

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

DW Griffith was the son of a Confederate Colonel and the PA family in Kentucky had, uh, once had been very prosperous, but had fallen on hard times. Uh, the father died, the mother moved to another state, uh, and Griffith wanted, uh, to, uh, sort of make it on his own. So, uh, somewhat impractically, he, he ended up in New York city wanting to be a full time writer, uh, churning up poems and short articles for, you know, this big city newspaper, uh, these, these big city newspapers, uh, or magazines. And of course that didn't pan out. So he, he, um, tapped into the acting profession and, uh, eventually he moved over to this rather scurrilous form of acting known as, you know, motion pictures, which, you know, didn't have much respect among the acting profession, but he did it anyway. And, um, after appearing as an actor in several of these really short one real movies, he began to become interested in what was going on behind the camera rather than performing in front of it.

Speaker 1 ([01:17](#)):

So, um, he started to direct films and by the time, uh, world war one had had rolled around, uh, he had already directed over 401 reel to reel three real movies. Um, the motion picture companies in America were somewhat conservative in terms of, uh, uh, sort of, uh, uh, creativity, uh, Hmm. Taking aesthetic risks and economic risks in Europe. Films were getting longer and longer and more elaborate, more complex in terms of production values and production design, and plot complexity. While most American films were cheap and, uh, pretty low brow, uh, the, uh, prime audience for these early Nickelodeon features, uh, were primarily working class so that these early movie producers, which by the way, uh, still resided in New York city, New Jersey, the move wouldn't come until like 1911, 1912, these films, um, uh, these th th these film producers were, uh, very reticent in making movies more expensive and more complex.

Speaker 1 ([02:32](#)):

Why throw good money for people with low attention span? That's what they, that's, how they felt about their audiences, but Griffith knew better. Um, he took a look at some of these European spectacle, historical spectacle types, uh, things on Greek mythology, enrollment, mythology, enrollment history, Christians versus the lions, uh, that, that sort of, you know, super spectacle. And he said, well, you know, America has a history to America's had its tragedies. You know, it's a great, tragic ethics. And given his background, he really wanted to do a movie about the American civil war, the great American tragedy. Um, he also was aware of a novel written by the Reverend Thomas Dixon, which Dixon himself had staged as a theatrical melodrama, a meeting with some success. And, um, uh, he got the rights to this book. And along with material from an earlier Dixon novel, uh, called the leopard spots, uh, he combined, you know, incidents from the leopard spots with this other novel and this play, which is called the Klansman.

Speaker 1 ([03:53](#)):

And he made, he got the, he got the investors and he got a studio to go along with this and everybody in early Hollywood at that point, they were already in LA. They thought that he was crazy. Cause what he, uh, wanted to achieve was not just an hour and a half or a two hour feature film. This was going to be an Epic three hour, uh, spectacle. And this was not going to, he insisted that the film not be shown in these kind of dumping nickelodeons or neighborhood theaters. Uh, he wanted this production to be exhibited in so-called legitimate theaters with reserved seating and a two hour admission price or a \$2 admission price. Um, that's unheard of. Um, and he had for the New York and, uh, LA showings, a full symphony

orchestra, and they even had a roadshow going to smaller cities with, uh, stage crews and musicians and, uh, you know, actors, uh, to sort of surround this film.

Speaker 1 ([05:13](#)):

It was a big deal. It was a big deal. And again, everybody thought in Hollywood that he was nuts. Um, most films, arms cost, even the biggest films cost, maybe eight to 10, two, \$10,000. The production eventually ended up costing \$110,000, which is an astronomical price if you consider it in terms of today's, uh, uh, inflationary, uh, prices. Um, and you know, they thought that was just suicidal. The film ended up being three hours long, \$110,000 production cost, uh, reserved seating in these huge theaters symphony orchestra compliment. Um, and it was a huge success. Uh, it was the first film to be shown at the white house. And supposedly at the end of the white house screening, president Wilson himself arose and pointed at the screen and said, this is like history written in lightning. And that became the blurb that's on the poster, a blurb from the president of the United States.

