

Cinema's Original Sin

D. W. GRIFFITH,
AMERICAN RACISM,
AND THE RISE OF
FILM CULTURE

PAUL McEWAN

CINEMA'S ORIGINAL SIN

D. W. Griffith, American Racism,
and the Rise of Film Culture

PAUL McEWAN

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS  *Austin*

Copyright © 2022 by the University of Texas Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2022

Some material related to the film *Intolerance* in chapters 2, 3, and 4 previously appeared in substantially different form in Paul McEwan, "The Legacy of *Intolerance*," chapter 21 of *A Companion to D. W. Griffith*, edited by Charlie Keil, © John Wiley & Sons, 2018; reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLSclear.

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be sent to:
Permissions
University of Texas Press
P.O. Box 7819
Austin, TX 78713-7819
utpress.utexas.edu/rp-form

⊗ The paper in this book meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Cataloging-in-Publication data is available from the Library of Congress.

LCCN 2022005696
ISBN 978-1-4773-2548-3 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-4773-2550-6 (PDF)
ISBN 978-1-4773-2551-3 (ePub)

doi:10.7560/325483

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

CHAPTER ONE

A New Art, 1895–1915 13

CHAPTER TWO

Film Art, *Intolerance*, and Oscar Micheaux, 1915–1925 52

CHAPTER THREE

Little Theatres, MOMA, and the Birth of
Art Cinema, 1925–1945 84

CHAPTER FOUR

From American History to Film History, 1945–1960 110

CHAPTER FIVE

In Search of Legitimacy and Masterpieces:
Film Studies in the Academy, 1960–2000 136

CHAPTER SIX

Race, Reception, and Remix in the New Millennium 162

Epilogue 192

Notes 199

Index 219

FROM AMERICAN HISTORY TO FILM HISTORY,
1945–1960

IN MIDCENTURY, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* ended up at the intersection of two long-term social changes. The first was the gradual decline in overt racism over the course of the twentieth century, a change that was slow and sometimes merely a tactical shift rather than actual progress. The second movement was the rise in the status of film over roughly the same period. Film began as a popular medium and was famously decreed to not be an art form by the US Supreme Court in early 1915, just as *The Birth of a Nation* was being released. Over the past century, film has remained widely popular while simultaneously coming to be regarded as an art form, with the attendant cultural prestige and academic study such standing brings. This shift in itself is obviously less important than changing attitudes about race, but it is part of broader artistic and cultural patterns that have profound effects and influences. This chapter traces the ways in which *The Birth of a Nation's* reputation fell along with the decreasing acceptability of racism, only to be rescued by the rising status of film. In the mid-twentieth century, *The Birth of a Nation* stood at the nexus of changing notions of race, art, and film. This period included some episodes of political controversy, as well as the rise of cinema clubs, which formed a key link between the institutional structures of filmmaking and the later rise of academic film studies. It is also crucial to consider the state of film criticism in the 1940s and 1950s.

In his book *The Rhapsodes*, David Bordwell recounts the developing careers of four prominent critics of the 1940s: James Agee, Parker Tyler, Manny Farber, and Otis Ferguson.¹ For the most part, their reviews did not become a crucial part of film culture until much later. Bordwell dates the beginning of their rise to the death of Agee in 1955. Agee won

a posthumous Pulitzer for his novel *A Death in the Family* in 1958, the same year a collection of his criticism, *Agee on Film*, was released. It is hard to gauge the impact that these writers had as they were writing; all had outlets, but as with most criticism, the impact is amorphous and difficult to map onto specific events or cultural changes. What is crucial is that they seemed to be working from a set of cultural referents in which Griffith figured heavily. As Bordwell writes:

All were cinephiles. They knew the standard story of film history, handily traced in Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930) and Lewis Jacobs's *Rise of the American Film* (1939). Their canon was, by today's standards, very cramped. It consisted mostly of Museum of Modern Art touchstones and Manhattan revival staples: D. W. Griffith (for some shorts and *The Birth of a Nation*), the silent clowns (Chaplin above all), *Caligari*, *The Battleship Potemkin* (sometimes *Earth*), and René Clair's *The Italian Straw Hat* and his early sound pictures. Yet the critics agreed that however great the classics remained, and however terrible contemporary Hollywood could be, there were extraordinary things to be found in new releases.²

In Bordwell's deep reading of these critics' work, he sees a constant dilemma for intellectuals faced with the industrial output of Hollywood. The assembly-line nature of Hollywood production was inherently at odds with a notion of filmic art. In this telling, despite Griffith's role in the invention of Hollywood style, he sometimes becomes a nostalgic touchstone for the days before Hollywood "ruined movies." It is not that critics see a distinct stylistic difference as much as a contrast in the mode of production. Griffith and DeMille become symbols of an era in which a single filmmaker could impose his artistic vision on the entirety of a production, whereas Hollywood in the studio era was an assembly line in which each cog in the process was expected to do his or her job and no other, with the overarching goal of maximizing profits. Despite Parker Tyler's assertion that "Hollywood is a vital, interesting phenomenon, at least as important to the spiritual climate as daily weather to the physical climate," he also held, by Bordwell's summary, that "high art in any medium . . . requires that a single person's vision deliberately control the shape and implications of the work."³ This was not an uncommon view of the era, and indeed is one that carries plenty of weight in the present day. Since film is inherently a collaborative

medium, the tension between film production and the romantic notion of art coming from an artist who reveals some particular part of his or her soul or worldview will never be fully untangled, at least outside of avant-garde or small-scale filmmakers who are able to control all aspects of their work.⁴ This tension is, in part, critically resolved by the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics of the 1950s, who work around it by asserting that directors, even in the Hollywood system, can often be properly seen as the creators of films. This position was of course heavily debated at the time, and the outlines of the argument and its critique are well known to anyone who has studied film in an academic setting since that period. It is in part an unresolvable argument because the two ideas it attempts to resolve—romantic artist and collaborative industrial product—are inherently opposed to one another. In the intervening years, auteurism has become an idea that continues to circulate because it is useful as a way of organizing film study and maintaining film's relationship to other art forms, despite the obvious difficulty in attributing the details of most films' content and style to any one person. There is also the obvious counterexample of television, in which creator credit goes to showrunners and writer/producers, and in which directors are often an afterthought. Auteurism is the quantum physics of film study, in which the mechanics of the underlying process have to be set aside because the product helps us do things.

Writing in the pre-auteurism era, critics of the 1940s had a much harder time squaring the circle of "artistic" film production. The foreign films that played in New York often had the names of known directors on them, while the mass production of many European countries was ignored because those films never appeared in the United States, leading to a selection bias that furthered the image of Europe as the home of artistic film. This perception was strongly supported by preconceptions borrowed from other art forms. In our modern era in which music and opera and painting and theater frequently move in both directions, it is easy to forget that this influence ran one way for a fairly long time. For cinephiles, it was thus important that *French* critics, among them writers who would go on to make some of the most exciting movies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, would be the ones to validate Hollywood production as a site of artistic filmmaking. Before that happened, however, it was harder to take seriously the idea that Hawks or Ford or Hitchcock was an artist in his own right. Griffith was far enough removed that he could be a representative of what American filmmaking *might* have been, rather than what it was.

