's scrapbook are found reproductions of the renowned works of John Martin and Georges Rochegrosse about ancient Babylon, which Griffith used as inspiration for recreating the city, and on which process we will focus in due course. An important aspect we should highlight is the fact that Griffith's movie and its splendid sets would ultimately inspire American and European directors, such as the German Fritz Lang (Barry 1940, 25). Could the Tower of Babel in *Metropolis* (1927) be somehow inspired by Griffith's *Intolerance* and its monumentality?

3. *Babylon in Intolerance*

3.1. The city

a) *Walls and gates*

The following analysis takes into account the historical period referred to, i.e., the final days of the last Neo-Babylonian dynasty, specifically, the year 539 BCE, when the capital fell to Achaemenid king, Cyrus the Great. One of the aspects that most fascinated Greek and Roman authors who wrote about this city was the size of its walls. Herodotus may have visited the city during the 5th century BCE, when many of the buildings, judging from his account, were still standing and in use. And we know that the producers of the film referred to Herodotus in calculating the height of the line of defence of the city. As indicated in the film, the walls were a «replica of Babylon's encircling walls, 300 feet in height» (fig. 1), a similar number presented by the Greek historian⁶. Griffith intended to create a scenario for his film that could transport the spectator to the city of Nabonidus with a certain authenticity. But the circa 300 feet (230 to be more precise)⁷ of the defensive structure in the film were far from an accurate measurement⁸. The true Babylonian walls would be much smaller, *circa* 130 feet less.

⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, I 178.

⁷ See Köhler 2007, 63.

⁸ It is possible that the exaggeration that we mention above is due to a confusion of descriptions, by Herodotus and others, of two different walls: the exterior wall of the city and Habl as-Sahr, which constituted the largest defence region of Babylon (Reade 2008, 114).

Another reason to believe that Herodotus was the source referenced for the cinematic creation of the great wall that surrounded the city was that ancient historian's famous description: «On the top, along the edges of the wall, they built houses of a single room, facing each other, with space enough between to drive a four-horse chariot»⁹. This concept is reproduced in the film, where one finds in the intertitle: «walls (...) broad enough for the passing of chariots». There are evident echoes of a narrative, repeated over the centuries, which eventually led to the common Western image of Babylon. This Western image is precisely what we can observe in *Intolerance*. In the film, a procession in honour of the goddess Ištar takes place on the common ground next to the gates of the city, while on top of the wall prince Belshazzar appears inside a small carriage pulled by two horses (fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Still from *Intolerance*. City walls.

The city of Babylon had eight entrances, of which the best preserved is the famous Ištar Gate. Both Morris Jastrow and James Henry Breasted¹⁰ dedicated some pages of their respective works to this real *ex-libris* of Babylon. Unearthed in 1902 by Robert Koldewey, the main access to the city, and the processional way, aroused great admiration. At present, there is a reconstruction of the gate in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. However, this restoration was only exhibited to the public in 1930, some fourteen years after the release of *Intolerance*. Therefore, the beauty of Babylon's gate could not compete with the Assyrian antiquities already in display in museums across Europe and illustrated in books.

⁹ Herodotus, *Histories*, I 179.

¹⁰ Judging from Brown's account, the book by James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Times. A History of the Early World* (1916), was one of the works used by the director's team (1973, 145).



Fig. 2. Still from *Intolerance*. Belshazzar at the top of the wall.

An example of this are the depictions that Felix Thomas, a renowned Italian painter, made for Victor Place regarding the old Sargonid city of Dūr-šarru-kīn¹¹. In this context, we find in the work of Perrot and Chipiez a recreation of the southeast gate of the Assyrian monarch's palace, based on Thomas' works¹². It is precisely this print that we will find cut out and pasted in the scrapbook that Griffith used during the making of the film (fig. 3).

Thus, the movie's version of the «gate of Imgur-Bel», where a veritable babel¹³ of «East Indians (...) Egyptians, Numidians, and ambitious Persians» were gathered, is an exact copy of Thomas' work of art (fig. 4). There we find the famous *lamassu* flanking the entrance, and the statue of a spirit (usually identified as Gilgameš)¹⁴ king and warrior in the centre. The actual name given to the gate, Imgur Bel, has Mesopotamian reverberances. In fact, Imgur-Enlil was the designation given by the ancient Babylonians to the internal wall of their city. On the other hand, the Akkadian expression represented simultaneously the ancestral name for the place known now as Balawat, situated in an Assyrian region, near Nineveh. By substituting Enlil, the supreme deity of the Sumerian-Akkadian pantheon, for Bel, a name associated to Marduk (Oshima 2007, 348), the god of Babylon, Griffith covered his work with a mantle of typically Babylonian reverberations.

¹¹ See Victor Place and Felix Thomas, *Nineveh and Assyria* (1867).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ «That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth» (Gn. 11, 9). The term *babel* in the Old Testament is a synonym for «confusion» and «diversity».