Speaker 1 ([06:26](#)):

Uh, and, uh, you know, you could still find, you know, copies of posters with that blurb on it. Um, and the film was a huge success and it wasn't just because of its elaborate scope. It's because of what Griffith was able to sort of intuitively achieve, uh, in terms of camera placement, direction, usage of actors, as well as, uh, editing, um, birth of a nation with no exaggeration, uh, could be viewed as a literal encyclopedia motion, picture techniques, uh, Griffith, uh, created the Hollywood feature film. As we know it, I tell my students that, um, you know, if it wasn't for birth of a nation, we wouldn't be seeing movies in precisely the way that we expect them, uh, as we expect them to see, to see them, uh, uh, today, uh, it's probably from a technical viewpoint, the most influential film ever made. However, as I also tell my students, this is undoubtedly the most controversial film ever made in this country, uh, a kind of embarrassment in terms of film history and the creation of this, uh, you know, multibillion dollar film industry, uh, because it's, it's what he did with these techniques that, uh, is profoundly disturbing even to this day.

Speaker 1 ([08:15](#)):

I think what is disturbing about it? What was the social impact of this film? Let's talk about what's the plot. Tell me the story. Okay. Like many other civil war films since, um, what he tries to do from his sort of, sort of skewered Southern perspective, okay. Is offer a kind of juxtaposition between the Northern way of life versus the Southern way of life before, during, and after the civil war, uh, and way he does that is by focusing on two family groups, one from the North and one from the South, they are not meant to be merely individuals in a sort of Victorian melodrama. They are meant a very self-consciously took portray values and attitudes from his perspective regarding the cold, harsh, brutal industrialized North versus the warm, um, uh, agrarian, small town, rural small town South, and therefore, even some of the names are highly symbolic.

Speaker 1 ([09:42](#)):

The Northern family, uh, is called the Stoneman family. The patriarch is a Congressman from Pennsylvania in the film he's called Austin Stoneman. He's patterned after the real life. So-called radical Republican from Pennsylvania, the congressional leader, fatty Stevens leader of the radical Republicans, you know, after the civil war. Um, in fact, if you look at photographs of the real life that he is Stephens and the way they made up the actor to portray Austin Stallman, they're, they're dead ringers. It's just absolutely remarkable. I mean, they, they really got this guy down and, you know, he stole him and he's

a man of stone. Uh, he represents the North. Um, he is somber, uh, uh, literally deformed with a club foot, uh, sickly. He's always shivering. He's always got his blanket. She always sweating his daughter, Elsie Stoneman portrayed by Lillian. Gish is always ministering to his every need.

Speaker 1 ([10:48](#)):

And he's vain. He's got this ugly to pay that she's constantly fixing, you know, and he's dabbing the sweat from under his brow. Um, his physical deformities are meant to reflect spiritual, psychological deformities. Uh, he's almost like Richard, the third, you know, um, complete, complete with, you know, you know, uh, uh, a club foot. Yeah. Um, and he, uh, is the villain of the piece. Um, there's this sort of ongoing debate between him and Lincoln. Uh, Lincoln is portrayed very, very sympathetically in this film. He's called the great heart, for example, uh, you know, for, for, for reasons that from Griffith's viewpoint might be understandable anyway, uh, there is no mother figure in this family. There's only, uh, you know, Stoneman his daughter Elsie and two boys. Okay. And it's kind of interesting. You never, the

Speaker 2 ([11:54](#)):

Family intact, you never see them interacting as a group. Um, again, it reflects Griffith's attitude toward life in the North. You know, there is really no nuclear family, no real sense of community. See what he does early in the film is juxtapose scenes with this Northern family group versus life down in Piedmont, South Carolina, where we, you know, he cuts to the, uh, the Southern family, but the camera and family. And the first time we see them, this is this idyllic, um, garden, the V you know, this paradise on earth. Um, there's the entire nuclear family intact, uh, uh, the veranda of their Southern plantation. Uh, there's father Cameron, uh, reading his newspaper with, uh, kitties on his lap and little cute puppies at his feet, you know, um, there's our hero, Ben Cameron, who would later be Colonel Ben Cameron. And then later after that civil war, the leader of the KU Klux Klan, he's the hero he embodies Southern chivalry, uh, at its most pristine and benevolent.