The only other "American" filmmaker who might have been seen to be in Griffith's league was Charlie Chaplin, who, unlike Griffith, was still an active filmmaker in the 1940s. As beloved as Chaplin was, the fact that he worked in comedy, a genre not usually considered to be art, meant that his position was complicated. He also, of course, had his own political problems.⁵ Like Griffith, he ended up being regarded as someone who was a historically great artist, even though the style for which he was known would not generally be considered art in the 1940s or in the present day. For Chaplin, that incongruity has never gone away. His reputation is as strong as ever, and there is no doubt that he is regarded as an auteur now, even though modern comedies are almost never received as art films, no matter the art or craft of their production. This is reflective of a larger bias in which contemporary film studies is interested in almost any artistic or historical film, which excludes a significant portion of contemporary films that are not considered artistic and are not yet historical.⁶

GRIFFITH'S DEATH AND LATE 1940S FILM CULTURE

When D. W. Griffith died on July 23, 1948, in Los Angeles, the obituary in the *New York Times* treated him gently, emphasizing the breadth of his career and his accomplishments as a filmmaker, while playing down the controversies his most famous film had engendered. The paper described *The Birth of a Nation* as a film "directed by a man whose family had been ruined by the fall of the Confederacy, . . . most biased but . . . filled with great sweep and movement."⁷ An editorial appreciation published the same day allowed that "stylistically speaking, Griffith outlived his times. His mind and his manner were Victorian—and so, of course, were his films."⁸ Lest this gentleness be attributed to an unwillingness to speak ill of the dead, there is the convenient contrast of Thomas Dixon's obituary from two years earlier. While it also emphasized the cultural impact of *The Birth of a Nation*, it clearly labels Dixon as the white supremacist and Klan supporter that he was. The subheadings on Dixon's obituary were "Book Was Basis for 'Birth of a Nation,' Provocative Film—Supported Ku Klux Klan," "He Had Held Pulpit Here," and "Also Was Lawyer, Lecturer—'White Supremacy' Was Subject of His Novels."⁹ In these accounts, Griffith was a filmmaker who had made a controversial film, while Dixon was a controversial figure who had helped make a film. In retrospect, such characterizations still seem reasonable. Dixon had devoted his life to

the cause of white supremacy and racial segregation. He had preached and advocated endlessly for the return of Blacks to Africa, and he wrote *The Clansman* as an antidote to the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When a review of *The Clansman* in the *New York Evening Post* called his play "a means of sowing the seed of revulsion for the black man," he cited it proudly in his own writing as proof that he had "found the hearts of my hearers."¹⁰ In contrast, Griffith did not seem primarily motivated by racism, even though he demonstrated plenty of it. While it is important to acknowledge that he never apologized or backed down from his film's message, he generally did not use the rhetoric of Black threat to defend it, preferring to portray his work as the true representation of an unfortunate history, and his detractors as enemies of artistic freedom. (There were of course exceptions, as when he condemned his critics in a letter to the *New York Globe*, and his climactic damnation of the NAACP was that "they successfully opposed bills which were framed to prohibit the marriage of Negroes to whites.")¹¹ The point of any of these comparisons is not to make Griffith seem progressive by contrast to Dixon and thus less guilty, but only to mark the different motivations of the two men. Griffith was motivated primarily by the possibilities of cinema, and this, somewhat ironically, is what allowed him to do much more damage to racial relations than Dixon had ever done. A version of *The Birth of a Nation* that was closer to Dixon's original stories and ideas would have been a much more pedantic and less successful film, one that would not have found the audiences that this film did. By toning down Dixon's racism and marrying it to his own fixation with narrative, Griffith made bigotry palatable and allowed it to travel much further.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the racism of *The Birth of a Nation* was much more widely acknowledged than it had once been, even as the film was well on its way to being recognized as a key point in the development of filmic art. The film's status as an art object rose just as its politics were becoming less acceptable, although neither the artistic claims nor the politics were completely new. The film was always controversial, and Griffith himself made numerous claims about the artistic status of *The Birth of a Nation* and about film in general at the time it was released. What was different by the late 1940s was that the debate was now largely between liberals who agreed on the film's politics. At the very moment when shifting attitudes about race might have consigned *The Birth of a Nation* to simply becoming a historical curiosity, shifting attitudes about *film* were elevating it to the status

of art object. At the same time, just as the film was less likely to be regarded as *American history*, it became *film history*, a category that did not previously exist.

This is the central irony of the place of *The Birth of a Nation* in midcentury: that the elevation of film to the level of art gave new life to one of cinema's ugliest debates. If film had never achieved the status of art form, then *The Birth of a Nation* would have become a nearly forgotten historical curiosity, something a society would be willing and eager to forget. It might have been the subject of study in histories of race in the United States, the way that other vestiges of racist popular culture are, but there would have been much less need to grapple with it thoughtfully. That challenge was eventually good for our understanding of film, given that it is generally art objects at the fringes that are most illustrative of our assumptions about what art is and should be. The nearly innumerable rounds of "But is it art?" that Western cultures have played in the twentieth century have both freed artists to explore the boundaries of creativity and helped scholars better understand what art is and might be.¹²

Even as notions of what art is were changing in midcentury, film's partisans were not in much of a position to shift the overall boundaries, beyond the already considerable challenge of having film admitted to the club as a "seventh art." The idea that film was worthy of study and contemplation as an art form was already a profound change, and like anyone trying to join an exclusive club who tries to put his or her best foot forward, the works that helped make the case for film's status as an art form tended to be masterpieces by directors who could be considered "auteurs."

The Birth of a Nation, although based on Dixon's successful novel and stage play, could be said to have been "written" by Griffith himself. By all accounts, there was no written screenplay for the film. In Griffith's surviving papers, there is a two-page list of scenes that would have functioned to keep the scenario in order, but even this might have been created afterward to help in the editing process. In any event, it was not *The Birth of a Nation's* authorship that made it a difficult object for a nascent art, but the contrast between its form and its content. For all the controversy the film's content has engendered in the past century, and despite the necessary corrections about how much Griffith actually invented, there has never been a serious argument that he did not use the form well. That fact in itself is worthy of note, and an important marker of Griffith's accomplishment. There has never been a moment

in the past century when anyone has mounted a serious critique of the film's editing or cinematography in and of itself. It does not seem dated even now, something that cannot be said of every film of the period. Such a contrast between the content and the form is a useful indicator of what those who were opposed to the film were up against.

In the late 1940s, *The Birth of a Nation* also became embroiled, like much of the film world, in arguments about communism. Tarring opponents of the film as Communists became the simplest way to defend it, and this happened repeatedly. Political arguments about the film were also intertwined with arguments about free speech as film moved toward the moment, in 1952, when it would finally be awarded First Amendment protection in the United States. The second focus of this chapter is cinema clubs, organizations that were formed in a number of countries and peaked between 1950 and the 1970s, rising with the status of film until the advent of the home video era made them less essential for some participants. Some of these clubs date back to the 1920s, including the London Film Society (1925) and a club in Glasgow founded in 1929. The clubs in Britain seem to predate their North American counterparts somewhat—there were more clubs in the United States after MOMA began distributing film prints in 1935. The free speech cases and the cinema clubs provide a complex portrait of the ways in which cinema was perceived and used in the middle of the century.

Cinema clubs differed dramatically in size and formality. Some were primarily focused on avant-garde films, while others doubled as creative groups for amateur filmmakers. Most offered regular screenings of foreign, historical, or artistic films, and as such were a crucial precursor to the academic study of film, which was not especially well developed until the late 1960s and 1970s. It is difficult to trace their extent or reach, since records are scattered and ephemeral. What remains is largely determined by luck and circumstance. But these clubs seem to have been very common in the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain, France, Latin America,¹³ and presumably other countries with developed film cultures. In North America and Britain, there seem to have been clubs in most mid-sized and large towns, and on most college or university campuses. Some of the clubs in this last group have survived as student film clubs to the present day.

