Building the American Hieroglyph:

Vachel Lindsay's Response to Pluralism in the Progressive Era

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ABSTRACT

In the 1915 pioneer book on film theory and criticism, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, poet Vachel Lindsay outlined a method of filmmaking based on the Egyptian hieroglyphic language, with the intention of re-establishing the balance between "e pluribus" and "unum" in the increasingly pluralistic Progressive Era. Although some parts of the book were adopted, the hieroglyphic method was dismissed as esoteric and naïve. Its dismissal can be attributed to the cultural and ideological shift that occurred in relation to the First World War. Ezra Pound and the Modernists were instrumental in the decline of Lindsay's career and the disappearance of the hieroglyph in film, and parallels can be drawn between this relationship and the decline of the Progressive Era as a whole. That Lindsay's work revolved around the racially-controversial work of D.W. Griffith is examined as a microcosum of the ironies and contradictions typical of the era of reform. A close reading of the book and an investigation of its cultural roots demonstrates that Lindsay's notion of the hieroglyph in film is an interesting and structurally valid, though flawed, solution to the imbalance of "e pluribus" and "unum."

This project focuses on Lindsay's hieroglyph in film, and argues for its reconsideration as a relevant response to Progressive Era concerns about pluralism. Through a close reading of the book and an investigation of its cultural roots, the project redefines the hieroglyph as a functioning form and the culmination of Lindsay's body of work. By further investigating its disappearance and Lindsay's decline, the project shows that the hieroglyph was dismissed before it was understood. Once understood, Lindsay's hieroglyph re-emerges as a powerful and poignant component of both film scholarship and studies of Progressive Era America.

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Introduction
A Film Theorist is Born

In early 1915, the poet Vachel Lindsay went to one of New York City's many

film theaters to watch the director D.W. Griffith's latest release.[1] After watching *The*

Birth of a Nation, Lindsay began to write a book about film. The book, published in

November of that year, was in part a letter of encouragement to Griffith, in whose work

Lindsay saw the potential for film to become an integral and unifying part of American

culture. He recognized in the film a form and directorial flourish that warranted further

consideration.[2] Indeed, Griffith fundamentally transformed the film form and industry in

America, in relation the popularization of the narrative form[3] and the attention received

by film as a result by the ensuing censorship legislation.[4] Lindsay hoped that filmmakers

like Griffith would follow the method of filmmaking outlined in *The Art of the Moving*

Picture, and that films made thus would restore the balance of a nation in flux. The

method outlined in the book was a direct response to the tensions and anxieties of an age

where the traditional balance between "e pluribus" and "unum" had been disrupted by

unprecedented and distinctly 'foreign' immigration, among many other social concerns.[5]

That the method for creating American unity through film revolved around the

application of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic language is perhaps as ironic as

Lindsay's having been inspired by one of the most racially insensitive films ever made. It

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[1] *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, David W. Griffith Corp., 1915, Archive.org (2007),
      accessed September 25, 2012, <http://archive.org/details/dw_griffith_birth_of_a_nation>.
[2] Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture,* 1915, 1922 (New York: Liveright, 1970), 75-6.
[3] Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill,
      NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 41; Charlie Keil, "Narration in the Transitional
      Cinema: The Historiographical Claims of the Unauthored Text." *Cinemas: Journal of Film*
      Studies, 21.2/3 (2011), 123.
[4] Paul Starr, *Creation of the Media* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004), 295-6.
[5] "E pluribus unum" is a motto on the Great Seal and coins of the United States, and translates as "one out
      of the many," denoting unity through plurality.

is certainly the case that, although some components of the book were adopted and adapted by later filmmakers, theorists, and academics, the hieroglyphic system was rarely taken seriously. However, a close study of hieroglyphs as Lindsay understood them reveals a system of thought and a practical method of filmmaking that conformed to the description of Lindsay as being "neither typical nor representative […] he was a one-man sorting house of ideas [and] he remained peripheral."[6] Regarding film, Lindsay aimed for universality and uplift, without resorting to the discourse of film as a universal language, or the 'scientific' reforms characteristic of the Progressive Era.

This project begins with a discussion of the Progressive Era, and the anxieties about immigration that defined many of the movements we associate with the turn of the twentieth century. Though vast and varied, many of the reforms enacted were measures enacted to contend with a nation in the process of becoming industrialized and pluralistic. Fundamentally, the anxiety of the Progressive Era concerned a loss of unity and identity; in America, these two concepts have traditionally been at odds. The physical unity created by national transportation and communication systems completed in the late 19th century seemed to undermined the rugged individuality of the Enlightenment-rooted, democratic individual.[7] At the same time, individuality could not appropriately meet the challenges of an increasingly urban, commercial, and ethnically diverse populace. Moreover, ethnic diversity and the arrival of non-Anglo immigrants called into question fundamental traditions and beliefs about American identity. At stake was the heart of American liberal democracy, which ideally balances the individual and collective, the

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[6] Anne Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 18.

[7] John Durham Peters, "Satan and Savior: Mass communication in Progressive Thought," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6.3 (1989), 247.

rural and urban, and the Republican and Democrat. I argue that Lindsay's book was a direct response to the imbalance of democracy he and his contemporaries saw in the early twentieth century, and that the core component of the book—the hieroglyphic in film—was the means he proposed to restore that balance, by bringing traditional values from both sides of national identity into a conducive and inspiring conversation with the increasingly visual modern world.

Lindsay's system, though structurally flawed and ideologically problematic, does provide an interesting and fairly satisfying response to the national imbalance and concerns about pluralism that worried his generation. The second chapter of this project argues that the hieroglyphic in film had definite and well-established roots, and functioned within a system of individual and collective interpretation that was not only an appropriate response to anxieties about pluralism, but also formally performed the task that Lindsay claimed would restore national balance and unity. The hieroglyphic form simultaneously engaged the individual and collective, and its character as a visual representation did in some ways adhere well to the new medium. In the Egyptian tradition, as deciphered by early 19th century European and American scholars, the hieroglyphic system consisted of individual hieroglyphs connected in sequence to communicate ideas.[8] Formally, an individual hieroglyph is a compact, free-standing pictorial representation of a thing or idea. The picture is a concrete image, but can be interpreted any number of ways, all of which then refer back to, and are guided by, the image. Linked together, hieroglyphs direct each other's interpretation—a hand hieroglyph next to a throne hieroglyph is different than if the hand is accompanied by a

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[8] John T. Irwin, "The Symbol of the Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance," *American Quarterly* 26.2 (May 1974), 103-124, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712230.

spear—which then directs and defines the larger idea or message being communicated. The economic communication of the hieroglyph was indeed well-suited to the increasingly visual consumer culture dominating modern America. In film, the application of hieroglyphs to visual narrative theoretically added levels of meaning and interpretive potential that would resonate at the individual and collective levels simultaneously. Examined broadly, Lindsay's hieroglyph in film reflected a larger national longing for stability and unity, and its creation and dismissal reflected the idealistic rise and disillusioned fall of the Progressive Era in America. Finally, the hieroglyph in film helps explain why Lindsay, a renowned and popular poet in 1915, was dismissed by the 1920s, and has since been largely forgotten in American culture.

The hieroglyph in film was in some ways the culmination of Lindsay's body of work, and perhaps the best manifestation of his obsession with the values of America and the "physical, artistic, and spiritual dimensions" of its democratic heritage.[9] Where his attempts to preach "The Gospel of Beauty" (as he called his works) was limited by available media—no one book or newspaper could accurately capture the full breadth of his project to reinvigorate and inspire a nation in flux—the new medium of film had the potential to communicate and affect large audiences across the country; as he noted regarding the affective and mass communicative power of film in comparison to other available media, "people do not cheer when reading their favourite newspaper,"[10] but he had witnessed such a reaction in film theaters. The new medium also had the potential to ameliorate the challenges with which his generation was concerned, specifically because

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[9] Anne Massa, *Fieldworker*, 16.

[10] Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies: A Second Book of Film Criticism by Vachel Lindsay*, edited by Myron Lounsbury. Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), 156-7.

of these communicative and affective properties. Lindsay's optimism about film was

shared by many of his contemporaries, including figures as diametrically opposed in

history as D.W. Griffith and Jane Addams. Film was a vehicle that could satisfy a large

range of social projects, from the construction of a universal language touted by

Griffith,[11] to the regulating and censoring of films and film houses as undertaken by

Addams and other practical reformers.[12] Nor did the medium discriminate against

viewpoints, as is clear in the mutual consideration of film by two such dichotomous

figures. That Lindsay was acquainted with and reverent towards both figures says much

about his character and works; Lindsay easily held contradicting or oppositional ideas

and beliefs simultaneously. The balance of simultaneously existing, though oppositional,

truths, was the base of American democracy as Lindsay understood it. Although he had

personal and regional allegiances, he took "e pluribus unum" literally. Much of his work

was an attempt to clarify and express this sense of balance, from the pairing of visual art

with poems (his poetry was often accompanied by drawings), to the polemic, *The Golden*

Book of Springfield, he wrote in 1920 about the sharing of virtues between rural and

urban centers.[13] However, this simultaneous existence and balance of forces he thought

essential to American identity and democracy was best expressed in his work on the

hieroglyphic. The message of the entire "Gospel of Beauty" was to hold fast to, bolster,

and maintain the democratic balance of the individual and collective, the rural and urban,

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[11] Anthony Slide, *Early American Cinema,* 1970 (Metuchen, N.J: The Scarecrow Press,
Inc., 1994), 224; Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became
American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 13.

[12] Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement
in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2003), 273.

[13] Vachel Lindsay, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920),
Archive.org, on openlibrary.org online edition, last revised April 13, 2012, accessed July 14, 2013,
<http://archive.org/stream/goldenbooksprin00lindgoog #page/n12/mode/2up>.

Republican and Democrat, even in the face of great national change. His work on the hieroglyph in film distilled his message, and gave it a practical and plausible outlet of mass communication, making it the culminating point of his public career. Applied to film, the hieroglyph could both express the core values of American identity, and provide a means by which to maintain them in the face of pluralism.

The Art of the Moving Picture did many things, but its various themes ultimately referred to the underlying message of unity through restoring the balance of oppositional elements of American culture. Despite the resonance of this message within the Progressive Era as a whole, the part of the book that most clearly demonstrates how to effect this restoration (through hieroglyphs in film), was dismissed. There is evidence that Lindsay's work on film was adopted in some respects, appearing in the Film Studies curriculum at Columbia University in the 1920s, and again in the 1930s in courses taught by Iris Barry, director of MoMA.[14] Newspaper clippings indicate that Lindsay's taxonomy of film forms and styles were appropriated by other filmmakers, requiring an effort on the part of Lindsay and his friends to give him due credit for his work.[15] However, his contribution to film all but disappeared after his death in 1931. The dismissal of Lindsay's work on film was due in part to external circumstances beyond his control, and in part to the idiosyncrasies of his own character and style, but this dismissal ultimately stagnated film theory in America until the 1950s and 1960s,[16] and it is only

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[14] Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8.

[15] Seymour Stern to the Dramatic Editor," *Herald Tribune*, "Every Man in His Own Humour: From the Producer of 'Conflict,'" May 12, 1929, Box 57, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

[16] Jeffrey Folks, "Vachel Lindsay's Populism in the Silent Film Era," *The Midwest Quarterly* 43.1 (Autumn 2001), n.p.

since the post-structural turn in the 1970s that his hieroglyphs been considered in detail. The third chapter of this project examines this dismissal.