Speaker 2 ([13:14](#)):

Um, uh, both in Warren peace. Um, there's the older daughter, the S the sort of morose Southern bell, Margaret, and then there's the little pet sister, flora, flora means flower in Latin. And that's symbolic because we get a certain Southern Victorian view of womanhood embodied in these white women. You know, um, flora being a flower is fragile, beautiful, beautiful, vulnerable, and utterly defenseless, which is a key to an understanding of what's really going on in this film. Um, anyway, and then of course, there's the mother, the bustling benevolent mother, mother camera. Uh, and so right from the very beginning, you'd see this juxtaposition, the family of the North, who we never see together ever, uh, just it's sort of isolated. And, uh, there is no mother figure in the Northern family mom's got, uh, it's never explained what's what happened her. And then of course, the intact family, uh, down South, um, the, the, the idea of, uh, the pre-war South as a virtual garden of Eden, um, a way of life raped, violated, and destroyed by the brutal industrialized North.

Speaker 2 ([14:53](#)):

Um, okay. The connection between the two families is that the Northern boys and the Southern boys, uh, were roommates at this boarding school. And, um, uh, in the opening scenes, uh, there, um, the, the Northern boys visit the Southern boys on the plantation. And it's really kind of interesting the scenes. They not only introduce sort of the love story subplot, uh, the Southern boy, Ben Cameron spots, a photograph in a frame carried by the Northern brother, Elsie Lillian Gish has stayed back up North to take care of the dad. Um, the moment that he spots that picture of Lillian Gish, he falls instantly and

hopelessly and completely in love with her. Having never met her now that Southern chivalry now, uh, and for the rest of the movie, he is carrying that thing near his heart. He takes out cherishes and finals. It, uh, it's, uh, from today's perspective, that's, that might be viewed as a little, a little obsessive, but, uh, he, you know, he embodies Southern chivalry.

Speaker 2 ([16:13](#)):

So, um, so that, that, that motif is introduced, you know, uh, then they take the, uh, the Northern boys to the plantation fields, and we are introduced to a various, a couple of other interesting motifs. Visually the emphasis is on cotton. I don't know how many times in a short scene, you see either a closeup of cotton, uh, cotton being picked cotton, being held close to the camera, or just everybody paying attention to cotton. And that gets across the idea that the entire social order, the entire economic and social order is built on this fragile plant now. And they really, uh, Griffith really stresses that. Mmm. So you've got two motifs, you know, the, the business with the LCS picture, the Southern chivalry bit, as well as this emphasis on cotton, then there's the interaction with the slaves. Um, the slaves, uh, uh, are before the civil war are supremely happy and satisfied, doing exactly what God meant them to do, you know, pick cotton, you know, and take care of the white folks.

Speaker 2 ([17:31](#)):

And so, uh, uh, right in the middle of their daily chores, they drop everything that they're doing and start singing and dancing for their benevolent masters and their friends. Um, so you've got another motif introduced the idea of good black people now, as well as we'll see, as the phone goes on, basically there are three kinds of, uh, African-American characters in this film, the good black folks, uh, the happy contented slaves that know their place, um, the bad black folks who, um, don't understand how good they had it. And, uh, actually, uh, become involved with the abolitionists and the scallywags and the carpetbaggers, uh, or as troops fighting for their own freedom that that makes them bad. And then the third kind of black person is the Mulata who, uh, there are two mulatto characters who are introduced later. They're, they're the prime villains of the piece they're even worse stolen.

