

# 1

## The Beginnings of Film Narrative

D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

### D. W. GRIFFITH'S BACKGROUND AND EARLY CAREER

D. W. Griffith, arguably the most influential pioneer in the art of the narrative film, was born on a farm near La Grange, Kentucky in 1875, ten years after the Civil War. He came from a family of wealth on his mother's side. His father, known as "Roaring Jake" and "Thunder Jake" for his oratory skills, achieved glory on the battlefield as a colonel in the Civil War. But Griffith's father was also a wanderer and a gambler who left his family in debt when he died. Hence, after Griffith's mother moved the family to St. Louis, Griffith took a number of jobs to help his mother financially and never finished high school. A job at a bookstore sparked a passion for literature, and his prime ambition in life was to be a writer.<sup>1</sup>

He was also, at an early age, intrigued by the theater. His eventual career as an actor, he claimed, was the result of advice he received from a stage manager who told him that a good playwright had to be an actor first. Although his literary success was limited (he produced one play and published one poem),<sup>2</sup> his success as an actor was more considerable. After playing bit parts in repertory companies in St. Louis, he went on tour with various productions all over the country, often playing leading roles and receiving good notices. Eventually he settled in San Francisco where he gained steady employment and acted in better quality

plays. He was on tour in Minnesota when the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 occurred. Rather than returning to the devastated city, he decided to try his fortunes as a playwright and actor in New York, where his career took an unexpected turn.

Married and short of cash, he took the advice of a colleague and approached a movie production company, the Edison Studio, for work as a scriptwriter. His scripts were too complex and expensive to produce, but film companies were eager to use stage actors because of the prestige they brought to film from the theater. Thus Griffith was hired not to write for films but to act in them. After playing a lumberjack in an Edison film directed by Edwin S. Porter, *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908), he got work, again as an actor, for a rival studio, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. He came at an auspicious moment. The company was flooded by the demand for short fiction films and, after a brief time acting, he was offered the opportunity to direct. Between 1908 and 1913 Griffith directed over 450 short films for the Biograph Company, molding the film medium into a sophisticated instrument for creating dramatic and suspenseful film narratives.

In order to appreciate the significance of Griffith's contribution to the creation of narrative film art, it is necessary to recall the state of the fiction film when Griffith began making movies in 1908. Film viewing by then was no longer a novelty but a regular mode of entertainment. People saw movies in small storefront theaters called nickelodeons because the price of admission was usually a nickel. Audiences saw anywhere from fifteen- to sixty-minute programs of short, mostly fiction films, lasting up to ten minutes each. But these films did not tell stories very well. They comprised a series of loosely spliced scenes or tableaux, shot with a static camera in long takes (sometimes lasting up to ninety seconds) with the camera remaining at a fixed distance from the action. The scenes proceeded in a strict chronological order, and the temporal and spatial relations between the shots were often ambiguous or unclear. The most common type of shot was the long shot, in which the human figure fills only a small portion of the lower quadrant of the frame, much as the human figure appears in the proscenium of stage dramas. In a theater, however, even though the actors may appear tiny, especially to spectators in the last row of the balcony, their words loom large, conveying dramatic excitement through the expressiveness of the human voice. This resource, of course, was not possible in the then-silent medium of film, which relied on static printed title cards to convey exposition or dialogue. Griffith found ways to compensate for the lack of spoken words, increasing the

drama and emotional power of his fiction films in three ways. First, he paid close attention to elements of the filmic *mise-en-scène*. Second, he photographed his scenes in more imaginative ways. Third, he added complexity to his narratives through editing.<sup>3</sup>

## GRIFFITH'S REFINEMENT OF NARRATIVE FILM TECHNIQUES

### MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The term *mise-en-scène* denotes all the elements of film direction that overlap with the art of theater. Thus a film's *mise-en-scène* involves the director's choice of actors and how they are directed, the way the scene is lit, the choice of setting or set design, props, costumes, and make-up. Since Griffith was an actor before he came to film, it is not surprising that he carried over his experience from the stage to the screen. Griffith, more than other contemporary filmmakers, took the time to cast actors who looked the part and carefully rehearsed the players before shooting the scenes (a practice rare in early filmmaking). He also chose costumes, props, and settings with an eye to providing narrative information that would enhance the film's dramatic effect. Griffith realized, moreover, that blatantly artificial painted background details, common in early films, would undermine the realism of filmed fictions. In a pre-Griffith film such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), for example, a fairly realistic rendering of a railroad telegraph office is marred by a painted clock on the wall, its hands perpetually set at nine o'clock. Griffith insisted on the construction of authentic-looking three-dimensional props and sets for his films. He also brought increased realism to the screen by directing the players to act in a restrained, natural, less flamboyantly theatrical style.

