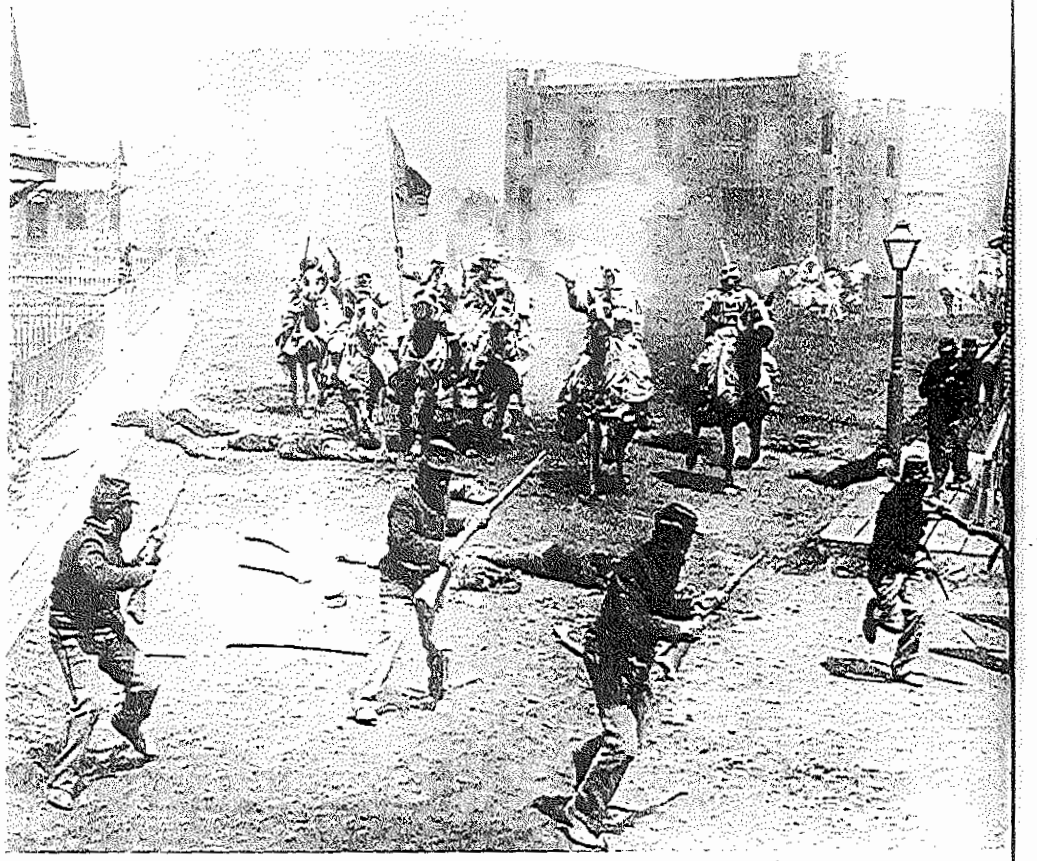
The Birth of a Nation (1915)



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Integrating Race into the Narrator System

Context

Set during the American Civil War and Reconstruction, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is a powerful story about the plight of two upper-class families: the Stonemans of the North and the Camerons of the South. A historic epic, this classic film offers its audience a tender portrait of two families' struggle for unity in the dense fog of war. Yet it is committed also to a romantic vision of the "Southern Legend" in its depiction of the Reconstruction era. Beset by revengeful black brutes, self-righteous white politicians, plundering carpetbaggers, manipulative mulatto mistresses, plotting mulatto politicians, and the graphic death of a Confederate daughter, the Stonemans and the Camerons endure this turbulent period of American history, eventually coming together in a marriage that symbolizes a reunited nation.

