



**"The Sword Became a Flashing Vision": D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation**

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*Representations*, Volume 0, Issue 9, Special Issue: American Culture Between the Civil War and World War I (Winter, 1985), 150-195.

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## “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision”: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*\*

HE ACHIEVED what no other known man has ever achieved,” wrote James Agee. “To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man.” The man was D. W. Griffith. The work climaxed in a single movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, “the first, the most stunning and durably audacious of all American film masterpieces,” wrote Arlene Croce, “and the most wonderful movie ever made.” *Birth* joined aesthetic invention to mass appeal. Nothing like it had ever been seen before, and it was seen by millions more people than had ever seen any other movie, more than would see any other movie for half a century. A *Variety* poll of two hundred film critics voted *The Birth of a Nation* the greatest motion picture in the first fifty years of the industry.<sup>1</sup>

Griffith’s inspiration was *The Clansman*, a best-selling novel by Thomas Dixon. When his assistant Frank Woods brought him *The Clansman*, as Griffith told the story, he “skipped quickly through the book until I got to the part about the Klansmen, who according to no less than Woodrow Wilson, ran to the rescue of the downtrodden South after the Civil War. I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying. . . . We had had all sorts of runs-to-the-rescue in pictures and horse operas. . . . Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation.”<sup>2</sup>

American movies were born, then, in a racist epic. “The film that started it all” (Herman G. Weinberg)<sup>3</sup> builds to its sustained climax from two attempted rapes of white women by black men. It depicts, after the triumph of death in the Civil War and in Lincoln’s assassination, a nation reborn from the ride of the white-robed Knights of Christ against black political and sexual revolution.

Celebrants of *Birth*’s formal achievement, with few exceptions, either minimize the film’s racist content or separate its aesthetic power from its negro-phobia. Against the evidence before their eyes, they split Griffith’s “gift for making powerful emotional connections” from “Thomas Dixon’s racial message.” They imitate Griffith’s split between good and evil, white and black, by blaming Dixon for the perversions in Griffith’s movie. Griffith and his audience, in that view,

did not share Dixon's propagandistic purposes; they were the victims of "unconscious racism."<sup>4</sup> That unconscious is visible on the screen in *Birth*, and it invites us not to avert our eyes from the movie's racism but to investigate its meaning. Instead of rescuing Griffith's form from his content, we will examine the relationship between the two by situating *Birth* at the juncture of three converging histories, the political history of postbellum America, the social history of movies, and the history of Griffith's early films. By placing the film in history before looking directly at it, we can grasp the multiple rescue operations performed by the ride of the Klan.

*Birth* brought together three southerners who moved north at the end of the nineteenth century, Griffith, Dixon, and Thomas Woodrow Wilson. Dixon and Griffith got to know each other as Johns Hopkins students. After Dixon became a minister and Wilson a professor, Dixon nominated Wilson to receive an honorary degree at his own undergraduate alma mater, Wake Forest. "He is the type of man we need as President of the United States," Dixon wrote the board of trustees. Dixon resigned his pulpit to write novels and plays; Griffith, before he turned to movies, acted his first important role in one of Dixon's touring companies. Griffith used *The Clansman*, Wilson's *History of the American People*, and other materials provided by Dixon as sources for *Birth*, and he and Dixon worked together in making and promoting the movie. Dixon appealed to Wilson to see *Birth*. The president, who was not appearing in public because his wife had recently died, invited Dixon to show the film at the White House. This first movie screened at the White House swept Wilson off his feet. "It is like writing history with lightning," as Dixon reported the president's words, "and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." When the new NAACP and humanitarian social reformers tried to have *Birth* banned, Dixon used Wilson's endorsement to promote the film for months, before political pressures finally forced the president publicly to separate himself from the movie. The three southerners did not hold identical views of the meaning either of *Birth* or of the history to which it called attention. But they shared a common project. They offered *The Birth of a Nation* as the screen memory, in both meanings of that term, through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future.<sup>5</sup>

## I

Asked why he called his movie *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith replied, "Because it is. . . . The Civil War was fought fifty years ago. But the real nation has only existed in the last fifteen or twenty years. . . . The birth of a nation began . . . with the Ku Klux Klans, and we have shown that."<sup>6</sup>

Griffith appeared to be following Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Dixon and claiming that the Klan reunited America. But the Klan of Wilson's *History* and

of Griffith's movie flourished and died in the late 1860s. Griffith's "real nation," as he labeled it in 1915, "only existed in the last fifteen or twenty years." Dixon traced a line from the Klan to twentieth-century progressivism, and Griffith may seem to be endorsing that view. But the floating "it" of Griffith's response made claims beyond those of Wilson and Dixon. "It" located the birth of the nation not in political events but in the movie. The "it" that gave birth to the nation, in Griffith's syntax, was *The Birth of a Nation* itself. Let us understand, in turn, each of these three linked attributions of national paternity, to the historic Klan, to progressivism, and to the moving picture.

Among the freed Negroes of the postbellum South, wrote Woodrow Wilson, "Some stayed very quietly by their old masters and gave no trouble; but most yielded, as was to have been expected, to the novel impulse and excitement of freedom. . . . The country was filled with vagrants looking for pleasure and gratuitous fortune. . . . The tasks of ordinary life stood untouched; the idlers grew insolent, dangerous; nights went anxiously by, for fear of riot and incendiary fire." There was, Wilson continued, a "veritable apotheosis of the negro" among northerners. They saw him "as the innocent victim of circumstances, a creature who needed only liberty to make him a man." Embracing Thaddeus Stevens's "policy of rule or ruin," the North determined to "put the white South under the heel of the black South."<sup>7</sup>

Stevens's policies, Wilson went on, caused "the veritable overthrow of civilization in the South." Forced "by the mere instinct of self-preservation" to take the law into their own hands, white southern men made "the delightful discovery of the thrill of awesome fear which their sheeted, hooded figures sent among their former slaves." "It threw the Negroes into a very ecstasy of panic to see these sheeted 'Ku Klux' move near them in the shrouded night," wrote Wilson, "until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, an Invisible Empire of the South."<sup>8</sup>

Griffith filmed *The Birth of a Nation* during Wilson's presidency. He used some of the words I have quoted for the subtitles that introduce Part Two of the film. He put on the screen the images—faithful blacks and rioting incendiaries, Negroes frightened by white sheets, northern illusions about black liberty vs. black dangers to white civilization—in Wilson's prose. But the first shot after the intermission, the title "The agony which the South endured that a nation might be born," was taken not from Wilson's *History* but from Dixon's fiction. *Birth* followed Wilson in its sympathy for Lincoln's aborted dream of reunion; like Wilson, it justified the Klan as a response to Lincoln's assassination. But though Wilson's Klan suppressed black independence, a suppression necessary were the South to prosper, it grew lawless and was itself suppressed.<sup>9</sup> Wilson's Klan signified the continuing conflict between North and South. Griffith's Klan gave birth to a

united nation. Griffith was telescoping developments that came to fruition in the history not that Professor Wilson wrote but that President Wilson helped to make.

The plantation myth of postbellum America was as much a product of northern needs as southern ones. The rapid social transformation of the North after the Civil War generated compensatory celebrations of the antebellum plantation South. At the same time, the massive influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—"men out of whose ranks there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence," as Wilson described them, "as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population"—created northern sympathy for southern efforts to control an indispensable but racially inferior labor force. Imperialism reinforced this mixture of class and racial antagonism. The Spanish-American War and the suppression of the Philippine independence movement gave the nation its own colonial people of color, and the need for racial tutelage abroad merged with fears of racial uprisings at home.<sup>10</sup>

The Reverend Thomas Dixon (who had the largest Protestant congregation in New York City) resigned his pulpit after the Spanish-American War to lead a crusade against the "black peril." Dixon's evangelical sermons, which emphasized personal sin and social conduct, had been more concerned with immigrant mobs than with Negroes. The subjugation of the Philippines reconnected this transplanted southerner to his past. Wilson also defended the war against the Philippines. Imperialists like Wilson and Dixon tied the racial question at home to America's world mission abroad. Dixon subtitled *The Leopard's Spots*, the first volume in his Klan trilogy, *A Romance of the White Man's Burden*. "Our old men dreamed of local supremacy. We dream of the conquest of the globe," explains the novel's hero, and we must not be "chained to the body of a festering Black Death." The Spanish-American War "reunited the Anglo-Saxon race," wrote Dixon, "and confirmed the Anglo-Saxon in his title to the primacy of racial sway." As northern capital and xenophobia migrated south, replacing carbetbaggers and northern egalitarianism, only reluctance to embrace negrophobia, as Dixon saw it, stood in the way of the birth of the nation. "It was seen by thoughtful men that the Negro was an impossibility in the new-born unity of national life," Dixon wrote; he titled the chapter with those sentiments "Another Declaration of Independence." The original ending of *Birth*, "Lincoln's solution," showed masses of Negroes being loaded on ships to be sent back to Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Woodrow Wilson also endorsed the war on the Philippines for catapulting America to world power and providing a model for political leadership over immigrants and workers at home.<sup>12</sup> When the southern race problem became national, the national problem was displaced back onto the South in a way that made the South not a defeated part of the American past but a prophecy of its

future. Dixon, Wilson, and Griffith thereby reclaimed southern loyalties they had left behind in their quests for new personal, national identities.

The reunion between North and South climaxed during Wilson's presidency. The first southerner elected president since the Civil War, Wilson presided over the celebrations of national reconciliation that marked the war's fiftieth anniversary. Griffith began shooting *Birth* on July 4, 1914; he released the movie fifty years after Appomattox. Wilson was so impressed by *Birth* that he offered to cooperate with more of Griffith's historical projects. "I am deeply interested in what you intimate as to future motion pictures," he wrote the filmmaker, "and if it is possible for me to assist you with an opinion about them at any time, I shall certainly try to do so." Wilson was not the only Washington official who saw and blessed the film. Through his ties to North Carolina progressive Josephus Daniels, Dixon obtained an interview with Edward White, chief justice of the Supreme Court. After the normally forbidding White confided that he'd ridden with the Klan in his youth, he arranged a showing of *Birth* before an audience of Supreme Court justices, senators, and congressmen. Some of these men were later embarrassed by their participation in this event, once *Birth* came under widespread attack, but the Washington screenings had singled out *Birth* in an unprecedented way for the stamp of political approval. The North was ready for a film that, though it did not endorse the traditional southern view of the Civil War, sympathized with the antebellum South and nationalized the southern view of Reconstruction.<sup>13</sup>

The similarities between immigrants and Negroes initiated the reunion between North and South. But as blacks became a sign of the negative American identity, progressives took immigrants to the national bosom. Antebellum southerners had identified their oppression by a centralized state with the sufferings of the subject nationalities of the Hapsburg Empire. Dixon, turning that decentralist tradition in a nationalist direction, based his Klan trilogy on the trilogy of a Polish patriot. Southern patriotism was beginning to mean not resistance to the northern state but loyalty to a united nation. "You are American by the accident of birth," the Polish hero of a later Dixon novel tells a native. "We are Americans because we willed to come. . . . We saw the figure of liberty shining here across the seas. . . . It is our country . . . as it can't be yours who do not realize its full meaning."<sup>14</sup>

Wilson also shifted his view of immigrants during the progressive period. Southern Europeans were no longer a threat to America's historical Teutonic identity (the view in *History* and other early writings). Now, like Wilson himself, they'd given up their inherited, local identities to embody American ideals. Wilson saw that regenerate national identity in Griffith's Klan. Its visionary brotherhood melded diverse individuals into a purposeful union. The fifty years that

had elapsed between the Klan Wilson wrote about and the Klan Griffith filmed allowed Wilson to praise Griffith for transforming his *History* into prophecy.<sup>15</sup>

As Wilson embraced immigrants, he segregated government employees. Black officeholders—significant numbers worked in the Post Office and Treasury Department—were separated from their white coworkers. White women had been “forced unnecessarily to sit at desks with colored men,” explained Wilson’s son-in-law, Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, and this proximity created “friction.” Beginning in the Wilson administration, blacks worked in separate rooms and used separate bathrooms. Black political appointees were fired and those holding civil service positions were downgraded or dismissed as well. In appealing to immigrants at the expense of blacks, the Democratic party was returning to its antebellum roots. And it was seeking political support from the audience for motion pictures.<sup>16</sup>

The first movies were one-reel immigrant entertainment. They were shown in storefront nickelodeons, in working-class neighborhoods, for a nickel admission, which anyone could afford. The motion picture was “the first democratic art,” said the *Nation*, and movies broke down class and gender divisions. Middle-class youths, wandering into the nickelodeons, were exposed to working-class temptations. “Girls drop in alone,” complained Jane Addams, and “the darkness takes away the feeling of responsibility.” When men offered girls “certain indignities,” Addams warned, the girls found it hard to refuse. Movie houses in “undesirable localities” turned immigrant girls into prostitutes. Vice districts had once been places for men, but movies were threatening that gender distinction.<sup>17</sup>

The content of movies made them even more subversive. Over half the early motion pictures were made in Europe, and few presented such American motifs as the rags-to-riches story or the settlement of the West. They depicted instead, without moral judgment, poverty, premarital sex, adultery, and slapstick violence (often against people in authority). Making “a direct and universal appeal to the elementary emotions,” movies appealed to “all nations, all ages, all classes, both sexes.” Their stories were permeated, in the *Nation*’s words, “with the very ideas of the crowd in the streets.”<sup>18</sup>

Addams and other reformers saw promise as well as danger in the movies. As the *Outlook* put it, “the very potency of the motion picture for degrading taste and morals is the measure of its power for enlightenment and education.” Like political progressives, cultural reformers wanted not to exclude immigrants but to enlighten and Americanize them. Seeking to capitalize on the breakdown of class and cultural barriers, reformers sought a mass entertainment of cultural uplift, not one that exploited immigrant frustrations and pulled the middle class into the mores of the ghetto. Because we failed to organize leisure as we organized production, wrote Addams, city youth was exposed to violent temptations. The

solution was to reform movies, not abolish them, so that the motion picture could operate like a "grand social worker." Reformers instituted movie censorship, but selective prohibition was not sufficient to turn movies to positive cultural use. Reformers needed an ally behind the camera. Griffith looked like the man.<sup>19</sup>

Griffith had begun making movies because he could not get work on the stage. He shared the reformers' discontent with the film present and their high hopes for its future. "Reform was sweeping the country," he later wrote. "Newspapers were laying down a barrage against gambling, rum, light ladies, particularly light ladies. There were complaints against everything, so I decided to reform the motion picture industry." He did so with a film that brought movies out of the nickelodeons and into the \$2.00 theaters. *Birth* established film as a legitimate art, one whose appeal cut across class, ethnic, and sectional lines. The opposition between North and South in the film, as well as that between immigrant and native in the history outside it, had been replaced by the opposition between white and black.<sup>20</sup>

That opposition did not pit white bodies against black ones, however, for the same actors who rode under the Klan sheets also put on blackface. The contrasting disguises, which point to the common identity they aim to hide, expose the projective fantasized character of Griffith's blacks. The opposition that engaged Griffith, Wilson, and the mass audience was between represented black chaos on the one hand and a transformed and sanctified white host on the other. *Birth's* visionary images completed Wilson's *History* by pointing to his future, to his world crusade to end all war. We will analyze those images and conclude with that crusade. To do so we must enter Griffith's world on the screen.

