Birth of a Nation, The

In 1915, D.W. Griffith released his artistically stunning yet intensely disturbing film *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith’s picture was adapted from the Thomas Dixon novel, *The Clansman*, a work that depicted the post-Civil War Ku Klux Klan as the last, best hope of Southern whites beset by emancipated, maniacal blacks. A native of North Carolina and a popular Baptist minister, Dixon claimed that he had written *The Clansman* in an attempt to “awaken the American people to the Black Peril.” Giving expression to a divisive dogma built on a foundation of “fervent racism and the fear of sexual relations between blacks and whites,” Dixon used his novel to ridicule “Black Reconstruction and the desire of Negroses to attain political rights” (Sklar, 1994).

Born in 1864, one year before the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the conflict-ridden Reconstruction period that extended from 1865 through 1877, Dixon was only eight-years-old when he reportedly accompanied his uncle to a session of the South Carolina legislature. Growing up surrounded by whites who wanted nothing more than to “redeem” the antebellum South, Dixon became increasingly upset by what he believed to be the “false and biased” reports concerning the Civil War and Reconstruction that were being circulated by northerners. Believing that he had an obligation to “set the record straight” in regard to his beloved southern homeland, Dixon committed himself to writing a Reconstruction trilogy, the first volume of which would be entitled *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden* (Mintz and Roberts, 2001).

Originally published in 1903, *The Leopard’s Spots* was an immediate success, selling 100,000 copies in a few short months and eventually being translated into numerous foreign languages. Dixon now became a highly sought-after lecturer and writer, whose fame and fortune allowed him to begin the second volume of his trilogy, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, which he wrote in a scant thirty days. Two years later, the three book set would be completed when Dixon finished the final volume of the Reconstruction trilogy, *The Traitor: A Story of the Rise and Fall of the Invisible Empire*.

Emboldened by the enormous success of *The Clansman*, Dixon began to think that the novel might be turned into a drama that could be performed on stage. Working on the project himself, Dixon was able, in a matter of months during 1905, to rewrite the story of *The Clansman* as a dramatic play. When it eventually went on tour, the powerful production attracted what were large audiences for a stage production and was ultimately heralded as “The Greatest Play of the South. . . . A Thrilling Romance of the Ku Klux Klan.” Although Dixon was proud of what he had accomplished as a playwright, he believed, correctly it seems, that the “endless repetition of plot and scene before relatively small audiences was not a very effective medium for the dissemination of ideas.” Books, too, he felt, although a powerful tool for spreading one’s message, and one that he would continue to use, were “limited in their appeal” in regard to a national audience. There was, however, a new medium that was becoming more and more popular, the motion picture, which Dixon believed would be perfect for delivering his message to the vast population of the United States.
The problem with converting *The Clansman* to film, however, as Dixon learned when he shopped the novel to motion picture producers, was that the cinema to this point had been used mainly to communicate short comedic or action sequences. *The Clansman*, said the producers whom Dixon approached, was “too long, too serious, and too controversial.” Dixon did not give up on his dream, however, and at the end of 1913 he was rewarded for his perseverance when he was introduced by Harry E. Aitken to a bold, young director named David Wark Griffith. Griffith, who was from Kentucky and the son of a Confederate officer, apparently swallowed Dixon’s hateful message whole and agreed to make the picture.

Significantly, where movies at this time were generally 10- to 20-minute-long, one- or two-reelers, Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* was a $100,000 twelve-reeler that ran over three hours in length. A cinematic masterpiece, the film used techniques such as irising, close-ups, split-screen images, tracking shots, mood-setting lighting, and cross-cutting to influence the viewer’s experience. After a documentary-style opening segment that instructed audiences on the origins of slavery in America, the abolitionist response to this “peculiar institution,” and the inexorable turn toward the “great Civil War” —“The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion,” we are told on an intertitle card—the film follows the story of two families, the Camerons and the Stonemans, as they make their way from the antebellum to postbellum periods of the mid-nineteenth century.

The first half of *Birth of a Nation* focuses on the antebellum lead up to the war and the war years themselves. Setting the scene for what is to come, Griffith opens the narrative portion of his film by introducing the two families. The Camerons—mother, father, two daughters, and three sons—are elite planters from Piedmont, South Carolina, who have carved out an idyllic, genteel plantation existence. Masters to a vast slave population, the Cameron men see themselves as benevolent fathers to their loyal, child-like servants, who happily labor in their “parents” extensive cotton fields. The Stonemans are northerners from Pennsylvania; they are led by their powerful and morally upright patriarch Austin Stoneman, a United States senator—patterned after the Radical Republican congressman from Pennsylvania, Thaddeus Stevens—a staunch abolitionist, and father to two sons and a beautiful daughter, Elsie (Lillian Gish).

