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***Birth of a Movement* Premieres on *Independent Lens*
Monday, February 6, 2017 on PBS**

Online Streaming Begins February 7

**Provocative New Documentary Explores the Enduring Racial Resonance
of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation***



Iconic Image from Birth of a Nation: Gus being lynched by the KKK.

Credit: Birth of a Movement, Northern Light Productions 2016

(San Francisco, CA) — Over 100 years after the release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which depicted the KKK as heroes and African Americans in the most racist caricatures imaginable, the battle to assert African Americans' rightful place in both civil society and popular culture continues. In the wake of the "#OscarsSoWhite" controversy, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and increasing social and political turmoil, ***Birth of a Movement*** traces the line between Griffith's controversial epic and Hollywood's continued legacy of misrepresentation and negative racial stereotypes. Based on the book *The Birth of a Movement: How Birth of a Nation Ignited the Battle for Civil Rights*, by Dick Lehr, the film features interviews with historians,

writers, and filmmakers including Spike Lee, Reginald Hudlin, Jelani Cobb, Vincent Brown, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Narrated by Danny Glover and produced and directed by Susan Gray and Bestor Cram and Northern Light Productions, *Birth of a Movement* premieres on *Independent Lens* Monday, February 6, 2017, 10:00-11:00PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

D. W. Griffith's film, originally titled *The Clansman*, opened in 1915, as America was celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Civil War. Although virulently racist, the film — a powerful retelling of Reconstruction that portrays the Ku Klux Klan as righteous vigilantes restoring America to greatness — was lauded in the press, and became the first film ever to screen in the White House. It was seen by a quarter of America's population and transformed Hollywood and the history of cinema.

Birth of a Movement recounts the little-known story of the battle waged against the film by an early and largely forgotten civil rights activist named William Monroe Trotter. Angered by the film's unrepentant racism, Trotter led African Americans in a pitched battle against the film's exhibition



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that culminated with protests in the streets of Boston, laying the foundation for the civil rights movement to come. As the first African American Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Harvard University, Trotter decried the film as a flagrantly racist glorification of the Klan, and as a dangerous and powerful new form of propaganda that would lead to the lynching of African Americans. Together with W.E.B Du Bois, Trotter founded the Niagara Movement, a national network of black activists that would grow into the NAACP.

Ironically, it was Trotter who called for censorship of *The Birth of a Nation* to control “hate speech,” while Griffith advocated for freedom of artistic expression. Ultimately, Trotter would lose the battle as the film went on to become the first financial blockbuster and established racial stereotyping as a bankable trope. His fears that the film would unleash racial violence proved true; the film is credited with inspiring the rebirth of the Klan which, by the 1920s, was bigger than ever before.

Through interviews with Spike Lee (whose NYU student film *The Answer* was a response to Griffith’s film), Reginald Hudlin, DJ Spooky, and others, *Birth of a Movement* explores how Griffith’s epic — long taught in film classes as a groundbreaking work of genius — motivated generations of African American filmmakers and artists as they worked to fight and reclaim their history and their onscreen image.

"How much power can one movie assert? Since its release, Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* has had a profound impact on the film industry and our society," said Lois Vossen, *Independent Lens* Executive Producer. "At a time when the Black Lives Matter movement and a radically different new movie titled *Birth of a Nation* are at the forefront of many urgent conversations, it is imperative to look back at the history surrounding the original film and the contentious protests and riots it sparked."

Visit the [Birth of a Movement](#) page on *Independent Lens*, which features more information about the film. *Birth of a Movement* will be available for online viewing on the site beginning February 7.

About the Participants (in alphabetical order)

Robert Bellinger is director of the black studies program at Suffolk University, Boston.

David Blight is professor of American history at Yale University.

Vincent Brown is professor of history and professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University.

Dolita Cathcart is associate professor of history at Wheaton College.

Jelani Cobb is a contributor to *The New Yorker* and director of the Africana Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut.

Mark Elliott is an associate professor of history at University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

Ira Gallen is a film and television historian and collector.

Reginald Hudlin is a film and television director and producer.

Spike Lee is a film director and producer; as a student at NYU, he made a short film called *The Answer*, about a black filmmaker who gets hired to remake *The Birth of a Nation*.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University.

Dick Lehr is author of *The Birth of a Movement: How Birth of a Nation Ignited the Battle for Civil Rights*, and professor of journalism at Boston University.

Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky is a composer, writer, and musician.

Charles Musser is professor of American studies, film & media studies, and theater studies at Yale University.

Charlene Regester is associate professor in the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Ellen Scott is associate professor at the School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA.

Melvyn Stokes is the author of *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation* and professor of film history at University College London.

About the Filmmakers

Susan Gray (Producer/Director) is the director of broadcast development at Northern Light Productions, where she has directed and produced numerous documentary features. Her films include *Public Enemy*, about four former members of the Black Panther Party, which was broadcast on Showtime; *Harlem, a Dream Deferred*, about the gentrification of Harlem; and *Across the River with Hedrick Smith*, a PBS documentary that explores positive programs in Washington D.C.'s Anacostia neighborhood.

Gray has an MA in journalism from Columbia University, with a concentration on documentary film, and an MA from the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies with a concentration in social change and development. While producing in Europe, she was awarded the Prix Europa, Europe's highest documentary prize, for the PBS documentary *Citizen Berlusconi*, about Italy's then prime minister. Her films have appeared on PBS, the Discovery Channel, National



Geographic, Arte, Showtime, and more. Her most recent credits include co-producer of *Beyond the Wall*, about an ex-convict's journey through re-entry; *Circus Without Borders*, a story that follows a Guinean and an Inuit circus troupe; and *Confessions of the Boston Strangler*.

Bestor Cram (Producer/Director) began his career as an independent filmmaker in the early 1970s, following a tour of duty in Vietnam. In 1982, he founded Northern Light Productions, where today he serves as creative director. Over the last 34 years, he has built Northern Light into one of the premiere documentary production companies in New England, dedicating himself to documentary film and museum work that strives to achieve insights about social, political and cultural endeavors and their consequences. Cram has written, directed, produced, shot, and executive produced over 50 feature-length nonfiction films, including *Scarred Justice: The Orangeburg Massacre*, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, *Weapons of Mass Disruption*, *Circus Without Borders*, *Beyond the Wall*, and *This Is Where We Take Our Stand*.

CREDITS

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Producers	Susan Gray Bestor Cram Matthew MacLean
Editor	Daniel Mooney
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Associate Producers	Malaika Woluchem Amy Shafer

Birth of a Movement is a presentation of Northern Light Productions, in association with THIRTEEN Productions LLC for WNET

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by Independent Television Service, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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