



AUGUST 30, 2005 (XI:1)

THE BIRTH OF A NATION(1915) 179min

Directed by D.W. Griffith

Based on Thomas F. Dixon Jr's novels *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, and *The Leopard's Spots*

Script by D.W. Griffith, Frank E. Woods,

Produced by D.W. Griffith

Cinematography by G.W. Bitzer....

Film Editing by D.W. Griffith, Joseph Henabery, James Smith, Rose Smith, Raoul Walsh

Costume Design by Robert Godstein

Special Effects by Walter Hoffman and 'Fireworks' Wilson

Stunts Leo Nomis, Monte Blue, Charles Eagle Eye

National Film Preservation Board, USA 1992 National Film Registry

Lillian Gish...Elsie Stoneman

Mae Marsh...Flora Cameron

Henry B. Walthall...Col. Ben Cameron

Miriam Cooper...Margaret Cameron

Mary Alden...Lydia Brown

Ralph Lewis...Austin Stoneman

George Siegmann...Silas Lynch

Walter Long...Gus

Robert Harron...Tod Stoneman

Wallace Reid...Jeff

Joseph Henabery...Abraham Lincoln/13 other bits

Elmer Clifton...Phil Stoneman

Josephine Crowell...Mrs. Cameron

Spottiswoode Aitken...Dr. Cameron

George Beranger...Wade Cameron

Maxfield Stanley...Duke Cameron

Jennie Lee...Mammy

Donald Crisp...Gen. Ulysses S. Grant

Howard Gaye...Gen. Robert E. Lee

John Ford...Klansman (as Jack Ford)

Raoul Walsh...John Wilkes Booth

Bobby Burns...Klan leader

Edmund Burns...Klansman

Edward Burns...Klansman

Fred Burns...Klansman

Peggy Cartwright...Young girl

Dark Cloud...A general

Charles Eagle Eye...Man who falls from roof

Madame Sul-Te-Wan...Black woman (Dr. Cameron's taunter)

D.W. GRIFFITH (22 January 1875, LaGrange, Kentucky—21

July 1948, Hollywood, CA, cerebral hemorrhage) directed

535 films, the earliest of which was *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908). He directed 148 films in 1909. Things slowed down once he got away from the one-reelers and started directing features, some of which were *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), *Lady of the Pavements* (1929), *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926), *America* (1924), *The White Rose* (1923), *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), *The Fall of Babylon* (1919), *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl* (1919), and *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Through the Ages* (1916). He was given an honorary Academy Award in 1936.

G.W. BITZER (21 April 1872, Roxbury, MA—29 April 1944, Hollywood, CA, heart attack) shot 825 films, beginning with *A*

Watermelon Feast (1896) and ending with *Hotel Variety* (1933). He worked frequently with Griffith, e.g., *America* (1924), *The White Rose* (1923), *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), *The Fall of Babylon* (1919), *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl* (1919), and *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Through the Ages* (1916).

LILLIAN GISH (14 October 1893, Springfield, Ohio—27 February 1993, NYC., heart failure) acted in 103 films, the first of which was *An Unseen Enemy* (1912) and the last of which was *The Whales of August* (1986) when she was 93 years old. Some of her other films

were *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *The Trip to Bountiful* (tv 1953), *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), *Romola* (1924), *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl* (1919) and *Daughters of Eve* (1912). She received an honorary Academy Award in 1971.

MAE MARSH (9 November 1895, Madrid, New Mexico Territory—13 February 1968, Hermosa Beach, CA, heart attack) acted in 184 films, 150 in the silent era. She had uncredited minor roles in a lot of terrific films in her later years, e.g., *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), *Donovan's Reef* (1963), *From the Terrace* (1960), *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), *The Last Hurrah* (1958), *The Wings of Eagles* (1957), *The Searchers* (1956) and *A Star Is Born* (1954), *Titanic* (1953), *The Quiet Man* (1952), *The Gunfighter* (1950), *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Tobacco Road* (1941), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). 14 July 1918, Uppsala, Uppsala län, Sweden)

from *World Film Directors*. Edited by John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Company NY 1987. entry by Gerald Mast

D. W. Griffith, the American director and producer who codified the cinematic means of storytelling, was born on a farm in Oldham County, Kentucky, twenty miles from Louisville. He was one of the seven children of Jacob Wark Griffith and the former Mary Oglesby. His father was a half-trained physician, gold prospector, farmer, raconteur, orator, politician and soldier. He had fought with the United States Army in the Mexican War and against it as a lieutenant colonel in the Confederate calvary.

Throughout his career D.W. Griffith revealed himself very much the product of his Southern childhood. His films always reflected a special fondness for rural life and rural people, a longing for an idyllic pastoral world, simpler, clearer, and sweeter than the urban present. He cherished the chivalric traditions of the antebellum South, just as his father Jacob cherished the sword that hung by his side as a soldier and over his mantel after the Civil War. Like his father, Griffith identified human feelings with concrete symbols. He also identified with Southern attitudes toward the proper place of whites and blacks. But if he was a racist—as we now define that term—he was also a populist, sharing the nineteenth-century agrarian suspicion of big business and meddlesome government. From childhood also came his initiation into the “finer things” of art. His father, the possessor of a famously powerful and resonant voice, introduced him as a small child to Shakespeare, Poe, Dickens, Longfellow, and the Bible, and also took him to his first magic-lantern show.