The Cameron and Stoneman boys are boarding-school-friends. Although worlds apart ideologically, the families are linked by their elite cultural positions. Missing the company of their friends, the Stoneman sons, Phil (Elmer Clifton) and Tod (Robert Harron) travel to the Cameron’s Piedmont estate. While there, Phil falls in love with the Cameron’s eldest daughter, Margaret (Miriam Cooper); and, shown a picture of Elsie, Benjamin (Henry B. Walthall), the eldest Cameron son, realizes that she will be the love of his life: “He finds the ideal of his dreams in the picture of Elsie Stoneman, his friend’s sister, whom he has never seen.”

The war, of course, tears the families apart, as both pledge themselves to their respective, “just” sides—“Conquer We Must for Our Cause is Just: Victory or Death,” reads a flag carried by Southern troops. A microcosm of the masses who are involved in the conflict,
the Camerons and Stonemans experience the death, destruction, and despair of the struggle. Representing the unity of the families, Benjamin—the “Little Colonel”—and Elsie are finally joined together in an army hospital where Elsie has volunteered and Ben languishes near death from wounds experienced on the battlefield.

In the second half of *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith made it clear that although the war finally ended, the North’s victory in the conflict continued to have dire consequences for whites in the South. Returning home after his wounds are healed, Ben finds the family estate, and the South in general, devastated by the war. Subject to the Reconstruction policies of the Radical Republicans in Congress, southern whites are now terrorized by the former, docile slaves who are whipped into a frenzy by Carpetbaggers and “uppity negroes” from the North. Allowed to run free, once loyal servants are now used in an attempt to “crush the white South under the hell of the Black South.”

Portrayed as vengeful, petulant, spoiled, even lustful children, Blacks—played in the film by whites in blackface—are shown pushing whites off of sidewalks into the streets, taunting white families, and acting like imbeciles in the legislative halls of the South, where they sneak drinks from hidden flasks of liquor, remove their shoes only to expose their malodorous feet, and pass tyrannical laws that act to oppress what are now dispossessed whites. Griffith brings things to a disturbing, dramatic point of climax in what has become one of the film’s most iconic scenes: the renegade Gus (Walter Long), unable to control his insatiable desire for the youngest Cameron daughter, chases after her until she finds herself forced to the edge of a towering cliff; terrified, and perhaps deciding that death is preferable to being violated by an indomitable “black buck,” she topples from the precipice.

It is at this point, when all hope seems lost, that the mighty, masked force of the Ku Klux Klan rides to the rescue. Cross-cutting among four scenes in one of cinema’s most memorable technological moments—Elsie Stoneman being symbolically raped by the mulatto Silas Lynch, members of the Stoneman and Cameron family besieged by blacks in a tiny cabin on the edge of town, Piedmont overrun by a frenzied black mob, and a glorious collection of elegantly attired Klansmen desperately riding in to save the frightened victims from their horrendous fate—Griffith presented audiences with a breathtaking, and stunningly modern, final sequence. Arriving just in the nick of time, the rescue of all by the masked riders of the Klan provided viewers with a happy, and redemptive ending.

Once the film was finished, Griffith graced it with a new name, changing the picture’s title from *The Clansman* to *The Birth of a Nation*. This was necessary, it seems, because in Griffith’s mind, and certainly in Dixon’s, this was precisely what this vastly important narrative was about: “the creation of a new nation after years of struggle and division, a nation of Northern and Southern whites united ‘in common defence of their Aryan birthright,’ with the vigilante riders of the Klan as their symbol” (Sklar, 1994).

Although the reaction to *The Birth of a Nation* was positive when it was initially screened in New York in February of 1915, resistance to the wide release of the film was
formidable. A large number of Americans thought that the film was “a travesty against truth as well as an insult to an entire race of people,” and they were “determined to prevent the showing of the film,” working tirelessly to “bring about its doom.” Many underestimated the resourcefulness and unbounded energy of Dixon, however, who worked equally hard to ensure that this film would be seen by millions of Americans. Amazingly, Dixon was able to turn to the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, for assistance in accomplishing his goal, as he and Wilson had become friends when they were both students at Johns Hopkins University. Dixon reasoned that if the President approved of the picture, this would go a long way toward silencing those who were seeking to censor the film. Dixon approached Wilson at the White House and was warmly greeted by the President. When asked if he would attend a screening of the film at a community theater, Wilson informed Dixon that although he was interested in seeing the picture, he was still mourning the death of his wife and thus it would be unseemly for him to be seen out in public for such an event. If Dixon could arrange to have the film shown in the East Room of the White House, however, the President, his family, and the members of the Cabinet and their families would be happy to view it. On February 18, The Birth of a Nation was screened in the White House for the President and his guests. After watching the film, Wilson is purported to have uttered, “It is like writing history with lightening. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”