¹⁴ The statue of Gilgameš which we see depicted in the film is also a recreation of a picture in Jastrow (1915, plate LVII).

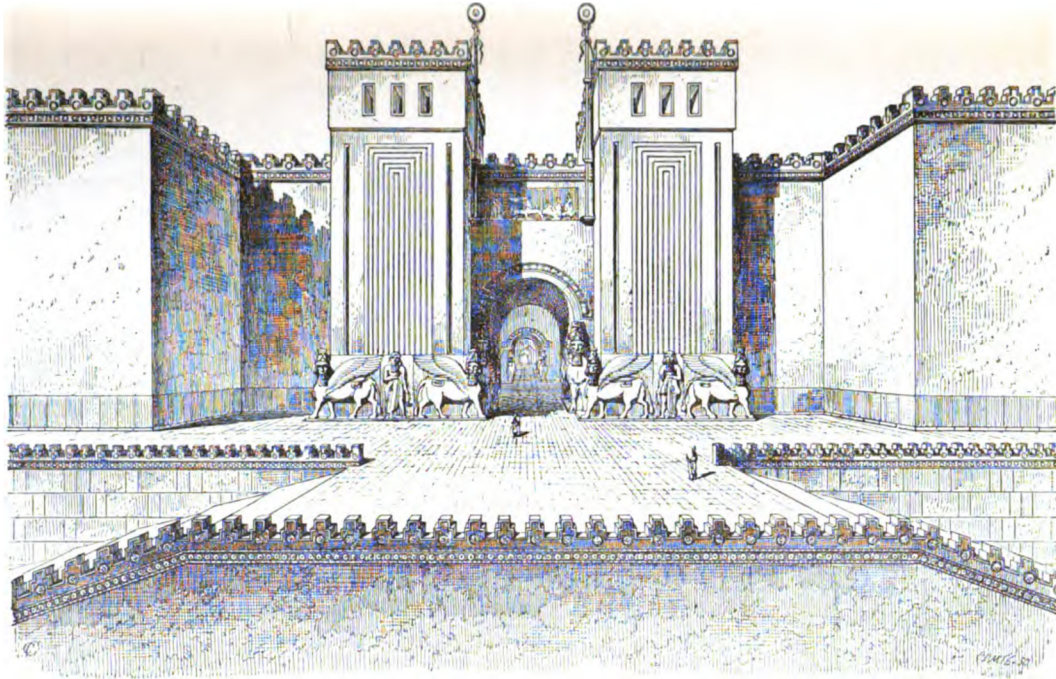


Fig. 3. Drawing by Felix Thomas depicting the south-eastern gateway of the palace of Sargon at Khorsabad (Perrot and Chipiez 1884, 17).

Curiously, or not, to reconstitute the gates of this entrance the director and his team would resort precisely to Imgur-Enlil, that is, Balawat. It was there that the most important and well-preserved relics of what would have been the gates of the ancient Assyrian structures, such as temples and palaces, were exhumed. In reality, what survived was not the actual gate, made of cedar wood, but rather the bronze strips (16 altogether) that adorned it. These decorative elements, loaded with images that evoked Assyrian power over its enemies, gave a very strong visual stimulus to the visitor of the palace (Curtis and Reade 1995, 98-9).

Intolerance recreates, twenty-nine centuries later, the luxurious atmosphere of the Assyrian monarch's palace, relocating it to the monumental entrance of the city of Babylon. The detail of these decorative motifs should not be underestimated. Some scenes next to the city gate show the attention that was given to them, with the entire structure totally adorned with iconographic details reminiscent of the originals from Balawat.

b) Monumental elements

When in May of 1847 the exhibition room of Assyrian antiquities in the Louvre museum was opened to the public, the highlight definitely was on the most striking and notable element of the entire collection - the colossal sculptures of huge winged androcephalous bulls measuring 4.20 m in height and 4.36 m in width¹⁵. The *lamassu* (as it was called in Antiquity), was considered by the old Mesopotamians to be a guardian, a protecting and

¹⁵ “winged human-headed bull” The Louvre Museum. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/winged-human-headed-bull> (accessed on September 2020).

benign spirit which defended the entrances to the temples and palaces of the city. After the first excavations in the north of Mesopotamia and the discoveries by Botta and Layard¹⁶, the *lamassu* became an icon of Mesopotamian culture.



Fig. 4. The door of Imgur-Bel constructed for the movie *Intolerance*, as it stood after the shooting.

