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Program for Tuesday March 30th., at 7.30 p.m., Room 318 (Radio Writers' Guild) 2 E. 23rd St., N.Y.  
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D. W. GRIFFITH'S

" THE BIRTH OF A NATION "

Directed by D.W. Griffith for the Epoch Producing Corporation (Griffith and H.E. Aitken).  
Script by Griffith and Frank E. Woods, based on "The Clansmen" and "The Leopard's Spots" by  
the Rev. Thomas Dixon jr. Photographed by G.W. Bitzer. Released February 15, 1915, and  
given its premiere at Clune's (now Philharmonic) Auditorium, Los Angeles. Shooting time: 9 weeks.

The Cast: Ben Cameron, "The Little Colonel" (Henry B. Walthall); Margaret Cameron, the elder  
sister (Miriam Cooper); Flora, the little sister (Mae Marsh); Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish);  
Flora as a child (Violet Wilkey); Dr. Cameron (Spottiswood Aitken); Mrs Cameron (Josephine  
Crowell); The Hon. Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis); Wade Cameron, the second son (Andre Beranger);  
Duke Cameron (Maxfield Stanley); Phil Stoneman (Elmer Clifton); Ted Stoneman (Robert Harron);  
Silas Lynch (George Siegmann); Sen. Charles Sumner (Sam de Grasse); Lydia Brown,  
Lynch's mulatto mistress (Mary Alden); Cyndy, the negro mammy (Jennie Lee); Jake, the faithful  
soul (William DeVaul); Laura Keane, the actress at Ford's theatre (Olga Grey); Abraham  
Lincoln (Joseph Henaberry); John Wilkes Booth (Raoul Walsh); General U.S. Grant (Donald Crisp);  
General Robert E. Lee (Howard Gaye); Gus, a renegade negro (Walter Long - who also appears as a  
Union soldier); Jeff, the blacksmith (Wallace Reid); White Arm Joe, negro owner of a gin mill  
(Elmo Lincoln - who also appears as a slave auctioneer); Stoneman's negro servant (Tom Wilson);  
Jake, faithful unto death (William Freeman); Union soldier (Eugene Pallette); Piedmont girl  
(Bessie Love); and Eric Von Stroheim (playing several negro extras).

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Attempting to write a compact, yet comprehensive, program note for Griffith's masterpiece is  
well nigh an impossibility. A few lines would be an insult. Yet ten pages of closely packed  
type would leave so much unsaid that again we should render the film an injustice. Perhaps,  
in the final analysis, no notes are necessary at all, since most film students and admirers  
of Griffith have presumably read avidly every one of the hundreds of pages that have been  
written about the film ever since it revolutionised all concepts of the motion picture in  
1915. Presumably too, most of our members are not seeing this wonderful film for the first  
time. Certainly it is a film that repays many viewings. Because of its quite violent racial  
angle, it is very rarely shown in its entirety these days, and consequently this screening  
is very much of a special event.

Since space limitations prevent our launching into a detailed appraisal of the film's merits  
and historical importance, we will content ourselves with shorter notes concerning the film's  
production and its innovations. Due acknowledgement is made that much of this information is  
derived from the writings of Seymour Stern, author of the Griffith index, and currently at work  
in Hollywood on a full-scale biography of the director.

Griffith began shooting the film on Independence Day of 1914. Initial scenes to be shot were the  
Civil War battle scenes, photographed in the San Fernando Valley on the approximate location of  
the present Universal Studios. The woodland scenes (Gus' attack on the Little Sister, etc.) were  
taken at Big Bear Lake, Arrowhead, and at Idyllwild, California. The Clansmen's ride was  
photographed in Whittier County, California -- with Griffith renting the entire lower portion of  
the county and blocking off roads so that shooting would not be interrupted. The little  
Southern town (later North East Babylon for "Intolerance", and a French village for "Hearts of  
the World") is now partially taken up by the Allied Artists studios.

Interiors were shot at the Fine Arts Studio on open air sets and without electrical illumination.  
A series of muslin diffusers regulated the sunlight, and certain effect lighting was achieved  
through the use of mirrors and harsh reflectors. Bitzer employed a Pathe studio model camera  
(value \$300) to shoot the entire film. This was before the day of the gyre tripod head, and  
despite the smoothness of the panning and tilting in the film, it was no easy task to manipulate.

Theodore Huff once established that there were 1,375 separate shots in the film, although in  
the original (cut slightly by Griffith after a preview) there were more. Quite incidentally,  
"THE BIRTH OF A NATION" was already the second version of Dixon's novel -- an earlier one, titled  
"The Clansmen" (on which no prints seem to have survived) was photographed completely in color!  
Griffith, of course, made extensive use of tints -- red for the burning of Atlanta, blue for the  
night scenes, and so on.