### THE ENFRAMED IMAGE

Griffith did more than improve the *mise-en-scène* of early cinema. Early on he began to shape and arrange the profilmic elements of the *mise-en-scène* into an emotionally charged picture language by exploiting the dramatic potential of techniques specific to the film medium. The term profilmic refers to the objects placed in front of the camera to be photographed—the actors, sets, props, etc. It is a critically useful term because it calls attention to the difference between objects that exist in the world before they are photographed and these same objects once they have been enframed on celluloid. The choices the director makes in fram-

ing the images, whether they are in long shot or close-up, shot from a high or low angle, shot with a moving or static camera, or even how they are composed within the frame, can add powerful dramatic effects to the filmed action.

Griffith was especially sensitive to the impact of the close-up, a shot in which the head and shoulders of a character fill the screen. As noted above, in most film dramas prior to Griffith, the camera stayed back, showing all of the action in long or full shots. By moving the camera closer to a character at crucial moments of emotional significance in the narrative, Griffith made it possible for spectators to better observe and hence to relate empathetically to the expressions on the character's face, thereby increasing their emotional involvement in the story. Griffith did not limit his close-ups to the human face. His insertion of close-up details of a significant prop such as a gun or a flower also enabled him to direct the spectator's attention to objects that were crucial to the dramatic unfolding of the plot. In most narrative films before Griffith viewers had to pick out the significant details of the action from a mass of superfluous and contingent visual information. Griffith performs this job for us. By deciding when to insert a close-up of an actor's face or a detail of the film's *mise-en-scène*, he determines what viewers focus their attention on, as well as the most dramatic moment for a plot revelation. In addition, close-ups of objects in Griffith's films are often imbued with subtle symbolic resonance.

Griffith also understood the dramatic power of pulling the camera back, far away from the action. Extreme long shots, in which a small human figure is dominated by the landscape, can make characters seem vulnerable to larger forces beyond their control. Also, by incorporating spectacular panoramic shots of landscapes into his films—waterfalls, snowstorms, massive battle scenes—he enhanced his narratives with a grandeur and scope that far exceeded what was possible in even the most extravagantly produced stage dramas. Further, as we shall see in the analysis of a sequence from *The Birth of a Nation*, these panoramic landscape shots, like Griffith's close-ups of objects, often functioned symbolically in the narrative.

Griffith did not "invent" the use of the close-up in film, nor was he the first to use extreme long shots. A close-up had appeared in one of Edison's very first films, *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, made in 1888, and the pioneering films of the Lumière brothers in 1895 included panoramic scenes taken in extreme long shot. Not until Griffith came along, however, were shots taken from various distances from the camera systematically com-

bined into sequential wholes to produce dramatic narrative effects. Karel Reisz in *The Technique of Film Editing* succinctly sums up Griffith's achievement:

Griffith's fundamental discovery . . . lies in his realisation that a film sequence must be made up of incomplete shots whose order and selection are governed by dramatic necessity. Where Porter's camera had impartially recorded the action from a distance (i.e., in long shot), Griffith demonstrated that the camera could play a positive part in telling the story. By splitting an event into short fragments and recording each from the most suitable camera position, he could vary the emphasis from shot to shot and thereby control the dramatic intensity of the events as the story progressed.<sup>4</sup>

