

Review Essay

Selling Racism: David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

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1. Introduction

In two previous articles for this journal,¹ I explored how Nazi Germany crafted propaganda intended to increase anti-Semitism to the level where the public would support or at least tolerate the systematic abuse of Jews. In this article, I will examine a propaganda film that was made in a markedly different time and place, namely, pre-World War I America, and argue that this film—*The Birth of a Nation*²—pushed anti-black racism in much the same way that the films I discussed in those earlier articles pushed anti-Semitism. However, the impact of the American propaganda was weaker than that of Nazi Germany because of the differences between the political systems of the two countries.

I first review briefly my approach in those earlier articles, which will be helpful for analyzing *The Birth of a Nation*. In commercial promotion there is a difference between advertising (marketing) and

¹ Gary James Jason, "Selling Genocide I: The Earlier Films," *Reason Papers* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 127-57, and Gary James Jason, "Selling Genocide II: The Later Films," *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2017), pp. 97-123, reprinted in *Cinematic Thoughts: Essays on Film and the Philosophy of Film*, ed. Gary James Jason (Bern: Peter Lang Publishers, 2021), pp. 131-64 and pp. 165-89, respectively.

² *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David W. Griffith (David W. Griffith Corp., 1915).

sales. When a company markets its brand, it aims at increasing the public's positive view of its product line. When the company (or its agents) does direct sales, they are aiming at getting specific individuals to buy specific products from the company's product line. Similarly, a political regime³ will often employ propaganda to increase the public's approval of the regime or its ideology, but it will also often tailor its propaganda to generate public support for a specific action or policy it plans to pursue.

The Nazi Regime, for example, distributed widely Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which she filmed at the 1934 Nazi Party gathering at the Nuremberg Rally. Hitler had assumed power in 1933 and was still relatively unknown among the German public. He wanted Riefenstahl to construct a movie to introduce him and the Party to the wider public. This she did brilliantly from the opening scene with Hitler descending by plane, like a god, to him saluting his followers as they adore him to scenes of Hitler Youth having wholesome fun.⁴ This was clearly a film made to market the Nazi Brand.

By contrast, to gain support for the war against Poland, the Nazi Regime made the propaganda film *Homecoming* (1941). That film was designed to convince Germans that German expatriates living in Poland were being subjected to endless abuse at the hands of the Poles.⁵

When a regime aims to get the public to hate some targeted group with such intensity that the public will be willing to commit or at least support violence against that group, it will likely do so through a specific type of propaganda. First, it will produce propaganda that portrays the targeted group as being essentially *different* from the rest of the public. The differences can be in appearance, dress, manners, customs, or mores. But that alone is not enough, for after all, tourists

³ I mean to include here political parties and political groups as well as an established political regime.

⁴ For more details about the film, see Gary James Jason, "Ein Volk, Ein Feuer: A Review of *Triumph of the Will*," in *Cinematic Thoughts*, ed. Jason, pp. 79-83.

⁵ See Gary James Jason, "Film and Propaganda: The Lessons of the Nazi Film Industry," *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), pp. 203-19, reprinted in *Cinematic Thoughts*, ed. Jason, esp. pp. 62-63.

often travel to countries that are culturally different but which they view as charming. Second, the propaganda will portray the targeted group as *disgusting*. That is, not only will the targeted group be portrayed as different, it will also be portrayed as being different in ways that make it worse. The members of the targeted group will be pictured as inferior mentally, physically, or spiritually with repellent lifestyles, values, or personal characteristics.

Difference and disgust are not enough, though. Some people might view homeless drug addicts as both different and disgusting, but they would not for that reason alone be inclined to harm or support harming homeless drug addicts. In addition to being different and disgusting, the propaganda will also portray the targeted group as being inherently *dangerous* to the general public. This can be the danger of the target (or “out-group”) attacking the general population (or “in-group”), controlling them politically, or “racially polluting” (i.e., demographically replacing) them.

The films I reviewed in those earlier articles—*Robert and Bertram* (1939), *Leinen aus Irland* (1939), *The Rothschilds: Shares at Waterloo* (1940), *Jud Suss* (1940), and *The Eternal Jew* (1940)—were crafted to reinforce and intensify every negative, anti-Semitic stereotype. I will demonstrate below that *The Birth of a Nation* was also crafted to reinforce and intensify every negative racist stereotype.

