

D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*:  
History and politics in the images of race and class on film  
by Kelly Williams

*“Silent film has left a legacy of bizarrely colorful images preserved in the popular mind by nostalgia. Yet in the early days of the primitive film industry, the cinema treated social problems in a way that was, ironically, as fantastic as the glamorous stars and tinsel world of Hollywood’s later silver screen,” (Ross, 43).*

The establishment of the cinema does not start with D.W. Griffith’s masterpiece *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). However, “*The Birth of a Nation* became the most widely acclaimed and financially successful film of the entire silent era,” and has since become the watermark for film studies beginnings (May, 67). The film definitively stands out as a landmark in the visual arts that brought about the modern *photoplay* and a long history of interaction between the cinema and politics. By the time Griffith created his films, “movies were already the best form of cheap entertainment,” (Czitrom, 538). D. W. Griffith is also responsible for the creation of another film, *Intolerance* (1916), which illustrates the use of cinema as a tool for addressing social problems through allegory. The former film has left a much greater mark on history than the latter, but both will be considered in how history shapes and is shaped by cinema since the art-form’s advent.

Film has a fantastic ability to promote understanding of “the relationship between our historical experience and the means and modes through which we attempt to remember, reconstruct, and forget it, and otherwise orient ourselves in relation to it. Historians and social scientist recently have come to appreciate the extent to which diverse media and means of expression—journalism, newsreels, and movies—were involved in concealing as much about the real nature of...the conflict[s]...that spawned them,” (Williams, 30). This said, “A film is a work of art. It is not meant to be a mimetic replica or depiction of reality,” (Williams, 41). Though film is art, it is rather dangerous to dismiss it simply as such, considering the power it has to

communicate with wide audiences. There is always a perspective or ideology to be considered in viewing a film, whether historical or strictly entertainment. Yet, they are also documents of history in themselves, displaying moments, ideas, and visions from another time. “In their documentary effects and social range, these founding motion pictures make a claim for film as history. Their representational aspirations point less to historical accuracy than to the politics that produced these movies, their ideological world views,” (Rogin, 2). Thus, each film can be regarded as a work of art and a source of historical knowledge about the people who made it and the time in which they lived. Considering the many lines of meaning communicated within a project, opens up the work for study on just as many levels. For example, politically driven films “relied on the *happy ending*, which provided audiences with continuity and faith in *the system*. Even actual historical events were rewritten to accommodate that expectation,” (Ross, 50). To what purpose would a filmmaker want to create their art in such a manner? There are several answers to the question: to make more money off the finished product, to use the power of film to influence, to promote themselves as a team player and receive the accolades that come with such cooperation, or a combination of these and other reasons.

In the period of Griffith’s works, there was a struggle to mark out territory, as a director or film company, or even as an actor, which is no different than today. In order to keep working, they had to produce a film that was likeable and in demand. The best way to accomplish these goals is to provide the audience with something they are looking for: affirmation, happy endings, or an answer. Another way is to set the work out as unique on a technical level, to innovate. (Bernardi, 15). “*The Birth of a Nation* represents two historical landmarks: an incomparable racial assault and a major breakthrough for subsequent filmmaking technique,” (Bernardi, 15). Griffith’s film was made in a time of uncertainty. America was facing World War 1, race

relations were still raw and the labor movement was in full swing (Williams, 31-33). These events could be why “for obscure reasons, narrative works considered landmarks in American culture for technical innovation and/or popular success have often importantly involved the portrayal of African Americans,” (Bernardi, 15). As, Bernardi asks, “might it be that some affinity exists between breakthrough productions and national allegories in which the definition of national character simultaneously involves a co-defining anti-type?” (Bernardi, 15). The director may have had something important to say and to have his commentary heard he must make his work stand apart from the rest, while still conforming to ideologies of the viewers. It was important to them to innovate and mark out territory on which to make a stand. It could mean the difference between hanging up their scene markers and leaving an indelible mark on history. A brief examination of the history of cinema shines a clearer light on such motives.