I argue in the third chapter that the dismissal of Lindsay's work was the result of the changes in the national mood that also led to the decline of the Progressive Era as a whole. The major influences considered are the rise of Modernism as the dominant cultural force, defined by economy and realism, and the cultural disillusionment in the wake of the First World War. Lindsay's system relied on a shared context of image recognition and understanding—an intertext—that was rooted in nineteenth-century values and morals, which ceased to appropriately address the problems of modernity by the First World War.[17] His interpretations of the hieroglyphic form relied heavily on traditional Western symbolism and values which "tended to make his naggingly valid comments seem old-fashioned," and thus out of place after the war.[18] The message and method outlined in the book made overtures to the Modernists, but it was described in language that obscured the modern economy of the hieroglyph. Pound and his contemporaries thought Lindsay's prose too ornamental and antiquated to be of use in the modern age.[19] Had this not been so, Lindsay's work on the hieroglyph might have been recognized as being transitional, embracing the past and future simultaneously. The war itself fractured the values and confidence of the Progressive Era as a whole, undermining the idealistic work of Lindsay and his contemporaries. Moreover, the war further transformed the film industry in America, placing commercial gain far ahead of artistic or

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[17] Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 6.

[18] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 18.

[19] Ezra Pound, *A Memoire of Gaudier-Brzeszka*, 1916 (New York: New Directions, 1970), 88; T.R. Hummer, "Laughed Off: Canon, Kharakter, and the Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay," *The Kenyon Review* 17.2 (Spring 1995), 78.

ideological experimentation with the medium. It is relevant that the book was released in 1915, a year that was close on the heels of both the "climax" and "death knell" of progressivism.[20] The year marked a "paradigmatic shift" [21] in film history, as well as the beginning of the tensions between Progressive factions over American involvement in the war that would ultimately eliminate any unity that had existed between the various movements. While Lindsay could, in 1915, still embrace contradictions—like his admiration of both Griffith and Addams—the irony inherent in those contradictions, specifically in terms of his touting of *The Birth of a Nation* as a unifying force, would undermine the validity and practicality, though not sincerity, of his use of hieroglyphs in film. With these changes in the national mood and outlook, Lindsay's seemingly fanciful ruminations could be easily dismissed for over fifty years.

This project concludes with a brief discussion of the re-emergence of Lindsay's work on film in the post-modern milieu, when the study of semiotics drew academics' attention to *The Art of the Moving Picture*. Although the study of semiotics had begun in the nineteenth century, the addition of film to the field in the 1970s reframed notions of sign, signifiers, and continuity.[22] At this point, Lindsay's hieroglyphs were reconsidered, and found to have, in some ways, anticipated later discussions about the perception of information and the fabrication of cultural communication. That being said, it is difficult to make sense of his work without considering the context in which he was working, and the message that he was ultimately trying to convey through the hieroglyphic system. In

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[20] McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent,* xvi.

[21] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 16.

[22] Johannes Ehrat, *Cinema and Semiotic: Peirce and Film Aesthetics, Narration, and Representation,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2005), 7.

concluding thus, this project aims to have added nuance to how we consider the work of a poet whose culminating work was a prose book on film that responded to Progressive Era anxieties about pluralism and national identity by applying ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs to film.

Chapter 1
The Reel Search for National Unity:
Progressive Reform and the Evolution of American Cinema

The Progressive Era, characterized here as spanning from the 1890s to the First World War, is generally described in terms of anxiety and the re-evaluation of fundamental tenants of social and individual life.[23] The era in which Lindsay lived and wrote, and to which his book immediately responds, was a moment of vast intellectual and material change. Lindsay was a part of the predominantly white, middle-class, generation that faced those changes through behavioural and legislative reform aimed at improving and directing a nation in transition. Of particular importance was the problem of national unity in an increasingly pluralistic society, exacerbated by the emergence of mass-consumer culture and the influx of non-Anglo immigrants into the United States. Though diverse and multi-faceted, many Progressive Era reform movements were driven by a desire to solve this problem. Lindsay's work on film, particularly where the hieroglyphic is concerned, also attempted to provide a solution to the apparent break down of "e pluribus unum" in the early twentieth century.

Although the difficulty of unifying a nation of individuals is inherent in the Enlightenment project underpinning the United States, the convergence of technology and immigration in the early twentieth century added further complexities to the

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[23] McGerr, *Discontent*, xiv.

quandary.[24] National unity, tenuously re-established after the Civil War, had been re-defined in terms of technology and immigration as early as the 1870s, and reached a crisis point by the beginning of the twentieth century. Where the 1892 publication of the Pledge of Allegiance rallied Americans as "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,"[25] the realities of the modernizing nation called this statement into question. The advances of the Gilded Age included the literal and figurative connection of the East and West coasts via the railroad and telegraph lines, giving a sense of material and ideological unity. However, concurrent with those connections was a rising sense of anxiety about unity creating cultural homogeneity, itself dangerous to the individualism and independence upon which the nation was also founded. The blurring of lines between the individual and the collective continued as cultural trends followed the path of the railroad and telegraph; newspapers, advertisements, and material goods like food and clothing were increasingly produced in large presses and factories, and then distributed across the country. The implications of unity within culture—each citizen reading the same news, sharing in the same fashions, and being influenced by the same advertisements—included a potential loss of individual thought and character, and the creation of dull-minded, automaton Americans.[26] This peculiarly American problem of the individual versus the collective was exaggerated by the technological and cultural changes of the late nineteenth century, and exacerbated by the immigration concerns of the early twentieth century.

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[24] Peters, "Satan and Savior," 247.

[25] "The Pledge of Allegiance," in *Historic Documents*, Independence Hall Association, 1995-2013, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

[26] Peters, "Satan and Savior," 248.

In the wake of immigration, the already bifurcated American culture and identity appeared to be under attack, and many Progressive efforts were directed at bolstering that traditional identity, while also finding a place for the new arrivals. Whether immigrants should be assimilated, or whether their differences should be maintained as a source of true democratic assembly, was a major point of tension within early twentieth-century America. From the late 1860s to the 1920s, immigrants arrived in American cities in unprecedented numbers, and quickly comprised a full third of the population and industrial sector. This presented many practical problems of civic organization, as urban areas expanded faster than they could be reorganized, despite the efforts of reformers like Jane Addams to acclimatize and organize new immigrants.[27] These efforts often appealed to the 'objectivity' of the social sciences, constructing seemingly non-partisan models for the treatment and direction of immigrants. The desire for objectivity and regulation was a larger trend within the industrializing world, but had its roots in the ideological problems with which America was contending at the turn of the century, specifically where immigration was concerned. The majority of new immigrants in this period were not of Anglo decent, miring civic organization and the quest for national unity in anxiety about the loss of Anglo American culture; objectivity and scientific rationality were considered means to approach these questions without falling into emotional debate. While the tension between "e pluribus" and "unum" is inherent in American identity, the arrival of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, whose own cultures were distinctly 'foreign,' added further complexities in the attempt to maintain the American balance. This addition contributed to the already staggering anxieties about vast and unmitigated

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[27] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 88.

technological and cultural upheaval changing the nation.[28] However, the sources of those

anxieties also provided American reformers with a means to ameliorate them.

A potential solution to the problems caused by pluralism and industrialization was

found in the film technology that began to flourish in the first decade of the twentieth

century. As films became more commonplace in American cities, their potential to

communicate values and information was immediately apparent. Films were popular,

entertaining, and could be understood by all. Reformers tended to view this potential as

either assimilative or uplifting, although it would be incorrect to assume any major

differences between the two in the Progressive Era. But, whether for the purposes of

erasing ethic cultural ties or reshaping them to function in daily life in America, it was

generally agreed that new immigrants should have some exposure to the values and

regulations of the United States. Assimilative reformers required a means of

dissemination of information that would transcend the obvious language and cultural

barriers. Reformers who encouraged diversity did so within the context of democracy; a

plurality of voices and opinions is essential for the 'true' functioning of a liberal

democracy. However, they too recognized that the core values and structure of the

democratic system were not immediately apparent to all new immigrants, and they also

sought a means of disseminating information. Film was an obvious vehicle for these

projects; it brought immigration and technology in conversation with each other.[29] Film

newspapers and magazines in the early twentieth century routinely prescribed film as a

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[28] Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 7.

[29] Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 82, Scribd online edition, accessed October 11,
2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/26982410/Film-Studies-Policing-Cinema-Movies-and-
Censorship-in-Early-Twentieth-century-America>.

means of cultural assimilation.[30] The choice of this medium for the dissemination of information was based partly on its growing popularity among the predominantly immigrant urban inhabitants, but was based mainly on the fact that the visuality of the medium transcended linguistic and cultural barriers. A story told in pictures could be understood by all, regardless of ethnicity and age. Not surprisingly, discussions about film were quickly couched in terms of democracy and universality, as well as assimilation.

In 1913, *The Nation* described film as the "first democratic art,"[31] reflecting popular opinions about the possibilities inherent in the use of film for socially-oriented ends. Beyond the specific project of assimilation, the medium itself functioned as "a purveyor of universal truths and an envoy for universally intelligible images,"[32] presenting a language with which all people could communicate. By thus creating a platform for unity, film was considered within a specifically social and cultural context. In America in particular, this context was connected to the search for national unity. The universality of film as a medium and as a language was thought to be the key to re-establishing the balance between the individual and the collective in the midst of major change. Moreover, the balance could be reached on democratic terms; the individual viewer could have his own interpretation and experience of the film, while sharing in the collective experience and broad narrative. Those most deeply invested in the early film industry, including Lindsay and D.W. Griffith, adhered to the notion of film as uplifting

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[30] Czitrom, *Media*, 50.
[31] McGerr, *Discontent*, 259.
[32] Decherney, *Hollywood,* 13.

and as speaking universally, which is reflected in the works of both.[33] Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* undeniably approaches film with this belief in mind, which only grew in strength as he watched film evolve from the "short and elemental" single-reel films of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the visual narratives pioneered by the Biograph company.[34] He spoke of the film industry as a "secular church," where in the darkness all surface differences were erased, thus placing all viewers in a state of social, democratic equality.[35] Furthermore, he regarded the democratic potential of the medium as an extension of Beauty, a form around which all his works revolved—"the human beauty of egalitarian, moral conduct."[36] This connection echoed the sentiments central to the Progressive view of film, and we can consider the use of early film by reformers and thinkers as attempting to connect the medium to larger projects of national unification, particularly in light of the increasing diversity of the American populace.

Ironically, it was immigrants who introduced the medium to America; although experiments with film technology and hardware had occurred in the United States under Thomas Edison in the late nineteenth century, the combination of technology, illusion, and story-telling arrived via the French Lumière and Pathé companies. Early film was distributed and shown predominantly in immigrant enclaves in urban centers.[37] After 1905, Anglo-Americans began opening small 'store theaters,' which came to be known as nickelodeons, and by 1909 an American film industry formed, in large part because of the

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[33] Grieveson, *Policing*, 17.
[34] Eleanor Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart: A Life of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Norton, 1959), 164.
[35] Laurence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*, 1994 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 23-4.
[36] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 91.
[37] Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 305.

popularity of the medium among immigrants.[38] In large part, immigrants attended films

because they were cheaper than the middle-class entertainments of vaudeville and stage

productions. Also, these theaters did not discriminate against colour and gender (for the

most part), charged a set price rather than a seat-specific price (unlike stage theaters), and

ran continuously throughout the day, thus being a seemingly democratic past-time.[39] For

many new immigrants, the film house served as a "neighborhood institution,"[40] attracting

reformers in part because theaters provided an opportunity to appropriate a popular

medium of mass-communication for their assimilative and ameliorative ends.[41] Jane

Addams, although worried about the "glamour of love-making" that accompanied the

darkness of the theater,[42] recognized that the popularity of the medium presented an

opportunity for its use in education and cultural entertainment. The technology and

foreign-born medium was quickly adapted to the cultural milieu of Progressive Era

America, and was used in the debate about the individual versus the collective, both

ideologically and materially.

