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Mani Mehrvarz
manimehr@buffalo.edu
(716) 645-0923

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Journal Article

Re "Birth"

The Clansman was in almost every respect a miraculous production: miraculous in its length, in its combination of spectacle and intimacy, in its complexity of structure, in its cost. In time, all these miracles would be equaled and surpassed by other films. Three miracles, however, would retain even to this day their capacity to astonish: the amount of money it grossed, which can only be estimated, but which has been exceeded with any consistency only in very recent times, when admission prices are much higher; the fact that a film could attain such tremendous popularity—however great its artistic and technical novelty—despite a morality actively offensive to perhaps half its worldwide audience and profoundly disquieting to everyone not a rabid racist; the fact that a movie as long and as difficult as this one was made without a detailed shooting script.

We shall return to the first two matters later. But since all movies are supposed to begin with a script, any discussion of this film must begin with the fact that it had none. Griffith had never used anything more elaborate than a modest scenario, generally little more than an outline of the plot, for his shorter films and saw no reason to change his ways now. Indeed, in his autobiography Griffith claims that when Woods brought *The Clansman* to him 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." The implication is that he started agitating for purchase of the property almost sight unseen (though he must surely have known the theatrical version). That may represent an *ex post facto* attempt to expand his creative claim to it at the expense of the original author, and of Woods, who either prepared some sort of treatment for him or brought one along from Kinemacolor; it may also represent an implicit plea of innocence regarding the book's more noisome moral qualities. But the fact remains that

film directors often interest themselves in projects simply because of the imagistic possibilities a first reading suggests. And Griffith did see this one, from the start, in the simplest imaginable terms. "We had had all sorts of runs-of-the-rescue in pictures and horse operas. The old United States Cavalry would gallop to the rescue—East, one week; West, the next. It was always a hit. . . . Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one poor little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation."¹ The stress, in short, was to be on melodrama, on sentiment. And though, during the spring, Griffith and his associates consulted a fair number of standard histories and personal reminiscences of the Era of Reconstruction—consultations that led to quite accurate reproductions of high historic moments in tableau-like scenes—there is no evidence that any thought was devoted to the racist implications of Dixon's story—except by Dixon himself, passionate and half-baked ideologue that he was.

In defense of Griffith and his cohorts, it should be noted that the weight of the time's scholarship was on their side. The historians generally agreed that, as one of them put it, the Republican scheme for reconstruction was "repressive" and "uncivilized," that it "pandered to the ignorant negroes, the knavish white natives and the adventurers who flock from the North," that it might have been, indeed, "the most soul-sickening spectacle that Americans had ever been called upon to behold."² It is only in our own time that this view has been extensively revised, that the crimes committed against white southerners after the Civil War seem not to be part of a studied pattern of repression but a series of more or less isolated incidents in a brief and relatively painless period of postwar adjustment.

Be that as it may, Griffith and his colleagues should have been far more aware than they were of a shift toward greater militancy about their lot and their image (as we would now say) among American blacks. It is possible, of course, that Griffith intended his film as an answer to the black agitation for equality. Certainly Dixon, now as before, continued to believe blacks not yet sufficiently civilized to practice political or any other form of self-determination. But Griffith naively supposed that his film was uncontroversial and incontrovertible, an exercise in historical truth-telling—and not merely *a* truth, but *the* truth. He might have been the first but he was not the last movie director to be so convinced, filmmakers inhabiting as they do an extremely narrow and parochial world in which the play of ideas, as a political or literary intellectual understands it, is virtually nonexistent. In short (and on balance), as he prepared his great project, D. W. Griffith's motives appear to have been quite pure.

Despite the fact that Frank Woods shared the first copyright of the film with Griffith, he never received any creative credit from the director. "We wrote no script. I never did for any of my pictures." (This is untrue;

scripts of his later films exist in his files.) "We would get the idea of the story, carry it around with us; eat over it; walk over it; drink over it; dream over it until every action and scene was catalogued in our minds. Then we would start rehearsing."³ In any event, the Woods scenario is lost. All that remains are a few pages of notes in Griffith's handwriting, a cutting continuity he presented his editor, Jimmie Smith, at some point during the time the film was being shot and Smith was making his first assemblages. It is scribbled on the back of some research about the activities of the Union League clubs during Reconstruction.

Griffith seems to have worked more from Dixon's play than from the novel and he expanded greatly on the basic story, especially in the first half of the film, with its spectacular battle sequences. These are made with enormous sympathy for the suffering endured by soldiers of both sides and are colored by a pacifist sentiment that may have been a response to the beginning of World War I in Europe, which occurred while the movie was shooting. These sequences, of course, give the film a scale not to be found in Dixon's novel and they also provide a general humane and high-minded context that somewhat—and somewhat duplicitously—disarms objections to the second half of the film with its heavy-handed racism and its glorification of the night-riding defenders of "Aryan" purity (the word actually appears in a subtitle). Indeed, the film was, and is, a great deal more pleasurable to view than any mere plot outline can suggest. The action sequences impart to it a sweep, even a grandeur, that, at least while we are watching it, tend to dull criticisms of its message. Then, too, the humanizing vignettes of life in the genteel Cameron family of Piedmont, South Carolina—idealized archetypes of the southern gentry, who treat their slaves gently (and in turn are the subjects of adoring loyalty)—have the effect of further disarming us. They are depicted as owners not of a huge, exploitative plantation but of something like a prosperous farm and they are, all of them, civilized and charming people.

It could, of course, be argued that all this was shrewd calculation on Griffith's part, a supremely clever attempt to make audiences lower their guard so he could get across his repellent beliefs. But that gives him too much credit for intellectualization. Griffith was a man—in his work, anyway—who followed and trusted his feelings more than he did reason; and besides, all the available evidence suggests that he did not for a minute believe he was making a "controversial" film. Very simply, he thought everyone thought as he did about the matters he was taking up. The surprise he repeatedly expressed as the storm broke around him after the film's release was genuine. Why, he loved Negroes! And believed (as have many southerners before and since) that he had a special understanding of their natures not vouchsafed northerners, honestly felt that these good, childlike people had been grievously misled by outsiders and agitators.

To be sure, by modern standards—and even by the standards of the

liberal and humanistic circles of Griffith's day—this is a poor and thoughtless performance. But if our century has taught us anything it is that high artistic vision does not necessarily correlate with a similarly elevated social vision.

So Griffith retained the core of Thomas Dixon's novel, in which the Camerons are friends of a northern family, the Stonemans, the patriarch of which, Austin Stoneman, is a radical Republican who keeps a mulatto mistress and has as a henchman another mulatto, a lustful politician named Silas Lynch. The latter aspires not only to political leadership in South Carolina but also, in time, to marriage with Stoneman's blond and virginal daughter as well. The families, of course, are separated by the war (though there is a very touching scene of lads from the two families finding each other and dying together on the battlefield at Petersburg, during the campaign that concluded the war); become enemies during the days of Reconstruction; are reconciled—those who survive these events, anyway—when the "Little Colonel" (the eldest Cameron son) in the end marries Elsie Stoneman, while her brother marries the Camerons' surviving daughter.

It is, to put it mildly, a highly coincidental plot and in sketching it, one gets some idea of the difficulties Griffith and the Aitkens must have had in selling it to backers without a script to indicate, in detail, what the director's treatment would be, without the magnificent images he created—images that did not simply bring the story to life but are, in fact, the life of the film, the source of its energy and its continuing fascination.

The conception, existing in the spring and summer of 1914 only in Griffith's mind, enormously enlivened him. We have Bitzer's testimony that it "changed D. W. Griffith's personality entirely. Where heretofore he was wont to refer in starting on a new picture to 'grinding out another sausage' and go at it lightly, his attitude on beginning this one was all eagerness. He acted like here we have something worthwhile." Bitzer did not share his leader's vision. "I had read the book and figured out that a negro chasing a white girl was just another sausage after all and how would you show it in the South?"⁴ It is probably fair to add that his attitude was typical of the majority of Griffith's employees when they heard the story for the first time and even as they worked on the picture later.

This had little effect on Griffith, who simply set to work. Lillian Gish has recalled that Griffith drew her aside one afternoon during a break in shooting one of his program pictures, requesting that she stay on after work. It was not an unusual request; Griffith often held after-hour rehearsals for a forthcoming project while another work was in progress, and a sizable percentage of those who would eventually have featured roles in the finished film assembled with Miss Gish to hear him announce his plans for *The Clansman*. She remembers only two unusual facts about this small beginning to a mighty project. The first was that she had ob-

served for some days that Griffith's pockets were overflowing with notes as well as scraps of printed material. She therefore correctly assumed that he was brooding about a work of unusual scale, since he carried no *aide-mémoire* when working on films of routine length. The other was that on that first night he swore his actors to secrecy about his intentions. He might control rights to Thomas Dixon's novel, but he owned no patent either on the Civil War or Reconstruction, and it would have been a simple matter for a competitor to cobble something together and beat him to market with a picture taking up the themes he regarded as his by birthright.

According to Miss Gish, Griffith did not make his final casting decisions until rehearsals were well along and he had seen more than one player essay most of the larger roles. The center of this nocturnal activity was the extras' makeup room on the Griffith lot, "a make-shift building of cheap, rough pine," where everyone sat on hard kitchen chairs, because Griffith felt that if anything more easeful were provided, "You were apt to get too comfortable and lean back, instead of keeping busy."⁵

The rehearsals went well. And despite the director's determination to keep his options open, there seems to have been no doubt as to who would play the central role in this drama, that of Ben Cameron, the "Little Colonel." From the start it appears that Henry Walthall had the part, despite the fact that he was somewhere between 36 and 38 years old (the year of his birth is in dispute) and thus a trifle old for the part, and more than a little intemperate in his drinking habits. His age could be de-emphasized, Griffith thought, by having him wear wide-brimmed hats whenever possible, thus softening the light on his face. Since "Wally" was a well-liked member of the company, there would be no dearth of volunteers to see to it that he arrived on time, and in a reasonably sober state, for each day's shooting. Slight of build, with long, curly hair and sometimes a romantic mustache, he carried something of the air of a poet about him, this actor who could, as his friend director Raoul Walsh said, "speak volumes with his eyes."⁶ His seeming fragility and his natural gentleness of spirit would render his heroics on the battlefield and as the Klan leader more exciting and, of course, they would also enhance his many tender moments in the film. Indeed, so right was he for the part that after the actor's death in 1936, Griffith told a reporter that his demise should effectively quell all talk of a remake. "I can never imagine any actor taking his place,"⁷ the director said.

According to Lillian Gish, it appeared for some time before production began that Blanche Sweet would play opposite Walthall as Elsie Stoneman, daughter of the abolitionist senator, eventually to become the loved-from-afar sweetheart of the Little Colonel. She, however, was absent at one rehearsal at which Griffith decided to run through what was to become one of the film's most famous scenes, in which Silas Lynch

forcibly tries to persuade Elsie Stoneman to marry him. "Come on, Miss Damnyankee, let's see what you can do with Elsie," said Griffith, and soon enough Gish found herself being chased round and round the rehearsal room by George Siegmann—who besides functioning as Griffith's chief directorial assistant was to daub himself with burnt cork and play Lynch in the film (all the major black roles were played by white actors, though some blacks were used as extras). In the course of evading his miscegenational clutches, Gish lost some hairpins, causing her long blond hair to flow freely over her shoulders as, finally, she fell into a swoon over the horror of it all. It was one of those images of imperiled innocence that was bound to fire Griffith's imagination, and besides, Gish's slender form suggested to him a vulnerability that a woman of fuller figure (such as Miss Sweet) might not be able to give him.⁸ Beyond that, of course, there was Gish's considerable talent to recommend her. She was, as everyone knows, a master of those fluttery, childlike gestures that Griffith required of his heroines when he wanted them to suggest—as he often did—a virginal condition. She was, as Parker Tyler wickedly put it, "a permanent lyric of jumpiness."⁹ Yet there was also about Gish spunk, humor and practicality, and, setting aside her confrontation scene with Lynch, these qualities were more significant to the success of her performance than her ability to suggest sexual inexperience.

