

FILM AND RACIST STEREOTYPES

“BIRTH OF A NATION” (1915)

SECTION ONE

“BIRTH OF A NATION” Review of the 1915 Film

SOURCE: <https://obscurehollywood.net/the-birth-of-a-nation-1915.html>

Special Notes: Great American Films, 1911-1920

Film: *Birth of a Nation*

Release Date: 8 February, 1915

Studio: David W. Griffith Corp.

Director: D.W. Griffith

This film has been selected to our list of [Great American Films, 1911-1920](#), which focuses on obscure and under-appreciated American film masterpieces.

Synopsis

Part 1: America before the Civil War

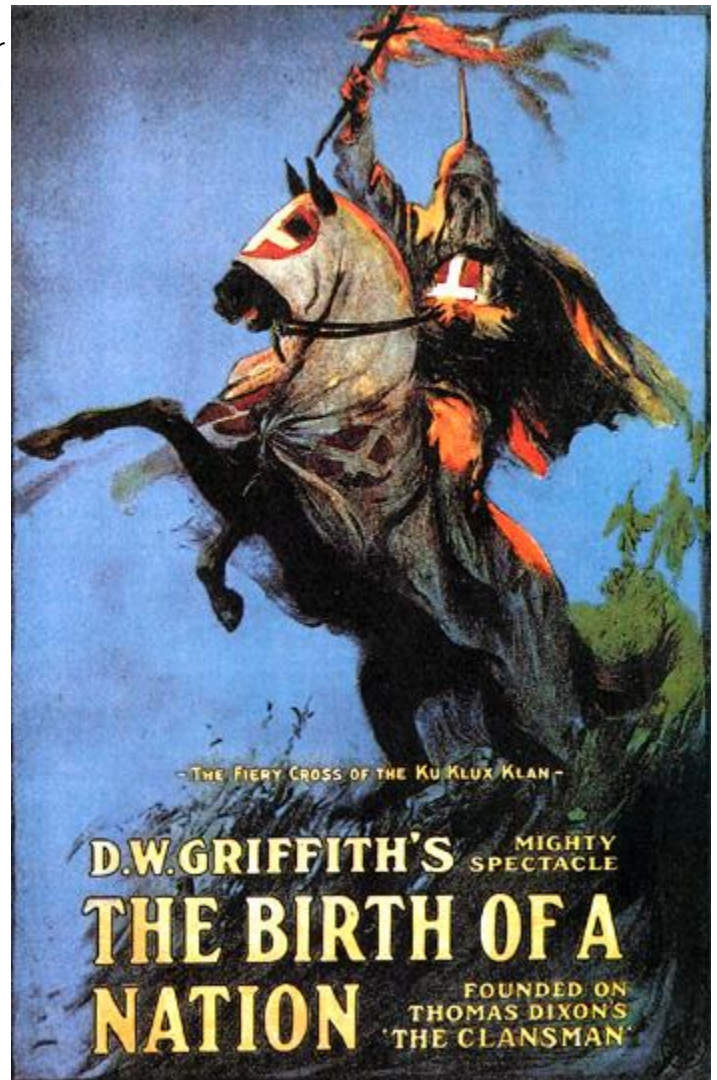
A title card states the hope that the film will convey the ravages of war and so promote abhorrence of it. After two brief scenes, depicting the bringing of the African to America and a church meeting of northern abolitionists, the main characters are introduced. Austin Stoneman lives in Washington D.C. with his daughter, Elsie, and two sons. Dr. and Mrs. Cameron live in Piedmont, South Carolina with their three sons and two daughters. The two families develop a strong union during a visit by the Stoneman sons to the Cameron family. Margaret Cameron and Phil Stoneman declare their mutual affection, Ben Cameron sees a picture of Elsie and calls her the ideal of his dreams, and the youngest sons, Tod Stoneman and Duke Cameron, become friends. Back in Washington, Austin Stoneman's mulatto servant, Lydia, gains his amorous attention.

