D. W. Griffith’s Controversial Film, 
The Birth of a Nation

**Introduction**

The relationship between racism and progressivism continues to be a difficult issue for scholars and students. A consideration of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) offers students an opportunity to consider the status of race relations on the eve of World War I. This lesson simulates the controversy of the film’s Boston premiere, as both black and white reformers and politicians reacted to the racially provocative themes and images of the film. Students will be exposed to the film’s wildly distorted interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction, which helped sear the mythology of the “Southern Legend” and the “Lost Cause” into the popular mind of generations of Americans. Also, students will attempt to recreate and understand the various perspectives from which Bostonians of the Wilson era approached the film.

Why were so many Americans drawn to *Birth*’s images and message? How did African Americans and their white allies respond to the film’s grotesque portrayal of blacks? These and other questions will help students not only evaluate *Birth* as a cultural artifact of the Jim Crow era, but consider the problematic power of film as an interpreter and, ultimately, a shaper of history.

**Time Frame**

This lesson involves three class periods and three homework assignments.

**Objectives**

1. To investigate the status of race relations during the Progressive Era.
2. To adopt the mindset and perspective of a person from an earlier historical era through the evaluation of both primary and secondary source material.
3. To examine the tension between an individual’s right to free speech and the state’s desire to censor objectionable or hurtful material.
4. To explore the possibilities and pitfalls of using motion pictures as a tool for teaching and learning history.

**Background**

Consisting of over 13,000 individual shots and twelve reels of film, *The Birth of a Nation* was America’s first full-length feature film and an immediate national sensation—between 1915 and 1946, over 200,000,000 viewed the movie. The film’s director, D. W. Griffith, pioneered a number of movie-making techniques—including montage editing, cross-cut sequences of parallel action, and the use of powerful close-ups—that enabled him to tell a story with tremendous realism and emotion.

On the vanguard of a new era of film, *Birth* took movies out of the nickelodeon and, for the first time, offered a “photo-play” that could successfully compete with stage productions. After receiving a private showing of the movie in the White House, Woodrow Wilson purportedly declared, “It is like writing history with lightning! And my only regret is that it is so terribly true.” (As the controversy surrounding the film grew, the president’s secretary characterized Wilson’s viewing of the film as “a courtesy extended to an old acquaintance” not intended to signify Wilson’s “approbation” of the film.)

Using Wilson’s own three-volume history of the American people and Matthew Brady’s Civil War photography as sources, Griffith lavished his movie sets with historical detail and depth. He created expensive “historical facsimiles” modeled after famous places (including Ford’s Theater and Appomattox Courthouse) in order to provide his film with a sheen of historical authenticity.

Far from capturing the “truth” of the Civil War and Reconstruction, however, *Birth* presents a skewed version of this period that
ultimately relies on racist themes many white Americans found quite appealing during the upheavals of industrialization and urbanization. Griffith derived the plot for the movie from Reverend Tom Dixon’s novel and subsequent stage play, *The Clansman* (1905). A rabid white supremacist, Dixon created a work that preached the evils of racial mixing and the need to repress, segregate, and ultimately expel blacks from America.

At the center of *Birth’s* narrative is a melodrama charting the entwined fate of two fictional families: the Camerons, an idealized southern plantation family, and the family of the Republican leader of the House of Representatives, Austin Stoneman, a character tailored after Thaddeus Stevens. Griffith used the trials and triumphs of these families, caught in the tumult of history, to project his version of a familiar southern legend concerning the Civil War and Reconstruction. The film presents antebellum plantation life as an idyllic era of pastoral simplicity when white men ruled over their families and slaves with benevolence and wisdom. It portrays Reconstruction as a period when barbaric hordes of lustful and ignorant blacks, placed in positions of power by northern white politicians eager to reap financial gain from the ruins of the South, shattered this natural aristocracy.

Austin Stoneman is a corrupt politician motivated by enormous avarice and lust for a mulatto housekeeper. After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln (a true friend of the South, in Griffith’s fable), Stoneman uses his power to establish negro rule in the former Confederacy. Under his tutelage, a mulatto carpetbagger named Silas Lynch becomes a powerful and dangerous political figure in the Camerons’ fictitious hometown of Piedmont, South Carolina.