Speaker 2 ([18:44](#)):

Anyway. Um, all of this occurs in the first, let's say 20, 25 minutes of the film, uh, the section dealing with life in the South before the civil war. And then, um, the civil war begins. The two, the two sets of friends are divided on opposite ends and probably the most celebrated sequence, and probably the least controversial sequences in the film are the civil war scenes. Uh, the battle scenes have an Epic sweep and sort of visual rhythm that are still imitated today in almost every war movie that contains battle scenes. Um, if you see even the most recent war movies, uh, saving private Ryan, uh, for example, uh, you will see certain techniques, uh, regarding how you photograph and direct an edit battle that you could go right back to the, these tremendous sequences and birth venation. Um, and, uh, there, we see the little Colonel Ben Cameron, uh, at his most Gallant and chivalric in terms of war, you know, uh, we've seen him doing the Southern civil rebuilt with his attitude toward women.

Speaker 2 ([20:11](#)):

Now here's the more stuff, uh, he is so Gallant, and so brave that even as his side is being decimated by the superior firepower of the Northern army, uh, he's taking the remnants of his troops for the final charge. He stops right in the middle of the final charge to give his last drop of water from his canteen to a dine enemy soldier. And even the union side, cheers that, you know, they stopped shooting and start sharing their, um, that's how Gallant this guy is. Um, ironically enough, on the other side, on the union

side is his best friend, you know, Phil Stoneman. Yeah. And I'm in the last charge. Our hero is a shot, severely wounded, but he takes that tattered Confederate flag and staggers up to the union Canon and jams it down his throat while his best friend tells everybody stopped shooting.

Speaker 2 ([21:11](#)):

And the two best friends collapsed at each other's arms. You know, what's sort of interesting is the schizophrenia view of war that's being depicted in this film. On the one hand war, is this Gallant romantic crusade, this glorious patriotic adventure. On the other hand, after the battle scene piles of corpses, you know, uh, this is tragic waste of human resources. Uh, it's quite remarkable now. Um, then we get into reconstruction, we get into reconstruction online. Okay. Uh, and that's when, uh, that's when things get, uh, really interesting, um, Stoneman has this mulatto protege, uh, somewhat heavy handedly called silence Lynch. Okay. And, uh, after Lincoln's assassination, and by the way, the assassination sequence it's forced theater is again, a model of how to shoot certain kinds of scenes it's just beautifully done. Anyway, uh, Stoneman is now as the, as his mulatto mistress now puts it the most powerful man in America after Lincoln's assassination C S uh, uh, Stoneman is surrounded by evil.

Speaker 2 ([22:44](#)):

Mulattoes his mistress, the mulatto mistress, the housekeeper Lydia, and his henchman Silas. Uh, and, you know, as I said earlier, they're the two most evil characters in the film. Um, Stoneman goes to Piedmont, South Carolina, where the Cameron family is, uh, and, you know, the, the South is trying to rebuild itself and then Lincoln gets assassinated and then the carpet baggers come in, led by stolen. And, um, that's where they start manipulating, uh, the freed black people. And, uh, that's when, uh, the Southern white aristocrats get more and more frustrated, more and more angry. Uh, there are scenes in the, uh, South Carolina state legislature, uh, that was within that short sequence showing the black legislatures legislators, uh, acting up. Um, it's almost

Speaker 1 ([23:46](#)):

Every negative stereotype that you can possibly imagine about black people. It's right there in four minutes, you know, the sequence at the, in the, uh, state legislature. Um, and, you know, the, the, the, uh, the, the, the copy bakers, uh, fix the election, um, they, uh, allow, uh, certain blacks to take power, and that makes our hero angrier and angrier, of course, connected to all this, um, is a kind of paranoia regarding black male sexuality. The bottom line for this film, you know, women are defenseless, they're little flowers to be cherished and all that. And since they are utterly defenseless, um, they need the protection from the brutal realities of reconstruction South. Uh, and that leads to the, uh, you know, the creation of the KU Klux Klan. Yeah. Um, that and up, uh, saving two sets of white folks, Elsie is locked, uh, in, in a room with Silas.