An important aspect is the shift in artistic interpretations of this civilisation that occurred after the 1850s, i.e. there was a difference between the time before, and the time after the first excavations. Before, Mesopotamia was portrayed, for lack of concrete evidence, by characteristics inherited from Egyptian, Persian or Classical art and sculpture. After, there was a cultural differentiator, the discovery of the *lamassu*. We do not have to look very far to confirm this. Two of the works we see reproduced in Griffith's scrapbook, and which served as inspiration for the film, the painting *Belshazzar's Feast* by John Martin and *La fin de Babylone* painted by Georges Rochegrosse, demonstrate this turning point. *Belshazzar's Feast*, Martin's painting of 1821, was based on iconography of contiguous civilizations and cultures, and the Rochegrosse work of 1890 introduces Assyrian artistic elements, the most significant of which is the *lamassu*, which becomes the symbol *par excellence* of northern and southern Mesopotamian culture. It should be mentioned that

¹⁶ Botta excavated Khorsabad, beginning in 1842; Layard excavated Nimrud and Nineveh, starting in 1845 and 1849 respectively.

no evidence of such was found in ancient Babylon or in the region of Chaldea that «made no use of stone» (Perrot and Chipiez 1884, 261). *Intolerance* thus confirms that the *lamassu* remained into the 20th century an icon of Mesopotamian culture.



Fig. 5. Still from the movie *Intolerance*. Detail of the decoration of the back wall.

But *Intolerance* was not only inspired by Assyria. Apart from the monuments, sculptures and bas-reliefs, Griffith adorned his whole work with various flower and geometrical decorations, which leads us to the remote land of Babylonia. In the marriage market scene, for example, when the character of the Mountain Girl is auctioned, we identify on one of the walls in the background an almost exact recreation of the panel of glazed tiles that

would have decorated the throne room in the palace of king Nebuchadnezzar II (fig. 5). The tiles with chromatic decoration, palmettes, trees and other geometrical representations are, as well as the stars and the lions in the film's settings, one of the best examples of the integration of Babylonian art in *Intolerance*. Thus, on a predominantly Assyrian stage, we are blown on by the winds of the Euphrates capital.

c) The general view of the city

When Nebuchadnezzar II came to power he imposed a series of measures to restore, enhance and embellish the main buildings of his city. In the temple of the god Bel/Marduk, the monarch «overlaid the furnishings of Esagila with red gold, and the processional boats with yellow gold and stones like the stars of the heavens» (Oshima 2007, 355). This profusion of colours, golds and reds, glazed blues and yellows, gave the city a modern and cosmopolitan feeling, reflecting his wealth and ostentation. The monochromatic and blurred shades typical of a film made before the imposition of Technicolor do not provide any perception of colour in the scenarios of *Intolerance*. However, judging from those who experienced the shooting in person «the set glittered with gold and glowed with colour. Everything everywhere was richly carved, richly decorated, richly draped» (Brown 1973, 169). Griffith did justice to Babylon.



Fig. 6. Still from the movie *Intolerance*. Prince Belshazzar and his wife approach a window with a view of Babylon.

Three scenes give us a general view of the city. In the first one, the priest of Bel looks out of a window to watch a procession in honour of the goddess Ištar. To one side is the statue of his god, Bel/Marduk¹⁷, which leads us to believe that the scene takes place in the temple of that deity. In the second scene, Belshazzar and the princess approach a similar window to contemplate their glorious city (fig. 6). The scene unfolds in the royal palace, where the prince regent meets up with his beloved. In the last scene, we again find the priest of Bel, plotting against Belshazzar in alliance with Cyrus. Although there were no such windows in Babylon, to prevent heat and dust (Marzahn 2008, 48) entering the rooms, these three sequences are extremely important to understand how the whole city was perceived, and how the buildings were imagined and laid out within the global architectural context.

The presence of two bridges and what looks to be a river suggest the division of the city in two separate parts. That was actually how it was in Antiquity, due to the course of the Euphrates. This feature is evoked since the time of the Greco-Roman accounts, which mentioned Babylon as a city through which the river ran. In Griffith's work, on the right side, we can see a large open courtyard with a sort of classical roofed colonnade. On the left is an indistinct cluster of buildings, several of which are stepped pyramidal structures, with a possible access ramp, similar to the old Mesopotamian ziggurats. The *ziqurratu* («temple tower»; «mountain peak») was, notwithstanding, only one in Babylon – its most important building. The stepped tower stood out in the cityscape, being the highest edification, at a height of approximately 60 metres (Montero 2010b). All the other structures, contrary to what was projected by Griffith, fell short of this measurement, being mostly ground level constructions.

The proliferation of buildings of this nature and scale in *Intolerance* is reminiscent of the iconography in the visual arts in the last decades of the 19th century. In *Intolerance*, in addition to the stepped towers, we also see a tall circular building which takes us back to some famous representations of the tower of Babel, such as that of Gustave Doré (*The Confusion of Tongues*, ca. 1865), most likely inspired by the 9th century AD minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra.