If we consider the introduction and adoption of film in America within the context

of the tension between "e pluribus" and "unum," it becomes apparent that the Progressive

attempts to maintain balance between the two through film is rife with complications.

Despite the popularity of the notion of film as a universal language, the majority of early

films were simple series of shots, communicating little. Early film, especially within

urban centers in the first decade of the twentieth century, consisted of little more than

entertaining vignettes that aroused the senses without engaging the mind. Moreover, the

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[38] Czitrom, *Media*, 40.
[39] Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 304.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Hansen, *Babel*, 66.
[42] Czitrom, *Media*, 45.

lack of substantial content devalued the communicative potential of film; although the medium could be used to mass-communicate values, the majority of films were of a sensational variety that promoted homogenous mass-culture. In the early years of film, the Progressive anxieties about the loss of cultural vitality in the wake of mass-production were exacerbated by the nickelodeon productions. For many reformers, this reality seemed to undermine their loftier projects of unity and uplift. That films and film houses were largely the domain of immigrants placed further limits on their appropriation for reformist ends. In addition to the worry voiced by Addams, other reformers, like the suffragist Anna Howard Shaw, viewed early film as crass entertainment located in morally compromising areas, thus encouraging vice.[43] That women, children, and other "underdeveloped minds"[44] were the main patrons of early film was particularly troublesome for reformers. In the immediate, film had to be gentrified and uplifted itself, if it was to fulfill its potential to stabilize the nation. To this end, the early film industry was transformed into an entertainment appropriate to the richer and more 'cultured' middle-class. By 1915 ticket prices had been raised to deter working-class patrons, and content reflected the values of white, Protestant America.[45] The result was the emergence of classical cinema, where the movie 'palace' replaced the nickelodeon, and longer narratives demonstrated American values at work.[46] Such changes ameliorated immediate problems and anxieties, but failed to substantially fulfill the potential of the medium to solve larger, ideological concerns. The complications of balancing the duality

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[43] McGerr, *Discontent*, 270.
[44] Hansen, *Babel*, 65; Czitrom, *Media*, 50.
[45] Hansen, *Babel*, 63.
[46] Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 309; Czitrom, *Media*, 40, 50.

of American identity in the midst of pluralism required further explorations of that identity and of the capabilities of the medium.

As Lindsay noted in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, first in 1915 and again in 1922, the pace of modernity would not decrease, and the ever-more visually-oriented culture of advertising and films should be studied and directed because they were becoming permanent fixtures of American life and identity. As he observed in the 1922 revision of the book, the nation was becoming increasingly defined by "the advertisements in the back of the magazines and on the bill-boards in the streetcars, [and] the acres of photographs in the Sunday newspapers,"[47] requiring a new way of thinking in order to solve problems. Ultimately, the new way of thinking would have to be along visual lines, and the emergent culture surrounding film could be beneficial if directed correctly.[48] He considered himself an excellent guide in this new world, having begun his career as a painter and religious cartoonist;[49] although he moved towards poetry, Lindsay never abandoned the visual as his personal, primary form of communication.[50] The evolution of the film industry had not fixed those problems, because those directing the course of the nickelodeons and movie 'palaces' had not fully realized the extent to which the nation was becoming visually-oriented. Moreover, the place of early and classical film, being so rooted in immediate concerns, failed to fully appreciate the ideological potential of the medium. Rather than bemoan the social and cultural changes occurring, Lindsay attempted to bolster the future by re-establishing the democratic balance that fundamentally defined American identity, embracing technology, visuality, and pluralism

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[47] Lindsay, *Art*, 22.
[48] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 9.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Stanley Kauffmann "Introduction," in Lindsay, *Art*, xi.

through film. His book is a treatise on the possibility of balance, through an understanding and appreciation of a medium that was developing in tandem with a new America.

Lindsay's work on film was thus a direct response to the anxieties of the Progressive Era, particularly where the balance between the individual and the collective was concerned. Connected to that central question of balance were anxieties about the effects of mass-culture and communication, to which film was an increasingly important answer. However, the use of film to re-establish the core balance of American democracy was limited, insofar as reformers approached the medium as either a concrete means to immediate ends (ie. assimilation), or as a form of universal communication without defined limits or modes of production (ie. how is film actually universal if the content is limited, as in the case of early film, or specifically geared towards middle-class audiences and their projects of reform?). In both cases, Progressive Era figures thinking about and working with film to ameliorate the plethora of anxieties that attended the beginning of the twentieth century failed to fully appreciate the potential of film to communicate beyond the immediate, and did not construct modes and means to realize that potential. Then, in 1913, David Wark Griffith, a director for the Biograph company, broke the early film tradition of directorial anonymity.[51] Two years later he released the film *The Birth of a Nation*, which explored the possibilities of film on a heretofore unprecedented scale.[52] The film captured the imagination of the poet Lindsay, who wrote *The Art of the Moving*

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[51] Charlie Keil, "Narration in the Transitional Cinema: The Historiographical Claims of the Unauthored Text," *Cinemas: Journal of Film Studies*, 21.2/3 (2011), 110, accessed July 14, 2013. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005586ar>.
[52] According to Keil in "Narration," Griffith's reputation as a lone film pioneer is debatable. However, Keil accredits Griffith with establishing the narrative structure of classical film.

Picture later that year as a means to encourage the kind of work Griffith was doing with film.[53] In Griffith's work, Lindsay saw the working out of the medium that exploited and exposed modes of filmmaking that held the possibility of solving the progressive dilemma and re-establishing the balance between "e pluribus" and "unum." Despite the glaring irony of championing an explicitly racist film as the solution to the problems of pluralism in modern America, Lindsay's work underlined the ideological and formal potential of Griffith's work, and explored the ways in which film could provide a solution to the anxieties and problems of the Progressive Era. Specifically, he outlined a system of film creation and reception that re-established the balance between the individual and the collective at the core of American democracy. The often-neglected film hieroglyphic, as Lindsay asserted, was essential to re-establishing this balance in the modern era. Although the efficacy of this system has been a point of debate among scholars, an in-depth consideration of the form reveals the ingenuity and resonance of Lindsay's film hieroglyphics in early twentieth-century America, and distinguishes the voice and ideas of the poet from the vast sea of collective questioning indicative of the Progressive Era.

Chapter 2
Constructing the American Hieroglyph:
The Pictorial Representation as the Solution to the Anxieties Caused by Pluralism in Progressive Era America

Approximately nine months after *The Birth of a Nation* was released, Lindsay's book on film was published. *The Art of the Moving Picture* was critically acclaimed in some respects, but it quickly became clear that the poet's work on film left many in a

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[53] Lindsay, *Art*, 215.

state of confusion. That the book made a case for the reception of films as art was a welcome argument, given the concerns about the potential for vice inherent in the crass entertainment of early film. The gentrification of the medium, undertaken within the context of social uplift and Progressive reform, required that someone as renowned as Lindsay explicitly state that the medium had potential beyond its nascent form. His defense of film as an alternative to the saloon certainly struck a chord with the various temperance unions, whose interest in film was focused entirely on its social effects. Others found Lindsay's taxonomy of film forms and types to be helpful in guiding their own viewership, and those working in the film industry made use of the parallels Lindsay made between film types and classical arts and literature.[54] Scholars working on Lindsay after his death in 1931 generally accepted these components as the core of his work on film, casting the book in the light of proto-criticism.[55] The confusion with which his book was often met stems from the fact that these components only made up half of the work. The other half asserted a thesis and a challenge to the American film industry and people that was more important than the argument for film as art, and certainly more important to Lindsay than supporting temperance. However, the language used and the ideas asserted struck many as naïve, poetically mystical, and unfit to guise the modern age. As such, the other half of Lindsay's work, specifically in regards to the hieroglyphic in film, has often been overlooked, dismissed, or cast aside. This study asserts that the hieroglyphic was in fact Lindsay's most important thought on film, and the core thesis of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, and that, despite its shortcomings when applied to a

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[54] Lindsay, *Art*, 13.
[55] See Massa, *Fieldworker*; Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart*, for example

peculiar medium, the hieroglyphic system provided some satisfactory answers to the

dilemma of "e pluribus unum" in the Progressive Era.

Although Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* was a response to many

different concerns about Progressive Era society and the emergence of film, its

fundamental thesis revolves around the hieroglyphic. As he later elaborated in a

collection of poetry,

> I believe that civic ecstasy can be so splendid, so unutterably afire, continuing and increasing with such apocalyptic zeal, that the whole visible fabric of the world can be changed. I believe in a change in the actual fabric, not a vague new outline. Therefore I begin with the hieroglyphic, the minute single cell of our thought, the very definite alphabet with which we are to spell out the first sentence of our great new vision.[56]

He considered the Egyptian hieroglyphic language to best reflect the base form of film, as

well as the national mood and mode of communication in the modern age. Throughout

the various chapters on film as art with socially-beneficial potential, Lindsay maintained

the hieroglyphic system as naturally functioning in the concrete and ideological axes of

the new medium. Moreover, he asserted that history occurred in cycles, from primitive to

enlightened, and that his culture was in a state of new, higher, primitivism. It could lead

to enlightenment through an informed return to pictorial communication and the proper

treatment of cultural expressions like film.[57] Where Edison was the new Gutenburg,[58] the

use of the visual medium to inform and create new narratives was, for Lindsay, "as great

a step as was the beginning of picture-writing in the stone age,"[59] Regarding the

problems of "e pluribus unum" and pluralism specifically, Lindsay asserted that the

Egyptian hieroglyphic language, when applied to film, provided a way to re-establish the

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[56] Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, 1923, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), xxvi.
[57] Lindsay, *Art*, 199.
[58] Lindsay, *Art*, 252.
[59] Lindsay, *Art*, 199.

balance of American democracy. The hieroglyphic in film spoke to the mass-visual

culture emerging in America in the early twentieth century. As he asserted in the 1922

revision of the book,

> American civilization grows more hieroglyphic every day. The cartoons of Darling, the
> advertisements in the back of the magazines and on the bill-boards in the streetcars, the acres of
> photographs in the Sunday newspapers, make us into a hieroglyphic civilization far nearer to
> Egypt than to England.[60]

At the same time, the hieroglyph also connected that culture to older traditions and

interpretations of popular symbols. It is important to note that Lindsay did not focus on

the original meaning of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, but saw in their form and structure

a useful tool for communication in modern America, especially in the making of films.

Films could and were used for education and assimilation, but the explicit application of

the hieroglyphic form to film made them inspiring and moving in a way that Lindsay

thought essential for the changing nation.

Formally, the hieroglyphic language consists of individual hieroglyphs (pictorial

representations of a thing, idea, or phonetic similarity), that present singular ideas. Each

can have a multiplicity of meanings, all of which stem from, and return to, the individual

representation; in this sense they are closed, or self-reflective, systems of representations

and communication. They have meaning as freestanding representations, but also

compose abstract concepts when linked together in the hieroglyphic system. Moreover,

these functions often occur simultaneously, and both require individual and collective

interpretation; a hieroglyph is not a symbol with a fixed meaning, but points to an idea

that is defined by the hieroglyphs around it, and how the reader interprets the sequence.