2. *The Birth of a Nation*: High-Quality Propaganda

The Birth of a Nation was based on a 1905 novel and play, by Thomas Dixon, Jr., called *The Clansman*. Filmmaker David W. Griffith met Dixon through a mutual friend. Both Dixon and Griffith were Southerners and devout admirers of the American South’s Confederacy, as Griffith was the son of a Confederate Army officer and Dixon the son of a slaveowner who had been a Klansman. They shared an ideological perspective about the U.S. Civil War, which the film clearly promulgates. I call this ideology the “Southern Historical Narrative.”

The Southern Historical Narrative involves five basic tenets. First, it holds that the Antebellum South, based upon slave-holding

plantations, was as successful a society as the industrial North. It was a society that was prosperous generally, culturally advanced in being refined and genteel (unlike the crude industrial North), and that promoted civic virtue by gentlemen and ladies of honor being imbued with the love of community. Second, it holds that because of the lies spread about slavery, the North decided to impose abolition on the South, even though the slaves were generally content and treated well. Third, because abolition forces were bound to win in the upcoming election, the South was forced to secede in 1861. Fourth, the North waged an unprecedentedly brutal war that the North won despite the gallantry of the Confederate Army. Fifth, at the end of the war, the North imposed a vicious regime of Reconstruction, aimed at putting white Southerners forever under the heels of blacks.

The Southern Historical Narrative was a historical shift in the Southern white elites' view of slavery, which is explored by Jeffrey Grynawski and Michael Munger.⁶ They note that the prevalent view of slavery among the Southern elites from the Revolutionary War era until around 1835 held that slavery was a "necessary evil," meaning that while it was incompatible with the liberal principles that informed America's founding documents (i.e., the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution), it had to be temporarily tolerated until its inevitable abolition. However, the racial prejudices of the white elites and their fears of facing black armed insurrection inclined them to favor restricting and delaying emancipation.

In the mid-1830s, that view of slavery was superseded by the view that slavery was a "positive good." According to this view, slavery was compatible with liberal principles because it (supposedly) brought the slaves the benefits of Christian civilization, protection from abuse, and made them better off than they would be as workers in Northern industrial factories. This new view also held that abolition was impossible. Additionally, racist assumptions made about blacks led white Southern elites to argue that slavery needed to continue because blacks, if freed, could not rule themselves. Buttressing this last point

⁶ Jeffrey Grynawski and Michael Munger, "Reconstructing Racism: Transforming Racial Hierarchy from 'Necessary Evil' into 'Positive Good,'" *Social Philosophy & Policy* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 144-63.

were allegedly “scientific” arguments from anthropology—specifically, ethnology, such as those put forth by Josiah Clark Nott⁷—that blacks were incapable of the same degree of self-rule as whites.

As Grynaviski and Munger explain, this new and more intransigent view of slavery as a positive good was built into the South’s case for secession. For example, according to the 1861 Texas declaration of secession, “the servitude of the African race . . . is mutually beneficial to both bond and free.”⁸ The Southern Historical Narrative, which viewed the loss of the Confederacy as a tragedy, was based on a commitment to making slavery a permanent institution.

It is no surprise, then, that a movie produced by two Southerners who deeply admired the Confederacy—and were releasing their film on the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Confederacy—would push a profoundly racist message. *The Birth of a Nation* has to be the most ironic film in the history of cinema. Perhaps the best description of this irony is by *The New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody: “The worst thing about *Birth of a Nation* is how good it is.”⁹ Artistically, the film was America’s first great film, as it truly established the American film industry. Filmsite.org gives a list of about two dozen movie techniques Griffith introduced or popularized in the film.¹⁰ Commercially, *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge success. It was the first blockbuster in the history of American cinema. It cost \$110,000 to make and earned \$18 million in ticket sales internationally by 1921,¹¹ which is roughly \$1.8

⁷ See, e.g., Josiah Clark Nott, *An Essay on the Natural History of Mankind: Viewed in Connection with Negro Slavery* (Mobile, AL: Dade, Thompson, 1851).

⁸ Grynaviski and Munger, “Reconstructing Racism: Transforming Racial Hierarchy from ‘Necessary Evil’ into ‘Positive Good,’” pp. 144-45, quoting from “A Declaration of the Causes Which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union,” February 2, 1861.