Speaker 1 ([25:10](#)):

Silas has proposed marriage and she horrified turns him down, but he's going to force her to get married to him. And the client has to, has to hear about this and ride to, to save the town as well as save Elsie C at the same time. Uh, the other set of white folks, um, are holed up in a cabin, the rest of the Cameron family, uh, uh, uh, our, our, uh, uh, and these white union veterans are being besieged in this little cabin by these black soldiers. And the scenes are almost like night of living dead with the monsters, trying to break into the cabinet and grab these white women and, you know, do whatever. And the white men tried to protect. So you have got, uh, trying to protect them. So you've got in the climates of the film,

what the critics have called Griffiths double rescue climax, where you have the Klan riding to the rescue of LC and the people in town.

Speaker 1 ([26:23](#)):

And then they have to hear about the people in the besieged cabin and go turn right around and ride after, try to, you know, try to save them and the way the sequence bills in terms of the rhythm of the editing. And, uh, the use of sort of propulsive action is a model on how to manipulate audience emotion and how to, uh, uh, build suspense by cinematic means what they call montage, the use of editing to achieve a desired effect. Um, that is probably the most imitated sequence of the film, uh, in order to, you know, build suspense. Um, it's a model for creating suspense and movies yet. Uh it's uh, it's, you know, it's, uh, it's a highly inflammatory sequence. Um, another very inflammatory sequence is the stocking of flora, the innocent, naive sprightly teenage girl, who, um, uh, despite the warnings of her brother goes off into the woods and is stocked by this monstrous black male, the Renegade black soldier, Gus. And again, you've got this buildup of horrific suspense leading to young flora, literally climbing a mountain to escape the clutches of the sky and jumping off the cliff rather than being ravaged by the brutal black buck, you know, uh, Gus and, uh, the brother trying to find her again as a three way editing between the monster and the helpless girl. And, uh, the brother tried to find her saver, but it's too late, you know, that leads to the formation of the Klan. And that leads to the climax that, uh, I just,

Speaker 3 ([28:26](#)):

Cameron is a stand in for Nathan Bedford Forrest to in reality. Yeah. Yes. So any idea how close to, to Bedford story this is, um, is pure fiction

Speaker 1 ([28:40](#)):

It's pure fiction. Yeah. Um, in fact, the way the film describes the formation of the Klan has absolutely nothing to do with the reality of the situation of what really happened, you know, um, it's just something contrived by Dixon in that novel and sort of enhanced by Griffith.

Speaker 3 ([29:00](#)):

Yes. And it was a huge success with what impact

Speaker 1 ([29:05](#)):

In 1908 or 1909. There was the formation of the national association for the advancement of colored people, the NAACP, um, they, uh, uh, plus a few other liberal organizations, uh, vehemently denounced birth of a nation. And, um, try to have the film censored in some cases successfully. Uh, the film was challenged, uh, in almost every major city, because in some, uh, there, there, there were racial incidents that, um, uh, that were the result of, you know, audiences being so outraged or so manipulated by the power of the imagery that they're, that they would confront black people right on the streets. You know, meanwhile, uh, there were organizations, uh, that were organizations that, um, uh, ended up, uh, uh, uh, forming, uh, demonstrations. Um, the largest and most successful was in Boston. Um, when the film opened at Boston NAACP and other organizations managed to get several thousand people, uh, in front of the theater to protest it.

Speaker 1 ([30:31](#)):

And that led to the banning of birth of the nation in Boston, and there were successful. Uh, it was successful censorship in, in other cities to Griffith, uh, publicly in vehemently denounced. The censorship

would write letters to the editors and editorial pieces and magazine articles. He even wrote a pamphlet that would accompany, uh, the distribution of birth of a nation, uh, in several towns and cities. Um, this led to a Supreme court decision, which, uh, very, you know, forthrightly stated that movies are not protected under first amendment, uh, protections that in fact, these products of these motion picture studios are simply, you know, products like any other business from any other business enterprise. They're not like books. And that ruling, uh, was pretty much the model until the early fifties. What does Supreme court reversed itself and stated, uh, for the first time that movies were protected under first amendment, uh, guidelines.