Given the difficulty of finding cinema club records, one of the best surviving collections of cinema club material comes from the collection of John Griggs in New Jersey.¹⁴ Griggs was an actor who had limited

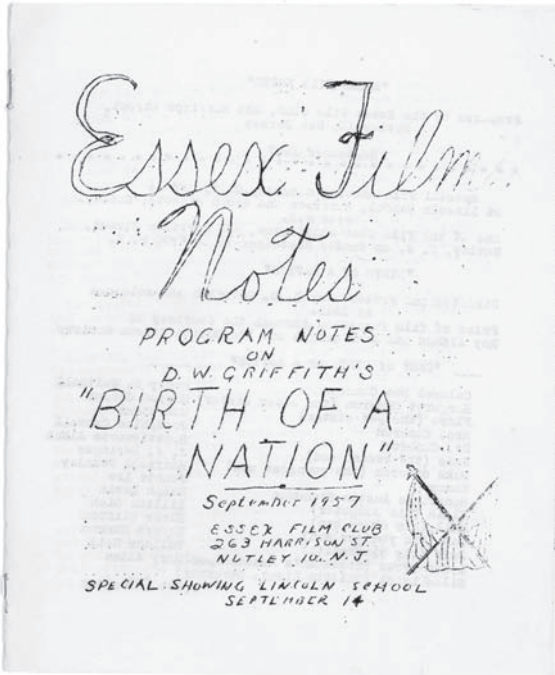


Figure 4.1. Essex Film Club program for *The Birth of a Nation*, September 1957 (courtesy of Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College).

success in film but appeared on numerous radio programs. He found his calling as a film collector and distributor. He made copies of some of the early films in his collection and distributed them under the name Griggs-Moviedrome.¹⁵ He was also friends with Robert E. "Bob" Lee, founder of the Essex Film Club in Nutley, New Jersey, which was one of the longest-functioning film clubs in the United States, running until Lee's death in 1992. Many of the films shown by the club in the 1950s seem to have been from Griggs's collection. The papers were compiled roughly between 1946 and 1960. There are numerous programs from bookings of the sound version of *The Birth of a Nation* around New York and New Jersey, and information on Griggs's own copy of the film, which he booked for school and community groups in the late 1950s. He had apparently even composed his own original score for the film.

The papers in this collection, which amount to perhaps one hundred pages, are by no means an exhaustive document of the film or the time period, but clusters of documents reveal key moments in the film's reception. In addition to records of the cinema clubs, Griggs collected clippings and letters from some of the controversies that followed the

film in the northeastern United States. One episode from New York state is particularly enlightening because Griggs managed to collect a range of letters from it, and because it connects to an important free speech case in the United States, *Feiner v. New York* (1951).

FREE SPEECH AND THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM

In early July 1949 the mayor of Syracuse, Frank J. Costello, reacted to public pressure initiated by the NAACP and denied a local theater permission to screen *The Birth of a Nation*. There are two letters in the Griggs papers from Elmer Rice, chairman of the National Council for Freedom from Censorship, which was a subcommittee of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The letter addressed to the mayor begins by assuming that the mayor has “undoubtedly . . . the best of intentions to prevent the growth of racial prejudice.” Rice goes on to make an impassioned defense of free speech rights, but also makes specific claims about the film that are revealing. He writes, “If there are traces of race prejudice in the film, they are put in the proper perspective of today by a statement in the prologue flashed on screen in the following words.” He then cites one of the title cards that was commonly added to the film in the 1940s: “Today the American Negro and all races of man living under the protection of the Constitution of these glorious United States, fight and work side by side to preserve our cherished freedom.” Rice also cites in his letter an epilogue card that appeared at the end of the film: “And so we learn from this great historical document that only by equality, justice and liberty for all, that ‘this Nation shall not perish from the earth.’”¹⁶ Rice assumes that the “traces of race prejudice” in the film can be reversed with simple prologue and epilogue cards. In this way, the cards echo the “Hampton epilogue” that was added to some prints in 1915, and which also attempted to contradict the film’s message with a simple add-on, but was generally regarded as a failure.¹⁷ Such a claim seems to us quite naïve, especially since these title cards survive, and they are not nearly as unambiguous about racial equality as he seems to assert. One card claims, “This historical document, reviving one of the most crucial moments in American history, forcefully depicts the exploitation of the slave-dazed negroes of that period by the northern carpetbaggers.” Such is the historical balance of the period, where the notion that the people recently freed from enslavement simply did not know any better constitutes an improvement over the idea that they had acted with conscious and violent intent. In both cases, the idea that African Americans ran wild during Reconstruction is not questioned, as it would

have been supported by many of the history books then available. Until midcentury, the historical understanding of the post-Civil War period was dominated by the Dunning School, named for William Archibald Dunning, an influential Columbia University historian whose work provided support for Griffith's view of Reconstruction.¹⁸

The more important assumption in the title card is based on the meaning of the phrase "historical document." In 1915 Griffith treated *The Birth of a Nation* as a historical document of Reconstruction and defended it as such. Today we still think of it as a historical document, but of 1915, not of Reconstruction, since its version of post-Civil War history has been so thoroughly debunked. By the late 1940s, we begin to see this transition from one sense of "historical document" to the other. In the title card, the phrase can be read either way, although it still seems to mean primarily "history of Reconstruction," since it implies that there is a valuable historical lesson to be learned from the film and takes the film's treatment of Reconstruction at face value. In the period around 1950, some began to refer to the film as a "museum piece" and the like, as is evident in a letter from the Griggs collection dated March 1950, apparently from a theater manager in Kentucky to Frank Markey, who seems to have been a distributor of the film in this period. The letter says that the Screen Directors Guild was planning to install a memorial to Griffith in the "little church yard near Crestwood, Ky." where Griffith is buried. The theater manager, A. N. Miles, writes, "As to exploiting this old picture 'Birth of a Nation' it seems to me that it would best be presented in the art and small 'class' houses for exactly what it is, you might say a museum piece. As you probably know it was screened last year at the Museum of Modern Arts & Science [*sic*]."¹⁹

In commercial terms, the appeal of *The Birth of a Nation* was now limited, although it does seem to have been screened regularly in those art houses for a very long time. As Miles notes, however, Griffith was now useful as a symbol of Hollywood's history and stature. The Screen Directors Guild paid for the stone cover on Griffith's grave, which also includes the seal of the guild. The first award the guild ever handed out was an "Honorary Life Member" award for Griffith in 1938, and in 1953 they honored him again by creating the D. W. Griffith Lifetime Achievement Award, which first went to Cecil B. DeMille and has been given out to most major postwar directors in the decades since. The guild merged with the Radio and Television Directors' Guild in 1960 to form the Directors Guild of America (DGA), and in 1999 Griffith's name was dropped from the Lifetime Achievement Award despite his

"innovations as a visionary film artist" because he "helped foster intolerable racial stereotypes" according to DGA president Jack Shea.²⁰

In 1949 there were still plenty of people who accepted *The Birth of a Nation* as a document that told the truth about American history, as one letter in the Griggs collection makes clear. Written in August 1949 to Frank Feocco at the Horseheads Theatre in Horseheads, New York, it thanks him for allowing the letter writer, Mrs. Charles W. Swift, president of the Elmira Community Motion Picture Council,²¹ to see a preview of the film. She is effusive in her praise:

I recommend that everyone, from History students on up, see it. It is invaluable to help understand the chaos in the country after the Civil War. That picture was never meant to hurt anyone, either black or white but to help them to understand the conditions. The colored people should stop and think, if it had not been for Lincoln & the Civil War, they might still be slaves . . . and, too, they should appreciate all that has been done for them in education, housing, a place in the community (of course many of them do) now it is up to them to do their part.²²

This is a remarkable misreading of the film and of the civil rights movement. It assumes both that African Americans do not understand Lincoln's accomplishments and that a misunderstanding of Lincoln is the primary problem with *The Birth of a Nation*. Mrs. Swift explains her broader concerns, however: "I am not going to sit calmly by and see communists and other pressure groups, poisoning the minds of people who do not understand that they are being used as tools for their cause. We have all got to work together to keep this country free!" While Swift's perspective seems easy to dismiss in the present day, such common concerns were an important part of the cultural context. At a time when liberals were defending *The Birth of a Nation* on artistic grounds or recognizing it as film history, it still also had its conservative defenders who saw it as an accurate portrayal of American history and had little problem with its racist content. Those opposed to the film now had a nearly impossible case to make, as the film had supporters from across the political spectrum who would defend it for, at times, completely opposite reasons. Conservatives saw it as a true history of racial equality run amok, while liberals saw it as an important reflector of early film art despite its racist content. Both groups would have been likely to defend the film on free speech grounds, a particularly American

response. Absolute defenses of free speech are ingrained in American culture in a way that they rarely are in other nations. Many developed democracies have laws against hate speech that provide criminal penalties for words considered dangerous to particular groups. There have been times when dangerous speech has been banned in America, but such bans have rarely held up in a culture that tends to see all such limits as a slippery slope toward totalitarianism. As it happens, one of the key free speech cases in American history was unfolding in Syracuse at exactly the same moment that the mayor was grappling with *The Birth of a Nation*.