Produced and directed by David Wark Griffith (1875–1948), *The Birth of a Nation* is widely considered to be the most important American film in history. Since its initial screening, critics and scholars have proclaimed it the first feature-length film to offer audiences a powerful melodrama told with artistic subtlety. Indeed, this classic work led American cinema into the era of the Hollywood style, a system of narrative filmmaking that marshals cinematic technique—from cinematography to editing—in the service of character psychology, causal plot development, and moral endings. Although refined and even challenged over time, this style of filmmaking is still dominant today. And for this reason, Griffith is widely considered to be the father of American cinema—"the Shakespeare of the screen."

The Birth of a Nation is based on two of Reverend Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novels, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Leopard's Spots* (1902). Not surprisingly, it is known also

for perpetuating some of the most repulsive stereotypes of African Americans in history. Borrowing from the Dixon novels, Griffith offers us a binary caricature of former slaves: either "faithful souls" loyal to the belief in white superiority or overly sexualized "brutes" out for revenge. Yet with few exceptions, European American actors play African American characters in blackface, making the film more about the way in which whiteness imagines blackness than it is about blackness itself. Griffith, it is widely reported, went so far as to segregate the cast, refusing to allow black actors to touch white actresses. For the famous director, whites must remain united in their quest for racial purity and national dominance. As one of the last intertitles of the film explains: "The former enemies of North and South are united in common defense of the Aryan birthright." Using the techniques of filmmaking to support the story of white supremacy, Griffith casts the Ku Klux Klan as heroes—romantic men in white hoods who ride with apparent honor and virtue in defense of white women, white families, and, via didactic metaphor, a white nation.

The importance of this complex film lies not simply in either its contribution to the art of cinematic storytelling or its overt racism, but in the relationship between these forces in the context of film history. Segregating Griffith's contribution to the craft of narrative filmmaking from his racist imagery undermines the impact that *The Birth of a Nation* had—and continues to have—on cinematic storytelling. In many ways, Griffith developed his style of filmmaking to tell unambiguous stories of an American color line. In *The Birth of a Nation*, this color line marks a clear hierarchy of races reinforced by a romantic representation of the Old South, social segregation, antimiscegenation laws, disenfranchisement, and the natural—divine—right of white rule into the future.

Analysis

Despite the trend among critics and scholars to either ignore or excuse the articulation of white supremacy in *The Birth of a Nation* in favor of focusing on the film's artistic achievements, and despite the criticism, on the other side, that this work is nothing more than racist propaganda, Griffith's epic reveals an important moment in film history, when cinematic storytelling developed as popular art in the service of

racism. In what ways does *The Birth of a Nation* reflect history? How are the techniques of cinema employed in the film to facilitate and refract the story of white supremacy? More broadly, how can we simultaneously acknowledge the film's contribution to storytelling technique while challenging its systematic embrace of racism? Can racism in film be at once ugly and painful and at the same time artistic and romantic?

Reflecting History

It is difficult and perhaps unproductive to view *The Birth of a Nation* with dispassion. The film calls out for audiences to engage with it, and to do so with critical indignation. Nonetheless, it is important to situate this classic film in the context in which it was produced and initially exhibited. The sociopolitical environment in which Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation* is reflected in the film itself. Ironically, this is most clear when looking at the way in which Griffith represented the past. In other words, we find the ideologies of race that informed the production of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 directing the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction (1861 to 1877) represented in the film. The history outside the film as well as the representation of history in the film comprise a key issue informing the significance of *The Birth of a Nation.*

The early twentieth century saw the growth of cinema as a popular form of entertainment. European immigrants followed their predecessors into nickelodeon theaters to discover the fictionalization of American democracy, and, in the process, they were encouraged to assimilate into the social order of things. At the same time, during this period the United States was dominated by a racial formation that positioned people of color as threats to whiteness. Although few citizens advocated a return to slavery as a means of controlling this perceived threat, Jim Crow discrimination was widespread and widely accepted. Racism was an openly supported fact of American social life.