Speaker 3 ([31:50](#)):

It's amazing that that was in the early fifties during the McCarthy. That was very interesting. That's yeah, that doesn't seem to compute, but it's, it,

Speaker 1 ([31:57](#)):

That's very interesting that that's true. That's right. Because the movie, uh, was banned, I think in New York city, in the early fifties, it was called the miracle and Italian neorealist film, and it was banned as blasphemous and anti-religious and, um, it went all the way to the Supreme court. The Supreme court ruled that blasphemous are not real anti-religious or not it's protected.

Speaker 3 ([32:20](#)):

Yeah. And then that would have effect on all the others before and after as well. Am I correct in recalling that, uh, in the riots, um, about birth of a nation people tied,

Speaker 1 ([32:34](#)):

I've never come across that I've never come across that. So I don't know. Um, I know people were beaten badly, you know,

Speaker 3 ([32:44](#)):

I'm sorry. Whoa, what happened?

Speaker 1 ([32:48](#)):

No. Um, audiences would be white audiences would be so incest, you know, by, uh, the what's going on in the climax, the birth of a nation that they would storm out of the theaters and run into blacks on the streets and beat them up. You know, that's one of the reasons why the film was banned because it really incited people to, uh, violence,

Speaker 3 ([33:14](#)):

But you have the president of the United States.

Speaker 1 ([33:17](#)):

That's very interesting because when this controversy began to develop Wilson retracted the statement, that's kind of funny. And there's a certain irony to that because Griffith and Dixon himself, themselves has stated that, uh, many of the so-called facts in the film came directly from Woodrow. Wilson's five volume history of the American people, which Wilson had, uh, you know, produced when he was still president at Princeton before he was president of the United States.



Speaker 3 ([33:48](#)):

There's a historian who stamps, I mean, his imprimatur is on this. That that's the way it was. Yeah. And in fact, he wasn't, if he was a friend of Dixon's

Speaker 1 ([33:58](#)):

Yes, yes. But he kind of, uh, sort of distance himself from the whole County.

Speaker 3 ([34:04](#)):

It w you know, that African Americans had supported Wilson in untold numbers. Very interesting. And then he turned around and sold them down the river with, with denying them a rights that they had. Yeah. I mean, that's actually, Jim Crow

Speaker 1 ([34:20](#)):

Laws got to be more, you know, uh, he sold them out in Washington. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Well, you know, another interesting twist to this story is that, um, I, you know, I tell students that what top gun was in the mid eighties, sort of like a, uh, a recruitment poster for the air force, you know, birth of a nation was to the research is the KU Klux Klan in the 1920s. There's several ironies to this because, uh, Dixon, this rabid race, this race monitor, you know, uh, denounced the resurgence of the Klan. He was against this new newly formed organization. Um, he didn't want anything to do with the new Klan, which is rather interesting, but also, um, Griffith, vehemently defended the film. But as the years went on and he went into sort of retirement and semi obscurity, every once in a while, some film historians would dig them out, you know, and set them down for an interview, you know, and in an interview done in 1941 Griffith, uh, died in 19 eight, but in 1941, there's an interview in which he stated to this film historian that was up to him, um, birth of a nation would never be shown publicly.

Speaker 1 ([35:48](#)):

Again, it might be shown like to film students and in classes, but never exhibited publicly. He said, it's past its prime. Uh, we've moved on. Uh, the Negro people have moved on, you know, even he toward the end of his life had second thoughts about film. Well, not even toward the end of his life. I mean, the next film he made after that was, was intolerance, wasn't it? Yeah. That was sort of an answer to his critics, uh, because he was shocked at, uh, the reaction of, uh, you know, these groups. And so he wanted to prove, and in fact, he said, you know, you've just made the greatest movie ever produced. What do you do for an Encore? Okay, well, you know, resignation was three hours long. Okay. Intolerance, uh, would be even longer. And instead of telling one historical Epic story, that'd be four there's four stories intermingled throughout this, you know, three and a half hour movie.

