

# New Critical Perceptions Surrounding Racial and Ideological Discourse in D.W. Griffiths “*The Birth of a Nation*” (1915) *Jordan Krohn*

*The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is often acclaimed as the most historically valuable and technically groundbreaking film of silent American cinema, notwithstanding its presentation of racist subject matter. At one point, D.W. Griffith's three-hour epic was the longest film ever made, the first movie to have an original soundtrack, and became Hollywood's highest grossing film until the release of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. Consequently, early filmmakers credited *The Birth of a Nation* (hereafter *Birth*) with revolutionizing the standard by which subsequent Hollywood productions were developed.

The film juxtaposes the conflicting ideologies of the 'Northern Union' and the 'Southern Confederate States of America'. As well, it chronicles the ongoing conflict between whites and blacks amidst the socio-political unrest after the American Civil War. *Birth* is most often critiqued for its white supremacist presuppositions and barbaric depictions of African-American people; the presence of racism in the film is undisputable. However, the existence of prejudice leads many spectators to dismiss important aspects of *Birth's* complex narrative structure in favour of focusing entirely upon the film's racial propaganda.

The following paper will begin with a brief plot summary to provide a foundational understanding of important scenes, characters, and themes, followed by two sections that will undertake a detailed examination of the technical elements and historical significance of *Birth*. These aspects of the film are underrepresented in comparison to its racist themes. The last section will deconstruct the way in which *Birth's* racist elements were promoted by Griffith's effective use of stylistic conventions (i.e. viewer identification, the 'happy ending', and the hero figure) to promote white supremacy. *Birth* integrates progressive entertainment with the marginalization and devaluation of black livelihood, which creates an ideological connection between the film's 'acclaimed greatness' and its white supremacist values.

## Plot Summary

Griffith's film tells the story of the American Civil War from a predominantly Southern perspective. The first half of the film focuses on the period before and up to the Civil War. *Birth's* plot is structured around several contesting themes of oppositional conflict which serve to perpetuate the struggles surrounding idiosyncratic class interests and contrasting ideological approaches to social problems (e.g. racism and gender equality) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The four main areas of conflict in *Birth* are: 'the North' vs. 'the South', Union vs. Confederacy, peace vs. war, and black vs. white people.

The movie's narrative follows the interconnected story of two American families who are at the center of the conflict. First, there is the Stoneman family from the North, which supports slave abolition and lives somewhere in the Pennsylvania countryside; next is the slave owning Cameron family from the South, which lives in Piedmont, South Carolina. The friendship between these two families is initially strong because Phil Stoneman falls in love with Margaret Cameron and Ben Cameron falls deeply in love with Elsie Stoneman. The American Civil War strains the civility between the two families since they must fight in opposing armies. The Stoneman family fights on behalf of the Northern abolitionist Union, while the slave owning Cameron family fights for the Southern Confederacy. The Confederate army fights valiantly, yet they are unable to defeat the Union forces. Ben Cameron is captured in the battle and sentenced to death, but escapes punishment when U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is suddenly assassinated.

After Lincoln's assassination, the second half of the film progresses with more Union abolitionists moving into Piedmont, thereby allowing the freed African-American slaves to gain political power. Once the black slaves came to power, they are portrayed as being too "simple-minded" and "savage" to successfully run a democracy. As a result, Ben Cameron, along with other Caucasian supporters of the Confederacy, founds the Ku Klux Klan (hereafter, KKK or 'the Klan') in order to save the South from African-American control. Ben has ill-intentions when he directs the KKK's wrath upon Gus 'The Negro'. Ben is falsely led to believe that Gus has killed his sister Flora Cameron, following her rape/sexual assault. The movie ends with a peaceful reconciliation between the surviving members of the Stoneman and Cameron family.

## Assessing the Reality of D.W. Griffith's Impact on Hollywood Cinema

Griffith began filming *Birth* in 1914 and upon its release in 1915, he received widespread public and critical acclaim for using and developing several revolutionary film production techniques. The panoramic long shot, the iris effect, still shots, night photography, and panning camera shots were just some of the new artistic film techniques utilized in the movie. Additionally, Griffith hired hundreds of "extras" to stage and film the large-scale battle scenes. While there were only hundreds of actors in the battle scenes, the panoramic long shots made it look as if thousands of people were fighting on screen. One of the most celebrated aspects of *Birth* was Griffith's use of "artistic colour tinting". Colour tinting is the process of adding colour to a black and white film, usually for dramatic purposes (Jacobowitz & Lippe). For instance, the chase scene between Gus 'The Negro' and Flora Cameron is a perfect example of artistic colour tinting because the entire sequence is tinted green. Before *Birth* was released, colour had never been previously used on film. This

added cinematic feature enabled audiences to construct personal meaning from the emotive nature of visualizing colour on screen.