The social reality of racism informed the development of filmmaking, facilitating a troubling yet persistent link between cinema and the politics of racism. *The Birth of a Nation* was the first film to be screened at the White House, and on seeing the classic, President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) reportedly proclaimed, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so

terribly true."[1] Wilson was a key proponent of the League of Nations, the forerunner to today's United Nations, and a past president of Princeton University. Before becoming president of the United States, he authored a popular nonfiction book, *A History of the American People*, which Griffith later used to help ground the story of *The Birth of a Nation* in history. Wilson was also an open and persistent supporter of segregation. Under his administration (1913–21), the U.S. government maintained "separate but equal" federal workplaces, bathrooms, and restaurants. A southern Democrat, the first to be elected president since the Civil War, Wilson reportedly encouraged screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* for Congress and at various government agencies.

Griffith not only used Wilson's *A History of the American People* to legitimize his interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction, but also included in the film historical facsimile scenes of Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Grant and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. He also loosely based the senior patriarch of the Stoneman family, Austin Stoneman, on Representative Thaddeus Stevens (1792–1868), a Republican congressman who created the "forty acres and mule" proposal and advocated strongly for an integrated postwar society. Stoneman as Stevens comes off as a well-intentioned but terribly misguided politician who eventually understands the error of his integrationist ways. In the end, he reveals his loyalty to whiteness when he reacts in horror to the idea that Silas Lynch, his handpicked mulatto politician and model of integration, aspires to marry his daughter. Taking great liberties with the historical record, Griffith represents Northern politicians as wayward souls who ultimately end up supporting the purity of whiteness.

The historical references found in *The Birth of a Nation* have less to do with the film's plot than they do with the story of whiteness that it perpetuates, as the classic work is based less on past events than on a romantic discourse with the past—one that wraps the ideology of white supremacy in the flag of historical "accuracy." Capitalizing on both popular memory and political change, Griffith used historical references to legitimize the artistic decision to represent blackness as

[1]Although this quote is widely attributed to President Wilson, there is no direct evidence he actually said as much. In later years he claimed not to have said it, but only after he was publicly criticized for embracing the film.

bestial or servile and whiteness as superior yet under threat. In this way, the representation of the past forms a key aspect of the film's complicated role in race relations, helping to ensure the film's and its director's place in history. In *The Birth of a Nation*, "Legend," notes Robert Lang, "rewrites history to conform to ideological imperatives" (4).

Griffith's commitment to white supremacy was legitimized by the rise of social Darwinism and the eugenics movement in the nineteenth century, two related scientific paradigms that divided "man" into biological subspecies that principally included Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. The so-called Caucasoid race, particularly those of Aryan stock, was considered to be innately superior. Conversely, the Mongoloid and Negroid races were considered to be innately inferior and, as such, not quite worthy of the full rights of a democratic society. Coupled with socioeconomic systems supported by separate but overtly unequal civil rights, the science of race at this time worked to support the belief in and structure of whiteness. Although these scientific schools of thought are considered by current scientists to have been motivated by ideology rather than empirical evidence, as pointed out by, among others, Stephen J. Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), they nonetheless helped shape the meaning of race that contemporaneous politicians and filmmakers used to support creative and legal decisions.

The influence of biological paradigms on *The Birth of a Nation* is illustrated in the scene, set in South Carolina, in which newly elected African American legislators during Reconstruction sit back in their chairs, shoeless feet perched on desks, eating chicken and leering at white women, apparently unable or unwilling to pay attention to the workings of democracy. In this interpretation of history, the story seems to be suggesting that African Americans are unable to think beyond primitive impulses. In the scene, blacks are represented as inherently unequal to whites. Scenes like this legitimize the South's efforts to deny African Americans the right to vote, which Griffith depicts at the end of the story, when the Ku Klux Klansmen stand guard, guns in hand, to supervise new elections and banish African Americans to the margins of the frame. This is a story about whiteness. Indeed, instead of showing the Klan committing acts of brutality and terrorism, which by the time Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation* was a matter of public record, he depicted them as heroes working to ensure a reunited white

nation. As Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon write, "In *The Birth of a Nation,* blacks simply do not matter: they are only counters in the struggle of a split white self to reunite" (20).

