

Birth of a Nation as an 'Educational' Tool for Racialized Violence

In 1915, director D. W. Griffith released the longest, most expensive, and most extravagant film up to that point; *The Birth of a Nation*. Margaret Mitchell, a fifteen year old Atlanta school-girl, loved the film so much she persuaded her family to see it with her dozens of times. She even gathered her school friends and staged a play based on *The Birth of a Nation*, during which children dressed as Klansmen chased their classmates in blackface. Mitchell would grow-up to write and publish *Gone with the Wind*, an ideological sibling to *Birth of a Nation*.¹

D. W. Griffith's film adapted Thomas Dixon Jr.'s 1905 novel *The Clansman*, and was the most popular American film of the silent era. *The Birth of a Nation* became the first American movie to be twelve reels long and last about three hours, a length almost unheard of in its time, thus making the film even more epic to its audiences. *Birth* was the first film to charge prices similar to those of live performances, the first to cost over \$100,000 to produce, and the first viewed by millions of ordinary Americans, with some estimates claiming a worldwide audience of 200,000,000.² Unlike contemporary movies, *The Birth of a Nation* did not experience an immediate nationwide release, rather a large team traveled with the film across the country opening it at different locations at different times. The film succeeded not only in the South, but generated its largest profits in Western and Northern cities, where Griffith's technical skill dazzled a mostly white audience bothered little by his film's racism.³ When white supremacists, along a wide spectrum of American society, utilized *Birth of a Nation* as a tool to promote racialized violence under the cloak of using the film as "education," they showed the power of film to shape perception and identity in American culture in the Twentieth Century.

¹ Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film*. (New York: Random House, 2002), 150.

² Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

³ Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 45.

The narrative of *The Birth of a Nation* follows two American families through the Civil War and Reconstruction: the Camerons in the South and the Stonemans in the North. The families, who were friends before the war, found themselves pitted against one another during the conflict. The second half of the film occurs after the North won the war, and Griffith depicts a rise of anarchistic Black political and sexual power within the South. At the film's climax, A Black Union soldier chases the youngest Cameron daughter, presumably to rape her. The young Cameron then commits suicide to prevent the assault. Following this tragedy, the families reunite and arouse the Ku Klux Klan to overthrow Black and carpetbag rule. By the end of the film, the two families are formally united through the marriage of their remaining children and white authority reigns. Scholar Jenny Barnett notes, "the family is the means by which Griffith tells the story of *Birth*, not only in the families at the centre of the narrative but also in the white brotherhood of the Klan, extending beyond these 'knights' to the white family nationwide."⁴ This presentation of the Civil War and its consequences reflects the influences of the Lost Cause tradition, a social movement that sought to control and write the history of the war and its aftermath and to utilize white supremacy both as a means and as an end.⁵

During the silent film era, popular directors, such as D. W. Griffith, depicted the Civil War through this Lost Cause interpretation. This biased conception of the war predates film and its origins trace back to the Reconstruction era. After the defeat of their slaveholding republic, ex-Confederates sought something positive to take away from their failed attempt at nation-building. Civil War scholar Gary Gallagher argues that this reconceptualization of the war manifested in former Confederates celebrating "their antebellum civilization with little reference

⁴ Jenny Barrett, *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History, and American National Identity*. (I. B. Tauris, 2009), 138.

⁵ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 259.

to slavery, justified secession on constitutional grounds, highlighted their undeniable wartime sacrifice, and insisted that defeat in the face of impossible odds entailed no loss of honor.”⁶ This Lost Cause argument found a wide audience through participants' memoirs, speeches, commemorative events, and a large number of public monuments.⁷ As time went on, the popularization of the Lost Cause narrative became rather widespread and as early as World War I, the white American public seemed in consensus of opinion, which favored this Southern narrative of the Civil War.⁸

Important to understanding the context and consequences of the film is knowing the social standing of Black Americans in the years leading up to the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. At that time, many Black Americans could not vote, Jim Crow became custom for public accommodations, and residential segregation was steadily increasing.⁹ White supremacy deepened in the first few decades of the twentieth century and the advent of film presented a new medium from which racist ideas could propagate further and faster than ever before. According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in its *Annual Report*, “every resource of a magnificent new art has been employed with an undeniable attempt to picture Negroes in the worst possible light.”¹⁰ *The Birth of a Nation* reflects this attempt to demonize Black Americans through a new and popular form of art. According to historian Bruce Chadwick, the overriding theme of the film was that Black people are unruly and only controlled in bondage, and freedom for Black Americans could destroy white society.¹¹ By constructing such a racist conception of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Griffith showed millions of

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 81.