## II

To understand Griffith, wrote Sergei Eisenstein, "one must visualize an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, streamlined trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyer belts. One is obliged to comprehend this second side of America as well—America the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial."<sup>21</sup>

D. W. Griffith, as Eisenstein implies, was a child of provincial America. He was born in 1875 on a Kentucky farm; when his father died seven years later, as Griffith told the story, Jake Griffith's faithful ex-slaves were at his bedside. But Griffith's father came to rest at home only in defeat and at the end of his life. He was a wanderer, drinker, gambler, and storyteller, wounded in mythic exploits during the Civil War. Instead of working the family farm, he took out three mortgages on it. After he died the family lost the farm and moved to Louisville. From there David Griffith wandered, alone or with touring acting companies, north to New York, west to Chicago, San Francisco, and points between, and back

home to Louisville, before beginning to make movies in New York City.<sup>22</sup> Against stage authorities and theatrical “rules,” and in the name of depicting “real life,” Griffith invented the techniques of narrative cinema. He fathered the distinctively modern art form.<sup>23</sup>

Griffith’s story of paternal failure and modern invention is one strand in the general crisis of patriarchy at the end of the nineteenth century. Traditional paternal authority, which had rigidified and become fragile, was assaulted in two modes, in Henry Adams’s formulation, that of the dynamo and that of the virgin. Eisenstein pointed to one form of the crisis, in which mechanization took command. Griffith filmed speeding automobiles and streamlined trains, but he went beyond the motion shown in a scene to the motion that constituted it. Griffith found a formal vocabulary for the pace of modern life. Paralleling the other industrial arts, he broke up traditional sequences into their component parts and reassembled those parts to make something new. Life was “more fragmented and faster-moving than in previous periods,” said the painter Fernand Léger in 1913. The cubists and futurists in different ways put movement on canvas; Griffith captured it on film. He invented few technical innovations, but he was the first to put the new film techniques to significant dramatic use.<sup>24</sup>

Griffith understood, like no filmmaker before him, that the unit of film was not the scene but the shot. He was “bitten by the lightning bug,” complained the Reverend Dr. Stockton. Stockton counted sixty-eight shots in a single Griffith one-reeler; the average in non-Griffith films was eighteen to thirty. By cutting back and forth, Griffith juxtaposed events separated in time (the flashback) and space (the cutback) and collapsed the distinctions between images in the head and events in the world. By speeding up, reversing, and stopping time, he brought the past into the present (or rather, as Stephen Kern says, controlled what the past would become). By juxtaposing events widely separated in space, he overcame the barriers of distance (barriers overcome in the film plot by the ride to the rescue). Griffith created an art of simultaneities and juxtapositions rather than traditions and continuities.<sup>25</sup>

Griffith also used editing to dynamize action within single scenes. He broke up the homogeneity of physical space through camera angles and closeups. Cutting from medium to long shots and in to closeups, and varying the lengths of the shots, he pulled the viewer into the action. He broke down the barriers not just of time and space and inner and outer but of audience and film. By establishing a camera-eye point of view, Griffith gave significance to objects, body parts, and faces. The symbolic meanings of these part-objects augmented or displaced traditional narrative conventions. Griffith made film a medium of images.

Griffith justified his movie method in the name of realism. “The motion picture,” he said, “approaches more closely real life” than does the stage. “The motion picture is what technique really means, a faithful picture of life.” “The

Biograph camera doesn't lie," proclaimed ads for Griffith's one-reelers. Formal conventions, Griffith believed, separated the theater from reality. Like the movement in social thought with which it was contemporary, movie realism revolted against the formalisms of the fathers.<sup>26</sup>

The realist movie required its own forms, however. Tom Gunning has recently argued that Griffith developed the narrative techniques of bourgeois realism in the Biograph one-reelers. Before Griffith, working-class audiences watched unmotivated characters engage in scenes of antisocial comedy and unmediated violence. These episodes were not made into stories. Griffith organized psychologically motivated social types into narratives of modern life. He wanted, like other middle-class progressives, to get closer to life without falling into chaos. Parallel editing, writes Gunning, responded to the demands of a complex narrative style.<sup>27</sup> But parallel editing didn't simply contribute to storytelling; its juxtapositions, contrasts, dismemberments, and boundary breakdowns endangered narrative control and threatened chaos. The source of that chaos visible on screen was the female image.

Traditional patriarchal forms were under siege at the end of the nineteenth century not just from technology but from what was conceived of as nature, from regressive forces as well as progressive ones. The movement forward and outward in external time and space entailed at the same time a movement backward and inward in psychological time and space. And women, whether out in the world or confined to the home, stood for that regressive, disorganizing power. Partly, in their efforts at emancipation, they posed a threat to order in their own right. Partly they stood as a symbol and accessible scapegoat for more distant social and political disruptions. Instead of providing a refuge from modern disorder, the New Woman fueled it.<sup>28</sup>

The New Woman appears everywhere at the end of the nineteenth century, in the work force and reform movements, in literature, art, social thought, and psychology. Existing beneath and beyond the stereotypical Victorian roles of wife, mother, spinster, and fallen woman, a female presence emerged by the century's end (in the male imagination) as the prepatriarchal, originary source of male identity. As working girl, fashion-conscious wife, or lady of the night, the New Woman represented the modern city. But even where women stood for fecundity and reproduction, like Adams's Diana of the Ephesians or Theodore Roosevelt's maternal ideal, they were a force larger than life. "She was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction," wrote Adams; he was describing more a fertility goddess than a domestic mother. Whatever her social form, the New Woman was imaged as monstrous and chameleonlike. Her permeable boundaries absorbed children and men.

We normally associate Griffith with victimized women, not powerful ones. But his films before *Birth* suggest that Griffith created women needing rescue in

order to rescue himself from their female predecessors on his screen. Strong women in Griffith's early movies liberated him from patriarchy and tradition only to subject him to female power. *Birth* was the solution to that problem.

"*The Birth of a Nation* owes more to my father than it does to me," said Griffith,<sup>29</sup> and that movie may seem to retreat from modern realism to pastoralism and provincialism. In fact the film employs tradition to sanctify modern force. It returns neither to paternalism nor to history but replaces them. It celebrates not the restoration of southern patriarchy but the birth of a new nation. And it locates reality not in the world viewed, either pastoral or modern, but in the cinematic image and the camera eye. Instead of generating the powerful female images that threatened Griffith, *Birth* culminated the filmmaker's appropriation of a power experienced as female.

### III

Between 1907 and 1913, Griffith made hundreds of one-reel motion pictures for the Biograph Company. The social exploration and psychological interiorization in these movies, the film cut and the intrusive camera eye, opened a Pandora's box for the filmmaker as his techniques threatened to turn on their inventor. Four recurrent themes in these movies constitute the prehistory of *Birth*: the presence of weak and/or repressive fathers, associated with provincialism and tradition; the emergence of female sexuality, imaged in the phallic woman, associated with modernity, and represented by the actress Blanche Sweet; the presentation of domestic interior space as claustrophobic, imprisoning, and vulnerable to invasion; and the use of rides to the rescue. These rescues are meant to reassert the contrast between good and evil, the domestic refuge and the menacing invader, male strength and female weakness, but they leave behind traces of a dangerous boundary breakdown. The collapse of gender and social differences that emerged in these films led Griffith to generate a new and deeper system of differences in *Birth*.

There is not space here to trace *Birth's* genealogy through the Biograph one-reelers. But the troubles taking over Griffith's screen climaxed in the two most important longer films he made between the one-reelers and *Birth*—*Judith of Bethulia* (1913) and *The Avenging Conscience* (1914).

*Judith of Bethulia* (Blanche Sweet) is a widow dressed in black at the beginning of Griffith's version of the biblical story. Her Jewish town is menaced by the Assyrian general Holofernes. Judith puts on makeup, adorns her head with spiky peacock feathers, and veils her face. By masquerading as a painted lady, a courtesan, Sweet transforms herself from a helpless victim in need of rescue (her role in the one-reeler *The Painted Lady*) to the rescuer of Bethulia. Her depersonalized erotic flowering points to Holofernes' death.

Holofernes (Henry Walthall) is a bearded patriarch. He commands a bacchanal from his couch/throne and seems to have the women at his service. But languishing on his couch as he observes his dancing girls, Holofernes is a curiously passive figure. The women move in *Judith*; Holofernes, like the movie audience, is a voyeur. His soldiers worship Holofernes' sword, but it is Judith who will seize it. The scene between Judith and Holofernes, orchestrated for a sexual climax, climaxes when she cuts off his head.

Judith caresses Holofernes as he lies on the couch; she gives him wine, they drink, he passes out. Cut to his head and shoulders, then to her raised arm. Her hand is off camera. Judith stands behind Holofernes; cut to the sword in her hand. Judith, framed so only her upper body is seen, holds up the sword; it has replaced the peacock feathers she no longer wears. Judith in closeup raises the sword. Cut to Holofernes' head rolling from the couch and bouncing on the step below. Cut to his headless body, one arm outstretched. The shot, of one arm instead of two, at once calls attention to the single, phallic member and (by way of the missing arm and head) to its metaphoric absence.

In cutting up Judith before she dismembers Holofernes, the camera fetishizes the female body. Fetishizing female body parts, argued Freud, assuaged the male viewer's fear of castration. Since the boy child imagines the female as a castrated male, the fetish restores her missing male member. But the fetishized body part or object—foot, hand, hat, sword—also stands in for the intact female body. Film cuts that dismember the woman on screen thus doubly disempower her, it is argued, by substituting a (male) fetish for her bodily integrity. Griffith may have cut up Judith to control her, since he was making a woman his parricide. The camera-fetishized Judith turns on the male viewer nonetheless, for she decapitates Holofernes. He is the headless body; she is the woman with the penis. When Holofernes' soldiers see his headless body, they become a disorganized mass. The Jews, who've placed his head on a pole, rout the Assyrians in battle.<sup>30</sup>

*Judith of Bethulia* was Griffith's first spectacular. He broke Biograph's rules about time and money in making the movie, and the excitement of taking power animated the entire set. Decapitating the patriarch, Griffith freed himself from Biograph's restrictive production rules. Decapitation also freed his camera. Cutting back and forth between opposed forces in the familiar ride to the rescue did not engage Griffith's talents in this film. Instead he invented what Eisenstein (denying Griffith had done it) would call dynamic montage, the creation of a wholly new set of images from the dismembered parts of the quotidian world.

Griffith's commitment to patriarchy and provincialism, Eisenstein argued, blocked his formal progress, allowing him to juxtapose contrasting images but not to constitute fundamentally new ones. The dualism in Griffith's social vision (which Eisenstein attributed to Griffith's inability to transcend class rather than

racial and sexual divisions) generated parallel montage, in Eisenstein's view; it prevented Griffith from discovering dynamic montage.<sup>31</sup>

Eisenstein grasped the relation between form and content but overlooked Griffith's breakthrough. For the first time on film, in the Assyrian siege of Bethulia, Griffith juxtaposed separate shots to create a single, complete, new mental image. The camera shifts from the beleaguered people behind the walls, to the defenders atop them, to the attackers outside, to Judith in her chamber, to Holofernes in his camp. Like a cubist painter, Griffith liberated the eye to roam everywhere. The siege of Bethulia is the first example of dynamic montage on film; Holofernes' beheading is the second.<sup>32</sup>

Griffith freed himself from Biograph by making *Judith*; when Biograph took away his artistic control over future productions because of the length and cost of this film, he left that company and formed one of his own. Its most important production before *Birth* was *The Avenging Conscience*.

