

Birth of a Nation and the Ku Klux Klan Revival

While the term racism is used in a wide number of historical and contemporary contexts, the actual definition of the word is difficult to specify. At the heart of racism is a belief that one's intrinsic worth in a supposed hierarchy of races has to do with one's ancestry rather than one's own actions, yet this alone is little more than prejudice if not accompanied by the element of implied or implicit legal authority. Racism thus also involves the deliberate use of power and authority to enforce a subservient relationship between the victimized group(s) with the dominant group. In *Racism: A Short History*, George M. Fredrickson asserts that there are two main categories of modern racism: the type involving colour-coded white supremacy and domination over people of colour as found in the United States of America, and an exclusive form of antisemitism, such as that found in Germany, which seeks the expulsion or eradication of the Jewish people rather than mere domination. In the U.S. Deep South, from the 1860s to the 1960s, racism was institutionalized in the form of the "Jim Crow" laws, which were a number of laws based on the principle of "separate but equal." While these laws maintained the separation of whites and blacks in many spheres of public and private life, they were anything but equal. The effect of such race-based laws was to encourage not only inequality but also outright hostility towards people of colour, as evidenced by the large number of lynchings which occurred during this time period. These lynchings, in turn, were condoned or, at best, tolerated by significant segments of government in general and officials in specific. The justification for this hostility can be perceived by the widely-held belief of the myths of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era as universalized by the unusually popular 1915 film by D. W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation*. While *Birth of a Nation* was not responsible for originating the cycle of anti-black violence in the South, it certainly glamourized lynchings and the disenfranchisement of the black vote as well as popularizing the Ku Klux Klan, a Reconstruction terrorist organization, resulting in the revival of the organization in the same year that the film was released.

D. W. Griffith's popular film, *Birth of a Nation*, which was based on Thomas Dixon's novels *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*, shortly became the most popular film of its day after its premiere on 3 March 1915¹. To this day Griffith's masterpiece is highly regarded by film students for its technical craftsmanship and trail blazing use of editing techniques and action scenes, yet it also bears the unfortunate earmark of being one of the most racist, popular films ever made. While author Dixon was a vehemently anti-black racist, Griffith was not known to espouse any especially hostile racist ideology and was primarily concerned with making what he saw as a patriotic and exciting spectacle of a film which glorified the South. The fact that he was

1 Richard K. Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991.

a Southern gentleman himself, whose father had fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, clearly inclined him to accept unquestioningly the mythology of the Reconstruction as passed down to him through various sources². The film's fictional narrative portrayed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as little more than the Reconstruction era versions of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, defenders of the "helpless whites" terrorized by northern carpetbaggers and black and mulatto politicians who were both drunk on their newfound power and completely inept at wielding it. *Birth of a Nation* betrayed two primary fears behind its grotesque portrayal of blacks and mulattos: first, that people of colour intended to take or steal white women for their own sexual purposes; and second, that blacks and mulattos sought to reverse the pre-Civil War pattern of white-over-black dominance to replace it with a black kingdom in which whites would be disenfranchised. These two themes dominate the film and provide a keen insight into the underlying philosophy of Deep South racism.

Birth of a Nation contains numerous repulsive portrayals of blacks and mulattos during the Reconstruction era which are further starkly contrasted by the heroic, even noble portrayals of whites, all of which implicitly serve as a justification for the race-based oppression of people of colour. Black and mulatto people are characterized in three ways: first, as dangerously ambitious and lustful near-animals, as personified by Simon Lynch, a mulatto politician who wants to literally build a "Black Empire" out of the South in which blacks rule supreme; second, as easily-manipulated pawns of the "Sallywag" carpetbagger politicians from the North, unsophisticated, disrespectful, and unable to handle their newfound and implicitly undeserved freedom and equality; and third, as "faithful souls," the few former slaves who continue to support their former slave masters and eschew the North's promises of equality for all, the implication of course being that the only good people of colour are those who know their place and keep it. Contrasting with these negative portrayals of blacks are the characterizations of Confederate whites as pillars of nobility who never let go of the ideal of the Old South despite their current helplessness in the face of Reconstruction. The most glaring example of this dichotomy between the portrayal of the races is a scene which depicts the South Carolina State House of Congress, in which over a hundred blacks have been elected next to a minority of less than thirty whites. The uncouth black and mulatto politicians are seen openly drinking liquor and going barefoot on the floor of Congress, completely out of sorts with their new roles and responsibilities while rapidly passing a number of amendments such as ones which will force whites to salute passing black soldiers and will allow for intermarriage between the races. The white minority politicians are conversely depicted as extremely dignified, quiet, and noble but nevertheless completely helpless to prevent the disintegration of the traditional ways of the South. In his efforts to romanticize the white man's cause, Griffith creates a caricature of the

2 Michele Faith Wallace, "The Good Lynching and The Birth of a Nation: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow," *Cinema Journal* 43.1 (Fall 2003): 94

South, “writing history with lightning,”³ and with a very broad brush at that. Blacks are portrayed as traitorous and malevolent, or at least dominated by sinister Northerners, while whites are noble, helpless, victimized by black rule, and in need of a saviour. It is into this simplistic background of good versus evil that Griffith drops his deliverers, the Ku Klux Klan.

