

Critique of *The Birth of a Nation*

On February 8, 1915, D.W. Griffith's controversial silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, premiered in Los Angeles, California. Released under the title, *The Clansman*, the movie debuted only after Griffith sought an injunction from the court. Although local censors approved the film, city council members responded to concerns about the racist nature of the picture by ordering it suppressed.

American director D. W. Griffith's silent film about the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, one of the most controversial films of all time because of its demeaning portrayal of blacks.

The Birth of a Nation was first released on February 8, 1915. The film's depictions of blacks as idling and brutish sparked a massive wave of protests from thousands of African Americans. The explosive controversy set off by the film revealed Hollywood's power to reflect and to shape public attitudes about race, while it set the stage for what would be a decades-long struggle to improve the portrayal of blacks on film (see *Film, Blacks in American*). Unprecedentedly long-three hours (and 12 reels of film)-The Birth of a Nation chronicles the fall of the South during the Civil War (1861-1865) and the reemergence of white political domination over the interracial state governments of the Reconstruction era.

In the film's final scenes, the Ku Klux Klan, described in a *New York Times* review as "a company of avenging spectral crusaders sweeping along ... moonlit roads," takes revenge for the attempted rape of two white women by black men. The film is based on the racist novels of Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*. It rushes through visually striking Civil War panoramas and melodramatic episodes about the plight of Southern soldiers and heroically depicts the rise of the Klan, all the while portraying blacks as lazy and weak or violent and dangerous.

Griffith's innovative filmmaking techniques delighted critics and drew a national audience deeply enmeshed in a culture of lynchings, Jim Crow segregation, and widespread anti-black sentiment. In its first 11 months in New York City alone, the film sold an estimated 3 million tickets. On Thanksgiving night in 1915, 25,000 Klansmen paraded through the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, to celebrate the opening of the movie. And when Griffith, the son of a Confederate soldier, presented his work to President Woodrow Wilson (reportedly the first screening of a feature film in the White House), the President allegedly declared, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Black groups, while aware that a public controversy would only boost ticket sales, were quick to react to the film's blatant racism. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent copies of a scathing *New Republic* review to more

than 500 newspapers and issued strong warnings that screening the film could spark rioting. The NAACP even managed to have some of the movie's harshest moments deleted, including a scene proposing that blacks be sent back to Africa as a remedy for the nation's ills.

But the efforts of the black organizations were drowned out by the film's runaway box-office success. Perhaps the protesters' biggest victories lay in rallying African Americans around a common cause, and in increasing awareness of the recently created NAACP and other black political groups. While the film is still praised by critics as a cinematic masterpiece, it has also become an important object lesson in how the relationship of popular media to public opinion can perpetuate racial stereotypes.

SOURCE: <http://www.africanamericans.com/BirthofANation.htm>