The prime victims of Lynch and his black cohorts, characterized in the film as poisoned by hubris and drunk with lust, are the female members of both the Cameron and Stoneman clans. Flora, the youngest Cameron daughter and Griffith’s personification of the frailty and virtue of southern women, is chased and attacked by a crazed renegade negro named Gus. To avoid Gus’s advances, she commits suicide by flinging herself over a cliff. Silas Lynch attempts to force Austin Stoneman’s daughter Elsie (who has fallen in love with Ben Cameron, the family’s eldest son and a former Confederate war hero) to marry him. Faced with such depredations of southern virtue, honor, and civility, Ben Cameron organizes the Ku Klux Klan to conduct a sacred crusade. In the triumphant climax of the film, the Klan saves Elsie, avenges Flora’s death, and redeems the South from the corrupt rule of the carpetbaggers and their black allies. With white rule restored, North and South (as well as the young lovers) are reunited.

Many during the early twentieth century shared the distorted view of history that prompted the negro phobia and preoccupation with racial purity found in the film. Griffith’s work on the film came at a time when American cities bulged with European immigrants and migrating blacks from the rural South. During this period, a cacophony of anxious voices competed for the ears of middle- and working-class whites: nativists advocated further restrictions on immigration; segregationists sponsored laws mandating the legal separation of blacks and whites in all public places; isolationists admonished America to stay out of war in Europe; and scientists proclaimed the genetic inferiority of certain races. The increasing frequency of race riots in urban areas, along with the rising number oflynchings in the South, were painful reminders that, at the time of *Birth’s* release, many white citizens eagerly turned to racial scapegoating as a simple solution to the complex problems posed by modernization. Not surprisingly, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan during the late 1910s and 1920s was greatly facilitated by the popularity of this epic film.

While some progressives such as Woodrow Wilson, Dorothea Dix, and vice crusader Charles Parkhurst endorsed the film, many...
reformers and organizations worked feverishly to restrict its general distribution. Black and white activists sent a flurry of appeals to civic leaders, government officials, and the mass media in hopes of having *Birth* banned entirely or at least getting the most offensive scenes cut out. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), formed in 1909, took the forefront in the censorship battle. Black reformers, including W. E. B. DuBois and William Trotter, along with white progressives such as Jane Addams and Oswald Garrison Villard, pressured the mayors of New York and Boston into delaying and suspending the film’s showing. Although some states (including Ohio, Kansas, and West Virginia) banned the film on the ground that it was a threat to public peace, it sustained only minor alterations at the hands of the censors and enjoyed long runs in most major American cities.

Despite the film’s success, the protest against *Birth* was in many ways a watershed in African-American political activism. The cause galvanized the NAACP into action and helped the fledgling organization recruit new members and publicize its goals. Efforts to suppress the showing of *Birth* have continued throughout the twentieth century (the right to screen the film was challenged at least 120 times between 1915 and 1973). As late as 1992, the NAACP vigorously protested the Library of Congress’s decision to place *Birth* on the National Film Registry.

**Procedure**

One impediment to using *Birth* in the classroom is its length (approximately 159 minutes). My solution is to use Leon Litwack’s absorbing short essay on the historical import of *Birth* (see bibliography) in conjunction with a twenty-minute excerpt from the film. I suggest the sequence involving Gus’s chase of Flora Cameron and her death-leap from the cliff, followed by his capture and subsequent lynching by the Klan. (This sequence covers shots number 983 through 1160 [pages 118-27] in the continuity script found in Robert Lang’s edition; see bibliography.)

1. The night before showing the film excerpt, have students read the Litwack essay and the documents contained in Handout 1. Provide students with a copy of Handout 2, which introduces the Boston simulation. Randomly assign each student to one of the three perspectives outlined in this handout.

2. After viewing the excerpt and eliciting immediate questions and feedback from the students, have students assigned to the same perspective break up into small groups to share their responses to the handout questions and develop a strategy for the following day’s simulation.

3. Follow the simulation format listed on Handout 2. For homework, ask each student to write a short essay on one of the following questions:

   a. According to scholar James Chandler, “The ‘reconstruction’ with which *The Birth of a Nation* is ultimately concerned is the reconstruction of America in 1915; in the end, Griffith imagines himself to be riding to the nation’s rescue.”

