The Birth of a Nation

*The Birth of a Nation* is a 1915 silent film by D. W. Griffith, known equally for its cinematic innovation and for the social controversy it has caused, becoming one of the most debated American films in history. The story is based on written works by Thomas Dixon Jr. that aimed to refute the pre-eminent narrative on race at the time, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Beginning in the pre-Civil-War era and continuing through Reconstruction, the story of *The Birth of a Nation* depicts the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic group indispensable in protecting white society from black infiltration. At three hours and $100,000, the movie’s length and budget significantly exceeded any previous American film. Revolutionary not only in scope and visual technique, it was also the first film to be distributed with a uniquely compiled score. Modernist filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin cited Griffith in having influenced their montage technique (Baldwin 65), although Eisenstein decried the idea of forgiving the film’s racism in light of its cinematic value (Platt 81). Stokes proposes (129-70) that just as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in a sense begat *The Birth of a Nation*, new forms of protest were born in the famous and fervent opposition to the film, and the fledging NAACP significantly strengthened itself through the battle. Still widely cited as a document of early twentieth-century racism, *Birth of a Nation* also continues to be seen as an essential work in the advancement of narrative motion pictures as a fine art — for its eloquence in putting a near-exhaustive array of cutting-edge photography and editing techniques (honed to some degree in Griffith’s 1908-1914 shorts for the Biograph Company) in the utmost possible service of story-telling.

**Media:**

NAACP picket outside theatre in New York City protesting *The Birth of a Nation*

Advice sheet distributed to theatres upon the release of *The Birth of a Nation* stating that “negroes” are not to be admitted to screenings “under any circumstances”.

Poster advertising *The Birth of a Nation* in Seattle

NEGROES OPPOSE FILM.; Ex-Service Men Say "Birth of a Nation" Misrepresents Them. (May 7, 1921) New York Times

**References and Further Reading:**

Baldwin, K. A. (2002) *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain‬:*

Platt, D. (1992) *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from “The Birth of a Nation” to “Judgement at Nuremberg”,* Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

Stokes, M. (2008) *D.W. Griffith’s ‘The Birth of a Nation’: A History of ‘The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time’,* New York: Oxford University Press.

Jeremy Harley

Independent researcher