Four years of civil war begins. President Abraham Lincoln calls for volunteers, and the Stoneman boys join the Union Army. The three Cameron sons fight for the Confederacy. Several years of war brings hardship and sadness to both families. A raiding Negro militia smashes Piedmont. Tod Stoneman and Duke Cameron die in battle. Sherman's troops burn Atlanta and march through South Carolina. The Cameron family sells its possession to aid the cause. Ben Cameron (called the Little Colonel by his troops) is wounded. The Cameron parents receive notice that their middle son is dead, and that Ben is severely injured. Ben is visited in hospital by his mother and Elsie Stoneman, where they learn that he has been condemned to hang for being a guerilla. Elsie takes Ben's mother to appeal to President Lincoln. Moved by her grief, Lincoln grants a reprieve.

Grant and Lee meet at Appomattox. The Civil War ends. A title card proclaims that state sovereignty has ended, and that liberty and union have triumphed. The Little Colonel, coming home, is shocked by the broken down condition of his city and his home. His youngest sister, Flora, wearing a poor dress decorated with raw cotton, comes out to greet him. Standing on the steps, they pause in shared sorrow over the altered circumstances of their lives. As he enters his home, his mother reaches out and draws him in. Phil and Elsie Stoneman are at Ford's Theater when Lincoln is assassinated. With Lincoln dead, Austin Stoneman gains political power. In Piedmont, the Cameron family wonders what will happen next.

Part 2: Reconstruction

A title card states that the White South was put under the heel of the Black South until the Ku Klux Klan arrived to protect the whites. Now a powerful man in Washington, Austin Stoneman promotes black equality. He sends his mulatto protégé, Silas Lynch, to South Carolina to organize a Negro government. Austin and Elsie visit the Cameron family and introduce Lynch to the Little Colonel, who refuses to shake his hand. In response to the elections of Lynch as Lieutenant Governor and a black majority to the state assembly, southern white men, including the Little Colonel, organize the Ku Klux Klan to save the south from the anarchy of black rule. Austin and Elsie oppose the formation of the clan. The Stoneman and Cameron families become bitterly divided by their political and social differences. Phil Cameron separates from Margaret Stoneman, as does Elsie Stoneman from the Little Colonel.



In the Cameron home, the mother and her daughters sew Klan costumes for the men. One afternoon, Flora Cameron goes out for water. A renegade Negro, Gus, finding her alone, grabs at her and proposes marriage. She slaps him and flees in terror. Reaching the edge of a cliff, she tells Gus to stay away or she will jump. As he approaches, she jumps. The Little Colonel finds her dying, and she tells him what happened. The Klan tracks down Gus, then tries and executes him. They dump his body on the doorstep of the Lieutenant Governor's house as a warning to carpetbaggers. The Negro militia fills the streets searching for members of the Klan. Stoneman leaves town to avoid any personal involvement in the confrontation. A fiery cross is raised by the Little Colonel as a message to disarm the blacks. Silas Lynch plans to destroy the Cameron family. His militia invades the Cameron house and drags off the father. Phil Stoneman and the Cameron's faithful black servants rescue Dr. Cameron, then escape with him, Mrs. Cameron and Margaret. They hide in the cabin of a pair of Union Veterans.

Elsie goes to Lynch seeking his help for her brother and the others. In response, Lynch proposes marriage and tells her that she will be his queen in a black empire. Horrified, she refuses. Lynch makes plans to force her into marriage. At this moment, Stoneman returns. He approves Lynch's plan to marry a white woman, until he learns the bride is his daughter. Events reach a climax. Enraged blacks overrun the town attacking whites. Lynch seizes Elsie, and her father cannot protect her. Black militiamen surround the little party in the cabin. The Klan organizes and rides to the rescue of the white townsmen. The Little Colonel and other Klansmen rout the blacks and rescue Elsie from the clutches of Lynch. The Klan then rides to save the desperate party in the cabin. The Klansmen arrive just as the blacks are breaking through the doors and rescue the besieged.

The Klan ride triumphantly through town with Elsie and the other rescued folk as the blacks run away. At the next election, the Klan intimidates blacks and prevents them from voting. White government is restored. After a double wedding, two couples honeymoon joyously. An end title pleads for the Peace of Christ, Liberty and Union.