As Robin Hood and his Merry Men are to the corrupt rule of the evil Sheriff of Nottingham and King John, so are Colonel Ben Cameron and the KKK to the depraved mulatto Lt. Governor Silas Lynch and his patron, the misguided abolitionist and parliamentary leader, Austin Stoneman. The idea for the KKK is borne from the tragic loss of Cameron’s little sister, Flora, who flings herself over a cliff rather than face being ravished by a mulatto soldier named Gus who wants to marry her. Cameron invents the idea for the Ku Klux Klan while in mourning over her and the state of his country, and in a particularly chilling scene he with his fellow KKK capture Gus and hold a kangaroo court at night, lynching him after finding him guilty for Flora’s death and leaving his corpse on the doorstep of Lt. Governor Lynch’s house. The film’s final climactic scene, in which Lynch holds Stoneman’s own daughter Elsie (who happens to be the love of Ben Cameron’s life, his own Maid Marian) captive, bound, and gagged, concludes when a large number of KKK members ride triumphantly into town on horseback to cheering, white crowds, the people of colour skulking away to their homes. An early scene in the film which portrays black soldiers preventing upstanding white citizens from voting is reversed at the end of the film, in which the armed KKK stand guard over the polls, completely disallowing blacks from voting at all in order to restore white rule. This mythologised version of the Reconstruction, more than any history textbook, is what influenced popular belief about the tumultuous post-Civil War era, especially since it so readily served to justify like nothing else the continued suppression of black equality and freedom.⁴

The legacy of *Birth of a Nation* was a revived and powerful new Ku Klux Klan, some forty-five years after it had been outlawed and made a mere footnote in history, and propaganda masquerading as history, an enduring and influential picture of the Reconstruction era which encouraged the rampant racist-motivated lynchings and harassment of blacks by whites that had been going on for decades. On 7 December 1915, as *Birth of a Nation* reached the Southern states, a self-proclaimed “fraternalist” named William J. Simmons posted an advertisement for a new KKK based on the one celebrated in the film.⁵ While there was originally little to distinguish this revived KKK from other fraternal organizations such as the Elks or the Freemasons⁶, its numbers swelled due mostly to the popularity of Griffith’s film, which soon became a recruiting tool for the organization. Griffith effectively created an origin story for a long-defunct terrorist

3 David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 2nd ed. New York: New Viewpoints, 1981, 26.

4 *Birth of a Nation*, dir. D. W. Griffith, Kino Video, 1992.

5 Tucker, 23.

6 Tucker, 23.

organization which he likely never foresaw becoming what it eventually became. For while, during its heyday in the 1920s, it commanded widespread popularity as a patriotic secret society, its members including many well known and important politicians and civic leaders⁷, but it soon began to be identified less with patriotism and more with racial violence and lynchings. While many people joined the KKK during the peak of its popularity, only the most diehard of racists remained in its membership as the years went on, and the KKK showed its true colours. Yet the KKK would not be as significant as it is in history if it had not been so widely endorsed by officials and authorities in government as it was, and much of that endorsement was originally founded in the Reconstruction myth of *Birth of a Nation*.

Griffith's lynching scene in *Birth of a Nation* was, by 1915, not merely a reconstruction of long ago events but a portrayal of a very real, contemporary problem in the Deep South, where lynchings had become commonplace. Lynchings were "extensively reported on in local newspapers," and "huge, festive crowds, including women and young children, often turned out to witness these hangings, in which victims were sometimes tortured, slowly burned alive, or castrated, their body parts distributed among the crowds as keepsakes."⁸ It must be understood that common, average people participated in lynchings on a somewhat regular basis, and that these crimes were not merely the work of extremists on the fringe of society. The corruption of the Deep South was such that several photographic "mementos of the events" were "widely distributed via mail as picture postcards" and "show huge crowds of people milling around in broad daylight."⁹ Most alarming of all is the fact that "virtually none of the perpetrators of these vigilante crimes, some of which were based on trumped-up charges of rape and murder, some on no charges at all, have ever been prosecuted."¹⁰ Almost "5,000 Americans—mostly black males—are documented as having been lynched between 1880 and 1960" despite the frustrated efforts of various governmental leaders to make the practice a federal crime, which "would have allowed the central U.S. government to prosecute those responsible, and overcome opposition from local police forces, who were often complicit in the crimes."¹¹ *Birth of a Nation* did not originate the practice of lynching, but it did idealize it as a kind of white man's justice and gave people ample justification to continue committing these acts of murder and terrorism.

Lynchings and various other racist violence, similar to the glorified actions of the Ku Klux Klan in *Birth of a Nation* and also in reality, were given unwritten consent by the local authorities and were widely participated in by many ordinary people, resulting in a racism with

7 Patsy Sims, *The Klan*, 2nd ed. Lexington, KT: University Press of Kentucky, 1996, 10.

8 Wallace, 94

9 Wallace, 94.

10 Wallace, 94.

11 "Senate apologises over lynchings," BBC News, 14 June 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/4090732.stm>> (16 June 2005).

the approval of local and state authority. Indeed, on 14 June 2005 it was reported by BBC News that the U.S. Senate finally “has apologised for spending decades blocking efforts to make lynchings and mob violence against black Americans a federal crime.” The article goes on to say that “nearly 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced, three of which made it past the lower House of Representatives between 1920 and 1940. But despite the support of seven U.S. presidents, the Senate stopped any of them becoming law.”¹² It was this type of governmental complicity with which racist violence was allowed to thrive until the civil rights movement which began in the late 1950s provoked change.

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