⁹ Thomas Cripps, “The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture Birth of a Nation”. (*The Historian*, vol. 25, no. 3 1963), 344.

¹⁰ Cripps, 347.

¹¹ Chadwick, 113.

movie-goers that Americans could be reunited after the end of the Civil War — but reunited in whiteness.

Once wielded by filmmakers, movies become a strong educational and moralizing force. Director D. W. Griffith truly believed his film reflected an authentic recollection of the Civil War and Reconstruction era. He told a publication, “I gave to my best knowledge the proven facts, and presented the known truth, about the Reconstruction period in the American South... these facts are based on an overwhelming compilation of authentic evidence and testimony.”¹² According to Griffith’s belief system, his film portrayed a flawless depiction of the South during the mid to late 19th century. To Griffith, it felt necessary to portray the time period accurately because he saw film as “a tool for completing the great goal of history: lifting mankind from animality.”¹³ Here, Griffith reflects his desire to spread his worldview, one of white supremacy, through the medium of film.

D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon Jr., the two men primarily behind the creative process of the film, purposefully crafted *Birth* from a particular political perspective with a clear ideological objective. Griffith’s own father was a Confederate veteran and presumably a member of the original klan, and Dixon wrote racist novels and plays for decades.¹⁴ Speaking to President Wilson’s secretary about *Birth*, Dixon claimed,

I didn’t dare allow the President to know the real big purpose back of my film - which was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in the audience into a good Democrat! And make no mistake about it- we are doing just that thing... Every man who comes out of one of our theaters is a Southern partisan for life...¹⁵

¹² Barrett, 131.

¹³ Ibid, 131.

¹⁴ Chadwick, 129.

¹⁵ Cripps, 349.

Clearly, the creators of the film had intentions with their brainchild beyond entertaining and making a profit. Dixon and Griffith, both white supremacists, crafted *Birth of a Nation* as a tool to promote racialized violence.

Immediate Responses

Before *Birth* even premiered in cities across the country in 1915, local branches of the NAACP protested the showing of the film due to their fears of reactionary white violence following its run in their respective communities. In order to obtain an injunction to halt the showing of *Birth*, the NAACP branch of Los Angeles became the first to fight the film's showing in court. The NAACP legal team argued that showing the film encouraged racial tensions and created a threat to public safety, which could lead to violence.¹⁶ This fear that the film may inspire racialized violence reverberated beyond the protests from NAACP chapters. A journalist for a Black newspaper, *The Denver Star*, explained his fear of the film in 1915 as such:

It is not so much what is in the play that, but it is the damnable influence it leaves behind to spread and the seeds of lies it sows in honest and unsuspecting hearts and minds... it poisyns the pure waters of justice with the causes of prejudice, destroys the staff of right doing and right thinking and makes not violence the standard of good citizenship.¹⁷

This quote reflects a justified fear of white violence and acknowledges the potential of the film to grow violent ideas into white audiences' heads. Black activists at the time realized *Birth* had a unique and strong power to promote white supremacist ideals in American culture.

Not only did Black organizations and newspapers fear racial antagonisms following the publication of the film, but some citizens from across the country, Black and white, wrote

¹⁶ Stokes, 130.

¹⁷ "Birth of Nation Must Not Show in Denver." *The Denver Star*. 04 Dec, 1915. It is worth noting that during the initial first few decades of film, full length feature films were sometimes referred to as plays. The author here is referencing the film and not Dixon's original book/play.