Griffith's representation of race in this way is linked directly to Dixon's novels. In Dixon's stories, the most treacherous and threatening characters are the mulattoes, people who are considered "half" white and "half" black. According to the social Darwinian paradigm, specifically its use in determining and supporting racial hierarchies, interracial relations improved the mind but not the morals of African Americans. For Dixon, this made mulattoes an even greater threat to white civilization. Although the racial order of things, or the socio-economic structure of contemporaneous race relations, positioned African Americans as primitive and thus not too difficult to control, mulattoes were positioned as intelligent, crafty, manipulative, and immoral. They were more difficult to control, which is why interracial relationships had to be made illegal and socially unacceptable. Mulattoes were a visible sign that the riches of whiteness were being plundered by the treachery of blackness.

In *The Birth of a Nation,* we see Austin Stoneman's mulatto maid begin to tear apart her clothing at the thought of seducing the elder statesman. Her aspirations are lascivious, as she plots an improved social standing through sexual immorality. Moreover, Silas Lynch, Stoneman's mulatto politician, aspires not only to turn the South black but to marry his daughter, Elsie. His prurient aspirations are represented as vengeful and violent. "Lynch," an intertitle reads, "drunk with wine and power, orders his henchman to hurry preparations for a forced marriage." In the end, his attempt to force the white woman to wed is stopped—in the nick of time—by the Klan.

Cinematic Technique and the Story of Whiteness

Although Griffith relied on Dixon's historical fiction and Wilson's fictionalized history, the director had a long-lasting commitment to the ideology of whiteness. This history is evident in the films he made before *The Birth of a Nation.* The father of American cinema directed over 450 short films, each roughly ten minutes long, for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, also known as American Biograph, from 1908 to 1913. In these works, Griffith refined his technique for creating compelling stories on film. He developed a commitment to

telling a story of white supremacy that included the depiction of people of color as inferior, savage, and unrestrained. For Griffith, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, Gypsies, Jews, as well as African Americans, posed clear threats to the sanctity of whiteness. The director went as far as to use the titles of a number of his early works to market racism, including *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), *Romance of a Jewess* (1908), *The Zulu's Heart* (1908), *The Mexican Sweethearts* (1909), *That Chink at Golden Gulch* (1910), and *The Heart of a Savage* (1911). As I have argued elsewhere, the racism in *The Birth of a Nation* can be traced to the director's Biograph work (104).

Griffith also made several Civil War films for American Biograph, including most notably *His Trust* (1911) and *His Trust Fulfilled* (1911). In these works, we see a sweeping battle scene, shots of slaves running wild as Northerners pillage Southern homes, close views that reveal the inner thoughts and emotions of characters, and compositions that feature recurring symbols of the Old South—including most prominently a Confederate officer's sword. Indeed, the sequel is based on the devotion a faithful soul has for his former Confederate master's sword long after the master has died in battle and the slaves have been freed. Griffith's camera work and plot structure seem to fetishize the Confederate sword, making it a symbol of white power and pride. And, as Michael Rogin notes in perhaps the most insightful essay written on Griffith's film, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision," these same stylistic choices are all found, refined and coherent, in *The Birth of a Nation* (275).

Most of the stylistic innovations credited to *The Birth of a Nation* can be found in the director's earlier films. This is most clear in his development of chase-and-rescue scenes. Constructed through parallel editing, which is sometimes referred to as crosscutting or intercutting, chase-and-rescue scenes consist of shots of two or more separate but usually parallel locations interwoven to advance the film's plot. In one scene, we see the person(s) being chased. In another, we see the person(s) doing the chasing. The filmmaker cuts back and forth between the locations, sometimes increasing or decreasing the tempo of individual shots to further heighten suspense. He does this until the chaser either catches his victim or is interrupted by a hero. This is famously illustrated in one of Griffith's last yet most successful films, *Way Down East* (1920), where, at the end of the film and not a moment

too soon, the hero saves the damsel in distress from crushing death as her body floats precariously toward a waterfall. We see this rescue through a series of parallel edits that serve to increase the tension caused by a woman heading perilously close to a gushing waterfall while casting a male as a savior. Griffith's stagings of chase-and-rescue scenes are always dramatic and intense, facilitating narrative suspense while emphasizing the plight of the characters. They also serve nicely to advance the story to a moral conclusion.