Speaker 1 ([36:53](#)):

Uh, each story was about the role of prejudice and intolerance at different historical periods. Okay. And, um, technically it was even more of a challenge because they're used for historical periods that they had to recreate. Uh, one of the stories dealt with, uh, the collapse of Babylon, you know, by the Persian army. The second story was the passion and crucifixion of Christ. The third story was the Saint Bartholomew days massacre where these French Protestant Huguenots were, uh, gathered up and, you know, massacred by the French Catholic King and his army. And the fourth story was a modern day story about an unemployed factory worker who is, uh, justly convicted of a murder. And he's on his way to the gallows and his wife's gonna got the evidence to save him now. And so all four of the films, all of these stories built to four climaxes.



Speaker 1 ([37:59](#)):

But what was interesting is that he didn't just tell the first story and get her over with and go to, you know, the crucifixion of Christ and do that story, and then do the third new form. He didn't do them in that order. He mixed them all up so that you'd get scenes in the modern day, cut to Christ on his way to the cross cut, to, you know, uh, the three, you know, three musketeer type action, you know, cut to the, you know, orgies and Babylon, you know, and all fosters, the stores were built and built until there were like four client axes going on at the same. And so you would have chariots racing and sword fights and Christ being crucified to a die being led to the gallows and cars racing. And the editing was getting faster and faster and faster. The audience at the time had no idea what was going on. And the film was a huge flop.

Speaker 3 ([38:56](#)):

And in fact, a was the financial ruin of D D.

Speaker 1 ([38:59](#)):

It was the financial ruin of DW Griffith during the 1920s. I mean, you know, he had a very successful career doing some very powerful, fine movies, but, uh, he never quite financially or creatively recovered from the, uh, commercial, uh, you know, uh, uh, lack of success of, uh, intolerance. So by the time talking movies came along, this guy was a, hasn't been washed up and, uh, pretty much lived in semi obscurity and semi poverty till he died. Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([39:36](#)):

It's amazing. The one movie that he makes that deals, that, that glorifies war and hatred yeah. Is a tremendous commercial success. Yeah. Seeing what has happened and, and in, in some case, trying to make atonement for the social impact. Yeah. He makes this bigger extravagant,

Speaker 1 ([39:56](#)):

Huge flop. Yeah. Yeah. Yep.

Speaker 3 ([40:04](#)):

How tightly, in your opinion is birth of a nation tied to the resurrection of the Klan, the first 20th century Klan?

Speaker 1 ([40:15](#)):

Well, you know, there's a lot of evidence yeah. During the twenties birth of a nation, uh, was rereleased several times. And, um, there's gotta be some cause and effect there. Uh, I don't think anybody would deny that. Um, even when, uh, the film, even when talking pictures came along, they prepared a talking picture version, uh, which is still floating around, uh, to this day. Uh, the Klan uses the birth of a nation as a kind of recruitment device to this day. Yeah. And, you know, I show to my students a version of birth of a nation, and most students find it quite frankly, boring, you know, or, uh, so heavy handed as to be almost laughable. Uh, some of the more astute students can, you know, appreciate the technical achievements of the film, you know, realizing that when you go to a horror movie today, or when you go to a war movie today, or when you go to any kind of suspense action be today, you're going to see, uh, techniques that Griffith created now for this film. There's absolutely no denying there. Uh, but, uh, I, I've also had, uh, people vehemently object to my showing of the film in this class. Um, and that that's

always the interesting phenomenon. Yeah. Uh, and it's primarily older people that object to the film more than younger people,

Speaker 3 ([42:08](#)):