## EDITING

Once Griffith had taken the first crucial steps of breaking a scene down into numerous shots (instead of photographing the action in one lengthy, static long shot), he was faced with the problem of reconnecting the shots smoothly, so that what was in reality a discontinuous sequence of separate shots would appear to the viewer to be a smooth and continuous action taking place in a unified time and space. He wanted spectators to maintain the illusion of watching a seamless flow of reality and not become distracted or disoriented by jerky edits that called attention to the film medium. In order to accomplish this effect, Griffith systematically developed the editing device known as the "match" or the match cut.<sup>5</sup>

The match cut, which has become a standard convention in the cinema, refers to any element in conjoined shots that smooths the transition from one shot to the next, so that viewers do not notice the cut or lose their orientation in relation to the screen space. In a movement match, for example, if a gesture of a character raising a hand to her face is begun in a long shot, the gesture must be smoothly continued in the subsequent close-up shot so that the viewer focuses on the gesture. The seemingly continuous gesture thus masks the fact that there has been a cut. In a direction match, the direction in which a person or object is moving is kept consistent across the splice. That is, in a chase sequence, a character moving across the screen from left to right must continue in the same direction from shot to shot. If the character exits screen right at the end of a shot, he or she must enter from screen left in the subsequent shot. If the character were instead to exit frame right and enter the next shot from frame right, it would appear that she had turned around and reversed direction.

To help maintain the spectator's orientation in a coherent screen space, Griffith made systematic use of the eye-line match. If he had established that Person A was positioned to the right of Person B, but then wanted to move the camera closer to photograph each of the characters separately for greater dramatic emphasis, he was careful to match the directions of the two characters' eye lines (or glances) so that they would seem to converge. Person A would look screen left, while person B would look screen right. If the actors both looked off in the same direction (let's say they both looked screen right), viewers would no longer have the impression that the two were facing each other and would lose their orientation in screen space. By carefully matching his shots in the ways described above, Griffith succeeded in breaking down the action of his narratives into a number of separate shots, creating dramatic emphasis, without drawing attention to the medium or confusing his audience.<sup>6</sup>

Griffith also refined the use of transitional editing devices such as fade-ins and fade-outs and iris-ins and iris-outs to heighten the impact of his narratives. In a fade-in, a shot begins in darkness and gradually brightens until the image appears fully exposed. In a fade-out, the opposite occurs: the image slowly fades to black. In an iris-in, a black screen opens from darkness in an expanding circle of light. An iris-out reverses the process. These optical devices allowed Griffith control over the pacing of the narrative (a fade or iris effect could be rapid, or very slow and drawn out), and heightened its dramatic effect. When a sad or ominous action ends with a shot that fades to black, for example, the effect is to make the action seem all the more troubling. Griffith also used these transitional devices to signal that time has elapsed from the end of one sequence to the beginning of the next. While these editing devices do call attention to the medium, they quickly became familiar conventions, and audiences were not distracted by their artificiality.

More significant than Griffith's refinement of methods for smooth continuities and his use of creative transitions to signal time ellipses was his creative development of associative editing techniques. These are editing devices that cue viewers to mentally construe the screen action in a way that greatly increases their mental participation in the story. Griffith especially made dramatic use of the point-of-view or POV shot. A POV shot follows a shot in which a character looks pointedly at something offscreen, revealing, from the character's point of view, what the character sees. Through the technique of the POV shot, viewers are mentally lifted out of their theater seats and put in the place of a character up on the screen, seeing the action as if through that character's eyes. The POV shot is often

followed by a reaction shot, a shot in which the camera captures the character's reaction to what was seen in the POV shot. The combination of a POV shot followed by a reaction shot is especially powerful because it gives us two ways of identifying with on-screen characters. First we identify with them because we are seeing through their eyes, and then we identify with the reactions we see on their faces. Especially powerful effects can be created when the reaction of the character is unexpected. (For example, a character might see something horrifying, and smile.)<sup>7</sup>