And yet Griffith did not develop chase scenes and parallel editing simply to advance causal events. In many of his films, including the earliest instances in which the technique is employed, the person being chased is a white woman, the chaser is a person of color, and the hero is a white male. In other words, Griffith developed the technique to support the tension surrounding interracial relations. This is perhaps best illustrated in *The Girls and Daddy* (1909). In this short work, a blackface brute is distracted from a burglary after coming upon two unsuspecting white girls. Griffith goes to great lengths to represent the girls as beautiful and innocent. Several shots show them playful in bed, hugging and kissing before they fall asleep. On seeing the young beauties, the blackface brute chases them from bedroom to living room to bedroom, only to be stopped by a white burglar who, at the risk of losing his loot and getting captured, elects to defend white purity and segregation and defend daddy's girls. The white burglar jumps on and pummels the blackface brute. Throughout the scene, Griffith employs cuts and even a panning shot, a rare technique at this point in film history, to both heighten the threat posed by blackness and to create a moral ending that reveals the innate heroics of whiteness.

This chase scene foreshadows the famous sequence in *The Birth of a Nation* in which Gus, another lustful blackface brute, chases Flora, a darling daughter of the Confederacy, to her death. As in *The Girls and Daddy*, Griffith cuts back and forth between Gus pursuing Flora with an obvious intent to rape and Flora either strolling ignorant of Gus or, realizing what Gus desires, running away from the "renegade Negro" in abject fear. "You see, I'm a Captain now—and I want to marry . . . ," an intertitle linked to Gus reads. Following the earlier scene of the legislature voting down antimiscegenation laws, the scene

is constructed tautly in a forest; long shadows cast by looming trees divide natural lighting in ways that add a visual rhyme to the narrative context of the scene. Moreover, the pacing of the edits adds a degree of tension to the sequence, as Griffith initially lingers on shots of Flora. There is also a close-up of Gus with a menacing and prurient expression on his face. "Wait, missie, I won't hurt yeh," a provocative intertitle reads. In the meantime, Griffith cuts to a third location, where Ben Cameron searches in despair for the young Flora. In one of the most notorious scenes in film history, Flora elects to jump off a cliff to her death rather than be defiled by Gus. Ben is too late to save his Confederate sister, but not too late to organize and rally the Klan to track Gus down and bring him to justice. As punishment, Gus is castrated and lynched (the castration scene was later cut by Griffith in response to threats of censorship by local film-review boards). Although he doesn't save Flora from tragic death, Ben is a hero nonetheless for his creation and stewardship of the Klan.

Another brilliant parallel-editing scene is found at the end of the film, as the Klan rides to save otherwise helpless whites from threatening blacks. The end of the film actually includes two chase scenes, one following the other and both including the Klan as heroic. In one, we find a Northern father, held up with the elder Cameron in a cabin, holding his rifle butt over his child's head, poised to kill her lest she be attacked by the black brutes outside. The situation apparently calls for the same fate suffered by Flora. Griffith moves the camera into a close-up of the little girl's face, revealing simultaneously fear and innocence. In the other scene, we see Lynch and his henchman on the verge of forcing Elsie to marry the mulatto politician. She falls into his dark arms as he seemingly smiles in satisfaction. Both scenes are powerful, as Griffith has the camera follow the Klan's ride to the rescue along a winding forest road. The effect of this technique is that the shots of the Klan offer viewers a sense of impending heroism. In both scenes, the Klan indeed arrives in the nick of time, narrative tension at full pressure, restoring white supremacy once and for all. The blacks are subdued, and the Klan receives a parade and, ostensibly, applause. Constructed with artistry through parallel editing, a technique now commonly employed by filmmakers around the world, these final shots are among the most racist moments in American film history.