Taking into account all of these aspects, and judging by the monumental size of the film's architectural structures, Griffith's Babylon coincides with the favourable image in the Old Testament account: «the jewel of the kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians» (Is. 13, 19), city that «Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD's hand, she made the whole earth drunk» (Jer. 51, 7).

d) *The grand courtyard*

Intolerance was the costliest film ever produced until then. 19000 male extras were hired for the shooting of the film, mainly for the battle scenes¹⁸. The action filmed in the so-called grand court was the most famous scene of the film, where the final episode of the

¹⁷ The statue was made according to the image displayed in the cylindrical seal dedicated to the god by Marduk-zakir-šumi, a Babylonian ruler, now in the Pergamon Museum.

¹⁸ The scenes of the battle between Babylonians and the forces of Cyrus the Great were filmed from a hot air balloon, and included nineteen thousand extras.

Babylonian story took place. For this set the director was inspired by different locations. We know that the great staircase in the hall was a reproduction of the steps of the palace of Darius I (550-486 BC), in Persepolis (Brown 1973, 153), the Achaemenid capital. In fact, in Griffith's scrapbook there is a clipping showing the monumental staircase of the palatial Persian building. It is precisely this stairway that the director would use to build the triumphal access to Belshazzar's Babylonian palace. As we know, Persian architecture and art shared certain similarities with Mesopotamian ones. However, we have no knowledge of any discovery of such a staircase from the country between the rivers. The ornaments with which Griffith embellished it, lion heads and rosettes placed on the edge of each step, are, nonetheless, a particularity of Babylonian imagery.



Fig. 7. *Belshazzar's Feast* from John Martin (1821).

The main idea for the grand courtyard came from an 1821 painting by the British artist John Martin, entitled *Belshazzar's Feast*, featuring a great courtyard open to the sky with columns to either side, and three entrances in the background (fig. 7). Above them, in the darkness that envelops the palace and foreshadows its fate, are two buildings similar to the ones Belshazzar and the priest of Bel contemplated from the window. The central building, likely a representation of the tower of Babel, evokes the one we see depicted in a painting by the 16th century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel (fig. 8).

In the film, *Belshazzar's Feast* served as the main inspiration for the set, which Griffith later filled with various other components and ornamental props. The three entrances of John Martin's painting are reduced to two in *Intolerance*, but the general scale (proportions) found in the painting are maintained. According to the artist (Martin), in

relation to the human figure the painting's perspective was manipulated so as to give the impression of the depth of a mile (Seymour 2008, 176). In the film of 1916, Griffith points out that «This hall over a mile in length, (was) imaged after the splendor of an olden day». Actually, more than a kilometer would have been the true size of the film's grand courtyard, the place where a cosmopolitan and heterogeneous population effusively celebrates victory in the first confrontation with the Persians.



Fig. 8. *The Tower of Babel* from Pieter Bruegel (1563).

It should be mentioned that the banquet of Belshazzar, immortalized by John Martin, evokes a biblical passage, which will be addressed below. For now, we must stress that the movement, the sense of festivity and exaltation in this canvas, are elements that Griffith transposes to his film. The Mesopotamian palaces were seats of power as well as royal residence, and places where the monarch communicated with his population. The concentration of such a diversity of population in a space that was perceived as sacred, would, nonetheless, be astonishing.

More astonishing would be the figure of an elephant. Perched on tall sculpted columns, these mammals from Southeast Asia stood out in the court of Belshazzar. The introduction of the elephant, strange to the Babylonian fauna¹⁹, in the court of Belshazzar gave Babylon a certain exoticism and exuberance. Griffith had been impressed with the 1914 film of Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria*, and he introduced into his own work some of the details he

¹⁹ The inscriptions of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (9th century BC) mention the hunting of elephants. However, the use of elephants as war animals only becomes common in the Hellenistic Period.

saw there. This corroborates the notion of ostentation and pride²⁰ with which Babylon is usually associated.



Fig. 9. Still from the movie *Intolerance*. The great court of Belshazzar.

3.2. The king and the population

a) The crown and other ornaments

The main character in *Intolerance* is Belshazzar, the so-called «apostle of tolerance». Although the leading character in the film, the son of Nabonidus was not the monarch himself but merely its prince regent. Notwithstanding, Belshazzar's costume, as conceived by Griffith, is that of an actual monarch. His robe and mantle were especially remarkable for their elaborate adornment, including the customary Mesopotamian fringed hem. The crown merits particular consideration. A true symbol of royalty, it underwent numerous alterations throughout history. In the neo-Babylonian period, the sovereigns used a conical-shaped crown, apparently undecorated²¹.

²⁰ Jer. 51, 32.

²¹ Such a crown is visible, for instance, in the stela of Nabonidus. This stela was acquired by the British museum in 1825. Its museum number is BM 90837.



Fig. 10. Still from the movie *Intolerance*. Belshazzar and the High Priest of Bel.