Griffith said that “the one person I really loved most in all my life was my father.” But ‘Roarin’ Jake, who never entirely recovered from his Civil War wounds, and was a heavy drinker, died in 1882, when his adoring son was only seven. In 1890 the Griffith family moved to Louisville. Griffith took what jobs he could find, working as an elevator operator in a dry good store, clerk in a book store, reporter for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*—until he discovered his metier in the theatre. In 1896 Sarah Bernhardt’s company came to Louisville. Griffith got a job as super: “I deified myself by carrying a spear for the divine Sarah Bernhardt.” . . .

He became an itinerant actor in American provinces, playing mostly minor roles with mostly undistinguished stock companies, for which he received little notice and little pay. Unlike his future colleague, Mack Sennett, Griffith never played in New York, while Sennett worked both on Broadway and in the premier burlesque theatres of the Bowery. Griffith’s theatrical apprenticeship was both more genteel and more shabby. What he was learning, without knowing it, were the techniques of theatrical melodrama—the sure-fire plot turns and emotional tugs that survived even mediocre playing and sloppy production. Both Griffith’s strengths and his excesses could be traced to his clear understanding of what would play in Peoria at the turn of the

century.

While he waited for rehearsals of his play, *The Fool and the Girl*, to begin, Griffith and his wife found work together on the stage—in a production of *The One Woman* by Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman*, on which Griffith was to base his most famous film. The production quietly folded on the road. Griffith immediately began work on his next play, *War*, an epic of the American Revolution in which an indentured servant becomes a heroic spy serving General George Washington and the American cause. As in so many later Griffith films, the historical epic served as background for a romantic drama of the common people. The patriot must choose between saving his country and saving his beloved from the barbarous Hessians. In *War* he makes the patriotic choice and abandons her to her fate, losing her forever. Later Griffith works would contrive ways for their heroes to take a political action that would also rescue the beloved. His most powerful films would take place at this same intersection of historical epic and romantic melodrama. Although *War* was never produced, some of its incidents found their way into Griffith’s 1924 film *America*.

One way for unemployed New York actors to keep the wolf at bay was to accept acting or extra work in the movies. Though it demeaned stage actors to perform in nonspeaking roles, a film job took only a day or two and no colleague was likely to witness their participation in such an ignominious enterprise; theatre people didn’t go to movies. The rivalry between film and theatre had already begun by 1907, the year in which the movies first became a powerful force in American life.

After outgrowing the vaudeville houses, where films were merely one more item on the vaudeville bill, they began moving into their own theatres in 1902. By 1908 it was estimated that weekly attendance had reached one hundred million at American nickelodeons—little storefront theatres, seating about two hundred, where it cost a nickel or dime to see a sixty-minute program of short films. Those most possessed by “nickel madness” returned daily, if not twice a day, for different screenings. Stage actors, who grudgingly participated in what had seemed like a passing fad, found themselves involved in a vigorous young art form. It was no coincidence that D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett both worked in films for the first time in 1907.

At the Edison Studios in the Bronx, Griffith applied for a job as a writer, his adaptation of *Tosca* under his arm. Griffith’s bulky script was six years ahead of the infant industry’s capabilities, defined by the ten-minute film, improvisational outdoor shooting, and cheap interior sets that only vaguely matched the exteriors which nature provided for nothing. Instead, Griffith accepted the Edison Company offer of an acting job at the standard rate of five dollars a day. In *Rescued From an Eagle’s Nest* (1907), Griffith’s first lead performance, he plays the lumberjack father of an infant stolen away by a huge bird. Griffith climbs into the eagle’s nest (shot partially outdoors on the New Jersey Palisades,

partially indoors on the ludicrous cardboard cliffs of the Edison studio) and slays the puppet eagle (dangling on clearly visible strings) to bring baby home.

Like Griffith's career as a whole, this little film stood poised between the conventions of film and theatre. Its director, Edwin S. Porter, America's most important filmmaker before Griffith, understood that narrative expectations provided the mental cement to join discontinuous pieces of space. That actual cliffs could be matched, however unconvincingly, with studio cliffs reveals that understanding. The attack on an innocent victim—child or defenseless woman—had also become a film staple by 1907, as it had been on the stage. The last-minute rescue from death (or worse) came directly from Victorian melodrama.

By 1908 Griffith was at Biograph—the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, as it was formally known, at 11 East 14th Street. It was founded in 1896 by a syndicate of inventors and investors...In 1908 it became an important member of the Motion Picture Patents Company. Set up to block the encroachment of independent producers into the industry. Biograph films had not captured the audience imagination as fully as Porter's at Edison. Even with a superb cameraman, G.W. ("Billy") Bitzer, Biograph films, generally directed by Wallace C. ("Old Man") McCutcheon, were often plodding or incoherent.