Refracting Whiteness

Disgusted by the negative images of African Americans and the positive images of the Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as numerous other social and political organizations, called for protests and boycotts. W. E. B. DuBois, one of America's leading intellectuals at the time, published poignant commentaries in *The Crisis*, the NAACP's journal. These actions resulted in exhibitions of the film being delayed, as well as local review boards, fearful of race riots, requiring minor changes. Even the Communist Party got involved, picketing the film as evidence of the Fascist failings of capitalism. As Janet Staiger, quoting Nickieann Fleener-Marzec, notes, "Between 1915 and 1973 the right to screen *The Birth of a Nation* was challenged at least 120 times" (199).

The famous director responded to the criticism of his film in an editorial published in the *New York Globe*. Claiming that his "associates" maintained a "dignified silence in the face of an organized attack" by "publicity seekers and fanatics," Griffith sought to ensure both the box-office success of the film and its place in film history:

> Most well informed men know now that slavery was an economic mistake. The treatment of the Negroes during the days of Reconstruction is shown effectually and graphically in our picture. We show many phrases of the questions and we do pay particular attention to those faithful Negroes who stay with the former masters and were ready to give up their lives to protect their white friends. No characters in the story are applauded with greater fervor than the good Negroes whose devotion is so clearly shown. (Griffith 169)

Griffith's response was clearly designed as a marketing ploy to further ensure the success of the film. As we have seen, it reveals also a key feature of the story. In *The Birth of a Nation*, there are "good" blacks, African Americans who remain faithful to whiteness and segregation, and "bad" blacks, African Americans who are bestial, lustful, untrustworthy, ignorant, and unfaithful to whiteness. This is a narrative pattern Griffith established during his days at American Biograph, as we have seen in *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*, and it remained throughout his career a preferred marketing strategy.

The controversy over *The Birth of a Nation* did not end with Griffith's deft use of the editorial pages of the *New York Globe*, and in fact continued through subsequent exhibitions of the film. Several scholars report race rioting in major cities after screenings of the film. Equally disturbing is the apparent fact that the Klan used the classic film as a recruiting tool. According to Michael Rogin, the Klan "screened the movie in the 1920s to build membership in the millions" (290). Other scholars have reported a rise in the number of lynchings of blacks by white vigilantes due to the film's depiction of African American men as rapists.

The impact of *The Birth of a Nation* was felt not only in the political and legal spheres of American life, but also in the specific experiences and protests of the African American community. In 1920, for example, African American independent filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux addressed the film when he made *Within Our Gates*. In this classic, Micheaux's ending serves as a challenging homage to the end of *The Birth of a Nation*. We see the attempted rape of a black woman by a white man as her family is being lynched for a crime they did not commit. In this scene, which is not explicitly tied to a historical event but is nonetheless far more historically accurate than any image of blackness found in Griffith's classic, Micheaux exposes the representation of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* as a lie that masks the horrors of white supremacy during the era of slavery and Reconstruction. It must be remembered that, in reality, white slaveholders raped African American women in numbers that were both horrific and apparent to most people living in the South.

Despite protests and direct evidence that the Klan was violent in the extreme, Griffith remained stoic and even belligerent—refusing to acknowledge the film's racism or its culpability in advancing the agenda of the Klan. In 1930, upon the release of one of his last films, *Abraham Lincoln*, the southern director sat down with Walter Huston, the star of the Lincoln film, for an interview. In this filmed interview, which is included on the Kino International DVD (*"The Birth of a Nation" and the Civil War Films of D. W. Griffith*), Huston presents Griffith with a Confederate officer's sword, an ironic recapitulation of the sword found in *His Trust*, *His Trust Fulfilled*, and *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith is visibly touched by the gift, and goes on to defend his depiction of the Klan as honorable and justified. He even reminisces romantically about how Mother helped stitch their white robes as they rode in defense of the Old South.