Finally, in assessing his choice of Gish for this role, it should be borne in mind that Griffith was beginning to be romantically taken with her. In her autobiography, and in her many other recollections of Griffith, Gish has never suggested that their relationship was other than platonic in character. Yet it is clear that sometime prior to the start of *Birth* she had begun to supplant Mae Marsh as the most favored of his actresses. He did not switch allegiance suddenly. As he would in the future, with other actresses, he encouraged, reveled in, their rivalry—both personal and professional. Miriam Cooper, another member of the company, recalled that Marsh, whose dressing room was on a second floor of one of the studio buildings, would peer through the cracks in a balcony's floorboards to spy on Gish at the end of the working day. If she emerged from her first-floor room dressed for a date, Marsh would know that Griffith was squiring her that night and she would make other plans. If Gish exited in street clothes Marsh would then put on her finery in hopes that Griffith would favor her.¹⁰

Anita Loos has said that favorite replaced favorite on the Griffith lot, "like the wives of Henry VIII," and that Marsh was "very bitchy" about Lillian Gish's rise to favor. Close to both the Gish girls, she remembered speculating with Dorothy Gish, a much more mischievous spirit than her sister, as to what, exactly, her sister and Griffith did when they walked out together. One night the two youngsters followed them in hopes of finding out. But the director and his leading lady were models of propriety; they

dined in a restaurant and Griffith escorted Gish home at a seemingly hour, not lingering in the house where the Gishes' highly protective mother awaited.¹¹

Not that Griffith was anything less than courtly—as far as anyone knows—in his cooling relationship with Marsh—"an Irish leprechaun . . . very strange," according to Loos. She was to winningly (if overactively) play Gish's younger sister, she who, rather than submit to the rapacious embraces of Gus, a low-caste black man (Walter Long) whose libidinal energies have been freed by Reconstruction, flings herself through "the opal gates of death." Marsh would later recall that, in effect, she was type-cast by the director. "You remind me so very much of my little sister. You are a little sister,"¹² he said to her, and though in the later sections of the film she played her age (nineteen), she obviously had to play Flora as a much younger adolescent in the antebellum section. Most of the time her pantomime suggests a child of perhaps twelve or thirteen, and she (and Griffith) made rather heavy weather of it. Still, no matter what the fate of his romantic feelings toward her, Griffith (as was not always the case with him) remained very loyal to Marsh. She would have the best female role (and perhaps the most memorable of her career) in his next film, the monumental *Intolerance*, and though she would leave him after Gish had completely supplanted her for a Goldwyn contract and for roles abroad, he summoned her back for another excellent role, in *The White Rose*, as late as 1923.

It would seem that in the cases of both Gish and Marsh, Griffith made his familiar equation between blondness and purity, behaving with them in public in the most respectful, indeed fatherly, fashion, whatever other feelings he might harbor for them. This was not completely the case with *Birth's* third leading lady, the dark and very handsome Miriam Cooper, cast as Marsh's older sister, Margaret. As a schoolgirl Cooper had modeled for Charles Dana Gibson, among other New York illustrators, and as early as 1909 had done a day's work as an extra in a Griffith one-reeler (*The Duke's Plan*), had gone on to work for Kalem, a rival concern, was dismissed and returned to her studies at the Cooper Union, hoping to become an artist. But in need of money, she found herself drifting back to film. In her autobiography she states a belief that Griffith had her in mind for her role in *Birth* even before his company left for California. This seems dubious, since she recalls heading West with no formal contract in hand, just the promise of employment and ten dollars in her purse. That, somehow, rings true, very much in the business style of the day. Doubtless Griffith had seen in her a striking young woman for whom, surely, he would find something useful to do.

At any rate, she remembered, years later, that Marsh told her she sometimes called Griffith "Mr. Heinz" (behind his back, we may presume) because he liked to have "57 Varieties" of girls on hand on his

stages, and there came a moment when he attempted to add Cooper to his more personal string. One day after location shooting, whether before or during *Birth* is unclear, he offered her a lift home in the large auto that was ever at his command. Exhausted, she leaned back against the cushions, closed her eyes, prepared to enjoy the cool evening breeze as they glided through the hills. Suddenly, she felt an arm snaking across the seat behind her head, and opened her eyes "just as Mr. Griffith leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. He smelled of butter: we'd had corn on the cob for lunch. I was so startled I pushed him away and he landed on the floor. He looked so silly that I'd have laughed if I hadn't been scared. He was amazed that anyone would do this to him. I was amazed that he would make a pass at me with the chauffeur sitting in the front seat."

Startled, Griffith inquired: "Don't you want me to kiss you?" Cooper "damn well didn't," but she also thought, probably erroneously, that lack of compliance might cost her job. So, good Catholic that she was, she said she would be delighted if she didn't have to tell about it in confession. Surely, Griffith said, the church did not consider kissing a sin. No, said Cooper, but the sisters had taught her not to put herself in the way of temptation, and that, precisely, was what Griffith was doing with his advance. It was a smooth answer, turning him away with flattery, and she heard no more from him on this subject.¹³

However much his actresses excited the director's sexual interest, though, his feelings for them were not allowed, at this point in his career, to interfere with his professional activities. Discretion was then, and for most of the time that he was in the public eye, his watchword. Added to this was a natural reticence about sex, perhaps a certain guilt about the nature of his needs in that area and, as his fame grew, a certain concern for the dignity of both his own image and that of his industry, which the public tended to perceive—even before the scandals of The Twenties—in rather raffish terms. In short, he did not number among his problems on *The Birth of a Nation* any insoluble ones between himself and his leading ladies: those who did not worship him as father-elder brother or actual or potential lover were sufficiently in awe of him to respond with absolute alacrity to his directorial commands. As for the men, few figured large in Griffith's life. For example, there were three heavies in *Birth*, all equally nasty in image, therefore memorable to the public, but only one of them appears to have had any special closeness to Griffith. Ralph Lewis, a character man who would have a long career in villainy, played Austin Stoneman, the Radical Republican Senator, much influenced by his mulatto housekeeper-mistress to stir southern blacks to vengeful rebelliousness during Reconstruction. His character was, in fact, a caricature, based on Thaddeus Stevens, the distinguished Abolitionist leader, and as such the focus of much of the controversy surrounding the film after its release, especially in the Northeast, where Stevens's historical reputa-

tion approached the heroic. Walter Long, who played the renegade Gus, who pursued Miss Marsh to her doom, went on to have a steady career as a character actor and passed unremarked through more prominent lives. George Siegmann, however, is another matter. He had a rather round, bland face, almost innocent in appearance, and it contrasted effectively, memorably with his villainy as the overreaching Silas Lynch. Moreover, as Griffith's chief assistant, the man who passed the director's orders to the vast cast, oversaw all the logistical details of the production, he was an inescapable and invaluable figure during shooting. He has been described by Karl Brown, Bitzer's youthful assistant, as a "gentle-hearted, soft-spoken human elephant, sensitive to Griffith's every whim, yet powerful enough to bend everyone else to his will."¹⁴

None of those featured in the more benign supporting roles achieved great prominence. Spottiswoode Aitken, who played Dr. Cameron, *pater familias* of the much put-upon clan, was a veteran Griffith character man, a specialist in playing kindly older men. His wife was Josephine Crowell, one of those women born to play mothers. She did so for Griffith for years, and then achieved an immortal screen moment playing the apotheosis of the awful, interfering mother-in-law in a Harold Lloyd comedy, *Hot Water*—a glorious comic performance. Playing their other sons were George Beranger (also known as "André" and also a directorial assistant and, latterly, a character actor of no great fame) and Maxfield Stanley, of whom little else was ever heard. Playing the Stoneman sons were Bobby Harron and Elmer Clifton, another assistant director, who would direct a number of important features in the 1920s and continue making pictures, mostly of the low-budget variety, until his death in 1949.

Clifton, indeed, was representative of the most interesting class of people employed on *Birth*—the small-parts players and assistant directors—nearly all of whom achieved greater fame and longer-lasting careers than the players—always excepting Miss Gish—who were billed above them. Among the former were Wallace Reid, cast as a strapping village blacksmith who, toward the end of the picture, takes on a barroom full of lawless blacks (he's searching for Gus in the aftermath of his assault on Marsh) and wipes them all out in a brawl. He was, of course, shortly to become a highly publicized romantic lead and to gain a tragic immortality as the first major Hollywood personality to die as a result of drug addiction. Then there was Elmo Lincoln, soon to become one of the screen's most enduring footnotes as the first movie Tarzan. He is most prominently visible as "White Arm Joe," Reid's chief opponent in the aforementioned fight, but he has been identified in at least eight other small parts in the picture. Eugene Palette, far more slender than he was in his later incarnation as a chubby, gravel-voiced and constantly working character man, played a tiny role—listed in the credits merely as "Union Soldier."

More prominently on view in the vignettes, which Griffith based on true historical incidents, were Joseph Henabery, who played Lincoln, Raoul Walsh, who played John Wilkes Booth, and Donald Crisp, who impersonated Ulysses S. Grant. Henabery was a movie-struck youth, adept at makeup and much interested in historical research—both qualities that aided him, a young extra, in obtaining his role in *Birth* and in making it memorable through careful detailing. He would go on to become a very prolific silent picture director. Walsh had, oddly enough, made his theatrical debut in a touring company of *The Clansman*, replacing an injured horseman, galloping his steed across a treadmill in the piece's climactic ride to the rescue. An expert rider, he had drifted into the Biograph orbit a little late as a rider and bit player, moving up to assistant director. A darkly handsome young man—he would woo and win Miriam Cooper, to their subsequent sorrow, on the Griffith lot—Walsh got the role of John Wilkes Booth because Griffith happened to glance up one day to see Walsh, as usual, surrounded by admiring girl extras. Obviously, he had the magnetism to impersonate a man who, if he was not a matinee idol, surely aspired to be. Walsh, who would, of course, go on to become one of Hollywood's finest directors of action films, was one of the several performers invalidated by his work on the film. When it came time for his big scene, Lincoln's assassination, hundreds of extras were assembled in the L-shaped set, which included the full stage and the entire side of the auditorium in which the presidential box was situated, but was open to the sky above and on the left side of the house, which there was no reason for Griffith to shoot. Everything went well, until Walsh, having shot Lincoln, was required to leap from box to stage. Unlike the historic Booth, he did not catch a spur in the bunting that draped the box, breaking his leg, but a hard landing on stage jarred a bad knee Walsh had acquired during his roustabout youth, and sprained an ankle. So when he limped off stage, it was a very convincing imitation of Booth's exit after his dreadful act. Finally, there was Crisp, who also worked as an assistant on the picture, and who would establish himself in a later Griffith film, *Broken Blossoms*, as a character man of distinctive force. He would himself become a director and would also be a familiar figure to a later generation of moviegoers as a kindly, fatherly type in films like *How Green Was My Valley* and *Lassie, Come Home*, among many others.

The large corps of assistants also included, besides those who doubled as actors, Monte Blue, another man who would achieve modest fame as a leading actor in the years to come; Herbert Sutch, an Englishman, who would be with Griffith on all his large productions thereafter, and who here functioned as the munitions expert; Fred Hamer, another Englishman who had served in the "other ranks" in sundry colonial wars, was in charge of extra casting and achieved a certain local fame for his knowledge of the kind of barracks room ballads Kipling could not print.

Christy Cabanne also took a hand when needed; so did Erich von Stroheim, whose introduction to the movies this was. His arrogance, if not his genius, was already apparent. And useful in the big scenes. He quickly rose from extra work to stunting to the ranks of the A.D.s.

Thus, as spring turned into summer 1914, the pieces began to fall into place. For Griffith. Back in New York, however, the Aitken brothers were still unable to raise enough money to start production, let alone see it through to a conclusion. Griffith, however, forced their hand. The picture already sketched out in his mind, his players rehearsing scenes for it, and money for sets, costumes and props already being spent, he blithely called the producer in New York and asked for the money to cover expenses. Within hours of receiving that call, the elder Aitken received another call—this time from Dixon, who now scaled down his original demand for a \$25,000 advance against the picture's eventual royalties. He would settle now for \$2,000 cash in front (retaining the 25 percent of the producers' grosses he had unwaveringly insisted upon and from which, eventually, he would net a million dollars). He needed the \$2,000 immediately, however, to cover some pressing obligations. Happily for Aitken these calls (which it is hard to believe were coincidental) arrived on a Friday, after the banks were closed. The hard-pressed Aitken would write the author a check for \$2,000 and have the weekend to scurry around, writing personal notes, to obtain the cash to back the check first thing Monday morning, before Dixon presented it for cashing. So, at last, Harry Aitken put his money where his mouth had for so long been—behind Griffith's dream.

The \$2,000 represented, in effect, the ante. Aitken was finally, definitely, in Griffith's game. And sport that he was, he would support this small investment with a still larger investment. The details of it are murky, but it seems that the deal Felix Kahn imposed on them became a model for other backers as well, with Harry and his brother Roy pledging percentages of their salaries plus such stock in their various enterprises as was not yet being employed as collateral on other loans, to various high rollers acting for themselves, not their Wall Street firms. By this method they raised \$25,000, according to the younger Aitken, turning it over to Majestic to pass on to Griffith, the Aitkens taking unsold Majestic stock in return for this cash. It appears, however, that his memory might have been faulty. In time, the Aitkens and Griffith formed a corporation, Epoch Productions, for the sole purpose of releasing *Birth*, and its first auditor's report, issued March 19, 1915, shows Majestic holding a very modest amount of Epoch stock—2,400 of the 107,910 shares outstanding, with the brothers Aitken holding either in their own name or in that of Mutual, the corporation they totally controlled, shares roughly equivalent in value to the total amount of cash they advanced the production.¹⁵ The logical explanation is that they returned most of the stock they ac-

quired in Majestic as a result of this dealing, allowing them to take a controlling interest in Epoch after they saw that they were in on a good thing.

Better late than never, perhaps. Though one may imagine other Majestic stockholders, lacking the Aitkens' privilege of seeing the picture take exciting shape, eventually being more than a little disappointed to be dealt out of what turned out to be the greatest game in movie history to date. On the other hand, the Aitkens had certainly given everyone they knew every opportunity to take a hand and all had refused the risk.

