The Birth of a Nation: History in Black and White Sectional Conflict and Civil War

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This paper was for Dr. James Seelye’s Section Conflict and Civil War, discusses and analyzes the historical accuracy of the film “The Birth of a Nation.”

On February 18, 1915, the President of the United States and his cabinet gathered to watch a film at the White House. Securing a presidential audience, in the executive mansion no less, was a significant publicity coup for the backers of the new film. Titled The Birth of a Nation, the story traced the wrenching changes the country and the South in particular, experienced as it passed through the crucible of civil war and Reconstruction. A transfixed President Wilson, the first southerner to hold the office since the war, is said to have remarked, “my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”1 The President's enthusiastic response was no doubt helped along by the film's prominent quotations of his own written work.

The vast majority of white Americans shared Wilson's favorable impression. The Birth of a Nation became a nationwide sensation. At a time when movies were generally considered cheap twenty minute novelties, Birth was something entirely new. Clocking in at three hours, and featuring unprecedented uses of cameras and editing, with a forty person orchestra accompanying the artfully constructed narrative, it represented a leap forward in film-making. Audiences had never seen anything like this before, and they paid accordingly. Ultimately viewed by an estimated 200 million people, when accounting for inflation it may be the highest grossing film of all time.2

Indeed, in both technical and cultural importance, few films are its equal. Yet despite its enormous influence, it is much less known to modern audiences than the next generation's civil war epic of similarly dubious historicity, Gone With The Wind. This is regrettable, for few films in the American pantheon are more revealing of the deepest cultural undercurrents that animated white Americans for most of the nation's history. Perhaps that is precisely part of the reason the film is now so little known. In The Birth of a Nation, we are confronted with blatant racism that met with the approval of the average white American, not in some distant past, but in the time of our great-grandparents. We may ignore it, but we cannot fully escape it because it is still here, preserved as an indictment forever, on film.

The Birth of a Nation is based on Thomas Dixon's novel The Clansmen, published in 1905. Dixon was one of the south's most popular writers at the turn of the century, and his work found a wide audience in the north as well. His novels promoted sectional reconciliation through

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white racial unity and the suppression of blacks from taking any part in the public life of the nation. Bringing the story to life on film was the job of David Wark Griffith. Born in 1875, he grew up with a deeply romantic view of the Old South and a reverence for his father, who had served as a Confederate cavalry officer in the Civil War.

After struggling as an actor, Griffith began making movies by 1908, but he had never undertaken anything approaching the scale of The Birth of a Nation. This did not deter Griffith, for he had a sense of messianic self-importance that was well-suited to the task. “What we film tomorrow,” he said, “will strike the hearts of the world.” He spoke of the new medium as a “power that can make men brothers and end war forever.” And with Birth, Griffith indeed succeeded in striking the hearts of the world, or at least, his fellow white Americans. In the following years he continued to make more films, such as Intolerance (1916) and Broken Blossoms (1919), but he never recaptured the success he had found with The Birth of a Nation. By the early 1920s his career as a successful filmmaker had fizzled out.

As Griffith's adaptation begins, the audience is introduced to two families, the Stoneman's of Pennsylvania and the Cameron's of South Carolina. Austin Stoneman is a rising star in Congress, father of three children, and an abolitionist. The Cameron's are a genteel family of the planter class of Piedmont, with an elderly patriarch heading his household of five children and numerous slaves. The Stoneman's visit the Cameron's and various romantic entanglements ensue among the young men and women, only to be ruptured by the arrival of civil war. The youngest brothers of the respective families meet on the battlefield and die in each others' embrace. The elder Cameron brother, Ben, is shown leading a gallant but futile charge at Petersburg, as his Northern opponents hold their fire in appreciation of his valor.

By war's end the Camerons are reduced to poverty, Lincoln is dead, and Congressman Stoneman is now the most powerful politician in the country. He and his Mulatto understudy Silas Lynch come to Piedmont to oversee Radical Reconstruction. The Camerons are forced to endure numerous indignities, such as black soldiers claiming an equal right to use the sidewalk. Blacks are encouraged to vote by northern carpetbaggers while southern whites are disenfranchised. We're shown the disorderly black-led legislature passing a bill for interracial marriage, as the black legislators leer eagerly at the white woman in the galleries.

In his moment of despair, Ben Cameron has an epiphany as he sees two white children under a white sheet scare some black children away. Meanwhile, a former slave named Gus, with ideas put in his head by unscrupulous carpetbaggers, attempts to woo Ben's youngest sister, Flora. After a chase through the woods, Flora jumps off a cliff to her death rather than allow herself to be touched by a black man. The Klan now makes its appearance, finds Gus, and lynches him. In response, Silas Lynch lets his black troops run rampant. “Crazed” black mobs roam the streets and Lynch decides he wants to marry Congressman Stoneman's daughter Elsie. This is too much even for the radical abolitionist. He is horrified by the idea of his daughter with a Mulatto. But Stoneman is put under guard and is powerless to protect Elsie.