letters-to-the-editor expressing their concerns. In order to persuade their fellow citizens that the violence depicted in the film was illegitimate and dangerous, citizens wrote about the nefarious cultural power of *Birth*. A woman named Annette Wallach Erdmann published a letter in 1915 entitled “History Distorted for Purposes of a Moving Picture Sensation” in the *New York Times*. She wrote, “the portrayal, unjust as it is to the negro, showing him as a cruel, inhuman, almost demented being, cannot help but create prejudice against a race that has a difficult road to travel at best and needs all possible sympathy and understanding from his white neighbor.”¹⁸ Erdmann asserts the film creates an unsympathetic view of Black Americans that could create racial antagonism. However, near the end of her piece, Erdmann states, “at the present date, when the nations across the sea are at each other’s throats... this film is particularly untimely.”¹⁹ She seems almost concerned that the violence stirred in the movie against Black Americans should instead be directed into the war effort. By framing her comments in this way, Erdmann positions the violence encouraged by *Birth* as illegitimate and distracting from the legitimate violence occurring in the war. Richard Carroll, a Black reverend from South Carolina, also included the war abroad in his arguments against *Birth*, as he attempted to convince the paper’s readership to not support the film. In 1918 he wrote, “the negroes have willingly and cheerfully presented their lives to the Government... they have burned no bridges, destroyed no munition factories.”²⁰ After criticizing the focus of the film’s violence, on Black Americans rather than the American enemies of World War I, Carroll claimed that after 25 years of preaching to improve racial tensions, “this play is a destruction of all good work done.”²¹ Carroll’s defense of Black Americans in the face of the cultural power of *Birth* reflects the strength of the hate which

¹⁸ Annette Wallach Erdmann. "A Woman's Protest: History Distorted for Purposes of a Moving Picture Sensation." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Mar 21, 1915.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*,

²⁰ Richard Carroll. "Breeder Of Strife: Carroll Asks for Suppression of 'Birth of a Nation.'" *Washington Bee*, June 1, 1918.

²¹ *Ibid.*,

permeated from the film and its showings, and Carroll feared that hate was enough to undo years of his work towards racial peace. Clearly, some citizens feared the film could promote racial hatred that could lead to violence in their local and national communities, and thus wrote letters to their newspapers in attempts to prevent the development of violence.

Immediate viewer responses to seeing the film confirmed fears that *Birth* stimulated a violent response from white audiences. Many white people who watched *Birth* became emotionally engaged with the narrative to the point of losing their natural inhibitions.²² Bosley Crowther, a movie critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in a 1965 article that:

Men who once wore gray uniforms, white sheets and red shirts wept, yelled, whooped, cheered and on one occasion even shot up the screen in a valiant effort to save Flora Cameron from her black pursuer.²³

The scene of an attempted rape by a Black Union soldier evoked such a response from white audiences that one man shot at the screen in order to stop even implied miscegenation/rape. Even in the 1960's one of the largest newspapers in the country chose to frame this violent action as valiant. An interview with white Southerner Paul Green in 1975 depicts a similar event. In his interview, Green talked about his experience seeing *Birth* in theaters,

The woman in the seat right in front of me sprang up and shouted, "kill them, kill them," and fell in a faint. It was quite a thing. It has a whole lot of racial feeling, I don't know if you know it or not. Well, back in 1915, it was something.²⁴

Green reflects on not only the verbal response of the woman in front of him to the film, but also his own memory of the racialized hatred the movie evoked in its viewers. The violence within the film itself became realized to some in its audience.

²² Stokes, 136.

²³ Bosley Crowther. "Of 'the Birth of a Nation': The Birth of 'the Birth of a Nation'." *New York Times*, Feb 07, 1965.

²⁴ Interview with Paul Green, by Billy E. Barnes, March 5, 1975, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

KKK Revival

The nationwide release of *Birth*, coupled with the film's ability to evoke hatred from its audience, brought interest to a Klan revival in the late 1910s to 1920s, an organization known for its targeted campaigns of violence. The founder of the second Klan, Colonel Simmons, placed advertisements for his own organization in Atlanta newspapers alongside advertisements for *Birth of a Nation*.²⁵ Likewise, those marketing *Birth* sent paid workers dressed as Klansmen to parade through towns as a publicity stunt before the opening of the movie.²⁶ This mutual relationship of the Klan and the movie, using one another for marketing purposes, makes it clear that some white Americans who viewed the film were inspired by its violent messages to join the organization and perpetuate violence within their communities.