⁹ Richard Brody, “The Worst Thing about *Birth of a Nation* Is How Good It Is,” *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2013, p. 1.

¹⁰ Filmsite.org editors, “Filmsite Movie Review: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915),” 2022, accessed online at: <https://www.filmsite.org/birt.html>.

¹¹ Richard Corliss, “D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* 100 Years Later: Still Great, Still Shameful,” *Time*, March 3, 2015.

billion in today's dollars. It was the highest-grossing film in history until *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

The Birth of a Nation wasn't just popular with the public. It was also the first film to have been shown at the White House. President Woodrow Wilson—a college friend of Dixon—saw the movie along with his entire cabinet, thirty-eight Senators, fifty Congressmen, and all of the U.S. Supreme Court Justices.

Critically, *The Birth of a Nation* has been universally hailed by film scholars. Famed actor and director Charlie Chaplin called Griffith “the teacher of us all.”¹² *The New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody said that “*Birth of a Nation* wasn't just a seminal commercial spectacle but also a decisively original work of art—in effect, the founding work of cinematic realism, albeit a work that was developed to pass lies off as reality.”¹³ History.com's editors said of Griffith, “Before [his] time, motion pictures were short, uninspiring, poorly produced, acted and edited. Under his guidance, filmmaking became an art form. Despite the harm his *Birth of a Nation* inflicted on African-Americans, he will forever be regarded as the father of cinema.”¹⁴ *Time* film critic Richard Corliss also praised Griffith: “*The Birth of a Nation* was the culmination of six years of pioneering artistry by Griffith . . . more than anyone else—more than all others combined—he invented the film art.”¹⁵ In 1992, the U.S. Library of Congress selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry and, in 1998, the American Film Institute rated the film number 44 on its list “AFI's 100 Years . . . 100 Movies.”

3. Summary of *The Birth of a Nation*

¹² Glenn Frankel, “A Black-and-White Epic,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2014, p. C7, accessed online at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-birth-of-a-nation-by-dick-lehr-1417183338>.

¹³ Brody, “The Worst Thing about *Birth of a Nation* Is How Good It Is,” p. 2.

¹⁴ History.com Editors, “*The Birth of a Nation* Opens, Glorifying the KKK,” February 9, 2010, p. 2.

¹⁵ Corliss, “D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* 100 Years Later: Still Great, Still Shameful,” p. 2.

The Birth of a Nation is a long feature movie—over three hours in length—in two parts. Part One covers the period from 1860 through the U.S. Civil War to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Part Two covers the era of Reconstruction (1865-1877). I here summarize Part One before moving on in the next section to analyze how the Southern Historical Narrative in general is pushed and, in particular, how blacks are portrayed in the film. I refer to the Photoplay Production’s amazingly well-restored version,¹⁶ indicating where scenes start in the film by their time in relation to this version of the film (e.g., “[1:12.34],” meaning that the scene starts at one hour, twelve minutes, and thirty-four seconds into the film).

The film opens with a prologue about the introduction of slavery into seventeenth-century America. An intertitle tells us: “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.” The opening scene of the story shows African slaves at auction bowing submissively to a white overseer [2:08].

The film cuts to an intertitle that says, “The Abolitionists of the Nineteenth Century demanding the freeing of the slaves,” and we see an abolitionist minister preaching to a crowd while pointing to two submissive black men on display [2:29]. As the crowd applauds, a man guides a black boy down the aisle, collecting donations for the cause.

With this context provided, the first part of the story is built around the interactions between two families—one Northern (the Stonemans) and the other Southern (the Camerons). The Northern family includes the powerful abolitionist Congressman Austin Stoneman,¹⁷ who lives with his three children, daughter Elsie and sons Phil and Tod. The Southern family, residing in Piedmont, South

¹⁶ Photoplay Productions ultra-HD restored version was produced with the support of the Library of Congress National Audio-Visual Conservation Center. It is available on YouTube.com, accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oikeRSja4kl&t=178s>.

¹⁷ Stoneman is modelled on Pennsylvania Senator Thaddeus Stevens, who led the “Radical Republicans” in the U.S. Congress during the Reconstruction period.

Carolina, includes Dr. Cameron and his wife, their two daughters—Margaret and Flora—and their three sons—Ben, Wade, and Duke.