After Griffith had been three months with the company as an actor and writer, Biograph asked him to direct films. The growing popularity of the nickelodeons generated an ever-increasing demand for films. Biograph need more and better product. Griffith's thorough knowledge of theatrical conventions and techniques probably determined Biograph's decision. Uncertain about his new job and the movie business as a whole, Griffith accepted the assignment on the condition that he could return to acting at five dollars a day if he failed. He signed his contract and drew his salary as "Lawrence Griffith," a name he'd adopted a dozen years earlier as a stage actor.

Griffith directed his first film, *The Adventures of Dollie*, in July 1908, with his wife in the lead. Thus began four remarkable years, arguable the most remarkable in the history of the cinema. During this period Griffith personally directed some 420 films, most of them one-reelers (a 35-mm reel, with a maximum of 1000 feet of film, ran between ten and fifteen minutes). While the film could not grow in length—the one-reel restriction was imposed by the MPPC to fit the exhibition patterns of the nickelodeons—they grew steadily in narrative complexity, thematic subtlety, psychological integrity, and stylistic fluidity. In these four years, movies evolved from crude, clumsy skeletons of theatrical and novelistic fictions to evocative, autonomous, *cinematic* versions of the same kind of narratives. The person most responsible for that evolution was Griffith. As Edward Wagenknecht noted, "Even we children sensed that Biograph pictures were different, although we could not tell wherein their differences might consist."

Although Griffith's accomplishment in this period is indisputable, critics and historians as well as children have had difficulty in describing it. The idea that recurs most often is that Griffith personally invented uniquely cinematic techniques. Robert M. Henderson summarized Griffith's accomplishment at Biograph by compiling a list of twenty-four techniques that Griffith was supposed to have contributed to the cinema. Lewis Jacobs wrote that "he repudiated theatrical conventions and evolved a method of expression peculiar to the screen." Underlying such assertions are two assumptions that dominated film history for five decades.

Both Griffith and the movies were born in that era of

American invention symbolized by Thomas Alva Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. The creation of a new and efficient machine or process seemed the highest human attainment. Invention and progress were synonymous; the patent and the copyright were instruments of destiny. To credit Griffith with the *invention* of devices first strikingly used in his Biograph films—close-ups, distant panoramas, cross-cuts—was to elevate his accomplishment into that American pantheon where art, science, and commerce met under the influence of historical inevitability. Griffith contributed to his own apotheosis when he laid claim to the invention of techniques and, late in life, regretted not having patented them. Later film historians, attacking this myth, actually succumbed to it when they demonstrated that Griffith only appropriated the techniques he claimed as his own. In proving that Griffith was no inventor, historians overlooked the problem of whether stylistic devices should properly be considered inventions at all.

The second assumption also arose from nineteenth-century certainties. Each art was supposed to have a unique mission, calling for unique tools: painting was pictorial, music melodic, the theatre verbal, and so forth. A tradition of film theory, stretching from Griffith to Eisenstein, determined that the unique tool of cinema was editing—the joining of disparate times and spaces into a single coherent artifact. It was editing or montage that distinguished cinema from theatre. While earlier films were "uncinematic" because they were "theatrical," composed of unedited shots spliced together in consecutive order, Griffith's films from 1908 to 1912 increasingly exploited the power of editing for both emotional and thematic impact. Kemp N. River's study of Griffith's years at Biograph was ruthlessly mathematical: the maturity of a film should be ascertained by counting the number of shots. Of course, the Biograph films reflect Griffith's growing mastery of many other elements no less essential to communicative cinema: effective composition, framing, and lighting; the telling use of both human personalities and inanimate objects; complex patterns of movement within the frame.

Intent on chronicling a unique cinematic art, historians took Griffith's editing as his "repudiation" of the theatre. Few early commentators realized, or remembered, that even Griffith's most famous editing device—the cross-cut during the last-minute rescue—came directly from the nineteenth-century stage. Increasingly complex theatrical machinery had made quick changes of location—from the victim on the railroad tracks to the hero rushing to her rescue—possible and popular. Griffith did not so much repudiate the stage as discover ways to translate its powerful effects into the terms of a new medium.

The real "discovery" of Griffith's 400-plus Biograph films is what we think of "the movies" as a whole. From an inchoate collection of familiar plot motifs in 1908 we see the simultaneous emergence of genres, character types, expressive interior and exterior decor, a lexicon of shots, empathic film acting, and powerful rhythms and resources of movement within the frame and between frames. When Griffith began making films in 1908 it was as if practitioners were barely able to construct the filmic equivalent of a coherent sentence; by the time he finished with the one-reeler in 1913 they were able to write "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Even his very first film, *The Adventures of Dollie* reveals visual care, despite its hackneyed story of a child stolen by gypsies and saved from a plunge over the falls.... Such narrative care was rare in 1908 cinema.

Other Griffith films of 1908 foreshadow his future predilections and preoccupations. His second film, *The Redman*

and the Child, reverses the convention of *Dollie* by making the “foreigner,” an American Indian, the heroic rescuer of a threatened child, assailed by mercenary white attackers. Griffith, whose racism did not usually extend to Indians, shared his generation’s belief in the uncorrupted virtue of the Noble Savage. Griffith’s taste for genteel literature also became evident in 1908 one-reel versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *After Many Years*, the latter the first of several versions of Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden*. In shaping coherent film narratives, Griffith was also elevating popular taste, combining the books of the bourgeois parlor with motifs from the dime novel and penny dreadful. American films ever after would bounce between these two poles or, like Griffith, try to combine them.

