

The Birth of a Nation

By Dave Kehr

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When D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" was re-released in 1921, only six years after its premiere, the advertising posters proclaimed it an "American Institution." It has been one ever since, for better — in that it gave birth to the movies as an industry, a cultural force, and a social power — and for worse, in that the film contains perhaps the most virulently racist imagery ever to appear in a motion picture.

Griffith's Civil War epic cannot be forgiven for its portrayal of African Americans as sex-crazed animals, the Radical Republicans who led the Reconstruction as their deluded patriots, and the Ku Klux Klan as an army of heroes, gallantly riding to the defense of the nation.

But neither can Griffith's great artistry be denied. When Woodrow Wilson famously declared that "The Birth of a Nation" was "like history written with lightning," he captured something essential about Griffith's filmmaking: here is a work that crackles with electricity, that eschews the three-act dramatic form of the Victorian stage in favor of a strikingly modern, nonliterary form of narration, founded in an ebb and flow of energy, an expansion and dilation of space, a rush of images and a cascade of emotion that quite clearly transcend the broken-backed plot, the stereotypical characters, and the melodramatic situations.

"The Birth of a Nation" put an end to a certain kind of popular theater and elevated in its place a medium that had, until then, been largely a novelty attraction headed from vaudeville theaters to sideshows. An industry grounded in one- and two-reelers was transformed within a couple of years into an industry of feature films; storefront nickelodeons grew into lavish movie palaces, and movies became the preferred entertainment to the emerging American middle class — all because of Griffith's film.



D.W. Griffith, with megaphone, on the set of an identified film directing a scene.

Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Collection

Born in 1875 in LaGrange, Kentucky, Griffith was the son of a Civil War veteran, a former colonel who enjoyed recounting his wartime adventures to his son. Among the more than 500 short films he made for the American Biograph Company between 1908 and 1913 are several Civil War dramas, in which Griffith can be seen developing the contrast between epic scale and intimate drama that would inform "The Birth of a Nation" and set

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the formula for most of the epic filmmaking that came after it.

The film was based on a hoary stage play which the Reverend Thomas F. Dixon Jr. had adapted from two of his novels, "The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan" and "The Leopard's Spots." Griffith enlisted the help of his old Biograph associate Frank E. Woods in "arranging" the story, as the opening credits put it — Griffith himself being notorious for working without a finalized scenario. By keeping the structure of the film in his head, and by being able to constantly revise and improvise as he worked with his actors on location, Griffith achieved a spontaneity and vivacity that few of his contemporaries could equal and none could surpass.

“The Birth of a Nation” is structured as a series of oppositions. On the epic, historical level, Griffith posits North vs. South, the Union vs. the Confederacy, war vs. peace, and black vs. white. On the intimate, dramatic level, similar oppositions are played out in interpersonal terms: the contrast of North and South becomes the contrast between the Stoneman family, intellectuals who live in stuffy, book-lined quarters in urban Washington (the character of Austin Stoneman, played by Ralph Lewis, is based on the Radical Republican senator Thaddeus Stevens), and the Camerons, plantation owners who live in the idyllic small town of Piedmont. The political tension between the Union and the Confederacy becomes the interpersonal tension that develops between romantic couples, notably Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish), the senator’s daughter, and Ben Cameron, the eldest of the three Cameron sons, who has seen Elsie only in a photograph but has fallen hopelessly in love with her.

For Griffith, war is associated with the aggressive North, personified by the arrogant, cigar-smoking Ulysses S. Grant in the historical tableaux, and on the personal level by Congressman Stoneman’s conniving assistant Silas Lynch, a power-crazed mulatto who intends to plunder the defeated Confederacy.

Peace is the province of the South, where an intertitle announcing “Hostilities” is followed by a shot of kittens and puppies wrestling. (Suggestively, Elsie is associated with a kitten on her first entrance, foreshadowing her suitability as a mate for Ben). It takes only one shot for Griffith to establish the tranquility and stability of Southern life: a view down the tiny main street of Piedmont, with the local church dominating the background and the Cameron mansion, a modest affair with a brace of white columns in front, dominating the right side of the screen. The left side of the screen belongs to the dirt road, which bears a traffic of happy slaves, presumably on their way to a pleasant day’s work picking cotton.