An early scene shows the Stoneman boys visiting the Cameron plantation. The white characters are dressed elegantly, while a wagon with shabbily dressed blacks¹⁸ in it is pulling out with some of the children tumbling out onto the dirt street. Phil and Margaret walk through a cotton field, passing slaves at work picking cotton. A close-up shot shows the slaves smiling, content in their work [12:35]. Shortly thereafter, the slaves enjoy a two-hour dinner break, during which they laugh, sing, and dance—apparently fully happy to be enslaved [14:45].

But then an intertitle proclaims, “The gathering storm.” The visiting Stoneman boys and the Camerons listen while Dr. Cameron reads a report in the Charleston newspaper that warns, “If the North carries the election, the South will secede.” War threatens the peaceful life of the South.

President Lincoln then signs a proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers, which the film tells us “uses the Presidential office for the first time in history to call for volunteers to enforce the rule of the coming nation over the individual states.” This act, the film suggests, is what started the Civil War.

Back in Piedmont, the town holds a farewell ball for the troops about to go to the front. The partiers celebrate the victory at the first battle of Bull Run, which was a Confederate victory. Early the next morning, the young men ride off to war, cheered on by the townspeople—including blacks [28:45].

The film jumps ahead two-and-a-half years into the war. An irregular militia force of black guerillas raids the town, with the white townsfolk resisting [36:00]. Flora and Margaret run inside their house, where Dr. Cameron puts them and their mother in a room, while he (carrying a pistol) stands guard. The black militiamen break into

¹⁸ The “blacks” in the film are almost all played by white actors in “blackface” (i.e., wearing black face paint).

Cameron's house, beating the elderly Cameron to the ground and ransacking the house, while the Cameron women hide in a cellar [36:44].

Some of the white townspeople manage to report the raid to a company of Confederate soldiers, who rush in to rescue the town. They rout the black militia, but not before the militia sets fire to the Cameron house. The girls hug their liberators, as does the Camerons' black housemaid [39:49].

As the war progresses, General William Sherman's march is vividly portrayed. A frightened mother and her children huddle next to the charred remains of their house, while Union forces burn vast areas of trees and homes. General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, heralding "the end of state sovereignty."

Congressman Stoneman then meets with Lincoln, urging the President to be harsh with the defeated South and telling Lincoln that "[t]heir leaders must be hanged and their states treated as conquered provinces." However, the compassionate Lincoln has a different vision: "I shall treat them as if they had never been away." Under Lincoln's supportive leadership, the South starts to rebuild, but this "healing time of peace" comes to an end with the assassination of Lincoln. In Piedmont, shocked Dr. Cameron reads the news of Lincoln's death in the newspaper and he says mournfully, "Our best friend is gone. What is to become of us now?"

4. The Propaganda Messages in the Film

Part One of the film pushes all the tenets of the Southern Historical Narrative. First, the scenes of the Cameron plantation—with the whites dressed elegantly, a ball staged for the Southern soldiers, and the Piedmont men volunteering to fight—serve to advance the view that life on the plantation was refined, elegant, and prosperous.

Second, the scenes of the slaves working happily, getting a two-hour dinner during which they sing and dance, and cheering the Confederate soldiers, serve to advance the view that the slaves were contented and taken care of well. Meanwhile, the scene of a white

preacher using a black boy to promote abolition serves to advance the view that abolition was promoted by Northern activist agitation rather than being due to mistreatment of the slaves.

Third, the scenes of Dr. Cameron reading the newspaper about the upcoming election forcing the South into secession and of Lincoln calling up volunteers serve to advance the view that the North forced the war on the South. In reality, the secession of the Southern states started before Lincoln ever assumed office. Moreover, the South's attack upon Fort Sumter—generally considered as the true start of the war—is never mentioned in the film.

Fourth, the vivid scenes of Sherman's march through Georgia advance the message that the North employed brutal terroristic methods to win the war. This brutality is amplified by the fifth point that scenes of Stoneman urging that the defeated South be brutally occupied, and Lincoln resisting but being assassinated, advance the message that the North imposed an equally harsh Reconstruction on the South.

There is also a concomitant virulent racist message. Blacks are presented as different, such that they are portrayed as an alien intrusion into America. They dress and act differently by singing and dancing on the plantation, behaving oafishly in the street, dressing shabbily, and behaving submissively. These differences are presented as being inferior, rendering blacks as unable to take care of themselves and capable of being productive only when controlled by whites. Blacks are also shown as dangerous blacks with the militia raid on Piedmont.