Of Griffith’s sixty-nine 1908 films, *For Love of Gold* has received most critical attention—an adaptation of Jack London’s “Just Meat,” in which two thieves plunder each other for money. To depict the climactic double killing, Griffith positions his camera closer to the two men than the standard far shot of 1908 films. The closer shot not only allows us to see crucial details—like the pouring of poison into a coffee cup—but enables us to observe the strategies and reactions of the two combatants. Although Griffith does not cut to a closer position *within* the scene, as many commentators claim, the setup he chose provides an early example of what Griffith called the photographing of thought.

Griffith’s most productive Biograph year was 1909—both in quantity (138 films) and innovative quality. A frantic production schedule made it possible for Griffith to finish as many as three or four little films each week....This was the year in which Griffith’s stock company of actors began to take shape. Mary Pickford, Mack Sennett, Henry B. Walkthall, Robert Harron, Blanche Sweet, Miriam Cooper, and James Kirkwood all joined the Griffith company before the end of 1909.

This was also the year of Griffith’s first use of cross-cutting to build the suspense of a last-minute rescue..

Although Griffith melodramas receive critical attention mostly on account of their editing, two Griffith mood pieces are among his most interesting films of 1909. In *The Drunkard’s Reformation* Griffith depicts a husband whose heavy drinking brings grief to his wife and daughter. The lighting effect with which the film ends, the reunited family basking in the warm glow of a blazing fireplace, has attracted most of the critical approbation (although Edwin S. Porter had used the same lighting effect to similar purpose in *The Seven Ages*, five years earlier.) It was Griffith’s first film to explore the curse of drink, which would become Griffith’s own curse in his later years. The husband’s reformation is inspired by a stage play that parallels his own life: a husband whose drinking destroys his family. That Griffith can tell the same story twice within the same film—one using deep film space and a relatively subtle style of acting, the other using flatter stage space and broadly theatrical acting—reveals Griffith’s awareness of the stylistic differences between the theatre that he had left and the movies he had adopted.

In 1913 Griffith made several key transitions: from short film to long, from staff director to auteur, from the MPPC studio Biograph to the independent company Mutual. The film business itself was in a similar state of change and growth. Spectacular feature films from Europe—*Queen Elizabeth*, *Quo Vadis?*—had become road-show attractions in legitimate theatres, while movie palaces were rising on Broadway. Like his coming to Biograph in 1908, Griffith’s move in 1913 was both a cause and an effect of activity in the film business as a whole. In a full-page

advertisement in the New York *Dramatic Mirror* of September 29, 1913, Griffith proclaimed himself the “producer of all great Biograph successes,” listed 151 of them, and claimed the invention of the close-up, the long shot, cross-cutting, and “restraint of expression.” Although his apparent purpose was to announce his availability, Griffith had already signed a contract with the Mutual Film Corporation for several program pictures as well as one personal production each year. The ad was a mere trumpeting and puffery, the kind of flourish that not only became familiar in the film business as a whole but also accompanied the release of every future Griffith production.

Griffith films of 1913-14, whether for Biograph or Mutual, showed him groping toward longer narrative structures, grander moral themes and more impressive visual settings. *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*, Griffith’s most spectacular Western, included a preliminary sketch for the climax of *The Birth of a Nation*: settlers trapped inside a cabin battle the encircling Indians, while the cavalry gallops to the eventual rescue.

After six frantic years of production, averaging more than a film a week, Griffith invested three years in just two films. *The Birth of a Nation*, filmed over the final six months of 1914 and released in January 1915, was another blend of film technique and literary aspiration. Frank Woods’ adaptation of Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (which Dixon himself had earlier adapted for the stage), incorporated passages from an even more luridly racist Dixon novel, *The Leopard’s Spots*. The controversial result offered a romanticized view of the antebellum South, the devastating effects of the Civil War, and the struggle of white Southerners to survive the Reconstruction.

Two families, the Stonemans of the North and the Camerons of the South, are torn apart by the War Between the States but reunited at the conclusion in harmony and matrimony, aided by the heroic Ku Klux Klan. In a brilliantly edited last-minute rescue. The excitement of which is hard to resist. The Klan preserves Stonemans and Camerons alike from death and rapine by rampaging black hordes. Despite Griffith’s softening of Dixon’s most shocking passages, the film provoked the first massive American social protest against racist cinematic propaganda. Both the infant NAACP and its white allies urged censorship of the most offensive scenes or sued to prohibit showings altogether. Although social activists learned much from this early campaign, civic agitation only helped publicize the film in 1915.

The Birth of a Nation cost more than any film ever had—over \$100,000, which Griffith had to beg and borrow to complete the project. It also made more, in proportion to its cost, than any film ever would—almost twenty times its cost in its initial domestic run. It became the first blockbuster in film history—the first film that *had* to be seen, even at two-dollar ticket prices in special road-show presentations. The reason for its success was not its racist view of American history but its visual splendor, its care and detail with historical settings, and its tender depiction of human feelings.