Contrary to this, on the film *Intolerance*, Belshazzar appears wearing a crown, somewhere between spiral and conical in shape, with the typical Mesopotamian spike and several decorative motifs. Where would Griffith have found the models for this headdress? The answer is simple: Assyrian bas-reliefs in which the Assyrian monarch is portrayed in a similar way. The king who governed the land of Ashur in the 7th century BCE wore a typical *polos* crown, with iconographic motifs positioned in rows (Bahrani 2007, 155). In the film (fig. 10), the crown of Belshazzar has adornments in oval shapes, stars, circles and a flower in the centre, symbolizing the royal diadem. Thus, we can conclude that, in *Intolerance*, the prince regent of Babylon wears a symbol of royalty analogous to those of the monarchs of the ancient Assyrian empire.

In the same picture, we see the priest of Bel, holding a staff topped by a crescent, symbol attributed in Mesopotamia to Sîn, the moon god, and not, as would be logical, to Bel/Marduk²². There are further inconsistencies: just before the appearance on the scene of the high priest of Bel, his servant leads the arrival procession holding the Egyptian ankh sign, which was unknown in Mesopotamian symbolism. The intrepid priest shares with Belshazzar the trappings and adornments that are reserved for top figures of society. However, his crown tells us a lot about Griffith's limitations in terms of historiographical analysis of ancient Babylon, and, in general, of ancient Mesopotamia. In fact, in the land between the rivers, the crown with horns was reserved exclusively for the gods, and it was unthinkable that a human would wear such a divine symbol.

²² For more references on the sources to this outfit, see Martin 1983.

b) The throne

As with the crown and sceptre, the throne was an important symbol of royal power. In the first page of Griffith's scrapbook we find examples of possible thrones for his work. The director chose the royal seat for Belshazzar from Assyrian and Persian models. Even more interesting is the seat where the prince reclines after the first Babylonian triumph over Achaemenid troops.



Fig. 11. Still from the movie *Intolerance*. Belshazzar and the princess enjoying a feast in the great court.

In the film's huge courtyard, Belshazzar and his beloved reap the rewards of a hard-won victory (fig. 11). He reclines on an enormous settee, protected by a sunshade; his legs are covered by a mantle. She rests in a high seat opposite her consort. Both are attended by servants waving fans to fend off the heat. The scene is presented like a photograph of the 7th century BCE relief of the banquet of Ashurbanipal which we see reproduced in the early 20th century works consulted by the director (fig. 12). The characters are the same as the bas-relief, that is, the ruler and his consort, although the context is different, however. The Assyrian monarch was celebrating in the gardens of his palace, the military victory against king Teumman of Elam, whose head he had brought as a trophy and ordered to be hung from one of the trees of his garden. Although the political and geographic context was totally different, Griffith captured its essence. In fact, the famous *Belshazzar's Feast* takes place in *Intolerance* after the military triumph of the Babylonian regent just as the banquet in the bas-relief of Ashurbanipal.

The North-American director manages to combine in the same set three different legacies: the Old Testament, from which he gets the famous banquet; the Assyrian, which inspires

the palatial celebration scene showing the intimacy between the regent and his wife; and the Babylonian, which serves as back drop to the scene.