Discussion

After reading the plot synopsis, it is fair to question the presence of this ugly movie on any list of great films. The fact that *The Birth of a Nation* is the first American epic film compels its inclusion. Griffith planned and executed a film with scope and complexity that far exceeded any previous film. Whereas Griffith's prior films are small in scale and utilize few actors, *The Birth of a Nation* was intended to awe its audience in every aspect: length, scope, sweep, and narrative. Prior to the world wars, no event in American history had been of greater magnitude than the Civil War. The war and its aftermath provided the elements for a film broad in scale and important in content. *The Birth of a Nation* can be appreciated for its historic importance and the breadth of its storytelling and technical achievements, but the film remains an unpleasant viewing experience.

SECTION TWO

“BIRTH OF A NATION” Review of the 1915 Film

SOURCE: <https://www.filmsite.org/birt.html>

NOTE: This article has been shortened by the instructor.

Background

A controversial, explicitly racist, but landmark American film masterpiece - these all describe ground-breaking producer/director D. W. Griffith's **The Birth of a Nation** (1915). The domestic melodrama/epic originally premiered with the title *The Clansman* in February, 1915 in Los Angeles, California, but three months later was retitled with the present title at its world premiere in New York, to emphasize the birthing process of the US. The film was based on former North Carolina Baptist minister Rev. Thomas Dixon Jr.'s anti-black, 1905 bigoted melodramatic staged play, *The Clansman*, the second volume in a trilogy:

- *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900*
- *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*
- *The Traitor*

Its release set up a major censorship battle over its vicious, extremist depiction of African Americans, although Griffith naively claimed that he wasn't racist at the time. Unbelievably, the film is still used today as a recruitment piece for Klan membership - and in fact, the organization experienced a revival and membership peak in the decade immediately following its initial release. And the film stirred new controversy when it was voted into the [National Film Registry](#) in 1993, and when it was voted one of the "[Top 100 American Films](#)" (at # 44) by the *American Film Institute* in 1998.

Film scholars agree, however, that it is the single most important and key film of all time in American movie history - it contains many new cinematic innovations and refinements, technical effects and artistic advancements, including a color sequence at the end. It had a formative influence on future films and has had a recognized impact on film history and the development of film as art. In addition, at almost three hours in length, it was the longest film to date. However, it still provokes conflicting views about its message.

Director Griffith's original budget of \$40,000 (expanded to \$60,000) quickly ballooned, so Griffith appealed to businessmen and other investors to help finance the film - that eventually cost \$110,000! The propagandistic film was one of the biggest box-office money-makers in the history of film, partly due to its exorbitant charge of \$2 per ticket - unheard of at the time. This 'first' true

blockbuster made \$18 million by the start of the talkies. [It was the most profitable film for over two decades, until Disney's [Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs \(1937\)](#).]

The subject matter of the film caused immediate criticism by the newly-created National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for its racist and "vicious" portrayal of blacks, its proclamation of miscegenation, its pro-Klan stance, and its endorsement of slavery. As a result, two scenes were cut (a love scene between Reconstructionist Senator and his mulatto mistress, and a fight scene). But the film continued to be denounced as "the meanest vilification of the Negro race." Riots broke out in major cities (Boston, Philadelphia, among others), and it was denied release in many other places (Chicago, Ohio, Denver, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Minneapolis, eight states in total). Subsequent lawsuits and picketing tailed the film for years when it was re-released (in 1924, 1931, and 1938).

The resulting controversy only helped to fuel the film's box-office appeal, and it became a major hit. Even President Woodrow Wilson during a private screening at the White House is reported to have enthusiastically exclaimed: "It's like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all terribly true." To his credit, Griffith later (by 1921) released a shortened, re-edited version of the film without references to the KKK.

In its explicitly caricaturist presentation of the KKK as heroes and Southern blacks as villains and violent rapists and threats to the social order, it appealed to white Americans who subscribed to the mythic, romantic view (similar to Sir Walter Scott historical romances) of the Old Plantation South. Many viewers were thrilled by the love affair between Northern and Southern characters and the climactic rescue scene. The film also thematically explored two great American issues: inter-racial sex and marriage, and the empowerment of blacks. Ironically, although the film was advertised as authentic and accurate, the film's major black roles in the film -- including the Senator's mulatto mistress, the mulatto politician brought to power in the South, and faithful freed slaves -- were stereotypically played and filled by white actors - in blackface. [The real blacks in the film only played in minor roles.]