The themes of difference, disgust, and danger are dramatically amplified in Part Two of the film, which sends the message that Radical Reconstructionists in Congress wrought "a veritable overthrow of the civilization in the South . . . in their determination to put the white South under the heel of the black South." An intertitle primes the film's viewers for the reaction to come with another quotation from President Wilson's book: "The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation . . . until at last there had sprang into existence a great Ku Klux Klan . . . to protect the Southern country."

The historical irony here is that Wilson, a Democrat and the leader of the Progressive movement, was elected to the presidency with

the help of the majority of black voters. However, his own history textbook pushes the Southern Historical Narrative.

In a key scene, the film shows Stoneman—now the “uncrowned king”—appointing Silas Lynch (“the mulatto leader of the blacks”) as his agent in imposing black rule on the South. Before he leaves, we see Lynch eye Elsie lasciviously [1:35:00]. Subsequently, Lynch makes Piedmont his headquarters and “starts the ferment” by organizing a party for blacks. We are shown blacks in the streets, drinking, eating watermelon, and dancing, as Lynch entices them to quit work to quit and join the partying [1:36:16]. The Freedman’s Bureau, set up by the U.S. Congress to aid poor black families transition into freedom, is characterized in the film as “the negroes getting free supplies . . . the charity of a generous North misused to delude,” with blacks grinning as they receive free goods [1:36:58]. Ben Cameron and his sister leave their home and step into the street, when black militiamen force them aside and threaten Ben [1:37:17]. Lynch taunts him by saying, “This sidewalk belongs to us as much as it does to you.”

On election day, black militia guard the ballot boxes, allowing blacks to vote while turning whites away [1:50:56]. Naturally, the returns show that “the negroes and carpetbaggers sweep the state.” Lynch is elected Lieutenant Governor.

The film suggests that as blacks increase their power, they become more arrogant. For example, armed black militia abuse a white father and his two children and assault an elderly white man, some of whom laugh at him [1:53:46]. Black militia also tie up and beat an old black servant who did not vote for the Union League; when an elderly man intervenes, the black militiamen shoot him dead [1:54:17].

Another scene shows the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1871, now dominated by blacks. Black Representatives behave in a crude and uncouth manner by eating fried chicken at their desks, drinking, putting their feet up on their desks and removing their shoes, dressed garishly, and behaving clownishly [1:56:45]. They pass a resolution requiring all white to salute negro militia on the street as well as a bill allowing the intermarriage of blacks

and whites, whereupon the black delegates erupt in jubilation. The film suggests that this legislation was the ultimate prize for blacks [1:58:28].

Legalizing interracial marriage leads to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). When Lynch shows some Klan hoods to Stoneman, the enraged Congressman avers, “We shall crush the whole South under the heel of the black South” [2:06:12].

In a later scene, Flora runs off alone to get some water from a spring. She doesn’t know that a black man named Gus is tracking her [2:12:20]. Gus catches up with her and says he wants to marry her [2:14:46]. She climbs a rocky ridge to escape Gus and, as he approaches, tells him to keep away or she will jump. He closes in and Flora jumps to her death, choosing suicide over an interracial liaison.

Ben and a group of other white men capture Gus. That night, in their Klan robes, they subject him to a “trial.” Naturally, the Klansmen find him guilty, whereupon they kill him and dump his body on Lynch’s porch. The next morning, upon finding the body, Lynch orders the black militia onto the streets to suppress the Klan. We now see the Klan in action. Ben, with his Klan group, sends an emissary to the Klansmen of a neighboring county “to disarm all the blacks that night.”

Elsie subsequently turns to Lynch for help, when he locks the door and tells her he wants to marry her. Elsie—showing complete revulsion—threatens to have him horsewhipped for his insolence. Lynch replies by showing her the street filled with black militia and black townfolk, saying that he will build a “black empire” with her as his queen [2:46:31]. Stoneman enters and meets with Lynch, not knowing that Elsie, who has fainted, lies in the next room. Lynch tells Stoneman that he wants to marry a white woman, whereupon Stoneman congratulates him. But when Lynch tells Stoneman he wants Elsie, Stoneman is furious. Outside, we see blacks—now in control of the streets—intimidate whites [2:53:54].