Daniel Czitrom asserts that the film business began in New York City during the-turn-of-the-century, an idea that is widely accepted (Czitrom, 525). From there, the cinema slowly evolved from “low brow entertainments” provided in nickelodeons into complex photoplays, like D.W. Griffith’s works, which gave rise to the lavish movie house (May, 60-64). Nickelodeon theaters were comprised of “film vending machines” in dirty store fronts located in lower class, if not seedy, neighborhoods. In addition, they were usually not family friendly (Czitrom, 530). Alongside this presentation of early film, “roughly from 1896 to 1906...movies became the single most popular act in American vaudeville, the latest in a long line of visual novelty acts—*living picture* tableaux, lantern slides, shadowography—that could easily be fit neatly into an established format,” (Czitrom, 530). Owners cleaned up their establishments in an attempt appeal to women, another demographic that meant greater profits, while others stuck with vice as

familiar and guaranteed income, (Czitrom, 527). Whichever path was taken in an effort to build business and make a greater profit, neither was without challenges.

“The tremendous popularity of the movies brought forth demands for stricter regulation,” (Czitrom, 530). Censorship and reform groups turned their efforts to locking down what could be portrayed in movies, (Czitrom, 532). “Complaints from clergy warning against the moral dangers posed by movies, and, between the lines, afraid of the competition that this new entertainment posed,” (Czitrom, 537). Soon, “the political, legal, and economic wrangles surrounding the nascent movie business in New York City established the template for the ownership and control of the mature industry, as well as the basic pattern for film censorship,” (Czitrom, 525). This statement speaks to the notion that filmmakers needed to conform their stories to ideologies. “The process that determined which entertainments were licensed and which were licentious had always been fundamentally political and volatile,” (Czitrom, 526). It’s difficult to understand what an enormous impact this has on filmmaking if the histories surrounding a film are not understood. Fundamentally, “battles over the regulation of representation need to be understood against the historical backdrop of urban cultural politics,” (Czitrom, 525). “To thrive, an entrepreneur had to negotiate a treacherous terrain that included autocratic police captains, ever-vigilant moral reformers, outraged clerics, and organized citizens,” (Czitrom, 528). Facing such odds, it is of no surprise that films, from their beginnings to present day, are often labeled controversial. History provides a narrative from which to view films like those Griffith made, and a series of examinations from multiple perspectives. In the time that *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* were made, the ideas expressed in them were widely held as fact.

“While the movie men looked to rationalize their business with the imprimatur of cultural respectability, the reformers saw an opportunity to uplift the cultural life of the audiences,” (Czitrom, 546). Much like the *uplifters* of *Intolerance*, these reformers meddled into the very heart of cinema, the story itself and the home in which it lived. The ideology of Griffith, his peers, and those shaping the works from outside, was based on the Victorian Moral Code. The Victorian moral code was derived from a 19<sup>th</sup> century construction of behavior for all classes, races and genders. For example, women could not go out anywhere unaccompanied, or races did not mix sexually and what specifically is a *race* or ethnicity (Ross, 42). Through the use of such codes, cinema was quickly adopted as a tool and put to use to serve a “Progressive Era vision of film as political propaganda,” (Ross, 51). Film as propaganda is not linked to any single period. Traditionally, however, this appears to be the point where “filmmaking seemed to have become fashionable among liberal reformers,” (Ross, 52). There was a long list of social foibles that groups spent their time attempting to mend in all of humanity, like a modern crusade waged mostly by housewives and clergy. “Most objections centered around excesses in scenes dealing with overt sexuality, prostitution, drug use, and overly explicit depiction of murder and robbery,” (Czitrom, 546).

In their vision they saw that “film could serve the interests of the middle class and of the film industry by appealing to a broader audience by using virtuous calls for reform,” (Ross, 52). They also saw that “going to a movie meant much more than merely watching the screen. It was a total experience that immersed the fans directly in the life they saw in celluloid...For a brief period during the day or evening, the happy ending was theirs, too,” (May, 147). Reformers saw clearly that “whatever their political message...films penetrated the social fabric even further than did muckraking journalists by tapping fantasy as well as reality,” (Ross, 52).