The hieroglyph of a duck may mean a duck, but placed in composition can refer to a body

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[60] Lindsay, *Art*, 22.

of water, or fowl generally, depending on its placement and how the sequence is read. What was important though, was the way in which the figure of the duck could represent things relevant to modern American culture; the original translation was subordinate to its function, as far as Lindsay was concerned. This simultaneity and plurality was not introduced to Americans by Lindsay; literary interpretations of Egyptian hieroglyphs and hieroglyphics had appeared in American literature throughout the nineteenth century. It is this use of representational systems that Lindsay saw in nascent form in Griffith's work, and it is this aspect of films like *The Birth of a Nation* to which he is responding. Whether Lindsay's choice of examples for his work towards pluralism undermined his project remains to be discussed. The hieroglyphic in film was certainly the least popular of the ideas put forward in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, and it is arguably this aspect of Lindsay's thinking that caused later theorists to ignore his work. However, when Lindsay's work is considered within the Progressive context, the hieroglyphic stands out as the central message he intended to convey. The book revolves around the visual projection of symbols and systems of meaning that are natural to film, reflect the national movement towards modern communication, and inherently link the individual and the collective in a visual and ideological conversation.

The book presented readers with a system of hieroglyphics to be applied to film, outlined in the original 1915 publication, to which Lindsay only added nuances and explicit social commentary in the 1922 revision. Essentially, he constructed a method of filmmaking that used hieroglyphs to guide and add meaning to both single shots and narrative sequences simultaneously. However, it is important to understand that his method was not a simple formula for success, but an urging of a way of thinking about

film and society that would, he believed, prove beneficial to both. One could take his hieroglyphics literally, and doing so would be a good practice for budding filmmakers, because it would train them to think about film beyond entertainment and commercial gain. That being said, Lindsay adamantly stated, "I do not insist that the prospective author-producer adopt the hieroglyphic method as a routine, if he but consents in his meditative hours to the point of view that it implies."[61] In a book of hieroglyphic grammar found among his personal affects, he marked a passage describing the "plural strokes," which are marks denoting polysemous—having multiple meanings or interpretations—hieroglyphics. While the mark sometimes denoted that a hieroglyph was plural, it more often referred to an abstract meaning of that hieroglyph that could be read simultaneously with the literal meaning.[62] This passage explains much about how Lindsay understood the form; multiplicity of meaning was a part of the standard grammatical system, which was for Lindsay indicative of adaptability of the form to the filmic medium. This interpretation is demonstrated by a practice he suggests for prospective filmmakers. He outlined a system of two-sided hieroglyphic cards; one side bore the hieroglyphic and its literal interpretation, while the flip side bore an abstract or mystical reading. He suggested that one shuffle the cards and choose nineteen literal hieroglyphics and one abstract meaning at random, as a starting point for photoplay composition.[63] A film made thus would not be a set of hieroglyphics in sequence, but would rely on the chosen cards to direct the narrative, which itself would revolve around the abstract revelation—a good film would be able to subtly reveal the abstract through

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[61] Lindsay, *Art*, 209.
[62] Gunther Roeder, "Short Egyptian Grammar," translated by Samuel A.B. Mercer, 16, Box 28, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.
[63] Lindsay, *Art*, 200, 208-9.

its guiding hieroglyphics. Lindsay was confident that such films would not be lost on audiences, and that their experience of revelation was central to the directing of American culture through the chaos of the early twentieth century. He believed that such revelation acted as a counter against the development of film as crass, commercial entertainment, imbuing even the most homogenously popular films with "a promise of beauty in what have been properly classed as mediocre and stereotyped productions."[64] However, Lindsay constructed his system from elements of a tradition that were markedly foreign in origin, requiring him to construct specifically American examples and detail cultural parallels between modern America ancient Egypt.

The appearance of hieroglyphic elements in film, created unintentionally by filmmakers, appeared to Lindsay indicative of the inherent parallels between modern American culture and the Egyptian picture language; his American hieroglyphs were an attempt to capture that parallel for use in restorative film. His use of the hieroglyphic tradition denoted a firm belief in certain, distinctly American, traits that corresponded easily with the ancient polysemous language. That is, some aspects of traditional American values and dreams (as represented by the words and deeds of important figures in American history, like Abraham Lincoln), could be visually represented in hieroglyphic form; American culture is full of emblems and symbols of abstracts like democracy and freedom. Although the American hieroglyphs he imagined did not appear in his 1915 work on film, they shed further light on the ideas he put forth in that earlier work. In an unpublished manuscript in 1926, Lindsay highlighted the importance of striving for light in American culture. Taken literally in the context of mechanical

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[64] Lindsay, *Art*, 209.

innovation, or abstractly in the context of the pursuit of greatness, Lindsay placed this trait at the core of American identity. The sun-rise and moon-rise were thus American hieroglyphs of the most important sort, and the kind of pictorial representations to which he referred in his earlier work on film. [65] The war-bonnet and winged book also appeared as related American hieroglyphs. The bonnet represented the constant and necessary struggle in every American to maintain the balance of democracy, and the tradition of playing at war as children that is practice for the aforementioned struggle in adulthood. The book represented the actual and inspirational power of the written word in American history, from Milton to the Declaration of Independence. [66] We might add that *The Art of the Moving Picture* was intended to stand as such a book, transforming and inspiring culture through words and the moving pictures they would produce. Yet, such parallels were not immediately obvious to the casual reader of 1915, nor those invested in the book for the sake of commercial success or social uplift and reform. As such, the relevance of Lindsay's application of the hieroglyphic form to modern mentalities and modes of communication was often lost. However, he wrote at length about the root of those parallels, which he argued exist at the very core of the American identity.

The apparent synchronicity between modern American and ancient Egyptian culture was based mainly on what Lindsay perceived to be similarities in moods and modes of communication. Of particular importance here was the striving for light, or enlightenment, encapsulated in his American hieroglyphics. He noted that the ancient

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[65] Lindsay, "On Drawing Pictures of the Sunrise," April 1928, I-III, V.1-2, Box 16, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

[66] Lindsay, "Small Town," in *The American Dream*, 8, Box 16, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

Egyptians also worshiped light, and drew abstract connections between literal light, intellectual and spiritual illumination, and the greater cosmos; Lindsay saw here a direct connection to film. Although this fixation in Egyptian culture was well-documented, Lindsay's case for its parallel in America was not immediately obvious to his readers. He pointed to Emerson's *Nature* as a prime example of this sharing of cultural interpretations and impulses, and reminded his readers that many monuments and building in American cities adhered to Egyptian architectural principles.[67] Lindsay went on at length about the similarities between the Nile and Mississippi River cultures, and how that link contributed to the continued presence of Egyptian culture in modern America, specifically where the hieroglyph was concerned; he said in *The Art of the Moving Picture* that "Hieroglyphs are so much nearer to the American mood than the rest of the Egyptian legacy,"[68] and that America was indeed "a hieroglyphic civilization far nearer to Egypt than to England."[69] It was at this point in his argument about hieroglyphic systems in film that Lindsay went beyond his readers' willingness to ruminate, despite the validity of his observation that political cartoons and the Eagle and Elephant are all hieroglyphic components of American culture.[70] However, if we consider the book as forwarding a system of communication that both suited and inspired the mood of the age, while simultaneously ameliorating some of the worst problems of unplanned pluralism, we might consider these cultural parallels as Lindsay's attempt to familiarize his readers with not only the language of hieroglyphs, but also the mode of thinking required for

[67] Lindsay, "The New United States," 1924, Box 14, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.
[68] Lindsay, *Art*, 22.
[69] Lindsay, *Art*, 21-22
[70] Lindsay, "The New United States," 20, the Barrett Collection.

them to be used and understood effectively. This familiarity was especially necessary when applying hieroglyphs to the new and controversial medium of film.

In discussing hieroglyphics in film, Lindsay was caught between establishing a clear system that "any kindergarten teacher can understand," [71] and introducing a complex notion of symbols that connected the literal and abstract, and the individual and the collective. The method was thus simple, with implications that required further thought. He demonstrated how each hieroglyph has a Roman equivalent, a literal translation, and a variety of possible abstract meanings. Lindsay suggested different interpretations that stemmed from, and ultimately referred back to, the hieroglyphic in question. In this sense his filmic hieroglyphics, like all hieroglyphics, are closed systems of meaning; although many interpretations are simultaneously possible, they all refer back to the fundamental idea presented by the pictorial representation. For example, the lasso hieroglyphic (Roman equivalent 'T'), is literally interpreted as a lasso, noose, or trap. Lindsay went on to suggest that the abstracts inferred by this figure include judgement, hanging (of the hero or the villain), or ensnarement and temptation. Moreover, he made the leap from trap to spider web, which he contended exists as an intentional hieroglyphic in the film adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Avenging Conscience*.[72] All of these interpretations, both literal and abstract then refer back to the picture that evoked them. An audience watching a film would, in theory, see a lasso or spider web, and recognize its deeper meanings, which would exist within the hieroglyphic and direct how they perceived further representations presented in the film narrative. With this method in mind, a filmmaker could make a film (be it with two-sided

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[71] Lindsay, *Art*, 20.
[72] Lindsay, *Art*, 208.

cards or not) imbued with deeper meanings which, if accurately perceived by the audience, would have a resonant individual and cultural impact. At the time the book was published, Lindsay could not name any one film that satisfied his requirements, but saw in some contemporary films the seeds of the hieroglyphic system.

Although film in 1915 was transitioning from early to classical cinema, the narrative and hieroglyphic components Lindsay wanted to encourage for the restoration of national balance only occurred sporadically. Moreover, the filmmakers responsible for the few films upon which Lindsay could draw were not explicitly working within the hieroglyphic system. However, he found hieroglyphic potential in a few contemporary movies, and used them as examples to direct future filmmakers towards films made "not for the trade, but for the soul."[73] For example, the 1914 production of *Such a Little Queen*, starring Mary Pickford, evoked for Lindsay the hieroglyph of a throne (Roman equivalent "C"). Although he lamented the absence of actual thrones within the film, the figure of Pickford herself (see Figure 2), stood out as emblematic of the themes of royalty and power with which the film dealt.[74] The 1914 production of *The Avenging Conscience* produced two hieroglyphs: the aforementioned spider web as an interpretation of the lasso hieroglyph, and the moment of synchronization between a beating heart, a swaying clock pendulum and the appearance of an owl outside the window.[75] He linked this moment to the owl hieroglyph (Roman equivalent "M"), given that the owl outside the window was the culminating point of a suspenseful scene. This particular hieroglyphic

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[73] Lindsay, *Art*, 33.

[74] Lindsay, *Art*, 201; *Such a Little Queen,* directed By Edwin Stanton Porter, 1914, Famous Players Film Company, information from IMDb.com, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004654/>.