No sooner had Griffith received the \$25,000 that the Aitkens had scrambled so hard to amass than he was wiring to remind them that, in their earlier talks, they had promised to provide him with \$15,000 more. Since this sum represented the last amount due on the total budget that Griffith had outlined to his backers, and the picture was still entirely unshot, Griffith knew at this point that more—much more—was going to be required. He must have been beginning to see, even then, that he was going to require something near three times his original cost estimate to complete the picture. So he was either deluding himself or he was cleverly escalating the level of financial pain slowly, trying to keep it within a range he calculated would be tolerable to the Aitkens. Be that as it may, they eventually made another contribution to the film that was almost as important as their cash. That was silence. For the fact was that the direct costs of the film, which was eventually released independently, under the Epoch name, would have been much higher had Griffith not had the resources of "the Majestic" behind him. It is impossible to calculate how many of *Birth's* expenses (Griffith's salary among them) were simply charged off to that firm, as part of its general overhead, but it is certain that all the principal players were simply assigned to *The Clansman* and paid for their work on it as if it were an ordinary Majestic film. So far as one can tell, no compensation was ever offered the corporation for these salaries or the production services it provided, probably unknowingly, for the film.

The Aitkens certainly never said a word about all this to their investors. They hid their considerable anxiety over *The Clansman* from their New York financial sources, and mostly maintained a calm and businesslike manner in dealing with their profligate producer out West. If they had small confidence in the box office potential of his project, they were loath to anger him, for they continued confident in his ability to make profitable pictures on a smaller scale once he had worked this madness out of his system. Indeed, as his vast new production ground along, the smaller films he had made for them in the early months of his Majestic contract moved, one by one, into profit. The strategy, obviously, was to hold him in check as much as possible, hope that their losses would not be devastating, and pray for a quick return to normalcy.

After Griffith finally "took" his first scenes for the picture, all such hopes were feckless, of course. For once the cameras turned, Griffith had the money men where he wanted them, where independent producers ever since have wanted to have their backers, with an expensive picture no longer being talked about or developing—stages at which it is comparatively easy to walk away from a project—but actually rolling. For once there is exposed negative in the can, the money people are faced with an exquisite dilemma. If they stop the flow of capital, they must accept a dead loss on the footage already shot. If, on the other hand, they press on with the production, the only hope of recouping whatever they have already spent, they are at the mercy of their possibly mad genius. To shut him down at a later date is, obviously, to face a still larger loss. To keep going means that they will have to continue pouring money into the production at whatever rate he deems necessary to realize his vision. He may be reassuring as can be, but for every *Birth* there are many more expensive deaths.

Griffith chose to begin work on a film that he must have sensed would change his life, and the life of his medium, on July 4, 1914, Independence Day. Symbolically, he was announcing his own independence not only from the niggling concerns of the Aitkens back East, but of all the conventions that had ruled American films in their infancy. Indeed, he was proclaiming their independence from childhood, and declaring (as he would make clear in his later statements to the press) that this new art must now be permitted to take its place with the older arts as a medium of ideas and of highly personal expression.

No one seems able to recall reliably what scene he made that first day, but it appears that he worked either within the confines of his "Fine Arts" studio or perhaps on the vacant lot across the street, which had been rented as the site for the set representing the main street of Piedmont, the small town where the Cameron family lived. That street was the largest standing set created for the picture, and it was built in forced perspective, the buildings farthest away from the main camera position being smaller than normal size, so the thoroughfare would appear longer and more impressive to the lens. The street on which the Cameron house stood was built on the studio street that led back into the lot from its main gate, and the interior of that house, like the other interiors, was constructed on the studio's open stages, where they were lit by sunlight and reflectors.

Most of this construction was completed by the July 4 start date, the handiwork of taciturn, tobacco-chewing Frank ("Huck") Wortman,

a stage carpenter with no formal training as a designer but a naturally gifted architect who remained with Griffith through the mid-twenties. Wortman's crew consisted mainly of carpenters recruited from the stage. Karl Brown, then a young assistant cameraman, latterly a distinguished cinematographer and director and author of the best record of this production, said that all of them, at one time or another, must have built sets for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that staple of American melodrama for over 60 years, and that, ironically, the design traditions that had grown up around that classic piece of Abolitionist propaganda influenced the look of this soon-to-be classic—if belated—piece of anti-Abolitionist propaganda. He also notes that these craftsmen were so used to hinging scenery (so that it could be folded flat and shipped from tour stop to tour stop) that they went right on doing so for their movie sets, which would be destroyed once the picture was completed.

Griffith hoped to do most of his large-scale scenes—the Battle of Petersburg, the Klan's ride to the rescue of the beleaguered citizens of Piedmont in general, the Cameron family in particular—first, so that he would have time to reshoot if he did not like the dailies. But he had all the sets ready for the smaller scenes so that he could work on the stages if delays in recruiting extras or securing matériel occurred. Or if he simply lacked the cash to meet the large payrolls for the big scenes.

These scenes were made, with one exception, at various locations within fairly comfortable distances from the studio. According to Seymour Stern, a Griffith scholar who went over the ground with Elmer Clifton in 1946, the battle scenes were shot in the San Fernando Valley, in the area between the present day locations of the Burbank Studios and what is now MCA's Universal City Studios, which has grown, on the same site, from Carl Laemmle's old company. Universal at that time either owned or rented some thirty or forty acres of gently rolling countryside—now at least partially occupied by the famous Forest Lawn Cemetery—which it found useful for the many outdoor dramas it produced, and Griffith apparently sublet the land from his rival. This acreage was surrounded by hills, which afforded Griffith excellent camera placements for panoramic views of both his battle scenes and of Sherman's march to the sea, which he also reproduced. The sequence showing the Little Colonel's "inspiration" for the Klan (little black children being frightened by "ghosts"—white children draped in bedsheets for a game they were playing) was shot in the surrounding hills, possibly intercut with some material shot elsewhere. The famous Klan ride was shot mostly, according to Clifton, in the southern part of Los Angeles County, spilling over the line into Orange County, near Whittier. Some additional shooting was done north of the city, in the Ojai Valley in Ventura County, when it was discovered that it was cheaper to take actors to the horses at a stable there than it was to bring the horses to the actors. The other major loca-

tion, and the most impressively beautiful one in the film, was in the pine forest surrounding Big Bear Lake. It was there that Walter Long pursued Mae Marsh to her doom while himself being pursued by Walthall, who arrived too late to rescue his little sister.

Griffith and his associates encountered few technical delays, no insoluble problems on these locations or in the studio—surprising considering the unprecedented nature of their enterprise. Good planning and careful rehearsal were well rewarded. Griffith's struggle, through the summer and fall of 1914, was not with his art, but with his finances. Most days on the set Griffith was his usual cheerful self, singing arias, shadowboxing, sweeping Miss Gish up for an impromptu waltz when there was a break in the action.

Which is not to imply that the work was without physical rigor and occasional danger. To begin with, there was the communications problem to solve. For Petersburg, Griffith sometimes has his "armies" spread over distances that have been estimated up to four miles. They were often well out of reach of his megaphone, so he had to resort to flags and mirror semaphores to start their advances and retreats. Occasionally, Griffith would signal starts and stops by having the troops nearest him fire a volley of blanks, though ammunition was expensive and he preferred to save it for use when the camera was turning.

The communications problem was sharpened by the nature of the people with whom the director was trying to communicate. Publicity would later claim that as many as 18,000 were employed in the cast. In fact, there were no more than three to five hundred extras on hand for the largest of Griffith's battle scenes. It is, of course, a tribute to Griffith's directorial powers that he could make so few seem like so many. Most of these men, however, had never worked in pictures; they were day laborers and drifters for whom two dollars a day and a box lunch represented a windfall. It was hard to keep them from degenerating into a mob. On one occasion one of them discharged his musket after the director had called a halt in the action and, then after being reprimanded, did so again after the next shot was completed. Griffith deserted his station by the camera and moved into the trenches where he ordered the man off the location, enforcing his authority with his fists. "You go, now you go," he said, spitting the monosyllables through clenched teeth. On another occasion, Howard Gaye, doubling as a Confederate officer of lower rank than Robert E. Lee (his credited role in the picture), came running up to the parallel on which Griffith, Bitzer, Brown and the camera were perched to cry, "These men are utterly crazy! Why I—I actually had to *defend* myself!"¹⁶

Raoul Walsh found he had a somewhat similar problem. He had been in charge of loading his "unit" onto trucks for transportation to the location and he had, without difficulty, got them into uniform, showed

them which end of the rifle the bullet emerged from and even put them through a half hour of close order drill to get them in the proper frame of mind—all this before nine in the morning, a typical start to a typical day's work in the life of an assistant on this picture.

And the day's first shots went well. As he did throughout the picture, Griffith had the men playing Confederate soldiers moving from left to right across the screen, the Yankees doing the opposite, so the audience always knew which was which. The length of the field over which they struggled ran north and south, with the camera generally placed at its southern extremity, so that he was shooting in fairly even cross light throughout the day, thereby gaining well-matched exposures as well as good modeling on their figures.

The trouble came when Walsh was told to have his charges change uniforms, doffing their Confederate gray for Union blue (in effect, many of the extras fought themselves). One of them snapped: "My daddy rode with Jeb Stuart. I ain't no goddamned Yankee." So saying, he threw down his rifle and stalked off, never to return, not even to pick up his pay. A few others followed his lead.

Walsh wisely decided to let them go, having enough troops left to fill the corner of the scene assigned to him. He counted his men off so that those assigned to fall down as if shot would do so when he shouted their number, and recalled that even the day laborers got so deeply into their scenes that they died most photogenically. When the sequence was finished, Griffith pumped his hand and even offered a rare grin. "Mr. Walsh, if you had been a Confederate general, the South would never have lost the war."¹⁷

Griffith was throughout a thoughtful leader, concerned about the safety of his command. Munitions were a particular hazard on this film, many of the techniques later used to simulate warfare on screen not yet having been fully developed. Incredible as it may seem, live cannon rounds were actually employed in order that shots could be seen to land and explode fairly near the soldiery—the technique of planting charges to imitate explosions not having been invented. Elaborate warnings were signaled when these rounds were used—fired from cannons lent by the U.S. Army but repainted, with their carriages remodeled to conform to those represented in the book that was the company's Bible when it came to military matters, *Leaders and Battles of the Civil War*, recently republished by a New York newspaper in a cheap edition to mark the war's fiftieth anniversary.

These caused a few anxious moments, but they were as nothing compared with the difficulties of obtaining the effect of men fighting under, indeed, through, artillery barrages. There is public mention of a man named Walter "Slim" Hoffman as the explosives expert on *Birth*, but Karl Brown's vivid memory is of a man named "Fireworks" Wilson being

in charge of this effort. He was missing one arm, and although he claimed never to have been injured by his wares, Brown was boyishly convinced that a professional miscalculation had cost Wilson, who was also pock-marked by powder burns, that extremity. He was a small man, with a Mephistophelean beard, who moved mostly in a rapid scuttle, an assortment of "thunderflashes" tucked between stump and body, a lighted fuse sputtering in his clenched teeth, his good arm free to seize and toss these fireworks as required. He had originally planned to create the effect of "bombs bursting in air" by using mortars. They, however, sent their missiles arching too high, out of range of cameras recording infantry attacks at ground level. His solution was to equip twenty or thirty men with firework "bombs" and have them stand just out of camera range, lobbing the things among the advancing troops. "Only you got to time it just right," he advised during a test. "Too soon and you get a lot of wiggly white trails from the fuse. Too late and you might get scorched a little."

"Suppose the boom is thrown too soon and it lands down among the soldiers?" Griffith inquired—by boom he meant "bomb," just as he meant girl when he said "gell," these being among his several verbal idiosyncrasies. "No problem," said Fireworks. "They just kick it out of the way." "Suppose someone kicks it right into the path of someone else?" came the logical next question.

"Look, Mr. Griffith. You're staging a battle, right? You want realism, don't you? Suppose someone *does* get hurt a little. Not much. A foot blown off or something. What you want to do is hustle right on down to where he is and get a good big picture of it, and I tell you, sir, it'll *make* your picture. Yes-sir-ee-sir, it'll make your picture!"¹⁸

Griffith might have been making the supreme effort of his life, but that degree of realism was more than even he required. Even so, injuries of a minor sort were common. Tom Wilson, a sometime sparring partner of Jim Jeffries, worked all through the picture in a variety of odd jobs and, since he had a good throwing arm, was stationed near the camera to toss grenades during the battle. He held on to one a shade too long and nearly had his hand blown off. One of the two or three doctors Griffith had present on the location ran to him with bandages and vaseline, but Wilson eluded him and ran to the camera platform, waving his powder-blackened hand, dripping with blood. He called up: "I ain't dogging out on you, Mr. Griffith. See my hand?" Griffith ordered him to stand still for immediate first-aid, but Wilson took off and was caught and forced to accept the doctor's ministrations only with difficulty.¹⁹

The unprecedented production was calling forth unprecedented devotion, unlikely exertions. Partly, no doubt, this was attributable to the obviously heroic scale of the enterprise. Partly it was due to Griffith's exemplary, steadfast behavior. He was a man of enormous reserve, not in the least given to warm camaraderie on the set. He was, indeed, in Anita

Loos's description, "secretive"—a trait she attributed to his Welsh heritage—"very peculiar people," in her view.²⁰ But not a single reminiscence of the picture reveals even a moment when he panicked or showed the slightest gracelessness under pressure. On the contrary, he did his best to minimize the physical risks the production imposed on his coworkers and was ever ready to demonstrate his own great physical courage when necessary while keeping his emotions under tight control.