The associative editing technique for which Griffith is best known is the cross-cut. A cross-cut is an alternation (a cutting back and forth) from one line of action to another, giving the impression that two or more spatially separated but plot-related events are occurring simultaneously. Although crosscutting appears in rudimentary form in a few early narrative films, the standard narrative practice when Griffith began directing in 1908 was to follow the actions of one character or a set of characters in an uninterrupted linear chronology. Griffith soon realized that more narrative excitement could be generated if he systematically intercut or alternated between two or more narrative threads happening simultaneously, thus thickening his plots by giving the spectator greater knowledge than the characters have. At the climax of *The Lonely Villa* (1909), for example, Griffith intercut three spatially separate simultaneous actions: (1) Shots of a mother and her three little girls alone in their isolated country house because the father has been called away on business; (2) shots of three male intruders trying to break into the house; and (3) shots of the father, who, after telephoning home, frantically rushes to the rescue in a borrowed gypsy wagon. Here the crosscutting of the three actions creates tremendous excitement, pace, and suspense, generating the question: Will the father get home before the intruders get to his wife and children? So much tension is built up by the crosscutting that, when the father arrives in the nick of time, the relief is enormous, even to audiences today. This crosscutting device became famous as the Griffith last-minute rescue, a convention that made failed last-minute rescues (the hero does not make it in time to prevent disaster) all the more devastating. Through constant experimentation with this technique, Griffith honed it into an increasingly powerful and complex narrative tool. Griffith became so excited by the potentials of crosscutting that in *Intolerance* (1916), the film he made after *The Birth of a Nation*, he told four separate stories, each taking place in different historical periods. At the end of the film, for a grand finale, he cut back and forth between the climaxes of the various tales.

## THE NARRATOR'S POINT OF VIEW

Griffith's attention to details of mise-en-scène, his cinematography, and his editing innovations not only enabled him to increase the dramatic power of his fictions, they also made it possible for him to fulfill another important storytelling role—the imparting of the narrator's point of view or commentary on the action. Narratives in any medium are rarely innocent. There is always some point to any story. But film narratives, because of their photographic realism, appear on the surface to be presenting events objectively or neutrally. Apparently unaware of the rhetorical power of his own pioneering film techniques, Griffith believed that the historical events he retold in his blockbuster feature film *The Birth of a Nation* were objectively rendered—the unvarnished truth. In an interview that came out shortly after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* he predicted that “in less than ten years . . . the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. . . . There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history.”<sup>8</sup> But a close analysis of Griffith's techniques in *The Birth of a Nation* demonstrates his skill in imbuing both his narrative actions and historical reenactments with strong moral and political implications. Implicitly and explicitly, Griffith's opinions on “history,” many of them repugnant, are expressed throughout this controversial film.

It is one of the sad ironies of film history that Griffith's artistic skill and mastery of his medium was first fully realized in a film that expressed a racist Southerner's view of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. *The Birth of a Nation* was an adaptation of a play by the white supremacist Thomas Dixon, Jr., which was based on two of his novels, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905). The hero of *The Birth of a Nation* is Ben Cameron (played by Henry B. Walthall), the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, the terrorist organization Griffith celebrates in the film for restoring white supremacy during the post-Civil War era. Griffith depicts black men who are not faithful Uncle Toms as dangerous, power-hungry rapists who equate political equality with the freedom to sexually possess white women. According to this logic, the violent overthrow of black power by the Klan at the end of the film is morally justified. Because Griffith not only told a story in *The Birth of a Nation*, but also conveyed strong ideological and political beliefs, the film provides vivid examples of how, consciously or unconsciously, a director can imbue a story with the director's beliefs and attitudes. To see in detail how Grif-

fith's techniques function both dramatically and ideologically, we shall take a close look at a twenty-shot sequence from the film.

The sequence under analysis relates the action just before Gus (Walter Long), a renegade ex-slave who has joined the Northern army, proposes "marriage" to Flora (Mae Marsh), the little pet sister of Ben Cameron. I put marriage in quotes because even though Gus's request seems innocent enough if you just consider the title card—"I'm a Captain now and I want to marry"—the visual subtext of the film suggests something else. Flora reacts to the proposal by running away in terror. When Gus pursues her, she flings herself from a cliff to her death. When her brother discovers her broken body, the strong implication is that Gus has raped and murdered her. As if this had actually been the case, Ben uses his sister's blood in a ceremonial ritual to spur on the Ku Klux Klan to a mission of vengeance against the newly empowered blacks, a mission that begins with the lynching of Gus and ends in the violent suppression of black power in the South. If we look carefully at just twenty-one shots from the Gus stalks Flora sequence, the incidents that lead up to Flora's fatal encounter with Gus, it will become evident why, despite the seeming innocence, even respectability, of Gus's proposal, audiences know it is not marriage Gus is after.

### SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: "GUS STALKS FLORA" IN *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*

Shot 1 of the sequence is a fade-in to a long shot of Flora, who has left the safety of her home to fetch water from the spring for her mother. She enters from screen left into a small clearing in a heavily forested landscape. Although the spring water she seeks would supposedly be within walking distance from her house, in this shot she seems suddenly transported to a very remote place.<sup>9</sup> As far as the eye can see, there are no signs of civilization, only huge towering trees. The landscape illustrates how well Griffith understood the potential symbolic resonance of the background or setting against which a dramatic sequence is staged in a film. The forest through which Flora passes on her way to the spring evokes an archetypal dream landscape, the woods of fairy tales and myths where innocent little girls carrying buckets or baskets are likely to meet up with big bad wolves.

Flora appears in a long shot, her body tiny in relation to the vastness of the forest. Here the long shot of Flora functions dramatically to increase our sense of her smallness and vulnerability. The way in which



Figure 1. The long shot of Flora functions dramatically to increase our sense of her smallness and vulnerability. The dark shadow at the base of the frame functions as foreshadowing. (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, Film Preservation Associates.)

Flora is lit, the light coming from behind her, creates a halo effect around her head. This technique, referred to as “angel lighting,” adds to our sense of her innocence. A dark shadow cutting a diagonal wedge at the base of the frame into which she is headed functions as an ominous (and literal) foreshadowing of the doom she will meet as the result of her entry into the forest. (See figure 1.)

At this point Griffith might well have continued to follow Flora on her journey to the spring. But at the moment she enters the shadowy portion of the image and before she exits the frame, he interrupts her action with a cross-cut to Gus (shot 2) standing by a fence and seeming to peer after her. The cross-cut to Gus sets up dramatic irony, giving the viewer information that the protagonist, Flora, does not have—that Gus is following her into the woods. Thus, in shot 3, when Griffith cuts back to Flora heading deeper into the forest, blissfully unaware of the threat that we know has materialized, he increases our anxiety for her well-being. A cross-cut back to Gus (shot 4), however, dispels some of the anxiety. Gus seems to have had second thoughts about pursuing Flora and turns back.

The first two shots of Gus in this sequence provide another example of Griffith's sensitivity to the symbolic potential of a film's setting or mise-en-scène. It is significant that in these two shots Gus shares the frame equally with a slatted fence which juts out diagonally on the left side of the screen. (See figure 2.) In a film obsessed with the threat of breached boundaries between blacks and whites, the image of a fence appearing large in the frame as a black man is about to pursue a young white woman into a forest is anything but accidental. Gus is shown to hesitate at the fence, as if the fence represents a kind of societal superego. He hesitates, however, very reluctantly looking back in the direction of Flora even as he seems to turn away from his pursuit. As a result, the question is raised in the viewer's mind: Will Gus's internal restraints be sufficient to keep him from pursuing Flora in a society where restraints have recently been weakened? Griffith has already established that societal restraints have been undermined by the reckless policies of Reconstruction, "the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers" mentioned earlier in a title, and by a law that has recently passed guaranteeing blacks "Equal Marriage." Here Griffith gives us a powerful dose of his ideology (that Reconstructionist policies are reckless and dangerous) through an image of Gus's reluctance to stop at the fence—without the need for a title.

In shot 5 Griffith cuts back to Flora, who has arrived at her destination: the spring where she is to fetch water for her mother. Here we see Flora in a full shot bending down to fill her bucket. Shot 6 is a close-up of the bucket being filled with spring water. Griffith then cuts back to a full shot of Flora as she finishes her task and wipes her wet hands on her dress. Griffith could easily have conveyed the same narrative information in one shot, but he chooses to present it in three separate shots joined together through match cuts on Flora's movements.