Griffith’s representation of Lincoln’s assassination in Ford’s theatre—step by step, moment by moment—was the first detailed reconstruction on film of a sensational historical incident, a resurrection of the dead past. The film’s careful rendering of strategies on the battlefield (influenced by Matthew Brady’s famous Civil War photographs), of injured soldiers in a Northern hospital, of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, were among the scenes that made audiences feel, as President Wilson did, that they were witnessing “history written in lightning.” In addition to its mammoth spectacle, Griffith saturated his film with the emotions of

his characters—the gallant Little Colonel (Henry B. Walthall), the demure Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish), the vivacious little sister (Mae Marsh): these were the same kinds of intimate human portraits that peopled his best Biograph films. Griffith brought to his epic the full arsenal of techniques he had mastered at Biograph—close-ups, cross-cuts, iris shots, tracking shots, distant panoramas, and the breathless climax of two interwoven last-minute rescues.

Although the film provoked the anger of antiracists—and still does—it remains an essential document in American cultural history. Most white Americans in 1915 shared Griffith's antipathy toward miscegenation and regarded social reformers who supported the black cause as meddling cranks. The "good" blacks in Griffith's films were "Uncle Toms," impersonated by white actors in blackface; however, at that time the blackface tradition dominated white America's depiction of black life—even on the Broadway stage. The enormous response to Griffith's film indicated that its depiction of blacks was neither offensive nor aberrational in the eyes of contemporary white audiences.

The film's enormous success converted an almost anonymous artisan into a famous public figure, speaking and writing widely and frequently about "the freedom of the screen" and the new art of the motion picture: "This is my art. . . whatever poetry is in me must be worked out in actual practice." Nowhere was Griffith's new role as visionary prophet more obvious than in his next film, *Intolerance*, perhaps the maddest, most idiosyncratic, most overwhelming and most overblown project in film history. While shooting *The Mother and the Law*, about gangs and crime in the city slums, Griffith got the notion that spectacular historical parallels could be found for its simple story. The most lavish was set in the ancient civilization of Babylon, which Griffith reconstructed on an enormous scale. The other historical settings were the Judea of Christ and the France of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. The theme of *Intolerance*—which Griffith subtitles "A Sun Play of the Ages"—was that social catastrophes always resulted from intolerant bigotry. The fall of Babylon, the death of Christ, the slaughter of the Huguenots, and the dissolution of the modern family could all be traced to the hypocrisy of "Uplifters." Although Griffith's war against intolerance may have been inspired by recent attempts to ban or censor *The Birth of a Nation*, the film's grandiose aspirations were also consistent with his new public persona. He was expected to top *The Birth of a Nation*. And he did.

Intolerance was released in 1916. Though for most critics and many viewers in the major cities it kept the artistic promise of *The Birth of a Nation*, it did not keep its commercial promise. With costs rumored at \$2 million (but documented at about \$400,000), *Intolerance* never repaid its original investment. Some historians have blamed the film's pacifist stance at a time when the nation was flexing its muscles for war; others its confusing metaphorical structure—the capricious leaps back and forth through history. Richard Schickel cites the lack of an intense dramatic focus: just as we are beginning to sympathize with one group of characters, we are transported elsewhere. A more probable reason for the film's disappointing performance is that it simply outstripped the capabilities of the 1916 film industry to return even a modest profit on an immoderate investment. Though it did solid business, *Intolerance* was no cultural sensation. Griffith himself lost a lot of money on the project but was neither destitute nor desperate as a result. The lesson he had learned was not that it was a mistake to make grandiose films (he would make

others) but that it was a mistake to put all his production eggs in a single basket.

After investing nearly two years of his creative life in *Intolerance*, Griffith returned to an earlier pattern: a diet of modest programmers, with one special project each year. His fame as a director of battle scenes brought an invitation from the British government to shoot propaganda footage on actual World War I battlefields. The documentary location footage he obtained in this way was woven into three fictional films of 1918—the major production, *Hearts of the World*, and two programmers, *The Great Love* and *The Greatest Thing in Life*. In each film, as in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, history intrudes into the lives and loves of simple families, here torn and tested by the Great War but with the courage, heart, and moral strength to endure all. In January 1919, Griffith joined Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and Charles Chaplin in forming the United Artists Corporation, the same year signing a three-picture contract with First National.

Griffith's program pictures of 1919 left war-torn Europe for the pastoral American idyll..., but his program pictures of 1920 took him to the exotic shores of the South Seas and West Indies. Griffith's major releases of those years—*Broken Blossoms* and *Way Down East*—were the last great commercial successes of his career.

In the final decade of his creative life Griffith fell steadily and drastically in public esteem. The three most impressive late Griffith productions—*Orphans of the Storm* (1922), *America* (1924), and *Isn't Life Wonderful?* (1925)—were commercial disappointments. Whatever their stylistic flourishes, all three reprised the theme of *The Birth of a Nation*—the family threatened by social tumult—simply redecorating the tumult as The French Revolution, the American Revolution, and contemporary Weimar inflation, respectively. Besides pictures like these, Griffith's output in the 1920s was characterized by an increasing proportion of programmers, and his customary fanfares of publicity upon the release of each new film seemed less and less appropriate to their object. For Lewis Jacobs, Griffith's sentimental Victorian moralism was inconsistent with the hedonism of the Jazz Age. For Richard Schickel, Griffith remained blind to the modernist literary currents around him, resolutely tied to the genteel literary fashions of his youth.