Simultaneously, we see Klans fully assembled, with Ben in charge, riding *en masse*. The Klan army rides to the rescue of Piedmont, routing the black militia, who run away in fear [3:01:01]. Ben and a group of the Klansmen rescue Elsie and capture Lynch. Black militiamen are forced to lay down their arms and they flee in panic

[3:06:32]. The Klan then stage a parade, with Elsie and Phil Stoneman now riding with them as Northerners who are now Klan supporters. The whites in the town hail their liberators. In the next election, the town's black citizens go to vote only to see a line of Klansmen on horses, so they turn away in fear [3:07:40].

Part Two of the film shows the Southern Historical Narrative completed. Reconstruction was—according to the film—a deliberate attempt to permanently place whites under the control of blacks by disenfranchising whites and placing armed black militia in Southern towns and cities. The KKK—again, according to the film—was white Southerners' way of staving off black oppression.

Moreover, the leitmotifs of difference, disgust, and danger are now driven home graphically and intensely. Blacks are portrayed as different in their manners, dress, language, and values. These differences are viewed as disgusting; that is, they are presented as differences for the worse, as blacks are depicted in several scenes described above as being uncouth, rude, power-seeking, high-handed, lazy, stupid, and hyper-sexual.

The film also depicts in numerous ways blacks as dangerous—in their lust for white women, their propensity to physically assault whites, their tendency to steal and vandalize property, and their financial parasitism of the community. It is worth noting here that the gravamen of the theme of danger is that of “racial pollution,” most vividly illustrated in the scene of Flora committing suicide. This is why attempts at legitimizing interracial relationships are shown as the tipping point for the rise of the KKK.

5. The Negative Effects of the Film

The Birth of a Nation was a major influential force at the time of its release. When it was distributed, it spurred racist attacks on blacks and race riots around the United States, which continued as long as the

film was in circulation. This rising tension peaked in 1919, during which there were twenty-five race riots, the worst occurring in Chicago.

An even more negative effect of the film was the role it played in resurrecting the KKK. The original KKK—so effectively glorified in the film—was founded in Tennessee in late 1865 by a group of former Confederate Army officers. While it had started as a more or less social, fraternal organization, by 1867 it was overtly political, focused on weakening black citizens' political power through threats and minor violence. By 1870, however, the KKK was using major violence, including vicious beatings and murders—often by lynching. It targeted white Northern leaders (the “carpetbaggers”) and especially black political activists. This escalating violence led the federal government to pass stiffer laws, such as the 1871 Civil Rights Act, and led President Grant to station troops in South Carolina. By 1872 the first incarnation of the KKK was eliminated.

However, when *The Birth of a Nation* opened in Atlanta in December 1915, and the second KKK was founded in Stone Mountain, Georgia by William Joseph Simmons. Simmons modelled the new Klan on the film's portrayal of them rather than on actual history. For example, the new KKK adopted the practices of wearing white robes and burning crosses, which the original Klan apparently did not do.¹⁹ As historian Tom Rice notes,²⁰ this KKK redivivus often used *The Birth of a Nation* as a recruiting tool. When the film was premiered in Atlanta, the new KKK staged a parade outside of the theater, replete with robed men on robed horses. With the film's help, the new KKK became more widespread than the first KKK.

The new KKK adopted more modern methods of recruiting and marketing by 1921, so the membership grew quickly. It spread to all fifty U.S. states and was no longer an exclusively Southern rural phenomenon. By the mid-1920s, its membership was somewhere between two and five million in a nation of fewer than 116 million.²¹

¹⁹ Wikipedia, “Ku Klux Klan” (2022), p. 2.

²⁰ Tom Rice, “How the Ku Klux Klan Used Cinema to Become a Force in America,” *The New Republic*, December 11, 2015, p. 1.

²¹ Joshua Rothman, “When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets,” *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2016, p. 4.

This meant that as much as 20% of eligible Americans (white, male, Protestant adults) were members—a huge number for what was essentially a hate group. As Joshua Rothman points out, the second KKK had many women’s and children’s auxiliaries, with names like the Junior Ku Klux Klan and the Ku Klux Kiddies.²² Although the Klan presented itself as an all-American fraternal society it engaged in many acts of violence. While it was not as violent as the first KKK, the second KKK still committed hundreds of assaults and murders during the period from the late 1910s to the late 1920s. For example, the KKK lynched 64 people in 1918 and 83 people in 1919 alone.²³

6. Factors Limiting the Impact of *The Birth of a Nation*

I have implicitly drawn a parallel between the Nazi Regime’s group of anti-Semitic propaganda films (summarized in Section 1 above) and the privately produced—yet bearing the stamp of approval by President Wilson—racist propaganda film *The Birth of a Nation*. However, the destructive force of the Nazi films was far more lethal and virulent than that of Griffith’s film, even when you include the baleful effects of the new Klan it resurrected. What accounts for this difference in the success of the propaganda? I think that we can point to a few factors that limited the impact of *The Birth of a Nation*.