The concurrent rebirth of the KKK to the film's initial release and run time reflects a symbiotic relationship between the two entities that would extend into the rest of the 20th century. According to scholar Bruce Chadwick, with the film's "romantic glamorization of the Klan, *Birth* gave the KKK legitimacy among millions of Americans who saw the film, a legitimacy no amount of parading, recruitment drives, or advertisements could have bestowed."²⁷ Those organizing the 2nd Klan leaned into *Birth's* romanticization and borrowed motifs from the film for their own rallies. For instance, just days before *Birth's* Atlanta release and 10 months after the film's initial debut, the Klan staged a public meeting on Stone Mountain, a huge Confederate monument, and burned a cross — an act first committed not by the original Klan, but by the Klan depicted in Dixon's novel and Griffith's film.²⁸ The burning of the cross at Stone Mountain demonstrates the incredible influence the film had on the revived Klan's aesthetics.

²⁵ Rory McVeigh, *Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 20.

²⁶ Chadwick, 130.

²⁷ Chadwick, 144.

²⁸ Barrett, 129.

Recruitment of new Klan members steadily increased following the initial gatherings in Georgia, with Klan organizer Edward Young Clarke stating in 1921, “in all my years of experience in organization work I have never seen anything equal to the clamor throughout the nation for the Klan.”²⁹ The upsurge in organized racist violence following the film’s release and the re-establishment of the Klan coincided with an increased number of lynchings.

The Klan of the 1920s sought to brand itself as an ‘understandable’ political movement, even adopting colloquialisms parroted by conservative and far-right groups for generations to come. The group claimed to be a “one-hundred percent American” organization and promised to unite white, native-born protestants in a common cause.³⁰ The Klan even participated in some public events alongside elected officials. During an unveiling celebration of a World War I monument in Rutherford County, North Carolina on November 11, 1924, a crowd of an estimated 5,000 people attended a full day of festivities including speeches by local politicians, repeated outdoor showings of *The Birth of a Nation*, a high school football game, fireworks, and finally, the evening ended with a parade of approximately 150 members of the local Ku Klux Klan dressed in full uniform.³¹ The Klan sought not only to defend and promote, through propaganda, the core cultural values of its membership, but also to impose said values onto others, and even at times resorted to violence as a means of punishing transgressors.³² The rebirthed Klan utilized *Birth* to promote their own cultural values rooted in white supremacy and thus violence.

Indeed, for decades after the film’s initial release, the Klan used *Birth* as a powerful propaganda tool to recruit and invigorate their base. Various Klan chapters screened the film to

²⁹ McVeigh, 21.

³⁰ McVeigh, 3.

³¹ “Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina.” *Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina* | Rutherford County World War I Memorial, Forest City, Documenting the American South, 19 Mar. 2010

³² *Ibid.*, 114.

audiences into the 1970s, and at least one of these screenings eventually led to multiple violent murders. According to a 1980 article by journalist Lindsey Gruson of the *Greensboro Daily News*,

In July 1979, for instance the Communist Workers Party (CWP) and a faction of the Klan, which was showing the film by invitation only, squared off... violence was narrowly averted although the CWP tore down and burned a Confederate flag, Klan groups constantly use the film as a recruiting tool, showing it at rallies in support of white supremacy and [to give them] some legitimacy.³³

Just over three months after this tense encounter, the Klansmen viciously avenged themselves by attacking a CWP rally in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Greensboro. The white supremacists deliberately shot at several leaders of the CWP. The Klan assassinated five individuals and left one seriously wounded, and though the massacre was caught on camera from several angles, an exclusively all white jury acquitted the white supremacists accused of murder.³⁴ Clearly, *The Birth of a Nation* remained married to violence beyond its initial connection to the rebirth of the Klan.

Birth and 'Education'

Birth of a Nation's inclusion in events like those described previously highlights the role the film played in teaching portions of white America about its heritage and identity.

This cultural response demonstrates the desire of *Birth's* producers for audiences to perceive the film as 'history' that can be utilized as an educational tool. Griffith re-created in full detail Ford's Theater, the location of Lincoln's assassination, and the South Carolina State Legislature's orante assembly hall, even bragging about his devotion to authenticity in building some of his sets, although what he depicted occurring in those locations were not authentic portrayals.³⁵ When

³³ Lindsey Gruson. "Film Sparks Protest at UNC-G." *Greensboro Daily News*, 13 Nov, 1980.

³⁴ Stokes, 10.

