D.W. Griffith's historical drama, The Birth of a Nation, is one of the most incendiary, yet technically lauded, films of all time. Repelled by the film's racist propaganda, some educators won't include it in their curricula. But the film introduced a groundbreaking set of cinematic techniques to the production lexicon. To those in film studies, The Birth of a Nation is an indispensable reference.

Ellen Strain and Greg VanHoosier-Carey, assistant professors at the Georgia Institute of Technology's new-media oriented department of literature, communication and culture, want to make the racially inflammatory nature of the film a point of study. The pair is producing a multi-disciplinary CD-ROM, Griffith in Context, with a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities. It is scheduled for release in the spring of 2001.

“The Birth of a Nation is really a staple of the film studies curricula, but that doesn't make it any easier to teach,” says Strain. “Once I started talking to other instructors who'd taught it, I realized that the problems I had were pretty universal. It’s just such a volatile film that it’s difficult finding where to begin and how to address both the racism and the storytelling method with equal weight without diminishing one or the other. On top of that, how do you deal with the very immediate anger with which students respond to it?”

Though developed mainly in Macromedia Director, the CD-ROM features a filmstrip interface created in C++ that Strain and VanHoosier-Carey say forces students to step back from the immediacy of the moving image. “They can watch the segment as QuickTime, but they can also use the strips as a quick way to scan them,” says VanHoosier-Carey. “We want them to understand that this is not some big film with one meaning but something that is constructed, frame by frame, from specific points of view.” The filmstrips are actually a chain of individual JPEGs that are precisely synched to timed points in the QuickTime movies. A program created by Patrick Ledwell, a graduate student, lets students re-edit the film and store their in-and-out points to a text file. The file then can be opened by anyone with the CD-ROM, which will automatically reset the points for viewing the edited version. “We had to do a lot of memory management along with that,” says VanHoosier-Carey, “because loading and dumping the JPEGs had to be done pretty quickly or we'd reach Director's maximum memory.” The disc is optimized to run on standard 166 MHz computers.

Some have already complained about the interface’s tiny film images. Strain, however, sees this as an advantage. “There is something to be said for miniaturizing the film to be able to contain it, for dissecting it with these editing exercises,” she says. “The film continues to be traumatic for me to watch, no matter how many times I see it. The key is to give students the tools to alter the film's meaning, and in the process, learn how Griffith was able to create these powerful, emotional effects.”

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Griffith in Context Project
Georgia Institute of Technology
Phone: 404-894-8923; 404-894-7004
Web site: http://griffith-in-context.gatech.edu