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## 'The Birth of a Race' - Emmett J. Scott and the Great Black Film Epic That Never Was

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Emmett J. Scott pictured with his family

This year being the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the most controversial movie ever made, D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of Nation," I thought it would be appropriate to go back and revisit a piece I wrote literally a year ago, about a film that was intended to be the ultimate answer to Griffith's movie, and the sad story of why it wasn't.

The history of the movies is littered with ambitious film projects that could have changed the course of cinema, but were either not made for various reasons, or so compromised by other factors that the end result was vastly different than what was first conceived.

And "The Birth of a Race" is definitely one of those latter films.

If the film that was originally conceived was actually made, it would be one of the most important black films ever made, still to this day. Instead, the final result was a travesty.

The story all began in 1915 when Griffith's 192-minute epic "The Birth of a Nation" was released to the public. It was the film that single handedly revolutionized movies, turning them from an entertaining novelty of short films, into an art form that could make a lot of money for a lot of people (In today's dollars, "Nation" would easily be in the top ten of the highest-grossing movies in film history).

But "Nation" is also, of course, a vile film.

Griffith, who was a proud Southerner and unrepentant supporter of the Confederacy, rewrote the actual facts of American Civil War history, turning black people into violent savages who were intent on "crushing the white South under the heel of the black South" with "ruin, devastation rape and pillage."

It is up to the film's heroes, the KKK, who literally ride to the rescue at the last minute to save the day, and put the black villains back in their place.

Needless to say, the film was, and still is today, very controversial. And it should not be surprising that there were numerous demonstrations and riots against it. (All of which Griffith, by the way, totally loved since it meant more publicity for his film).

Of course there was outrage, and many protests against the film by black people, and organizations such as the NAACP, and it wasn't too long before the idea came about to make a film that was to be sort of a response to "Birth of a Nation," as a way of countering its lies.

At first, the NAACP considered the idea of such a film, but quickly dropped the project, so it was left to Emmett J. Scott (pictured above with his family), who had been the personal secretary to Booker T. Washington, to pick up where the NAACP left off.

At first his idea was very modest. With financing from well-to-do and middle class black people, Scott intended to make a 15-minute short film called "Lincoln's Dream," that would show the accomplishments of black people, which was intended to be screened before "Birth of a Nation" in theaters.

However, as Scott further developed "Lincoln's Dream," bringing in screenwriters and changing the title of the film to "The Birth of a Race," his project grew larger and grander in scope, to eventually becoming a 3-hour black film epic that would out-rival "Nation."

Seeing that the project was getting more expensive than originally planned, Scott tried to get Universal Pictures involved with the financing, but they turned him down. So, putting Booker T. Washington's "do-for-self" philosophy into action, he went out and decided to make his epic film on his own, in Chicago.

Unfortunately, the film was plagued with problems from the beginning.

Scott, at first, was actually able to get film producer Louis B. Mayer (before he went on to found MGM), to provide part of the financing for the film, provided he could find outside investors to fund the rest of the project. Scott, through a Chicago associate, was able to raise some money to make the film, because of the subject and his association with Booker T. Washington, who was considered to be a hero among black people back then. However the associate turned out to be a con man and ran off with the money. Upon this development, Mayer told Scott, "Good luck" and left the project.

Scott soldiered on with what he had, but the poorly-funded film suffered from inadequate, low rent production values and delays. Furthermore, when bad weather in Chicago caused even more problems, the whole production was forced to move to Tampa, Florida to be completed.

However, the production was constantly plagued by a serious lack of money, and Scott was eventually forced to bring in white backers to help to keep his ship afloat.

Naturally, those new backers weren't so keen on making a black film, so, little by little, scene by scene, and rewrite by rewrite, Scott's grand version for a black cinema epic became a simplistic World War I film about two German-American brothers who find themselves fighting on opposite sides of the war.

In fact, with the exception of a few brief scenes with black people and some stereotyped Africans in the film, there are hardly any black people in "Birth of a Race" at all.

The final result opened in Chicago in December 1918, just a month after the end of WWI, and flopped, quickly disappearing from public view afterward.

I don't know if there's even an entire print of the film in existence, except for the brief clip below.

Although Scott is still listed in historical records as the producer of the film, I have no doubt that the final version must have been a great disappointment to him. His grand dream turned into a disaster.

But by any definition of the word, Emmett J. Scott is a true black film pioneer.



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