Its climactic finale, the suppression of the black threat to white society by the glorious Ku Klux Klan, helped to assuage some of America's sexual fears about the rise of defiant, strong (and sexual) black men and the repeal of laws forbidding intermarriage. To answer his critics, director Griffith made a sequel, the magnificent four story epic about human intolerance titled [Intolerance \(1916\)](#). A group of independent black filmmakers released director Emmett J. Scott's *The Birth of a Race* in 1919, filmed as a response to Griffith's masterwork, with a more positive image of African-Americans, but it was largely ignored. Prolific black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's first film, the feature-length *The Homesteader (1919)* (a lost film), and *Within Our Gates (1920)* more effectively countered the message of Griffith's film.

Its pioneering technical work, often the work of Griffith's under-rated cameraman Billy Bitzer, includes many techniques that are now standard features of films, but first used in this film. Griffith brought all of his experience and techniques to this film from his earliest short films at Biograph, including the following:

- the use of ornate title cards
- special use of subtitles graphically verbalizing imagery
- its own original musical score written for an orchestra
- the introduction of night photography (using magnesium flares)
- the use of outdoor natural landscapes as backgrounds
- the definitive usage of the still-shot
- elaborate costuming to achieve historical authenticity and accuracy
- many scenes innovatively filmed from many different and multiple angles
- the technique of the camera "iris" effect (expanding or contracting circular masks to either reveal and open up a scene, or close down and conceal a part of an image)
- the use of parallel action and editing in a sequence (Gus' attempted rape of Flora, and the KKK rescues of Elsie from Lynch and of Ben's sister Margaret)
- extensive use of color tinting for dramatic or psychological effect in sequences
- moving, traveling or "panning" camera tracking shots
- the effective use of total-screen close-ups to reveal intimate expressions
- beautifully crafted, intimate family exchanges
- the use of vignettes seen in "balloons" or "iris-shots" in one portion of a darkened screen
- the use of fade-outs and cameo-profiles (a medium closeup in front of a blurry background)
- the use of lap dissolves to blend or switch from one image to another
- high-angle shots and the abundant use of panoramic long shots
- the dramatization of history in a moving story - an example of an early spectacle or epic film with historical costuming and many historical references (e.g., Mathew Brady's Civil War photographs)
- impressive, splendidly-staged battle scenes with hundreds of extras (made to appear as thousands)
- extensive cross-cutting between two scenes to create a montage-effect and generate excitement and suspense (e.g., the scene of the gathering of the Klan)

- expert story-telling, with the cumulative building of the film to a dramatic climax

The film looks remarkably genuine and authentic, almost of documentary quality (like Brady's Civil War photographs), vividly reconstructing a momentous time period in history - and it was made only 50 years after the end of the Civil War. Its story includes the events leading up to the nation's split; the Civil War era; the period from the end of the Civil War to Lincoln's assassination; the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era detailing the struggle over the control of Congress during Andrew Johnson's presidency and actions of the Radical Republicans to enfranchise the freed slaves, and the rise of the KKK.

[...]

The Birth of a Nation: Does it refer to the re-established 'united' states, or to the "birth" of the Invisible Empire - the Ku Klux Klan?

The debate regarding the film's form versus content will never end. The film is many things: repulsive, naive, biased, simplistic, historically inaccurate, and astonishing in its view of history and racist glorification of the KKK. Yet it is also a tremendously significant and powerful work of art (and example of movie propaganda), with extraordinary effects and brilliantly-filmed sequences.

SECTION THREE

“BIRTH OF A NATION” Review of the 1915 Film

By Alexis Clark

SOURCE: <https://www.history.com/news/kkk-birth-of-a-nation-film>

How 'The Birth of a Nation' Revived the Ku Klux Klan

D.W. Griffith's controversial epic 1915 film about the Civil War and Reconstruction depicted the Ku Klux Klan as valiant saviors of a post-war South ravaged by Northern carpetbaggers and freed blacks.

History is usually written by the winners. But that wasn't the case when *The Birth of a Nation* was released on February 8, 1915. In just over three hours, D.W. Griffith's controversial epic film about the [Civil War](#) and [Reconstruction](#) depicted the Ku Klux Klan as valiant saviors of a post-war South

ravaged by Northern [carpetbaggers](#) and immoral freed blacks. The film was an instant blockbuster. And with innovative cinematography and a Confederate-skewed point of view, *The Birth of a Nation* also helped rekindle the [KKK](#).