*Birth* was historically regarded as the “greatest and most important American film ever made”. However, it is necessary to be suspicious of the proclaimed degree of innovative influence that Griffith’s film contributions had on other directors. Griffith’s supposed widespread influence on future film techniques and his popularity with early audiences should not be compared to his skill as a film artist. It is impossible to seriously assess Griffith’s film directing capabilities without first acknowledging the problems of referring to *Birth* as the most important Hollywood film ever made. On the contrary, Griffith did not pioneer every important film convention and production technique:

“Other filmmakers were establishing important narrative conventions – especially in the areas of continuity editing, three point lighting, organically integrated set design, subjective camera movements and manipulation of narrative chronology and point of view – that owed little to Griffith.” (Merritt 34)

The filmmaking process is comprised of a variety of competing systems of expression and ingenuity that are independent of each other. Therefore, it is illogical to argue that *Birth* had a substantially pervasive influence on all films that succeeded it. Other acclaimed filmmakers, such as F.W. Murnau, established their own expressive techniques without strictly adhering to Griffith’s narrative conventions.

### **Technical & Historical Composition of *The Birth of A Nation***

*Birth* is a complex structural composition with a surprising degree of attention given towards the technicalities of set design. One of the most technically proficient and emotionally complex scenes within *Birth* is the infamous chase scene between Gus and Flora Cameron. The set had been meticulously designed to provide a visual experience of a high magnitude during the chase scene. The chase scene's striking application of various film compositional techniques, such as panning and exhaustive transitions coupled with the intricate set design, provided audiences with extraordinary visual stimulation. Furthermore, the chase sequence is marked by four actively distinct phases: 1) Gus sees Flora walking into the woods alone and he follows her; 2) Gus approaches Flora, she runs away and he runs after her; 3) Ben Cameron goes into the forest to look for his little sister Flora; and 4) Flora is under the belief that Gus will hurt her, so she leaps off a cliff to her death. Ben later finds the mangled corpse of his beloved sister on the ground below (Merritt 38).

Griffith preferred to film scenes in a way that only captured three sides of the room in each shot. Yet, the chase scene is filmed outdoors, in the middle of a forest. Consequently, the forest is filmed in a naturalistic way, which helps illustrate its natural harmony: “So here we see only one face of each part of the forest, the vantage point of the shot never changing” (Merritt 39). Griffith uses a consistent vantage point, which highlights the sheer size of the forest, while still capturing the subtleties of nature. The amount of suspense generated in this scene can be credited to Griffith’s effective use of contrasting film shots. On one end, one sees the expression of horror on Flora’s face, which is blended with camera angles that make Gus appear misguided and menacing. In addition, one of the most stunning elements of the chase scene is the way that it propels the viewer to emotionally respond. Flora Cameron’s

demise is one of the most shocking plot elements within *Birth*. Clearly, Griffith utilizes the suicide of a wholly innocent character to maximize the emotional reaction elicited from the audience. The grandiosity of the chase scene is amplified by appealing to viewer emotions with the visceral imagery. There is a simple reason for illustrating the scene in this manner: viewers are meant to identify with Flora due to her tragic and unnecessary death. Yet, Gus is portrayed as a villain whose pursuit leads to the death of the angelic, young Flora. In actuality, viewers are not given any prior context of Gus' intent or motives for chasing after Flora in the first place.

Another critical technical element of the film is the deliberate inclusion and manipulation of props in a progressive way (i.e. characters interact with props they find, which progresses the plot). Given that *Birth* is a silent film, Griffith often relied on a 'prop-oriented' approach to bring characters into conflict with one another. For example, as part two of the chase scene is about to begin, Gus drops his jacket, leaving it there for Ben Cameron to discover. In turn, the jacket is later used as evidence to incriminate Gus for Flora's murder, leading to his public execution near the end of the film.

*Birth* is a 'fictional biopic', meaning all the primary characters are fictional creations. Some of the characters and events in the movie serve as a historically accurate means of driving the plot in new directions. For example, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is what allows the fictional protagonist, Ben Cameron, to escape from his captors. Nevertheless, *Birth* also wields the influential power of Hollywood cinema to portray factual historical events, while simultaneously promoting biased racial perceptions. Griffith's historical misinterpretations in *Birth* are problematic because they present a series of historical events without providing probable explanations for the validity of their cause. For example, the South is portrayed as the strongest militant force, due to the way that white Southerners took matters into their own hands and established the KKK to secure white liberty and ensure black subordination. Notwithstanding, Griffith's strong depiction of the South solidifies his racial biases and neglects historical accuracy, as the Confederate States surrendered and lost the American Civil War. Griffith's southern bias is the primary reason the film is often treated as racist propaganda. Accordingly, this generates dismissal of the movie's positive attributes (e.g. the film's technical proficiency) due to feelings of disgust amongst viewers.

