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The Motivations and Manipulations Behind *The Birth of a Nation*

By 1915, the United States could feel the long-term repercussions of the Civil War and Reconstruction as race relations suffered setbacks under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. According to Thomas R. Cripps's 1963 essay "The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture, *Birth of a Nation*," "Residential segregation was increasing; the ballot box was a distant memory to many Negroes; Jim Crow had become the custom in public accommodations" (111). Into this increasingly divisive tense atmosphere, D. W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that decades after its release inspired writer Arlene Croce to call it "the first, the most stunning and durably audacious of all American film masterpieces, and the most wonderful movie ever made" (qtd. in Rogin 250), despite the explicit bigotry it drew from *The Clansman*, "a romantic, angry novel of the fate of the ideals of the antebellum South during Reconstruction" (Cripps 111) written by Thomas Dixon, "a sometime preacher, a professional Southerner, and a fretful Negrophobe" (Cripps 111). "Artistically," Cripps notes, "it was the finest work the cinema had ever produced" (112). Indeed, *Birth's* formal achievements—the refinement of moving, tracking shots, the use of panoramas, and the monumental battle scenes requiring hundreds of extras and massive coordination, to name a few

([www.filmsite.org/birt.html](http://www.filmsite.org/birt.html))—coupled with Griffith’s “gift for making powerful emotional connections” (Rogin 251) easily qualified the film as “the finest work the cinema had ever produced” (Cripps 112). But “Socially,” Cripps continues, “it was reflective of the depth of hostility that many white Americans felt toward Negroes” (112). Sympathetic to white, Southern sensibilities, *Birth* portrayed the notorious Ku Klux Klan as the protector of white virtues under attack from Northern influences during Reconstruction. In the film, the Klan united white Americans “in defense of their common Aryan birthright” (*Birth*)—that is, their supposedly inherent dominance of African Americans, whose enfranchisement and freedom were bucking a traditional hierarchy rooted in subjugation. The film’s ‘happy’ ending speaks volumes: “Hooded and rifle-armed Ku Klux Klansmen greet ‘the next election’ mounted on horseback flank to flank as Reconstruction-era black freedmen cast furtive glances toward a polling place before sinking back into their cabins” (Simmon 104).

In an effort to counter the prevalent racist ideas and social customs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1909 (“NAACP Timeline”) to voice the concerns of the slighted and disenfranchised. After President Wilson sanctioned a federal policy of segregation in 1913, the NAACP launched public protests, but these demonstrations would not be their last. When *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915, the NAACP fought to have the film banned. While the group’s demands went largely unfulfilled as millions across the country viewed a slightly edited version, the NAACP was the first to challenge the film’s content and indict Griffith on its account. Unfortunately, such accusations are not as common as one might think. Too often,

Griffith's defenders praise the director's filmmaking prowess separately from what Elliot Carter coined "the film's detachable content" (qtd. in Simmon 108). Such analyses allow Griffith to shirk his responsibility for *Birth's* deplorable and disturbing content. But as director of the film, he should certainly shoulder some of the blame. But Thomas Dixon is just as, if not more, culpable for *Birth's* intolerant message. By manipulating not only Griffith, but also friends in the highest places in Washington, Dixon launched a compelling promotional campaign that brought millions to theaters in an effort, as he described it, "to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in the audience into a good Democrat" (qtd. in Cripps 115)! It is this "presentation of history" that differentiates Griffith from Dixon. Griffith desires, as *Birth's* heroine Lillian Gish recalls, "to tell the truth about the War between the States" (42). Unfortunately, his version of history is informed by his upbringing in rural Kentucky during Reconstruction, which undoubtedly led to his portrayal of the Klan as a positive, unifying force. Still, Griffith's motivation to recreate history seems naïve in comparison to Dixon's boldfaced plans to spread his bigotry to the widest possible audience by deliberately distorting the truth. While both men remain responsible for their collective portrayal of "Negroes in the worst possible light" (Cripps 113) in *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith hopes, albeit rather simplemindedly, to enrich the country by preserving its history, while Dixon openly seeks to indoctrinate audiences with his racist agenda.

Since his birth in 1875 on the Kentucky farm where he was raised, Griffith was unconsciously preparing to make *Birth*. His father, Jake Griffith, who was "wounded in mythic exploits during the Civil War" (Rogin 258), proved to be a highly influential

figure in young D. W. 's life. "About the first thing I remember," Griffith told a reporter after *Birth's* release, "was my father's sword" (qtd. in Rogin 275). He continues:

...he would put it on to amuse me. The first time I saw that sword was when my father played a joke on an old Negro, once his slave but who with the heads of four other families refused to leave the plantation; those four families were four important factors in keeping the Griffith family poor.