³⁵ Chadwick, 103.

talking to critics in 1915, Griffith claimed his story was based on fact and that his staff had compiled research to protect the film's authenticity. However, the books read by those working with Griffith were not scholarly works or even commercial analyses of the conflict. Instead the production assistants selected illustrated picture books of Civil War era items used to promote the general aesthetic of the time period rather than historical facts. It is worthy to note that even if Griffith's aides chose to read the popular historians of the time, such as James Rhodes and John Burgess, they would have consumed a recollection of the war with a Southern bias, as the historians' work argued the South held no responsibility for the war nor slavery.³⁶

Once the production team completed the film, *Birth's* marketing campaign continued to promote a linkage between the film and a legitimate historical education. Some initial advertisements for *Birth* in the *New York Times* framed it as a proto-documentary:

The feature film tracing the history of African slavery [as] the story begins in the seventeenth century with the coming of the first African slaves to North America [and] the Civil War is pictured in some of its most striking details, Sherman's march to the sea, the burning of Atlanta, the fall of Petersburg, the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, and the assassination of Lincoln are some of the episodes shown.³⁷

This advertisement for the film simply became a list of events, seemingly hiding the twisted interpretation present within the film. From the beginning of the filmmaking process, the white supremacist producers sought to cloak *Birth's* violent racism behind a veil of education and historical inquiry.

Marketers associated *Birth* with members of academia to legitimize the film's white supremacy. The publicity department for *Birth* even claimed three college professors verified the 'history' in the movie.³⁸ An article from 1915 entitled "Dr. Wallace of Wofford Praises Griffith

³⁶ Chadwick, 125.

³⁷ "Written on the Screen." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Feb 28, 1915.

³⁸ Stokes, 121.

Play: Teacher of History and Economics Describes ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’ as Stupendous and Illuminating- Gives One New Understandings of War and Reconstruction” contains Dr.

Wallace’s interview in *State*, a South Carolina newspaper. Within his interview, Wallace claimed,

Yes, there are some horrible things in it: but there are some horrible things in life, and I don’t know that we are going to get rid of them by pretending that they are not there. Taken all in all, it is something that no American, certainly no Southern man or woman, can afford not to see. I took the whole family except the baby and if it comes along after she’s big enough, I’ll take her too.³⁹

This quote, in the context of it coming from a college history professor, seeks to legitimize the film as a source of historical knowledge for the paper’s readership and encourages, even to the point of an imperative, the paper’s readers to educate their entire family with the film. By having professors frame the film as a legitimate source of Civil War education, the promoters of *Birth* purposefully cloaked their movie as a tool for educators in order to promote white supremacy in American culture.

Birth’s marketers attempted not only to include college professors, but even directly involved students in the advertising campaign to frame the film as history. The *Star-Telegram*, a Texas based newspaper, held an essay contest in 1915 that corresponded with the film’s showing in town.

History students are reported to be taking a lively interest in *The Star-Telegram*’s “Birth of a Nation” contest and many are reported at work upon essays for the competition. The subject is: ‘Why Should Every History Student See the Birth of a Nation?’ [...] Dealing as it does with the Civil War and the Reconstruction days, it has distinct historical value and an interest to every student of American life.⁴⁰

The contest awarded the two best essays with cash prizes and ten third place winners received two free tickets to the film. The diction used to promote the essay contest merged the film and

³⁹ "Dr. Wallace of Wofford Praises Griffith Play Teacher of History and Economics Describes The Birth." *State*, no. 9011, November 14, 1915.

⁴⁰ "History Students Take Lively Interest in 'Birth of a Nation' Contest; Send in Your Essay." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, no. 51, March 23, 1919.

history into one, even going as far to claim the film a necessity to a proper American history education. Those organizing the contest deliberately connected a film containing a white supremacist message with historical events critical to the white American identity, thus promoting a violent world view to the dozens of children whom participated in the essay contest. Not only did the film's marketing team target young children for indoctrination with their propagandistic movie, but they also sought to involve college students in their advertising campaign. The screening team of *Birth* travelled with its own orchestra, which sometimes performed with local musicians. In Boise, Idaho, *Birth's* symphony orchestra performed a free concert inside the state's capital building with the University of Idaho's glee club.⁴¹ The co-performance worked to connect a respected academic institution and students with the film, and did so in the building which contains the center of political power in Idaho. By including students of differing ages in their marketing campaigns of *Birth*, those behind the film, and additionally those printing the advertisements, influenced impressionable students' perception of the Civil War by encouraging them to watch and identify with a movie that promotes white supremacy.