The budget for "THE BIRTH OF A NATION" was \$110,000 -- then a fabulous sum, and more than five  
times larger than any sum previously expended on a motion picture. Today of course, the sum is  
trifling -- even a film like "Jack Slade" (a 9-reel, unelaborate western) costs \$140,000. It  
has remained one of the all-time top grossers, and "Variety" has estimated that during the years  
it has rolled up a gross in excess of \$48,000,000. Historian Stern reports that in the first  
six months it was seen by more persons than witnessed all the stage plays in the United States  
in any given five-year period!

Undoubtedly, "THE BIRTH OF A NATION" represents the triumphant fulfillment of the many ideas and experiments in direction, photography and cutting over which Griffith had labored in the preceding six years at Biograph and at Reliance-Majestic. As Seymour Stern once pointed out, "... certain aesthetic or expressive devices, often erroneously referred to as technical effects, here were brought to a peak-point of development". Griffith invented and created much, and that which he did not create personally (i.e., the close-up) he developed to a dramatic state beyond recognition.

Here one notices principally the very advanced use of the moving camera (shots were taken from the rear seat of an old open touring car), including the first travelling riding close-ups of horsemen. Too, Griffith introduced more intelligent uses of the panning shot; perspective or extreme long shot; full-screen close-ups; cameo profile; vignette; split reel; dream image; lap dissolve; iris, and many others.

Bitzer had no assistant cameraman on "Birth", and Griffith used no assistant director in the accepted sense, although George Siegman, Raoul Walsh, Donald Crisp and others helped him with many of the mob scenes. Most of his players - Walthall, Gish, Marsh, Reid and others - became stars overnight, while Raoul Walsh (still very active), Elmer Clifton (who died recently) and other actors in the film later achieved fame as top-ranking directors. Lillian Gish is still remarkably active on stage and television of course, and Bessie Love makes an occasional bit appearance ("The Barefoot Contessa", "The Weak and the Wicked"). Mae Marsh of course is an old reliable in all John Ford films (several close-ups and a line of dialogue in "The Sun Shines Bright") and in an occasional Fox opus such as "Titaro".

Looking at "The Birth of a Nation", and even more especially "Intolerance" (together, almost without question the two greatest films ever made) today, it is frightening to conjecture what might have become of world cinema generally, and how long its development might have been retarded, had it not been for D.W. Most of the great innovations came from him. He alone was responsible, through "Birth", for the overnight respect gained for the motion picture. The first great American film not made by Griffith was "Creed" in the early twenties - made by Von Stroheim, a Griffith pupil. Even the great Eisenstein admitted his great debt to Griffith, and at one time D.W. was invited to take over complete guidance of the Russian film industry. He declined and in later years, political changes forced Eisenstein to repudiate Griffith and to attack "The Birth of a Nation" publicly.

When all is said and done, perhaps the greatest tribute one can pay to "The Birth of a Nation" is that - overlooking its revolutionary importance in 1915, and all its innovations - it remains, in 1954, a tremendously exciting, moving and thrilling piece of work. If it dates at all, it is only occasionally in the lushly sentimental titles so beloved by D.W. Dramatically and visually, it is still as great as it ever was. It is even tragic (or, to be less dramatic, disheartening in the extreme) to look around at 99 percent of today's product and to see how much that Griffith created has now been discarded in favor of slick artifice. Because of this, a good deal of "Birth" still seems refreshingly new and vital. The classic sequence of Sherman's march to the sea for example - one of the most beautiful and dramatic images ever recorded on film - certainly left its mark on Hollywood's film-makers. Less than two years ago, MGM copied the shot in "Go For Broke" - but it was a mechanical, unfeeling thing that merely left one with a renewed conviction in Griffith's mastery.

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Preceding "THE BIRTH OF A NATION" will be "SATURDAY AFTERNOON", the Harry Langdon comedy short that we were unable to present at our last meeting. Please see our last set of notes for further details.  
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Members who are not au fait with other filmic events in New York may care to note that four other great D.W. Griffith films will be on view in this city within the next few weeks. The Museum of Modern Art will present, as part of a United Artists season, WAY DOWN EAST, CRIPPIANS OF THE STORM and ISN'T LIFE WONDERFUL? And on April 11th., at the Washington Irving High School at 8.15 p.m., the Group For Film Study will screen INTOLERANCE. (Members of this society admitted to screening, or to full membership, at a discount).  
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COMMITTEE OF THE FILM SOCIETY: Robert G. Youngson (Program Secretary); Charles Turner (Chairman); Herman G. Weinberg; Warren Rothenberger; William K. Everson (Program Notes).  
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