Down South the men usually wore their hair rather long; this Negro...had seen Northern men with their close-cropped hair; when he came back he got hold of my brother and cut his hair close, Northern-style.

When father saw this he pretended to be enraged; he went into the house, donned his old uniform, buckled on this sword....

Then, drawing his sword, he went through the technical cuts and thrusts and slashes, threatening the darkey all the time with being cut up into mincemeat.

The old Uncle was scared pale, and I took it seriously myself until a wink and a smile from father enlightened me." (qtd. in Rogin 275)

In this recounting, Griffith's father and his joke become allegorical in their representations of post-war Southern sentiments, which engendered the hatred and bigotry embodied by the Ku Klux Klan. Griffith mentions that four black families refused to leave the plantation and, thus, kept "the Griffith family poor." He fails to note, however, how his father was "a wanderer, drinker, gambler, and storyteller" (Rogin 258) who "came to rest at home only in defeat and at the end of his life" (Rogin 258). This phenomenon of denied responsibility and reallocated blame fostered the Klan at its inception and justified the group's aim of reclaiming white supremacy over the South from freedmen, who became scapegoats for the radical white South's economic and social crises. *Q*

Griffith's account of his brother's unwanted haircut succinctly describes the South's resentment of Northern influence. He describes the former slave who, inspired by Northern fashions, takes the other Griffith son's long mane and "cut[s] his hair close,

Northern-style.” In essence, the hair represents Southern traditions, which are severed by a combination of Northern Republican, carpetbagger influences and the emancipation of the slaves. In a disturbing turn, Jake Griffith puts on his old Confederate uniform and threatens “the darkey all the time with being cut up into mincemeat” with his old saber.

Jake’s actions are strikingly reminiscent of the tactics used by the Klan at that time, which included posing as spirits of Confederate soldiers returning from the battlefields. By acting this way, Jake Griffith unwittingly (although this cannot be certain) informed D. W. of the supposed righteousness of white supremacy, and the long-term effects of his influence are evident in his son’s first memory, which references these radical white Southern theories.

Key to understanding the radical white mentality after the Civil War is the South’s resentment of Reconstruction policies. Following the war, “the 10 remaining Southern states (Tennessee had been readmitted to the Union in 1866) were divided into five military districts” (“Ku Klux Klan”), and their state governments were “generally Republican in character and were governed by political coalitions of blacks, carpetbaggers (Northerners who had gone into the South), and scalawags (Southerners who collaborated with the blacks and carpetbaggers)” (“Ku Klux Klan”). Many Southern whites resented these developments, feeling they were forced upon them.

According to Griffith, it was the memory of his father’s sword that inspired *Birth*, and in his own words, “*The Birth of a Nation* owes more to my father than it does to me” (qtd. in Rogin 274). In a self-penned article entitled “My Early Life,” Griffith recalls, “As I started the book [*The Clansman*], stronger and stronger came to my mind the traditions I had learned as a child, all that my father had told me. The sword I told you

about became a flashing vision” (qtd. in Rogin 275 ). In a separate account of *Birth*'s genesis, Griffith tells that when his assistant brought him a copy of *The Clansman*, he “skipped quickly through the book until I got to the part about the Klansmen, who according to no less than Woodrow Wilson, ran to the rescue...I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying” (qtd. in Rogin 250)....

Griffith has a record of justifying the content of *Birth* by invoking the oft-illusory benedictions of President Woodrow Wilson, who was in the White House during the filming and release of *Birth*. This is not to say, however, that Wilson was some kind of Lincoln-esque figure who Griffith had simply misrepresented. Wilson did more during his presidency than perhaps any other post-war president to strain race relations in America by resisting black political and social progress. “Beginning in the Wilson administration, blacks worked in separate rooms and used separate bathrooms,” notes Michael Rogin. “Black political appointees were fired, and those holding civil service positions were downgraded or dismissed as well” (256). And, in his multi-volume *A History of the American People*, published before his presidency, Wilson described the impetus to form the Klan as “the mere instinct of self-preservation” (qtd. in Rogin 253) as Northerners sought to “put the white South under the heel of the black South” (qtd. in Rogin 253). In effect, the South reacted, according to Wilson, to Lincoln's assassination and subsequent Reconstruction policies by suppressing black independence with the Klan, “a suppression necessary for the South to prosper” (Rogin 253).