He never quibbled about money—dismissing talk of the cost of something he wanted with a brief, vague wave of the hand. He kept his instructions succinct, his criticisms even briefer. Bitzer would later recall that the only certain sign of Griffith's displeasure with a scene as it proceeded was a slight wiggle of his foot as he sat next to the camera, legs crossed, watching the action. If he received a telegram from New York, complaining about costs or the quality of one of his products, he might start singing: "Save your money, for the winter time is coming soon," was a lyric he favored on these occasions. Brown, however, remembers that the notes he sounded most frequently to let off steam and, of course, to keep people at a distance while he thought things out during the action sequences were not from *Tosca* or *I Pagliacci*—two former favorites—but a pair of notes doubled and extended in almost infinite variety: "Ha-ha-Yah! Ha-haaa-Yah! Hi-yah! H-yah! Hi-Yah! Hi-haaaa . . . Yah!" He was especially generous with these sounds during the filming of the Klan's ride, and Brown was at once bewildered and fascinated by this unconscious obsession. They must, of course, have been variations on the rebel yell.²¹

Beyond fulfilling the demands of his artistic conscience, even (perverse as it now seems to us) his moral vision, beyond being a suitable response to the dictates of his ambition, *The Birth of a Nation* answered a far deeper need on Griffith's part, the need to cast himself in the heroic mold of his father. That he handled himself without Roaring Jake's bluster, with a decisiveness and a reserve that won him not just respect but enthusiasm from his company, was a mark of his own mature character. *Birth* was Griffith's high tide, that moment in life when his creative powers, his hard-won skills as a craftsman, his self-confidence and his confidence in the suitability of his work for the particular historical moment in which he was pursuing it all flowed together, energizing him and all who were around him.

This was never more apparent than during the week in which he shot the famous ride of the Clansmen, the climax of the picture and perhaps the most powerful action sequence yet placed on film. To be sure, it was yet another "ride to the rescue," but here it was accomplished on a scale, and with an intensity of movement and suspense, that no one had attained before.

Years later, Elmer Clifton would recall that as preparation for the

sequence was undertaken Griffith "went hogwild over horses." He wanted literally to fill the screen with mounts and riders and was "beside himself" because he couldn't bear the thought of empty or blank spots in the distant background of his shots. The problem was that with war about to break out in Europe, a war everyone imagined would require cavalry just as the wars of the nineteenth century had, there was a growing shortage of horseflesh in the U.S. Griffith's people did what they could. During the period *The Ride* was being shot, western production all over Los Angeles was shut down, Griffith's wranglers having rounded up all the horses and riders that worked regularly in the movies, even adding some steeplechasers from a nearby track. But that did not satisfy his needs and, at the last moment, according to Clifton, horses were shipped in, at considerable expense, from the ranches of western Arizona to help realize the director's vision.²²

But if the temporary shortage of horses was overcome, there was little that Griffith, or anyone, could do about the permanent shortage of expert riders to mount them. Most movie riding was done then—and later—by a handful of men, mostly former cowboys, who had drifted into the movies from the open range, mostly when they brought herds in to sell in Los Angeles. They were sufficient in number to provide all the riding necessary in the ordinary western or war drama and this small band made a reasonably good living moving from picture to picture. There were not enough of them, however, to fill all the saddles when a director required a mass charge, and on *Birth* it was necessary to fill out the ranks with inexperienced men, men desperate enough to hide their ignorance and fear of horses in order to get a few days' work. Right from the start they were a peril to themselves, to more experienced riders and to the cameramen forced to move close to the flying hooves in order to get insert shots. In the battle sequences Bitzer, lying prone in a ditch—and collecting powder burns from bombs that burst too close to him—had obtained a spectacular shot of a horse-drawn wagon thundering right over the camera, blotting out the lens with its bulk. Now, working on the Klan's ride, Griffith wondered if the cameraman could get a similar effect. He wanted the horses to leap Bitzer as he lay prone on the ground with his camera pointing skyward. Bitzer thought it could be managed and Wally Walthall, in the van, was an expert horseman, making his leap effortlessly. Those immediately behind him, the steeplechase jockeys, also negotiated it easily.

Now, however, the less-experienced riders came on, hindered not only by their lack of expertise but by the fact that both they and their horses were swathed in sheets, which had a way of twisting about as they rode, temporarily blinding horse or rider, or both. Bitzer was sure he could roll out of the way if any of the horsemen lost control, but one man, blinded by his sheet, decided discretion was the better part of valor and

reined in and dismounted in order to get himself straightened out. There were horses behind him, however, and they, still coming full tilt, panicked the halted horse, which bolted, pulling free of his rider's grasp. The runaway was heading directly toward Bitzer, out of control, when Griffith rushed forward, seized its trailing reins and deflected his course before managing to pull it to a halt—a courageous act in that melee.²³ Bitzer, it appears, thereafter decided to stay safe on the parallel, doing the master shots while spy Karl Brown worked the ground level camera.

This was not the end of the near disasters attending the Klan's ride. America almost lost one of its great directors, before his career behind the camera began, down there in Orange County. John Ford was one of the extras who rode with the Klan, and his bedsheet too twisted and blinded him as he pounded along. He failed to see an overhanging tree branch, which swept him from the saddle and plunged him, unconscious, to the ground. He came to with no less than Griffith kneeling over him, offering a brandy flask. The director insisted that he retire from the field for the day, and Ford would remember stretching out comfortably under a tree to watch the rest of the day's shooting on a sequence that he would have cause to duplicate (and surpass) during his great career.²⁴

After these exertions, young Brown was glad enough to be chosen to make a little outing to Big Bear Lake, high in the mountains north of San Bernardino. The sequence to be made there was simple enough—Walter Long's pursuit of Mae Marsh, climaxing with her entrapment high on a canyon wall, where she had to choose between dishonor and death. They set forth in three cars and the trip should have been a pleasant enough break in the rigorous production schedule. Already Big Bear was a well-known vacation spot for those seeking refuge from the summer heat of the Los Angeles basin, and the little company, which besides the actors included the director, Bitzer, Brown, Siegmann, Clifton, and a couple of driver-assistants, had booked rooms at one of the lodges there. Unfortunately, however, Griffith's driver did not know about a new road across the desert of the San Gabriel valley, and they bumped dustily along rutted roads that were not much more than dry washes for the first day, exhausting themselves. They stopped the night in San Bernardino, and found the occupants of the other cars, rested and refreshed after a quickly made, entirely pleasant journey along the new, nicely paved roadway that paralleled the Santa Fe tracks across the valley. As usual, Griffith's comments about this mix-up were mild, ironical, and next day they set forth in good spirits for what they knew would be the really rugged portion of the journey—through the mountains to the lake above. It was a nightmare for those in Griffith's car. The road was in almost total disrepair and had been thoughtlessly built to begin with. Again, Griffith's group arrived frazzled and frightened (they had been negotiating hairpin turns at the edge of sheer cliffs all day) to find the rest of the party awaiting them calm

and refreshed. It seems Griffith's driver had been deliberately misled by a local garageman having his little joke on the greenhorns in their impressive Packard, while the others, having phoned ahead, received directions for a longer, but less hazardous and therefore quicker, route.²⁵

At last they reached their destination unharmed—and it must be said that the results are worth the trouble. The tall pines of the location are distinctly Californian, there is nothing quite so grand in the pine forest of the South, but no matter. These great trees very successfully suggest the majesty and indifference of nature to the meanness of man. They dwarf the small figures acting out their primitive, indeed distasteful, drama in their shade.

The action of the scene is straightforward enough. Mae Marsh has come to the woods to draw water from a well, but childish and innocent, she is distracted by the beauty of her surroundings—cutaways to small, equally innocent, woodland creatures which seem to be observing her, underline that message—and she gambols deeper and deeper into the forest, all the while stalked by Long, whose burnt-cork makeup is ludicrous, as are the skipping and fluttering that attends Marsh's progress. Griffith was not playing the scene for subtlety. Indeed, during the shooting, Brown found Griffith's instructions to both players preposterous. Long, for example, was forced to run doubled-over, transforming his movements into an animalistic scuttle. Moreover, frequent resort was made to the prop box, wherein several bottles of hydrogen peroxide were habitually kept, since Griffith was convinced that lustfulness was best suggested by having those caught in its grips literally foaming at the mouth, and a swig of peroxide, held behind the teeth, was a sure way of getting that effect.

Yet somehow the scene works. The physical contrast between the two principals, strong enough naturally, is hugely heightened by the powerfully contrasting manner of movement the director insisted upon. And the breathtaking beauty of the stage on which their fatal drama is acted out creates yet another contrast, ironic in nature, that further tightens the scene's grip upon us. Finally, Griffith's editing technique was most artfully applied to his material, crosscut shots of the players coming in more and more rapid alternation as Long draws closer and closer to Marsh. When they must finally be contained mostly in the same shot, another, more hopeful kind of suspense is created by cutting to the searching Walthall, who is, of course, too late to effect a rescue on this occasion.

Curiously, in shooting the scene Griffith suffered one of his rare technical lapses, perhaps a sign of how profoundly it caught his emotions. When he got back to the studio from the Big Bear Lake location, he discovered that he could not cut around Mae Marsh's leap to her death, that audiences would have to see her actually falling through the air if the sequence was to have its full emotional impact. So Bitzer and Brown were sent back, carrying a well-weighted dummy dressed in the actress's cos-

tume. This Brown tugged and hauled up the heights, while Bitzer set up his camera below. After much signaling back and forth, Brown launched the dummy and very nearly launched himself along with it, having somehow got tangled up in a ribbon or a belt dangling from the 100-pound figure. He managed to save himself, and stay out of shot, but it was a near thing.²⁶

In the end, one is struck by how much Griffith managed to overcome in this sequence—the antique melodramatic conventions with which he started, the deliberate overplaying of the principals and, finally, its implicit racism. One does not wish to rationalize the indefensible, yet the fact that Griffith chose a white man to play the black, Gus, the fact that his makeup cannot and does not fully transform him into a Negro, and his weird less-than-human movements, all conspire to somewhat mitigate the sequence's racism. One is reminded of how often, before and after *Birth*, Griffith arranged confrontations between the beautiful and the bestial, how obsessive was his belief that innocence must, almost inevitably, be brutally despoiled. One cannot help but think that this theme, not the racist one, was paramount in his mind as he staged this sequence. Indeed, it is the major theme of his work, while the racial question was one that he returned to less often, and then more in patronizing rather than inflammatory terms.

It is curious, certainly, that he did not employ a black actor to play Gus. One is aware, of course, of the minstrel tradition, still pertaining in show business in those days, which insisted that even black performers darken their skin with burnt cork in order that there be no ambiguity about their negritude when they were on stage. Yet if anyone knew the revelatory power of the camera, it was Griffith. He must have been aware that if a white man was playing a black man there was no way to disguise that fact, no way to prevent the audience from being aware of this duplicity every moment he was on screen. Why, then, did not Griffith go all the way and hire a black to play a black? He would say later that there were few Negro actors available in Los Angeles and that in any case he wanted to draw on his own repertory company for important roles. It may also be, as Andrew Sarris has speculated, that Griffith was suggesting "that blackness itself [is] a state of being so inferior that blacks themselves are incapable of interpreting and communicating its inescapable baseness."²⁷

But if it was rape more than race that motivated the sequence as Griffith visualized it, he was ambiguous in stating even that point—peroxide bottle and scuttling movement notwithstanding. Gus keeps insisting that he merely wants to talk to Flora. That he may be harboring larger hopes of sinister passions is certainly implied. But it is really the girl's reading of his intentions, nothing that he himself overtly indicates, that leads, finally, to the scene's tragic denouement.

About none of this can we ever be certain. Griffith never discussed his intentions about the scene. And dispassionate analysis of its character, however detailed and specific, can never overtake the passionate rhetoric that has been lavished on it from all sides. Best perhaps merely to return to the most obvious point about it—the lengths to which Griffith went to separate this scene texturally from the rest of his film. The long, and as it turned out hazardous car journey he undertook to make it proves that. He could just as well have staged it in the handy Hollywood Hills, losing something pictorially perhaps, but gaining, of course, a more seamless join with the rest of the film. Again, one cannot help but think that unconsciously he wished to set this one blatantly sexual assault apart, to indicate that, despite his generally horrified view of Reconstruction, this action was, even in his own eyes, atypical.

It may be objected that Lynch's rather vigorous proposal of marriage to Gish, later in the film, is of the same character as the woodland scene. But, in fact, its implications are quite different. For one thing, Lynch is a mulatto, therefore a living ambiguity. If "blood" is driving him, is it his white heritage or his black heritage that is doing so—or a desperate need to resolve this ambivalence in violence? Beyond that, it should be noted that Lynch's patron, Stoneman, has, throughout the film, insisted on Lynch's equality in all matters. Lynch's problem is that he has finally come to believe that Stoneman and his sin, indeed his tragedy, are as much social as they are racial; he is at least as much the overreacher as he is the Black Stud of America's oldest and most common racial nightmare. Even when he binds and gags Gish after she faints at the very notion of marriage to him one does not believe, after repeated viewings of the film, that his intention is to carry her off and work his will upon her at leisure. What seems to be moving him is shame, fear that she will tell others of his proposal and thus bring him to ridicule—and possibly to more dire punishment. One imagines, indeed, that his true intention may be to kill her rather than allow her to expose his terrible secret, which is not that he lusts after her but that he truly loves her.