   In what ways are the images and themes of this film a reflection of the anxieties and turmoil that white Americans faced during the early twentieth century? Why did black Americans become central targets of this angst? How did blacks respond to these attacks?

   b. In 1992, Librarian of Congress James Billington placed *The Birth of a Nation* on the prestigious National Film Registry with ninety-nine other film classics. “Bigoted and racist as its treatment is of African Americans,” he asserted, “*The Birth of a Nation* is an inescapable part of our history.” The NAACP demanded that the film be removed. Referring to the first time he saw *Birth*, NAACP National Board Member Joseph Madison noted, “For me it set off a silent rage over the blatant misuse of the cinematic arts. For others I fear, [those] who might not have the knowledge of post-Civil War history that I had been fortunate enough to acquire, this film being hailed as a history of that period could be shattering for both their psyche and self-esteem.”

   What is the best way to preserve and recognize this controversial film? Write a letter to James Billington outlining your position.

   c. In an article for *The Editor* written in 1915, D. W. Griffith envisioned the modern motion picture as a revolutionary tool in the teaching of history: “The time will come...when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures....There will be no opinions expressed [in those films]. You will merely be present at the making of history.”

   Reflecting on *Birth*’s interpretation of history (as well as more modern historical movies you may have recently seen, such as Oliver Stone’s JFK, Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*, or Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*) do you believe films are a useful way to “teach” history? What are the major strengths of movies as teaching tools? Are there significant dangers for a society that finds its history lessons at the box office? How should a serious student of history approach films that purportedly allow the viewer to be “present at the making of history”?

4. Share essay responses in class the next day.

**Bibliography**


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Student Handout 1

The full texts of the following documents are reprinted in Robert Lang, The Birth of a Nation (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 159-89.


In view of the splendors of national reunion what should be the attitude of every right-minded person toward attempts to revive the passions of the Civil War period, relight the fires of sectionalism, and intensify race prejudices that are unhappily still much alive? The questions sufficiently answer themselves, and when they are answered there is no reason to ask the further question of whether it is desirable, for purely sordid reasons, to exhibit such a moving picture film as the so-called The Birth of a Nation.

...To present the members of the [black] race as women-chasers and foul fiends is a cruel distortion of history. Bad things occurred, but what man will say that the outrages of black on white equaled [sic] in number the outrages of white on black? Which race even to the present day has the better right to complain of the unfairness and brutality of the other?

...White men in this country have never been just to black men. We tore them from Africa and brought them over as slaves.... We do not, in any state of the Union, grant to the Negro economic and political equality. No white man of proper feeling can be proud of the record. The wonder is that the Negro is as good as he is. Then to the injury is added slander. To make a few dirty dollars men are willing to pander to depraved tastes and to foment a race antipathy that is the most sinister and dangerous feature of American life.

Excerpts from D. W. Griffith’s reply to the Globe’s editorial, New York Globe, 10 April 1915.

In presenting this motion picture story before the intelligent theater-goers of New York City, in a regular theater, which has been well advertised, I thought the moving drama told its own story. My associates have maintained a dignified silence in the face of an organized attack of letter writers, publicity seekers, and fanatics against our work. We have traced this attack to its source, and know the reasons for it. Without wishing to tell any newspaper its business, permit me to suggest that a cub reporter in one hour could find out that this attack is an organized effort to suppress a production which was brought forth to reveal the beautiful possibilities of the art of motion pictures and to tell a story which is based upon truth in every vital detail.

...Your editorial is an insult to the intelligence and the human kindness of nearly 100,000 of the best people of New York City, who have viewed this picture from artistic interests and not through any depraved taste such as you try to indicate.

...We have received letters of the heartiest commendation from statesmen, writers, clergymen, artists, educators, and laymen. I have in my possession applications for reservations from the principals of ten schools, who having seen the picture, are desirous of bringing their pupils to view it for its historic truths.


The two outstanding features of Griffith’s remarkable production, The Birth of a Nation, are its controversial spirit...and the splendor and magnificence of its spectacles.

...The audience which saw the play at the private exhibition in the Liberty Theater was a most friendly one. It was significant that on more than one occasion during the showing of the films, there were hisses mingled with the applause. These hisses were not, of course, directed against the artistic quality of the film. They were evoked by the undisguised appeal to race prejudices....The negroes are shown as horrible brutes, given over to beastly excesses, defiant and criminal in their attitude toward the whites, and lusty after white women. Some of the details are plainly morbid and repulsive.

