

The Birth of a Nation by David Wark Griffith



Abstract

The paper examines a three-hour silent drama *The Birth of a Nation* written by David Wark Griffith. It had a huge impact on viewers. Despite numerous allegations of racist propaganda, several ones were able to reject the technical and artistic merits of the film. The question of research has been to trace the impact of the political message of the movie on its modern audience as well as to identify the political ambiguity of its plot. The results and social resonance, which became a response to the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, have been identified as well. Moreover, the research notes the differences in the perception of the political message of the picture by modern viewers. To do an analysis, the reading materials containing the information on the historical background of the movie and its impact have been processed. The paper comes up with the conclusion that due to the evolution in the outlook the perception of the film differs to a certain degree.

In 1915, 100 years ago, *The Birth of a Nation* by David Wark Griffith was released (Bazin, 2004, p. 90). This film is officially considered the beginning of the great American cinema. It is not the first movie produced. However, it is the first film that was a milestone in the American cinema and in the world, in general, as well. *The Birth of a Nation* is a three-hour drama in silence. It is an extremely inconvenient film to discuss with regards to its political message and implication. The position of the movie is also rather intriguing if to analyze from today's political correctness and in light of the common sense and normal human relations. This film cannot be described otherwise than racial. The perception of *The Birth of a Nation* by the modern viewers compared to the contemporaries of Griffith's film should be changed since it emerges racist message and is unacceptable within the modern paradigm of political correctness.



Overview of the Film: The Birth of a Nation

The film was made based on the play with a tinge of racism *Secret Society: A Historical Novel about the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)* by Thomas Dixon (Bazin, 2004, p. 90). Although the director remained ambivalent, the debate about the ethical side of the movie has continued for 100 years. The discussions about the ideological part were so hot that Griffith had to say that he did not feel sympathy for racism. He told as well that he had been appealing for freedom of speech and considering himself outside of political movements. However, it cannot be a strong justification given that racists and later the Nazis considered *The Birth of a Nation* something more than a good movie and a milestone in the development of art. Either way, the picture was not totally prohibited and ignored. During all this time, neither technical aspects of the film nor acting had been criticized. It is a gigantic panorama, which shows the South before the Civil War, the war itself, and the events immediately after this event, i.e. the Reconstruction.

The film depicts a serene illustration of slave society and the Afro-American people being incapable of anything other than forced labor. The movie as well illustrates how these individuals are instigated by the Radical Republicans aggressively trying to get ahead of the white Southerners. According to the film, the freed slaves were most interested in interracial marriages and used violence to force white women to have sexual relations with them. As the movie shows, white southerners found the Ku Klux Klan to protect themselves from these threats, extending the Aryan ideals. The film argues that the murderers in white hoods generally had been acting fairly and refusing blacks in the right to vote. They were leaving them in subjection and division, returning the order and civility to the South.

The first part tells about the life of slaves in America before the Civil War using the example of two families. In the second section, racism is gradually reaching its limits

after the Civil War. At that period, the movement of the Ku Klux Klan was at its height. Its members were represented as the real heroes. Apparently, only one conclusion can be drawn: the KKK could preserve the unity of the nation.

The second part is devoted to the period of Reconstruction. It shows the awful events, which the war had brought to the South. The black inhabitants of the South, which were freed during those events, began to mock whites, including women. Therefore, only the new knights, who were the members of the KKK, could protect them. They were the new heroes of Griffith.

Nowadays and at that time as well, *The Birth of a Nation* seems to be blatantly racial. Southerners in the American mythology present the unity of a gentleman with his slaves. That is the way how the events were shown. There was the refined culture of aristocratic slaveholders and chivalrous spirit illustrated. Walter Scott was extremely important to southerners. They were brought up on the ideals of chivalry and subtracted from romantic books. All this is mentioned in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Politics Impact on the Contemporaries

The film production was financed by the company Epoch-Film, founded by Griffith and Aitken. The latter one invested a quarter of the total capital, i.e. 25 thousand dollars in the organization. The rest of the amount was input by shareholders. It is possible that some of the KKK members helped to finance the film as the movie was serving their ideologies (Barry, 2002, p. 37).

The Birth of a Nation had such a huge success that the costs of its creation were paid off in only two months of its release. The audience consisted of the representatives from all sectors of society. It significantly increased the political and cultural status of the movie. At the same time, the image was related to black characters being rather

racial. Therefore, it resulted in the prohibition of the movie in many American cities.

The Birth of a Nation was promoted as the sensation and became such one. It was shown at the gala premieres. The tickets for this film were sold at high prices. Moreover, the human rights activists were protesting against it. The movie was criticized by journalists and priests as well. It was not in vain since The Birth of a Nation had provoked many cases of violence against African Americans in a lot of cities (Barry, 2002, p. 39).

One should also mention that when the film was shown, the race riots occurred in several towns. It means that even at that time The Birth of a Nation did not seem harmless; it was not normal as well. Griffith, who did not understand what he had done, always said that there was no racism there shown. After that, he made the film Intolerance depicting how it was necessary to inculcate tolerance (Christensen & Haas, 2005, p. 68). However, The Birth of a Nation is a racist movie. This fact cannot be ignored.