In his depiction of Southern socio-economic problems after the war, Wilson makes his Southern sympathies perfectly clear, painting a rather rosy picture of the Klan as a necessary, regulatory force. His version of American history is, however, not

surprising when considering Wilson's own attitudes toward black progress, which he, not completely unlike the Klan, sought to stifle. It is logical that Griffith and Dixon appropriated Wilson's words—Griffith to support *Birth's* message, Dixon to promote the film—to validate the racist themes of *The Birth of a Nation*. In the introductory intertitles before Part Two of the film, which depicts the Klan's rescue of the South from Reconstruction and integration, Griffith quotes Wilson's *History*, including the aforementioned "heel of the black South" line, to set the scene. He supplements these intertitles with one of his own: "This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today" (*Birth*). Actually, this is not the first occasion in the film where Griffith attempts to characterize *Birth* as an accurate, historical account of the era, rather than the fictionalization it really is. In the first part of the film, for example, the intertitle preceding Lincoln's assassination describes the scene as "AN HISTORICAL FACSIMILE" (*Birth*). Later in the film, the same intertitle precedes a scene shows "a legislature with carpetbag and Negro members in overwhelming majority loots the state. Lawlessness runs riot" (Noble 127). These intertitles show Griffith's desire for *Birth* to act as more than simple entertainment and become instead a work "through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future" (Rogin 252). For Griffith, Wilson's quotes reinforce his own misconceptions of Reconstruction, African Americans, and the Klan in that they come from the seemingly irrefutable source of a Princeton history professor-turned-President of the United States.

While Griffith's evocation of Wilson stemmed more from a rather naïve duty to history than any malevolent ambitions, Dixon used Wilson in the basest sense and

exploited the President for his own gain. After *Birth's* premieres in Los Angeles and San Francisco, the film required approval from the highly influential National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures before it played in New York. The NAACP, lacking funds to create its own, counteractive film, shifted its resources toward an effort to censor *Birth* and pressured the Board to act in its favor. While this battle unfolded in New York, Dixon took *Birth* to Washington for a private screening—the first of its kind—before President Wilson, his former professor at Johns Hopkins, and members of his cabinet only two days before the Board took the film under consideration. Wilson granted the viewing, as well as another before the Supreme Court and members of Congress the following evening, as a favor to his former pupil “with the stipulation that there be no publicity” (Cripps 115).<sup>1</sup> After the White House screening, Wilson congratulated Dixon, according to the author’s own accounts of the evening, and remarked that *Birth* was “like writing history with lightning” (qtd. in Carter 133). Before the same screening, Chief Justice Edward White, who apparently attend both evenings, reportedly told Dixon, “I was a member of the Klan, sir.... Through many a dark night, I walked my sentinels’ beat through the ugliest streets of New Orleans with a rifle on my shoulder.... I’ll be there” (qtd. Cripps 115)!

Despite his assurances of confidentiality, “Dixon used Wilson’s endorsement to promote the film for months” (Rogin 252). With the President’s approval in hand, Dixon could rather handily swat away protests made against the film. The NAACP’s efforts were woefully obstructed, as Dixon “had in effect secured the *imprimatur* of the president of the United States” (Cripps 115). Although the group did win some concessions, including the removal of a lynching sequence, the Board voted 15-8 in favor of *Birth*, and

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<sup>1</sup> where is my footnote???

the film opened on March 3, 1915 in New York. Dixon's unscrupulous promotion aided him in two ways. As a collaborator on *Birth*, he stood to reap the benefits of the film's success. But Dixon's position was truly exceptional because "he reluctantly agreed to accept instead of cash a 25 percent interest in the picture" (Gish 43), the largest share ever offered at the time to a screenwriter. By defying the President's trust and subsequently influencing the Board to approve *Birth*, he orchestrated a promotional campaign unparalleled in its scope and impact. His methods further prodded the ire of the NAACP and its allies, resulting in increasingly vociferous protests, most notably in Boston, as the film opened nationwide. Yet Dixon, ever the opportunist, recognized the positive potential of such dissent and used it to his advantage, even remarking in a letter to the associate editor of the Boston-based publication *The Congregationalist and Christian World* that "The silly legal opposition they are giving will make me a millionaire if they keep it up" (qtd. in Cobleigh 81). His prediction came true; *Birth* became the most successful film in history, and Dixon "earned several million dollars as his share" (Gish 43), due in no small part to the controversy stirred by his promotional campaign.<sup>2</sup>

But equally important to Dixon was his opportunity to influence potentially millions of theatergoers with his radical views of white supremacy. His motivation and duplicity are unmistakable in his account of the White House screening of *Birth*, as he told it to Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty:

