

Process Paper

Every Friday night, my family sits down to watch a movie together. We debate the merits of a film amongst ourselves, which sparked my interest in film criticism. For this year's National History Day theme, *Debate and Diplomacy in History: Successes, Failures, Consequences*, I wanted to explore films that left a mark on both the film industry and history itself. The reason D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* piqued my interest simply because I was eager to watch the film for myself and to make my own judgments about why it has been so controversial for the past 100 years.

I initially considered beginning my research with a screening of the film. With a runtime of three hours, however, I wanted context for what I would be seeing and what I should look out for. Thus, I read several articles that provided background information on the film. I then turned to research databases to learn more about the film's reception at the time of its premiere. Once I felt armed with information, I watched the film in its entirety. After consulting the primary source, I had several questions that drove me back to research databases and also to some of Griffith's earlier films. Although it was imperative I watch the film myself, I feel my research questions were better answered by articles that contextualized both the film's cinematic achievements and its subsequent racist outcry.

From the outset, I knew I wanted to present my project as a website because it is important for my viewers to experience the video clips and film stills first-hand. As I watched the film, I took plenty of screenshots and timestamps. I then created a page for each side of the debate, along with pages for general information about the film and its enduring legacy. There was so much I wanted to include, but this layout helped keep me focused on my thesis argument.

Since much has been written about both the film-making techniques and the film's racist depiction of Blacks, I focused my historical argument on the delayed reaction to its bigoted content. I contend the film became a symbol of white supremacy not necessarily because of its content but because of the way it was leveraged by the NAACP and urban

leagues when Blacks were still trying to carve out a respected and equal position in American society.

This topic is significant to history for a multitude of reasons. Artistically, the film boasted groundbreaking achievements that still define what we enjoy in movies today. Historically, *The Birth of a Nation* demonstrates how dangerous it can be to present only one, biased version of events. Finally, from a contemporary perspective, this film is still relevant 100 years after its premiere. The motif of Blacks somehow not being worthy is echoed in the #BlackLivesMatter movements of today. Therefore, it is essential to understand where these tropes come from and why this narrative has persisted as long as it has.