Most commentators place the black/white opposition at the center of “The Birth of a Nation,” and it is certainly its most conspicuous component. But behind it lies another contrasting pair — the opposition of male and female. Griffith’s “blacks,” many of whom are played by

Caucasians in burnt-cork makeup, are predominantly large, stocky men, and irresponsible children. For Griffith, blackness is associated with male sexual power, with violence, and with rape.

Griffith’s white Southerners, on the other hand, are predominantly feminine. The Camerons appear to be a matriarchal clan, dominated by a strong-willed, independent woman, Mrs. Cameron (Josephine Crowell), who takes the initiative to go to Washington to search for the wounded Ben in a government hospital while her biblically bearded husband, Dr. Cameron (Spottiswoode Aitken), stays behind, too weak to leave his easy chair. Ben’s two younger brothers, Wade (George Beranger) and Duke (Maxfield Stanley) are barely more than boys; the dominant siblings are the two daughters, Margaret (Miriam Cooper), the eldest and an elegant embodiment of “the manners of the old school,” and Flora (Mae Marsh), a wide-eyed innocent with blonde curls and an irrepressible, childlike energy.

By right, Ben Cameron should be the dashing, manly hero of the piece, but instead Griffith has made him a strangely effeminate figure, played by the diminutive, delicate Henry B. Walthall. Nicknamed “The Little Colonel,” he is first presented as a dandy wearing a top hat and twirling a cane. Injured in battle, he is later found lying back in a hospital bed, a large white bandage covering a symbolic head wound. Ben only regains his stature and potency when he puts on the following white robes of the Klan.

Duke, the youngest Cameron brother, bonds with the junior Stoneman through some blatantly homoerotic horseplay and hugging; later, they will die together on the battlefield in each other’s arms, kissing each other on the lips. This is not to suggest any homophobia on Griffith’s part — such physical expressions of affection are common in early films and these characters are, in any case, among the film’s most positive.

But there is a sense on Griffith’s part of a masculinity that desperately needs to be curbed — a masculinity brutally represented by Gus (Walter Long), the liberated slave who attempts to rape Flora (she jumps to her

death rather than submit to him). Gus's Northern counterpart is the mulatto Silas Lynch, who is encouraged by Congressman Stoneman's speeches on the equality of the races to believe that he has a right to the hand of Stoneman's daughter. Stoneman, for his part, appears to have a sexual relationship with his mulatto housekeeper, Lydia Brown (Mary Alden), an affair described in an intertitle as "the great leader's weakness that is to blight a nation."

The most famous single sequence in "The Birth of a Nation" comes as Ben Cameron, at the climax of the film's central battle sequence, charges across the field, a Confederate flag raised above his head. The camera, looking down on Ben from an overhead mount, rushes ahead of him and stops abruptly when Ben reaches the Union lines. In a spectacular, truly thrilling gesture, he rams the pole of the Confederate flag down the barrel of a Union cannon, demonstrating not only exceptional courage and theatrical flair but also a sense of mastered, controlled sexuality — a virility contained and put to service at an appropriate moment, rather than allowed to sow the chaos that we will see among the broadly caricatured liberated blacks of the Reconstruction scenes.

The double weddings that end the film — Ben Cameron to Elsie Stoneman and Phil Stoneman to Margaret Cameron — seal, of course, the union of the North and the South and symbolize the resolution of many of the thematic oppositions Griffith has built into the overriding conflict of the war. Here is "the birth of a nation," in the sense that a new ruling paradigm has emerged, one that channels male sexual energy not into the violence of rape and war but into the gentle, controlled sexuality of monogamous marriage. With war over and the anarchy of sex channeled into positive creation, America can finally begin its true business — which, as we know, is business.

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