As mayor Frank J. Costello was reading the letter from the ACLU about *The Birth of a Nation*, he could also have been thinking about a much more significant free speech case in which he had become embroiled only a couple of months previously. He had denied a permit at the last minute for a public appearance by a lawyer who was defending six Black men accused of murder in Trenton, New Jersey. After Mayor Costello pulled the permit, student organizers took to the streets to protest the action and to announce a new location. One of them, Irving Feiner, stood up on a soapbox to denounce the mayor. Feiner was arrested for disorderly conduct and sentenced to thirty days in jail. He appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, and in 1951 the court upheld his conviction on the grounds that his speech was likely to cause a riot. This case came to be associated with others that grappled with what was known as the “heckler’s veto” since it meant that anyone could stop a controversial speaker by threatening violence. It has since been overturned in a number of cases.²³

Costello did not know that Feiner’s case would become a Supreme Court precedent, and it is unclear whether he banned *The Birth of a Nation* for the same reasons he tried to stop the speech (the threat of public disorder) or whether it was an appeasement aimed at the Black community, since the original event Feiner was protesting had been about race, and the “mob” he was accused of inciting was a mixture of Blacks and whites.

There are two other key arguments in the letter from the ACLU’s Elmer Rice to the mayor. The first is practical—that if *The Birth of a Nation* could be banned in the North, then films sympathetic to Blacks could be banned in the South. Such a position reveals what I have always seen as the inherently practical, as opposed to philosophical, position of the ACLU on free speech.

Rice’s last argument is based on a faith in the audience that, given the

particular history of this film, also seems naïve. He writes: "If there is unfortunate propaganda in 'Birth of a Nation' the people of Syracuse will be adept in spotting and discounting it for what it is. Faith in freedom of speech is nothing except faith in the people. We have such faith."²⁴ It is tempting to see Rice himself as foolish or naïve, but we need to remember that this letter was written with a particular purpose: to convince someone he does not know to accept his philosophical and political position. Given that, we have to keep in mind the rhetorical construction of this letter; Rice was using arguments he thought most likely to convince the mayor and perhaps would have made his point differently to a different audience.

Rice also wrote to Jack Zurich, the owner of the Midtown Theatre, and this message is simpler: that he understands Zurich withdrew the picture under duress, and that he offers the ACLU's legal help if Zurich should decide to defy the ban.²⁵ Zurich seems to have decided to simply wait the mayor out, since the film appeared at the Midtown Theatre in June 1950, not long after Mayor Costello had left office.²⁶

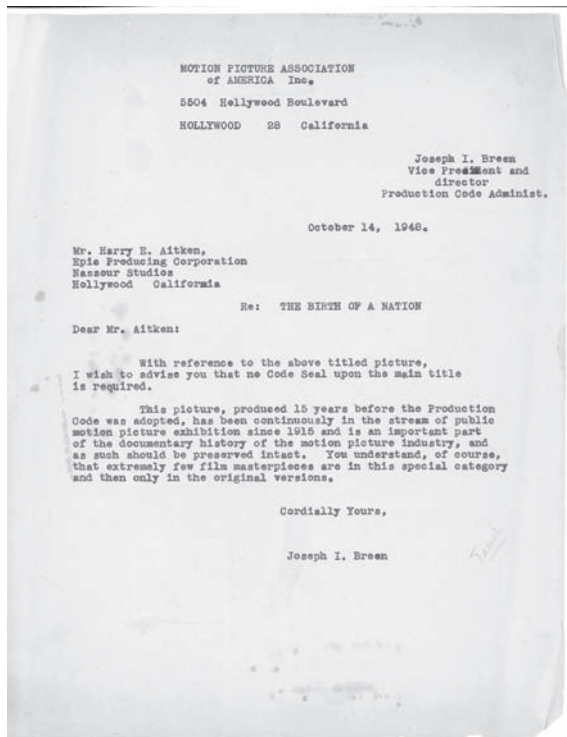


Figure 4.2. Letter from Joseph Breen to Harry Aitken, October 1948 (courtesy of Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College).

All of this discussion of censorship takes place in an environment in which films were still subject to the *Mutual* decision of 1915 and thus could not claim an exemption from censorship on First Amendment grounds. At the same time, the Production Code of 1934 provided stricter limitations on films than almost any local or state law. A 1948 letter from Production Code director Joseph Breen to Griffith's producer Harry Aitken (who was still administering the film in the late 1940s) assured him that *The Birth of a Nation* was exempt from the Production Code and that "extremely few film masterpieces are in this special category and then only in the original versions." In the same letter, Breen also said the film was "an important part of the documentary history of the motion picture industry, and as such should be preserved intact."²⁷ It is important that he refers to the film as a "part of the documentary history of the motion picture industry" and not a document of American history. Breen is making it clear that the film is now an artifact of film history and outside of midcentury concerns about morals and censorship. This placement of the film as part of "film history" would begin to have important ramifications for the reception of the film in the 1950s.

THE RISE OF FOREIGN FILMS IN AMERICA

In this same period, the range of films available to Americans was changing in important ways. The success of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* in 1946 helped to create a market for other Italian neorealist films, and in their wake came a great expansion in the market for foreign films in America, or at least the foreign films that could be conceived of as art films. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, films arrived in waves from Britain, Japan, France, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.²⁸ Often not submitted for Production Code approval because the theaters that showed them were not bound by the code, they could offer access not only to more complicated ideas and ideologies, but also to sexual images not found in Hollywood releases. Even after the controversy around Rossellini's *The Miracle* destroyed the legal foundation of the Production Code, the studios continued to use it for the next decade and a half, although its strictest rules were gradually weakened. After the code was abandoned completely in 1968 and Hollywood liberalized its standards, foreign films would lose this competitive advantage, but in the 1950s it still helped them to draw audiences. It would be a mistake of course to ascribe the popularity of foreign films simply to sex appeal, since the majority of them contained no sex or nudity whatsoever. It

was clear that tastes were changing for various reasons that are hard to quantify in and of themselves. The postwar GI Bill provided four years of college education for returning soldiers, and nearly eight million took advantage, so that the number of degree holders in the United States doubled between 1940 and 1950. At the same time, these veterans were the foundation of the postwar baby boom and the migration to suburbia, so it seems unlikely that they were also the core of the urban art-cinema market. Film academics tend to search for sociological answers to film audience questions, but it seems more likely that the response had more to do with markets. Hollywood studios had thrived for many years in a closed ecosystem in which they controlled nearly all access to American moviegoers, because either they owned the theaters outright or block booking allowed them to keep independents out. The 1948 Paramount decision had loosened the studios' hold on theaters, but it was also clear that, for all of Hollywood's success at making movies, its studios offered a limited product line compared to the full potential of what film could be. For there to be increased audiences for art films, it is not necessary that there be a lot of new filmgoers, even though there were surely some people who were drawn into cinephilia by what the art cinemas had to offer. Instead, it is only necessary for some portion of the people who love cinema to be excited by the greater range of films now on offer and make them part of their viewing habits.