Both academics and the public disproportionately focus upon the racist elements of *Birth*. Disproportionate focus on the brutal occurrences of racism encourages the audience to neglect valuable historical inquiries about the film, which can be studied to broaden understanding of particular socio-historical, political, and cultural contexts. Simultaneous examination of the historical and racial elements of *Birth* brings forth the troubling conclusion that Griffith's own racial bias is responsible for the disconnect between factual history and his passionate 'historical' portrayal of an overly empowered Southern Confederacy. The very beginning of the movie takes place at the Cameron house; the Cameron family is depicted as being very tight-knit, privileged and standing united amidst the bright North Carolina sunshine. Conversely, the Stoneman family is first introduced to the viewer in a dimly lit study occupied only by Austin Stoneman. The South was depicted as being a much warmer and more familial place to live, despite the Confederate States actively promoting and defending inhumane behavior such as slavery.



### Stylistic Conventions & Griffith's Endorsement of Racist Ideals

In the following section, three different film conventions that were used throughout *Birth* will be discussed: 1) viewer identification; 2) the "happy ending"; and 3) the hero figure. Some questions will be asked considering each convention and its significance towards promoting *Birth's* values and ideals. One must recognize the contextual realities of analyzing an old film from a modern perspective. In other words, watching a 102-year-old film from a solely 'progressive' modern perspective may impede one from gaining a more nuanced understanding of the film's content, racist overtones notwithstanding. In order to have a more focused critical discussion, each of the three conventions will be separated into sections.

The ideologically biased complexity of *Birth* fails to provide viewers with interpretive modes of identification. In other words, Griffith portrays his characters in a way that coerces viewers into identifying with Flora Cameron as the innocent victim of sexual abuse, and Gus as the violent perpetrator of sexually explicit behavior. As previously mentioned, Flora is portrayed as an angelic, naïve, and innocent young woman. When Gus is ferociously chasing Flora, the viewer is led to feel sorry and empathize with Flora's feelings of hysteria and despair. Gus' character is portrayed as an "immoral savage" and this is evident through the actor's (Walter Long) application of erratic body language. However, watching this movie from a modern standpoint effectively manipulates potential identification possibilities, since current views on racism are generally much more progressive compared to the dominant racist values from 1915. Additionally, viewing *Birth* in a modern context made me identify with Gus due to the fact that I felt sympathy for him. On this subject, Russell Merritt claims, "Yet in *The Birth of a Nation*, Flora's pursuer is curiously restrained; Gus keeps insisting he merely wants to talk with her" (Merritt 45). To reiterate, at *no* point in the movie is the viewer given an accurate account or explanation of Gus' motivations for chasing after Flora, yet it seems that Flora's death brings him much remorse. Gus' feelings of remorse and him requesting 'just to speak' with Flora shows his intentions were likely not malicious, and the suicide that ensued was an unfortunate tragedy. Moreover, the unjust nature of Gus' court trial, and him being sentenced to death, also influences viewer identification. Gus is convicted of murder and sentenced to death based on pure circumstantial evidence, with no witness testimony confirming his guilt or innocence. From a post-modern perspective, the ideological morality in the chase scene is highly ambiguous. The portrayal of South Carolina in a powerful light leads to scenes of black slaves terrorizing the Cameron family by destroying their home and ransacking the local community. The assault on the Cameron home directly influences who the viewer identifies with, since the black raiders were depicted in an extremely primitive and animalistic way, while the Cameron men were seen as heroic defenders of their property, women, and children. Relating to technical film composition, the Cameron house attack scene utilized a red screen. The red screen is an example of how groundbreaking film technology also contributes to creating a savage atmosphere, thus forcing the viewer to identify with the defending Cameron family.