...Whatever fault might be found with the argumentative spirit found in both the titles and the pictures there can be no question that the appeal to the imagination will carry the picture a good way toward popular success. In the South of course, where memories of Reconstruction horrors are still vivid, the picture will have an immense vogue. It is altogether probable that its many fine points will outweigh its disadvantages in every other section of the country.

Excerpts from Ward Greene’s review of The Birth of a Nation in The Atlanta Journal, 7 December 1915.

There has been nothing to equal it—nothing. Not as a motion picture, nor a play, nor a book does it come to you; but as the soul and spirit and flesh of the heart of your country’s history, ripped from the past and brought quivering with all human emotions before your eyes.

It swept the audience at the Atlanta Theater Monday night like a tidal wave. A youth in the gallery leaped to his feet and yelled and yelled. A little boy downstairs pounded the man’s back in front of him and shrieked....Here a young girl kept dabbing and dabbing her eyes and there an old lady just sat and let the tears stream down her face unchecked.

...Race prejudice? Injustice? Suppression? You would not think of those things had you seen The Birth of a Nation. For none but a man with a spirit too picayunish and warped for words would pick such flaws in a spectacle so great and whole-hearted as this. In the first place, the picture does every credit to the negro race, lauds those faithful old black people whose fealty to their masters led them to dare the anger of mistaken fanatics....This picture is too big a thing to be bothered by such a gnat’s sting of criticism.

...And after it’s all over, you are not raging nor shot with hatred, but mellowed into a deeper and purer understanding of the fires through which your forefathers battled to make this South of yours a nation reborn! And if you haven’t seen it, spend the money, borrow it, beg it, get it in any old way. But see The Birth of a Nation.
Student Handout 2

Author's note: The following is meant to be suggestive only. Teachers and students are urged to create their own materials (summary of background, characterizations of the participants).

"Art is always revolutionary, always explosive and sensational."
—D. W. Griffith, 1915

Introduction
This exercise will allow our class to simulate the controversy surrounding the opening of The Birth of a Nation in Boston, Massachusetts. The setting is a public meeting called by Mayor Curley in the spring of 1915, to air opinions on the following petition recently sent to the Mayor's office by the New Public Opinion Club:

"[We petition] the Boston Censor Board to stop the photoplay Birth of a Nation, which teaches race prejudice, racial injustice, [and] racial disenfranchisement against colored Americans, [while] falsifying [R]econstruction."
—Boston, Journal, 31 May 1915

You have been provided with a background essay, some primary sources documenting the film's initial public reception, and a twenty-minute excerpt to help you grasp the issues at stake. Each student will adopt one of the three perspectives outlined below. It is important to try to shed your "modern skin" as much as possible and approach the issue as a person from the Progressive Era might have done. Work with other students assigned to the same perspective to consider the questions on this handout and to develop a position statement on the resolution.

Format for the Public Meeting
I. The groups representing the Boston branch of the NAACP and the owners of the Tremont Temple Theater will each present a short (5 minute) position statement concerning the resolution.

II. The members of the Boston Censor Board will ask clarification and follow-up questions to both the NAACP and the Tremont owners.

III. First the NAACP, then the Tremont owners, will offer rebuttals to the opinions expressed by the other side.

IV. The members of the Boston Censor Board will vote on whether to adopt the resolution and offer a short statement explaining their rationale.

The Setting: Boston in the spring of 1915
Since its opening in Los Angeles on 8 February, The Birth of a Nation has been a national sensation. Endorsed by President Woodrow Wilson, Supreme Court Justices, prominent clergy, and many other important figures, the film portrays a highly controversial interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction while setting a new technical and artistic standard for moving pictures.

Even as drama critics continue to praise Birth, many journalists and reformers have challenged the film's negative portrayal of blacks and its treatment of history. With a growing membership of six thousand, the NAACP has spearheaded the opposition. In New York, the organization has repeatedly asked the Mayor and the National Board of Censorship to ban the film on the grounds that it is indecent, dangerous to "public morals," and likely to spawn violence. In an article for the New York Evening Post, settlement house reformer Jane Addams argued: "The producer seems to have followed the principle of gathering the most vicious and grotesque individuals he could find among colored people, and showing them as representatives of the truth about the entire race. It is both unjust and untrue."