Beginning in 1910 and with increasing frequency over the next three years, critics complained that Griffith's films were becoming morbid. The psychological, expressionist melodramas that troubled the critics featured suicide, neurosis, family estrangement, forbidden temptation, and failed rides to the rescue. *Conscience* is the culmination of these gothic one-reelers. One critic calls it his most important film before *Birth*, a judgment that is justified not cinematically but psychologically. Based on several Edgar Allan Poe stories and intercut with lines from "Annabelle Lee," *The Avenging Conscience* took Griffith further inside the parricidal psyche than he wanted to go. *Birth* would take him out again.<sup>33</sup>

Blanche Sweet as Annabel has no sword in *Conscience*, and she is not an active subject like Judith. But as the subject, object, and eliciter of desire, she disempowers both herself and the two male protagonists. Their collective disturbance generates madness and parricide.

Henry Walthall plays an orphan who has been raised by his uncle. This withered old man wears an eye patch, and his dessication contrasts to Sweet's ripeness. She caresses her furry little dog with her foot and lifts the fence for it to crawl under. Cut to her meeting with Walthall. Griffith juxtaposes their erotic encounter to the embittered, isolated uncle. The cut from her sensuality to his single eye, by contrasting her puppy to his missing organ, underscores the uncle's emasculation. "Embittered by youthful happiness" as he sees another young couple in love, the uncle forces his nephew to send Annabel away.

Walthall watches a spider devour an ant and determines to murder his uncle. Griffith borrowed Poe's hieroglyphic method, wrote Vachel Lindsay, to replace narrative by symbol.<sup>34</sup> Visual emblems like the fly and the spider pull viewers "into the plan of a fevered brain." As Walthall raises a gun to shoot his sleeping uncle, Griffith cuts to an Italian laborer (George Siegmann) with his arm around

a girl. Siegmann relinquishes the girl; Walthall lowers his gun. After this double anticlimax, Walthall imitates the spider instead of the masculine laborer and strangles his uncle. He walls the body up in the fireplace and joins Annabel.

A flower that wilted when the uncle separated the lovers comes alive again after the murder. But the detective (Ralph Lewis) plucks another flower for his buttonhole as he comes in Walthall's door. It is a sign that Walthall will not enjoy the fruits of his crime. Walthall is also at the mercy of the Italian, who has witnessed the murder and blackmails the murderer. But psychological bond overcomes narrative logic and turns Siegmann into Walthall's assistant. Siegmann serves Walthall, since the Italian stands for access to women. Lewis, investigating the crime, represents the uncle's prohibition. Though he finds no evidence of foul play, Lewis awakens Walthall's avenging conscience. The uncle's ghost materializes behind the lovers; it appears to Walthall as he sleeps. Questioned again by the detective, Walthall stares at the pencil that Lewis taps on the table; it mimics the beat of his uncle's heart. Lewis has repossessed the pencil/penis as well as the flower. An iris-in on one of his eyes invokes the one-eyed uncle. But Lewis's eye, like the camera eye and unlike the uncle's eye patch, can see into Walthall.

"They are neither man nor woman; they are neither brute nor human; they are ghouls, ghouls, ghouls," announced a title; we watch, with Walthall, as human bodies with animal heads dance in the fireplace. Walthall's nightmares drive him to an isolated cabin, on which the opposing forces led by Lewis and Siegmann converge. Trapped in the cabin (Lewis had earlier nailed shut its trap door), Walthall prepares to hang himself. Cut to Annabel leaping into the sea. At that moment Walthall awakens; his uncle is alive, the flower is wilted, and we realize we have been inside his dream. The uncle blesses the lovers, and the film ends with Walthall and Sweet on a hillside overlooking the water. But that happy ending fails to erase the film. The successful slaying of the patriarch in *Judith* required giving the woman the sword. Taking it from her and making her the object of desire was even more disturbing, however, for it entombed the young man in parricidal, self-destructive guilt. Nonetheless, by intensifying Griffith's nightmare of desire, *Conscience* allowed him to engage in an inspired act of inversion and free himself from the demons that were taking over his screen.

#### IV

The characters and images of *The Avenging Conscience*, turned inside out, gave birth to *The Birth of a Nation*. The figures from Walthall's fevered brain step out of *Conscience's* claustrophobic private interior. Walthall awakens from his nightmare into history; more accurately, he enters epic history in the form of

Griffith's dream. *The Birth of a Nation* is the dream wish that rescues Walthall from his avenging conscience.

Ralph Lewis, as Austin Stoneman, orchestrates the white South's punishment in *Birth* out of his passion for a female mulatto. The little colonel, played by Henry Walthall, loves Stoneman's daughter, Elsie, and he leads the Klan to rescue her from the blacks whom her father has unleashed. Sexual desire generates violence, in *Birth* as in *Conscience*, but that desire now belongs to Lewis as Austin Stoneman, not to Walthall as the little colonel. Siegmann, the Italian representative of Walthall's libido in *Conscience*, plays Silas Lynch, the mulatto extension of Lewis's desire in *Birth*. Spottiswoode Aitken, who played Walthall's uncle in *Conscience*, plays his father in *Birth*. He is still emasculated, but now his helplessness is permission-giving for the young man, not life-denying. Instead of having to relinquish what Aitken is denied or kill him, the little colonel rescues his father. In *Birth*'s climax as in *Conscience*'s, two forces converge on an isolated cabin, one good and the other evil. But his innocent family has replaced the guilty Walthall inside the cabin, and Walthall leads the ride to their rescue. Lewis's psychological pursuit of the criminal Walthall turns into the physical chase of Walthall's Klan after Lewis's Negro.<sup>35</sup> Griffith has projected Walthall's internal turmoil onto blacks and Klansmen. Blacks save Walthall by appropriating his desire; the Klan acquires his conscience. Since that conscience is now directed at the other rather than the self, Walthall can ride at its head.

The Klansmen "look like a company of avenging spectral crusaders," remarked the *New York Times*. A writer described them, in one scene, as "vanishing like ghouls." "Moving like figures in a dream" (Dixon), the Klansmen have emerged from Griffith's dream. Making their "spectral dash through the night," they save Walthall from his nightmare (Fig. 1).<sup>36</sup>

The mounted Klansmen invert, repeat, and dematerialize Walthall's ghouls. They are the ghouls turned upside down, since instead of animal heads atop human bodies, human heads and torsos ride animal bodies. The Klansmen (called cyclopes) are horned, like Walthall's ghouls. But those ghouls, like the uncle's personal ghost, remain grotesquely physical. The white robes that cover horns, riders, and horses transfigure human bodies into an impersonal, anonymous "spectral army," as one reviewer saw it, "a vast grim host in white."<sup>37</sup>

Blanche Sweet's leap to her death in *Conscience* pays for Walthall's murderous desire. Sweet's leap anticipates the little sister's leap to her death to escape a black rapist's murderous desire in *Birth*. Walthall and his lover look down over the water in the happy endings of both movies.<sup>38</sup> Blanche Sweet is not that lover in *Birth*, however, for Griffith excised her from the second film. That single failure of repetition is the key to *Birth*'s inversion of *Conscience*. When Sweet left *Birth*, she took with her the female sexuality that had provoked first the hero's desire



and then his avenging conscience. Mae Marsh, who played the little sister in *Birth*, replaced Sweet in the leap to the death; Lillian Gish replaced Sweet as the object of Walthall/Siegmann's desire.

Griffith had planned to cast Sweet as Elsie Stoneman. When she was temporarily unavailable to rehearse the scene in which Siegmann (as Silas Lynch) seizes and forcibly embraces her, Griffith asked Gish to stand in (Fig. 2). Gish recalls, "I was very blonde and fragile-looking. The contrast with the dark man evidently pleased Mr. Griffith, for he said in front of everyone, 'Maybe she would be more effective than the mature figure I had in mind.'" The Walthall/Sweet couple was destroying itself in the films before *Birth*. Walthall commits suicide in *Death's Marathon*; Sweet beheads him in *Judith*; she kills herself in the dream that constitutes *The Avenging Conscience*. Blanche Sweet, in spite of her name, was neither white nor sweet enough to play Elsie Stoneman. *Birth* marked her disappearance from Griffith's screen.

When Griffith replaced Sweet with Gish he was shifting sexuality from the white woman to the black man. The regression to the presexual virgin and the invention of the black demon went hand in hand. White supremacists invented the black rapist to keep white women in their place. That strategy, counterposing the black man to the white woman, hid a deep fear of union. Griffith wanted what one viewer called the "contrast between black villainy and blond innocence"



FIGURE 1 (*opposite*). The ride of the Ku Klux Klan.

FIGURE 2 (*left*). George Siegmann (as Silas Lynch) embraces Lillian Gish (as Elsie Stoneman).

to undo the association of his unconscious, which had merged women and blacks (see Fig. 2). Critics who excuse Griffith's "unconscious racism" and separate it from his sexism overlook the link in Griffith's unconscious (as Faulkner's Joe Christmas would run it together): "womanshenegro."<sup>39</sup>

Griffith had romances with his leading actresses. The "mature figure" Sweet developed as she reached adulthood led him to shift his affections first to Marsh and then to Gish. Inverting the oedipal triangle of one woman and two men (depicted, for example, in *Conscience*), Griffith was squiring both Marsh and Gish when he made *Birth*. If Gish emerged from her dressing room after rehearsals dressed for the evening, Marsh would know Griffith was taking her out, and she would make other plans. If Gish left in street clothes, Marsh dressed up.<sup>40</sup> The two women assaulted by blacks on camera were the objects of Griffith's attention off screen.

Griffith's cinematic mirroring of his off-screen relations to his heroines was duplicated in his use of his villain. As the mulatto Silas Lynch, George Siegmann carried out Austin Stoneman's orders. As the director's chief assistant, he carried out Griffith's orders. Just as Lynch sees to the details of Stoneman's plan to "put the white South under the heel of the black South," so Siegmann passed Griffith's orders on to the cast and oversaw the logistical details of the production. Karl Brown, assistant cameraman on *Birth*, described Siegmann as a "gentle-hearted,

soft-spoken human elephant, sensitive to Griffith's every whim, yet powerful enough to bend everyone else to his will."<sup>41</sup> Stoneman bends Lynch to his will only to discover that that will is for his daughter. Tracing Lynch's actions back to their source, in Griffith behind the camera and Stoneman in front of it, breaks down the divisions Griffith set up—between male and female, white and black, the production of the film and its story.

Thomas Jefferson had fathered the normal American racial fantasy that freed the fathers from desire. Inverting the social psychology of the slave South, Jefferson located desire in the black man and made the white woman its object.<sup>42</sup> Gus and Silas Lynch (whose name turns the black victims of lynching into aggressors) are Jefferson's children. Read as the successor to the Blanche Sweet films, *Birth* shifted sexuality from white women to blacks. Stoneman's liaison with his mulatto mistress, Lydia, moreover, allowed Griffith to retain the sexual woman by making her black; Lydia's arm-waving gestures recall Judith's simulation of passion.

At the same time *Birth* registered, in however distorted a way, the origin of desire that Jefferson denied. Stoneman's liaison called attention to the mulatto (Lynch as well as Lydia), and the mulatto in American history signified the white man's desire for the black woman. Griffith, tracing that desire back to its paternal origin, made Stoneman's passion for Lydia the source of the South's oppression. Griffith wanted to demonize blacks and keep them under control at the same time. It was already provocative to depict black revolutionaries on screen; no one had done it before and no one would do it again for half a century.<sup>43</sup> To give the black man a will of his own, in addition, violated the constraints of the political unconscious. Depriving these id figures of their reason kept them politically dependent and retained them as projections of white desire. The process required a bad white father.

Griffith employed two reversals to distinguish Stoneman from the actual patriarchs who controlled black slaves. He made Stoneman subservient to Lydia, and he moved the interracial union from the South to the North. Stoneman, as audiences were intended to know, was modeled on Thaddeus Stevens. Stevens had a mulatto housekeeper, and she was probably his mistress.<sup>44</sup> Fidelity to historical detail allowed historical distortion, since this interracial constellation typified the antebellum South, not the North.

Griffith borrowed the details of his Stevens caricature—massive brown wig, club foot—from hostile southern descriptions of the Pennsylvania congressman. Stevens was a "horrible old man," as one biographer of Andrew Johnson put it, "craftily preparing to strangle the bleeding, broken body of the South." He wanted to watch "the white men, especially the white women of the south, writhing under Negro domination." Both Dixon and Griffith focused on Stoneman's club foot—"the left leg ended in a mere bunch of flesh"—as a distended, sexualized, aggress-

sive weapon. But in two seemingly contradictory ways, Griffith departed from the southern caricature. Stevens was an ascetic-looking, cadaverous, "pale, emaciated, death-like" old man during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Griffith's wife described Griffith, too, as a "cadaverous-looking young man," and Dixon was also "weirdly gaunt" and "almost cadaverous." But Griffith, unlike Stevens and Dixon, has a sensual face; he gave that sensuality to Stoneman. Stoneman is the most negroid-looking of all the major characters in *Birth*, those who play blacks as well as those who play whites. By making Stoneman northern and negroid, Griffith wanted to distance him from the southern white man, who was actually the male bearer of historically significant interracial sexuality. That splitting allowed Griffith to depict monstrous paternal desire.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, Griffith gave Stoneman children, although Stevens had none, and made him a loving father. The conscious intention was to make Stoneman's love for his daughter a counterweight to his love of blacks. The unconscious intention was to confuse the two desires, for Stoneman's sensuality first emerges in seductive contact not with his mulatto mistress but with his daughter.

