

*from*  
**THE MOVIES, MR. GRIFFITH,  
AND ME**

----- *Lillian Gish* -----

D. W. Griffith (1875–1948) was a popular and innovative Hollywood film director who made silent films in the early 20th century. His most famous film was *Birth of a Nation*, which appeared in 1915 and drew criticism from many African Americans for its depiction of blacks and its advocacy of white supremacy. The NAACP organized protests and boycotts of the film nationwide. In this selection from her autobiography, the actress Lillian Gish describes Griffith's conception of the film.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying Problems, Recognizing Bias**

What makes a film or novel "historically accurate"?

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One afternoon during the spring of 1914, while we were still working in California, Mr. Griffith took me aside on the set and said in an undertone, "After the others leave tonight, would you please stay."

Later, as some of the company drifted out, I realized that a similar message had been given to a few others. This procedure was typical of Mr. Griffith when he was planning a new film. He observed us with a smile, amused perhaps by our curiosity over the mystery that he had created.

I suspected what the meeting was about. A few days before, we had been having lunch at The White Kitchen, and I had noticed that his pockets were crammed with papers and pamphlets. My curiosity was aroused, but it would have been presumptuous of me to ask about them. With Mr. Griffith one did not ask; one only answered. Besides, I had learned that if I waited long enough he would tell me.

"I've bought a book by Thomas Dixon, called *The Clansman*. I'm going to use it to tell the truth about the War between the States. It hasn't been told accurately in history books. Only the winning side in a war ever gets to tell its story." He paused, watching the cluster of actors: Henry Walthall, Spottiswoode Aiken, Bobby Harron, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Elmer Clifton, George Siegmann, Walter Long, and me.

"The story concerns two families—the Stonemans from the North and the Camerons from the South." He added significantly, "I know I can trust you."

He swore us to secrecy, and to us his caution was understandable. Should his competitors learn of his new project, they would have films on the same subject completed before his work was released. He discussed his story plots freely only

over lunch or dinner, often testing them out on me because I was close-mouthed and never repeated what anyone told me....

Mr. Griffith didn't need the Dixon book. His intention was to tell his version of the War between the States. But he evidently lacked the confidence to start production on a twelve-reel film without an established book as a basis for his story. After the film was completed and he had shown it to the so-called author, Dixon said: "This isn't my book at all." But Mr. Griffith was glad to use Dixon's name on the film as author, for, as he told me, "The public hates you if it thinks you wrote, directed, and produced the entire film yourself. It's the quickest way to make enemies."

After the first rehearsal, the pace increased. Mr. Griffith worked, as usual, without a script. But this time his pockets bulged with books, maps, and pamphlets, which he read during meals and the rare breaks in his hectic schedule....

At first I didn't pay much attention to Mr. Griffith's concept of the film. His claim that history books falsified actual happenings struck me as most peculiar. At that time I was too naïve to think that history books would attempt to falsify anything. I've lived long enough now to know that the whole truth is never told in history texts. Only the people who lived through an era, who are the real participants in the drama as it occurs, know the truth. The people of each generation, it seems to me, are the most accurate historians of their time.

Soon sets were going up; costumes arrived; and mysterious crates, evidently filled with military equipment, were delivered....

When the final casting was announced, we learned that Ralph Lewis was to play the Honorable Austin Stoneman, the "uncrowned king of Capitol Hill." The character of Stoneman, a fiery political fanatic from the North, was patterned after the real-life Thaddeus Stevens, one of the legislators whose harsh policy toward the South wrecked President Lincoln's postwar plans.

Bobby Harron and Elmer Clifton were to play Stoneman's sons, and I was given the role of his daughter Elsie. Mary Alden was to be Stoneman's mulatto mistress Lydia Brown, whom Dixon described as "a woman of extraordinary animal beauty and the fiery temper of a leopardess."

George Siegmann was awarded the part of Silas Lynch, who, according to Dixon, was "a Negro of perhaps forty years, a man of charming features...." Walter Long was to be the renegade Negro Gus, and Elmo Lincoln, a magnificent strong man who would later swing through the trees as Tarzan, played the Negro who attacks Wallace Reid, the stalwart blacksmith.

