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# RETHINKING GRIFFITH AND RACISM

Most years I teach a course called "American History through Hollywood Film." One of the movies I use for teaching is *The Birth of a Nation*. This year, in the exam at the end of the course, I asked my students to comment on a particular clip from the film: the scene of the fight in the saloon in which the muscular white blacksmith Jeff (Wallace Reid) battles a group of African Americans and beats them all in a brawl before he is shot in the back. What I expected from the students were some comments on the linkage between alcohol and race, together with a discussion of the wider historical resonances of the sequence, particularly those associated with black boxer Jack Johnson and the attempts to find a "great white hope" able to seize his crown as, since 1908, heavyweight champion of the world. What I got were a number of further suggestions relating to class as well as race that made me want to rethink, at least to some extent, the analysis of this sequence I gave in my 2007 book.[1]

The scene begins with an intertitle: "Gus hides in 'White-arm" Joe's ginmill." We see Gus (Walter Long), who has just chased Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) to her death, appear from behind the saloon and glance around furtively to make sure he is not being followed. He enters the saloon and joins a group of blacks apparently persuading them to hide him, and they all go to the back of the saloon. We next see Jeff, carrying a heavy anvil. As he talks to his assistant, "Little Colonel" Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall) comes in with two companions. They talk to Jeff, who puts down the anvil in his smithy. An intertitle makes clear what is supposedly going on: townsmen are being "enlisted in the search for the accused Gus, that he may be given a fair trial" by the Ku Klux Klan. Both Jeff and his assistant take off their aprons and join the search.

The Cameron family, who have been planter class before the Civil War, have clearly fallen down the social scale. After an earlier intertitle declaring that "The South under Lincoln's fostering hand goes to work to rebuild itself," we see Ben Cameron rolling up his sleeves and heading off into the garden. We never see precisely what "work" he intends to do. Indeed, the only work we see any members of the Cameron family do comes immediately afterwards when Mrs. Cameron (Josephine Crowell) and Margaret Cameron (Miriam Cooper) put up a "BOARDING" sign on one of the porch columns of Cameron Hall. The "Little Colonel," as his nickname underlines, has not only been a senior officer in the Confederate Army; he is also depicted in the film as the originator and founder of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina. Yet he has no hesitation in asking for help from Jeff, the working-class blacksmith. This sequence suggests that whites from whatever social background came together in support of the Klan and

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what the film presents as its chivalric mission in protecting (or here, avenging) white women.

The beginning of the sequence also emphasizes the contrast between whites and blacks in terms of work. Jeff is depicted working hard in the middle of the day at his forge. He is clearly a useful and productive member of white society, turning out all the iron products from wagon wheels and horseshoes to ploughs and tools that are needed in the local, agrarian economy. Without the constraints and discipline of slavery to make them work, by contrast, most of the African Americans in the sequence clearly have no work to do and are idling their time away drinking in a saloon in the middle of the day. The only exceptions to this are Gus himself, who tells Flora he is now a "Captain," presumably in the state militia, and "White-arm" Joe, the owner of the saloon. The black drinkers meeting in the saloon may conceivably be criminals rather than ne'er-do-wells (how else do they support themselves?), and this could explain why Gus chooses to take refuge there.

The sequence as a whole presents a straightforward contrast between the strong, clean-limbed, hard-working white blacksmith who fights fairly and the crowd of weak black loafers who can only beat him in the end by unfair means. The contrast is so obvious and direct that it started me thinking again about other sequences in *The Birth of a Nation* in which blacks are unfavorably compared to whites. This was, let us remember, a film that presented the presence of African Americans as the main source of division between whites. As the very first intertitle claimed, "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." It was also a film that suggested ethnic cleansing as the only solution to this "problem": in its original form, according to critics of 1915, it ended with an intertitle ("Lincoln's Solution") showing blacks at a harbor waiting *en masse* for deportation.[2] It was a film intended to suggest that African Americans were both a threat to white American society and an unassimilable element within that society.