Various other factors contributed to Griffith's decline. Unlike his colleagues and contemporaries at United Artists, Griffith was a careless businessman who delegated the management of his financial affairs to apparently incompetent others. In 1920 he left Hollywood for a new studio in Mamaroneck, New York, the cost of which kept him severely in debt. If Griffith made a mess of his business affairs, he brought even less order to personal matters. The intensity of his films had always reflected emotional relationships with his women stars, especially Mae Marsh and Lillian Gish. In the 1920s Griffith transferred his emotional attention to a lesser actress, Carol Dempster. As Richard Schickel observes, "Whatever happiness we may imagine her bringing him in the years they were together, the cost of her presence at the center of his work for close on seven years was exorbitant." To accompany his disastrous relationship with an apparently inept Galatea, Griffith began drinking heavily.

While his personal life crumbled, his public drifted away. As ordinary program pictures, his films of the 1920s were not bad. But they bore the name of Griffith, from whom everyone—himself included—expected great things. In the context of the decade's cinematic explosion—the comedies of Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon, and Lloyd; the European challenges of Lubitsch, Lang, Murnau,

Eisenstein, Gance, and Clair; the American genre epics of Ford, Vidor, Walsh, Cruze, and King—Griffith's films seemed frozen in the past. Although some critics, like Andrew Sarris, found Griffith's first sound film, *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), fluid beside its static contemporaries, Griffith's final film, *The Struggle* (1931), was a clumsy reprise of *The Drunkard's Reformation* of 1909.

Through the 1930s there was hope and talk of a Griffith comeback, and he even went to England to discuss a remake of *Broken Blossoms*. Griffith ruined most of those hopes with heavy drinking, irascible behavior, and incurable womanizing. His one Hollywood job in seventeen years was as advisor to producer Hal Roach in 1941 on *One Million B.C.*, a sound-film expansion of Griffith's 1912 Biograph fantasy of prehistoric life, *Man's Genesis*. Griffith retired to Kentucky, where he worked on plays, film scripts, and his memoirs: none was ever completed. Like Chaplin, Griffith settled late in life into a comfortable marriage with a younger woman, Evelyn Baldwin—but only for a while. They separated after a decade in 1947. He died in a Hollywood hotel room, not precisely broke but certainly alone. With his death Griffith became the hero of a sentimental melodrama that he himself might have filmed—the poetic genius crushed by crass commercial expediency.

Instead, one might see Griffith as a tragic rather than a pathetic figure: the powerful embodiment of a particular place and time, with consummate skills suited exactly to that place and time, but to no others. James Agee said, "He lived too long, and that is one thing sadder than dying too soon. There is not a man working in movies or a man who cares for them who does not owe Griffith more than he owes anybody else." Griffith, who from 1908 to 1918 virtually *was* film history, was ultimately condemned by history to history.

The Parade's Gone By. . . Kevin Brownlow. UCal Press LA 1968

Griffith was the son of a Kentucky colonel, and he regarded himself as a member of the aristocracy. This affair of loving pictures, he felt, was degrading. To show his lack of respect he broke all the existing rules of film making. But there was more to it than mere perversity. Griffith also regarded himself as an artist of potential genius. As Lloyd Morris has profoundly put it: "He had no respect for the medium in which he was working, but his temperament compelled him to treat it as if it were an art. The result was that he made it one."

It is a fact, and a disturbing one in many ways, that every device of cinematic storytelling had been established by 1912. The close-up, the tracking shot, the high angle, the flashback, the insert, effect lighting, masking, fades, dissolves—the whole gamut was there. But it was as though the components of a steam train had been assembled, and no one knew how to light the boiler. For while all of the components of the narrative film had been devised, no one was fully exploiting them.

The first match was struck by Griffith, and it led to an explosion, the effects of which the industry is still feeling. *The Birth of a Nation* was a cinematic revolution—it was responsible for revolutions in every field affected by motion pictures. Riots and demonstrations were living proof of the power of film. No well-informed person could allow himself to ignore it. The intelligentsia, who had regarded movies as the jukebox is regarded today, conceded at last that the film had value. With critics and writers embroiled in controversy, the middle classes went to see it

for themselves. And more important still, the men who controlled the business grew ambitious again.

The Birth of a Nation was the first feature to be made in the same fluid way as pictures are made today. It was the most widely seen production of the time and it had the strongest influence.

Technical considerations apart, *The Birth of a Nation* is an achievement which needs to be given a context. Astounding in its time, it triggered of so many advances in film-making technique that it was rendered obsolete within a few years.

Griffith was well aware of his own contributions to motion pictures. He once said he loved Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, and "particularly loved the ideas he took from me."

Melodramatic treatment was dangerous enough for political subjects; when it appeared with racial connotations it became downright offensive.

After *The Birth of a Nation* outcries, the Negro did not appear again as a villain. He was relegated to atmosphere, or comedy bit parts. As it happened there were very few Negroes in California, and white actors often had to don blackface to play such Negro roles as railroad employees.