[75] *The Avenging Conscience,* directed by D.W. Griffith, David W. Griffith Corp., 1914, Archive.org, Internet Archive, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://archive.org/details/TheAvengingConscience>.

structure is interesting because it demonstrated that Lindsay's hieroglyphic in film was more complex than it initially appeared. The dominant and single-shot hieroglyphs did not have to be as obvious as the Pickford throne. Rather, an effective hieroglyph was woven into and enhanced the narrative. One of the major problems Lindsay found with early films was their reliance on title cards to explain narrative, when a few well-chosen hieroglyphs would direct the action and viewer comprehension, and imbue the film with meaning and ideological value. In the 1922 revision of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay pointed to the 1921 production of *The Old Swimming Hole*, a film entirely without title cards and guided by well-crafted shots in which a fishing pole, an old dock, and a young man walking down a path acted as hieroglyphs within the whole.[76] However, there was one director whose work consistently employed narrative structures and proto-hieroglyphic components. It was in response to the potential of D.W. Griffith's work to restore national balance through film craft that inspired Lindsay's own work on the medium.

Lindsay noted that he had long followed Griffith's career, and stated that *The Art of the Moving Picture* was, in many ways, an "open letter to Griffith and the producers and actors he has trained."[77] Much can be made of the fact that Lindsay's book was published nine months after the release of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, calling the efficacy of Lindsay's method for national balance into question. However, we must recognize that Lindsay was responding to a larger body of work that could only be attached to Griffith's name once he had broken the tradition of directorial anonymity in

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[76] *The Old Swimming Hole*, directed by Joseph De Grasse, the International Film Distributing Company, 1921, Uploaded by Shaneleebrown, February 12, 2012, YouTube.com, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWsiBgBhdUk >.

[77] Lindsay, *Art*, 215.

1913.[78] Griffith's status as the pioneering father of cinema may be being questioned by modern scholars, but his adaptation of narrative structure to film was ground-breaking. Films like his 1911 adaptation of the poem *Enoch Arden* demonstrated the potential of the medium to be more than trivial entertainment.[79] Moreover, this particular adaptation relied on the presentation of visual symbols and allegory to direct the narrative. That Griffith tended to take moral stances in his films, like *A Drunkard's Reformation* of 1909, endeared him to Progressives. His use of visual symbols endeared him to Lindsay, who focused on the symbols as images, or isolated systems of self-reflective meaning. Linked together, these symbols could ostensibly produce visual metaphors, much like a poem. Lindsay and Griffith shared a poetic sensibility that guided their understanding of symbols, metaphor, and allegory, which they applied to the new visual medium. Griffith's early work undeniable sought to visually present metaphor, and these attempts revealed for Lindsay the potential of film to communicate high principles and values in a mode appropriate to the modern age.[80] Moreover, if a series of symbols or images could produce metaphor in a poem, the effect of doing so on-screen would be magnified. A good poem generated affect through metaphor (who has not been inspired at one time or another by a well-crafted poem?), and so too could film, if guided by visual symbols imbued with meaning and structure (the hieroglyph). In the chapter on hieroglyphs, Lindsay discussed the duck hieroglyph (Roman equivalent "Z"), which is considered as referring to Griffith's early poem *The Wild Duck*.[81] In choosing this particular

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[78] Keil, "Narration," 110.

[79] *Enoch Arden*., directed by D.W. Griffith, Biograph Company, 1911, Archive.org, n.d., accessed July 13, 2013, < http://archive.org/details/EnochArden_94>.

[80] Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film,* translated by Harsha Ram (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 108.

[81] Lindsay, *Art*, 202.

hieroglyph, Lindsay was inviting Griffith to look back on his body of work, and recognize the hieroglyphic potential of his symbols and allegories.[82] Griffith read and was inspired by Lindsay's 1915 book; *Intolerance* (1916) is often described as directly responding to Lindsay's work. That Lindsay was personally invited by "king-figure"[83] Griffith to the film's premier, and that Griffith's employees were apparently given copies of Lindsay's book to study, further suggests the validity of this assertion.[84] Within *Intolerance* specifically, Griffith attempted to use Lindsay's hieroglyphic method. He literally used hieroglyphs from a number of ancient cultures in some of the title cards, but also presented the audience with a reoccurring sequence that acted as the dominant hieroglyph of the film as a whole. [85] The four stories presented in the film were linked by a scene of a woman rocking a baby's cradle. The film began and ended with this scene, which was introduced by a title card that read "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking."[86] Although Griffith relied on a title card to explain this hieroglyph, its repetition and importance to the narrative was a result of Lindsay's work. The relationship between Lindsay and Griffith demonstrates the presence of the hieroglyphic system in the transition from early to classical film, and demonstrates a shared literary background that defined the hieroglyph in film.

The literary tradition on which Lindsay based his own interpretation of the hieroglyphic system was one with which many of his readers would have been familiar,

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[82] Iamploski, *Memory*, 108.

[83] Lindsay, *Art*, 215.

[84] Iampolski, *Memory*, 106-7.

[85] Iampolski, *Memory*, 111.

[86] *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Through the Ages*, directed by D.W. Griffith, Triangle Film Corporation, 1916, Archive.org, Internet Archive (2008), accessed October 1, 2012, <http://archive.org/details/Intolerance>.

thus establishing an intertext—"an imprint of meaning guaranteed by tradition"[87]—for

the comprehension of the hieroglyphic system in film. Although ancient Egyptian culture

would come back into vogue with the 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb,

Lindsay's 1915 book directed American eyes to Egypt through the works of Emerson and

Swedenborg. The link between Lindsay and his chosen literary predecessors can certainly

be traced through their mystical interpretations of symbols and nature as fundamental

components of human experience and understanding, which in turn back be traced back

to Goethe and the Romantics. The looking to Nature and established sets of symbols for

divine revelation as a foil to Reason is certainly present in Lindsay's work. Moreover,

this tradition also guided Griffith's early work, particularly in regards to his filmic

adaptation of *Enoch Arden*. Lindsay made a point of mentioning that work as

demonstrating Griffith's awareness of symbolism and imagery, and exhibiting the

beginnings of hieroglyphic structures in film. However, it is important to remember that

this literary tradition was deeply influenced by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798,

which caused a wave of Egypt-inspired architecture and literature in America (concurrent

with the neo-classical revival), and subsequent debates over the translation and

interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphics.[88]

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone and *The Book of the Dead* allowed for the

translation of the hieroglyphic language, but it became apparent that hieroglyphs could be

interpreted both phonetically and symbolically, literally and metaphysically. The

metaphysical interpretation became popular among various Christian sects, who saw in

the symbols a purity of expression that balanced the increasingly abstract and rational

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[87] Hansen, *Babel*, 175.
[88] Irwin, "Hieroglyphics," 103.

world in which they lived. The theologian Swedenborg, whose religious writings would later be a staple in the Lindsay household, held that hieroglyphs were the key to understanding Nature and Spirit through correspondence of figures; the individual hieroglyph corresponded with things in Nature, and revealed truths about those things through interpretation of the pictorial representation.[89] Such was true even of mundane things, imbuing daily life with the potential for revelation; Lindsay interpreted his long-untreated epilepsy as the revelation of visions that seemed to "bear a religious, ritualistic, a prophetic import."[90] Goethe was also influenced by this reading, in opposition to the phonetic reading, which only saw meaning in the hieroglyph insofar as it was connected to others in sequence. Emerson saw value in both translations of the hieroglyphic language, insofar as the phonetic and rational reading serviced the spiritual and revelatory. Drawing on the Neo-Platonic system of simultaneous one and many, the Emersonian hieroglyph was a free-standing image with a literal and abstract meaning that could be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, ultimately returning to the actual visual representation on display.[91] Lindsay drew heavily on this line of tradition, and his hieroglyphic system on film relies on this simultaneity of one and many in visual representations. The hieroglyphic system in film was thus rooted in a tradition of which most Americans would have been aware, if not deeply familiar. Immigrants from Europe would have also been aware of the hieroglyphic to an extent, due either to relative proximity or familiarity with the nineteenth-century European fascination with

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[89] Irwin, "Hieroglyphics," 108.
[90] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 11; Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart*, 122.
[91] See Plato, "Parmenides," *Plato Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, translated by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1997); Plotinus, *Ennead V*, edited and translated by A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge (Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1984).

hieroglyphics.[92] Although the reception of Lindsay's work undermined this assumption of familiarity, Lindsay's place in this line of tradition clarified some of the more confusing ideas he presented in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, with particular regards to the application of the hieroglyphic system to the new medium of film in response to Progressive anxieties about pluralism and modernity.

Given the traditions and interpretations of the hieroglyphic system with which Lindsay approached his work, we can begin to understand how he thought an increasingly industrialized, modern, pluralistic America might benefit from viewing films based on his model. A mixed group of people collectively engaging in a form of communication that functions at the individual and collective levels simultaneously would share in an engaging and entertaining experience. This experience would be guided an informed by dominant hieroglyphs that would depict important ideas, themes, or revelations, educating and inspiring each individual as he or she interprets the narrative, and the collective audience as it watches the same story. The act of participating in the activity of interpreting visual representations would ingrain a sense of balance between the individual and the whole, which might then be applied to relationships and actions beyond the walls of the movie house. He wrote that this activity was inherently transformative, because the form itself was revelatory, and because the sheer popularity of the medium ensured the sharing of experience on a national scale; "Because ten million people daily enter into the cave, something akin to Egyptian wizardry, certain national rituals, will be born."[93] Lindsay advocated for the acceptance of talking during the movie (a vestige of the early film culture, discarded during the

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[92] Irwin, "Hieroglyphics," 103.
[93] Lindsay, *Art*, 287-8.

gentrification process that led to classic cinema), so that the audience could engage in the discussion of individual interpretations of a collective enterprise.[94] In this sense, watching a film would be an exercise in true social democracy, thereby facilitating the re-establishment of the balance between "e pluribus" and "unum" in the guise of an entertaining past-time. Here then, Lindsay's statements about film culture being the new American religion, and the film house as a "secular church" [95] cease to be "idiosyncratic and naively poetic,"[96] and can be understood as being perhaps overly optimistic, but idealistic in a manner natural to Lindsay's style and the age in general. However, the actual functioning of the hieroglyphic system in film was contingent on the direction of medium that few fully understood. Although Lindsay was a long-time fan of film, even sneaking off to Springfield's nickelodeons as a child, we must consider the efficacy of applying the specialized hieroglyphic form to the equally specialized medium of film.[97]

As the film critic V.F. Perkins noted in the 1970s, film is a "hybrid medium,"[98] despite the fact that most early film critics, including Lindsay, tended to treat it as an extension of advertising or photography. Early discussions of film, including Lindsay's work, attempted to equate film with the classical arts. Indeed, the bulk of *The Art of the Moving Picture* detailed links between film and painting, sculpture, and architecture. He also equated those designations with different schools of poetry, connecting film to literature. In many ways, Lindsay's hieroglyphic system in film relied on film functioning as a visualization of literary devices—symbolism, imagery, and metaphor—wherein

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[94] Lindsay, *Art*, 15-16.
[95] Goldstein, *American Poet*, 23-4.
[96] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 7.
[97] Ruggles, *The West-Going Heart*, 44.
[98] Victor F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, 1972 (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1976), 58.

single shots were linked together through narrative and chronological sequence. Where early film relied on title cards to establish narrative in lieu of spoken cues, Lindsay's favourite films were those that crafted their story through purely visual actions and expressions. Their meaning was established by the "resonant reverberation"[99] of the hieroglyphic system; they were guided by the dominant hieroglyph, and each shot contained a hieroglyph of its own, drawing the viewer's eye towards what was important. In the film examples he chose in 1915, the hieroglyphs accented and directed specific shots (as in *The Avenging Conscience*), or guided the film as a whole (*Such a Little Queen*). As was mentioned, Lindsay associated this structure with poetry, insofar as individual hieroglyphs acted as visual symbols or images that composed visual metaphor when placed in chronological and narrative sequence in film. For this reason he looked to Griffith, whose early films demonstrated a similar understanding of visual representation and poetic affect. However, this understanding of film became problematic when further studies of the medium revealed the peculiarity and uniqueness of film. It cannot be directly equated with any older plastic arts, nor can the written word be directly translated onto the screen; a metaphor is not a literal image that can be translated from literature to the screen, although such was the thinking in the early days of film.[100] Regarding the hieroglyph specifically, the equation of film with poetry created structural problems that threatened to undermine the larger point Lindsay was making about national balance in the Progressive Era.