Be that as it may, it must be observed that at the end of the scene between Long and Marsh, Gus, too, is afflicted by conscience. When he sees the mortal panic into which he has thrown the girl, comprehends that she will indeed fling herself into the abyss rather than submit to his embraces, he drops his menacing manner. His final moves toward her, just before she makes her fatal decision, are intended to be reassuring, to demonstrate that, whatever his original intentions, he surely does not want her to die. The panicked girl does not believe him—though there is no hint in Long's playing that this is a ruse to lure her back to him—and she goes over the cliff with Long clutching at her, trying to save her.

Looking at this scene, and the scene between Gish and Siegmann, one is tempted to argue that Griffith was more sexist than racist. That is

to say, the most melodramatic consequences occur in this film because of his conviction that the only possible response his girl-women can make to danger is a loss of control over their emotions—and their reason—followed perhaps by a swoon. Couple this with his conviction that at least half the male sex, no matter what their age, color or station in life, are always poised on the edge of rape or some other violence toward women and one has the basic crisis toward which many—if not most—of his longer films are aimed.

This does not, of course, excuse Griffith from the charge of racism. He shared with southerners of his age and background, indeed with most of his audience, an unconscious—but not especially passionate or vicious—racism of a familiar kind. We need but refer to the scene of the Little Colonel's inspiration for the Klan, in which black children are seen to be frightened by "ghosts." This belief that blacks are peculiarly fearful of supernatural apparitions was a common bit of folk wisdom until very recently. It forms, for instance, the basis for a great deal of film comedy throughout the silent period and on through the first decade of sound pictures. It is now offensive, and surely was then to the minority who were sensitive to racial stereotyping, but the white majority unthinkingly accepted this as a reasonable theatrical convention, though just what observed reality it was based upon is hard to determine.

Even when he showed "good" Negroes, Griffith was condescending. The Camerons' house servants, for example, are seen to be impervious to the rabble-rousing of the carpetbaggers, and willing actively to oppose their police-state tactics. Yet they are referred to in subtitles by the patronizing phrase "Faithful Souls," and the male is an Uncle Tom type, while his wife is a Mammy. In the prewar scenes residents of the slave quarters are seen as happy children, dancing and singing for masters who are perceived as benign guardians of a people incapable of ruling their own lives. After the war we are given to understand that the blacks are in the largest sense guiltless of whatever crimes are committed in the name of Reconstruction. It is merely that their new leaders, scalawags and carpetbaggers, do not understand that such juvenile natures dare not be indulged. Unchecked by the kindly sternness of the Camerons and their ilk, the blacks are seen to lapse easily into drunkenness, for example, or stirred with equal ease to casual discourtesy (bumping whites off sidewalks, for instance) when they are in small groups, to riotous excesses when they are massed. But they are not *blamed* for these affronts, any more than we blame small children for pre-moral lapses in conduct. As Griffith tells his story, that blame is consistently laid at the feet of the northern interlopers, who, lacking the southerner's intimate and, indeed, affectionate understanding of the blacks, woefully overestimate their capacity for self-rule, even their capacity for civilized personal conduct.

This view of the blacks, which did not preclude (at least in theory)

their coming after the passage of time to a true state of equality with whites, was and remained until very recent times the conventional wisdom of "enlightened" southerners. One might have expected more of someone like Griffith, who had lived long in the North and had some pretensions to culture and cosmopolitanism, but he was not alone in his blindness. It was, as we shall see, shared by, among others, the President of the United States, who was a scholar and a man of great formal cultivation.

It must also be stressed that as Griffith improvised scenes he had not written out in advance, and which fitted into a structure that was only lightly sketched out, he was quite incapable of stepping back and objectively observing all the implications of what he was doing. Add to this the burdens he was carrying when he was not on location or stage—problems of logistics and finance—and one can at least partially rationalize the moral insensitivity of his work.

Finally, he was, as we have seen, one of the pioneers of his industry's move to California and, in this instance, he became one of the first victims of its isolation from the main currents of contemporary thought and newly developing social consensus. It is hard to believe that, if he had been working out of New York, he would have been unaware of the founding of the NAACP and the Urban League, for instance. Or of the fact that in the Negro press voices were beginning to be raised at the thoughtless continuation and intensification on stage and screen of outworn black stereotypes, mostly taken over from nineteenth-century southern writers specializing in rural regionalism. Or of the fact that strong voices drawn from the white liberal intellectual community were now being raised in protest against segregationist practices and the racial stereotyping that supported, falsely justified, those practices.

Beyond all that, he was also a victim of the independence he had fought so hard for and was the first director to gain. There was no one in his organization with the power or the prestige to act as a sounding board, to look at the footage he was assembling and dispute the point of view that informed it. He might not have listened, and there would have been no way to prevail on him to abandon his vast project, but there might have been ways to get him to temporize, to present a more balanced view of the era he was determined to recreate on the screen. Had there been someone to say him nay—at least in his more outrageous conceits—the fate of his film might have been quite different, since we know that once it was released, and he became aware of the (to him) surprising objections to it, Griffith busied himself with the shears, trying to modify those sequences that had raised the greatest outcry. At which point, of course, it was too late, since much of the work would have had to be reshot and restructured in order to still the controversy.

As it was, his film was far less vicious in tone than Dixon's shrill

novel, far less obsessive in its anxiety about racial "mongrelization." There are several reasons for this. The most important, of course, is that Griffith does not get down to the heart of Dixon's book until the second half of his picture. The first part, with its idyllic portrayal of antebellum life in the South and its powerful realization of the terrors of war, is almost pure Griffith. The effect of this material is to provide, first of all, a human context for the Klan material that is to follow. The Camerons are established as a decent, kindly, loving family, and their prewar way of life, modest, pleasant and law-abiding, provides a kind of benchmark against which to measure the impositions of war and Reconstruction. The contrast between the way things were and the way they become is what motivates the Little Colonel to form the Klan—even before the death of his young sister. Inescapably, we care for these people, and that caring is intensified by the battle sequences, in which the Little Colonel is seen to be both brave and compassionate (as are his enemies)—no small feat given the huge scale of these scenes. To be gallant and humane in a frightening and inhumane terrain is not an inconsequential matter, and the unassuming manner with which Walthall plays the role establishes a reassuring air about the Little Colonel that carries over into the film's second half. We cannot believe he is motivated by anything as mean-spirited as bigotry.

It is also true that however much Griffith enjoyed playing the role of a general when directing the battle scenes, he was careful to surround them with pacifistic sentiments. "War's Peace" says the ironic subtitle preceding wide shots of the dead and dying on the bloody ground at Petersburg. This, too, serves as an earnest of the filmmaker's high intentions. This, too, was a theme he would revert to in later spectacles. In *Birth* it serves to disarm us partially, for at the end of the film, after the Klan has restored peace through its warlike exertions, there are symbolic shots of Christ banishing Mars from the scene, a painfully obvious statement by the director that he deplored the fact that events had reached such a pass that they could be resolved only by bloodshed. Clearly, the attempt here is to dissociate Griffith from the uglier aspects of his material, to establish a feeling that he was as pained by its violent implications as anyone else, and that he hoped, by exposing to public view an unpleasant historical chapter, he could contribute his mite to seeing that it would have no sequels.

The guise of the objective historian was one Griffith liked. By being as authentic as possible in details of decor and costume, by stressing to the point of exaggeration in his publicity the amount of historical research that underlay the film, by inserting throughout the picture recreations of well-known historical incidents (the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lee's surrender, Lincoln's death, and so on) he was attempting to wrap his inventions in a cloak of fact, to insist in yet another way that

he was functioning here as an objective historical observer, bringing painful material into the healing light.

Viewing the film from the perspective of almost 70 years, it is harder to dismiss the simple humanity with which Griffith realized his many moments of the quotidian realities. Returns and farewells, the love scenes and the scenes of domestic life—these he managed with unaffected charm, with rue and romance and even occasional humor, just as he always had, right from the start of his directorial career. As Andrew Sarris has wisely written, “there is more of eternity in one anguished expression of Mae Marsh or Lillian Gish than in all of Griffith’s flowery rhetoric on *Peace*, *Brotherhood* and *Understanding*.”²⁸

What is on view in these moments is the best side of Griffith’s gift and nature. And that, too, disarms, contributing to the ambiguity surrounding the picture, that ambiguity which made it possible for millions of people to see it, if not in total moral comfort, then as concerned citizens eager to witness, first of all, this great advance in the art of the screen, second of all, to make up their own minds regarding the intense, highly publicized “controversy” that swirled about it.

We may, far after the fact, and with much testimony to hand regarding the fundamental decency of his spirit, his essentially untutored and rather innocently romantic view of complex historical matters, make excuses for Griffith, enter at least a plea of invincible political and social ignorance for him. But there was no reason for those who rose up against him and his work to know any of this or to accept any excuses on his behalf. They had to deal with the film they saw and with the terrible fact that the art that had been lavished on it made it a peculiarly potent demagogic weapon. They had a right to expect more of Griffith, of anyone who called himself an artist and therefore laid claim to special awareness of such tragic human conditions as blacks had found themselves in on this continent. To put the matter simply, Griffith should have known better. And if he had he would not have had to pass the rest of his life in the knowledge that his first masterpiece, the screen’s first masterpiece, was a profoundly tainted one.

3

Thus it was that in the summer of 1914 he labored exhaustively, exhaustingly on the many troubles afflicting his film, without ever addressing its central trouble, a trouble whose existence he seems never to have consciously acknowledged. And this, of course, becomes one more excuse for him. Many a director since, caught up in the logistics of managing an enterprise of epic proportions, oppressed by a million and one details,

has failed to see those large issues of story, character, theme, underlying philosophy which will fatally flaw the critical reception of his work, no matter how brilliantly he has solved those practical problems of technique and management the day's work presents to him.

Back East, Griffith's backers continued to wonder where their money was going. They therefore journeyed westward sometime after shooting commenced and were present when Griffith did the lovely ballroom sequence, in which a dance is interrupted with the news that Fort Sumter has been fired upon, and the Little Colonel and the other officers of his regiment depart in order to march to war the next morning. He also apparently took them along on location for part of the Clansmen's Ride. But Roy Aitken remembers that the atmosphere was distinctly chilly, with Griffith pressing for more money, Harry Aitken refusing. His last words to Griffith, who came to the station to see the brothers off on their return trip, were: "Make the picture with the \$40,000 you already have. . . . This isn't the only picture we are financing."²⁹

While the younger Aitken was in London, where he spent most of his time overseeing distribution of the product rolling out of the several studios his brother controlled, he heard from Harry that Griffith had finally persuaded him to put another \$19,000 into the picture, but that Harry had sworn that would be the last money the director would get from him. And it was. He also reported to his brother rumors that Griffith had shot 150,000 feet of negative—a ratio of almost twelve feet of film for every foot that was incorporated in the movie's final print, which ran—before postrelease cutting—13,058 feet. It is a generous ratio, far more than the standard of the time, but it is not exorbitant by the standards that came to pertain on epic productions of this sort.

Harry Aitken made a second visit to Los Angeles, in the early fall, and there he and Griffith found themselves in disagreement even more intense than it had been on the earlier trip. Roy Aitken would claim that it was only sometime later that his brother heard that Griffith was selling stock in *The Clansman* to any and all comers, and that he was concerned at this dilution of the picture's ownership. But it appears that Griffith must have started doing so sometime in the summer, for there is scarcely a memoir of this filming that does not speak of Griffith cadging money out of sundry bystanders. Adela Rogers St. John, then a young reporter on Hearst's *Los Angeles Herald*, remembers Griffith appearing in the paper's city room and, with the drama editor's sponsorship, passing the hat to accumulate \$250 to meet a payroll.³⁰

Billy Bitzer came in for a far larger investment than that. He claimed later that it all started one morning when he picked Griffith up at the Alexandria Hotel, his usual home in Los Angeles. The director showed him a telegram from Aitken informing Griffith in no uncertain terms that no more money would be forthcoming from him and that the director

must "FINISH PICTURE IMMEDIATELY." Bitzer, upon reading it, advised the director to do as he was told. "I will like hell," Griffith snapped. Then, in more reasonable terms, he asked Bitzer if he had any money tucked away. He said that he needed four hundred dollars to pay the extras.

Bitzer, as it turned out, had a thousand dollars in a savings account. And after a quick handshake from Griffith, they took off for the bank, and then to the studio. As Bitzer recollected, only \$385 was required to meet the extra payroll, and the principals, that day, received nothing. That, however, was not the end of Bitzer's financial contributions to the film. Over the weeks ahead, the cameraman invested some \$7,000 all told, withdrawn in smallish amounts from a savings account he held jointly with his wife. Oddly, his name does not appear in the first list of Epoch stockholders. It seems likely that to settle accounts Griffith and Harry Aitken simply handed over to him some of their stock at some later date, for after the picture opened, Bitzer recalls receiving weekly checks for his share of the profits.³¹

One sees from all this what a near thing the birth of *The Birth* was, and though we have the names of those who invested in the picture after the Aitkens' front money ran out, their identities—as anything other than names on a list—are for the most part lost. We do know that Griffith's attorney, Albert Banzhaf, invested \$100 and prevailed on his brother to come in for \$5,000. We also know that "O. Wimpenny" ran the little restaurant near the studio. But just who was Mae B. Rogers, holder of 5,000 shares in the company that was eventually founded to market the picture and protect the interest of those who lent money to the producers, it is impossible to say. The same goes for R. J. Huntington, and L. Hampton—to name just two of the larger shareholders. Where and how Griffith or Aitken recruited them to the ranks is hard to say.