The Birth of a Nation, released in 1915, was the first feature film to exploit fully the extraordinary power of editing. In the truest sense of the word, this is a masterpiece; it served as an example for the rest of the industry.

"David Wark Griffith" James Agee, *The Nation*, September 4, 1948 (Agee's last film piece for *The Nation* in *Cinema Nation*. Edited by Carl Bromley Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books New York 2000

He achieved what no other known man has ever achieved. To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man....

The most beautiful single shot I have seen in any movie is the battle charge in *The Birth of a Nation*. I have heard it praised for its realism, and that is deserved; but it is also far beyond realism. It seems to me to be a perfect realization of a collective dream of what the Civil War was like, as veterans might remember it fifty years later. Or as children fifty years later, might imagine it....

This is, I realize, mainly subjective; but it suggests to me the clearest and deepest aspect of Griffith's genius: he was a great primitive poet, a man capable, as only great and primitive artists can be, of intuitively perceiving and perfecting the tremendous magical images that underlie the memory and imagination of entire peoples. ...

This was the one time in movie history that a man of great ability worked freely, in an unspoiled medium, for an unspoiled audience, on a majestic theme which involved all that he was; and brought to it, besides his abilities as an inventor and artist, absolute passion, pity, courage, and honesty. *The Birth of a Nation* is equal with Brady's photographs, Lincoln's speeches, Whitman's war poems; for all its imperfections and absurdities it is equal, in fact, to the best work that has been done in this country. And among moving pictures it is alone, not necessarily as "the greatest"—whatever that means—but as the one great epic, tragic film.

(Today, *The Birth of a Nation* is boycotted or shown

piecemeal; too many more or less well-meaning people still excuse Griffith of having made it an anti-Negro movie. At best, this is nonsense, and at worst, it is vicious nonsense. Even if it were an anti-Negro movie, a work of such quality should be shown, and shown whole. But the accusation is unjust. Griffith went to almost preposterous lengths to be fair to the Negroes as he understood them, and he understood them as a good type of Southerner does. I don't entirely agree with him; nor can I be sure that the film wouldn't cause trouble and misunderstanding, especially as advertised and exacerbated by contemporary abolitionists; but Griffith's absolute desire to be fair, and understandable, is written all over the picture; so are degrees of understanding, honesty, and compassion far beyond the capacity of his accusers. So, of course, are the salient facts of the so-called Reconstruction years.)...

My veneration for Griffith's achievements is all the deeper when I realize what handicaps he worked against, how limited a man he was....He had noble powers of imagination, but little of the *intricacy* of imagination that most good poets also have. His sense of comedy was pathetically crude and numb. He had an exorbitant appetite for violence, for cruelty, and for the Siamese twin of cruelty, a kind of obsessive tenderness which at its worst was all but nauseating. Much as he invented, his work was saturated in the style, the mannerisms, and the underlying assumptions and attitudes of the nineteenth century provincial theater; and although much of that was much better than most of us realize, and any amount better than most of the styles and non-styles we accept and praise, much of it was cheap and false, and all of it, good and bad, was dying when Griffith gave it a new lease on life, and in spite of that new lease, died soon after, and took him down with it. I doubt that Griffith ever clearly knew the good from the bad in this theatricality; or, for that matter, clearly understood what was original in his work, and capable of almost unimaginably great development: and what was over-derivative, essentially non-cinematic, and dying. In any case, he did not manage to outgrow, or sufficiently to transform, enough in his style that was bad, or merely obsolescent....

There is not a man working in movies, or a man who cares for them, who does not owe Griffith more than he owes anybody else.

Dwight Macdonald *Encounter*, January 1957

Griffith was the inventor, and to this day remains, except for Eisenstein, the most creative user of the two basic elements in cinematic technique, montage and the close-up.

"The Birth of a Nation" from *Film Notes*. Scott Hammen. J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Ky, 1979

In the imperfect art of surveying history, the practice of singling out "firsts" is particularly perilous. But in coming to terms with David Wark Griffith's epic study of the Civil War, the temptation can't be resisted. In length, expense, scale, and profitability, the film was without precedent. Never before had a movie been shown at the White House and never had a President helped in its promotion: Woodrow Wilson exclaimed that it was like "history written with lightning."

But appreciation of the work is complicated by the fact that its content is a vicious mixture of racism and historical falsehood. The film's hate-filled story was derived from a combination of a popular novel and stage play of the time, "The Clansman" which offered a glorified (and false) view of the origins of the Ku Klux Klan, and Griffith's own bitter feelings as a

Kentuckian about the Reconstruction period and the way it punished his father who had been a Confederate officer. Sentiment and prejudice undoubtedly contributed far more to the film's story than did historical fact.

Whatever his motivations, however, Griffith was attempting to work on a breathtaking scale. He poured every cent of his own money into the project, borrowed as much as he could from everyone he knew, and accumulated a huge number of creditors. Observers of the young film industry ridiculed his decision to attend to every aspect of the production singlehandedly.