However, it always happens when the product of culture becomes controversial. People talk and argue about it. Thus, the demonstrations against the film were the result of its political message. The debates in the mass media were noticeable too. In 1915, the statements against the movie were made by such magazines as The New Republic and The Nation. The first one slightly shifted to the center. As for The Nation, it had remained the most left magazine. These were the socialist editions. They angrily attacked Griffith for this absolutely racist film (Barry, 2002, p. 41).

Although the movie was really rather controversial, it was the first picture that was shown in the White House. Woodrow Wilson at first said something good about The Birth of a Nation. Further one, he said something bad; and finally he denied everything. This fact shows an ambivalent attitude of authorities towards politics

illustrated in movies at that time. However, it would be fair to note that in some time the film was put in a difficult situation as well. However, technically, it was good work.

Moreover, white actors were playing black characters there. Griffith filmed the first part of his movie with the action taking place in the pre-war South. He used the samples of the first photos. For the second section, where the blacks were working, he used the caricature. It seems all black actors look like the caricatures in the movie. It is the most embarrassing moment being artistically unconvincing. Viewers experience some inconvenience of Griffith-ideologue, a man with some specific features. In this case, these ones are racist political views.

Modern View

During the whole film, Griffith's sympathy to the Confederacy is not hidden. However, his depiction of events is the representation of reality as he knows it. The paradox of the modern perception of this movie consists in the fact that not everything corresponds to the director's intentions. The very essence of realism, i.e. open frame boundary, a complex mise –en -scene and several plans of action, involves more than descriptive images and political beliefs.

For example, there is a scene in which the slave-owners and their guests from the north, exchanging pleasantries, are walking by cotton fields, where black slaves are working in the background. It shows an obvious link between the gentlemanly manners of white Southerners and slaves forced to heavy labor (Griffith, 1915). Griffith did not mean this but the effect is as follows. He showed the court of the Ku Klux Klan on an African American, whose sexual harassment had made a white woman to commit a suicide. This process, after which the victim's body is brought to the threshold of the vice-governor, should look like a heroic act. However, in fact, it

turned out as a horrible scene (Griffith, 1915). The celebrations of the Battle of Bull Run were held together with the flame of fire. Thus, the viewers were forced to think about the dance of death. When the members of the Ku Klux Klan threatened with weapons to the unarmed blacks going to vote in the elections, it looked like nonsense cruelty in spite of Griffith's beliefs.

The Birth of a Nation is more than a vision of history. It is an example of the vast possibilities of cinema. The tools that it has used are powerful enough to refute the content of the film itself. The majority of its viewers knew too little about slavery, the reconstruction of the South, Jim Crow, and the KKK. Thus, they were ready to believe in everything without a doubt. They saw only what Griffith wanted to show. However, it was not the initial intention of the film. The conventional racism left viewers in ignorance of the facts. They agreed to believe Griffith's version of racist ideas. The film also deprived the other directors the possibility to assign and develop the methods of the author to create more movies about the historicity of the period depicted.

One should consider the view of modern directors on the issue. For example, the picture of uprising of slaves provocatively titled The Birth of a Nation directed by Nate Parker became the sensation of the film festival Sundance in 2016. It won the prize as the best American motion movie. The work is about the largest slave uprising in America. Many call it a radical statement about the atrocities of white Americans. The Birth of a Nation includes a lot of scenes of tortures and cruel punishments. Its provocative title clearly refers to the movie created by Griffith before. The modern version The Birth of a Nation is considered a modern response of the black director, who himself played the role of a leader of rebels.

The Birth of a Nation has linked the innovative film language with racist content. The value of the work of Griffith is that it exhibits both a huge aesthetic possibility and its

capacity for demagoguery. The movie is able to animate the whole world on the screen. It is able to turn the surrounding into a huge lie with sincere or cynical intentions. The Birth of a Nation is a pattern of propaganda which has a cinematic subconscious content being much broader than the intentions of its director. There is nothing wrong to see those elements of the film, which are opposite to his clear intentions beyond prejudice.

The stratification of the movie's message makes it a versatile piece of art. It contains the statements being anti-war and politically incorrect, patriotic and revisionist. Sometimes the film all turns into a fictional documentary chronicle, which is characteristic to the silent historical film. Moreover, The Birth of a Nation has shown the possibility of cinema to create a national epic. Historic opportunities have become the major aspects of the movie for many people. In our time, history becomes the fact of national consciousness only when it has a good film as it has been said by Andrzej Wajda (Braudy & Cohen, 2004).

Conclusion

In the three-hour epic film The Birth of a Nation, Griffith has put all his knowledge as a director. The movie tracing the history of relations between the two American families during the Civil War and the subsequent period of reconstruction of the country, has become the most significant one among all the pictures created in America at that time. It could not be denied that The Birth of a Nation is a racist propaganda. However, the worst thing in it is the way in which it is good. Its grand aesthetic qualities do not allow ignoring the movie. Due to them, it is hard not to fall in love with the work despite its disgusting content. This conflict makes the film even more odious. Griffith directed his great talent into the work of hatred being even worse. He sincerely has portrayed it as a virtue.