It is interesting to speculate why Griffith took the trouble to insert the detail of Flora's bucket being filled with water rather than presenting the action in one long shot. For part of the answer we need only consider the techniques of nineteenth-century novelists such as Charles Dickens, whose literary techniques Griffith often drew upon for inspiration in the construction of his films.<sup>10</sup> Dickens is renowned for the care he took to render his fictional world in minute detail, in order to enhance the reader's impression that it was real. By focusing on the detail of the bucket being filled, Griffith too adds verisimilitude to his fictional world. The close-up of the bucket also gives the action dramatic emphasis. Fetching water at the spring was Flora's goal, her reason for the journey through the forest. By giving emphasis to this action through the close-up, Griffith



Figure 2. In a film obsessed with the threat of boundary breakdowns between blacks and whites, the image of a fence appearing large in the frame as a black man is about to pursue a young white woman is anything but accidental. (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, Film Preservation Associates.)

allows the viewer to breathe a sigh of relief. Flora's task is done. Nothing has happened to her. She can now return home.

But there is, I think, one more effect of Griffith's close-up here. The close shot of the bucket dipping into the water emphasizes the symbolic resonance of the spring. Springs, with their pure water, are often associated with virgins, but in myths and fairy tales, springs are also associated with the violation of virgins. Ingmar Bergman's film *Virgin Spring*, for example, is based on a legend in which a young girl on her way to church is accosted deep in a forest by roaming vagabonds who rape and murder her. At the very spot in the forest where her violation occurred, a spring miraculously appears. Because of the archetypal associations of springs with both virgins and the violation of virgins, Griffith's close-up heightens the sexual foreboding and anxiety that already infuse this sequence. Adding to this effect is the female imagery suggested by the close-up—a circular orifice in the midst of heavy foliage.

In shot 8 Griffith crosscuts from Flora back to Gus. Gus now appears

in the same forest location where Flora appeared in shot one. Here Griffith indicates through the location match that Gus has not turned back. He is following Flora. Because we have seen Gus turning back from his pursuit of Flora in shot 4, this shot comes as a shock, illustrating how good Griffith was at manipulating audience emotions through the careful ordering or editing of his shots. He is playing with our expectations: first teasing us to think the danger to Flora has diminished, only to surprise us now with the information that Gus has moved beyond the fence and is still on her trail.

Our knowledge that Gus is in pursuit makes the next series of shots (shots 11 through 15) all the more alarming. Flora, rather than going straight home after filling the bucket with water, becomes distracted by a squirrel in a tree. Griffith conveys the depth of her distraction by cutting from shots of Flora gazing screen right to POV shots of a close-up of a squirrel from Flora's perspective. The squirrel appears surrounded by an iris, or circular matte, also signifying that we are seeing it through Flora's eyes. Griffith then cuts back to reaction shots of Flora from a reverse angle, capturing her fascination and delight in observing the forest creature.

Aside from making us worry that Flora is so involved with the squirrel that she will be taken unaware by Gus, Griffith's cuts between the squirrel and reaction shots of Flora have other narrative functions. Flora's interest in the squirrel provides a vivid visual means of characterization. Small animals like squirrels convey a sense of harmlessness, helplessness, and innocence, and these characteristics spill over onto Flora by association. If Griffith had depicted her as fascinated instead by the sight of a spider eating a fly or two moles mating, the effect would be quite different. Finally, and most crucially, cutting back and forth between Flora and the squirrel artificially prolongs the moment before the dreaded outcome we all fear, when Gus reveals his presence to Flora. Literary critics refer to this technique of delaying a denouement as "retardation." Here, the 13 shots this sequence devotes to Flora interacting with the squirrel enable the tension to build, in the cinematic equivalent of foreplay.

The rhythmic alternation between shots of Flora and the squirrel is suddenly interrupted by shot 16, a cross-cut to Gus emerging, as if from out of a cave, from the murky depths of the forest. Tangled, dead branches fill the top third of the frame. Gus stares intently, crouched and predatory, creating the impression that he is more a wild beast than a man. This shot comes as a shock not only because of the sudden appearance of Gus, but also because the film's *mise-en-scène* has totally changed. Up



Figure 3. Griffith was intuitively aware that as an image gets bigger on the screen, the intensity of its emotional effect grows proportionately. (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, Film Preservation Associates.)

to this point we have been in a sunny forest filled with leafy foliage. But now, Gus appears surrounded by darkness with an eerily illuminated tangle of dead white branches framing his head, a skeletal configuration associating Gus with death. While Gus's facial expression is neutral (he's not foaming at the mouth or gnashing his teeth like a stage villain), the black-and-white color symbolism and nightmarish setting in which he is placed tell us all we need to know about his evil nature.