Tales do hang on the inclusion of two other names on the list. One was W. H. Clune, owner and manager of Clune's Auditorium, latterly the Philharmonic, one of the larger Los Angeles theaters and obviously a desirable location for the picture's first run. Griffith arranged for Clune to come out to the lot when he shot the big, impressive scene in which Walthall led his troops down the main street of Piedmont, heading for the war. For the occasion, he hired a small brass band to put soldiers and the townspeople who lined the street in a properly martial mood.

Clune watched—and listened. And looked pained.

"That's not much of a band," he complained.

"No, it's not," Griffith agreed. "But think of how that tune would sound if your orchestra played it."

"I've got the best orchestra west of the Mississippi," said Clune.

"Think of how 'Dixie' would sound in *your* auditorium, with *your* orchestra!" the director pressed on. "Why, you'd charm the audience right out of their seats! All we need is \$15,000 more. . . ."

Whereupon Griffith guided the theater man off the set, in the direction of the director's office, from which they shortly reappeared, wreathed in smiles.

As soon as Clune had left the lot, Griffith held a staff meeting. "Let's start shooting right away. Clune might change his mind. And for heaven's sake, send that band away."³²

Obviously, Griffith's persuasive powers could be magnetic. Faced with a bill for costumes he could not pay, he somehow persuaded Robert Goldstein, president of the firm supplying them, to take shares in the production amounting to \$6,200 in his company's name and got another thousand out of him as a personal investment. Deferrals of this sort have since become common enough in the film industry, especially among independent producers, but they certainly were not common in those early days, when the number of fly-by-night producers was huge and the continuing tradition of doing business on a cash basis grew up among the smaller suppliers of motion picture equipment and services—a tradition still very much in force today. Once again, Griffith can be said to have been a pioneer, this time in the realms of low (but vital) finance.

As far as one can tell, Griffith never lost a day's shooting for lack of money, though Miss Gish recalls him saying things like, "Come on, let's shoot this scene. If we don't get it today, there's no money to make it tomorrow." She also remembers him walking around with a highly visible hole in the sole of his shoe, declaring he wouldn't even buy new shoes "until we start getting money back at the box office." Only once did activity come to a standstill at the studio and that was the only occasion his people became vividly convinced that he had finally, irrevocably run out of money. And, indeed, when he appeared on the lot after lunch he looked weary and there was something grim about him as he said, "All right, let's get to work." Obviously, he had been out trying to round up money. And obviously he had failed, for on the next payday J. C. Epping had to tell everyone that there was nothing to put in their pay envelopes. He, however, convinced them that if they were patient they would be rewarded and no one left the company or failed to report if not to *Birth*, then to one of the several other pictures that were produced simultaneously with it, as the studio kept up with Harry Aitken's implacable demands for product. One suspects that since everyone was working on the Majestic payroll, the problem here was not of Griffith's making but was the result of cash flow troubles back in New York. But those few hours on that single morning represented the only time Griffith lost as result of underfinancing. And in a matter of weeks, the shortage was made up, the payroll regularized.

Griffith's only known refusal of financial aid occurred around this time, when Lillian and Dorothy Gish's mother came forward offering to invest all their savings in the production. "How much money do you have

saved, Mrs. Gish," the director inquired. "Three hundred dollars," was the reply. "Mrs. Gish, I can't let you do it. You'd be taking too great a risk."³³ It was a shame, in a way. She would have made thousands on the investment.

Finally, sometime in early November 1914, the last scene was shot (though no one seems to remember what, precisely, it was). There was no celebration, no wrap party, nothing to mark what should have been a memorable day. It was just that from this time forward, for a period of two months, no one saw much of Griffith. Even while he was still shooting, it had been his habit to retire to the projection room in the evening to work into the small hours of the night with his cutters, Jimmie Smith and his wife, Rose, to make preliminary selections of his material. Now, however, he was fine-cutting the enormous work, and it was a brutal task. For the Moviola had not yet been invented. What he had to do was run the picture back and forth through the projector, a buzzer at hand to signal the projectionist whenever he wanted him to slip a piece of paper into his machine's uptake reel, a signal to the editor either to begin or end a cut. He in turn, would stand by, taking notes and, in time, literally attack the film with shears, hoping to approximate the director's necessarily approximate instructions. With 150,000 feet of film piled up around him, Griffith had three projectionists working night and day with him in the screening rooms and the work, in these circumstances, must have been maddening and exhausting.

Nor was editing his only task. There were the titles to be done. Here Frank Woods—known to Griffith as "Mr. Woooods"—came into his own. Woods was not quite a gray eminence; he was intellectually too lightweight for such a role. But when Griffith had problems on the set it was noted that he would head for Woods's office to talk them over, get the views of a sensible, highly practical, reasonably literate man who was not caught up in the day-to-day confusions of production. Somewhat older than Griffith, he was noted for habitually sporting a tam-o-shanter, made of rough tweed and surmounted by a large, flat button, the shape of a tea biscuit. He was also noted for appearing unshaven on the lot during daylight hours, betaking himself to the barber only at the end of the working day. After that it was his habit to repair to his favorite table at the center of the Hoffman House Café, where, it would seem, his real life began. For he was a journalist of a familiar type, the sort of man who prided himself on knowing, at least slightly, everyone who was anyone and who was at his best as the focus of a group of convivial males, drinking and swapping yarns, and in the process—during this period—making sure that his journalistic cronies heard all the most impressive gossip emanating from the production of *The Clansman*.

It was surely in the admiring talk of Frank Woods, at the Hoffman House, that the legend of D. W. Griffith, the profligate genius, began to

take shape. Certainly it was from that center that word of mouth regarding Griffith's monumental undertaking began to spread, generating the excitement that would begin to crest at Clune's Auditorium in the early spring of the following year, sweeping eastward in what would prove to be an irresistible tide.

Now, however, there was something more (or less, or anyway different) than a legend to create. There was a movie to be polished and Woods contributed enormously to this process. There can be no doubt that Griffith took a large hand in the process of writing and rewriting the subtitles (which Karl Brown was shooting and reshooting by a new method of his own devising which made them much clearer). But it is also clear that the process began with Woods, who would make first drafts of them in batches, have them inserted into the film for Griffith to see, then take down the master's revisions, perhaps cut and polish them a bit, then resubmit them. After which, more often than not, Griffith would order up more revisions. And more. Titles were cheap to change; they were, indeed, the only footage in the film that the director could now have reshot to his heart's content. So his heart was never content.

While all this was going on, Griffith was also conferring with a musician named Joseph Carl Breil, a popular composer in the sentimental vein ("The Song of the Soul" was one of his hits) about a score for the film. As early as 1909 Griffith had employed him to compile cue sheets for some of his Biograph releases. These were nothing more than listings of the film's major scenes, with suggestions for appropriate music, drawn from the most familiar sources, for the theater orchestra or pianist to play as accompaniment. They were thought to be an improvement on the practice of letting musicians freely improvise as they followed the action on screen. For such later Griffith releases as *Home, Sweet Home* and *The Avenging Conscience*, Breil devised scores for small orchestras (no more than a dozen players), again drawing upon familiar sources, and these were sent out with the release prints to the theaters.

The Clansman presented the arranger with a challenge far larger than any he had faced before. There were no fewer than 214 cues in the score that was eventually sent out. It called for an orchestra of 40 pieces, plus offstage chorus and sound effects, and it drew on a huge range of material. Schubert, Dvořák, Schumann, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, even the contemporary Mahler, and, of course, Wagner, contributed to it. Beyond that, nearly every Civil War song of note was represented by at least a few bars of quotation. Then, too, Griffith, who had fond memories of parlor music of his younger days, insisted on plenty of quotations from that, too. Stephen Foster was generously represented, as might be expected, but you could also hear "Turkey in the Straw" and "Home Sweet Home" and "Beautiful Ohio" and "After the Ball." Finally, Breil composed some original material—a tom-tom rhythm for a historical se-

quence showing black slaves arriving in America (the picture's first shots), an orchestration for brasses of Griffith's rebel yells, which many contemporary sources noted as a particularly effective bit of underscoring. It, naturally, occurred and recurred during the climactic ride of the Clansmen. Finally, Breil managed to compose the first hit song ever to be taken from a film score. It was a love theme he created for the tender moments between the Little Colonel and Elsie Stoneman. It was later published as "The Perfect Song" and by one of those weird ironies of popular culture it lived on well past its moment—as the signature music for yet another widely popular bit of racism, the *Amos 'n Andy* radio show.³⁴

None of this was easily accomplished. The procedure, according to Lillian Gish, was for Breil, having looked at this or that portion of the film, to play selections he regarded as appropriate to it for Griffith. Whereupon they would wrangle. "If I ever kill anyone," Griffith once said in exasperation, "it won't be an actor, but a musician." She recalls that their big quarrel was over what came to be known as the "Clan Call," the orchestration of those two notes that had been on Griffith's mind since he shot the sequence. They were apparently very close to some of the brass sounds in "The Ride of the Valkyries"—close enough for Breil to accuse Griffith of tampering with Wagner, or to express fear that he, Breil, might be charged with that offense. But Griffith persisted. It was mood he was after, not the approval of musicologists, and in this instance he was proved right by the singular effect those notes had on audiences.³⁵

4

Finally, sometime before the turn of the year, it was done—and for all the struggles over its cost, at a remarkably reasonable price. Before charges for prints and advertising were added, the picture cost just a little more than \$100,000. Griffith, according to Gish, arranged a screening for his principals, without orchestra, of course, in the small projection room where he had now spent so many nights. When the last frame had flapped through the projector, there was a stunned silence, followed by a great crowding around of the director, a babble of amazement, congratulation and gratitude for inclusion in so monumental a work. Then, on January 1 and 2, 1915, Griffith took his work to Riverside, California, for sneak previews, another innovation of his, to see how it played before a large audience of strangers. There is no way of knowing how the film fared at this first public viewing. None of the memoirists accompanied the director to these suburban showings, but obviously nothing occurred to discourage him. We may imagine that the five weeks between these

screenings and the official premiere at Clune's Auditorium, on February 8, were occupied by more refinements on film and score.

And by a certain amount of wheeling and dealing. Griffith was not yet rich, as he would be after the film went into general release, but he was prospering as never before, and had become, in a small way, a man of affairs. He had acquired a small ranch in the San Fernando Valley, and he now received a report that this land, which he had others farm for him, and to which he occasionally repaired for picnics, but which he never developed as a residence, might contain enough oil to be worthy of exploitation. He discovered, as well, that he could trade in some common stock in the mineral water firm he had purchased back East for some more desirable preferred shares. And finally, he was presented, late in January, with a Majestic Pictures balance sheet showing that the company, in which he owned stock, had closed business the previous year with a working surplus in excess of \$300,000. Though Griffith's own corporation owed it something over \$10,000 it had obviously borrowed to help finance *Birth*, this must have pleased the director, proving that he had been correct in his surmise that the public was responding well to the longer titles his studio had been shipping forth all year. All in all, things looked to be going well as he put the final touches on a film he had no reason to suppose would do at all badly in the marketplace.³⁶

Indeed, he was now clearly concerned that his rights in the film be fully protected and, unbeknownst to his partners in the East, or to the West Coast investors he had persuaded to back him, he calmly had the film copyrighted in the name of the D. W. Griffith Corporation, despite the fact that his rights in the film were cloudy. To be sure, he was in every sense its author. On the other hand, very little of his own money had gone into it and he had made it while he was a full-time employee of Majestic.

Surely pique entered into this decision, for he had not forgiven the Aitkens for failing to finance him fully, putting him to the trouble and embarrassment of finding money for the picture when he should have had nothing on his mind but creative work on it. They had, in his view, renegeed on a promise, and mixed with his anger there was a mistrustfulness that would pollute his relationship with Harry Aitken from that time onward. By copyrighting the film in his corporate name, Griffith was assuring himself of a voice in planning its promotion and distribution, assuring himself that it would not simply be taken away from him and handled as his often fainthearted principal backers saw fit.

And he was right to do so, whatever the ambivalence of his legal position. For the elder Aitken remained woefully overextended. He had never consolidated and rationalized his many movie holdings so that they could be sensibly managed, and he had never acquired a staff of professional managers to help him keep things under control. Worse, he con-

tinued chronically short of cash, despite the solid front he maintained in New York, and Griffith must have realized that if *Birth* was simply taken over by one of Aitken's concerns its profits—of which Griffith was so much more confident than the money man was—would surely have been used to cover other losses and finance new ventures Aitken could not resist.