Uh, this association of publishers got together and they wanted to give the Klan as little ink as possible. So there is actually a dearth of newspaper accounts in 1925, July 4th, there was a meeting, a rally of the Klan in grand Rapids and a March, 3000 marchers Klan members, 15,000 observers. Wow. And grief. And at that point, because of legal action that the Klan, quite frankly, it was out to make money. I mean, this was a moneymaking business. Um, there was a court case, a, the kleagle who was supposed to come in and, and get things moving in Michigan, uh, was ousted from his position in the court records show that in, in Kent County, there were about 5,000 members. But of course it was kind of like the odd fellows in Mount pleasant. And the, and in fact, John Cumming said the odd fellows in Mount pleasant was the cover for the client. Really? Yeah. So, and upper peninsula, but they weren't always, it wasn't always true. I mean, the Klan targeted Catholics, Jews, uh, Italians, uh, any Mediterranean,

Speaker 1 ([43:15](#)):

Uh, in, in, uh, Saginaw where these antique warehouses, Trisha, and I like to go to these antique place, Legolas kind of stuff. And I was looking at a, um, a magazine from 1928 and it's, uh, it was something like Liberty. What are these popular magazines? Liberty was, it was, um, an election preview, the 1928 Al Smith Hoover election. And the, they had a series of articles, you know, leading up to the election. And the one that I just happened to see it was about, well, who is the Klan going to support in 1928? And I looked over the thing. It was kind of fascinating because, uh, there, wasn't not one, one word about race in the, in the, uh, article, uh, it was primarily the Klans views about immigration. Yeah. And it was kind of fascinating then. Of course they were anti-immigrant. Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([44:16](#)):

[inaudible] as long as if you were an imminent

Speaker 1 ([44:18](#)):

Yeah. Meaning, you know, Southern Europe or yeah. Eastern Europe.

Speaker 3 ([44:22](#)):

Yeah. That was you're. You're done. But if you were sweet, you were okay. Yeah. Or Erin, Erin, yes. Blonde and blue eyes. If you had to put it in a nutshell, the IM the impact of birth of a nation, what if somebody comes up to you on the street? How important is this film socially,

Speaker 1 ([44:38](#)):

Socially, uh, it reinforced extremely negative attitudes towards race, uh, in this country. I always tell students that this film has a lot to answer for. I think the reason that we were sort of transfixed by CNN coverage of the OJ trial, for example, uh, has to do with attitudes and values and stereotypes that perhaps were not created by birth of a nation, but were reinforced, uh, in, in very powerful visual ways. Uh, the film is not an encyclopedia of cinematic techniques. It's instance, it's an encyclopedia of, uh, negative racial attitudes towards black people, towards people of color. Um, and I think that's probably its greatest impact, its greatest social impact. It reinforced, uh, very, very divisive attitudes that we all carry around, whether you're black or white or Asian or whatever, we, we, uh, we have those attitudes locked into our consciousness and that's not good, but

Speaker 3 ([46:05](#)):

I'm still in effect us. I mean, comedian has no power to mine.

Speaker 1 ([46:12](#)):

Yeah. I hear that every day. I, you know, I, it's really funny. I, uh, I get more resistance from the people off Clint again, older people off campus, you know, this is just a lot of baloney, you know, it's just a movie, you know, it's only a movie, you know, it doesn't affect us one way or the other, you know, advertising doesn't bother us. And you know, I say, well, you know, uh, next time you go to a supermarket, okay. And you look down in your shopping cart and they ask yourself, why did you pick those brands? You know, why are you driving the model of car that you're driving now? Um, why do you, when you look in the mirror, you know, how are you dressed? You know, why are you dressed this way? You know, uh, what influences the kinds of choices that you make in every aspect of your lives, you know? And, but media has nothing to do with it.

Speaker 3 ([47:15](#)):

That's where we were. We were talking about older people who were objecting to you showing that. Yeah, because they, they, uh, they thought that this was, they came out of a much nastier background. They turned off the power. That's where we were. Yeah, that's right.