After beginning with the slave trade, which sowed "the seeds of disunion," *Birth* shows the divided Stoneman family. Elsie fondles her father and adjusts his wig. The scene shifts to Stoneman and Lydia in a house from which his children are excluded. Lydia's embrace of Stoneman parallels Elsie's. That parallel opposition between white family and black will break down after the Civil War. In Part Two of the movie, scenes 508–50, Lynch appears for the first time.<sup>46</sup> Stoneman is shown with his mulatto mistress and mulatto protégé, as if they constituted a family. He tells Lynch not to scrape, that he is the equal of any white man. Elsie replaces Lydia in the next scene. Lynch stares at her and, after he leaves, she caresses her father. The sequence establishes a circuit of desire initiated by Lydia that runs from Lynch to Elsie to Stoneman. The camera also sets up the formula Stoneman is to Lydia as Lynch wishes to be to Elsie. Drop out the two middle (shadow) terms, and Stoneman's wish is for his daughter. The blacks have been invented as a defense against what their invention allows to return, father/daughter incest.

Stoneman, like the father of the primal horde, monopolizes his women and directs the mob of black men. There is no Stoneman mother, for her absence suggests a family triangle too explosive to be more explicit. Were Elsie's mother present, she would either separate Elsie from Lydia or else be the mulatto herself. The one alternative is insufficiently charged, the other forbidden. Having moved southern racial and sexual entanglements north, Griffith can give the southern family a mother. Whatever the ages and genders of the other antebellum southern blacks, they are all asexual children.

The missing Stoneman mother at the film's opening establishes the racial division within the Stoneman family as the central division in the movie. The

film's second opposition, between North and South, supersedes the racial contrast in Part One in order to give way to it in Part Two. The visit of the Stoneman boys to the Cameron plantation, home of Ben Cameron, the little colonel, promises to override the sectional division, and the Civil War does not frustrate that promise but realizes it.

Griffith's battle scenes twin North and South in two ways, one private and sentimental, the other epic and impersonal. Two sets of Camerons and Stonemans meeting in battle constitute the first mode. One younger brother is about to stab the other when, at the moment of recognition, he is fatally shot. The two brothers die embracing in a *Liebestod*. The older Cameron, Ben, leads a charge against Phil Stoneman's lines, is wounded, but survives. Like the family interactions earlier in the movie, these scenes are emotionally overwrought. The panoramic battle scenes, distant, beautiful, and otherworldly, are a cinematic triumph.

An iris opens up from a woman and her children onto the first panorama, Sherman's march to the sea. The camera takes the woman's position, and we look down on a slow, curved, marching line. Griffith cuts back and forth from the still observers to the tiny soldiers, silhouettes against a red flame, as if "The torch of war against the breast of Atlanta" were the family's dream. The receptive camera merges with an eerily pastoral landscape. Cut to a closeup of starved soldiers eating corn before Petersburg. The scenes of this battle comprise an ecstasy of pain. Panoramic shots of curved lines of battle alternate with closeups of the charge. Tiny, transparent soldiers move across the screen as hand-tinted red flames light up the sky; it is impossible to tell one side from the other. Union soldiers enter the screen from the right, Confederate from the left; otherwise the two sides are indistinguishable.<sup>47</sup> Clumps of trees on the battlefield and a hill in the background accentuate the roundness and passivity of the scene. "War's peace," a closeup of dead bodies, is reconstructed from a Mathew Brady photograph. The camera's passivity has obliterated the differences between North and South.

Griffith omitted the greatest destruction at Petersburg, that suffered by black troops sent into the crater opened up by Northern mining under Southern lines. He sentimentalized battle scenes by personalizing them, as in the little colonel's charge. But that charge is mock-heroic and failed. It does not spoil what Agee rightly labeled Griffith's unforgettable images of the war. The southern director left a record of war as the triumph of death.<sup>48</sup>

Southern extras who played both Union and Confederate soldiers objected to putting on Northern uniforms. "My daddy rode with Jeb Stuart. I ain't no god damn Yankee," one protested.<sup>49</sup> Griffith's father rode with Joe Wheeler; the son shot, directed, and merged both sides. The South is the ultimate victim of Griffith's war, to be sure. But he used Lincoln to nationalize victimization. Stoneman and his blacks, not the North as a whole, torture the bleeding body of the

South. A triptych of victimization linking North and South, which concludes Part One, justifies the reversal of Part Two.

Lincoln and Stoneman meet in the central scene of that triptych. Stoneman, hobbling up to Lincoln, demands vengeance against the South; Lincoln refuses, and Stoneman hobbles away. This contrast, between the vengeful tyrant and the benevolent patriarch, actually feminizes Lincoln. A stooped, warm, androgynous figure, called "the great heart," Lincoln has responded to the pleas of Elsie and Ma Cameron and pardoned the little colonel. "I shall deal with them as if they'd never been away," he tells Stoneman of the Confederate states. The maternal image of Lincoln was a common one, promoted by Lincoln himself. It drained the president of war's ferocity and anticipated his martyrdom.

The assassination follows Lincoln's meeting with Stoneman. Lincoln draws his shawl around him in a feminine gesture that anticipates his danger and is helpless against it. The president's martyrdom twins him with the defeated South. Booth limps from the stage onto which he has jumped after the shooting; the limp twins him with Stoneman. Lydia's embrace of Stoneman when they learn of the assassination brings Part One to an end.

Ben Cameron's return home, the first panel of the triptych, sets the tone for the two Lincoln scenes. After a title, "The homecoming," we see the Cameron street and front yard; everything is in need of repair. Ben enters the picture and limps slowly toward home. The defeated, limping colonel climbs the stairs of his porch in the longest single shot in all of Part One (fifty-seven feet) and is greeted by his little sister. (Only two single shots in Part Two are longer: Ben shows his little sister his Klan costume in one; in the other he holds her as she dies.)<sup>50</sup> Female arms reach out from the door and draw Ben in (Fig. 3).

Cameron's limp foreshadows Stoneman's and Booth's in the next two scenes. The intent of the repetition is to contrast the devastation that makes cripples to the devastation wrought by them. Lincoln's promise to bring the South home, from which the limping Stoneman walks away, echoes the woman who welcomes home the limping Ben. But Stoneman's "weakness which will blight a nation" (a conflation of his passion for the mulatto with his club foot) shades into the little colonel's weakness. Lydia's arm around Stoneman repeats the arms around Ben. The contrast collapses between mulatto and white female, sex and family, for both villain and hero are placed intolerably under the power of a woman.

Eisenstein contrasted patriarchal order in Griffith to modern speed. Part One climaxes in stillness, not motion; that stillness, however, a landscape after battle, registers not the triumph of patriarchy and tradition but their defeat. The father/daughter incest in the Stoneman family, displaced onto the mulatto, returns to its maternal source in Ben's homecoming. Fathers were once sons, and the father's desire for the daughter, the homecoming suggests, defends against being drawn back into the power of the mother. The bifurcation between mulatto and



FIGURE 3. The homecoming.

mother, a second defense besides father/daughter incest against the mother/son bond, breaks down at the end of Part One. Mother and mulatto threaten to unite as Judith, the woman with the penis. Griffith takes the sword from the woman in Part Two, runs it through black aggression, and puts it into the hands of the Klan. The blacks who take over Piedmont's streets and invade the Cameron home, by intensifying the little colonel's claustrophobic familial confinement, give him the opportunity to bring it to an end. The Klan's ride to the rescue that saves a nation from black rule saved Griffith from (and thereby allowed him to make) *The Birth of a Nation*, Part One. Critics who want to rescue *Birth's* greatness by excising Part Two of the film fail to see the dependence of each part on the other.<sup>51</sup> Overriding the binary oppositions in the film between North and South, black and white, male and female, is the opposition between Parts One and Two.

## V

Griffith displaces sexuality from white men to women to blacks in order, by the subjugation and dismemberment of blacks, to reempower white

men. That project of disempowering women, which culminates in Part Two of *Birth*, emerges from the pre-*Birth* history of Griffith's movies. It also emerges from his source. The Elsie of Thomas Dixon's *Clansman* is a New Woman, a believer in female equality. "I deny your heaven-born male kingship," she tells Ben. "I don't care to be absorbed by a mere man. . . . My ideal is an intellectual companion." Ben, by contrast, is a southern cavalier indifferent to politics. The black threat politicizes Ben, and Elsie adopts his point of view. Repudiating her previous identity as "a vain, self-willed, pert little thing," she tells him, "in what I have lived through you I have grown into an impassioned, serious, self-disciplined woman."<sup>52</sup>

Charles Gaston, the hero of *The Leopard's Spots*, Part Two, also wins his bride by leading a negrophobic crusade. "You will share with me all the honors and responsibilities of public life," he tells Sallie Worth. She responds, in the novel's last words, "No, my love, I do not desire any part in public life except through you. You are my world." Gaston's triumph marks the defeat of Sallie's father. General Worth opposed their marriage; he is "beaten," he tells Gaston, by the force of the hero's negrophobia.<sup>53</sup>

Stoneman is also beaten at the end of *Birth*. Their defeats may seem to represent the transfer of women from fathers to husbands, the reinscription and transmission of patriarchy. Gaston does promise "to eliminate the negro from our life and reestablish for all time the government of our fathers." But Gaston repudiates the paternalist stance that made the Negro "the ward of the republic." He wants blacks subject to the law not of paternalist planters but "of the survival of the fittest."<sup>54</sup> *Birth*, Part Two, also restores male dominance, but the instrument of that restoration is not the traditional father but the warrior brothers. Unlike such nostalgic pastorals as *True Heart Susie* (1919) and *Way Down East* (1920), Part Two invokes traditional values in the service of modern force.

"*The Birth of a Nation*," Griffith wrote in his autobiography, "owes more to my father than it does to me." Yet Griffith shot the war in which his father was shot, the war that registered his father's defeat. The movie dwells on defeated fathers. Doctor Cameron, the sympathetic paternal figure, is thrown to the ground and paraded in chains before his former slaves. Helpless to resist the raiders who invade his home during the war, he can't keep black troops out of it after the war is over. Griffith's father, to be sure, is the model for the little colonel, not for the doctor. Griffith remembered hearing stories of his father's exploits in the war and of his mother staying up nights sewing Klan robes. He made *Birth*, he said, from those stories, "Underneath the robes and costumes of the actors playing the soldiers and night riders, rode my father." But Griffith's father never rode in the Klan. He drank, told stories, did no work, and lived in the past in the years before he died. When Griffith recalled thread in connection with his father it was not the thread that sewed Klan robes, but the thread that sewed up his father's

war-torn stomach. That thread was rotten, Griffith claimed, because the Northern blockade prevented good surgical thread from reaching the South. The rotten thread broke, as Griffith told the story, his father's stomach burst, and he died. Griffith did not mention that his father was swilling bourbon and eating pickles when he got his fatal attack. Griffith's father was a cavalry officer, but the horse charges that dominate *Birth* are those of the Klan. In the memories transmuted into film, Griffith's mother sewed the sheeted shroud from which his father's failed body was reborn. Roaring Jake Griffith rode through "the shrouded night" (Wilson) as a member of a "spectral army, . . . a vast grim host in white." "The ghostlike shadowy columns" (Dixon) of the Klan were led by the father's shade. Haunted by Griffith's father, *Birth* celebrates not his living body but his ghost.<sup>55</sup>

Patriarchal weakness raised the specters of black and female power in the movie Griffith made to honor his father. These specters are not laid to rest by the restoration of traditional patriarchy in the form either of the gentlemanly Dr. Cameron or the primal Austin Stoneman. The primal horde, split in two, slays the father. Defeated as a black mob, it is reborn as a white mass. Griffith put on the screen Revelation 19: 14–15: "And the armies *which were* in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations."

"About the first thing I remember was my father's sword," Griffith told an interviewer after *Birth* was released. That sword inspired *Birth*. Griffith explained, "As I started the book [*The Clansman*], stronger and stronger came to my mind the traditions I had learned as a child, all that my father had told me. The sword I told you about became a flashing vision. Gradually came back to my memory the stories a cousin, one Thurston Griffith, had told me of the Ku Klux Klan." "The sword remains the first memory I have of existence," Griffith repeated in 1930. In the trailer to the sound version of *Birth*, released that year, Walter Huston presents Griffith with a cavalry sword like the one his father carried in the war.<sup>56</sup>

Griffith first used that sword in *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* (1910) to symbolize a dead master's power. He filmed the opening scene, whether consciously or not, of *The Leopard's Spots*. The widow of a soldier killed in the war, wrote Dixon, "took the sword of her dead lover husband in her lap, and looked long and tenderly at it. On the hilt she pressed her lips in a lingering kiss." Then she hung the sword on the wall.<sup>57</sup> Griffith filmed that scene in *His Trust*. A slave has brought the sword home, in the film as in the book; he refuses to leave his mistress after emancipation and devotes himself to his dead master's child. Griffith's black hangs the sword in his own cabin after the big house burns down. For him as for the widow, it signifies devotion to the dead master. The associations

of sword, child, Negro devotion, and the dead father's power, which Griffith found in *The Leopard's Spots*, awakened a childhood memory.

About the first thing I remember was my father's sword; he would put it on to amuse me. The first time I saw that sword was when my father played a joke on an old Negro, once his slave but who with the heads of four other families refused to leave the plantation; those four families were four important factors in keeping the Griffith family poor.