Shot 17, a POV shot, reveals the not-unexpected object of Gus's intent stare—Flora, who is rocking back and forth on a log, still fascinated with the squirrel. The camera has moved even closer to her now, framing her in medium shot, conveying the impression that Gus is moving in on her. Like the squirrel, she too appears in an iris, but now we know that the watcher is not a benign child gazing at a cute forest creature, but an evil stalker staring at a cute little girl. In a foreshadowing of her doom, the screen has darkened within the circular iris that surrounds her. Shot 18 is a POV shot of the squirrel from Flora's perspective, followed by shot 19, a reaction shot of Flora who continues to rock on the



Figure 4. Because we know we are looking at Flora through Gus's eyes, her actions become sexualized. (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, Film Preservation Associates.)

log and look up at the squirrel in innocent delight. Shot 20 is the most ominous in the sequence. The camera has moved up to a big close up of Gus. Just his face fills the left half of the frame; on the right are the dead tangled skeletal branches. (See figure 3.) Griffith was intuitively aware that as an image gets bigger on the screen, the intensity of its emotional effect grows proportionately. When a character is sympathetic, a big close-up can increase our feeling of intimacy and deepen our identification with the character. When a character is unsympathetic, the big close-up has the opposite effect, making the character seem threatening and intrusive because it is "in our face."

The intense effect of the big close-up in shot 20 heightens the effect of shot 21. Here Flora appears as in shot 19, from Gus's point of view in a medium shot. She is laughing and blowing kisses at the squirrel. (See figure 4.) If we were to see this shot in almost any other context it would connote innocence and joy. But because we know we are looking at Flora from Gus's perspective her actions take on new significance. She not only seems terribly vulnerable because we know she is being watched by someone with evil designs, but her actions of blowing kisses and rocking on

the log become sexualized. (A student once suggested that Flora's rocking was masturbatory, a thought that would not have occurred to him, I suspect, if this shot had appeared in another context.) Through the use of the POV shot here, Griffith places the spectator inside Gus's subjectivity and invites us to participate in a perverse excitement.

This perverse excitement is all the more heightened, we might speculate, because, as Christian Metz observes in *The Imaginary Signifier*, his influential psychoanalytic investigation into the pleasure and fascination of cinema, we are all voyeurs when we go to the movies.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not the cinematic scenario involves explicitly sexual scenes, an important part of the excitement and appeal of most narrative films is the illusion that we are secret observers looking into private lives and worlds. We can watch a film's characters in their most private moments to our heart's content, while they remain unaware that they are being observed. Griffith gives us the double pleasure of spying on Gus (who is hidden in the dark like the film spectator), while Gus is spying on Flora. Perhaps the moviegoer's secret kinship with Gus's voyeurism accounts for the extra appeal, the *frisson*, of these eye-line shots of Flora.

### ART AND IDEOLOGY: RACIST REPRESENTATION IN *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*

Few moviegoers, I suspect, would openly acknowledge a kinship with Gus. In fact, as the analysis of the above shots has demonstrated, everything about the way Griffith has portrayed Gus cinematically makes us disavow any association with him. His animal-like gestures and the symbolic suggestiveness of the *mise-en-scène* make him an image of pure evil, reflecting Dixon's racist view that African Americans are less than human.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Griffith portrays Flora's brother Ben Cameron (who tries to rescue Flora from Gus but arrives too late) and his Ku Klux Klan followers as forces of transcendental purity and goodness. At the end of the film, they swoop down dressed in white to rescue Southern womanhood from armed and dangerous black men whose goal, like Gus's, is presented as blatantly sexual. In the final climactic shots of the film, images of rioting blacks are crosscut with images of the Ku Klux Klan, dressed in white and riding in orderly formations. The drastic contrast Griffith sets up between the way the white heroes and the black villains are depicted seems laughable today, so blatantly does it expose the racist ideology at the heart of this film. But this example, as well as the sequence of shots depicting Gus as an evil beast-like predator of Flora, serves, nevertheless, as a clear illustration of how a film director can, in the direc-

tion of the actor's performance, choice of mise-en-scène, framing of the shots, and editing patterns, project into seemingly neutral photographic representations deeply held cultural and psychological fantasies.