As visual representations and ideas encapsulated in a singular pictorial form, Lindsay's hieroglyphics are suited to one aspect of the medium, but undermine the

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[99] Iampolski, *Memory*, 100.
[100] P.N. Furbank, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), 1-3, 12.

syntagmatic chronology upon which film narrative relies. Early film was confined by the tension between the self-contained shot and the connection of those shots within a complex narrative, that is, between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements.[101] The hieroglyphic in film participates in this tension. It is a closed system, but is used to create movement through time, which is antithetical to its fundamental structure. A film is not a series of photographs, but involves chronology and narrative. How then, might a series of hieroglyphics be presented as narrative, with respect to their inherent structure and that of film? Lindsay suggests that hieroglyphics appear within larger scenes—the lasso shows up in a cowboy film as a noose by which to hang the villain—thus giving them depth as distinct sequences and imbuing the film with meaning.[102] However, the hieroglyphic as a focal point detracts from the film narrative, because it draws the audience always back to a singular, closed image, thus privileging one aspect of the film over all others. Given that he and his contemporaries had to develop a way of thinking and talking about an utterly new medium, the privileging of certain aspects of the medium over others can be forgiven; the understanding of film as a hybrid immediately considered. However, the structure of the hieroglyphic, when taken as the dominant, driving feature of a film, limits the narrative.[103] This problem was the focus of a number of later film theorists and filmmakers, as well as prominent Modernist poets and artists, including Ezra Pound. Moreover, the efficacy of the hieroglyphic was film is limited by the problematic link between representation (director) and perception (audience) inherent in the medium itself.

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[101] Hansen, *Babel*, 45.
[102] Lindsay, *Art*, 208.
[103] Iampolski, *Memory*, 166.

One of the major problems of early film was the connection between a director and an audience separated by the camera, which was in the process of being understood in the first fifteen years of film in America.[104] Lindsay's hieroglyphics attempt to direct representation, but do not address the complexities of the medium, thus limiting the efficacy of their practical application in film. His hieroglyphic form relied on an a shared intertext—problematic within the immigrant context as well as the shift towards modernism—that can only be demonstrated by the director as auteur, controlling all aspects of the filmmaking process, thus connecting his representational intentions to the perception of meaning among audience members. [105] In this context, the particular arrangement of hieroglyphics could be perceived as a representation of the creator's values, but there was no guarantee; in the early film days, the anonymity of directors would have undermined this project. Griffith was an ideal example of this process; as the first director to break from the system of anonymity within a film company, he created a direct link between directorial intent and representation, and audience perception.[106] Moreover, the efforts of middle-class Americans to reform film and film houses, as well as to direct the cultural acclimatization (or assimilation) of new immigrants, essentially forced the creation of an American intertext that maintained the core myths and values of Anglo-America, while allowing for pluralistic interpretations and expressions. However, the hieroglyphic itself relies on these surrounding elements to be fully effective. Although Lindsay cited some films made by directors other than Griffith that fulfilled the hieroglyphic potential of film, there is no evidence to suggest that other filmmakers

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[104] Hansen, *Babel*, 25.

[105] Iris Barry and the Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), *D. W. Griffith: American Film Master*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 14; Goldstein, *American Poet*, 24.

[106] Keil, "Narration," 110.

directly applied his method. And, in the first two decades of film in America, few were

concerned with plumbing the depths of representational potential in the medium.

One of the reasons Lindsay was so moved by Griffith's work, and argued so

vehemently for the adoption of the hieroglyph in film, was because the film industry had

been steadily moving towards commercialism over the first decade of the twentieth

century. The very reform movements created to counter this "glib materialism"[107]

certainly gentrified the medium and its attendant culture, but that gentrification also

empowered the more business-minded filmmakers and producers. [108] The emergence of

classical cinema was defined by middle-class standards and incomes, making the film

industry alluringly lucrative. *The Art of the Moving Picture* contended with the problem

of commercialism, which exacerbated the apparent cultural imbalance of pluralism by

stripping film of its potential to unify the nation. While the hieroglyph would make a film

worth watching, thus lucrative, it required an ideological and even spiritual mindset on

the part of the filmmaker. Not surprisingly, the more idealistic and poetic components of

his work—those he deemed the most important—were often "dismissed as idiosyncratic

and naively poetic," even though the work held some grain of truth or useful information

for nearly every group exposed to film in America.[109] As a reviewer in 1924

acknowledged, Lindsay was considered in many ways as "the most naïve poet we have.

His heart is always exposed. His passions are unveiled. He is unique in giving himself to

the casual reader."[110] Lindsay complained bitterly that his work was often adopted

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[107] Lounsbury in Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 138.
[108] Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 308.
[109] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 7.
[110] Herbert S. Gorman, "Vachel Lindsay: Evangelist of Poetry," *The North American Review* 219.818, (January 1924), 127-8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25113208.

without giving him credit (much of his Last Will and Testament concerned copyright claims[111]), and in a disjointed fashion that allowed his work to be applied to commercial film, without attending to the necessary spiritual and cultural inquiries posed by the book. Often, it was treated like and addition to the first technical film textbook, published in Chicago in 1914,[112] despite the fact that Lindsay clearly states that the book is not meant to "teach office-boys ways to make 'quick money' in the 'movies,'" which seemed to be the "delicately implied purpose of the mass of books on the photoplay subject."[113] Although Lindsay claimed that D.W. Griffith, Jane Addams, Victor O. Freeburg, and Gordon Craig celebrated his work on the medium,[114] Lindsay's biographer Ann Massa asserts that only Charlotte Perkins Gilman seemed to grasp the core of Lindsay's case for film.[115] Generally, those involved in the film industry in Hollywood were willing to adopt his structural theories, but were less open to his mystical ruminations.[116] In Europe, his work was taken more seriously; Iris Barry and others read "The Art of the Moving Picture" as a "harbinger of the Americanization of the world,"[117] assuming that Lindsay's work would be used in its entirety; Barry herself would later plagiarize Lindsay's work.[118] Domestically, however, the book was adhered to only insofar as it served individual ends; many Progressive reformers were invested in transforming the popular medium to better direct, regulate, and enrich American culture at the turn of the twentieth

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[111] Lindsay, "Last Will and Testament," September 26, 1929, Box 27, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.
[112] Slide, *Early American Cinema,* 203.
[113] Lindsay, *Art*, 46.
[114] Glenn Joseph Wolfe, *Vachel Lindsay: The Poet as Film Theorist*, PhD diss. State University of Iowa, 1964 (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 16.
[115] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 272.
[116] Wolfe, *Poet*, 18.
[117] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 14.
[118] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 266.

century. This tendency initially led scholars to overlook the book, treating it with a cursory glance in biographies and poetic studies, but similarly dismissing it as mere fancy. [119]

Chapter 3
Ironic Outcomes and the Spectre of War:
Modernism and the First World War as Marking the End of Progressivism and the Hieroglyphic in Film

The dismissal of Lindsay's hieroglyph was due in large part to the global and cultural changes that also brought an end to the Progressive Era as a whole. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 marked the beginning of a process that would not only geo-politically transform Europe, but would also cause a major shift in the global mood. The idealism with which the Western world had entered the twentieth century was extinguished by the fractures and loss resulting from the war. The strict codes of conduct and social value systems that had heretofore defined the middle and upper classes in the Western world did not sufficiently answer the demands of modernity, and the idealistic attempts to direct society were rebuffed by the disillusionment and moral relativity of the post-war generation. In America, the decision to enter the war in 1917 brought the ennui of this latter generation in direct conversation with the still-active Progressives, whose own ranks were divided over America's participation overseas. The various contradictions and oppositional figures that had co-existed in Progressive Era America could not be as easily tolerated in the post-war era, not least because many among the working classes were through being direct by a group so blind to its own glaring ironies. Lindsay's celebration of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* as a uniting force in America was unacceptable in light of the violence generated by the film, and this irony

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[119] Wolfe, *Poet*, 1.

undermined the legitimacy and authority of his film work for many. Furthermore, his

body of work drew on the traditions, symbols, and intertexts of an older America, placing

him at odds with the new intellectual generation. [120] He became an easy target for more

modern thinkers and poets, like Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. Pound made a point of

publishing scathing satires of Lindsay's work, writing "Whoop-golly-ip Zopp, bob BIP!!

/ I'm Mr. Lindsay with the new sheep-dip, / I'm a loud-voiced yeller, I'm a prancing

preacher, / Gawd's in his heaven! I'm the *real* High Reacher,"[121] mocking the poetic

rhythms and onomatopoeia on which he had built his career. Moreover, Pound appears to

have had poets like Lindsay in mind when he wrote "to use a symbol *with an ascribed or

intended meaning* is, usually, to create very bad art,"[122] demonstrating a clear antipathy

towards the kind of work he thought Lindsay was doing. The war-time division and

destruction indirectly undermined Lindsay's work and that of his Progressive

contemporaries. The Modernist poets, however, directly attacked Lindsay's poetry and

hieroglyphic system, damaging his career and undermining the authority of his work on

film. In reacting thus to what they perceived as an antiquated and talentless poet, the

Modernists failed to recognize the similarities between his work and theirs, specifically at

the point where poetry met film. Their attack and dismissal of Lindsay's work was

symptomatic of larger cultural shifts that pushed people like Lindsay, Griffith, and other

Progressive Era figures, into the periphery.

 1915 was an auspicious year for Lindsay and the Progressive reformers, marking

both the zenith of their authority and the beginning of their decline. Lindsay's career and

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[120] Jackson T. Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 5.
[121] Hummer, "Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay," 78.
[122] Pound, *Memoir*, 86.

popularity were at their height, but while his book was well-received by contemporary critics the central message of the book was lost on most readers. The work was gleaned for its practical applications, and its central message discarded. The Progressive Era itself had had many successes in directing and improving society; by the end of the first Wilson administration, the various causes for which the progressives had been fighting began to come to fruition at the federal level. The future of America was considered secure, and was viewed by many with hope and idealism. However, the material changes the Progressives had made did not ameliorate the growing unrest among the working class. In many cases the work of reform in fact exacerbated pre-existing problems of labour and class. The Progressive impulse to force a reunion of "e pluribus" and "unum" through legislation had been accepted insofar as it relied on the objectivity of the social sciences, and had definitely improved living and working conditions in many parts of the country. With the president on the side of reform in 1915, it is not surprising that the Progressives generally, and Lindsay specifically, could confidently assert new directions for the nation. However, the other side of uplift and reform was the desire for social control. A practice like eugenics, for example, may have produced birth control and thus a certain amount of economic and reproductive freedom, but its application was often aimed at 'social undesirables' and working-class immigrants. Those under the control of the Progressives began to grow restless, and the outbreak of war in Europe became a platform for highlighting the inconsistencies and contradictions of the reform movement. One of the glaring inconsistencies of the Progressive Era was the discourse of universality that was racist and assimilative in practice; Griffith was an excellent example of this contradiction, underlining the irony of Lindsay using *The Birth of a Nation* to

demonstrate the uniting force of hieroglyphs in film. Early in his career, Griffith had

described the medium as the new "universal language," which would unite and

strengthen the plurality of voices in America.[123] Lindsay pushed this idea further with the

hieroglyph; in an unpublished manuscript on "The New Democracy" (1900), Lindsay

describes democracy itself "not as an application of political science, but as an <u>art</u>

product,"[124] that was ultimately guided by the hieroglyph. Film as directed by the

hieroglyph then stood not only as a means of universal communication, but as the

"consuming fire in the hearts of a generation of men who love beauty more than any

other thing."[125] The hieroglyph in film was directed at bolstering and re-establishing the

balance of American democracy and identity, and functioned in a way that embraced the

pluralism of modern America. For Lindsay, a working democracy required a plurality of

voices, and the hieroglyphic system could communicate ideology to the individual and

collective simultaneously. Moreover, Lindsay's system was not overtly aimed at

assimilation of immigrants, but at fostering a democratic conversation about the place in

which they had chosen to call home. He viewed the nation as being flawed, but

essentially good, and took to heart the fundamental belief in equality he considered

essential to American identity. At the same time, he was aware of the various betrayals of

this ideal. Having grown up in Springfield, Illinois, he was well acquainted with the

racial violence that in many ways defined the country better than its founding documents.

