

## Document Citation

Title	<b>A leap forward that tugs backward</b>
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Source	<i>New York Tribune</i>
Date	2011 Nov 27
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	AR24
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Griffith, D. W. (1875-1948), LaGrange, Kentucky, United States Racism in motion pictures
Film Subjects	The birth of a nation, Griffith, D. W., 1915



p-24 AR

FILM

VIDEO | Dave Kehr

# A Leap Forward That Tugs Backward

**A**T least one eternal truth can be abstracted from D. W. Griffith's 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation": people can be very, very advanced in some areas, and very, very backward in others.

A motion picture of unprecedented scale, ambition and formal assurance, "The Birth of a Nation" was the first to open at a legitimate theater on Broadway (the Liberty, absorbed not long ago into the franchised chaos of 42nd Street) with reserved seats, a 40-piece orchestra and an appropriately elevated ticket price: a shockingly high \$2, at a time when a typical admission charge was 15 cents. Feature films had barely evolved out of the one- and two-reel attractions shown in storefront nickelodeons when Griffith proposed his sudden great leap. Eight months in the making, at a then-staggering cost of \$110,000, his film was a vast spectacle that ran well over three hours, employed the services of "18,000 people and 3,000 horses" (at least according to a hyperbolic preview in *The New York Times*), and was built on an intricate interplay of huge historical panoramas and intimate dramatic scenes.

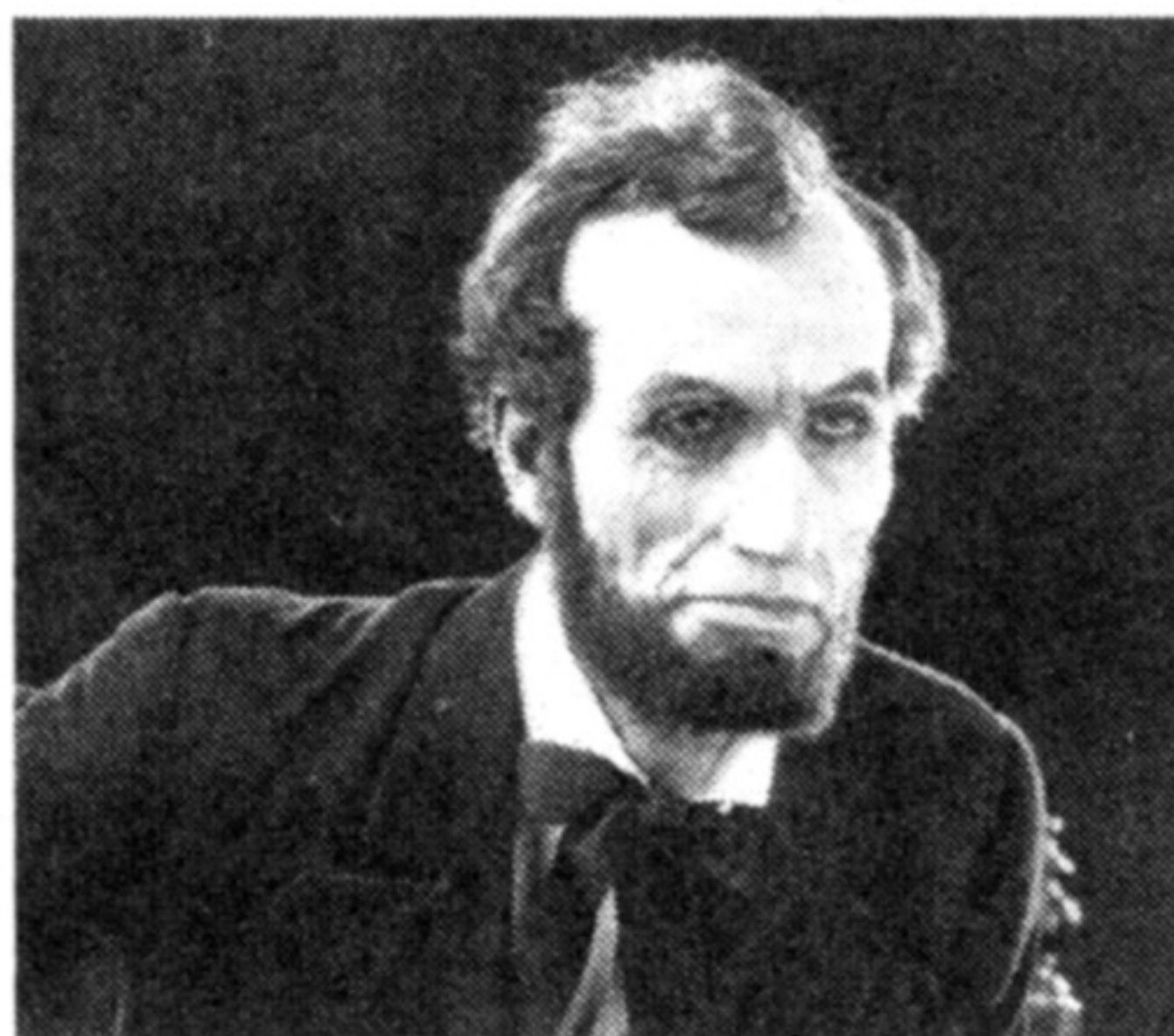
"In dramatic and photographic technique it is beyond our present-day criticism," wrote an anonymous reviewer in the trade publication *Motion Picture News*. "The true greatness of this production lies in its emotional appeal, an appeal so forceful that it lifts you out of your seat and thrills you as the speaking stage never did."