Griffith consciously designed and took shots emphasizing the fact that African Americans were not and never could be equal to whites in American society. He reinforced this message in his editing. When there is a confrontation using force between blacks and whites in *The Birth of a Nation*, the whites—like the blacksmith in the saloon before his murder—inevitably win. In the first part of the movie, immediately after an intertitle asserting that "the first negro regiments of the war were raised in South Carolina" (a reference to the First South Carolina Volunteers regiment, largely made up of escaped slaves), there is a raid on the Camerons' home town of Piedmont, South Carolina, by what is described as "an irregular force of guerillas." Encouraged by their "scalawag white captain," the guerillas seem intent only on destruction and arson. Although they are not actually constructed in the film as regular members of the Union Army, the implication of this series of shots is that black soldiers can only behave in mindlessly destructive ways. More importantly here, they are easily driven away when Piedmont is rescued by "a company of Confederate state troops." The climactic battle between the Klan and the black militia in the second part of the film is equally one sided. Many military conflicts, including the Napoleonic wars, had demonstrated that cavalry could not break infantry when the latter were equipped with rifles and ensconced in defensive positions. Yet this is *precisely* what happens when the horse-borne Klan seize power back in Piedmont from the black militia. The fact that the Klansmen have only handguns while

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the militia have rifles was neither here nor there to Griffith: in a confrontation that is as one sided as the blacksmith's initial defeat of all the blacks in the saloon, the white Klansmen prevail.

It is not simply that blacks are innately inferior to whites. The film represents them as incompetent when they attempt to take on roles formerly performed by whites. The most dramatic example of this is the representation of the black-dominated session in the state House of Representatives in 1871. Black politicians are shown to have no sense of the seriousness of their new role. They eat peanuts, drink alcohol surreptitiously, gnaw meat, and take off their shoes and put feet on desks (the Speaker of the House is obliged to rule that "all members must wear shoes"). Their "politics" seem to revolve around passing a resolution demanding whites salute black officers and a law permitting marriages between blacks and whites (they are shown leering at white women in the balcony). This could, of course, be interpreted as Griffith depicting black men straight from the cotton fields as ill prepared to govern their state. But I have increasingly come to see this sequence as suggesting that blacks would *never* be capable of supplanting white men as legislators and politicians.

Such black "inferiority" is coded in the film in many ways, including through the use of particular types of clothing. Some of the black members of the state House of Representatives are shown wearing checkered suits that evoke the vaudeville theater more than the state legislature. Black women wear gaudy patterned dresses and shawls. When Dr. Cameron is brought in chains before his former slaves, two of these women abuse him verbally and physically. Given the fact that most if not all of *The Birth of a Nation* was originally tinted with color, these sequences probably stood out even more for contemporary audiences.[3]

In the whole film, only two kinds of African American are represented favorably. First are the large group of blacks who appear to accept uncritically, even enthusiastically, the continuance of white supremacy. They are the happy-go-lucky slaves in the quarters, so content with their twelve-hour workdays (with two hours off for dinner) that they put on a dance for massa's son and the Camerons' northern guests. There are also the "faithful souls"—mammy (Jennie Lee) and Jake (William Freeman)—who stay loyal to the family once slavery has gone, willingly risking their lives to save the Camerons. All of these of course are caricatures of real blacks, just as much fantastic constructions of the white imagination as "bad" blacks such as Gus and Lieutenant-Governor Silas Lynch (George Siegmann).

We must never forget that the "nation" born in *The Birth of a Nation* was a *white* one. Only with blacks disarmed, banned from voting and banished from the streets (pretty well what real whites had achieved in the South by 1915) can the arrival of a new nation be celebrated. Deliberately, Griffith promoted this idea of a dominant white society from which African Americans had been excluded, however much he attempted to deny it. In what may have been his final defense of *The Birth of a Nation*, dated—as he characteristically noted—on Lincoln's birthday, 1947, the director wrote that

> I am not now and never have been "anti-Negro" or "anti" any other race. My attitude towards the Negroes has always been one of affection and brotherly feeling. I was partly raised by a lovable old Negress down in old Kentucky and I have always gotten along extremely well with the Negro people.[4]

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Griffith's contrived nostalgia for the mythical world of his distant youth (everything is "old," from the faithful black woman to Kentucky) cannot be allowed to obscure his crucial role in the making—as this essay has argued—of the most premeditated and consciously racist film in American history. There was never a screenplay for *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith rehearsed his company of actors in the scenes before he shot them. He had complete control of all the shots made, including camera angles, and how they were edited together. The racism of his film was not episodic and intermittent. It was built into its very structure and narrative. In making *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith put himself permanently and inescapably on the road to being remembered primarily for his racism.

## NOTES

[1]Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation": A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), particularly 218–21.

[2]John Cuniberti, *"The Birth of a Nation": A Formal Shot-by-Shot Analysis Together with Microfiche* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1979), 166–67.

[3]Karl Brown, assistant cameraman on the film, maintained in a 1975 interview that "no sequences were in black and white … everything carried some sort of tint." Cuniberti, 19, n. 31.

[4]D. W. Griffith to the Editor, *Sight and Sound* 16 (Spring 1947): 32.

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