Down South the men usually wore their hair rather long; this Negro, who in our better days had been the plantation barber, had been taken to Louisville, . . . and had seen Northern men with their close-cropped hair; when he came back he got hold of my brother and cut his hair close, Northern-style.

When father saw this he pretended to be enraged; he went into the house, donned his old uniform, buckled on this sword. . . .

Then, drawing his sword, he went through the technical cuts and thrusts and slashes, threatening the darkey all the time with being cut up into mincemeat.

The old Uncle was scared pale, and I took it seriously myself until a wink and a smile from father enlightened me.<sup>58</sup>

Griffith had been unconsciously preparing to make *Birth* since age five, he said, which would have been his age in this scene. He recalled the barber story at the height of his powers, just after he filmed *Birth*. Fifteen years later, when he was no longer able to make movies, the darker side of the sword memory took over. "The only person I ever really loved was my father," Griffith confessed, but he doubted that his father loved him, and as his first memory he replaced the story of the sword and the Negro with a tale of a dog and a gun.<sup>59</sup>

His favorite sheepdog, as Griffith remembered it, fell in helpless, forbidden love with the sheep. In its passion, the dog bit them to death. Griffith's father tied the dog to a tree to shoot it and young David fled the scene, "but I couldn't run fast enough to get away from the report of the gun." The boy identified in both memories with victims of his father's violence. He was saved from the terror of sharing the black's fate by the discovery that his father was play-acting, but he could not escape participating in the fate of the dog. In the sword memory, the boy shifted, by way of theatricality, to the side of his father; in the gun memory, as a violently hungry self, he remained his father's victim. It was a black, Griffith remembered, who told him to go on the stage, and an actor called Gloomy Gus (Griffith gave the name Gus to his rapist) who told him to try Biograph. Both the sword and the gun were screen memories, but only one led Griffith to the screen. The other returned only after the screen was lost.<sup>60</sup>

One child who worshiped his father's sword (in *The Leopard's Spots*) grew up to lead a negrophobic crusade. Another child who worshiped his father's sword grew up to film one. But the sword, so prominent in Griffith's accounts of the sources of *Birth*, is not prominent in the film we see. The little colonel, as he leads his failed charge, waves the Civil War sword of defeat. "The sword [that] . . .

became a flashing vision," I believe, originally formed *Birth's* climax. But that sword, which castrated the black rapist, has been cut out of the film.

*Birth* realized progressive hopes for an uplifting cinema with mass appeal, a cinema with American themes. But the realization of those dreams, as Lary May has written, looked very different from what humanitarian reformers had imagined. Cultural guardians had always favored film censorship. Movies of the first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, knocking out a white contender had been banned in the name of racial peace. Now white humanitarians like Jane Addams joined with black activists to support banning *Birth* as well.<sup>61</sup>

*Birth* showed white victory, not black, however, and the two were hardly reversible. The National Board of Review (set up by the industry to pass on motion pictures) applauded *Birth*, not on free-speech grounds but because of its historical accuracy and educational value. Most members of the cultural elite agreed, in Dorothea Dix's words, that the movie was "history vitalized." "Go see it," she urged her readers, "for it will make a better American of you."<sup>62</sup>

There were moments in the film, however, that the censors agreed to sacrifice. They cut out a quote from Lincoln opposing racial equality, though Lincoln had actually spoken the offending words. They censored "Lincoln's solution" at the end of the film, showing blacks deported to Africa. They eliminated some graphic black sexual assaults on white women. And they cut out Gus's castration. Censors found truthful and educational the suggestions of black sexual violence (so long as they were implied rather than stated), but they wanted to bury the (more accurate) representations of white racist speech and action. The missing footage of castration, seen by Los Angeles audiences for weeks after *Birth's* release and in the South for half a decade, takes us to the heart of Griffith's project.<sup>63</sup>

Viewers now watch Gus foam at the mouth as he lopez after the little sister. In the original version he probably raped her, as he does in *The Clansman*,<sup>64</sup> now she leaps to her death to escape him. Gus flees, is captured, and is brought before a conclave of the Klan. As Gus lies passive and helpless, the little colonel takes off his hood. Walthall, exposed as a parricide in *Conscience*, un masks himself as the innocent avenging conscience. Gus is "Guilty" (a title announces) and about to be killed (Fig. 4).

The southern plantation novelist Thomas Nelson Page, who was the most popular writer in early twentieth-century America and Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to Italy, blamed lynching on the preaching of racial equality by some whites and, by others, "the determination to put an end to the ravishing of their women by an inferior race." Page invoked "the ravishing and tearing to pieces of white women and children" to excuse the murder and dismemberment of black men. Early twentieth-century audiences knew southern blacks accused of sexual crimes were often lynched and castrated. The headline in a 1934 Alabama newspaper, for example, making history as well as reporting it, proclaimed, "FLOR-

IDA TO BURN NEGRO AT STAKE: SEX CRIMINAL SEIZED FROM JAIL WILL BE MUTILATED, SET AFIRE, IN EXTRA-LEGAL VENGEANCE FOR DEED." Reports of early viewings of Gus's punishment also referred to his "mutilation." That footage is now lost or unavailable, but Seymour Stern left a detailed record of it. (There is, regrettably for those who want to blame *Birth's* racism on Dixon, no castration scene in *The Clansman*.)<sup>65</sup>

First a masked Klansman steps forward. (The picture of him towering over Gus was used in billboards and other ads for the film.) Then the little colonel performs a mystic ceremony with his sister's blood. (This ceremony now appears in the film after Gus's execution and will be described in a moment.) Cut to the Klansman. He raises his arm, with his back to the camera, and holds up a small sword. Against the background of the storm music from Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, he plunges the sword down. He repeats this "ritualistic and totemic gesture," as Stern calls it, to the crash of Beethoven's storm. Cut to a closeup of Gus's face, his mouth flowing blood and his eyes rolling in agony. Griffith synchronizes his cutting to the cutting of the sword. "In flash-cuts, the Klansman's hand now plunges and rises, plunges and rises, again, again, and still again, on each down-beat of the timpani, all within a few frames of film. On the final thunder-crash of the series, there is a final flash of the castrated Negro's pain-racked face and body. Gus is dead."<sup>66</sup> The father's threat to make mincemeat of a black, which frightened the son, turned out to be play. The grown son, through his film cuts in a play, made that threat real. "[M]y father's sword . . . became a flashing vision" to castrate Gus.

But the sword that castrates Gus has also been severed from the father's body. The father who wielded the sword in Griffith's memory, as Griffith went on to say, was "all shot to pieces," was mincemeat himself inside.<sup>67</sup> Griffith sensed the connection between violence and internal patriarchal weakness: a damaged body makes vindictive Walthall's uncle in *Conscience* and Stoneman in *Birth*. *Birth's* aim, however, was to rescue the father, not expose him, to insulate the father from his violence, not to eliminate it entirely. The sword had to be protected from the father's "shot to pieces" body (which ruptured soon after the sword memory) and from the threats that the father's weakness opened up. These dangers, which were at once displacements of the feared father and alternatives to him, were the threats of women and blacks. Griffith rescued the paternal sword by detaching it from the father's body and putting it into the hands of the father's specter. He not only gave the sword to the mystic body, but also removed the hat (menacing on Judith) from the woman's head to the massed horned Klansmen. Griffith paid homage to his father by turning the penis into a phallus. He sacrificed the member's vulnerable bodily connection and raised it to a weapon of vengeance.

The liberty blacks wanted, Dixon and Griffith insisted, was sexual. "Equality. Equal rights. Equal politics. Equal marriage" read a placard in the black-domi-



FIGURE 4. The Klan prepares to castrate Gus (Walter Long).

nated South Carolina legislature. Griffith and Dixon accused *Birth's* opponents of promoting miscegenation. Dixon called the NAACP the Negro Inter-marriage Society and claimed it “hates *The Birth of a Nation* for one reason only—it opposes the marriage of blacks to whites.” One purpose of *Birth*, Griffith boasted, “was to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men.” Griffith and Dixon imagined a monstrous future for America: its peopling by mulattos. Stopping black men from penetrating white women gave birth to a redeemed nation instead. The nation was born, in Gus’s castration, from the wound that signified the white man’s power to stop the black seed.<sup>68</sup>

Mixture of blood from “the surviving polygamous and lawless instincts of the white male,” Dixon wrote in *The Leopard’s Spots*, had “no social significance”; the offspring of black mothers were black. But give Negro men access to white women, and they will destroy “the foundation of racial life and of civilization. The South must guard with flaming sword every avenue of approach to this holy of holies.”<sup>69</sup> The sword guards the female genitalia not only to protect the white woman from the black phallus but also to keep her from acquiring a phallus of her own. The sword that passed from Griffith’s father to Judith is put into the



FIGURE 5. Lynch's blacks gag Elsie Stoneman.

Klansman's hands; the sexuality displaced from the white male to the white female is cut off by that sword.

Castration protected white women, in the film's ideology. "The southern woman with her helpless little children in a solitary farm house no longer sleeps secure," warned the president of the University of North Carolina in 1901. "The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demonical." Beneath that public justification for dismembering the black beast lay an anxiety about the freedom not simply of blacks but of women. The scene at *Birth's* final climax in which Lynch assaults Elsie (also not in Dixon's novel) is intended to repeat, invert, and justify Gus's castration. But the blacks whom Lynch orders to gag Elsie (Fig. 5) are doing the white man's work. When Stoneman's instruments break free to assault and silence his daughter on screen, they reveal Griffith's desire behind the camera. "It may be no accident," writes Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "that the vision of the black man as a threatening beast flourished during the first phase of the southern woman's rights movement, a fantasy of aggression against boundary-transgressing women as well as a weapon of terror against blacks. Certainly the rebelliousness of that feminine generation

was circumscribed by the feeling that women were hedged about by a 'nameless horror.'"<sup>70</sup>

Women and slaves resemble one another at the opening of *Birth*. Both move with short, jerky, childlike motions. The hidden danger is that women will mature; the filmed danger is that blacks will. The woman cannot have a penis, for that would be a sign of her power. But the woman without a penis is a sign of what can happen to the man. Having turned women into blacks to keep women childlike, Griffith castrates the black rapist to make him female. The passivity forced upon the defeated South is now enforced on Gus. It is not the white man who is in danger of becoming a woman, without a penis, says the castration, but the black. Blacks must either embrace the sword, as the loyal Negro does at the end of *His Trust Fulfilled* (miming his mistress's action at the opening of *His Trust*), or be castrated by it. Anticipating Joe Christmas's fantasy of "womanshenegro" when he created the black rapist, Griffith anticipated Percy Grimm's fantasy when, just as Percy castrated Joe Christmas, Griffith castrated Gus.<sup>71</sup>

*Judith* climaxed as a severed head issued forth from the wound in Holofernes' trunk; the image merges castration and birth. *The Avenging Conscience* began with a woman (Walthall's mother) dying in childbirth. The associations of castration, birth, and death, disturbing in those films, are redemptive in *Birth*. *Birth* entails, however, not just the sacrifice of the black male but of Ben's little sister as well. Just as Lynch is the dark side of Stoneman's desire for his daughter, so Gus mediates between the little colonel and his little sister.

Flora's death is sacramentalized not only by Gus's castration but by her own communion blood. The birth of a nation required Flora's blood as well as Gus's, and the original scene sequence, which joined the two rituals, came perilously close to mixing their blood together. We now see four cyclopes dump Gus's body on Lynch's porch. After the title "The Klan prepares for action," audiences watch Ben Cameron soak a flag in a chalice. He speaks: "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." Ben raises a small fiery cross and intones, "I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of Time." That bloody cross summons the Klan. Just as Gus's castration participates in the fantasies Faulkner illuminated in *Light in August*, so this communion confirms its prophetic opposite, the black mass on the *Pequod*. Captain Ahab quenches the harpooners' fire in their blood to bind his "mongrel crew" to hunt the white whale.<sup>72</sup> The little colonel quenches the fiery cross in his sister's blood to bind the sheeted white males to hunt the black beast.

The castration scene clarifies Griffith's intentions, which is why the censors took it out. But the cinematic transformation following that scene is manifest even in its absence. To the music of Klan clarion calls and the cheers of movie audiences, the Klansmen assemble. The ride of the Klan reenacts and reverses

Civil War battles. Northern soldiers were indistinguishable from their Southern brothers; the massed, white-robed men on horseback (Fig. 1) contrast to the chaotic black mob. Blue and gray intermingled in Civil War charges; the Klan stands out against and routs the blacks. Hand-to-hand slaughter marked Civil War battles. Sword-wielding horsemen tower over black men on foot. Civil War closeups showed suffering; Klan closeups show movement and power. Ben led Southern stragglers in his quixotic charge, and he alone reached Northern lines. Now he stands before a massed, invincible Klan.

Klansmen ride with or into the camera; their power contrasts to the futility of Civil War charges. A passive camera filmed curved Civil War battle lines. The Klan rides forcefully in straight lines. When the Klan is filmed in a curve, riding around a bend, its power contrasts with the stillness of Sherman's curved march. The confusions of night Civil War battles contrast to a breathtaking single line of Klansmen silhouetted in a long shot at night. The tiny, transparent Civil War soldiers were shades; Klan shrouds incarnate large, forceful presences. Panoramic Civil War battle scenes, with remarkable depth of field, dwarfed the human participants. The Klan fuses humans into an animal, mechanical, sacred power. The dead soldiers on the Civil War battlefields rise up, an "Invisible Empire," and ride to regenerative victory.

