

"Art [and History] by Lightning Flash": The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest

The racism that African Americans experienced in both the South and the North during the war years could be glimpsed in many arenas of American life, including the movies. It is not surprising, perhaps, that *The Birth of a Nation*, which appeared in March 1915, was both one of the landmarks in the history of American cinema and a landmark in American racism. Historian Thomas Cripps has characterized *The Birth of a Nation* as "at once a major stride for cinema and a sacrifice of black humanity to the cause of racism." Based on two historical novels, *The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden*, (1902), and a play, *The Clansman* (1906), written by a North Carolina lawyer turned preacher, Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Birth of a Nation* recounts the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction through the eyes and experiences of Southern whites who vehemently opposed the political and social progress made by newly freed African Americans after the Civil War. Much of the novel's tone, which Cripps describes as "a nightmare of interracial brutality, rape and castigation," found its way into *The Birth of a Nation*.

Dixon had committed his entire writing career to arguing in favor of the racial superiority of whites and the Ku Klux Klan's use of violence to redeem the "Lost Cause" of the Confederate South. Angered by a 1901 staging of Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which depicted African Americans in a positive light, Dixon decided to produce a play that offered his own interpretation of race relations in the South. Dixon's description of what he hoped to accomplish with his stage adaptation of *The Clansman* could well serve as the justification for the film that would appear almost a decade later:

My object is to teach the North, the young North, what it has never known—the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful Reconstruction period. I believe that Almighty God anointed the white men of the South by their suffering during that time . . . to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme.

D. W. Griffith—arguably the most talented and successful Hollywood director of the silent film era—co-wrote, produced, directed, co-edited, and co-scored *The Birth of a Nation* with a budget and cast unprecedented in early silent films. *The Birth of a Nation*'s epic scale and its path-breaking editing and cinematic techniques made it an instant film classic, praised by such cultural figures as the poet Vachel Lindsay, who described *The Birth of a Nation* as "art by lightning flash." The film's melodramatic plot revolves around the intertwined fates of a southern and northern family before and after the Civil War. It openly depicts southern blacks as vicious and lascivious, their northern white allies as cunning, unscrupulous, and arrogant, and the film's southern whites as suffering repeated political and sexual indignities at the hands of white northerners and black southerners before literally being rescued by the gallant, hooded riders of the Ku Klux Klan.

A selection from historian Thomas Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* offers a scene-by-scene breakdown of *The Birth of a Nation* as African-American filmgoers might have viewed the film in 1915.

Four key scenes from *A Birth of a Nation* convey the film's powerful artistry, historical distortions, and racist sensibilities:



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1. A series of inter-titles (text on the screen), drawn from *A History of the American People*, published originally in 1902 by Woodrow Wilson, who in 1915 just happened to be president of the United States; Wilson's prose introduces the Reconstruction section of the film, making the rise of the Ku Klux Klan a positive good that resulted in the redemption of the white South from the ravages of Negro and Carpetbagger rule.
2. A scene set in the South Carolina legislature in the early 1870s (introduced with an inter-title that suggests that what is to follow is drawn from "historic incidents"), which depicts newly elected black legislators lolling in their chairs, their feet bare, eating chicken and drinking whiskey, leering at white women in the visitors' gallery.
3. A scene in which one of the film's white southern heroes witnesses a group of white children donning white bed sheets, inadvertently scaring several black children playing nearby, which provides him with "The Inspiration" for the Klan's infamous outfits.
4. A scene of Klansmen, dressed in white sheets and astride horses, dumping the body of the character Gus, an African American who they had killed for causing Flora, the little sister of the story's southern white protagonists, to hurl herself off a cliff.

Because widespread black protests had greeted the staging of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* nine years earlier, both Griffith and Dixon decided to drum up support among prominent Americans for *The Birth of a Nation* in anticipation of the storm of criticism that would surely follow the film's release. Dixon managed even to wangle an interview with President Woodrow Wilson; he screened *The Birth of a Nation* for the president on February 18, 1915 (the first film, in fact, ever to be screened in the White House). The film's power and message reportedly overwhelmed Wilson, no doubt in part because his own scholarly writings figured so centrally in the film's historical interpretation.

Even as Griffith completed *The Birth of a Nation* in Hollywood, black leaders began laying plans for a nationwide protest campaign. In the week prior to President Wilson's screening of the film in the White House, the Los Angeles branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), after a series of unsuccessful attempts to have local authorities censor the film, called for *The Birth of a Nation* to be banned in Los Angeles. Founded only six years earlier by a coalition of black and white political leaders and intellectuals, the NAACP was the nation's most important and powerful organization devoted to protecting African-American rights and interests and achieving black equality and economic opportunity.

In March, the NAACP's protests shifted to New York City, where the film's producers planned a huge opening on March 3, 1915, at the Liberty Theater near Times Square. Using advance ticket sales, reserved seating, huge Times Square billboards of Klan nightriders, special trains to transport white movie patrons from Connecticut and New Jersey, and horsemen dressed in Klan regalia riding through city streets, the producers managed to attract thousands of New Yorkers in the first few weeks after the film opened. Despite daily picket lines outside the Liberty Theater, *The Birth of a Nation* quickly became the most successful film ever shown in New York City during the silent film era.

Ten days after the film opened in New York City, noted reformer and NAACP board member Jane Addams (founder of Hull House, the Chicago settlement house) participated in a critical interview about *The Birth of a Nation* that appeared in the *New York Post*. Though Addams's review abhors what she calls the film's "pernicious caricature of the [N]egro race," she nonetheless concedes—perhaps intimidated by Griffith's unrelenting efforts to cloak the film in the mantle of historical "accuracy"—that "some of the elements of the plot are based on actual events," which suggests how the pro-southern interpretation of Reconstruction had permeated popular understanding of that history. Director D. W. Griffith responded vigorously to the

NAACP's criticisms and Addams's critical review, releasing an annotated guide to the film that drew heavily on the work of contemporary academic historians like Columbia University's William Dunning, whose Reconstruction scholarship included racist depictions of African Americans and uncritical sympathy for the cause of the white South.

When the proposed boycott of *The Birth of a Nation* failed to stir significant white opposition to the film in Los Angeles and New York City, the NAACP changed its tactics, arguing instead that the film's most egregiously racist scenes must be excised from release prints. An April 17, 1915, letter from NAACP national secretary Mary Childs Nerney describes the NAACP's efforts, largely in vain, to get local film censors to remove particularly racist scenes from *The Birth of a Nation*. The NAACP's ongoing national campaign to censor the film had decidedly mixed results. Despite successes in Boston and Chicago in getting sympathetic officials placed on newly formed film censorship boards, by year's end distributors could show *The Birth of a Nation* almost anywhere in the country (the exceptions included Kansas), though with several minor cuts in the film's release print.

Over the next twenty years *The Birth of a Nation* went on to become one of the most admired and profitable films ever produced by Hollywood, replaced finally after 1940 by *Gone with the Wind*, another film about the Civil War and Reconstruction era based on a novel by a southerner that told the story of gallant southern cavaliers and their ladies and the "Lost Cause" of the Confederate South.

For more reading on *The Birth of a Nation* and the black protest movement it engendered, see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film*, (1977); Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (1975); Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*" in Robert Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation* (1994), 250-93.

SOURCE: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/features/episodes/birthofanation.html>