There can be no doubt, in short, that Griffith's copyright of the film was a key factor in forcing the foundation of Epoch Productions, which was formed exclusively for the purpose of distributing the film and from which, for many years, profits flowed to Griffith, Dixon and the other backers of the picture, unvexed by the troubles in which Aitken soon found himself. That company was the subject of discussions between Griffith and the Aitkens when the latter came to Los Angeles for the premiere at Clune's on February 8, but its official creation would have to wait until the following month, since everyone was preoccupied with the details of launching the film properly.

By the time of the world premiere the title under which it would eventually achieve immortality was creeping into newspaper advertising as a subtitle—*The Birth of a Nation*. Just how or under whose auspices that stirring phrase was first attached to the picture is unknown, but for the moment Griffith was sticking with *The Clansman*. After all, Dixon's book under that title had been a best seller and its theatrical adaptation had increased its fame. For the moment Griffith saw no reason to abandon it here, especially since Thomas Dixon's status in Los Angeles was that of a famous and popular writer, not a racial propagandist as he was increasingly identified in the East.

Still, there was one group of people who knew all too well what Dixon was about, what the implications of his work were. This was the small local chapter of the NAACP, and they were determined to stop *The Clansman* before it galloped into anyone's heart. They went to court to obtain an injunction against the film on the ground that other branches of the NAACP would later employ, namely that exhibiting it presented a threat to public safety. That is to say, they argued that the picture might so heighten racial tensions as to lead to riots. There was perhaps an implicit threat in this maneuver, but it was the only legal tactic available to them, since the film presented no censorable sexual material, no threat to morality as the law understood that term. To argue that its portrayal of Negroes amounted to racial slander, an offense against a larger morality, would have been feckless. There were no laws on the books applicable to such a charge and, anyway, the film's proprietors could argue that to stop exhibition of the picture because its view of historical events offended a minority would constitute an infringement of their basic rights of free expression.

The NAACP's Los Angeles injunction was a narrow one. It merely forbade the matinee showing of the film on January 8 and said nothing

about the evening showing on that date or about any subsequent performance. Therefore the evening presentation proceeded on schedule. There was a vast throng milling around outside the 2,500-seat house, doubtless swollen by people denied entrance to the canceled showing and hoping to obtain tickets for the evening gala. There were none to be had, most of them having gone to people connected with the production, their friends and families, all of whom were in a state of high excitement. They had, most of them, lived with this enterprise far longer than they had with any other movie, and though they had a general idea of what to expect, they had no idea of how well, or how badly, Griffith might have done his work. They knew only that they were about to witness the longest and most expensive film ever made, knew therefore that a great deal was at risk here. Inside, they were confronted with usherettes, wearing gowns cut after the fashion of Civil War days. They were passing around petitions addressed to the Los Angeles City Council, urging that body to take no action to prevent exhibition of the film. Most signed, according to newspaper reports—not surprising considering the loyalty most of them felt they owed *The Clansman*.

Then, at a little past eight, conductor Carli D. Elinor took his place in the pit, the house lights dimmed and the first frames of the film—the main title—were to be observed blurrily on the still-lowered curtain. Then it rose, the title clarified itself as it fell upon the screen behind, and Elinor swept into the downbeat for the opening fanfare. Thereafter, said Brown, whose memories of the film's unfolding are the most detailed, the orchestra "sort of murmured to itself" until the final titles disappeared and the action of the film began, "gliding along through its opening sequences on a flow of music that seemed to speak for the screen and interpret every mood."³⁷

This sense of being swept along on a flood of imagery and melody is the common note that one finds not only in memories of this occasion, but in the memories of everyone exposed to the film during its first run—when, literally, there was nothing to compare it with. It is a note, too, that recurs time and again in reviews of the film as, over the next months, it opened all across the United States. The power of the picture was simply stunning; there is no other word for it. There are even, on record, statements by members of the NAACP in which they concede that, at least while watching the film, they were swept up and away by it along with everyone else in the audience. Indeed, it is remarkable that so few critics, in their initial responses to the film, even alluded to its portrayals of blacks, its view of the historical incidents it purported to portray accurately—despite the fact that the NAACP was hauling it into court whenever it opened in major cities, while, of course, making its opinion of the film known everywhere. To a viewer under the spell of the picture, none of this made any difference; the objections seemed almost niggling.

In Karl Brown's shrewd recollections of that first First Night we gain a sense of how the picture worked on an audience. It built gracefully, quietly, with a gathering sense of foreboding, as it established characters, set out plot lines, engaged one emotionally in the fate of its characters. Then came a quickening pace as war was declared, poignant farewells said. Thereafter the sudden opening up of the picture, its vast change in scale from domestic drama to one of epic proportions, though logically enough prepared for, was breathtaking. Yes, obviously, there must be battle scenes, but no one really expected to see panoramas as vast as Griffith gave them, with action as vivid as this. There was, as Brown says, an ebb and flow to these scenes, a lack of chopiness about them, which was simply unprecedented on stage or screen.

Of course, one of the most famous moments in the battle sequence is its climax. The Southern forces have, obviously, been broken, their defeat is imminent, when Walthall snatches up a fallen flag and with it in one hand, his sword in the other, he charges the Union trenches, to cram the flag down the mouth of a cannon, in a really magnificent gesture of defiance and despair. Watching the scene when it was shot, Brown had thought it pretty silly stuff. "Hank delivers the mail," he had written sarcastically in the camera notes it was his duty to keep. But now, in the theater it was another matter. It was the low angle shot that Griffith chose for the business with the cannon—Walthall outlined against the sky—that did the trick: "I think every man in that packed audience was on his feet cheering, not the picture, not the orchestra, not Griffith, but voicing his exultation at this one man's courage—defiant in defeat and all alone with only the heavens for his witness."³⁸

In the lull after this storm, there were two other privileged moments of great power. One occurred in the Northern hospital, where the Little Colonel, captured after his exploits in the field, is recovering from his wounds. It is there that he meets Stoneman's daughter for the first time—though he had fallen in love with a picture of her and carried it through the war in the back of his watch. Her comings and goings are observed by a sentry, draped sleepily over his grounded rifle. He has a remarkable face, it seems to contain the sadness of the world, and his eyes follow Gish's every movement, as if he were in love with her from afar. Or perhaps he recognizes in her ethereal beauty a spiritual quality that briefly lifts the gloom from these surroundings. No one can say quite what Griffith was after in this sequence, but it has a very powerful effect, and people began asking after the uncredited extra who played the sentry. But his name was unrecorded, and it was not until Gish, riding in a float at the opening day of the 1939 World's Fair in New York, spotted him in the crowd that he was revealed to be one William Freeman, a man with no interest in acting, who had taken a day's work in the movies one idle day in far-off California.

The other great scene in the movie's first half was Lincoln's assassination. And it remains one of the most beautifully orchestrated sequences in the film. Again, it was a surprise to Brown. When it was being shot Bitzer had ordered a large mirror brought on the set, the idea being to arrange it so it reflected the sun—remember they were working on an open stage—in such a manner as to follow Booth as a spotlight might, while he draws closer and closer to his prey. Again, Brown had thought this a silly business, but on screen that dancing, flickering light was hugely effective as it “picked out a symbol of death itself, a figure all in black with a ghost-white face and a short, villainous little mustache; you never knew or cared where that light came from, so compelling was this poetic vision of Nemesis.” Indeed, here as elsewhere, Brown, the eager and intelligent young cameraman, found himself entirely unaware of Griffith's changes from shot to shot, so compelling was the editing, drawing one in from the master shots of the theater to the alternating shots of the passive Lincoln and the stalking murderer, drawing closer, ever closer to him.

By intermission, Brown was entirely lost in the film, but he pulled himself together and headed for the lobby to try to overhear comments. It was a knowledgeable crowd of professionals, and they were all wondering how Griffith could top himself. The predictions were that he could not.

But he could. Again, a famous scene, much discussed by critics ever since: it is Walthall's homecoming to the economically devastated South. His walk up to the family homestead was so slow that, while it was being shot, Brown had been desperately anxious that the camera would run out of film before the actor attained his objective. Now, however, the thoughtfulness of his return, the suggestion in Walthall's movements of a flood of memories overwhelming him, is enormously touching. So are shots of Mae Marsh decorating her dress with “Southern Ermine” (cotton) to add a festive touch to the occasion, an indication of the poverty to which he was returning and of the gallantry with which it was accepted. It was a wonderfully revealing, and moving, bit of business. And when a pair of feminine arms—we never know whose they are—reach out through the door to draw the Little Colonel into his home, one is struck by the austere beauty of Griffith's imagery, the understated rightness of his choice of action and framing in this moment.

After that, of course, there were the powerful scenes that have already preoccupied so much space in this account—the threatened rape and the death of Marsh, the riotous anarchy in the streets of Piedmont, which drives the remainder of the Cameron family out of their home and into the sanctuary of a cabin outside town where they are encircled by blacks and from which they are rescued, in the nick of time, by the hard-riding Klan. The pacing of this final crisis was cinematically irresistible.

Some recall a moment of silence when the last, peaceful frames of

the film—Walthall and Gish seated on a bluff overlooking the sea, sharing pacifistic visions of Christ—had passed through the projector. Some do not. But all recall the audience leaping up, cheering and applauding and stamping their feet, not to be stilled until Griffith made an appearance, not in a triumphal mood, but an ostentatiously humble one. Or maybe there was nothing ostentatious about it. Maybe he was genuinely overawed by this response. For surely this ovation was of a character he had dreamed about in all those dismal years as an unsuccessful touring actor. At any rate: "He stepped out a few feet from stage left, a small, almost frail figure lost in the enormousness of that great proscenium arch. He did not bow or raise his hands or do anything but just stood there and let wave after wave of cheers and applause wash over him like great waves breaking over a rock."³⁹

A phase of his life, his career, was ending in that moment when an audience at long last fully recognized his mastery, perhaps sensed as well that he had somehow found a way of fusing, in this film, the stuff of his childhood memories and aspirations with the craftsman's knowledge hard-won in adulthood. He could not know, in this moment, how huge his success would be, but he must have sensed that it was going to be of a magnitude as unprecedented for him as his achievement was unprecedented in his young art. Nor could he know how much pain would accompany it in the months ahead, how much anguish would attend his trip back down from the heights on which he stood this night in the years that would follow on from there. What he had to savor here was a moment that might have justified, in its triumphant lack of ambiguity, the long years of struggle and disappointment, may even have sustained him in the long years of struggle and bitterness that were to come. We must imagine him happy beyond any power of ours to quantify or express it.



David Wark Griffith, circa 1908. This is one of a group of formal portraits for which the actor-playwright sat around the time he was making his first reluctant forays into filmmaking.





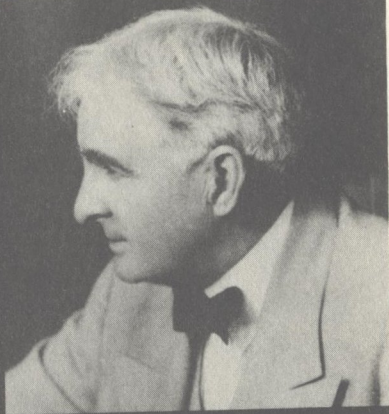
An actor's life: *Opposite top*, Kathryn Osterman shows "Lawrence" Griffith the door during their brief tour in *Miss Petticoats*, 1902. *Opposite bottom*, his first film appearance, in the Edison production *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, 1908. *Above*, Linda Arvidson Johnson, the young actress Griffith met in San Francisco in 1904, married in Boston in 1906.



At the Biograph: *Above*, Griffith and Billy Bitzer study a strip of the cameraman's work by the blinding light of the studio's Cooper-Hewitts. *Below*, the harrowing climax of *A Corner in Wheat*, 1912: Frank Powell is buried alive under a cascade of the grain the financier sought so desperately, and without conscience, to control.



Fathers of *The Birth*: At right, Thomas Dixon, "the ranting, wandering divine," author of the novel on which the film was based. Below, Griffith confers on the set with Frank ("Daddy") Woods, his story editor, who wrote the first adaptation of *The Clansman*. Bitzer looks on.



