of a sophisticated distribution network, censorious state film review boards, and prejudiced white theater owners who refused to book his films. The white press and white audiences ignored his efforts. While some black audience members enjoyed his films for the positive images they presented of African Americans, many others stayed away because Micheaux also insisted upon showing a sordid underworld of drinking, gambling, violence, and the hypocrisy of black religious leaders. (Micheaux was also accused by some of a form of racial fetishism by pitting light-skinned blacks against darker-skinned ones, a charge McGilligan discusses only briefly and takes no position on, perhaps because it remains unsubstantiated.)

McGilligan succeeds in making his case that Micheaux certainly does deserve to be considered in the same breath as Griffith. He fashions a compelling story of the unique life of this “Great and Only” man, one who is finally beginning to be broadly recognized as having an important place among those who have led inspirational lives in the struggle for racial equality and artistic integrity. Micheaux was a Sisyphus of his age, always pushing the boulder of race up the hill, knowing he had to do it every day over and over again if he was going to live his life the way he wanted to live it. Always the outsider as he made his way in the white man’s world, he nevertheless lived a full life, even though he died penniless and forgotten. Loved by a few, vilified by many, misunderstood by most, Micheaux disappeared from public view for a half-century after his death, but now, happily, he is reincarnated again in this definitive biography. © 2010 Richard Grupenhoff

Near the end of the introduction to his comprehensive and lucid book, Melvyn Stokes writes, “Why, it might be asked, is yet another scholarly book on [The Birth of a Nation] needed?” (13) Stokes has good answers to this question: so much has been written over the years about The Birth of a Nation that a thoroughgoing synthesis is in order. But precisely because of the volume of writing, there is much misinformation about The Birth of a Nation that needs correcting. Additionally, there is a great deal that is not known about this disturbingly seminal film—and much that scholars, often working mostly as interpreters of the text of the film, have argued cannot be known about it—so fresh attention to archival materials is desirable. Stokes promises synthesis, informational correction, and wholesale plumbing of the archives, and he delivers on all counts.

Stokes puts the better part of his book’s subtitle in quotation marks. The claim that The Birth of a Nation is the most controversial movie ever comes from one of its financiers, Roy Aitken, but Stokes makes clear that the claim is not just hype. He sees The Birth of a Nation as unusual because the cause for the controversy was not explicit sex or violence, the two preponderant reasons for censorious alarm, but explicit and brutal racism. To be sure, in the later decades of the twentieth century, protests against films for misrepresenting specific social groups became more common, but for Stokes the long history of protest against The Birth of a Nation’s exhibition presaged this way of responding to movies. Additionally unusual in the case of Griffith’s film is that its controversial element was, from the start, entangled with—but also, for many and for too long, excused or even justified by—its innovative qualities. Surveying the literature of protest against the film, Stokes often finds its detractors ruefully conceding its stylistic and aesthetic powers: its fluid movement across narrative and pictorial scales; its dynamic editing; its rousing use of music. Only really in the 1980s, as Stokes shows in his survey of scholarship, did critics like Brian Gallagher, Michael Rogin, and Clyde Taylor start to insist that the film’s content and form should be thought of as inescapably interrelated. Stokes at once agrees with this assessment and works to historicize the long career of The Birth of a Nation so we can understand why it took decades for this critical position to become dominant. Stokes draws from the film scholars who have preceded him—those named above, as well as writers such as Linda Williams and Susan Courtney—but his book probably has most in common with Janet Staiger’s chapter on the film in Interpreting Films (Princeton University Press, 1992), and as a cultural historian Stokes is more cautious with his generalizations and strong interpretive claims than many of his predecessors.