“The political role of film was potentially as threatening to society as were its challenges to a Victorian moral code,” (Ross, 47). The cinema had evolved into quite a powerful tool in the vast scope and reach it provided to those who could afford or knew how to make films. In this light, money and power appear to be at the heart of film productions. This phenomena is a curious point of examination for many theorists, and “reflection on film and other forms of popular culture place enormously sensitive resources for practical reasoning at the disposal of students of politics and society. Film has become one of the most visible, pervasive, and widely consumed media of representation in our time,” (Williams, 29). Clyde Taylor reiterates this in his article “The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema” (contained in *The Birth of Whiteness*, edited by Daniel Bernardi): “the movie was one of the most potent social agencies in America,” (Bernardi, 15). Naturally, any group seeking leverage would want to make use of such a tool. At the-turn-of-the-century, filmmaking was put to a somewhat holistic use, encompassing not only the stories told, but the atmosphere in which they were told, (Czitrom, 539).

While, “motion pictures seemed to offer secular salvation: the classless seating and sexual mingling of both sexes in a former lower-class arena suggested a break from formality...a place where people could presumably mingle on equal terms,” this did not include interracial comingling (May 166). It is evident that race was and had been an issue by the time Griffith made his films. Regarding *The Birth of a Nation*, Steven J. Ross states that “it is an important story both for the vision it provides of how entertainment can deliver social problems to the public, and for the historical portrait it paints of America just after the turn of the century,” (Ross, 43). *The Birth of a Nation* serves as a barometer of societal issues going on in the early twentieth-century.

Although Griffith “saw himself as *above politics* and portraying feelings *bred in the bone*,” he cannot truly escape it as his film shows (May, 67). Despite his assertion that his films were not intended to be part of some grand political movement, “Griffith’s artistry had expressed the aesthetics and social goals of a great movement,” (May, 94). His portrayals of blacks are the largest example. Griffith’s film was “deeply patterned along the lines of a strong American tradition of political demonology,” (Williams, 33). In *The Birth of a Nation*, he demonizes blacks and the north as the cause of suffering which he depicts the whites of the south experiencing. “*The Birth of a Nation* instantly became the object of compelling national and international attention for all classes at the same socio-historical moment. The outcry against the film’s racism, led by African American activists, was also massive,” (Bernardi, 15). These activists included groups such as the NAACP (Bernardi, 18). In essence, this says that it gave a place for all classes of the white patriarchy to stand upon common ground and make their case. Taylor’s essay backs up this assertion: “If the work is an epic, which means among other things that it elaborates a theme of national unity, then it goes without saying that this unity must rest on the basis of White values, particularly the hatred of miscegenation. If *The Birth of a Nation* is an epic, it is an epic of White supremacy,” and also when he says, the film’s purpose “is the unification of national sentiment around the theme of miscegenation as a threat to *civilization*,” (Bernardi, 19, 22). Whether this is Griffith’s admitted intention or not, it has left a legacy of complications.

One example of complications created by *The Birth of a Nation* is in how “cinema studies has charged its historical claim from the starting point of Griffith’s movie—almost a myth of origin—there is an inclination to unburden this grand originating moment from any discourse on race relations in the United States,” (Bernardi, 16). According to Taylor, if theorists, students and

teachers of cinema engaged the film on such a level and “were the discussion of the social implications of Griffith’s racist movie to intrude to the fullest impact possible, then the discipline of film studies might lose its status, might enact its own *undisciplining*,” (Bernardi, 16). I think this is a bit extreme, but others clearly do not. In order to avoid such an outcome as the undisciplining of film studies, there has been an active attempt of “aesthetic masking of ideology,” (Bernardi, 19). In other words, there has been an avoidance of the topic. The ways that this has been done is many. “Some simply accept Griffith’s denial of racist intent. Some specify the *unconsciousness* of his racism. Others argue that Griffith’s portrait of the Reconstruction era and the role of Black people in it is essentially accurate...[and] that Griffith’s posture towards Blacks, and its easy acceptance by mass audiences, attests to the conventional racist thought of his time,” (Bernardi, 17). Also, “by segregating the issue of racism for bracketed attention, the real issue—White Supremacy—is avoided,” (Bernardi, 20). In addition, “as propaganda, *The Birth of a Nation* accomplished the significant feat of transposing the national myth of the South into terms congruent with the mythology of White American nationalism,” (Bernardi, 20). Theorists separate the issue of race and the alteration of historical events in the above mentioned ways in order to preserve the importance of the film to the discipline of cinema studies. They don’t want to release its technical and historical accomplishment to posterity because of the inconvenience of racism.