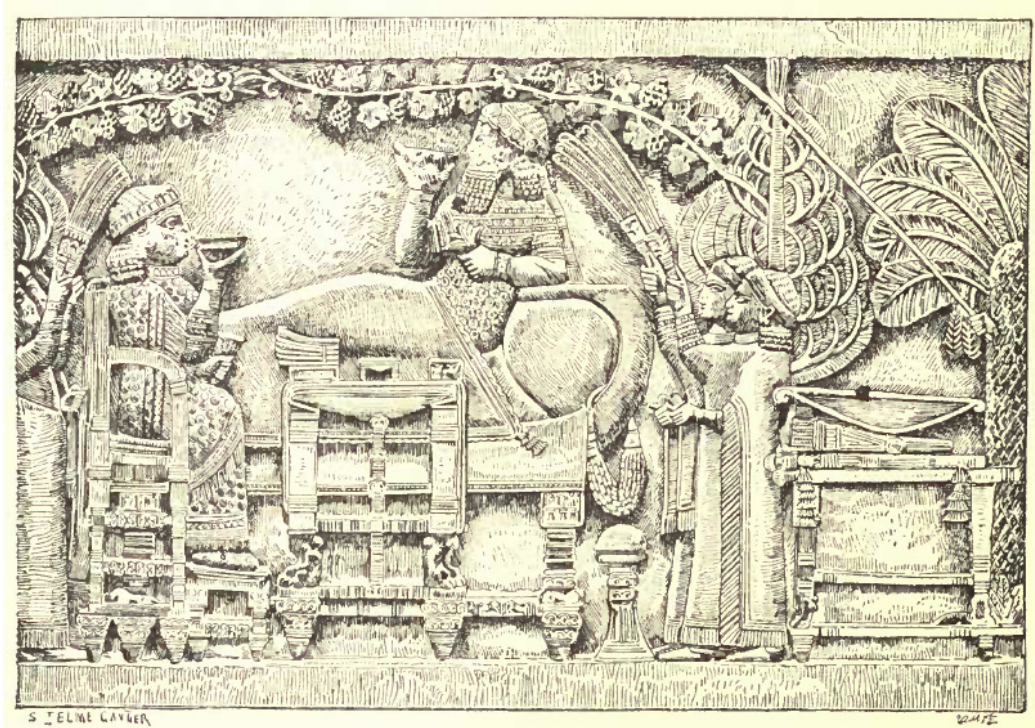


Fig. 12. Drawing of the bas-relief of Ashurbanipal (Perrot and Chipiez, 1884, 108).

c) *The costumes*

If the costumes worn by the ruler and the elite in *Intolerance* intended to be as authentic as possible, those used by the female characters left a lot to be desired. Neither the queen, or her assistants, or even the women of the harem wore clothes that resembled in any way those of Antiquity, but rather an elaborate interpretation of the director and his team based on a romantic idea of Orientalism²³. The suggestive garments that revealed bare shoulders, legs and backs, the transparencies, gems, feathers, sequins, were associated with the exotic and extravagant idea held of the lascivious Oriental women. These clothes conveyed, therefore, modernism and not the traditional Mesopotamian attires. The queen, for example, generally covered her body with a long ankle-length tunic, usually with a decorated band on her head.

More indicative of the idea of Orientalism is the bacchanal scene. The atmosphere for the action is suggested by the French artist Georges Rochegrosse who in 1890 illustrated the fall of the city in a painting entitled *La fin de la Babylone* composed of nude female figures, stretched out on beds and accompanied by their lovers – the debauchery is a clear sign of

²³ In what concerns the idea of the Oriental women, Edward Said remembers that «the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic- but curiously attractive – ruler» (Said 1985, 103).

the decline of the empire (Bahrani 2001, 176). This scene is reminiscent of Eugène Delacroix' painting *La mort de Sardanapale*. The resignation in the face of the inevitable is a common theme in both artists, as is the showing of the body of the concubine, created according to the concept of the Oriental women, submissive and lascivious, living in a space that captured the imagination of Western men – the harem. Griffith introduces the scene during the celebrations of the Babylonian victory over the Persians. As in the above-mentioned painting, the debauchery and dissoluteness, perpetuating the biblical idea of the «lover of pleasure» (Is. 47, 8), «the great prostitute» (Rev. 17, 1) are the final images that mark the history of a city famous for its luxury and ostentation.

Roche-grosse's was not the only painting that influenced the director. In the 5th century BCE Herodotus propagated an outlandish story which imparted an image of Babylon as a city of bizarre customs. According to the legend elaborated by the historian, «once a year in every village all the maidens as they attained marriageable age were collected and brought together into one place, with a crowd of men standing around. Then a crier would display and offer them for sale one by one»²⁴. Based on this account Edwin Long painted *The Babylon marriage Market*, which would later lead to the scene in the film with the same title. In *Intolerance*, the Mountain Girl is auctioned in a market, as other women are sitting in a row patiently awaiting their turn. On one side, the men of the city appraise their potential new wives, and bid for them. Long's atmosphere is wholly recreated by Griffith²⁵. There is, however, no evidence in the cuneiform sources that would corroborate Herodotus' fable.

Thus, in these two different sequences it is possible to verify the influence that Greek authors and references from the Bible still had at the beginning of the 20th century. Babylon had been shaped in the image the other had created, and had so remained.

4. Why Belshazzar?

Everything in *Intolerance* points to the survival of the Old Testament narrative, from the banquet of Belshazzar reminiscent of the one in the Book of Daniel in which Belshazzar holds a feast for a thousand of his lords, to the stage setting based on the painting by John Martin. The work of the English painter depicts this precise moment: the feast when the fall of the city and the death of the monarch are prophesied. Daniel marks the moment in which the impiety and blasphemy against God culminate through the profaning of the sacred vessels. Through the Book of Daniel, Nabonidus was reduced to obscurity, while Belshazzar would be renowned, for many centuries, as the last ruler of the last empire of Mesopotamia. It did not matter, therefore, what was written in the *Cyrus Cylinder* or the *Nabonidus Cylinder*, but rather the age-old and indisputable Old Testament.

The backdrop for the final hours of Babylon in the film was thus the Book of Daniel. But there was also an element of novelty in *Intolerance*. In his clay cylinder, the Persian king, Cyrus, is noted for his tolerance, and for personifying the liberator of Babylon. This idea is

²⁴ Herodotus, *Histories*, I 196.