While film reception was changing in response to social mores, there were equally important shifts in technology and distribution that also had a considerable impact on film culture and allowed *The Birth of a Nation* and other films to circulate in places where they might not previously have been accessible. The wide availability of 16mm film projectors, with libraries and distribution networks of films to fuel them, allowed amateur film societies to spring up all over the United States. This expansion predated, for the most part, the creation of academic film programs, which is notable given that many of these new film societies were on college and university campuses. While this was part of a wider conception of film as art, it was also connected to the idea that film could be education. As Charles Acland has noted, we have tended to see education *about* film and education *through* film as distinct threads, but this was a period when the two were intimately interrelated by the technology of 16mm. Purchases of projectors by educational institutions might be driven by a desire to show educational films as well as by an inclination to provide access to non-Hollywood films. In addition, film

societies and film education organizations often had overlapping memberships.²⁹ In a history of the Film Council of America, “the most visible national and influential US film education organization of the 1940s and 1950s,”³⁰ Acland points out that “the expanding availability and mobility of media—that is, sounds and images from elsewhere becoming ubiquitously evident—destabilized the hold of traditional educational institutions, authorities, and ideals, thus engendering a certain crisis of modernity and calling forth efforts to navigate and guide a potentially chaotic realm. The FCA . . . legitimized a particular configuration of modern education and cultural authority.”³¹ While Acland is writing about the activities of a particular organization, he identifies much of the broader tension that existed in 1950s film culture. While film societies were flourishing on college campuses, there was still very little film in most curricula. Students and other members of academic communities were ahead of the faculties of their own institutions, even though some of those professors were surely at the same screenings. These screenings were not just a way for members of the campus community to pass time; they helped to create an intelligent and insightful film culture. In many cases, the writing that came out of these groups was as sophisticated as the academic writing that would follow it in later decades.

During this period, even laudatory accounts of film societies often revealed tensions about high and low culture. In a September 1949 article in the *New York Times*, Thomas Pryor approvingly notes the explosion of film societies around the country, pointing out that although New York had one of the largest film societies (Cinema 16, organized by Amos Vogel), other smaller cities had film-lending departments in public libraries, something that New York City did not have. He writes, though, that “film society audiences run the gamut from pseudo-intellectuals and sophisticates, professing a marked disdain for Hollywood’s fictional creations[,] to more reasonable and intellectually sound admirers of motion pictures. Among the last are many ‘occasional’ patrons of the commercial movie theatre who have a healthy respect for Hollywood’s best creative efforts, but also recognize the film as a potent form in modern society and a medium of expression which has yet to be fully developed.”³² It is noteworthy here that Pryor is warning against a generalized notion of the superiority of non-Hollywood film, guarding a place for the best Hollywood productions in the same way that the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics would a few years later. This position reads differently coming from an American, of course, but it is also interesting that Pryor was defending contemporary films rather than

classic films. For him, it goes without saying that Hollywood is making important films. He is critiquing as pseudo-intellectual the position that Hollywood is unworthy and claiming a space for contemporary American popular film alongside its historical and foreign counterparts.

Thus, the wide availability of projectors and prints made it possible for films to circulate in new and decentralized ways. A considerable part of the Griggs collection consists of documents related to Griggs's own showings of films, including *The Birth of a Nation*, in the late 1950s. In promotional materials, he claims that his print is the original uncut version. It was extremely unlikely that he had any 1915 version, given the history of the prints of this film. Although common versions of the film now include material, like references to the printed program, that clearly date from the original run of the film, no copy can be definitively traced further back than 1921.³³ He means that he at least had a silent-era version, which would have distinguished his copy from nearly every other copy in circulation in the 1950s. As we saw in chapter 3, for much of the period between the 1930s and the 1990s, most people who saw *The Birth of a Nation* would have seen the greatly truncated sound-era version. The sound version of the film is nearly a different film than the one in current circulation, since so much is cut or changed. The net result of these changes is that the sound version of the film is more of a war adventure story and less of a social history lesson, although of course the bulk of the racism remains, inscribed as it is in the very bodies and performances of the actors.

Griggs produced a program for a special showing of his print by the Essex Film Club in Nutley, New Jersey, in 1957. The Essex Film Club was one of the longest continuously operating amateur film clubs in the United States, holding at least monthly screenings between 1939 and the early 1990s. The showing of *The Birth of a Nation*, scheduled in the auditorium of a local public school on the evening of Sunday, September 15, was a special event for the club. The program includes a summary of the film largely copied from program notes written by T. K. Peters, a film teacher and collector from Georgia. The summary repeats most of the key claims of the film at face value—that Lincoln, had he lived, would never have imposed Reconstruction on the South, and that the rise of the Klan was a reasonable reaction of disenfranchised whites to the enfranchisement of African Americans. The program also goes out of its way to distinguish the Reconstruction-era Klan from later counterparts.

Following this description, though, the program makes explicit the now-dual historical nature of presentations of *The Birth of a Nation*. Griggs writes:

The showing of "The Birth of a Nation" today is for a two fold purpose. First it is recognized as the museum film of the motion picture industry, and shows clearly the progress made in the motion picture art during the last 42 years.

Secondly, but still more important, it is now shown to portray very clearly the progress that has been made by our Negro Race during the last 97 years; progress made since tolerance and education in human relationships have assumed proper perspective.³⁴

So the film was still considered to be a history of Reconstruction, but it also had become *film history* and could be justified as such. As a collector, Griggs was obviously interested in film for film's sake, but his justification is crucial here because of the nature of the film. If *The Birth of a Nation* was now film history, then those who objected to showing the film were not just antiracists, but people who object to the notion that film itself constitutes an important part of America's cultural history. Those who sought to suppress this film were now potential enemies of art, and of art history.

This new binary used to defend the film came under sophisticated attack in a letter also preserved in the Griggs collection. Addressed to Robert "Bob" Lee, the head of the Essex Film Club, it is written by Grace Golat, who is trying to convince Lee to voluntarily withdraw the film, at least from the advertised public showing. Refusing to be painted as an enemy of film art, Golat makes her case on exactly those grounds: she argues that a showing of *The Birth of a Nation* is "a distortion and perversion of the purposes of film groups, which [she understands] to be the study and exhibition of the film art, the advancement of the film as an art form, and the encouragement thru this art of the growth of all human cultural values, deepening and strengthening individual sensitivity, insight and awareness." Drawing an analogy, she asks, "Could one be considered genuinely fostering the film arts who would exhibit films that are primarily pornographic, despite the fine photography thereto? Or one who would foster showing of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda films for all their excellent photographic or sound techniques?"³⁵ She also notes, "In the eyes of the community, I'm afraid the substance will

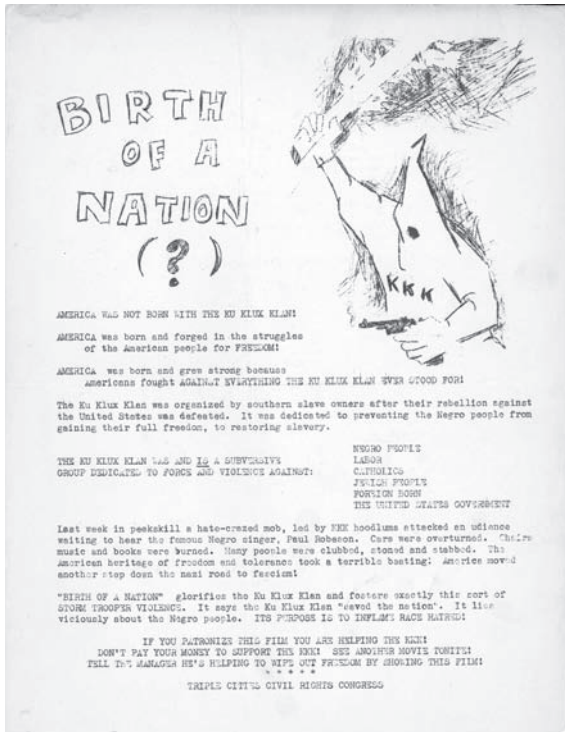


Figure 4.3. Protest flyer distributed by the NAACP of New York, 1950s (courtesy of Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College).

take precedence over the art form." With this line, she anticipated a large part of the justification of the film in the following thirty years, that one should simply divorce the form from the content, although in almost all subsequent cases the argument would be that the form should take precedence over the content, or even that one should simply "ignore" the content and learn from the form. We now tend to see the form as inseparable from the content. At the same time, the context of the film's viewership and changing social values continually decreases (but does not eliminate) the likelihood that it will contribute to the racism of its viewers.