There were practically no Negro actors in California then and, as far as we knew, only a few in the East. Even in minstrel shows, the parts were usually played by whites in blackface. The only scene in which actual Negroes appear in *The Birth* is the one in which the Stoneman boys, visiting the southern Camerons, are taken out to the plantation to see Negroes working in the cotton fields. When this scene was filmed in Death Valley, where the Negroes worked, they danced and

played their banjos for the visiting actors.

But one young Negro woman did play in the film—Madame Sul-Te-Wan. (We never did discover the origin of her name.) She was first employed to help us keep our dressing rooms clean at the studio. She was devoted to Mr. Griffith, and he in turn loved her. Later, when Madame was having financial difficulties, he sent her money to help herself and her small sons. She was one of the few friends near him when he died years later in Hollywood....

For President Lincoln, Mr. Griffith chose Joseph Henabery, a tall, thin man who could be made up to resemble Lincoln. The search for an appropriate Mary Todd Lincoln ended when he found a woman with an uncanny similarity to the First Lady working in wardrobe. Raoul Walsh was picked for the role of John Wilkes Booth. Members of Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet were chosen on the basis of facial resemblance to the historical characters. The other historical characters were re-created by Donald Crisp as General Grant, Howard Gaye as General Lee, and Sam de Grasse as Senator Sumner....

Although fact and legend were familiar to him, he did meticulous research for *The Birth*. The first half of *The Birth*, about the war itself, reflects his own point of view. I know that he also relied greatly on Harper's *Pictorial History of the Civil War*, Matthew Brady's *Civil War Photographs: Confederate and Union Veterans—Eyewitnesses on Location*; the Nicolay and Hay *Abraham Lincoln: A History*; and *The Soldier in Our Civil War: A Pictorial History of the Conflict 1861–1865*. For the second half, about Reconstruction, he consulted Thomas Dixon, and *A History of the American People* by Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson had taught history before going into politics, and Mr. Griffith had great respect for his erudition. For Klan material, he drew on a book called *Ku Klux Klan—Its Origin, Growth and Disbandment* by John C. Lester and D.L. Wilson. But he did not use the uniform that is worn by Klan members today. Instead he used the costumes that, according to Thomas Dixon, were worn by the earlier Klans—white and scarlet flowing robes with hood and mask to hide the features of rider and horse.

Brady's photographs were constantly consulted, and Mr. Griffith restaged many moments of history with complete fidelity to them. The photographs were used as guides for such scenes as Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and Sherman's march to the sea. He telegraphed a newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, for photographs of the interior of the state capital, which held a majority of Negro representatives after the war, and constructed the legislative chamber according to the photographs.

The largest interior was Ford's Theater, the setting of the assassination scene, which was done in one day on the lot. So great was Mr. Griffith's obsession with authenticity that he unearthed a copy of *Our American Cousin*, which had been performed at Ford's Theater on the night of the assassination, and restaged parts of it. In the actual filming, as Raoul Walsh, gun ready, steals into the Presidential box, the lines being spoken on the replica of the stage are precisely those spoken at the fateful moment on the night of April 14, 1865. This fidelity to facts was an

innovation in films.

Mr. Griffith knew the terrain of the battle fields, and he hired several Civil War veterans to scout locations similar to the original ones. After exploring the southern California country, they chose what later became the Universal lot for the countryside around Petersburg, Virginia, site of the last prolonged siege and final battle of the war.

He had studied maps of the major battles of the Civil War and, with the help of the veterans, laid out the battle fields. Trenches, breastworks, roads, brooks, and buildings were constructed to duplicate those of the actual battle fields. Troop movements were planned with the advice of the veterans and two men from West Point Military Academy. Civil War artillery was obtained from West Point and the Smithsonian Institution, for use when the camera was close.

Mr. Griffith also sent to the Smithsonian for historical records and then went over the documents with his advisers. But in the end he came to his own conclusions about historical facts. He would never take the opinion of only one man as final.

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