Virtuoso parallel editing climaxes the movie, but the aesthetic force of the climax is inseparable from its political message. Griffith moves back and forth from Lynch's assault on Elsie ("Lynch, drunk with wine and power, orders his henchmen to hurry preparations for a forced marriage" [Fig. 6]), to the Negroes' assault on the Union veterans' Lincoln log cabin in which the Camerons have taken refuge, to the Klan rides to the rescue. Griffith cuts from the cabin refuge ("The former enemies of North and South reunited again in defense of their Aryan birthright") to Elsie's fluttering, helpless motions (as Lynch seizes her and kisses her white garment) to Klansmen moving forcefully through the water. The Klan's ride to rescue Elsie doubles the blacks' assault on the cabin. Griffith's parallel montage, his failure to transcend dualistic oppositions, marks no victory of patriarchy and provincialism over modern speed. The moving camera and the moving Klan, welding white individuals into a mystic union, embody Griffith's prophetic vision. Upon the collapsed distinction between the mechanical North and the traditional South, he erected an apocalyptic division between black and white.

The formal advances in Griffith's earlier films also juxtaposed opposites. But these contrasts—between what happened in one time or place and what happened in another; between self and other, inner and outer, fantasy and reality; between public and private, rich and poor, good woman and bad—instead of reinforcing traditional distinctions threatened to break them down. Modern technique seemed to augur the triumph of mass society in social terms, in psy-



FIGURE 6. Lynch proposes marriage to Elsie.

chological language the regression to dual unity with the primal mother. *Birth* erected a system of differences—between male and female, white and black, good and evil—whose purpose was to withstand collapse and so defend against the breakdown of all difference.

The violent sacrifice of a monstrous double, in René Girard's terms, gives birth to a regenerate order. Ritual murder averts a sacrificial crisis of indiscriminate violence. It ushers in the distinction between culture and nature, a system of differences and a system without them. Griffith's system without differences is black and female, the differentiated system is white and male. But motion, speed, and the breakdown of difference constitute the new culture as well. In Girard's words about the "enemy brothers" who've slain the primal father, "We are left with a group of people all bearing the same name, all identically dressed. . . . Their resemblance is such that they do not possess identities of their own." The Klan not only brings about national unity; it also submerges human divisions in a merged, sacred, brotherly horde.<sup>73</sup>

One image in this climax, however, unsettles the entire film. Two horsemen in blackface survey the Piedmont streets. Identified as "White spies disguised," they turn toward the room in which Elsie is imprisoned when they hear her cries

for help. But the Negroes who bind and gag Elsie when she screams for help (Fig. 5) are also whites in blackface. So is the “black spy” who sees a Cameron sister with that other disguise, the Klan robe. The “white spies” cannot be told from other Negroes in the film not because their paint covers their whiteness but because the others’ paint does not. Masks transform some white bodies into a white host and other white bodies into a black mob. Whites in white sheets defeat whites in blackface. The climax of *Birth* does not pit whites against blacks, but some white actors against others.

Sometimes they were the same white actors. White extras switched back and forth from playing Klansmen to playing blacks, just as Griffith cut back and forth from one scene to another. Elmo Lincoln, first seen as the slave auctioneer at the opening of the film, played both a Klansman and the black owner of the gin mill in which Gus hid. Bobby Harron, killed as Elsie Stoneman’s younger brother, was resurrected as a free Negro. Joseph Henaberry, assassinated as Lincoln, played thirteen bit parts in Part Two. He recalled, “In one sequence I played in a group of renegade colored people, being pursued by white people—and I was in both groups, chasing myself through the whole sequence.” Griffith had split the fraternal primal horde into black desire and white punishment; blackface enabled whites to “impersonate” (Griffith’s word for playing a role) both sides.<sup>74</sup>

Dixon and Griffith, one opponent of the film pointed out, “ought to realize that if the Negro was as bad as they paint him in these films he was what the South made him; he was the shadow of her own substance.”<sup>75</sup> Historically and cinematically, that concessive “if” gives too much away. Griffith’s Negroes were as bad as he painted them because he painted whites black. The obviousness of blackface, which fails to disguise, reveals that the Klansmen were chasing their own negative identities, their own shadow sides.

Griffith did use hundreds of black extras throughout the film. He gave several blacks small bits of business to do (an old black man dances the buck and wing early in the film), and one black woman has a small individuated role. Neither she nor any other black actors appear in the list of credits, however, and no blacks were given major parts. Griffith explained, “On careful weighing of every detail concerned, the decision was made to have no black blood among the principals.”<sup>76</sup>

Blacks were barred from the stage; there were none in Griffith’s company, and the scarcity of established black actors may have influenced Griffith’s decision. But he preferred creating his own leading players to using established ones, and he wanted to invent his own blacks as well. He was following the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, the first form (before movies) of American mass culture, which appropriated black masks for white actors. Minstrels mimed blacks, but the referent was not allowed to possess his representation. A few black troupes did appear after the Civil War, however. When one played Louisville, where

young Griffith was living, a local reporter commented, "The success of the troupe goes to disprove the saying that a negro cannot act the nigger."<sup>77</sup>

Griffith allowed a few blacks to act the nigger. But he did not want to let the representation of blackness go. On the one hand, Gus, Lynch, and Lydia were so menacing that only whites could safely play them. The contrast of "black villainy and blond innocence"<sup>78</sup> when Lynch seized Elsie (Fig. 2) had to remain metaphorical. The conventions of representation (that this was only a scene in a movie) broke down in the face of blackness, since no black could be allowed to manhandle Lillian Gish. On the other hand, whites in blackface allowed Griffith to inhabit the fantasies he imposed on blacks, to keep those fantasies his own. Griffith represented blackness without having it take him over. But his fear of giving blacks autonomy traces his blacks back to him.

Disguise is not only the method of *Birth* but (with the racial opposition that it seems to undermine) the movie's major theme. Austin Stoneman's wig, which Elsie adjusts at the film's opening, is a sign of his hidden bad motives. It marks him as a hypocrite. The first page of Griffith's pamphlet attacking film censorship shows a dark, devilish figure putting on the mask of reform. Hiding under the disguise of virtue, "the malignant pygmy has matured into a caliban."<sup>79</sup> The contrast between a whiteness that protects the growth of blackness and a blackface that hides white may appear unstable; blackface may seem to expose Griffith as Stoneman, using "paint and powder" (as True Heart Susie will refuse to do) to deceive. The little colonel also employed disguise, however, masking his identity under Klan robes. On one level Griffith is contrasting masks of pretended with masks of genuine virtue, deception with regeneration, hypocrisy with grace. He is celebrating the role of costume and ceremony in personal transformation. (Griffith once attributed his virtues to the fact that as an actor he'd "impersonated" Lincoln.)<sup>80</sup> But to celebrate impersonation does not oppose the Klansman to the white in blackface. It joins them together, for the movie puts both disguises to regenerative use. White sheets and black masks establish that fixed opposition, which real bodies resist. Sheets and masks enable rebirth without the mediation of female sexuality. The deeper opposite of the white in blackface, indeed, of the system of represented binary oppositions itself, is the white with black blood, the mulatto.

"Its purpose was to bring order out of chaos," Dixon wrote of the Klan in *The Leopard's Spots*. "Henceforth there could be but one issue—are you a White Man or a Negro?" If order depended on distinguishing white from black, however, Dixon's very next words threatened chaos. "[T]here was but one question to be settled: 'Shall the future American be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto?'" In shifting from black to mulatto Dixon acknowledged the mixture he was trying to prevent. He reestablished the boundary by making mulattos into blacks: "One drop of Negro blood makes a Negro. It kinks the hair, flattens the nose, thickens

the lip, puts out the light of intellect, and lights the fire of brutal passions. The beginning of Negro equality as a vital fact is the beginning of the end of this nation's life. There is enough negro blood here to make mulatto the whole Republic."<sup>81</sup>

The spread of blackness through interracial sex (Ike McCaslin's nightmare at the end of *Go Down Moses*) was one form of national rebirth; blackface was its alternative. Mulattos with "black blood" were stuck in their blackness. Dressed in blackface (or watching others so dressed), whites played with blackness as part of their self-fashioning. Griffith took an interest in clothes as a young man, he later wrote, because he could not change his body.<sup>82</sup> Griffith discovered in *Birth* that changing clothes allowed him to leave the body behind.

Griffith wanted to assume negative identities if he could discard them, but he also required stable nurture and recognition from others. Self-abnegating blacks and women like the black hero of *Trust* and the white heroine of *True Heart Susie* supplied, in Erik Erikson's terms, basic trust. The dependence on blacks and women, in Griffith's depiction, allowed white men to be free. But that dependence also rooted the mobile, self-making identity in its opposite. Boundary division was built on boundary breakdown, selfhood in one on its absence in the other. Griffith, who needed both dependence and autonomy, feared that the one wiped out the other; he sacrificed the autonomy of women and blacks. But the wish for basic trust that obliterates the autonomy of the other brings with it anxiety over vengeance. Given the primitive sources of the need for basic trust, the women and blacks from whom it was demanded became repositories for the panic against which trust defends, of violence, loss, and mobile desire.

Blackface played with boundary breakdown, retaining control over it, and Griffith returned to blackface in the 1920s. He planned to star Al Jolson in a film called *Black and White*. Jolson would play a detective who puts on blackface to investigate a crime and saves a falsely accused man from being executed. Since both the suspect and the detective are innocent underneath their guilty appearances, *Black and White* took as its explicit theme the difference between blackface and blackness. When Jolson backed out of the movie, another actor and another director in Griffith's company made it. A few years later Jolson starred in the first talkie. Like *Black and White*, it moved blackface from method to subject. Blackface frees the character Jolson plays in *The Jazz Singer* from his inherited, Jewish immigrant identity. Jolson becomes a jazz singer over his father's objections; "Mammy," sung in blackface after he's become a star, expresses his gratitude to his mother. But self-consciousness about the method undercut blackface. *The Jazz Singer's* homage to the technique that had founded American mass entertainment, first in minstrelsy and then (through *Birth*) in movies, brought blackface to an end.<sup>83</sup>

*The Jazz Singer* did not do away, however, with the principle for which black-

face stands; it rather exhausted blackface as a way of standing for that principle. Blackface was a synecdoche for the freedom provided by representation. It pointed to Griffith's effort, thematized by white sheets in *Birth's* plot and by blackface in its production, to replace history by image.

## VI

The emphasis on impersonation may seem to contradict Griffith's belief in the historical accuracy of film. The director went to enormous trouble to reconstruct historical vignettes accurately in *Birth*, for he wanted to acquire the aura of history for film. The actors on stage at his Ford's Theater read the play that was performed the night Lincoln was shot; Griffith shot Booth shooting Lincoln at the same moment in the play. Critics praised the historical accuracy of *Birth*. The vice crusader Charles Parkhurst, who had tried to close the New York nickelodeons, insisted, "A boy can learn more pure history and get more atmosphere of the period by sitting down three hours before the films that Griffith has produced with such artistic skill than by weeks or months of study in the classroom."<sup>84</sup>

Griffith agreed. He imagined that in the public library of the future, instead of reading about history and "ending bewildered without a clear idea of exactly what did happen, and confused at every point by conflicting interpretations . . . you will merely . . . press the button and actually see what happened. There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history!"<sup>85</sup>

Accuracy, however, required impersonation. Joseph Henaberry was not Lincoln any more than he was black. Henaberry impersonated Lincoln by getting as close to the details of his beard, posture, and clothing as he could. Historical authenticity entailed disguise. Griffith and Dixon offered to pay \$10,000 to Moorfield Storey, president of the NAACP, if he found a single historical inaccuracy in *Birth*. The pretense may seem absurd; Thaddeus Stevens, for starters, had no children. But Ralph Lewis played Stoneman, not Stevens. He impersonated a historical type just as (in Vachel Lindsay's contemporary account of the gathering of the Klan) "the white leader, Colonel Ben Cameron (impersonated by Henry B. Walthall) enters not as an individual, but as representing the white Anglo-Saxon Niagara."<sup>86</sup>

When Storey asked Griffith what mulatto lieutenant-governor had bound and gagged a young white woman to force marriage on her, Griffith avoided answering and tried to shake Storey's hand. Storey refused. By imitating the little colonel, who had refused (to Atlanta audience cheers) to shake Lynch's hand, Storey had gotten Griffith to play the lieutenant-governor. But even if Griffith found himself on the wrong side of that reenactment, it testified to film's power.

*Birth* used impersonation in the service of a vision that by tapping collective fantasies created a conviction of truth beyond history. Contingencies and conflicting interpretations constitute history. Griffith's aim was to abolish interpretation; that project made representation not an avenue to history but its replacement.<sup>87</sup>

Griffith claimed to be filming history in *Birth*, just as he said he was filming his father, but he also claimed to be bringing a new history into being. "We've gone beyond Babel, beyond words," he said in 1914. "We've found a universal language—a power that can make men brothers and end war forever."<sup>88</sup> That preverbal universal language did not simply create a historical eschatology, a move from the traditional to the sacred. It replaced history by film. Presented as a transparent representation of history (more transparent than language could ever be), the film actually aimed to emancipate the representation from its referent and draw the viewer out of history into film.