In the collection of the Cinémathèque québécoise in Montreal are numerous film club programs from Canada, Britain, and Australia.³⁶ There is a great deal of overlap in the programs that these clubs produced for films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and, later, *Intolerance*, and in many cases the club organizers copied film descriptions and details from one

another, sometimes with attribution and sometimes without. One group of programs from the Ottawa and Montreal area in the early 1950s all seem to be based on a program from the Oxford University Film Society written in 1949. This means that many errors are repeated, particularly the claim that "because of [the film's] anti-negro tone . . . in Boston a riot broke out with continuous fighting for twenty-four hours."

While the programs in the collection vary in their approach to dealing with the film's racism, few seem to argue it away. This is important because well into the 1970s, one can find articles in newspapers and magazines on Griffith that still attempt to do just that, dismissing the controversies over the film's content as some kind of attack by philistines on a great artist, much as Griffith had defended himself in the teens. In contrast, most of these programs are among the earliest attempts to put the film's racism in context. While emphasizing that they are showing the film because of its importance in the formal development of film style, the film clubs include statements that acknowledge the harmful stereotypes the film contains.

The program from the Oxford University Film Society for a showing in May 1949 is an early attempt to strike this balance. Its author writes of the film: "It was an immediate success, partly perhaps because of its anti-negro tone which gained it some notoriety. . . . When it was shown in London quite recently, it was preceded by a notice asking the audience to disregard the sociological implications and to treat it as a work of art. Griffith does in fact represent the negroes in a very bad light, and he makes a mock of the Radical politician, Stoneman, who takes their part."³⁷ While it may sound as though this is just another attempt to diminish attention to the film's racism, it is different from the dismissals one finds in the popular press and in film history books prior to the 1980s. The film club programs make repeated attempts to *emphasize* the film's historical context, recognizing how much attitudes have changed in the forty years since 1915 and trying to position the club members as distanced art historians who are presenting these films as an opportunity to learn about cinema and history, rather than just "appreciating" the films as works of art.

The Oxford University Film Society was founded in 1944 by theater and film director Peter Brook, who went on to have one of the longest and most remarkable careers of the twentieth century. The Oxford society's level of activity increased in the late 1940s, earlier than many such similar groups. The organization's lofty reputation was bolstered

by the relative critical acuity of the notes that it issued. The group's notes on *Intolerance*, written in 1949, begin thus:

Some critics consider *Intolerance* the greatest film ever made: none considers it the most perfect. No one denies its importance as an influence: there is some debate about its value as a work of art. In *Intolerance* Griffith did four things which were at that time remarkable. He used many new technical devices which later influenced the early Russian and German cinemas; he evolved an elaborate and efficient organisation for production; did everything on an enormous scale at very great expense in both setting an example for the American cinema, and he tried to make a film about a subject that really mattered, and in this he is, from time to time, followed by most directors who take themselves seriously.³⁸

The summary contained in these notes, written more than seventy years ago, still resonates strikingly with current critical consensus on *Intolerance*. The last line even offers a nicely balanced dose of cynicism, in the claim that making films about subjects that "really matter" is a habit of directors who "take themselves seriously." The author demonstrates an awareness of the risks inherent for directors who take themselves seriously, as well as for those who do not.

There can be little doubt, of course, that Griffith belonged to the category of directors who take themselves seriously. No one would undertake films called *The Birth of a Nation* or *Intolerance* if he did not. And Griffith's writings on the meaning of film, and on his films, reveal a strong belief in the transformative nature of cinema. Yet while the past one hundred years have witnessed a near-complete transformation in reactions to *The Birth of a Nation*, surprisingly little change has marked the reception of *Intolerance*. Griffith's sense in the 1910s that he was making foundational cinematic works has turned out to be correct, even if they are not now remembered exactly as he would have wished.

The cut-and-paste nature of the programs in the Cinémathèque québécoise collection means that much is repeated from film society to film society. One frequently copied page features a range of quotations about *The Birth of a Nation* that illustrate the complexity of its midcentury reception. The generally debunked Wilson remark is included, but the quotations that follow alternate between praise and condemnation. The next two are arguments similar to those made in the teens about the film's historical accuracy, with notorious Griffith

defender Seymour Stern making a strong case for Griffith's "objectivity and scholarship." From there, they largely deal with the film's status as an art object, whether it is a work of genius or a piece of "old-fashioned theatricality." It gives the last word to British critic (and later filmmaker) Lindsay Anderson, who remarks on the "generally Fascist tone of its final sequences" and the "corresponding assumption of White 'supremacy.'"

Even while listing the formal techniques that Griffith either devised or mastered, these film programs try to find some scholarly distance. A good extended example is the program from the Ciné-Club of Saint-Laurent, Québec, probably from 1953. The program begins by describing the film as being about "the fight to the death between white and black, the will of the former to guarantee forever their complete domination. This theme, which has never ceased to be exploited (for or against the racist ideal) by the American cinema, maintains a troubling relevance today."³⁹ Under the section "L'Apport de Griffith" (The Contribution of Griffith), it begins, "One cannot exaggerate the importance and the historic role of Griffith who took on, between 1908 and 1918, the carefully thought out establishment of the syntax of cinema." The summary explains in detail the nature of his contributions to film language and style as well as his role in the development of the star system. It adds: "For the first time, the camera, forgetting its origins in still photography with its firmly rooted feet on the ground, became aware of its possibilities of mobility; shooting, which had always been objective, could become subjective; the mechanical eye substituting itself for the human eye."⁴⁰ This is reasonably poetic prose, but despite the high praise, which is extensive, there is no attempt here to justify Griffith's version of history, and the tone is scholarly rather than celebratory. In fact, it is notable that much of the praise in this section is about Griffith's work in general, while the first section, titled *The Birth of a Nation*, is the part that condemns the history.

Another program in the collection from around the same time makes a division between form and content, but not to argue that the two are unrelated. This program survives only in part, so it cannot be dated, but the notes are largely drawn from the English-language examples referred to earlier, so it is in some way a descendent of the Oxford program from 1949. It contains the same summary and some details about the stylistic innovations, but then concludes that "the faults of *Birth of a Nation* are obvious . . . The film's passionate and persuasive avowal of the inferiority of the Negro seems even more narrowly prejudiced and

insidious than it did to its contemporaries. In 1915 the social implications of the film aroused a storm of protest. Negroes and whites united in attacking it. In Boston and other 'abolitionist' cities race riots broke out. The President of Harvard charged the film with 'a tendency to pervert white ideals.' Viewed today this criticism seems over mild."⁴¹ It is interesting that these related programs all seem to build on one another, since they offer us a chance to trace the spread of a particular way of reading the film. Of course, there is no linear progression here from more racism to less, and in cases where few details are given it can be hard to discern the intended meaning. A program from the AGE Film Society in Toronto in 1961 simply states, "The storm of protest that broke after this picture's release is now well known. Though he tried to be fair, it was still the work of a fiercely loyal but embittered southerner." It goes on to credit Griffith with rebutting much of the criticism when he made *Intolerance*.⁴²

This collection of Canadian programs seems to reflect a cultural moment in the development of film clubs. For other places, the record is spottier, and it is impossible to tell if available examples are representative at all. A program from the Tyneside Film Society in northeast England, written in 1955, is a clear example of the "triumphant Griffith" genre. It covers the film's controversy thus: "From the very beginning, *The Birth of a Nation* became the subject of bitter controversy and Griffith was frequently accused of inciting racial hatred. The film made front page headlines when political organisations, seeking the Negro vote, attacked it viciously. Disturbances broke out in several places where the film was being shown and in some communities where the Negro vote meant money and power, it was banned altogether." After summarizing the film's successes in "nearly all the capitals and key cities of Europe and Asia," the author concludes, "the world record of *The Birth of a Nation* is little short of fabulous. The attacks against it have been echoed and re-echoed down the years but none of the attacks has finally prevailed either against the film or against Griffith." It ends: "To sum up, Griffith revealed in this film, first to America and later to the world, the hitherto undreamed of possibilities of the motion picture as a medium of expression. It came as overwhelming proof that the screen could re-create history, stir emotion and feeling, provoke controversy, and even direct thought."⁴³

A more balanced program from Melbourne, Australia, for a presentation by the Continental Film Group of both *Intolerance* and *The Birth of a Nation* sometime in the 1950s includes extensive notes on the form of the films.