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Meanwhile, members of the Cameron
and Stoneman families find themselves
cornered in the same building, and join
together to defend themselves against the
black mobs. When it seems all hope is lost,
the Klan arrives and routes the blacks,
reunites Congressman Stoneman with his
daughter, and restores white rule to
Piedmont. In the final scene, Ben Cameron
and Elsie Stoneman are married, as two
families so recently divided by a bitter civil
war are united once again in their common
whiteness.

For white audiences throughout the
country this was considered not only
compelling drama, but truthful history as
well. Many blacks thought differently. The
fledgling NAACP undertook a campaign of
boycotts that succeeded in getting the film
banned from some cities, at least
temporarily. They also tried picketing and
other tactics. When a large group of blacks
and a few white allies attempted to buy
tickets at the Boston premiere, theater
managers falsely claimed it was sold out and
violently turned them away. An
unsympathetic New York Times duly
reported the story with the headline,
“Negroes Mob Photo Play.” The NAACP
felt they had to try to censor the film, for
they knew that its message of racial violence
was not received in a cultural vacuum. In St.
Louis, pamphlets promoting a new
segregation law were passed out at the
theater. In Indiana, a man shot and killed a
black teen after watching the film, while
cries of “lynch him!” could be heard in
Houston as the crowd watched the scene of
Flora jumping to her death.

Black leader W.E.B. Du Bois pointed
out that the number of lynchings in 1915
was greater than the nation had seen for over
a decade. Most ominously, 1915 was also
the year of the Klan’s rebirth. And though
the impetus The Birth of a Nation gave to
the Klan has at times been overstated, it
would be used as a recruiting tool for
decades to come, bringing the white
supremacist group into the mainstream of
American society and politics.

The rough summation above of the
major themes is perhaps enough to convince
the modern reader that The Birth of a Nation
suffers from severe historical inaccuracies,
but it is worth delving into what exactly
these errors were, especially since they
represent the mainstream of white opinion in
1915. While the second half of the film gets
most of the attention for its racist content,
the problems of historical inaccuracy begin
right from the start. The South is portrayed
as a place of utter tranquility, full of happy,
contented slaves. The idea that as many as a
third of these slaves may see their families
destroyed through sale, that they may not
want to be slaves, indeed, that they may
have any independent thought or agency at
all, is beyond Griffith’s imagination. When
war comes, according to Griffith, it is
simply because “The power of the sovereign
states…is threatened by the new
administration.”

There is no mention of President
Lincoln’s clearly stated aim to not interfere
with the existing institutions of the states,
nor of the Republican Party’s extensive
effort to appease radical secessionists. Right
from the beginning, the South is portrayed
as a noble victim of aggression, rather than a
region held captive to its own radicalism.

The war is presented as a noble battle
between valiant white brothers fighting for

5 Niderost, “The Birth of a Nation,” 78.
6 “Negroes Mob Photo Play,” New York Times,
April 18, 1915, 15.
7 David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois:
Biography of a Race (New York: Henry Holt,
1993) 507.
8 Peter Kolchin, American Slavery: 1619-1877
the right as they saw it, an idea epitomized by the Stoneman and Cameron brothers dying together in an embrace of friendship, and Ben Cameron's gallant charge that earned the respect of his foes. This was very appealing to the audiences of 1915.

Thorny issues of slavery, race, and responsibility for the war were subsumed under the imperative of sectional reconciliation. It mattered little why the soldiers fought or who was in the right; what mattered was the common, poor, white citizen-soldier who fought with gallantry and honor. Thus, by 1915, Memorial day was a time to honor Union and Confederate dead, Robert E. Lee was a national hero, and the Republican Party's call for free elections in the South lay nearly two decades in the past. It was as if blacks had just been spectators in the war. White reunification required that blacks be rendered invisible not only in the present, but the past as well.

As the story progresses into Reconstruction, the real villains of the film are revealed to be the northern carpetbaggers who come South and put reckless and silly notions in the heads of former slaves. The freedmen, being childlike and simple, cannot possibly think for themselves. Blacks vote just because white northerners tell them to do so. The interracial state governments they set up are portrayed as incompetent, presiding over a South that is in anarchy. By 1915, such views of Reconstruction were by no means confined to the South, and they had the imprimatur of academic historians. Known as the Dunning school, a group of scholars at Columbia University advanced the notion that Reconstruction's failure was inevitable because it was not based on the great truth of black inferiority.

Starting with these explicitly racist assumptions, historians of the Dunning school could only conclude that Reconstruction was a disaster not for having failed, but for having been tried at all. The “scholarship” of the Dunning school, such as it was, fell apart in the decades after the civil rights movement, as its racist foundations were knocked out from under it. The actual reality of the Republican interracial Reconstruction governments was about what one would expect in the difficult circumstances of the post-civil war South. Large swaths of the countryside lay desolate after four years of war, while many of the citizens the new governments needed at least tacit support from were extremely disgruntled, if not treasonous. There was corruption, intrigue, and failure, but significant accomplishment as well.

