



D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time

By Melvyn Stokes

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In this deeply researched and vividly written volume, Melvyn Stokes illuminates the origins, production, reception and continuing history of this ground-breaking, aesthetically brilliant, and yet highly controversial movie.

By going back to the original archives, particularly the NAACP and D. W. Griffith Papers, Stokes explodes many of the myths surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Yet the story that remains is fascinating: the longest American film of its time, Griffith's film incorporated many new features, including the first full musical score compiled for an American film. It was distributed and advertised by pioneering methods that would quickly become standard. Through the high prices charged for admission and the fact that it was shown, at first, only in "live" theaters with orchestral accompaniment, Birth played a major role in reconfiguring the American movie audience by attracting more middle-class patrons. But if the film was a milestone in the history of cinema, it was also undeniably racist. Stokes shows that the darker side of this classic movie has its origins in the racist ideas of Thomas Dixon, Jr. and Griffith's own Kentuckian background and earlier film career. The book reveals how, as the years went by, the campaign against the film became increasingly successful. In the 1920s, for example, the NAACP exploited the fact that the new Ku Klux Klan, which used Griffith's film as a recruiting and retention tool, was not just anti-black, but also anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish, as a way to mobilize new allies in opposition to the film.

This crisply written book sheds light on both the film's racism and the aesthetic brilliance of Griffith's filmmaking. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the cinema.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Written with precision, Stokes illuminates both the film's racism and the aesthetic brilliance of Griffith's filmmaking. By placing the film into an historic, political, and cultural framework, this tome should attract film scholars, historians, and cinema enthusiasts."--*The Courier*

"Stokes succeeds wonderfully in providing readers with an engaging, insightful and comprehensive account of how D.W. Griffith created his epic film, which astonished and outraged moviegoers in 1915 and has done so ever since. While Stokes examines the film closely, the breadth of his account extends to the social and cultural currents that Griffith rode in making it, and analysis of how the film's meanings have changed over time. This is the go-to volume on a film whose cinematic and ideological legacy informs and haunts American film to this day."--Matthew Bernstein, Emory University

"*The Birth of a Nation* is well noted for its contribution to the early aesthetics and narrative form of U.S. commercial cinema. Simultaneously, however, the film is considerably more notorious for its iconic and vile racism, and the many conflicts it stirred. Now, in a clearly argued, thoroughly researched book, Melvyn Stokes has managed to capture the people, politics and controversies surrounding the film's production and exhibition. Stokes portrays the film's writer, director and stars, as well as its eminent critics and protestors, with engaging biographic detail. And more, the author deftly inscribes *Birth's* twisted path through public discourse. Finally, we have a first rate book that places "the most controversial motion picture ever made" in an in-depth, historic, political and cultural context, to be enjoyed by film scholar, historian and cinema aficionado alike."--Ed Guerrero, New York University

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"Melvyn Stokes's book, coming on the eve of the film's centennial, is likely to be its definitive chronicle in the twenty-first century....no one volume brings together the variety and depth of research he does here. This is a valuable book for those who want a highly readable, up-to-date account covering the dismal as well as the encouraging aspects of the American social and cultural experience in World War II." -- American Historical Review

"Stokes offers scholars a valuable survey of the diverse body of literature on *The Birth of a Nation* even as his own analysis inspires new directions for inquiry." -- Journal of Southern History

"Melvyn Stokes excellent new study of D.W. Griffith's abidingly controversial 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* situates insightful readings of the film in a brilliantly conceived and densely researched historical context."--*The Southern Quarterly*

"The depth and reach of Stokes's research reveals some true historical gems, disturbing and clear windows onto the history of racism, representation, popular culture, and social change in the twentieth-century United States." --*Journal of Social History*

About the Author

Melvyn Stokes teaches American history and American film history at University College London. He has also been a visiting fellow at Princeton, a visiting Fulbright Professor at Mount Holyoke College and a visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris. He has edited or co-edited nine books, including four for the British Film Institute.

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