Movie images seen from afar allowed audiences to keep their distance, to be voyeurs instead of participants. But that protection, as in dreams, broke down defenses and opened a road to the unconscious. The size of the image and its reproducibility, the closeup and film cut, the magical transformations on screen and film's documentary pretense—all these, Griffith sensed, dissolved the boundaries that separated audiences in darkened theaters from the screen. The silent-film epic, moreover, accentuated movies' visionary aura. "Words, after all, are a clumsy method of conveying thought. They close expression in so many ways," said Griffith. *Birth* used titles, to be sure, but it stood closer to music than to words. Not only were its filmic rhythms musical, but Griffith also used an orchestra to reinforce the beats and themes on screen. To watch and hear *Birth* as it was originally shown was to enter the immediate, prelogical universe of the primary processes.<sup>89</sup>

Griffith founded a preverbal art. It pulled viewers back to the condition, before language, of illusory unity with the originary source of being. Film, in Griffith's imagination, evoked and made itself the substitute for an ominous, preverbal, maternal power. *Birth* replaced birth.

"I have even heard it said that if it hadn't been for the transfusion of your blood into it the motion picture would have died," a reporter commented to Griffith after *Birth* opened. "I believe in the motion picture not only as a means of amusement, but as a moral and educational force," Griffith replied. "Man is a moving animal. It isn't so with woman. Their natures are different." Griffith was describing women as the victims of male mobility, victims whom the movie would rescue. "Do you know that there has been less drinking in the past five years, and that it is because of motion pictures?" asked Griffith. Men who once frequented the saloon went to the motion-picture theater. Because they watched

movement on the screen instead of moving themselves, Griffith concluded, "the domestic unities are preserved." Movies preserved traditional values by replacing modern life, by moving for modern men.<sup>90</sup>

The motion picture protected women from men, Griffith claimed. But he invoked the stereotypical gender division in response to the reporter's metaphor, which broke down the boundary between body and film. Griffith's blood transfusion, the dialogue implied, rescued women by appropriating them. *Birth* transubstantiated Griffith's blood into celluloid so that he and his audiences could live inside film.

As film replaced the female body, it also ingested history. Plays, explained Griffith, were "the art of interpretation glorified." Movies were superior to plays because playgoers were aware of the artificial, representational effects. "[C]oncealment [was] one of the rarest attributes of true art," wrote Griffith, and silent film concealed "the brain behind this art" as words could never do. Griffith's distinction went beyond the interpretation that points to itself and the one that, rendering itself invisible, "impersonates" reality. Silent film, like the "hand of God," lifted people from their "commonplace existence" into a "sphere of poetic simulations." It didn't render reality. It was *The Real*. To be "present at the making of history" was to be present at the viewing of film.<sup>91</sup>

## VII

*The Birth of a Nation*, by appropriating history, itself became a historical force. It not only showed millions of viewers how to see and enact domestic conflicts but also pointed toward the World War. But Griffith's reentry into history through American entry into World War I initiated the process by which he fell out of film.

*Birth*, like Wilson, claimed to be against war. "Dare we dream of a day when bestial war shall rule no more?" asks the penultimate title, and a bestial war god (of the sort Africans worshiped) is succeeded on the screen by a white-robed Christ. But the white Knights of Christ who erased the Civil War were not pacifists. Like America in World War I, they were fighting a war to end war.

Karl Brown, the assistant cameraman on *Birth* and *Intolerance*, also connected Griffith's movies to American entry into World War I. He wrote, "Here was his story, the story he had used so effectively time and time again, played right before his eyes: his famous run to the rescue. Only this time it was not a handful of desperate people but a typical Griffith production on the most gigantic scale: all Europe under the iron heel of a monstrous enemy, with the rescue now coming from the massed might of America."<sup>92</sup>

That was Wilson's vision as well. Griffith put on the screen Wilson's "ghostly

visitors," whose "Invisible Empire" saved a nation. Now Wilson borrowed Griffith's images to celebrate the Americans who rescued Europe. "Coming across sea in spirit of crusaders, . . . possessed by something they could only call religious fervor," Wilson's troops were "fighting in dream." "Those dear ghosts that still deploy upon the fields of France"—Wilson evoked them after the Armistice—were the ghosts of Griffith's Klan.<sup>93</sup>

Dixon and Griffith also saw the connection between *The Birth of a Nation* and World War I. Dixon agitated in print and film for American entry into the war; he called his novel and movie *The Fall of a Nation*. "What we film tomorrow will strike the hearts of the world," Griffith had declared in 1914, "and end war forever." After *Intolerance* (1916), Griffith began *Hearts of the World* to bring America into the war to end war. Griffith began *Hearts* at Lloyd George's urging, to create sympathy for the allied cause. He reported to Wilson during the production of the film and screened it at the White House.<sup>94</sup>

*Hearts* (1918) was the most popular war movie of its time, but the cross-purposes at work in the film fatally compromised it. On the one hand, *Hearts* was a remake of *Birth*. It contained, observes William Everson, "the same family structure, the same separations and reunions, the same editing patterns." George Siegmann plays the German officer von Strohm instead of the mulatto lieutenant-governor Silas Lynch; once again he chases, seizes, and mauls Lillian Gish. Scenes of German officers ravishing French girls, omitted from the film when it played after the Armistice, parallel the scenes of black sexual violence censored from *Birth*. Tramping Americans coming to rescue Europe fill the screen in the film's final image. They reincarnate the ride of the Klan. Griffith dedicated *Hearts* to President Wilson.<sup>95</sup>

If American entry were to save Europe from World War I, then the American ride to the rescue would transform the World War as American Civil War (*The Birth of a Nation*, Part One) into the World War as Klan triumph (*Birth of a Nation*, Part Two). But had *Hearts* simply repeated Part One, it would have had to merge the Germans with the French. That would not justify an American ride to the rescue, so Griffith had to collapse Part One into Part Two. *Birth* made equivalent the two sides in the Civil War; *Hearts* distinguished the noble French from the bestial Germans. Neither of the two lovers in *Hearts* could be German, so their rescue could not reunite Europe. The French troops are sufficiently dirtied by the war, moreover, to fail to rise to the role of the Klan. Although they also ride to rescue Lillian Gish, they are too disorganized and battle-weary to replicate the Klan's transcendent order. Their ride to the rescue substitutes interminable length for visionary power.

Though Bobby Harron plays the Henry Walthall role, he does not lead the ride to rescue Gish. Trapped together in the familiarly claustrophobic room (after she, not he, stabs a German soldier), Gish and Harron are both menaced by von

Strohm. They make a suicide pact in case the Germans break down the door. Griffith succumbed to more than propaganda exigencies when he merged Haron and Gish as victims. *Hearts* marks Griffith's fall into masochistic nostalgia.

That shift in Griffith's movies derived from the history of his private life and his career. But World War I, as it shattered the confidence of Euro-American culture as a whole, had its impact on Griffith as well. Griffith, I've said, had to film a war that distinguished the French from the Germans. Even where *Hearts* imitated *Birth's* Civil War battles, it thereby detached itself from the greater horrors of trench warfare. Generally, however, Griffith's battle scenes lacked the nonjudgmental implacability that marked his refusal to take sides in *Birth*. In personalizing the conflict and in showing troop breakthroughs, Griffith made meaning where no meaning resided. The war Griffith directed, says Richard Schickel, with its sweeping movements and decisive victories, was the war that generals on both sides were fantasizing. It was not the soldiers' war.<sup>96</sup>

Griffith sensed the inadequacy of *Hearts* as a depiction of World War I. "Viewed as a drama," he said, "the war is in some ways disappointing." "A modern war is neither romantic nor picturesque," he explained. "Everyone is hidden away in ditches. As you look out across No Man's Land there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness." Because Griffith sensed the failure of his filmed war to overcome the real one, *Hearts* lacks *Birth's* conviction.<sup>97</sup>

Woodrow Wilson presided over a Red scare during and after World War I in which thousands of Americans were jailed or deported. As if he wanted to avert his eyes from the persecution his nationalism had unleashed, Wilson condemned *Hearts* for stirring up hatred by its depiction of German bestiality. *Birth* forged a bond between the president and the filmmaker; *Hearts* severed it.<sup>98</sup>

The League of Nations would have redeemed the horrors of war for Wilson and protected him from its actual character. But Wilson collapsed in the struggle for the league. His new wife ran the White House for months after the president was incapacitated, and though Wilson lived out his life for four more years, he was out of touch with postwar America. A culture of consumption at odds with Wilson's messianic dreams flourished in life and on film. But the progressive vision that Wilson and Griffith shared also had its legacy—100% Americanism and a revived Ku Klux Klan. The new Klan, organized in 1915 in response to *Birth's* popularity, screened the movie in the 1920s to help build a membership in the millions. But the new Klan's targets were immigrant Catholics and Jews, not blacks, signaling the disintegration of the progressives' melting-pot dream. Wilson's son-in-law, W. G. McAdoo (he had presided over the segregation of the Treasury Department during Wilson's presidency and had then become general counsel for Griffith's company, United Artists), received Klan support

and a plurality of delegate votes for more than fifty ballots at the 1924 Democratic presidential nominating convention.<sup>99</sup>

Dixon attacked Bolshevism and the New Woman in his novels of the 1920s and 1930s; he also attacked the revived Klan, since it was anti-Catholic rather than anti-Negro. In Dixon's final novel, *The Flaming Sword* (1939), Negro Communists take over America. Dixon shared the fantasy of that danger with Martin Dies's House Un-American Activities Committee, with Mississippi's representatives Bilbo and Rankin. But Dixon's obsessions had lost their national resonance. Although he saw *The Flaming Sword* as a sequel to *The Birth of a Nation*, it was a commercial failure.<sup>100</sup>

Griffith, like Wilson and Dixon, never recovered from World War I. "Are we not making the world safe for democracy, American Democracy, through motion pictures?" he asked.<sup>101</sup> But his own contribution to that project was coming to an end. Immigrants took over the motion picture business in the 1920s; instead of being absorbed by visionary Protestantism, they made film represent consumption culture. Griffith continued to make significant movies after *Hearts*, but they lacked either the power of *Birth* and *Intolerance* or the freshness of the Biograph one-reelers. Retreating to an elegiac mode of pastoralism and tradition, Griffith embraced an aesthetic of victimization. His films did not celebrate patriarchy, but they were paralyzed by the failure to challenge it. In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Lillian Gish plays a daughter whose father (Donald Crisp) beats her to death. In *True Heart Susie* (1919), Gish plays a virtuous country girl whose self-abnegation finally wins back her wayward childhood sweetheart.

Audiences flocked to Griffith's movies for a few years after the war, until his financial difficulties cost him first his artistic independence and then his ability to make films. These troubles were not caused, Richard Schickel has recently shown, by production costs or box-office failures. Griffith sabotaged himself with the enormous expense of building and operating his Mamaroneck studio estate. There was no compelling artistic reason for that studio. But Griffith wanted a plantation, a patriarchal pastoral retreat. This flight from modernity, on screen and off, could not sustain the filmmaker. Griffith had credited movies with reducing the consumption of liquor when he made *Birth*. As his movies declined in the 1920s, his drinking increased. His final film, *The Struggle* (1931), began as an attack on prohibition. But the fall of Griffith's alcoholic protagonist turned the movie into an exposé of drink. When audiences and reviewers laughed at the film's excesses, Griffith retired to his hotel room and drank for weeks. He never made another movie.<sup>102</sup>

Interviewed on film for the sound rerelease of *Birth* in 1930, Griffith recalled the stories of his father's heroic suffering during the Civil War and of his mother's sewing Klan robes afterward. When Walter Huston asked him whether the his-

tory recounted in *Birth* was true, Griffith replied, "You can't hear" such stories "and not feel it is true. . . . I think it's true, but as Pontius Pilate asked, 'What is Truth?'" Losing confidence in film's ability to transubstantiate childhood screen memories into reality, Griffith was sensing the violence of *Birth's* project, and identifying not with the white-robed Knights of Christ but with Christ's crucifier.<sup>103</sup>

Griffith lived sixteen more years after *The Struggle*, and was neither poverty-stricken nor friendless during most of that time. But two episodes, one at the beginning of his forced retirement and the other at the end, exhibit the consequences for Griffith of falling out of film. In 1932 an English producer invited him to direct a remake of *Broken Blossoms*. To convince the producer to replace the actress he'd chosen for the Gish role with one Griffith preferred, as Gish had once replaced Blanche Sweet, Griffith himself played the scene in which Battling Burrows beats his daughter. He seemed to lose control and actually become Battling Burrows, and the terrified producer had to pull him off the girl. That night a drunken Griffith called Gish in New York and pleaded with her to come to England and rescue him.<sup>104</sup>

Fifteen years later a reporter who wanted to interview Griffith convinced a young woman (who'd never heard of the once-legendary director) to call him on the phone. Griffith invited her to his hotel room, and though he tried to shut the door behind her, the reporter forced his way in. Griffith lunged for the girl a few times, just as Siegmann ("drunk with wine and power") went after Gish in *Birth's* forced-marriage scene (Fig. 6). After she eluded him, Griffith refilled his glass and answered the reporter's questions.<sup>105</sup> No longer able to direct Donald Crisp and George Siegmann, Griffith was playing them. Six months later his body, weakened by drink like his father's, ruptured from within like his father's. Stripped of the shroud that had memorialized a mythic patriarch, Griffith had entered his father's dead body.