For the first time, many southern states established public school systems, and in many areas both black and white children had more learning opportunities than they had experienced before the war. In other domains, too, Reconstruction governments began to build a new legal and social system on the ruins of one that had been predicated on the total control of master over slave. Alabama offered legal assistance for poor defendants, while in South Carolina, money was appropriated to provide the poor with medical care. Other laws forced white men to pay child support for the Mulatto children they fathered, and broadened property rights for married women. Laws mandating the integration of public transportation and accommodations were passed throughout the Deep South.

The Reconstruction governments consistently resisted the attempts of white

9 Grantham, The South in Modern America: A Region At Odds, 24-34.

planters to restrict labor mobility and economic freedom. Also for the first time, interracial juries and school boards could be found across the South. In short, the Republican governments attempted to build societies whose outlines we can see in modern America. Though these governments made mistakes, they were hardly the incompetent and inevitable failure described by the Dunning school and dramatized in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Juxtaposed uneasily to the idea of the former slaves as childlike beings with no independent agency was the stereotype of the lustful Negro scheming to get his hands on virginal white women. Thus the audience sees the South Carolina legislature passing a law for interracial marriage, former slave Gus chasing Flora to her death, and Mulatto Silas Lynch proposing marriage to Elsie and locking her in the room with him when she tries to resist his advances. Numerous times during the second half of the film, we see blacks and their carpetbagger allies holding signs promoting “equal marriage,” as if this was a primary black goal.

This train of images and events centering on the black man’s desire for the white female body is threaded through the whole second half of the narrative and constitutes the emotional core of the film. Indeed, it may be difficult for modern readers to grasp just how explosive and infuriating these scenes were to white audiences in 1915. They spoke to the audience’s deepest fears and prejudices, and affirmed their commitment to defend the honor of white women.

The reality was quite a bit different. Reconstruction governments did not even push strongly for integrated schools, much less marriages. When it came to marriage, the black community was focused on trying to reunite and rebuild all the marriages separated by slavery. A concerted drive for “miscegenation” existed only in white people’s imaginations. But the film makes clear, whether marriage was legal or not, there was still the ever-present threat of rape at the hands of black beasts. If ever there was a case of mass projection, in the psychological sense, surely this was it.

Before the war, the rape of black slave women by white planters, their sons, and overseers was an incredibly common feature of everyday southern life. In the decades afterward, black women continued to be more at risk, as the enormous differential in social and legal power was slow to dissipate. If a black man had sex with a white woman, he could expect to be lynched. If a white man had sex with a black woman, it would be quietly tolerated. In the white mind, this was not hypocritical, for the corollary to the black man as rapist was the stereotype of the black woman as incontinent promiscuous. Thus, interracial sex defiled a white woman, while a black woman was just getting what she wanted.

Another problematic aspect of the film is its treatment of the Ku Klux Klan. The account of Ben Cameron’s inspiration drawn from the children under a sheet is wholly fictitious, as is the massive number of Klansmen riding to the rescue of Piedmont. The Klan is portrayed as the freedom-loving organization “that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule.” In reality, the Klan promoted a uniquely southern conception of freedom: whites are not free unless they can

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rule over blacks. They used violence, murder and intimidation in an attempt to overthrow the new social order. Considering their political ends and the tactics they employed to achieve them, the modern reader may think of them as terrorists, though applying such a label to the 1860s Klan would be anachronistic.

D.W. Griffith was surprised by the firestorm of controversy his film caused and stung by the criticism. He did not understand how he could be accused of prejudice, for he “loved Negroes,” and that would be “like saying I am against children, as they were children, whom we loved and cared for all our lives.”\(^{15}\) The self-evident racism of this statement was lost on Griffith and most of his white audience. In the end, this is precisely what makes *The Birth of a Nation* so chilling. It was not produced by a rabid racist, but by a man who saw himself as a friend to blacks and was not conscious of any prejudice within him. It was received by audiences in much the same way. The lurid depictions on film did not reflect racial prejudice, but simply the sad historical truth of a misguided era.

A more balanced memory of the war and Reconstruction lived on among black Americans and a few whites, but it was historical memory at the margins of society. The great mainstream was swept along by the ideas of the Dunning school and *The Birth of a Nation*. The centrality of slavery and race to the conflict, and the tragedy of Reconstruction’s failure, were forgotten. Indeed, David W. Blight has written that “The alienation of the emancipationist vision, and of the basic substance of black memory, from mainstream popular remembrance of the Civil War era received no greater long-term stimulus than when *Birth of a Nation* premiered across the country in the spring of 1915.”\(^{16}\) The work of undoing this legacy continues to the present day.

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