White supremacists attempts to frame *Birth* as a legitimate means for a Civil War and Reconstruction education were successful and before long, some teachers began showing *Birth of a Nation* in a classroom setting, thus promoting an ideology of racialized violence within schools, adversely affecting students intellectually. Griffith, aware of cinema's potential as a learning tool, stated, "the time will come, and in less than ten years[...] when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures[...] certainly they will

⁴¹ "Appreciation of Boise in Concert Form. by 'the Birth of a Nation' and University of Idaho Glee Club." *Idaho Statesman*, no. 228, April 15, 1916

never be obliged to read history again.”⁴² An interview in 1975 with white Southerner Don West mirrors Griffith’s sentiment:

Twice while I was at Berry [school] they showed this *Birth of a Nation*, taken from Dixon’s *Klansman*. A very vicious, anti-Negro kind of slanderous movie. And before the movie would be shown the history teachers would prepare us in history class, you know. Give us all the data back of this thing. I believed that if, after that picture was shown, a black man had come across campus he might have gotten beaten up or something. Because it stirred up a lot of hard feelings.⁴³

Birth’s arousal of hatred occurred in minors as well. To these children, especially in the context of history class, the film depicted a historical ‘truth’ that they would take into adulthood. In New York, a film library sent circulars, filled with flowery language about the merits of the movie, to school principals and teachers informing them that the film was available to rent for classroom use. The New York NAACP branch quickly began protesting to the New York City Board of Education asking that principals not book the film.⁴⁴ Despite attempts by the NAACP to restrict the viewership of the film, many children witnessed *Birth* in class and learned white supremacy. Students who consumed film under the pretense of gaining a historical understanding of the Civil War had their perception of white American identity and history partially influenced by a piece of media which clearly promoted racial antagonism and violence.

The film’s fanciful propagation of white supremacy greatly impacted the youths who saw *Birth*, and in some instances, they even re-enacted the violence witnessed on screen. Paul Green remembered the movie fondly:

I grabbed my dad and said, ‘That’s the greatest thing I ever saw.’ Well, living down in Harnett, we didn’t have any movies and I don’t remember any movies that I saw until I saw *The Birth of a Nation*, which to me, wiped out everything else. That was in 1915 in Raleigh. I learned a lot from that...⁴⁵

⁴² Barrett, 195.

⁴³ Interview with Don West, by Jacquelyn Hall, Jan 22, 1975, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁴ "Birth of a Nation Film Offered to New York Schools." *Negro Star*, no. 45, February 18, 1938

⁴⁵ Interview with Paul Green, 1975

Witnessing *Birth* was a monumental occasion in Green's childhood because he believed it taught him about his world. Green attended the screening with his family and travelled to a different city, the state capital, to bear witness to something that was more than just a standard movie experience, but a moving picture sensation. To Green, the power of *Birth* eclipsed that of the other movies he saw in his adolescence and the screening became, to him, a special life event. Beyond childrens' identity construction, some youths who saw the film sought to actualize the violence depicted in *Birth*. During the 1930s, dozens of teenagers in East Orange, New Jersey schools engaged in racial disputes during the three days *Birth* played at the local cinema, and in response to the increased violence, local courts cancelled the film's weeklong run on day four.⁴⁶ The introduction of *Birth* to impressionable, young, white Americans resulted in the propagation of racialized violence and a violent world view to a younger generation.

Conclusion

When white supremacists, along a wide spectrum of American society, use *Birth of a Nation* as a tool to promote racialized violence, under the guise of using the film as educational material, they showed the power of film to shape perception and identity in American culture in the Twentieth Century. The producers of the film utilized a new and rising mass media technology to promote a racist and dangerous misconception of the Civil War to justify and legitimize prejudice, discrimination, and violence to the white American viewing public. Foundational Russian director Sergei Eisenstein said of *Birth*, "the disgraceful propaganda of racial hatred toward the colored people which permeates this film cannot be redeemed by the purely cinematographic effects of this production."⁴⁷ The legacy of *Birth of a Nation* is both one

⁴⁶ Chadwick, 138.

⁴⁷ Stokes, 28.

of the film's immense powers as an influential cultural force and its power for racist demagoguery which led to tangible violence and human rights violations. Films hold the potential to bring a world, and worldview, to life onscreen, and film creators can, regardless of intentions, turn that world into dangerous propaganda.

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