There has been a good deal of critical controversy over how much of the racism in *The Birth of a Nation* was Griffith's and how much was just a reflection of Dixon's beliefs. But placing the blame for the racist representations on one or the other of these two men ignores the pervasive racism in American society in 1915. The film came out during a backlash against progress toward racial equality in this country. Jim Crow laws had recently been instituted in the South, and for the first time in history, black and white government workers were segregated under Woodrow Wilson's administration. As the film historian Russell Merritt observes, in both of the novels on which *The Birth of a Nation* was based, Dixon "rode the back of current fears spawned by the large immigration of Southern Negroes to Northern cities, the waves of immigrants pouring in from Eastern Europe, and the abiding popularity of alarmist social theories."<sup>13</sup> *The Birth of a Nation*, which was a phenomenal box-office success, would never have become the enormously popular film that it did unless it struck a chord with members of the dominant white society who flocked to see it, and who were all too eager to accept Griffith's filmed "history" as truth.

Apparently even Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States and former political scientist and historian, accepted Griffith's biased account of Reconstruction as factual. After seeing the film at a special screening at the White House arranged by Thomas Dixon, an old college friend of Wilson's, Wilson was reported to have exclaimed: "It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."<sup>14</sup> Later, the White House denied that it had sanctioned the film, but most historians accept that Wilson did respond to the film with these approving words when he first saw it.<sup>15</sup>

Griffith, it must also be remembered, was born in the South only ten years after the Civil War, and was the son of a Confederate colonel. Thus, he grew up incorporating a set of widespread cultural assumptions and beliefs which the historian Everett Carter calls the "plantation illusion." Carter argues that the plantation illusion "is based primarily upon a belief in a golden age of the antebellum South, an age in which feudal agrarianism provided the good life for wealthy, leisured, kindly, aristocratic owner and loyal, happy, obedient slave."<sup>16</sup> This mythic garden of civilization (epitomized in *The Birth of a Nation* by Dr. Cameron's idyllic plantation), was destroyed in the Civil War by a supposedly envious,

vengeful, hypocritical North who punished and humiliated the South by giving the former slaves political power. Carter understands the plantation illusion's insistence on the black man, and especially the mulatto, as a sexual predator of white women, a theme which obsessively runs throughout *The Birth of a Nation*, as a key component of plantation illusion mythology.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the real predators were white males with power over women slaves. By projecting<sup>18</sup> their lawless sexuality onto black men, whom they can then hate, revile, and punish with impunity, white men are able to protect the illusion that they are pure, lawful and restrained. Interestingly in this regard, Gus and Silas Lynch, both lawless men who lust after white women, are played by white actors wearing unconvincing blackface. Scratch the black façade and underneath the leering exteriors of the film's prime villains are white men.<sup>19</sup>

The study of Griffith's pioneering techniques in *The Birth of a Nation* illuminates his achievement in molding the film medium into a vehicle for transforming ideologically and psychologically charged fantasies into dramatic fictions that seemed stunningly real. Not everyone, of course, bought into the truth of the film's representations. The NAACP declared in its annual report the year the film was released that "Every resource of a magnificent new art has been employed with an undeniable attempt to picture Negroes in the worst possible light."<sup>20</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* sparked riots and protests against its racist representations in many cities, and the film was refused license for exhibition in Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Ohio.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the huge box-office success of the film in 1915, and the conviction held by many, including the president of the United States, that Griffith's film presented an objective, truthful rendering of Reconstruction, serve as an early warning for viewers. We should never trust film as a transparent reflection of events in the external world and we should especially mistrust the idea that film can objectively re-enact the past. *The Birth of a Nation* is clearly not history but a cultural illusion written with lightning, the lightning of the powerful picture language of film articulated by its first master.