While he acknowledges the topic of bracketing, Taylor himself believes that “Griffith’s racism *was* unconscious—but all racism, as a group psychosis, is unconscious, at least of its motivating sources,” (Bernardi, 25). I think he makes a valid point and I also feel that it does not have a negating impact on the importance of the work historically. In fact, I think it only serves to give further perspectives from which to think about film in general. At the time of the film, it

was widely acceptable to believe the things about Blacks that were portrayed in his films. This has implications over multiple disciplines, and enriches the study of film within the discipline itself. For example, in watching the film, the first question I had was about these images: were there no Black actors available to take the parts? What was the need of the *blackface* makeup? Taylor's article and the other sources I reviewed helped to answer those questions. Griffith claimed "he could not find any qualified Negro actors in the Los Angeles area and, further, that he wanted to cast from his own company," (Bernardi, 26). Furthermore, it is accepted, as Taylor asserts, that the reason for the use of *blackface* (also called burnt cork) was because: "under the mask of racial and moral darkness, hidden desires could be exercised and indulged in public performance, even glamorized and applauded," (Bernardi, 26). This means that Whites felt that the makeup made the portrayals of Blacks *safe*. They felt that their actions were clear of racial intent through not using an actual person of the race they pantomimed. Blackface comes from pre-Civil War entertainments, (Rogin, 5). Rogin gives a different interpretation of the use of blackface as a means for groups who were not considered White, to lay claim to being a part of the White race, such as Jews and Irish. By painting their faces black with burnt cork, they could show the literal contrast of their skin and make the case that they were white-skinned. Instead of embracing the similar sufferings of their ethnicities (Irish, Blacks and Jews experienced similar prejudices from the dominant group), these groups sought acceptance and inclusion with the Anglo-Saxon protestant dominant group (Rogin 1-34).

Taylor sites three terms that could be used to explain the phenomenon of blackface representation: negrofetishism, negrophobia and negrophilia. All of these terms surround reactions or symptoms of a psyche preoccupied by Blackness in a "complex fusion of desire and aversion, projection and concealment," (Bernardi, 27). Taylor suggests that viewers of Griffith's

film may dismiss the racism of the work by excusing the director as having “never thought about actual Negroes, so caught up was he with them as auxiliary, fetish instruments for his private reveries,” (Bernardi, 28). The openness of his portrayal of the Blacks in the film is a clue to how acceptable was such sentiment toward the race. It also suggests that there was a preoccupation and curiosity about them, benign or otherwise.

Though the intention of the portrayals may be dismissed as benign at the time of its creation, “*The Birth of a Nation*, like the sensational Radicalism that conceived it, reflects a virulent episode in Southern consciousness, more than an aberration but less than a permanent fixture,” (Bernardi, 32). For instance, the film raises the Ku Klux Klan to the level of heroes. “The KKK is a Christian secret society,” which makes use of “fundamentalist syncretism fusing the Bible with Scottish rites into American Christian fascism,” to lay claim to White supremacy over other races (Bernardi, 21). Their existence is no coincidence. They arose out of the realization that “American freedom was born from American slavery,” (Rogin, 1). Neither is it coincidence that “*The Birth of a Nation* touched a sensitive political nerve. In its message, the film called for an alliance of the common folk from the formerly warring sections to overthrow a tyranny based on Northern commercial corruption” making use of its display of the good old south, home of “ordered paradise,” (May, 81-82). The film was meant to bond Whites in a common vision of where the nation was headed and how they would bring it there.