²⁵ The bizarre marital costumes are given as one of the explanations for the fall of the city. Long's painting is judge sufficiently accurate to be reproduced in the movie (Bahrani 2001, 175).

also depicted in the Old Testament. In the Book of Isaiah, God chooses Cyrus as his associate, whom He sends against the king of the Euphratean city to free the people of Israel from their yoke. However, this is not the positive and conciliatory picture we see in *Intolerance*. Right in the beginning of the episode that takes place in Babylon, Belshazzar is given the title of «apostle of tolerance», and assumes the part of avenger and protector. The roles are thus reversed. Cyrus is a ruthless invader, while Belshazzar is a decorous prince who is a victim of the utmost treason. What did Griffith intend with this image?

As a result of the negative criticism which ensued after his previous film, when Griffith was accused of racism and prejudice, he tried to improve his image and come across as a merciful and tolerant person. He used the screen to defend himself, using perhaps a little of his own history in the film's script. With Cyrus being the foreigner who claimed the city, it would be logical, in terms of strategy and character, that he would play the role of aggressor. Even though the Mesopotamian capital's «reputation» was quite negative because of the way it was depicted in the Old Testament and the Book of Daniel, Griffith chose to gild his Babylon, portraying it as a martyr, falling to the hands of a ruthless ruler²⁶. Thus, in *Intolerance* the inhabitants of the city accept Cyrus after his victory in what appears to be an attitude of resignation rather than of joy and liberation. Fundamentally, the director wanted to extol the Babylon of excesses, wonders, and possibilities.

Belshazzar, in turn, commits suicide, choosing death over capitulation. The truth is that, even though the prince regent fought ferociously against his opponent, his permissiveness and passivity were strong character traits; he gave priority to the banquet rather than taking precautions to defend the city. There are no heroes among the elite in *Intolerance*. The closest figure to this status is the Mountain Girl, who tries in vain to halt the advance of the Persians. This reflects a tendency over the last few centuries. Let us remember, for example, Lord Byron's 1821 play *Sardanapalus*, in which it is a woman that shows bravery and determination in the face of danger: Myrrha, the favourite concubine of Sardanapalus, urges the king to react, to go off to battle and take harsher measures against his opponents. Her character is probably based on the legendary queen, Semiramis, who was supposed to have been rather man-like (sometimes seen as a valiant warrior). Furthermore, in *Intolerance* it is the princess, and not Belshazzar, who takes the decision to sacrifice some concubines before he commits suicide, a scenario that makes one remember Delacroix's painting. The Oriental king, on the other hand, probably as a result of European colonialism and imperialism came to be perceived as idle and lazy, a vision that shows the adulterated and superior attitude of the other.

5. Why Babylon?

Intolerance is one of a long list of epic films shot in the first decades of the 20th century. The director chose nothing less than one of the most famous empires in the history of humanity. Babylon loomed in Western imagery so ageless and everlasting that it blended with the notion of time itself. It was back there, in the origins, in the place where the tower

²⁶ As Runions states «In Griffith's idyllic world of Babylon, people are not controlled by laws. They are allowed to pursue their own pleasures and interests, sexually and religious» (2013, 138).

of Babel had been built after the great Deluge, a symbol of the scattering of humanity. The choice of this city as a backdrop for this kind of story makes sense, not only because of its size, but also because of the events experienced at that time. The dark cloud that was hovering over Europe threatened to spread to other parts of the world, sinking it into an apocalyptic chaos. Misunderstood, criticised and surrounded by a society divided by social conflicts, Griffith alternated the crucifixion of Christ and the massacre of the Huguenots with a story equally able to engage the spectators. Babylon, as an inseparable legacy of the Judeo-Christian legacy, met perfectly the expectations of the film director. The end, the final result of mankind's intolerance was searched in that which constituted the defining and cathartic moment in the history of humanity, as portrayed in the Old Testament – the fall of the Babylonian empire and capital.

Griffith was not immune to the vicissitudes of his own times. The Babylon depicted in *Intolerance* was a combination of socio-cultural inheritances, showing the different degrees of reception that emerged over time. As implied by the word babel, for Griffith Babylon was a jumbled mixture of ideas perceived, experienced and transmitted over the centuries. This vision is not strange to our day-to-day conception about the ancient capital of Mesopotamia²⁷.

Notwithstanding, to this patchwork of perceptions, the North-American director added facts provided by the cuneiform sources, which exposed the *modus vivendi* and *pensandi* of this civilization, giving this eternal city a whole new vitality (unknown to the public at the time).

²⁷ Again, it should be recalled Oliver Stones' film *Alexander* (2004), whose set of Babylon, although much more accurate, with a recreation of Ištar's gate, also displays the famous hanging gardens and the colossal tower. In size and in imagination it is thus not very far from that of Griffith's *Intolerance*. The myth around the capital of the Euphrates still persists, overshadowing history.