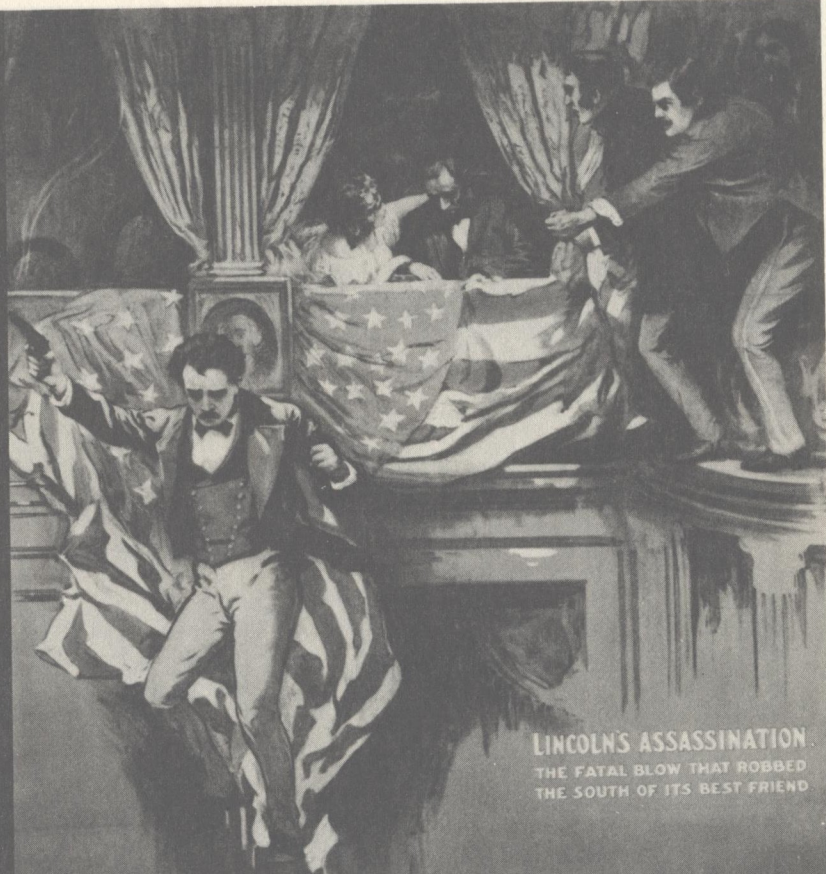
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Images, innocent and infamous, from *The Birth of a Nation*: Above, the Little Colonel (Henry Walthall) is welcomed home from the war. Below, the Klan captures Gus, the would-be rapist who forced “the Dear One” through “the opal gates of death.” Gus was played by Walter Long, in blackface.





LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION
THE FATAL BLOW THAT ROBBED
THE SOUTH OF ITS BEST FRIEND

D.W. GRIFFITH'S
MIGHTY SPECTACLE
THE BIRTH OF A NATION
FOUNDED ON THOMAS DIXON'S
'THE CLANSMAN'

One of *Birth's* less offensive posters showed Raoul Walsh as John Wilkes Booth escaping the presidential box after assassinating Lincoln. Most of the film's promotional art featured the Ku Klux Klan's night riders in full, menacing regalia.

COURTESY OF RICHARD FINER

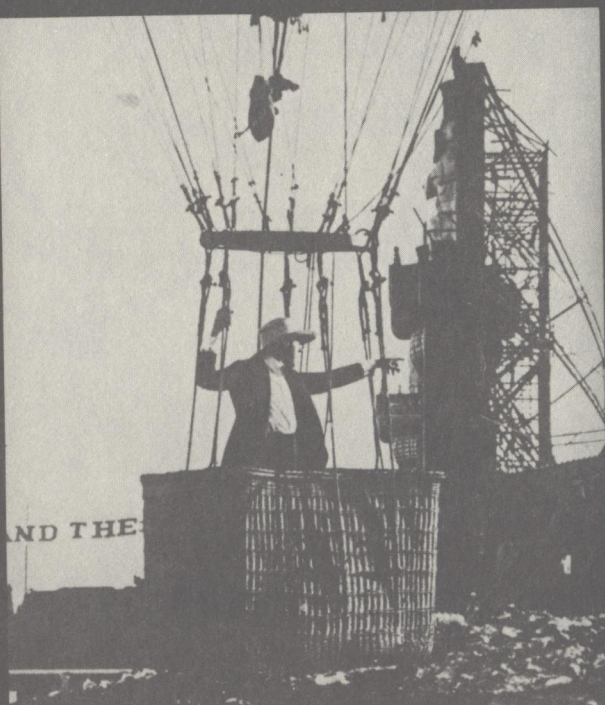
Intolerance: Griffith and Bitzer mounted a camera on a racing car to film the greatest of their many rides to the rescue. Tod Browning, later famous as a director of horror films (*Dracula*, *Freaks*), played the driver in this climax to the film's modern story. Mae Marsh, beside him, was the wife trying to obtain a governor's pardon before her husband's execution for a murder he did not commit. The other passengers are Miriam Cooper, "the Friendless One," and the real miscreant, and Edward Dillon, the cop who broke the case.

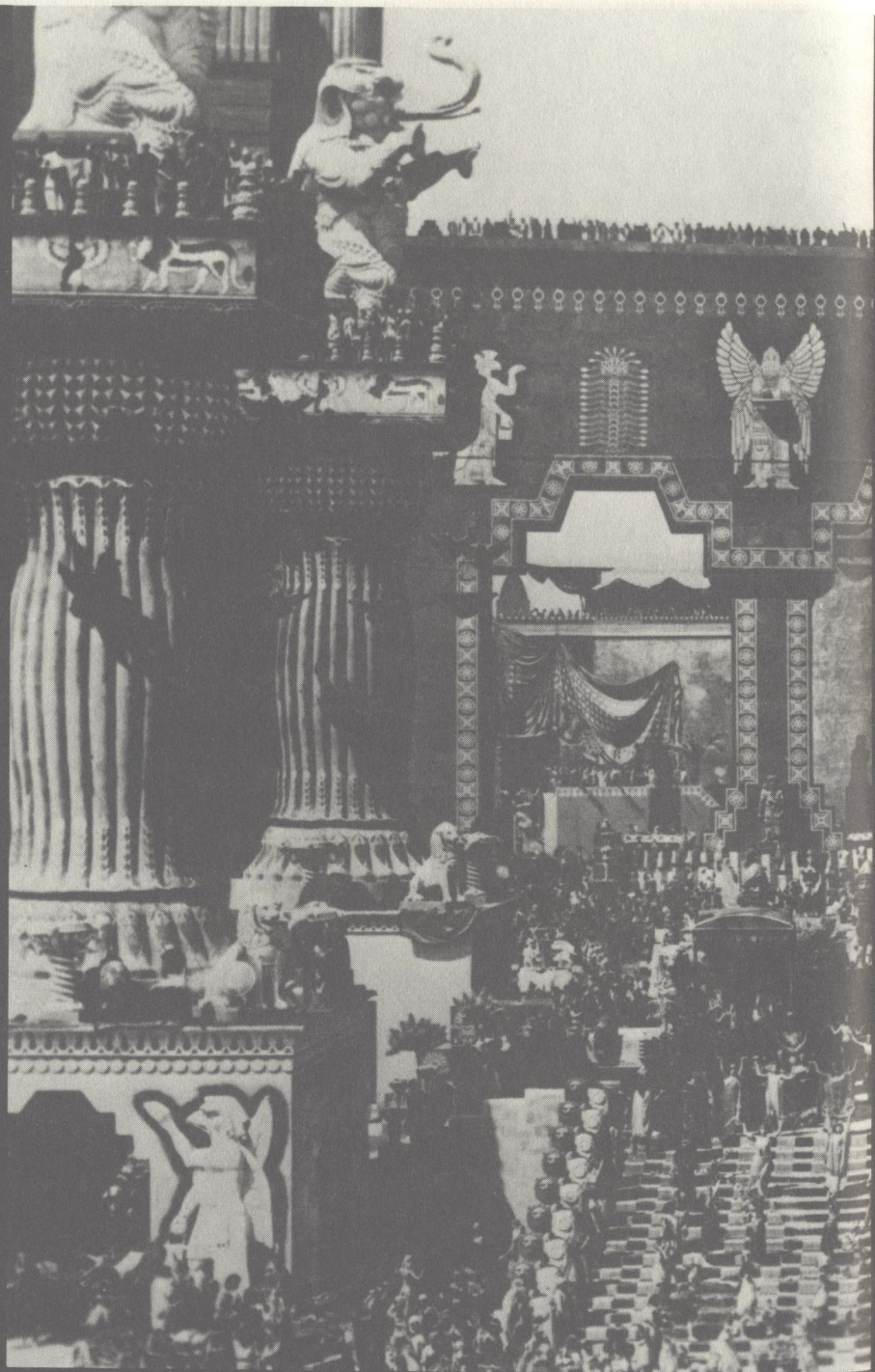




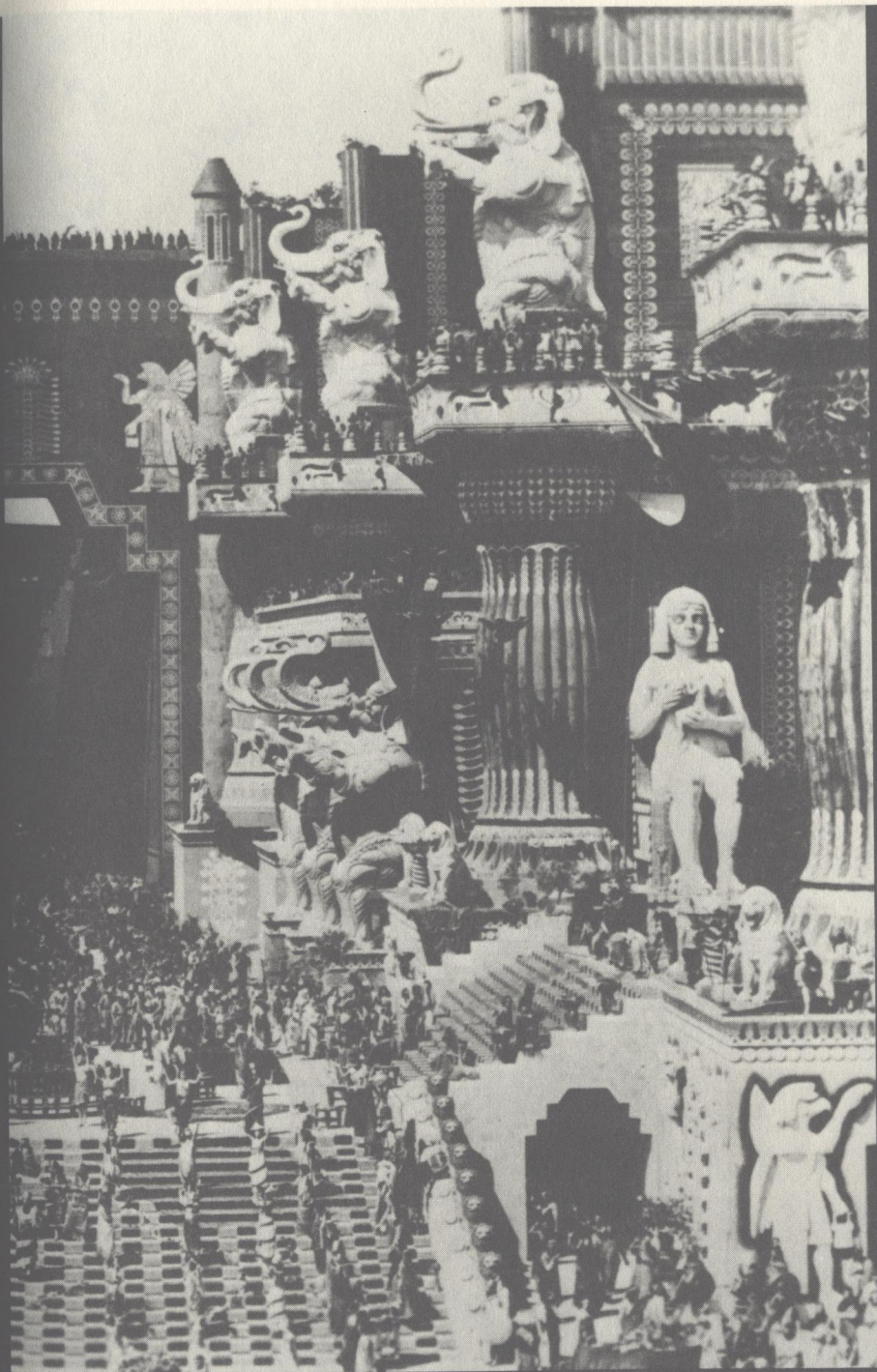
High points: Mac Marsh, in the modern story's court-room sequence, pleading for custody of her child, achieved the apotheosis of her art. *Below*, the director prepares to lay aloft to survey construction of the Walls of Babylon. The banner in the background advertises the film's working title, *The Mother and the Law*.

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"A Sun Play of the Ages": Griffith's grandiose subtitle for *Intolerance* never seemed more apt than in the moment his great vision of Belshazzar's feast in the forecourt unfolded before the startled eyes of its



1916 audience. It remains one of film's immortal images. And unlike most such expensive and highly conscious efforts to overawe the public, its power to impress seems to grow, not to diminish, as time passes.



Low society: Griffith, the sometime touring actor, remained ever a creature of hotel rooms and lunch counters. Here, a newspaper interests him more than the companionship of Bobby Harron, former prop boy turned expert juvenile lead.

High society: The welcome accorded him by the English elite when he filmed there in 1917, at the height of World War One, remained one of Griffith's proudest memories. Here he directs Lily Elsie and Lady Diana Manners (with whom he said he fell in love) in a scene for *The Great Love*.





At the front: Griffith's visits to the war zone were carefully staged for maximum propaganda value and minimum risk to the world's pre-eminent director. *Above*, he poses, camera at the ready, with British flyers. His garb, *below*, suggests the trench from which he was supposed to be observing a battle was not alarmingly far forward.





At the movies: Not unnaturally, Griffith saw the war within the conventions of a Griffith movie. But *Hearts of the World* had moments of great power, notably Lillian Gish's harrowing mad scene as she wandered the battlefield convinced her lover had died on their wedding night. *Below*, a peacetime pose with co-star sister, Dorothy.





Broken Blossoms (1919) gave Lillian Gish her greatest tragic role, and was for Griffith one of his most memorable successes.