I didn't dare allow the president to know the real big purpose back of my film—which was to revolutionize Northern sentiment by a presentation of history that would transform every man in the audience into a good Democrat! And make no mistake about it—we are doing just that thing....Every man who comes out of our

<sup>2</sup> *Birth* maintained its title as the most successful film in history until 1937, when Disney released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and stole the crown.

theaters is a Southern partisan for life.... (qtd. in Cripps 115)

But, in order to achieve his goals, Dixon had to first get *Birth* past the Board of Censorship. Obviously, he did not come to Washington in good faith, but rather to “bolster Wilson’s known Southern biases, especially his attitude toward the Negro” (Cripps 115). In doing so, he manipulated out of Wilson what is perhaps the most powerful critical acclaim in the history of film and pushed *Birth* through the Board and into hundreds of theaters. While every person who saw *Birth* was not transformed in the “good Democrat” Dixon envisioned, many were undeniably affected by the film’s heroic treatment of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1915 near Atlanta, Georgia, Colonel William J. Simmons, “inspired by Thomas Dixon’s book *The Clansman* and D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation*” (“Ku Klux Klan”) instigated the reorganization of the Klan, which had diminished in popularity since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1920’s, the Klan experienced a renaissance, with its national membership grew in excess of four million members (“Ku Klux Klan”).<sup>3</sup> Through this resurgence of the Klan, Dixon witnessed the realization of his goal to shift public sentiment toward the white South. His promotional plan, founded through manipulation, allowed him to reach an audience far larger than that of his novel. Enraptured by Griffith’s stunning style, these moviegoers were more easily persuaded, and perhaps even overwhelmed, by the spectacle of *The Birth of a Nation* than by the comparatively bland and poorly executed *The Clansman*. The sensational nature of cinema gave Dixon the unique opportunity to vividly articulate his bigoted concepts to the entire nation, and he exploited his chance for all it was worth.

Although Griffith and Dixon were Southern Democrats and pro-Klan, and both

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<sup>3</sup> The influence of *Birth* upon the Klan can still be felt today, as Klan chapters continue to use the film to recruit new members.

men claimed that *The Birth of a Nation*, in Dixon's words, "teaches our boys the history of our nation" (75), they differed markedly in their respective motivations to create a popular historical epic, which were highlighted by their contrasting evocations of President Wilson. *Birth's* intertitles, along with corroborating, anecdotal evidence, show that Griffith was concerned with historical accuracy in his depictions of the Civil War and Reconstruction. He cited Wilson's *A History of the American People* extensively in the film to support its bigoted content and favorable depiction of the Ku Klux Klan; the President was a credible source, and Griffith, a kind of self-proclaimed historian, recognized its value. While Griffith's choice to portray events with such bias was certainly regrettable, *Birth* was simply American history as he—a Kentuckian born to a Confederate veteran—understood it. While Griffith's limited and skewed knowledge of history does not pardon him for making such a ruthless, hateful film, it does explain how his seemingly admirable intentions to preserve history went terribly awry. Dixon, like Griffith, had gross misconceptions of American history, and the two men shared a belief that the Klan finally united the country by restoring white power. But what separated Dixon from *Birth's* director was his propagandist intent "to revolutionize Northern sentiment." By showing Wilson, a segregationist, the film before its nationwide realize, Dixon guaranteed himself a very persuasive endorsement that would help catapult *Birth* to success and make him a millionaire. He recognized the incendiary nature of the film's content, and he stoked the ensuing flames to gain publicity and lengthen the reach of his racist ideas.

Despite Griffith and Dixon's widely varying motives, they are both responsible for the impact of *Birth*. Griffith's naïveté does not exonerate him, for the images he

created are too powerful to allow a viewer “to portion out *The Birth of a Nation’s* aesthetic pleasures alone” (Simmon 109), and Dixon, whose novel inspired the *Birth* and whose promotional campaign filled theater seats, is also quite culpable due to his manipulations of the White House and moviegoers. In the end, both men made substantial efforts to degrade and vilify African Americans in a booming medium popular throughout the country. Scott Simmons astutely observes how “Movies tempt us by their dynamism to forget that they are artifacts” (105). But in the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film’s spectacle illuminates, for the contemporary viewer, the absurdity of its premises, and the film is today considered “one of the ugliest artifacts of American popular art” (Simmon 105). Unfortunately, such hindsight was unavailable when *Birth* was released, and its humiliation of African Americans only served to further divide the country, contradicting Griffith’s wish to unite it under its history, and Dixon’s hope of bringing together the nation through white domination.

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