The inclusion of a "happy ending" is a pivotal stylistic convention used in *Birth* because it demonstrates the resilience of humankind, principally through the ways in which people overcome adversity. Before delving into a more in-depth analysis, it is essential to recognize that many modern viewers perceive the film's ending as "charmless" and "unhappy." Modernity has ushered in a universal toleration of racial differences, which are certainly

more accommodated and respected, seeing as how racism has become much less overt in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A key element of modern racism is that it is often restricted to the private sphere (i.e. covert forms of racial bias including institutionalized racism), thus explaining why racial slurs have largely become shunned from casual conversation. For this reason, the ending of *Birth* is problematic because it can be perceived as being "happy" for the few with privilege, yet it clearly poses serious implications for marginalized racial minorities. In the movie, privileged white Southerners are depicted as the underdogs who successfully fought overwhelming odds after losing the American Civil War. The most frightening aspect of *Birth* is the celebrated presence of the KKK, which controversially signifies the 'happy ending'. The KKK represents the catalyst facilitating white supremacy, since they promote exacting undeserved revenge upon the "savage" black people, whom they deem unable to exist in democratic society. The KKK crusade towards the end of *Birth* can be interpreted from a variety of different ideological perspectives. Modern spectators would presumably be disgusted with the racial hierarchy at the end of the film. On the opposing side, early viewers would likely feel satisfied when the KKK cavalry rampaged through the Southern Carolina village, thus signifying the KKK's return to former glory. To elaborate, *Birth* was initially called *The Clansman* in 1915, which illustrates the widespread societal acceptance of white supremacy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By modern standards, *Birth* is problematic because of its celebratory interpretation of the racism plaguing early American history.

When films were first made available for popular viewing and global distribution, they were expensive and required financing. Consequently, the majority of the initial movie watching demographic consisted of white, privileged families. After the racial genocide occurring in World War Two, Griffith faced harsh criticisms from African-American viewers for the film's racist ending: "In communities where blacks could not get *Birth* banned outright, they made the censorship of Flora's death scene a top priority" (Merritt 37). The African-American community's resistance to *Birth's* release in theatres suggests the film's inherent bias in favour of whites. White people were pleased with *Birth's* positive reaffirmation of dominant Caucasian values, which explains why white people comprised the majority of *Birth's* viewer demographic. Upon the film's initial release, *Birth's* comfortably racist ending served as a critically important ideological reaffirmation of previous historically accepted notions of white superiority.

The last remaining film convention is not used to endorse any specific ideological viewpoint in *Birth*. Most movies have a narrative structure, revolving around a perceivable hero figure, but there is ambiguity surrounding the hero in *Birth*. The resulting ambiguity is due to the fact that character development is limited because *Birth* is a silent film. When attempting to clearly locate the hero figure in the film, it is essential to examine the presence of evil in order to decide who takes a heroic stance against injustice. Given the repeatedly mentioned fact that *Birth* espouses evil in the form of racism, it is acceptable to define any character that actively fights against racism as a heroic figure.

As Merritt argues, Griffith was sympathetic to the racist rhetoric of the Confederate States. This could be part of the reason why he portrayed the Northern Union in a negative light, since they supported the abolition of slavery. Considering the way that Griffith's own racial biases influenced the film's narrative, *Birth's* hero figure would be Ben Cameron. Obviously, Ben's character is clearly racist, and is not perceived to be even remotely heroic by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. Notwithstanding his racist perspective, Griffith intends for Ben Cameron to be viewed as the film's hero figure. Since racism towards African-Americans was

accepted in 1915, it seems that in Griffith's distinctly ironic fictional world, those who fight against the societally acceptable racial hierarchy are villains. Modern standards dictate that the "true" hero figure in *Birth* must be a brave character and a progressive thinker. Racism is a counter-progressive mode of thought; it irrationally divides humanity as opposed to encouraging uniform human growth and development. Given this fact, a more accurate representation of the hero figure would then be Austin Stoneman. One could argue that Austin Stoneman is truly heroic since he displays humanitarian traits such as caring, compassion, and acceptance. Stephen Weinberger argues in support of Stoneman's heroism, stating that "He is also highly principled: he has a visceral hatred for the institution of slavery and also for those who have created and benefited from slavery" (Weinberger 3). Stoneman may appear like an evil character because of his stoic persona and stern facial expressions, but, the contrary is true: Austin's honorable nature - as demonstrated through his progressive advocacy against slavery - makes him worthier of the hero figure label than Ben Cameron, the KKK, or any of the racist Southern Confederates.

Griffith's epic silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, should not be dismissed as a simplistic narrative. Arguably, *Birth* should *always* be recognized for the complex, structural narrative that it is. Griffith made use of innovative film techniques and conventions to convey a landmark narrative, highlighting the cultural significance of racist colonial relations. *Birth* is filled with paradoxically racist and historically discursive thematic elements. Even so, the film should be analyzed in-depth to better articulate the reasons *why* white supremacist rhetoric within Griffith's film resonated with audiences at the time and how the themes in *Birth* - while repugnant - are still relevant to contemporary world issues.

## Works Cited

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