In his opening chapter Stokes describes the February 1915 Los Angeles premiere of the film, still called The Clansman after its sources in Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel and play. This effectively captures the sense of daring and excitement that the film created for its earliest audience, and it also allows Stokes to both synopsize the story and review some of the issues of The Birth of a Nation’s textual instability. After this opening flash-forward, Stokes organizes his book in the-
matic chapters that allow him to create a linear, if also often overlapping, narrative. His first subject is Thomas Dixon. He tracks this preacher—entrepreneur—writer's emotional and intellectual formation in the post-Civil War South as well as thoroughly examining Dixon's novel, the play he adapted from it, and his own unsuccessful attempts to translate his successes to the screen. A chapter then gives Griffith and his life and career up to 1915 similar treatment. Much of this material will be familiar to those who have studied Griffith, but the chapter also provides interesting new information on the details of how the film's production was arranged.

The book's fourth chapter focuses on the making of the film, from pre-production through the process of editing the film and showing it to its earliest audiences in L.A. and New York. This is perhaps the most myth-busting chapter of the book, with Stokes detailing what can be known or deduced from records about cast size and the costs and financing of the film (basically, big on all fronts and dauntingly complex, especially by the standards of the day, but not nearly as big as the hype). Examining race in relation to the casting of extras and the use of blackening make-up (though not uniformly the stereotypical blackface minstrel mask) for its “black” principals, Stokes finds it “highly revealing” that in a 1916 interview with Photoplay Griffith explained his casting and make-up choices “in terms of straightforward racism: the desirability of excluding ‘black blood’” (87).

The second half of the book will be, for many, the most interesting and innovative. Here Stokes examines the marketing and distribution of The Birth of a Nation, the initial struggles to censor or suppress the film, arguments about its validity or invalidity as history, and the film's career and resonances after its initial run. These four chapters find Stokes doing his most vigorous synthesis of previous scholarship—he draws from an impressive range of sources in film studies, history and historiography, African American studies, legal studies, and business history—as well as his broadest new research. Stokes's narrative of responses to The Birth of a Nation, both in its initial run and across the rest of the twentieth century, is invaluable for those interested in African American and U.S. cinema, and his consideration of The Birth of a Nation as “history,” along with his laying out of the film's innovative marketing, adds considerably to our understanding of its huge popularity. © 2010 Arthur Knight

STEVE NEALE

The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s
by Lea Jacobs

Hollywood cinema is often said to have changed after World War I. In addition to vertical integration, a new oligopoly, and substantial Wall Street investment, historians have pointed to changes in the nature of Hollywood’s films. While some of these changes predate the 1920s, they are usually said to involve the advent of a new sexual permissiveness, new gender stereotypes, and a number of new genres and styles, each of them linked to an emergent mass consumer culture. The Decline of Sentiment deals with these changes too, but it does so in an innovative way.

Focusing on the literary upheavals of the period, and in particular on the reaction against genteel Victorian values and canons of taste, Jacobs argues that there are correspondingly though by no means identical changes of taste at the level of film as well. These changes are manifest not just in the film industry’s output, but also in discussions of stylistic and generic trends as well as audiences and their preferences in the industry press. Jacobs is particularly concerned with female tastes and with issues of gender. But she also points to differences between the tastes of metropolitan and rural or small-town audiences. Noting that metropolitan intellectuals tended to associate pathos and sentiment with genteel culture, she points out that these ingredients were often just as central to the vernacular, mass-culture taste for slapstick or jazz. The decline in sentiment that she charts in her book is thus an uneven one, varying from genre to genre, but also from class to class and from place to place.

In pursuing her argument, Jacobs looks in detail at five different story types, genres, and trends: “Hollywood Naturalism,” “Sophisticated Comedy,” “The Male Adventure Story,” “The Seduction Plot,” and “Romantic Drama.” In each case she analyzes the narrative and stylistic characteristics of a wide range of films (some of them only available in archives); and in each case she cites reviews and other comments in the industry press. Hollywood naturalism, she argues, was a marginal but significant trend that drew on the tenets of literary naturalism and on some of its novels and plays. For Jacobs, it not only encompassed films such as Greed (1925) and The Docks of New York (1928), each of them marked by brutal actions, sordid motives, and protagonists overwhelmed by their passions or by their environment, but also a number of rural comedies and dramas, among them True Heart Susie (1919) and The Old Swimmin’ Hole (1921). Despite their obvious differences, and despite the overemphatic symbolism evident...