Dixon did not stop at showing the film to the President; he went on to show it to the members of the Supreme Court and many members of the Senate and the House of Representatives at a formal gathering in the ballroom of the Raleigh Hotel in Washington. The Chief Justice of the Court, Edward D. White, initially rejected Dixon’s offer to view the film, declaring that he was not interested in motion pictures and that he and the other members of the court had far better things to do with their time. But once Dixon explained to him that the film was the “true story of Reconstruction and the redemption of the South by the Ku Klux Klan,” the Chief Justice, who informed Dixon that he, himself, had been a member of the Klan, agreed to see the picture. With the support of the President and members of both Congress and the Supreme Court, much of the resistance to the film from censors was muted. Although there continued to be a great deal of opposition to the film, and some cities still refused to screen the picture, The Birth of a Nation ultimately opened in New York on March 3, 1915, playing to huge audiences for forty-seven weeks at the Liberty Theater. Eventually, the film played to audiences across the country, and although figures like Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House in Chicago, and Booker T. Washington, the influential African American leader, condemned the film, it received glowing reviews.

It was not a coincidence that the release of The Birth of a Nation coincided with the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan had first emerged during the Reconstruction period. Founded in 1866 as a sort of fraternal “social group” by a collection of southern veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee, the Klan soon became a “powerful and frightening vehicle of vigilante violence and lawlessness.” By 1871, anti-Klan legislation and congressional investigations into the group diminished the influence of the movement, although its heritage remained a powerful force in American society throughout the rest of the nineteenth-century. Indeed, it was the legacy of the
Reconstruction-period Klan that moved historians, novelists, and filmmakers to produce their twentieth-century paean to the movement. This latter-day support for the ideology of the original Klan gave rise to a second and perhaps even more troubling alliance, a so-called “second Klan,” which was founded at Stone Mountain, Georgia, by William J. Simmons and later taken over by the incredibly powerful, future Imperial Wizard of the movement, Hiram W. Evans. Although still a violent organization, the twentieth-century “Knights of the Invisible Empire” differed from the original, Reconstruction-era Klan in that it attracted millions of men, and women, not just from the South, but from all over America (Boyer, 2001).

While Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* was clearly a cinematic celebration of the original Ku Klux Klan and a filmic justification for the rise of the second Klan, perhaps what was even more significant about the picture was how successful it was in helping to develop a virulent twentieth-century anti-black sensibility in the United States. The release of Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* not only reinforced antebellum and postbellum images of blacks—Sambo, Mammy, Uncle, Zip Coon, Pickaninny, Black Buck—but recast them in what was an even more destructive twentieth-century form. This was especially true in regard to the image of the young-black-male, whose “vicious bestiality,” which had been depicted as frighteningly obvious during the nineteenth-century, Griffith now portrayed as being cunningly hidden behind the grotesque mask of the grinning, sycophantic “darkie.” For many, including some of the most important people in the United States, Griffith’s picture became the filmic representation of America’s struggle against insidious blacks, who, argued Imperial Wizard Evans, were responsible for causing the first cracks in America’s moral foundation during the tragic period of the nation’s late nineteenth-century history. Even worse, suggested Evans, was that during the twentieth-century, the “sacredness of [America’s] sabbath, of our homes, of chastity, and finally even of our right to teach our children in our own schools . . .” were being threatened not only by blacks, but by Catholics, Jews, southern and eastern European immigrants, civil libertarians, and socialists (Carnes, 1995).

In the end, *The Birth of a Nation* was a vastly important film not only because it acted as a panegyric to the rise of the first Klan and provided cinematic legitimation for the explosive growth of the second Klan, but also because it helped to define the destructive racial boundaries that were put in place during the first part of the twentieth-century. Indeed, the racist themes articulated in Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* would set the tone for the filmic depiction of the WWI combat “enemy” as a heartless and debased threat to the civilized world, one that needed to be stopped at all costs.

—Philip C. DiMare

See also:
African Americans in Film
Griffith, D. W.
Politics and Film
References and further reading:


