

# Arts Comment

by Bruce Cookson

In the letters section of the Oct. 3 *Gateway*, Sally McLean writes that the "issue of (sculptor) Fafard's chauvinism is pathetically immaterial to the issue of his sculpture." This reply is not to refute the specific charges made against the critic who reviewed Fafard. It is more concerned with the implications of her theory of art criticism.

McLean makes the breath-taking, dogmatic assertion that "attacks on personality or society have no place in anything categorized as Art criticism." Apparently artists are given the license to be whatever they want, whether that be chauvinist, or racist, fascist or whatever. If they display these qualities in their art, then they shouldn't be criticized; after all it is the aesthetics that are all important.

Perhaps McLean thinks that this kind of artistic immunity is safe when applied to the fine arts. Large audiences don't exactly break down doors to see the latest art gallery exhibit. But, what about the other arts? What about the arts that have enormous audiences? What about the arts that have enormous impact and influence? What about the movies? What about one movie in particular?

In 1915, a movie was released that forever changed the way people thought about motion pictures. That movie was D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, an epic tale of the American Civil War and Reconstruction. The movie was a sensation right from the start. Its three hour length and \$2 admission charge astounded people. They were equally astounded by the realism with which Griffith captured the colossal spectacle of war.

Griffith's movie captured the fancy of millions, and tributes flowed in from historians, religious leaders and critics. Woodrow Wilson, much impressed, was reputedly to have called it "history written in lightning."

Griffith incorporated into *The Birth of a Nation* many of the techniques he'd been experimenting with in dozens of previous movies. He was the first director to effectively integrate experimental devices like flashbacks, closeups, moving cameras, double exposures, cross-cutting and split screens. He realized the importance of authenticity of detail and of physical settings. Under Griffith's direction, a glimpse of the camera's true potential was revealed. Propagandists were delighted and Griffith became known as the father of cinematic grammar and syntax.

At the same time as Griffith's movie was receiving lavish praise, it was also denounced as satanic. It provoked riots and near-riots in many places. Even as late as the sixties it was not allowed to be shown in certain towns. Why? Because *The Birth of a Nation*, the movie that had brought respectability to its medium, was one of the most blatantly racist films ever made.

The movie was based on a book called *The Clansman*. The book and the movie apotheosized the role of the Ku Klux Klan during the period of reconstruction following the war. The Klan was formed in 1867 as a kind of boy's club, but it wasn't long before it turned into a murderous instrument by which white supremacy was maintained. In the movie, the KKK are romanticized as heroic knights preserving the virtue of their women and upholding their white south's social and economic position in the face of

black anarchy.

The KKK are bathed in white light, but the blacks are portrayed as fiends from hell. They are shown beating old white patriarchs and faithful black servants. Of course, they are incapable of self-government. In one scene they are lolling irresponsibly in the state legislature, arrogant and illiterate, their feet propped upon on their desk, fried chicken clutched in their hands. In typical southern fashion they are depicted as maddened by lust for white women. The climax of the movie is the last minute KKK rescue of a young white girl from the clutches of a black.

Less than two months after the release of the movie, a strange character named Colonel William Joseph Simmons led fifteen followers to the top of Stone Mountain near Atlanta. The occasion for the mysterious rites that occurred that night was the reincarnation of the first Ku Klux Klan which had been destroyed by federal legislation in the 1870s. This re-birth was the beginning of the Klan's strongest period. For the next ten years they repeated the infamy of their predecessors: Church burnings, mutilations, whippings, murders and other disciplinary methods became their trademark. By 1923 they had a membership of five million and had elected four of their members to the position of governors and five to the U.S. Senate.

There are many complex sociological, historical and economic reasons for the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. But, there seems little doubt that the direct inspiration and encouragement for its reappearance came from the deification of the Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*. Simmons wished to recreate an organization that was depicted as having been successful during the Reconstruction. If an organization had once been so heroically effective at maintaining white, Protestant supremacy, then perhaps it could be successful again.

Griffith never considered himself to be racist. He was of Southern blood; of the old Southern thought that believed blacks and whites had their respective place in society. He never hated blacks, but felt that the natural order of things meant that blacks would be happiest as cotton pickers or servants of their white masters. He genuinely felt that his account of the events during the Civil War and Reconstruction were true.

Was Griffith a racist, or was he a well meaning, though irresponsible artist for not gauging the effects his movie would have on the public? By Ms. McLean's philosophy of art criticism, these concerns are irrelevant and critics who discuss them are "dishonest". However, it seems that critics then and now would be remiss if they (to paraphrase Ms. McLean) had concluded that the "issue of Griffith's racism is pathetically immaterial to the issue of his movie."

## Women's group, from page 3

in occupations dominated by their sex," she cautioned, "affirmative action is not going to change much at all."

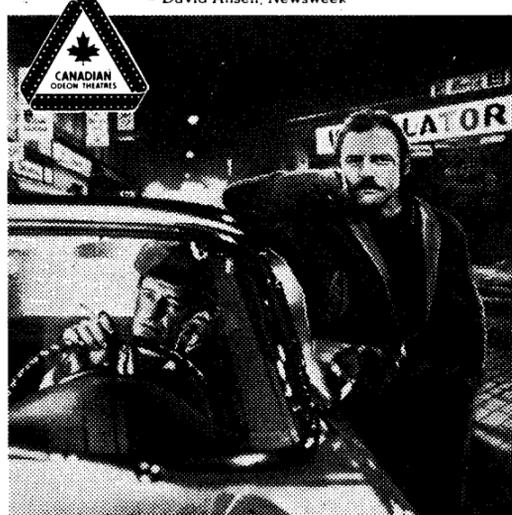
After Freeland's report, plans for the next International Women's Day were discussed. For the first time, events will be planned by all the human rights organizations in Edmonton.

Details will be determined after the steering committees of all concerned groups meet.

Membership in EWC is open to anyone. The next meeting will be Tuesday, November 13 in TB-65 Tory at 7:30 p.m.

**"A BRILLIANTLY STYLISH THRILLER... SPINE-TINGLING SUSPENSE... EASILY THE BEST THIS YEAR HAS OFFERED."**

—David Ansen, Newsweek



**"Fascinating. Extremely beautiful...plus a good deal of suspense."**

—Vincent Canby, New York Times

**"The American Friend' is one of the most compelling movies of the year — the one essential movie to see."**

—Terry Curtis Fox, Village Voice

**"Quite possibly one of the best films ever made."**

—Rob Baker, The Soho Weekly News

**"A HIGHLY ORIGINAL, TANTALIZING THRILLER. Director Wim Wenders builds up the tension in an artful manner distinctly reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock."**

—Kathleen Carroll, The New York Daily News

**"The best crime melodrama to open in longer than we should have to remember."**

—Roger Greenspun, Penthouse

**DENNIS HOPPER**

**BRUNO GANZ**

In a film by

**WIM WENDERS**

# THE AMERICAN FRIEND

**LISA KREUZER**

**GERARD BLAIN**

A New Yorker Films Release

German and French With English Subtitles

Adult Not Suitable For Children

FEATURE: 7:10 & 9:30

MAT. Sun. 2 PM

**VARSCONA**

10907-82 AVE. • 433-3222



APPEARING  
IN RATT

**JAZZ**

**"RIKK McGUIRE"**

(Upside Down Jazz)

Thursday, Nov. 1

Friday, Nov. 2

Saturday, Nov 3

Cover \$2

- Starting at 8:00 PM



**K** omedy  
abaret

Thursday, Nov. 1  
4:00 PM

Friday, Nov. 2  
1:00 PM

**FREE!**