## Notes

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\* I have borrowed insights from Ann Banfield, Kim Chernin, and Catherine Gallagher throughout this essay and benefited from their responses to an earlier version. Elizabeth Abel and Jim Breslin also supplied valuable readings, and I am grateful for the contributions of Joel Fineman, Carolyn Porter, and Paul Thomas. Nancy Goldman of the Pacific Film Archive, University of California Art Museum, helped obtain films and arrange screenings. She and the archive provided indispensable support for this project.

1. James Agee, *Agee on Film* (Boston, 1958), 313; Arlene Croce, quoted in Martin Williams, *Griffith, First Artist of the Movies* (New York, 1980), 77; Roy E. Aitken, *The Birth of a Nation Story* (Middleburg, Va., 1965), 4.

2. James Hart, ed., *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D. W. Griffith* (Louisville, Ky., 1972), 28–29.
3. Harry M. Geduld, ed., *Focus on D. W. Griffith* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 8.
4. Quotes are from Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York, 1984), 299, 279. Cf. pp. 29, 213, 232–37. I have learned a lot from this detailed, sensitive biography, but Schickel minimizes and apologizes for Griffith's racism.
5. Cf. Raymond Allen Cook, *Fire from the Flint: The Amazing Career of Thomas Dixon* (Winston-Salem, N.C., 1968), 51–52, 72, 163–73; Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1981), 47; Seymour Stern, "Griffith: *The Birth of a Nation*, Part I," *Film Culture* 36 (Spring–Summer 1965), 34–36; Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, N.J., 1956), 253; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York, 1977), 62; Russell Merritt, "D. W. Griffith Directs the Great War: The Making of *Hearts of the World*," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981), 47; John Hope Franklin, "'Birth of a Nation'—Propaganda as History," *The Massachusetts Review* 20 (Autumn 1979), 417–33.
6. *New York American*, Feb. 28, 1915, in Geduld, *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 28.
7. Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, vol. 5, *Reunion and Nationalization* (New York, 1901), 19–20, 49–50.
8. *Ibid.*, 49–50, 60.
9. *Ibid.*, 62–64, 75–78.
10. *Ibid.*, 212; cf. Mary Odem, "Wilson and the Immigrants," unpublished seminar paper, U. C. Berkeley, 1984; George Frederickson, *White Supremacy* (New York, 1981), 188–91.
11. Maxwell Bloomfield, "The Leopard's Spots: A Study in Popular Racism," *American Quarterly* 16 (Fall 1964), 387–92; Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 79–112; Woodrow Wilson, "The Ideals of America," *Atlantic Monthly* 90 (December 1902), 721–34; Michael Rogin, "The King's Two Bodies: Lincoln, Wilson, Nixon and Presidential Self-Sacrifice," in J. David Greenstone, ed., *Public Values and Private Power in American Politics* (Chicago, 1982), 80–81; Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots, A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (Ridgewood, N.J., 1967), 334–35, 408, 439.
12. Wilson, "Ideals of America," 721–34.
13. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 26–27; Schickel, *Griffith*, 224; Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 171–72; Merritt, "Griffith Directs the Great War," 47.
14. Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 71; F. Garvin Davenport, Jr., "Thomas Dixon's Mythology of Southern History," *Journal of Southern History* 36 (August 1970), 361.
15. Odem, "Wilson and the Immigrants," 1–16; Rogin, "The King's Two Bodies," 83–87.
16. Link, *Wilson*, 467; Lawrence J. Friedman, *The White Savage* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 157–63.
17. Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1965), 19–67; Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison, Wisc., 1976), 57–72; Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York, 1909), 75–103.
18. Merritt, "Griffith Directs," 63–65, 75–79; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 36–37; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York, 1975), 105–6.
19. May, *Screening Out the Past*, 52–53, 59; Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 6, 75–100.

20. May, *Screening Out the Past*, 71. The interpretation in these paragraphs draws heavily from May.
21. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form* (New York, 1949), 197.
22. I rely on Schickel for Griffith's biography unless another source is indicated.
23. Robert Welsh, "David Griffith Speaks," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Jan. 14, 1914, 48–49, 54; Tom Gunning, "Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith's Biograph Films," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6 (Winter 1981), 12–25.
24. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1973), 379–90, 428–35; Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 1; Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 11. For general discussions of Griffith's cinematic contributions, cf. Williams, *Griffith*, 34–44; Louis Jacobs, *The Rise of American Film* (New York, 1967), 98–110; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 48–54.
25. Jacobs, *Rise of American Film*, 98; George C. Pratt, "In the Nick of Time: D. W. Griffith and the 'Last-Minute Rescue,'" in Marshall Deutelbaum, ed., *"Image" on the Art and Evolution of the Film* (New York, 1979), 74–75; Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 29–30, 38–39; Welsh, "Griffith Speaks," 49, 54.
26. Jacobs, *Rise of American Film*, 14, 118–19; Welsh, "Griffith Speaks," 49, 54; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 73; Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston, 1957).
27. Gunning, "Weaving a Narrative," 12–25.
28. The interpretation of the patriarchal crisis and the fear of women in this and the following paragraph derives from Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents* (London, 1983); Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, Politics and Culture* (New York, 1980), 208–80; Fred Weinstein and Gerald Platt, *The Wish to Be Free* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969); Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage* (New York, 1970); Michael Rogin, "Max Weber and Woodrow Wilson: The Iron Cage in Germany and America," *Polity* 3 (Summer 1971), 557–75, and "On the Jewish Question," *democracy* 3 (Spring 1983), 101–14; Martin Green, *The von Richtofen Sisters* (New York, 1974); David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America* (New Haven, 1970), 42–52; Adams, *Education of Henry Adams*, 379–90, 427–35, 441–47, 459–61; Debora L. Silverman, "Nature, Nobility, and Neurology: The Ideological Origins of 'Art Nouveau' in France, 1899–1900," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1983.
29. Hart, *Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 26.
30. Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in James Strachey, ed., *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1955) 21: 152–57; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds., *Women and the Cinema* (New York, 1977), 412–28; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (New York, 1983), 31–52, 202. There is no space here to analyze the specular role of the camera as a desiring apparatus. But it is important to realize that the psycho-logic of fetishism is linked at the founding moment in American cinema to a specific political, sexual, and racial content.
31. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 205, 223, 227–30, 234–37, 243–45, 253.
32. Cf. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 56.
33. Cf. Russell L. Merritt, "Mr. Griffith, *The Painted Lady*, and the Distractive Frame," in Deutelbaum, *"Image,"* 47; Seymour Stern, "Griffith and Poe," *Films in Review* 2 (November 1951), 23.
34. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, rev. ed. (New York, 1970), 152–53, 207.

35. Edward Wagenknecht, *The Movies in the Age of Innocence* (Norman, Okla., 1962), 98–99.
36. *New York Times*, March 4, 1915; Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 123; Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman* (Lexington, Ky., 1970), 342; James Shelley Hamilton, "Putting a New Move in the Movies," *Everybody's Magazine* 32 (June 1915), 680.
37. *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 7, 1915, in Fred Silva, ed., *Focus on The Birth of a Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 35.
38. Wagenknecht, *Movies in the Age of Innocence*, 98–99.
39. Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), 133; Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Mind That Burns in Each Body: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in Ann Snitow, et al., eds., *Powers of Desire* (New York, 1983), 331–33, 337; Milton Mackaye, "The Birth of a Nation," *Scribner's* 102 (November 1937), 45–46; Schickel, *Griffith*, 233–34, 578; William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York, 1968), 147. Cf. Frederickson, *White Supremacy*, 104.
40. Schickel, *Griffith*, 217–19.
41. *Ibid.*, 220; Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York, 1973), 57.
42. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1944), 256–62; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black* (Baltimore, Md., 1969), 429–81.
43. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (New York, 1973), 16.
44. Fawn M. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South* (New York, 1959), 86–91.
45. *Ibid.*, 369–70, 386; Mrs. D. W. Griffith (Linda Arvidson), *When the Movies Were Young* (New York, 1925), 47; Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 78; Dixon, *Clansman*, 39, 132, 143. Kim Barton has influenced my understanding of Stoneman.
46. Scene numbers are from Theodore Huff, *The Birth of a Nation Shot Analysis* (New York, 1961).
47. Gish, *Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me*, 140.
48. Richard Slotkin, *The Crater* (New York, 1980); Agee, *Agee on Film*, 313.
49. Schickel, *Griffith*, 227.
50. Shot lengths are in Huff.
51. Cf. Croce, in Williams, *Griffith*, 74, and Jay Leyda, "The Art and Death of D. W. Griffith," in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 161–67. Leyda offers, nonetheless, the best analysis I have seen of the differences between the two halves of the film.
52. Dixon, *Clansman*, 127, 149, 163–64, 333.
53. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 447, 468.
54. *Ibid.*, 418, 420.
55. Hart, *Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 26–28; Schickel, *Griffith*, 30–31; Wilson, *Reunion*, 60; Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation*, 35; Dixon, *Clansman*, 39. Paul Thomas first perceived the Klan sheets as shrouds.
56. D. W. Griffith, "My Early Life," *Photoplay* (1916), in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 13–14, 39–40; Schickel, *Griffith*, 15, 555.
57. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 9–13.
58. Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 13–14.
59. Williams, *Griffith*, 4; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 68.
60. Schickel, *Griffith*, 15; Hart, *Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 73; Robert M. Henderson, *D. W. Griffith: His Life and Work* (Oxford, 1972), 54.
61. May, *Screening Out the Past*, 80–86; Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 56–62; Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, 7; Francis Hackett, "Brotherly Love," *New Republic* 2 (March 20, 1915), 185.

62. Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 170; Silva, *Focus on The Birth a Nation*, 102; Schickel, *Griffith*, 277; Russell Merritt, "Dixon, Griffith and the Southern Legend," *Cinema Journal* 3 (1972), 28.
63. Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 66, 123, 164.
64. *Ibid.*, 66; "Films and Births and Censorships," *The Survey* 24 (April 3, 1915), 4.
65. Friedman, *White Savage*, 57–68; Thomas Nelson Page, "The Lynching of Negroes—Its Cause and Prevention," *North American Review* 178 (1904), 36–39, 45; Hall, in Snitow, *Powers of Desire*, 329; Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 123.
66. *Ibid.*, 123–24.
67. Griffith, in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 15.
68. Dixon, in Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation*, 79, 94–95; NAACP, Boston branch, "Fighting a Vicious Film," in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 94. Ann Banfield, in her interpretation of Artemesia Gentileschi's painting of Judith beheading Holofernes, first suggested to me the connection between castration and birth.
69. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 336.
70. Hall in Snitow, *Powers of Desire*, 347n., 337.
71. Cf. Neil Hertz, "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," and Catherine Gallagher, "More about 'Medusa's Head,'" *Representations* 4 (Fall 1983), 27–57; Faulkner, *Light in August*, 437–40.
72. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York, 1956), 140–41.
73. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, Md., 1978), 4–22, 48–49, 56–64, 79–83, 203, 236, 307.
74. Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 3–4; Gish, *Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me*, 139; Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (New York, 1968), 54.
75. NAACP, Boston branch, "Fighting a Vicious Film" (Boston, 1915), 19.
76. Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 5, 14; Griffith, in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 41.
77. Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974), 3–57, 202; Mackaye, "The Birth of a Nation," 45–46.
78. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
79. D. W. Griffith, "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America" (Los Angeles, 1916), 1, 5.
80. Wagenknecht, *Movies in the Age of Innocence*, 78–79.
81. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 152, 161, 244.
82. Hart, *Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 33.
83. Schickel, *Griffith*, 483; Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, 26; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 218. On dependence and autonomy cf. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984).
84. Williams, *Griffith*, 62; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 61.
85. D. W. Griffith, "Five Dollar 'Movies' Prophecied," *The Editor*, April 24, 1915, in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 25.
86. Brownlow, *Parade's Gone*, 50–53; Schickel, *Griffith*, 294; Lindsay, *Art of the Moving Picture*, 74.
87. Schickel, *Griffith*, 294; *New York Sun*, March 4, 1915, in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 86. Cf. Catherine Gallagher, "The Politics of Culture and the Debate over Representation," *Representations* 5 (Winter 1984), 115–47.
88. May, *Screening Out the Past*, 60.
89. Schickel, *Griffith*, 290; Stern, "Birth of a Nation, Part I," 103–18.

90. *New York American*, Feb. 28, 1915, in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 28–29.
91. D. W. Griffith, “The Future of the Two-Dollar Movie,” in Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation*, 100; Schickel, *Griffith*, 301; Brownlow, *Parade’s Gone*, 628–29; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 73.
92. Brown, *Adventures with Griffith*, 177–78.
93. Rogin, in Greenstone, *Public Values and Private Power*, 86–87.
94. Davenport, “Dixon’s Mythology,” 341; Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 184–85; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 60; Merritt, “Griffith Directs the Great War,” 47–57.
95. Schickel, *Griffith*, 353; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 92.
96. Schickel, *Griffith*, 353–54; Merritt, “Griffith Directs the Great War,” 51, 58–59.
97. Schickel, *Griffith*, 354–55.
98. Merritt, “Griffith Directs the Great War,” 57.
99. G. Charles Niemeyer, “David Wark Griffith: In Retrospect, 1965,” in Geduld, *Focus on Griffith*, 129; Stern, “*Birth of a Nation*, Part I,” 67, 79–80; Link, *Wilson*, 246–47; Schickel, *Griffith*, 400–403.
100. Bloomfield, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 395–96; Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 196, 216–23.
101. May, *Screening Out the Past*, 60–61.
102. Schickel, *Griffith*, 416–19, 560–64.
103. Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation*, 9.
104. Henderson, *Griffith*, 280–84.
105. Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York, 1961), 4–5.