His family had fought on both sides of the Civil War, and he often noted the curious

duality of his beliefs and values, saying that "Mason and Dixon's line runs straight

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[123] Slide, *Early American Cinema*, 224.
[124] Lindsay "Democracy," 1, the Barrett Collection
[125] Lindsay "Democracy," 2, the Barrett Collection.

through our house in Springfield still, and straight through my heart.[126] It is no surprise

then, that he could watch *The Birth of a Nation* and see its racially explicit

representations, and still focus on the hieroglyphic potential of Griffith's work. In *The*

Art of the Moving Picture, Lindsay excused Griffith by laying the blame on Thomas

Dixon, on whose play the film was based.[127] This was perhaps satisfying for a man who

saw the world as a balance between opposites, and could excuse great wrong-doing if a

great good was also present. That he considered the hieroglyph a great enough good to

counter the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and multiple acts of violence against

African Americans in cities where the film was shown is obviously problematic.[128]

If we take the hieroglyph seriously, it is plausible to see how Lindsay thought

that encouraging the best parts of Griffith's work would produce films without such

contradiction. Lindsay took Griffith at his word when he said that "what we film

tomorrow will strike the hearts of the world […] and end war forever."[129] However, such

ideals and assumptions did not mitigate the physical violence and bloodshed caused by

the film. Moreover, Lindsay seemed utterly blind to Griffith's own feelings about the

film; he considered it to be a true representation of the Reconstruction Era in which he

had grown up, and he proudly paraded the film from city to city in an unprecedented

advertising campaign.[130] It has been shown that Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance* was

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[126] Lindsay, *Collected*, 23.

[127] Lindsay, *Art*, 75-6.

[128] Maxim Simcovitch, "The Impact of Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation' on the KKK," *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from "The Birth of a Nation" to "Judgement at Nuremberg*," Edited by David Platt, (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 73-6.

[129] Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation,'" special issue, *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985), 187, http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca/stable/3043769.

[130] Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation:" A History of "The Most*

partly an exercise in the hieroglyphic system, but it is also the case that the film made a

case against film censorship. The outcry against the racism of *Birth,* combined with the

problem of deadly riots—at least 120 screening struggles broke out between 1915 and

1978[131]—with sufficient violence to have the film subjected to censorship and banning in

five states and nineteen cities.[132] Griffith went to the Supreme Court to fight these

municipal and state decisions, but was overruled. *Intolerance* was his response to these

decisions, citing historical cases in which censorship led to national destruction.[133]

Lindsay's apparent blindness to this aspect of Griffith's work was typical of his character,

noted for its naivety and innocence.[134] Moreover, the disparity between theory and

practice was not limited to Lindsay and Griffith, but was characteristic of the Progressive

Era as a whole. That President Woodrow Wilson enjoyed the film and showed it at the

White House is not entirely surprising given the magnitude of Griffith's undertaking, but

his statements about the history in the Reconstruction South legitimated Griffith's

position and undermined Wilson's egalitarian stance. Moreover, Wilson's embrace of

imperialist policies in the Philippines stands in contrast to his domestic reform, and

highlights the synonymity of reform and social control.[135] Such glaring inconsistencies

and ironies had very real and brutal consequences, and the response to those

consequences did much to fracture and dissolve the Progressive movement, leaving men

like Griffith and Lindsay on the periphery of the modern age. In Lindsay's case, his

Controversial Motion Picture of All Time" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 199-120.

[131] Janet Staiger, "'The Birth of a Nation: Reconsidering its Reception,'" *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, Director*, Edited by Robert Lang (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 199.

[132] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films,* 4th Ed. (New York, London: Continuum, 2001), 15.

[133] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 19.

[134] Goldstein, *American Poet*, 27.

[135] Rogin, "Sword," 152-4.

inconsistencies and reliance on tradition made him vulnerable to the attacks of a new

wave of poets and artists, whose dismissal of his work brought a fairly swift end to his

career.

In his chapter on "Progress and Endowment" in *The Art of the Moving Picture*,

Lindsay directly and specifically invited the emerging modernists to apply their poetic

tactics, structurally similar to his own work on the hieroglyphic—particularly wherein the

photoplay as "space measured without sound plus time measured without sound"

intersected with the application of the Chinese ideogram to the moment of action central

to Imagism[136]—to film. He suggested that the imagists, an experimental modernist

branch that included Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, adapt their poetic form and theory to a

visual medium. In a broadsheet announcing the publication of Lindsay's book, the first

paragraphs were devoted to this proposed alliance.[137] In their attempts to capture a single

moment of action, the imagists had found that traditional Chinese characters functioned

as single ideas that, when placed in sequence, generated a new and separate concept.

Like the Egyptian hieroglyphic, the imagist's Chinese ideogram could communicate

particularly well on the screen. Moreover, Lindsay recognized that there were cases

where the hieroglyph might not be accurately interpreted, and suggested the ideogram as

an alternative or substitute. [138] He maintained that the ability of the hieroglyph to evolve

made it superior to the ideogrammic concept, which, once generated, was fixed. [139] His

invitation denoted an awareness of the changing cultural and artistic milieu, and he hoped

to engage in the discourse surrounding those changes, despite the fact that his rootedness

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[136] Lindsay, *Art*, 267.
[137] Broadsheet advertisement, n.d., Box 57, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in
        the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.
[138] Lindsay, *Art*, 265.
[139] Lindsay, *Art*, 210-11.

in an older tradition barred him from participation in the new movement. In that tradition

it was both assumed and desirable that the hieroglyph be mystical and revelatory. [140]

Modernism did not hold such assumptions, and instead worshipped "force" and the

"real."[141] Lindsay's propensity for contradiction allowed him to believe that the two

systems of thought could exist in cooperation, but such was not the case. His invitation

was met with derision; both Pound and Lowell published satires of Lindsay's poetry, and

dismissed his work on film.[142] Pound in particular, thought traditional symbols and

Symbolism, even within the hieroglyphic context, irrelevant in the new age; he said

definitively that "Imagism is not symbolism," thus rejecting the systems of "association"

within which Lindsay seemed specifically to work.[143] Thus, Lindsay's hieroglyphics,

reliant on interpretations and associations rooted in the pre-twentieth century world, were

rejected by modernism. However, later modernist film experiments would prove the

importance of the hieroglyph as the foundational representational form.

Although Lindsay maintained the importance of the hieroglyph in the 1922

revision of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, it was largely ignored even when it reappeared

in European avant garde films of the 1920s and 1930s.[144] Formally, Lindsay pointed to

the hieroglyphic structure as a means of understanding how to make visual

representations and narrative meaningful. His intention was to direct that meaning at

uniting America and restoring balance between the individual and collective in the

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[140] Iampolski, *Memory*, 107.

[141] Lears, *No Place of Grace,* 58; Jackson T. Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making Of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 327-8.

[142] Hummer, "Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay," 77-8. *Beyond artistic and ideological differences, it is suggested that Pound resented that Harriet Monroe chose Lindsay's *The Chinese Nightingale* over T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* to receive the annual *Poetry* prize in 1929.

[143] Pound, *Memoire*, 84-8.

[144] Czitrom, *Media*, 55.

pluralism of the Progressive Era. Without that meaning, the hieroglyph that would re-emerge is not specifically Lindsay's creation, but denotes the indebtedness of the film industry to his connection of the form to the medium. The European avant garde movements, specifically French Impressionism and Surrealism, continued to move away from the hieroglyph by adopting the ideogrammic form. Because the ideogram was not a closed system of interpretation, it was thought more appropriate to the action-through-time medium of film. In the post-war era, ideogrammic experiments were undertaken in tandem with a quest to abandon traditional intertexts, no longer appropriate in the modern world. Taken to its extreme in the Surrealist films of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, the ideogram, combined with a lack of intertext, produced images that were not fixed in chronology or interpretation; the images became hieroglyphs.[145] Moreover, the interpretations made by the filmmakers were associative, reflecting Lindsay's method of applying ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs to modern American film. At the same time, Sergei Eisenstein, a Soviet filmmaker, was honing a method of film editing that was based on the ideogram, but tended to produce hieroglyphs. Montage editing, still used in the film today, connects associated images in sequence to form an impression of a larger concept. Eisenstein's work fulfilled the promise of film as art, and inadvertently created hieroglyphs through ideogrammic projects, highlighting the relation between the two forms.[146] In the 1928 film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World,*[147] he placed images of religious icons from different cultures in sequence is an ideogrammic way to represent divinity, but it has been argued that the editing together of distinct images does not

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[145] Iampolski, *Memory*, 162-88.
[146] Massa, *Fieldworker*, 267; Wolfe, *Poet*, 100.
[147] "Intellectual Montage." *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*. Directed by Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei Eisenstein. Sovkino. 1914. Uploaded by templefilmone, October 8, 2001. YouTube.com. Accessed July 14, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cw2chy64m34>.

necessarily create a new concept; each image actually functions as a hieroglyph.[148] Nevertheless, Lindsay's contribution to film theory could not be separated from its traditionalist, Progressive context, and the hieroglyphic system in his book was generally ignored or dismissed, surviving only provisionally and in tatters. The rejection of his system ultimately played an important role in the decline of his career, and indicated a larger movement away from traditional modes of thought.

By the time that film technique had developed sufficiently to experiment with the hieroglyphic and ideogrammic forms, the film industry in America no longer considered the medium in social terms. Film techniques and technology evolved partially in response to theory, and partly in response to directorial intent outstripping available technology; close-ups, dissolve, and early forms of montage, developed as a result of this latter problem. Griffith's unprecedented moving of the camera mid-scene exposed new possibilities in technique, and led to later mobile camera technology and close-ups.[149] But by the end of the First World War the American film industry was more in the control of bankers and producers than of writers and directors—the Supreme Court had, in 1915, ruled film as "a business, pure and simple"[150]—and experimentation with the medium occurred more often in Europe; in France especially, a long tradition of experimental art allowed for the hieroglyphic and ideogrammic forms to be fully examined. Moreover, it was not until after the war that the aesthetics of film, rather than its socially beneficial potential, became the industrial focus, and rarely in America. This industrial divergence

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[148] Perkins, *Film as Film*, 104, 189 *Perkins does not address this sequence directly, but comments on Montage Theory as a whole; see also Sergei Eisenstein, "Film Form," *"Film Form: Essays in Film Theory" and "The Film Sense,"* edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company: Meridian Books, 1957).