Griffith's unprecedented accomplishment yielded an unprecedented hit. "The Birth of a Nation" played for 804 consecutive performances at the Liberty, breaking the record for any production yet seen on Broadway, and went on to similar success in the rest of the country. By 1922, the film had been seen by more than five million people in the United States.

As it happens, we possess these figures only because Griffith's lawyer offered them as evidence of the film's wide acceptance when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sought to have "The Birth of a Nation" banned in the



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Top, a scene from D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," and above, Joseph Henabery, cast as Abraham Lincoln.

state of New York. The same film that had, in effect, established motion pictures as a major art form was also, as Walter H. White of the NAACP described it in a 1922 letter to the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York: "A glorification and exaltation of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization avowedly for the purpose of creating racial and religious prejudice against various elements of American citizens. . . . It is a malicious misrepresentation of colored people, depicting them as moral perverts. It arouses sharp antagonisms that embitter American citizens against each other."

Even now, in Kino International's fine new Blu-ray edition, "The Birth of a Nation" continues to thrill and confound, to exalt and appall in equal measure. Griffith's racial caricatures were crude in 1915; seen today, as the film approaches its 100th anniversary, these images may seem

more ludicrous than dangerous (watermelon plays a major role), but in reminding us of how far we have come, they remind us how far we have yet to go.

Paradoxically, the overriding theme of "The Birth of a Nation" is one of unification, of the harmonizing of diverse elements — social and regional, political and personal, North and South, male and female — into an original entity called the United States of America. The metaphor embedded in the title — that of childbirth — is played out in both the film's structure and story line, as a series of opposites come together to produce a new whole.

The film is divided, more or less equally, into two parts, the first set during the Civil War and the second during Reconstruction. The story centers on two families, the Stoneman clan of Pennsylvania, whose head, Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) is the abolitionist Leader of the House; and the slave-owning Camerons of South Carolina; two symmetrical couples are produced: the eldest son of the Cameron family, Ben (Henry B. Walthall) falls in love with Stoneman's daughter Elsie (Lillian Gish), while the elder Stoneman son (Elmer Clifton) is enamored of the elder Cameron daughter, Margaret (Miriam Cooper).

Unity requires sacrifice, not only on the battlefield (the climax of Part I is the charge led by Ben Cameron, "the Little Colonel," against a Union line), but through two parallel acts of martyrdom: the assassination of Lincoln (Joseph Henabery) by a

crazed Southerner (the young director Raoul Walsh, as a memorably menacing John Wilkes Booth), and the suicide of the younger Cameron daughter (Mae Marsh), who leaps to her death from a promontory rather than submit to the advances of Gus (the white actor Walter Long, his face darkened by make-up), who is identified in the credits as a "renegade Negro."

Ben's battlefield heroism in the first half is echoed in the second by his exploits as founder and leader of a paramilitary group he calls the "Ku Klux Klan" — portrayed here as gallant knights out of a Walter Scott tale, called upon to combat the excesses of newly freed black slaves manipulated by power-hungry white politicians. For Griffith, it is also a combat of acting styles, with Walthall performing in the subtle, understated manner that was one of Griffith's contributions to early film, and his opponents emoting in the grand, gestural manner of the 19th-century stage.

All of these narrative threads come together at the film's electrifying final sequence, which finds Griffith cutting with furious precision between two planes of action: a house in town where it is now Elsie's turn to defend her honor (against a "mulatto" associate of her father) and a cabin in the countryside, where most of the Cameron family has taken refuge with a pair of Union veterans — "former enemies," as an intertitle puts it, "united in defense of their Aryan birthright."

Executed in what a contemporary review called "the high and peculiar Griffith tempo," the sequence still makes the heart race, and points the way to the even more complex achievement of the multilayered montage in "Intolerance," which Griffith would create the next year. To find yourself inwardly cheering the Ku Klux Klan, as Ben's troops ride to the rescue, is a discomfiting experience but also a valuable one. More than any other movie, "The Birth of a Nation" demonstrates how thoroughly form can trump content in the cinema — how even our deepest convictions can succumb to the power of the moving image. (*Kino, Blu-ray* \$39.95, *DVD* \$29.95, *not rated*)