Both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* have a “strong temptation towards historical amnesia,” (Williams, 31). What this means is that it chooses a specific perspective from which to tell its story, leaving out other opinions and events that may negate such a perspective. For example, “Griffith located [U.S.] origins in the movie. Through his film, he literally claimed to be bringing a new history into being,” (Williams, 31). Griffith believed that “film did not attempt

to render reality; it sought to transcend it,” (Williams, 31). Quoting Michael Rogin who quotes Griffith about his film, the “project thus initially rendered cinematic representation ‘not an avenue to history but its replacement’,” (Williams, 31). He was purposely altering the perception people would have about the historical events of his film, making use of the old adage that history is written by the dominant group, used as a tool of glorification and subversion, (Williams, 42). This can be a very dangerous thing to do.

Disregarding the consequences of divisive and ahistoric representations leads to what Williams sites as a “grievous misunderstanding of America’s own historical roots,” (Williams, 41). “The obvious historical inversion and grievous misunderstanding, indeed amnesia, about America’s own revolutionary experience has worsened through the period since Wilson’s presidency,” (Williams, 32). The results of such can be seen as recent as this year. For example, Michele Bachmann’s gaffe in New Hampshire about the battles of Concord and Lexington has provided misinformation to thousands despite it being refuted by national media. Likewise, *The Birth of a Nation* shifts the beginning of the American national myth to “the South instead of colonial New England or the Western Frontier,” and also “shift[s] the core of nationalizing experience...to miscegenation...The issue of Black-White sexual relations, in fact, forms the spine of the text,” (Bernardi, 21). The fear and horror that Flora shows in being pursued by Gus is not just virginal female fear of a conquering man, but fear of the Black race conquering the unsullied bodies of White women, a fear that was spread by White supremacist groups since before the Civil War.

Racism is not all that is presented in films of the time, but may be a symptom of a society seeking a scapegoat for the struggles they experienced. Class struggles, spurred on by the labor movement, were now in focus. Lary May states, “the new middle classes were undergoing a

major political reorientation,” (May, 97). Several decades before Griffith’s films, an entire group of people were freed and made their way onto the labor market as wage earning workers. This increase in workers would lead to a decrease in available jobs. Likewise, it would lead to a lowering of wages, because they could get those desperate for work to work for less. Race then becomes an issue of competition between varying groups. Racism becomes the answer, for some, as to why they may be out of work or struggling in the job they do have. It is ironic that Griffith created the film *Intolerance* just after attempting to rewrite history and negatively impacting race relations himself through *The Birth of a Nation*.

Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* left a “tradition of national self-understanding and representation,” through signs of supremacy and place (Williams, 30). However, racial biased groups were not the only groups having an impact on film. As Ross writes, “early censors feared the political content of films as much as their occasional sexual content,” (Ross, 47). Lary May adds to this with, “the dominant motif for films set in the modern era echoed the beliefs of the vice crusaders: women were in danger and had to be protected,” (May, 79). The vice crusaders were groups of ideologues who petitioned to have moral law rule American society (May, 60-95). Instead of going against the censors, “using images of sin and salvation,” a filmmaker such as Griffith decided to go along with the limitations and create “an experience that could convert the soul from evil to good,” as was desired (May, 71).

As mentioned before, activist groups protested Griffith’s films as much as he used them to promote his own influences. In this way, motion pictures are used as activism (Ross, 45).

“Conflicts that challenged the foundations of society found their way into the cinema as film companies seized on the news in the headlines for rich melodramatic and comic material. They also documented contemporary events,” (Ross, 45). Activists with enough clout could control or