Until the movie's debut, the Ku Klux Klan founded in 1865 by [Confederate](#) veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee, was a regional organization in the South that was all but obliterated due to government suppression. But *The Birth of a Nation*'s racially charged [Jim Crow](#) narrative, coupled with America's heightened anti-immigrant climate, led the Klan to align itself with the movie's success and use it as a recruiting tool.

"People were primed for the message," says Paul McEwan, film studies professor at Muhlenberg College and author of *The Birth of Nation (BFI Film Classics)*. "Hard to argue this was a distortion of history when the history books at that time said the same."

Adapted from the book *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon Jr., who was a classmate and friend of [President Woodrow Wilson](#), *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed Reconstruction as catastrophic. It showed Radical Republicans encouraging equality for blacks, who in the film are represented as uncouth, intellectually inferior and [predators of white women](#). And this racist narrative was widely accepted as historical fact.

"Academic histories mostly centered around the Dunning School," McEwan says of the historiographical school of thought conceived by scholar William Archibald Dunning. It concluded that Reconstruction was a terrible mistake, which helped validate the film's message, McEwan added.

Shortly after the Los Angeles launch, Thomas Dixon Jr. convinced President Wilson to screen the movie inside the White House, arguably the first time that was ever done. President Wilson [reportedly said](#) of the film, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Although the quote's authenticity has been disputed, there is no debate where Wilson stood on the issue of race. "He re-segregated the civil service," says McEwan. "It's not unreasonable to conclude that he thought the film was amazing." And of course, a movie screened at the White House was going to be perceived as an endorsement of the film; one white supremacist in Georgia understood this implicitly.

William Joseph Simmons is considered to be the founder of the 1915 modern Ku Klux Klan. While recovering from a car accident, the local preacher in Georgia followed the *Birth of a Nation*'s nationwide success. There were KKK-inspired aprons, costumes and regalia that glorified the defunct organization. Simmons seized on the film's popularity to bolster the Klan's appeal again.

It wasn't just the fraught racial tensions that made the timing of a rebirth feasible. The way the film was made, with innovating editing techniques and close-up action shots, was captivating.

"People were taken to another planet," says Dick Lehr, author of *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War*. "The galloping Klan riding to the rescue. The pure spectacle of it all," says Lehr, romanticized the KKK. The film bolstered the idea that the Klan was there to save the South from savage black men raping white women, a racist myth that would be propagated for years, Lehr adds.



Members of the N.A.A.C.P. picket under the marquee of the Republic Movie Theatre in Flushing, New York, against race discrimination featured in the movie, 'The Birth of a Nation,' being played at the theater in 1947.

As described in a [journal article](#) by historian Maxim Simcovitch, Simmons put a plan in motion once he learned the film would be released on December 6, 1915 in Atlanta. Just 10 days before the film premiered, Simmons gathered a group and climbed Stone Mountain, outside Atlanta, to burn a large cross. He reportedly said, "There was good reason, as I have said, for making Thanksgiving Day (November 25, 1915) the occasion for burning the fiery cross. Something was going to happen in town (Atlanta) the next week (the premiere of *The Birth of a Nation*) that would give the new order a tremendous popular boost."

As planned, word spread about the burning cross. Simmons also took out a newspaper ad about the KKK's revival that ran right alongside an announcement about *The Birth of a Nation* premiere.

On opening night, Wilson and fellow Klansmen dressed in white sheets and Confederate uniforms paraded down Peachtree Street with hooded horses, firing rifle salutes in front of the theater. The effect was powerful and screenings in more cities echoed the display, including movie ushers donning white sheets. Klansmen also handed out KKK literature before and after screenings.

The [NAACP](#) unsuccessfully protested *The Birth of a Nation* but the film's popularity was too strong. With black troops from [WWI](#) returning from France and the migration of black people to the North, there were new racial tensions in northern cities, like Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia. "There was no will in the North to enforce equality," McEwan says. "It half-heartedly condemned racism."

As the film continued to be screened and rescreened well into the 1920s, Lehr says more Klan chapters formed and membership reportedly reached into the millions. New Klansmen were shown *The Birth of Nation* and the film continued to be a recruiting tool for decades to come.