When it comes to the discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*, this program also has one of the clearest statements about the film's content:

The Committee of the Continental Film Group screens films for their artistic and historical importance and, it should hardly be necessary to add, not because of ideological content. We do not justify any of the historical inaccuracy, racial bias and the glorification of the Ku Klux Klan which are particularly displayed in the second half of the film. The attitude of Griffith can be explained, not excused, by his background. He was a Southerner by birth steeped in an atmosphere of racial prejudice, he was brought up with the conventional Southern States attitude to the negro.⁴⁴

This perspective on the film is not really different from ours now. This is not to suggest, of course, that there was anything like a consensus on the film by this point in the 1950s. As we have seen, responses ranged from thoughtful ones like this to outright defenses of the film. What is most important in this example is the idea that the film could be of "artistic and historical importance" even as its content is disavowed. The key words here are "it should hardly be necessary to add," since they capture a turning point in the reception of the film. The programmers think it is obvious that films can be appreciated even as they are critiqued, but they are aware that their audience may not make such a distinction.

The program introduces *Intolerance* thus: "*Intolerance*, the world's largest film, ranks with *The Birth of a Nation* as one of the two historic cornerstones of film art. *Intolerance* advanced the revolution of the medium, initiated by Griffith through the former and primary work, in a dimension, and to a degree, such as may be regarded as constituting, both artistically and technically, as well as in creative influence, the second cinematic revolution."⁴⁵ The description of *Intolerance* as "the world's largest film" is an odd construction that manages to seem remarkably apt given the magnitude of the film's means and ambitions. It captures the film's scale and scope while sounding oddly neutral on whether this largeness is laudable. The program goes on to note the independent nature of the film's production and the lack of a written script. The bulk of the notes, though, are detailed summaries of the various formal devices in the film, from the moving camera and parallel editing to soft focus and natural lighting. The section entitled "Stylized Shots" remarks, "In the Modern Story, the scaffold and other instruments of Death, stark and simple, [are shown] against an empty black background

(the hangman's cell). The omission here of all surrounding realistic detail raises these objects from the status of natural 'props' to the category of image-symbols."⁴⁶ The program goes on to credit *Intolerance* with the invention of "Inanimate Objects as Symbols," describing the use of the technique in this way: "The origin of this peculiarly cinematic form, which has psychological as well as pictorial capacity, may be traced to *Intolerance*: for example, in the Babylonian story, when Griffith introduces Cyrus by showing first his sword (the "sword of war"); or in the Modern Story, when he introduces the Musketeer of the Slums."⁴⁷ On this last point the praise seems a bit overblown: one can scarcely claim that the use of inanimate objects as symbols is particular to cinema. Despite these occasional oversteps, the notes on *Intolerance* are smart and clear, summing up the film in the following fashion:

As a spectacle, *Intolerance* made a deep and lasting impression on the American film industry. Hollywood rejected its artistic integrity, its content and approach, but it envied, and later tried to rival, its physical magnitude, pageantry and use of crowds.

The principal effect of *Intolerance* along this line may be seen in the ambitiously imitative spectacles of Cecil B. De Mille, who never forgot *Intolerance*.⁴⁸

There are three main intellectual threads here. The first is that in midcentury, *The Birth of a Nation* is at the intersection of two currents in American society: the gradual decrease in the acceptability of racism and the rise in the status of film as an art form. As we have seen, just when *The Birth of a Nation's* racism became less socially acceptable, and just as it was becoming clearer that the film did not accurately reflect US history, *The Birth of a Nation* emerged as a key example of film history, a category that did not previously exist. Museums, cinema clubs, and Hollywood itself were all interested in seeing film regarded as an important part of cultural history. The fact that they all saw *The Birth of a Nation* as a key text is useful to us now, because the arguments and defensiveness the film engendered meant that we have been left evidence of how people approached film in general and what they thought it meant.

My second argument in this chapter has been about the importance of the cinema clubs themselves, which are an understudied yet crucial element in the development of film culture. The reason they have been understudied is in part perfectly sensible—it is by its nature a piecemeal

history that must be patched together from documents that are widely dispersed if they exist at all. The depth and nuance of some clubs' understanding of film are crucial to the history of film reception in the years before academic film study became well established. Cinema clubs often give us a perspective that is in between critics and fans, indeed closer to that of the academic film critics who would come later.

The last part of my argument concerns those academic film critics themselves. It is clear from a reading of the period that the scholars involved in the early days of film studies in the academy did, in general, a far worse job of dealing with the complexities of *The Birth of a Nation* than the cinema clubs had done a decade or two earlier. While there were exceptions, the tendency in academia in the 1960s and 1970s was to downplay or ignore the film's racism in favor of regarding it as a masterwork of cinematography and editing. As film studies tried to make its case within the academy for why its object was worthy of study, it needed artistic and historical masterpieces in order to better match the structure of art history or English literature. In a rush to demonstrate that it had such history, film studies often stripped away the sociological and cultural context in favor of aesthetics. While this is somewhat understandable in the historical context, it also sometimes reflected a step backward for the understanding of *The Birth of a Nation* and other films like it. Generations of film students were shown *The Birth of a Nation* as a historical masterpiece and told to ignore its racist content. As we will see in the following chapters, this had a range of negative implications for the nascent discipline of film studies.

58. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, 175.
 59. A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 348–349.
 60. Milton MacKaye, “The Birth of a Nation,” *Scribner’s*, November 1937, 69.
 61. Fritzi Kramer, “The First White House Motion Picture Show? Theodore Roosevelt Rides to the Rescue,” *MoviesSilently.com*, <https://moviesilently.com/2019/01/25/the-first-white-house-motion-picture-show-teddy-roosevelt-rides-to-the-rescue/>.
 62. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, 394.

CHAPTER 4: FROM AMERICAN HISTORY TO FILM HISTORY, 1945–1960

1. Two of these critics, Tyler and Farber, are also the subject of an earlier book-length study by Greg Taylor, in which he argues for an even more central role for criticism in the rise of the status of film as an art. Taylor argues that these two writers’ styles of criticism, which he labels Camp and Cult, respectively, positioned the critic as the essential element in making filmmaking an art. In Taylor’s view, it is not so much that these critics decreed what art was, but that their “vanguard criticism” transformed the raw material of mass culture into art. Greg Taylor, *Artists in the Audience: Cult, Camp, and American Film Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. David Bordwell, *The Rhapsodes: How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 11–12.

3. Bordwell, *The Rhapsodes*, 118.

4. And even then . . . It is tempting to use filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage as an example here, but even his method often required collaboration with the people who were in his films. For example, Jane Brakhage’s account of the making of *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) makes clear the extent of their collaboration. Jane Brakhage, “The Birth Film,” *Film Culture* 31 (1963–1964): 35–36.

5. Chaplin’s political problems in the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, and his eventual exile from the country, have been well documented. See, for example, Peter Ackroyd, *Charlie Chaplin* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014), and Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).