References

- António, Lauro. 2010. *Temas de Cinema: David Griffith, Orson Welles, Stanley Kubrick*. Lisboa: Dinalivro.
- Bahrani, Zainab. 2007. "The Babylonian visual image." In *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, 155-170. New York and London: Routledge.
- Barry, Iris. 1940. *D. W. Griffith: American film master*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Breasted, James Henry. 1916. *Ancient Times. A History of the Early World*. Boston: Ginn and Company.
- Brown, Karl. 1973. *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bühler, Philipp. 2007. "Cabiria." In *Movies of the 20s*, ed. Jürgen Müller, 50-53. Los Angeles: Taschen.
- Collon, Dominique. 2007. "Babylonian seals." In *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, 95-123. New York and London: Routledge.
- Curtis, J. E. and J. E. Reade. 1995. *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Finkel, Irving. 2008. "The madness of Nebuchadnezzar and the sins of Nabonidus." In *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, 161-165. London: The British Museum Press.
- George, Andrew. 2011. *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schoyen Collection (Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology)*, vol. 17. Bethesda MD: CDL Press.
- Good, Irene. 2007. "Cloth in the Babylonian World." In *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, 141-154. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hansen, Miriam. 1991. *Babel & Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hanson, Bernard. 1972. "D.W. Griffith: Some Sources", *The Art Bulletin* 54/4: 493-515.
- Herodotus. *Histories*. Accessed March 5, 2018.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0126>
- Jastrow, Morris. 1915. *The civilization of Babylonia and Assyria*. Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott Company.
- Köhler, Heinz-Jürgen. 2007. "Intolerance." In *Movies of the 20s*, ed. Jürgen Müller, 58-63. Los Angeles: Taschen.
- Koldewey, Robert. 1914. *The Excavations at Babylon*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Louvre Museum. 2017. "winged human-headed bull." Accessed March 5, 2018.
<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/winged-human-headed-bull>

- Martin, Floyd. 1983. "Intolerance': A Note on Additional Visual Sources". *Art Journal*, 43/3: 231-233.
- Marzahn, Joachim. 2008. "Koldewey's Babylon." In *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, 46-53. London: The British Museum Press.
- Montero Fenollós, Juan Luis. 2010. "Babilonia. La gran metrópoli del Oriente antiguo." In *Torre de Babel. Historia y mito*, ed. Juan Luis Montero Fenollós, 35-55. Murcia: Ediciones Tres Fronteras.
- Montero Fenollós, Juan Luis. 2010b. "Etemenanki versus torre de Babel. Nueva hipótesis de reconstrucción del zigurate de Babilonia." In *Torre de Babel. Historia y mito*, ed. Juan Luis Montero Fenollós, 119-144. Murcia: Ediciones Tres Fronteras.
- Montero Fenollós, Juan Luis. 2012. *Breve Historia de Babilonia*. Madrid: Nowtilus.
- Nadali, Davide. 2013. "Invented Space: Discovering Near Eastern Architecture through Imaginary Representations and Constructions." In *Time and History in the Ancient Near East, Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Barcelona (26-30 July 2010)*, eds. L. Feliu, J. Llop, A. Millet Albà and J. Sanmartín, 391-404. Winona Lake: Indiana, Eisenbrauns.
- Oshima, Takayoshi. 2007. "The Babylonian God Marduk." In *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, 348-360. New York and London: Routledge.
- Perrot, Georges and Charles Chipiez. 1884. *A History of Art in Chaldaea & Assyria*. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Reade, Julian. 2008. "Early travelers on the wonders: suggested sites." In *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, 112-117. London: The British Museum Press.
- Runions, Erin. 2013 "Intolerance: Love's Struggle Through the Ages (1916)." In *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, ed. Adele Reinhartz, 135-140. London and New York: Routledge.
- Said, Edward. 1985. "Orientalism Reconsidered". *Cultural Critique*, 1: 89-107.
- Sallaberger, Walther. 2007. "The palace and the temple in Babylonia." In *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, 265-275. New York and London: Routledge.
- Seymour, Michael. 2008. "Representations in art." In *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, 173-178. London: The British Museum Press.
- Seymour, Michael. 2008b. "Robert Koldewey and the Babylon excavations." In *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, 41-45. London: The British Museum Press.
- Seymour, Michael. 2015. "The Babylon of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*." In *Imagining Ancient Cities in Film. From Babylon to Cinecittà*, eds. M. G. Morcillo, P. Hanesworth and O. L. Marchena, 18-34. New York: Routledge.
- Simmon, Scott. 1993. *The films of D. W. Griffith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- "The Cyrus Cylinder Translation." The British Museum. Accessed March 5, 2018. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1

Van de Mieroop, M. 2003. "Reading Babylon". *American Journal of Archaeology*, 107: 257-275.

Wiseman, D. J. 1991. *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon (the schweich lectures of the British Academy 1983)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.