



Michael T. Martin. *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 344 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04235-4.

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Growing out of a 2015 symposium convened by the Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University, Bloomington, the loose organizing principle of the essays in *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present* is to consider the impact and enduring legacy of D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* on the racism and xenophobia that remain part of the mainstream of US cultural life. Bringing together authors from a range of scholarly enterprises and academic disciplines, editor Michael T. Martin makes clear that this collection is intended to speak to our current moment. For Martin, both the symposium and the publication of this volume were prompted by a pressing need to address the enduring "hegemonic structures in the American social formation that support and maintain white supremacy and social inequality" (p. ix).

To that end, the scholarship here is divided into three sections, explained by Martin as *Birth of a Nation* as "text, artifact, and cultural legacy," *Birth* in "historical time—then," and *Birth* in "historical time—now" (p. 18). In practical terms, this provides the reader with five chapters in the first section examining *Birth of a Nation* as a tangible filmic enterprise, with particular attention to audience response, whether in the form of outrage or inspiration. In the third section, we find five chapters focused on *Birth* in conversation with a range

of modern filmmaking efforts, and the ways in which the 1915 film continues to exert influence. This tripartite construction unfortunately leaves just two chapters in the limbo of the second section of the collection, seemingly excommunicated as neither beast nor bird despite perhaps best embodying the stated goals of the book.

The avowedly presentist and "imminently practical" (p. ix) ethos of the collection can make for an uneasy balance. Where the focus is on *Birth of a Nation* as historical product, as in the first five essays, the effort to explicitly tie the film to current events can feel forced. In Cara Caddoo's excellent consideration of Black protest against the film, for example, a final few paragraphs on the violence of Charleston and the actions of Bree Newsome seem an unnecessary addition. By the time Newsome appears, Caddoo has already made a convincing case as to the contemporary lessons that can be learned from anti-*Birth* activists. More than simply the legalistic battles of middle-class NAACP officials that have often taken center stage in discussions of Black response to the film, Caddoo point us toward a far wider range of individuals, interests, and tactics in the struggle for social and cultural power.

This balance tips in the other direction in the final five chapters of the collection. Concerned primarily with race and racism in current cinema,

these essays engage both with films that readers may expect to find (Quentin Tarantino's 2012 *Django Unchained* or Steve McQueen's 2013 *12 Years a Slave*) and some more unexpected choices (the 2015 Will Ferrell/Kevin Hart comedy *Get Hard*). These pieces have some significant points to make about *Birth*. David C. Wall, for one, makes explicit the key point that *Birth's* "aesthetic is its racism" (p. 260) and that the two cannot be disentangled. At the same time, though, *Birth of a Nation* itself often appears something of an afterthought in a number of these chapters—a peg upon which to hang otherwise thoughtful and useful analyses of the cinematic language of race. This can lead to some puzzlingly ahistorical claims, including the idea that effective satires of the Ku Klux Klan's racism are a purely modern phenomenon.

This leaves our two orphaned chapters as the Goldilocks of the collection—neither too hot nor too cold. Linda Williams's contextualization of *Birth* and Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) as racial melodramas competing over the thesis of whether Black lives matter offers a measured balance of the two competing tendencies of the collection, speaking comfortably to the present about the past. Lawrence Howe, who places *Birth* in the tradition of the Southern romance, provides a compelling analysis of the ways in which Griffith built on aesthetics of scholarship "to persuade his audience of the film's reliability and historical authority" (p. 166).

Howe's argument also speaks to a more persuasive central theme. Almost all of the essays found here work, implicitly or explicitly, to deconstruct the idea of *Birth of a Nation* as a "classic" and raise probing questions as to the culpability of critics and academics in extending the life and reach of the film's racist screed. Whether the film is a Western or a Southern, the nation's first blockbuster, or a groundbreaking directorial work are conversations that must be—and here, for once, are—placed within a wider context. To separate artistry from racist ideology is an artificial divi-

sion that hinders our understanding of the film and its legacy. It is beyond time that we recognize that any discussion of *Birth* as cinematic art must be grounded in an understanding of *Birth* as racist propaganda. This is the major contribution of Martin's collection.

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