6. Popular music criticism had a similar problem for many years in which older pop music such as Motown was lauded even though contemporary pop was not. In popular music, many (but not all) of the artists excluded by this indifference to contemporary pop were Black or female or both. These artists tended to receive critical attention only decades after their music was made. This tendency was eventually critiqued as “rockism,” because it evaluated all popular music by the “standards” of predominantly white and male rock artists. It would now seem strange for any popular music critic to ignore pop albums. Film’s situation is similar, although very popular films do get some scholarly attention, and the line between popular and artistic films does not break down on racial lines. The fact remains that the majority of mainstream current releases are the only films that contemporary film studies scholars see as inherently outside their purview. For an overview of this phenomenon in music, see Kelefa Sanneh, “The Rap Against Rockism,” *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2004, as well as Chapter 7 of Sanneh’s *Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres* (New York: Penguin, 2021).

7. "David W. Griffith, Film Pioneer, Dies," *New York Times*, July 24, 1948.
8. "David Ward Griffith," *New York Times*, July 24, 1948.
9. "Thomas Dixon Dies; Wrote 'Clansman,'" *New York Times*, April 4, 1946.
10. Thomas Dixon Jr., "Why I Wrote The Clansman," *The Theatre* 6, no. 59 (January 1906): 20–22.
11. D. W. Griffith, "Reply to the *New York Globe*," April 10, 1915, reprinted in Robert Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 1994, 168–170.
12. Any of the debates about Marcel Duchamp or Abstract Expressionism or a million other contemporary artists would be illustrative here. For an overview, see Cynthia Freeland, *But Is It Art? An Introduction to Art Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
13. Rielle Navitski has compiled an extensive list of cine-clubs in Latin America dating from 1927 to 1965, https://faculty.franklin.uga.edu/rielle_navitski/latin-american-cineclubs-1927-1965. There was also an overview of film societies, published in 1969, that describes the Latin American cine-clubs, as well as some in Japan, India, and Pakistan that had taken part in print exchanges with counterparts in European countries; see Thorold Dickinson, "Film Societies," in "Film, New Media, and Aesthetic Education," special issue, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 3, no. 3 (July 1969): 85–95.
14. These papers are now in the Special Collections of the Trexler Library at Muhlenberg College, having been purchased from a private seller in 2005.
15. For a much fuller discussion of the collectors who shared and showed 8mm and 16mm prints of *The Birth of a Nation* in midcentury, see Andy Uhrich, "Great Moments from *The Birth of a Nation*: Collecting and Privately Screening Small Gauge Versions," in *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 46–75.
16. Letter from Elmer Rice, Chairman, National Council on Freedom from Censorship, to Mayor Frank Costello, Syracuse, NY, July 18, 1949, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.
17. Allyson Nadia Field, "'A Vicious and Hurtful Play': *The Birth of a Nation* and *The New Era*, 1915," in *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 151–184.
18. See John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).
19. Letter from A. N. Miles to Frank Markey, (postmarked) March 2, 1950, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.
20. Emily Farache, "Directors Guild Renames D.W. Griffith Award," *EOnline*, December 15, 1999, <http://www.eonline.com/news/39141/directors-guild-renames-d-w-griffith-award>.
21. Further references to Mrs. Swift are difficult to find, but an obituary in the June 13, 1915, *Elmira Morning Telegram* for her father-in-law, Allen W. Swift, mentions that he was a prominent industrialist in the town who had built homes in Elmira for each of his children as they married. So Mrs. Swift would likely have been at least fifty-five years old and part of a relatively well-off family in 1949.

Frank Feocco eventually owned a number of theaters in southern New York and northern Pennsylvania.

22. Letter from Mrs. Charles M. Swift to Frank Feocco, August 8, 1949, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.

23. For an overview, see Cheryl A. Leanza, "Heckler's Veto Case Law as a Resource for Democratic Discourse," *Hofstra Law Review* 35 (2007): 1305–1319.

24. Letter from Elmer Rice to Frank Costello, 2.

25. Letter from Elmer Rice to Jack Zurich, Midtown Theatre, July 15, 1949, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.

26. "'Birth of a Nation' at Midtown Undimmed by Passing Years," *Post-Standard* [Syracuse, NY], June 27, 1950, 14.

27. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Harry E. Aitken, October 14, 1948, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.

28. For a comprehensive view of this moment of film history, see Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946–1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

29. Charles R. Acland, "Classrooms, Clubs, and Community Circuits: Cultural Authority and the Film Council Movement, 1946–1957," in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 150.

30. Acland, "Classrooms, Clubs, and Community Circuits," 150.

31. Acland, "Classrooms, Clubs, and Community Circuits," 151.

32. Thomas M. Pryor, "Film Society Movement Catches On," *New York Times*, September 18, 1949, X5.

33. For an overview of the difficulties in determining which surviving copy is closest to what would have been seen in 1915, see the introduction to John Cuniberti, *"The Birth of a Nation": A Formal Shot-By-Shot Analysis together with Microfiche* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1979); and J. B. Kaufman, "Non-Archival Sources," *The Griffith Project, vol. 8: Films Produced in 1914-15* (London: BFI, 2004), 107–112.

34. *Essex Film Notes: Program Notes on D. W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation*, September 1957, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.

35. Letter from Grace N. Golat to Robert E. Lee, Essex Film Club, September 12, 1957, John Griggs Collection, Trexler Library, Muhlenberg College.

36. For an overview of the reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in these three nations and several others during the teens and twenties, see Melvyn Stokes, "D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*: Transnational and Historical Perspectives," in *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 76–106.

37. Oxford University Film Society, program for "The Birth of a Nation," May 18 & 19, 1949, collection of the Cinémathèque québécoise.

38. Oxford University Film Society, "Program for *Intolerance*," October 19, 1949, Cinémathèque québécoise.

39. Ciné-Club de Saint-Laurent, "Un chef-d'œuvre de David W. Griffith: *The Birth of a Nation*," c. 1953, Cinémathèque québécoise. Translation mine.

40. Ciné-Club de Saint-Laurent, "The Birth of a Nation."

41. Undated midcentury *Birth of a Nation* program, Cinémathèque québécoise.

42. Elwood Glover, AGE Film Society Program for *The Birth of a Nation*, November 2, 1961. AGE Film Society was a creation of Aldo Maggiorotti, Gerald Prately, and Elwood Glover and existed from 1955 to 1962; see <http://torontofilmsociety.com/a-g-e-film-notes/a-g-e-film-society-of-toronto-1955-1962/>.

43. Tyneside Film Society, program for *The Birth of a Nation*, November 7, 1955, Cinémathèque québécoise.

44. Continental Film Group, program for “A Tribute to D.W. Griffith,” 195?, 6, Cinémathèque québécoise.

45. Continental Film Group, 3.

46. Continental Film Group, 5.

47. Continental Film Group, 5.

48. Continental Film Group, 5.

CHAPTER 5: IN SEARCH OF LEGITIMACY AND MASTERPIECES

1. See Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

2. See Peniel E. Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

3. This idea is at the core of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.” https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

4. See chapter 2.

5. Dana Polan, “Young Art, Old Colleges: Early Episodes in the American Study of Film,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 95. See also Polan’s *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

6. Polan, “Early Episodes,” 94.

7. Polan, “Early Episodes,” 110.

8. Polan, “Early Episodes,” 95.

9. Polan, “Early Episodes,” 115.

10. Gessner’s presentation was later reprinted in the society’s journal, which would become *Cinema Journal*. Robert Gessner, “Cinema and Scholarship,” *Journal of the Society of Cinematologists* 3 (1963): 73, originally presented at the first national meeting of the Society of Cinematologists, New York University, April 11–12, 1960.

11. Gessner, “Cinema and Scholarship,” 73–74.

12. François Truffaut, “Nouvelle Vague,” *Truffaut par Truffaut*, offered online as part of a virtual exhibition by the Cinémathèque française, <https://www.cinematheque.fr/expositions-virtuelles/truffaut-par-truffaut/index.php?id=5>. Translation mine.