Conclusion

Irrespective of Griffith's indifference to the history of the Klan, the controversy over the film illustrates the ways in which cinema is informed by and informs our approach to race relations. To this day, scholars continue to argue about how to situate the film in history: Should it be approached as art or as propaganda? Should it be condemned for advocating racism or for the censorship it provoked? It is not uncommon for contemporary scholars to sidestep the issue and either avoid teaching the film altogether or, on showing it, ignore the incestuous relationship between the development of cinematic style and the story of white supremacy.

The Birth of a Nation should remind film scholars of at least two critical imperatives. First, films do not simply reflect the context in which they are produced. They also inform the direction of both creative and social forces. Griffith's classic work certainly reflected the meaning of race dominating the early twentieth century, as this essay has tried to demonstrate. Yet it also refracted racial ideologies in ways that impacted the meaning of whiteness in the future. *The Birth of a Nation* greatly influenced the direction of the Hollywood style. Moreover, it prompted protests, censorship, and rigorous debate about the American color line. Scholars have linked screenings of the film to a dramatic rise in Klan membership, to lynchings, to riots, and to a vigorous national critique of stereotypes. As late as the 1940s, the NAACP organized groups to picket screenings of the film and to protest the negative stereotypes the film promotes. In response, the film was rereleased numerous times in attempts to edit, minimize, and excuse the film's racist message while maintaining its status as a classic. As KVC Entertainment advertises on the back cover of its video case, "Because the story was told from the South's point of view, *The Birth of a Nation* was denounced by various liberal and civil rights organizations, and banned by the NAACP. Yet, no film before, or ever since, has portrayed the most painful chapter of America's history with such profound realism."

A second critical imperative concerns a presumed distinction between art and ideology. *The Birth of a Nation* illustrates the fact that film can be at once stylistic and political, simultaneously imaginative,

brilliant, reactionary, and racist. If *The Birth of a Nation* teaches us anything, it is the ways in which the art of cinema can construct white supremacy as history written with artistry. The innovations Griffith made in pursuit of a style of narrative filmmaking were not simply in the service of storytelling; they were in the service of white supremacy. Thus, the art of *The Birth of a Nation* is its racism, particularly its construction of whiteness through the lens of black stereotypes and the craft of cinematic technique. In *The Birth of a Nation,* art is ideological, form is content, and cinema is simultaneously moving, artistic, ugly, and painful.

Credits

United States, 1915, Epoch Producing Company

Director and Producer: D. W. Griffith
Screenplay: Thomas F. Dixon Jr. (novel and play), D. W. Griffith, Frank E. Woods, and Thomas F. Dixon Jr.
Cinematography: G. W. Bitzer
Art Direction: Cash Shockley, Joseph Stringer, and Frank Wortman
Music: Joseph Carl Breil and D. W. Griffith
Costume Design: Robert Godstein

CAST:

Elsie Stoneman	Lillian Gish
Flora Cameron	Mae Marsh
Col. Ben Cameron	Henry B. Walthall
Margaret Cameron	Miriam Cooper
Lydia Brown	Mary Alden
Austin Stoneman	Ralph Lewis
Silas Lynch	George Siegmann
Gus	Walter Long
Tod Stoneman	Robert Harron
Jeff (blacksmith)	Wallace Reid
Abraham Lincoln	Joseph Henabery
Phil Stoneman	Elmer Clifton
Mrs. Cameron	Josephine Crowell
Dr. Cameron	Spottiswoode Aitken
Wade Cameron	George Beranger
Duke Cameron	Maxfield Stanley
Mammy	Jennie Lee
Gen. Ulysses S. Grant	Donald Crisp
Gen. Robert E. Lee	Howard Gaye