Ultimately, the National Board of Censorship approved the film with some minor alterations. Cut from the movie was a quote from Lincoln opposing racial equality; a scene at the end showing blacks being deported back to Africa; some footage depicting black men sexually assaulting white women; and a scene of the Klan castrating the black renegade Gus. Also, for a brief period of time, a "Hampton Institute" epilogue was added to the film (an idea attributed to Booker T. Washington) to document...
the advances made by the black race in industry and education since Reconstruction. Reverend Francis Grimké, voicing an opinion widely shared by other black activists, contended that these scenes were "tagged on in such a way as to make them of no value in countering the bad impression already made against the race."

Since the film’s arrival in Boston, the controversy has continued to brew. The Tremont Temple Theater (where the film is being shown), Faneuil Hall, and the Boston Symphony have all been sites for protest demonstrations. William Trotter, the black newspaper editor who stood at the center of the Boston protests, recently warned, "[Birth]...is a rebel play... an incentive to great racial hatred here in Boston. It will make white women afraid of Negroes and will have white men all stirred up on their account. If there is any lynching here in Boston, Mayor Curley will be responsible."

Three Perspectives

1. Member of the Boston chapter of the NAACP

You've watched racial segregation and black disenfranchisement become the norm across much of the country. People of color, in large numbers, are moving to urban areas with hopes of improving their economic and educational opportunities, a shift that continues to increase racial tensions in the cities. You had high hopes of Woodrow Wilson, but the president has proved to be a staunch segregationist who has systematically replaced black office holders and civil servants in his administration with whites. Most ominously, you have endured the accounts of numerous lynchings of blacks (approximately seventy-five a year between 1900-1920), usually on the trumped up charge of raping a white woman. Now comes this film.

Questions to consider:
1. How are blacks portrayed in this film? What is the effect of having the principal black parts played by whites wearing "blackface?"
2. In what ways does this film distort the history of Reconstruction and the role of the Ku Klux Klan in the South?
3. What are the best arguments for banning this film? Is censorship the best answer or is there another way to combat the negative images found in this film?

2. Owner of the Tremont Temple Theater

Since their invention, moving pictures have carried a sullied reputation. Your middle-class white peers have always considered the nickelodeon to be a breeding ground for vice and immoral behavior in immigrant and lower-class communities. Now comes a movie that can compete with fancy stage productions in a first-rate, two-dollar theater. Here is a chance for a new kind of cinema that celebrates the power and progress of America, and the Tremont Theater is poised on the cutting edge (and ready to turn a significant profit). Perhaps Birth goes a bit far in its negative depiction of blacks but it also shows "good" blacks who remained loyal to their former masters. Also, many experts and famous people have endorsed the film. Griffith, himself, has offered $10,000 to anyone who can find a single scene in the film that isn't historically accurate. Some say that the bulk of the film's protesters are from groups such as the NAACP that promote the radical notion of intermarriage between blacks and whites.

Questions to consider:
1. What evidence can you marshal to support the notion that this film is a powerful piece of artwork that people should have the choice to see?
2. Why do you think so many white Americans are attracted to this film?
3. Does it matter whether the scenes in the film are true to the historical record?

3. Member of the Boston Censor Board

Outbreaks of racial violence have unfortunately become a common occurrence in many American cities this century. Just a decade ago, riots in Philadelphia and other places plagued the touring production of Thomas Dixon’s play, The Clansman, upon which this new film opening in Boston is based. During the film’s New York run, some white patrons hissed and threw rotten eggs at the screen. Still, the majority of movie-goers keep coming away from this spectacle awestruck by the power and emotional intensity of the film. Although the critics of this film are numerous, the throngs of people rushing to the box-office vastly outnumber them. Many prominent citizens have eagerly endorsed the film. Dorothea Dix, for one, labels the film "history vitalized," while cajoling others to "go see it, for it will make a better American of you."

Questions to consider:
1. How would you evaluate Griffith’s claim that Birth is “a story which is based upon truth in every vital detail”?
2. Should this film be judged by its artistic merit, the accuracy of its content, or its potential effect on viewers—or by some combination of these three elements?
3. What is more important, Griffith’s right to free speech or safeguarding the public from exposure to the film’s controversial representation of race relations?