THE BIRTH OF A NATION (1915)

Simultaneously one of the most revered and most reviled films ever made, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is important for the very reasons that prompt both of those divergent reactions. In fact, rarely has a film so equally deserved such praise and scorn, which in many ways raises the film's estimation not just in the annals of cinema but as an essential historic artifact (some might say relic).

Though it was based on Thomas Dixon's explicitly racist play *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, by many accounts Griffith was indifferent to the racist bent of the subject matter. Just how complicit that makes him in delivering its ugly message has been cause for almost a century of debate. However, there has been no debate concerning the film's technical and artistic merits. Griffith was, as usual, more interested in the possibilities of the medium than the message, and in this regard he set the standards for modern Hollywood.

Most overtly, *The Birth of a Nation* was the first real historical epic, proving that even in the silent era audiences were willing to sit through a nearly three-hour drama. But with countless artistic innovations, Griffith essentially created contemporary film language, and although elements of *The Birth of a Nation* may seem quaint or dated by contemporary standards, virtually every film is beholden to it in one way, shape, or form. Griffith introduced the use of dramatic close-ups, tracking shots, and other expressive camera movements; parallel action sequences, crosscutting, and other editing techniques; and even the first orchestral score. It's a shame all these groundbreaking elements were attached to a story of such dubious value.

The first half of the film begins before the Civil War, explaining the introduction of slavery to America before jumping into battle. Two families, the northern Stonemans and the southern Camerons, are introduced. The story is told through these two families and often their servants, epitomizing the worst racial stereotypes. As the nation is torn apart by war, the slaves and their abolitionist supporters are seen as the destructive force behind it all.

The film’s racism grows even worse in its second half, set during Reconstruction and featuring the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, introduced as the picture’s would-be heroes. The fact that Griffith jammed a love story in the midst of his recreated race war is absolutely audacious. It’s thrilling and disturbing, often at the same time.

*The Birth of a Nation* is no doubt a powerful piece of propaganda, albeit one with a stomach-churning political message. Only the puritanical Ku Klux Klan can maintain the unity of the nation, it seems to be saying, so is it any wonder that even at the time the film was met with outrage? It was protested by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), sparked riots, and later forced Griffith himself to answer criticisms with his even more ambitious *Intolerance* (1916). Still, the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* remains respected and studied to this day—despite its subject matter—reveals its lasting importance. Jkl