[149] Barry, *D. W. Griffith,* 13-14.
[150] Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 312.

occurred partly as a result of the war, insofar as the destruction of European industries in the war left a lucrative opening for American business, but had its roots in the earliest classes on film at Columbia University.[151] Lindsay and the first film professor, Victor O. Freeburg, had fought against this development, but were of the older, Progressive mindset whose power was already dwindling. Noting the rampant commercialism that was overtaking American film, Lindsay wrote a second, unpublished book on film in 1925. In a desperate attempt to salvage the medium from a new wave of crass commercialism, he omitted the hieroglyph from the manuscript, although it remained the central feature of his writings on film until his death.[152] It is an unfortunate matter of timing that once film could technically support the hieroglyph its message had ceased to be relevant.

Although changes had begun with the outbreak of war in 1914, America's entry into the conflict in 1917 fundamentally changed national identity, values, and projects, leaving idealists and theorists like Lindsay to be undermined and forgotten; what survived of Lindsay's work in the mainstream was that which was practical. His work was used in the first film courses taught at Columbia University—he and Professor Victor O. Freeburg corresponded and exchanged ideas[153]—but the course itself was always under pressure from university heads looking to make courses profitable, and it quickly became mired in the lucrative business aspect of filmmaking.[154] Lindsay's work had inspired Iris Barry, who claimed his work as her own in the 1930s. Barry was also

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[151] Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 30, 37.

[152] Assorted manuscripts and notes. 1915-1930. Various boxes, inc. 14, 16, 23, 28, The Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

[153] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 44-5.

[154] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 41-2.

the head of the newly formed film department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and preserved both Griffith's work and reputation to the exclusion of other contemporary filmmakers; again, Lindsay's contribution was notably absent. The appropriation of Lindsay's work by Barry was compounded by the fact that Lindsay had written at length about the necessity of viewing film as art, and of preserving it in museums and art galleries. Although film collections had been an industry goal since the invention of the medium, his case for its preservation was strong enough for places like MoMA to overcome the danger and expense of storing silver nitrate stock; this material was the industry standard at the turn of the century, and was highly flammable.[155] Among smaller filmmakers and associated industry workers, such plagiarism was no less present. In a newspaper article from 1929, the film critic Seymour Stern (a close consort of Griffith's) corrected an earlier article that had attributed the idea of sculpture-in-motion, a component of the book's taxonomy of film, to someone other than Lindsay.[156] As was mentioned, his later legal documents were concerned with gaining copyrights to his own work because he had seen it used repeatedly, without credit and often misinterpreted.[157] This trend was caused by, and reflected, various cultural and national changes that affected the whole of Progressive Era America, from the individual idealist to the movements for reform. The treatment of Lindsay's work on film, both the appropriation of its practical measures and the dismissal of its more esoteric aspects, was a largely a result of these external factors, exacerbated by the reaction of the Modernists to his hyperbolic, naïve, and fanciful style. The film as hieroglyphic revelation was quickly

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[155] Decherney, *Hollywood*, 49.
[156] Stern, "Every Man in His Own Humour," in the Barrett Collection.
[157] Lindsay, "Last Will and Testament," in the Barrett Collection.

overcome by the film as profit machine, just as Progressive reform became imperialist

expansion, and turn-of-the-century idealism became bitter disillusionment.

Despite the triumph of the hieroglyph in avant garde film experiments, the

adaptation of some of *The Art of the Moving Picture* to American film structure, and the

preservation of films at MoMA, both Lindsay and Griffith died in abject poverty and

anonymity. Griffith lived out his last days a lonely alcoholic in the Hollywood

Knickerbocker Hotel in Hollywood, dying a penniless vestige of an age past.[158] After

struggling with crippling financial debt and depression, and becoming the butt of many a

joke in the 1920s, Lindsay committed suicide in December of 1931 by drinking Lysol.[159]

His decline was, as Folks notes, directly "congruent with the ascendance of an elitist

'high art' hostile to American populist culture,"[160] which marked the death of idealism in

a world defined by the "real."[161] His visions, once thought real and a divine gift, were

diagnosed as epilepsy, aggravated by depression.[162] However, the idiosyncrasies of these

men, and the roles they played in the establishment of the American film industry, have

preserved their works as important study cases. The preservation of Griffith's

filmography at MoMA, and the controversy generated by *The Birth of a Nation,* has

ensured his place in history. Lindsay, however, has only recently been reconsidered in

scholarship. Although books have periodically appeared over the last century about his

life and work on film, their treatment of what actually constituted the culmination of his

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[158] Eileen Bowser, "An Annotated List of the Films of D.W. Griffith," in Barry, *American Film Master*, 87;
     Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a
     Nation,'" special issue, *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985), 189,
     http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca/stable/3043769.
[159] Goldstein, *American Poet*, 20.
[160] Folks, "Populism," n.p.
[161] Lears, *Rebirth*, 327-8.
[162] Massa*, Fieldworker*, 11.

career, was cursory at best. The vehicle for Lindsay's message of unity and the

restoration of balance in the face of pluralism, the hieroglyph in film, has re-emerged

since the 1970s. Beginning with film critic Stanley Kauffmann's re-release of *The Art of*

the Moving Picture in 1970, this strange and often contradictory figure was revived

through his work on film, revealing a way of thinking about film and the structures of

representation and perception that has proven far more interesting and important than was

thought by any of his contemporaries.

Conclusion
Lindsay Revisited

The dismissal of Lindsay's work on film was due in part to external

circumstances beyond his control, and in part to the idiosyncrasies of his own character

and style, but the effect of this dismissal was to stagnate film theory in America until the

1950s and 1960s.[163] In Europe, the hieroglyph and ideogram had been the focus of avant

garde film movements in the 1920s and 1930s, including Impressionism and Surrealism,

but mainstream film was generally more concerned with profit than artistry. Film

continued to be considered a communicative medium throughout the twentieth century,

but the technicalities of that communication meant little to most working in the film

industry. Moreover, film language became a matter of technical terminology, as opposed

to a way of talking about the medium that reflected the character and potential of the

medium. That is, the hieroglyph in some ways described how film actually functioned in

relation to audiences, and forced a mode of thinking about film that transcended the

labelling of equipment and shot-types. However, the linguistic, post-modern turn in the

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[163] Folks,"Populism," n.p.

1970s was reconsidering language at the same time that Film Studies was accepted as a legitimate academic discipline, changing the course of the medium and its study.[164]

The linguistic turn quickly looked to film because of the peculiar way in which the visual medium relies on symbols and active audience participation in the representation; the combination of these elements constitutes the actual language of film. Silent film in particular relied on systems of codes to convey meaning, placing it firmly within the domain of semiotics. As film semiotician Christian Metz stated, "Film is too obviously a message for one not to assume that it is coded."[165] Moreover, it became clear that the codes and systems in silent film were based on literary frameworks, due to the fact that the new medium did not have its own set of terms and specialized knowledge until after the 1920s. The literary tropes at the core of these methods have proven structurally problematic in film, but crucial to the beginnings of how we talk about and describe the medium, with respect to its peculiar modes of representation and perception. It was within this context that Lindsay's work on film was rediscovered and the hieroglyph in film was reconsidered. It is not the case that Lindsay's hieroglyphs have been wholly or widely accepted as a functioning system of film, but it is acknowledged that his system exposed some of the semiotic peculiarities and possibilities of the medium. Certainly, Lindsay's work on film was "far ahead of his contemporaries in exploring what would later be understood as […] semiotics,"[166] particularly where the creation of cultural systems of communication were concerned. While early and classical filmmakers were concerned with profit and technique, and reformers with the social

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[164] Myron Lounsbury, in *Progress and Poetry*, 5.

[165] Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 40.

[166] Folks, "Populism," n.p.

aspect of the medium, Lindsay's work touched on some of the theoretical frameworks on which film relies. Some scholars have begun to see connections between Lindsay's hieroglyphic system and the semiotic system of "continuity" roughly outlined by Charles Pierce in the late 19th century; no distinct lineage can be proven, but Peirce's idea subjected signs to a sequencing and chronology similar to film structure.[167] As Miriam Hansen demonstrated, the hieroglyph, as envisioned by Lindsay and experimented with by Griffith, played a major role in the reorientation of the public sphere in the Progressive Era. She argues that the inherent relationship between the audience and film, and between perception and representation, was explored through the hieroglyphic form. That the hieroglyph examined and strengthened those relationships forces us to consider it as flawed, but in some ways capable of creating the unity and democratic balance Lindsay had desired.[168] Despite the shortcomings of the hieroglyph at the structural level, as studied by the literary theorist Mikhail Iampolski, it remains the primary theoretical structure in early and classical film, specifically where the medium was guided by literature rather than later, medium-specific conventions. The way in which the hieroglyphic participates in discussions of semiotics and communications studies added academic weight to film studies in North America, heretofore an applied versus scholastic area of study. Film studies now engages in this structural conversation on the one hand, and investigates the complexities of the cultural and industrial relationships to early and classical film, as in the work by Dana Polan and Marc Decherney on the commercialization and militarization of post-World War Two Hollywood. Thus, Lindsay's "The Art of the Moving Picture," with particular regards to its focus on the

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[167] Ehrat, *Cinema and Semiotic*, 5-9.
[168] Hansen, *Babel*, 15.

hieroglyphic method, remains relevant to the study, if not the making of, films and film culture. What was once dismissed as ornamental fancy and a limited expression of the film form has, in postmodern scholarship, become an indicator of the moods and modes of thought about early and classical film, and the place of the medium in the turmoil and idealism of the Progressive Era.

Despite the structural limitations of the hieroglyphic in film, and despite the limitations of Lindsay's ability to clearly convey his message, the core thesis of *The Art of the Moving Picture* remains informative and important. When Lindsay watched Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a spark was ignited. The possibility of using film responding to social anxieties was a popular stance in Progressive Era America, be it through the quest for a universal language and brotherhood in the movie theater, or through the various reforms made in an attempt to direct and uplift society. For Lindsay, however, the use of film to ameliorate social problems began at the structural and formal level of the medium itself. Although his 1915 book on film approached the medium from a variety of angles, and justified it in a variety of ways, the hieroglyph was the central component of the work. So important was this component that it was emphasized in the 1922 revision, and his later musings on film were almost exclusively concerned with the form. His second, unpublished 1925 book on film moved away from the form in a desperate attempt to re-orient the increasingly commercial American film industry, in the hopes of salvaging the hieroglyphic potential of the medium. The hieroglyph was Lindsay's response to the anxieties of the Progressive Era, but focused on problems that ran deeper than the influx of immigrants or the rise of mass-culture. Rather, it responded to a fundamental imbalance of "e pluribus" and "unum," the democratic core of

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American identity that had been disrupted by those problems. Using the hieroglyph in film, a form in which the picture and its plurality of interpretations have equal weight and value, would focus and inspire the minds of an increasingly pluralistic nation. The hieroglyph in film allowed for, even necessitated, the coming-together of individual and collective interpretations. The activity of being a film audience was thus a practice in the fundamentals of American democracy, wherein the one and many, the "e pluribus" and "unum," were actually "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."[169]

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[169]"The Pledge of Allegiance," *Historic Documents*, n.p.

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