Most importantly, the Nazi anti-Semitic films were a product of a well-financed and organized propaganda machine, operating within a pervasive police state that controlled what appeared in theaters, on radio, in newspapers and magazines, and so on. There was thus no counter-propaganda to the anti-Semitic films, as books and articles criticizing anti-Semitism, organized protests against the showing of the Regime’s anti-Semitic films, and movies countering that anti-Semitism were all virtually impossible under the Nazis.

The U.S., in contrast, had freedom of speech, so as soon as *The Birth of a Nation* was released, counters to it sprang up. As the film started to appear in theaters on the East Coast, black leaders such as

²² Ibid., p. 7.

²³ Adam Augustyn, “Chicago Race Riot of 1919,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

William Monroe Trotter and W. E. B. Dubois as well as black organizations such as the NAACP started writing essays exposing the racism in the movie and organizing demonstrations against it.

Especially noteworthy in the realm of protest were the efforts of Trotter, who was the editor of a Boston newspaper *The Guardian*. He had supported President Wilson for election and was bitterly disappointed with Wilson's apparent endorsement of *The Birth of a Nation*. When the film was scheduled to screen in Boston, Trotter—who had earlier succeeded in getting Dixon's play *The Clansman* banned in the city—tried but failed to get the film banned. Instead, he organized a protest of 3,000 black demonstrators who marched on the statehouse. He kept the protests going for three weeks. While Trotter's demonstrations did not succeed in stopping the screening of the film, they were reported in newspapers nationwide.²⁴

It did not take long for other filmmakers to start producing films that countered the racist propaganda of *The Birth of a Nation*. For example, black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux soon made two films rebutting the messages of *The Birth of a Nation: Within our Gates* (1920) and *The Symbol of the Unconquered: A Story of the Ku Klux Klan* (1920).

Within our Gates rebuts the portrayal of blacks in *The Birth of a Nation* by offering a counterview of their values. The central plot line concerns an attempt by several good people—white as well as black—to keep a Southern grade school serving poor, rural, black children in operation. The parents of those children are shown as extremely hard-working, honest, and desperate to see their children educated. They do this in the face of fierce racist hatred, including the lynching of innocent blacks (shown in graphic detail in the film). The only attempted rape is perpetrated by a white man against a black girl, who stops only when he recognizes that she is his daughter. Many of the black characters in the film are professionals—doctors, teachers, ministers, nurses, business owners, and so on. The viewer sees quickly that blacks generally are nothing like what is portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation*.

²⁴ For additional details on Trotter's role in this matter, see Gary James Jason, "The Birth of a Nation and the Birth of Cancel Culture," *Liberty*, July 23, 2022.

Micheaux's other counter-piece, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, centers around Eve Mason, a young black woman of light complexion, and Hugh van Allen, a black prospector who owns a large land holding. In the film, a villainous black man, Driscoll, discovers that van Allen's land sits atop large deposits of oil and Driscoll employs the local KKK to help him steal the land. Van Allen gets the support of his black neighbors and they defeat the Klan, enabling him to develop his own land and become wealthy. He loves Eve, but erroneously thinking that she is white, he doesn't act on it. However, she is able to prove that she is black and he marries her.²⁵

Micheaux's story here counters the stereotype in *The Birth of a Nation* of black men lusting after white women. Also, the KKK is presented not as being protectors of white people in general or white women in particular, but as being a criminal gang focused on stealing and extorting the property of black people. Micheaux's films were somewhat effective counters to Griffith's masterpiece. Unfortunately, however, his films played primarily in 700 theaters located in predominantly black neighborhoods, so the counter-propaganda effect of those films on the white population was rather limited.

²⁵ For more details about Micheaux's films, see Gary James Jason, "Countering *Birth of a Nation* in Film," *Liberty*, September 22, 2022.