The work encompassed virtually every technique of which the cinema was capable, many of them never before seen. Griffith employed night photography for some scenes, lighting his sets with huge flairs, then tinting the film for dramatic effect. He moved his camera about with great freedom, pulling it back for panoramic long shots filled with hundreds of extras and moving in for expressive close-ups. He researched the details of sets and costumes scrupulously giving the film the look of an actual historic document. And perhaps most important, he edited the giant work brilliantly, weaving the multiple facets of his story together to produce a thunderous climax.

The opening of the film in New York City on March 3, 1915 was something of an historical event in itself. Reserved seats commanded the unheard-of price of two dollars. A full symphony orchestra was engaged to provide music and sound effects and newspapers gave the premiere front-page attention. The NAACP publically protested the film and, though Griffith responded by cutting a few of the more inflammatory scenes, the film provoked racial tension and occasionally violence almost everywhere it was shown. Petitioned by a number of prominent citizens, the Massachusetts legislature considered a law banning the film but, despite the protests, the film was seen by millions across the country.

A single film had changed the face of the medium. In a negative sense, Griffith had shown how easily and profitably movies could pander to sentimentality and prejudice. In a positive sense, he had shown that they were no mere nickelodeon fad, but an art form of overwhelming power.

"Race, Melodrama, and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)," Linda Williams. In *The Silent Cinema Reader*. Ed. By Lee Grieveson & Peter Kramer. Routledge. London/New York, 2004.

"The white women of the South are in a state of siege....Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her...Shall men...demand for [the demon] the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine....Civilization peels us off...and we revert to the impulse...to "kill! kill! kill! —South Carolina senator Ben Tillman, 1907

"Some people were crying. You could hear people saying God...You had the worse feeling in the world. You just felt like you were not counted. You were out of existence. I just felt like...I wished somebody could not see me so I could kill them. I just felt like killing all the white people in the world."—William Walker (on recalling viewing *The Birth of a Nation*)

What *The Birth of a Nation* did, as a film, was to convert an Uncle-Tom style sympathy for the sufferings of a black man to an anti-Tom antipathy for the black male sexual threat to white

women.

Uncle Tom's Cabin had deployed melos, pathos, and action to draw northerners who had previously been uninvolved in the debate over slavery into its orbit, making the "good nigger" into a familiar and friendly icon, for whom whites had sympathy. Now, sixty years later, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, *The Birth of a Nation* solidified North and South into a new national feeling of racial antipathy, making the black man into an object of white fear and loathing.

When Thomas Dixon, Jr. Gave up his popular ministry to write a series of novels about the Reconstruction period, he followed a familiar ante-bellum, anti-Tom novelistic tradition. His inspiration to write came in 1901 at a performance of a Tom play. Infuriated by what he saw as the injustice of the play's attitude toward the South, he vowed to tell what he considered to be its true story....

Such, then, are the explicitly racial, explicitly anti-Tom politics of Dixon's first novel, as it directly attempts to refute Stowe's romantic racialism with a new twentieth-century demonic racism.... Thus Stowe's antebellum feminized "good Negro" is sexualized and demonized into the postbellum, hyper-masculinist rapist who can only be stopped by lynching.

Insistently, Dixon counters the myth of the gentle, familiar, melodic, and rhythmical "good nigger" with a new myth of the rapacious "bad nigger." Citizenship had transformed the black man from a piece of property into the potential owner of property, including the property of women.

The idea of a spirit of national re-birth forged through the expulsion of racial scapegoats is deeply embedded in Dixon's work.

Griffith's film, which would be used as a recruiting tool by the Clan later in the decade, sparked a vigorous campaign by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to have it banned. Though the campaign ultimately did not succeed, the film was in fact banned in eighteen states and numerous cities and the campaign did bring about some cuts. However, for every mayor who banned the film out of respect for blacks or a desire to keep the peace, there were, as Jane Gaines tells us, others who did so for its depiction of interracial sex (Gaines 2000). One thing is clear, however: Griffith's film was more incendiary, more racially hateful in its consequences, more likely to produce the phenomenon of race riot (which more often than not meant whites attacking blacks) than Dixon's novels and play. But the reason may not only lie in the greater lust of his Lynch or the greater violence of missing sequences. At a deeper level its effectiveness as race hatred, its ability to make William Walker impotently despair of ever being counted and to resolve that the only possibly effective reaction would be, like Senator Ben Tillman, to "kill! kill! kill!" in turn lies in Griffith's greater willingness to deploy the familiar features of the Tom material. For it was Griffith, not Dixon, who ultimately created the most effective counter to the Tom story. He did so by refunctioning the enormous emotional appeal of the antebellum story of the old South into a new kind of racial melodrama.

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Oct 18 Robert Bresson **A MAN ESCAPED/UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT** 1956 (35mm)

Oct 25 Luis Buñuel **DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID/LE JOURNAL D'UNE FEMME DE CHAMBRE** 1964 (35mm)

Nov 1 Andrei Tarkovsky **ANDREI RUBLEV/ANDREY RUBLYOV** 1966 (DVD)

Nov 8 Peter Yates **BULLITT** 1968 (35mm)

Nov 15 Woody Allen **ANNIE HALL** 1977 (35mm)

Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder **MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN/DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN** 1979 (35mm)

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