influence the content of a film. A person with enough know how could also produce a film to serve their political ends, especially if it ran with a strain of the dominant ideology. “The fictions of those actual conflicts told a richer story about the climate of the period...allowed an injection of fantasy an ideology,” (Ross, 45). The grain of truth with the grain of fantasy helped to make the commentary more lasting in the minds of the audience. This impacted the labor and class movements much like race relations. “Controversy over the issues of social protest spilled over into the pages of early trade magazines...their reviews testify to the lively arguments over workers’ rights, class conflict, political graft, and sexual politics,” (Ross, 55). Films presented images of restless Americans, stuck in unrewarding jobs with little compensation or protection (May, 102-103). Within the flickering images were cultural signposts of paramount importance about how entertainment shapes the political issues affecting the lives of moviegoers. They are a reminder of the capacity of film to explore the problems of society and lessen their threat while still suggesting the need for change,” (Ross, 54). The point of view of the laborer was not the only perspective lauded in films. “The central question in their lives was how to find a morality appropriate to the corporate order...as employees and managers of large organizations, they followed the new nationalism of Theodore Roosevelt, believing that well-run corporations and professional organizations might serve the public interest,” (97). The elite were using film to promote the capitalist pecking order in a nationalistic manner that would keep the status quo and still satisfy and dissipate dubious sentiments held by their employees.

Theaters themselves were a sign of American democracy. They provided a space where ethnicities and sexes mingled, regardless of class. However, Blacks were segregated. Although Ross is speaking of the 1920s, sometime after Griffith’s movies were made, his statement is still true of the previous decade of film: “The creation of these seemingly democratic centers of

entertainment...exacted political costs that went far beyond the price of a ticket,” (Ross, 66). Segregation of races in theaters was only one social issue that was faced by theater goers of the time (Ross, 77). Much like blackface, the cinema provided a way for groups not considered White to mingle with Whites and prove they were White too. One other way they did this was to share in the cross-class issues that films like *Intolerance* presented. However, this was not the goal of theater owners or filmmakers. “The goal of these cross-class fantasies was not to integrate the classes in any lasting way, but to increase movie attendance and revenues by drawing them into the same theaters,” (Ross, 66). Here to, Ross’s statement can reflect on the examples of the 1910s. Griffith’s films hit on sensitive issues just the same as the next generation of film, in an effort to make money (Ross, 75).

In closing, “producers may have homogenized the politics of their movies, but not the political perspectives of all moviegoers,” (Ross, 86). While critics believed that “all dramas should portray cause and effect, which showed the ethical order lying at the core of the universe. Subject matter should be drawn from *high art*: formal literature and history rather than cheap melodrama or vaudeville,” it appears that personal gains were more the driving force behind what made its way onto film (May, 65). “Although his films were not explicitly political, they did express a broad cultural outlook which appealed to the *producers* of all classes and backgrounds,” rousing them to response (May, 78).

Film of the era continued with the same nuances, as Ross explains, “Hollywood continued to deal with class issues throughout the 1920s, but it presented its class visions in the form of cross-class fantasies rather than riskier labor-capital features,” (Ross, 79). Labor features had been powerful tools that helped to continued and excite the movement. This was counter to the ideology of the power structure of the time. Loading their money into the productions, those

with the cash and influence were able to lean films toward their vision for American society. This is not to say that all films served those in power. After all, not every person can be paid to ignore their values. As Taylor describes, “vast social, political, and economic interests have accumulated around the aesthetic as an institutionalized discursive history, much of it around the site of the established art-culture system...this discourse in effect throws protective skirts around all sorts of political ideologies and nostrums couched within the representational form of *art*, not simply because it loves them, but because it must protect them in order to protect its own authority,” (Bernardi, 33). Taylor is speaking about cinema studies adherents, but I think this quote can also serve the patterns of society at large in regards to the films their culture has given rise to and those they hold dear.

It is important to keep in mind that “the political implications of cinematic representations in America’s evolution possess more significance for the world as whole than tends to be appreciated,” (Williams, 30). Exploring these representations should not be feared. In review of the thoughts on such films, I feel it is possible to still appreciate the technical and historical achievement of a film despite the depictions that may affront the viewer’s sensibilities. Therefore, “Griffith’s film confronts us with the possibility of a work being powerfully persuasive, affecting and aesthetically rewarding, while at the same time saturated with noxious conceits and ideas: beautiful yet evil. Cinema has established the possibility more vocally than other forms,” (Bernardi, 33). Even in the case of current film, a viewer should have the “realization that a work may be artful and pernicious at the same time,” (Bernardi, 34).