

THE BIRTH OF A NATION: PROPAGANDA'S ROLE IN SHAPING RACIAL VIOLENCE AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

DongQiao Chen

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100032, China.

Corresponding Email: 25180082@qq.com

Abstract: This paper explores the influence of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), one of the most controversial films in American history, which has been both condemned for its overtly racist depictions and praised for its technical innovations. The research focuses on specific scenes that portray African Americans as lustful and uncivilized predators, analyzing the film's role as propaganda that reinforced racial stereotypes and bolstered white supremacist ideologies.

Using historical analysis and primary sources, the paper examines the cultural and societal impacts of the film, particularly its role in sparking widespread racial violence, police brutality, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. By depicting African Americans as threats and glorifying the Reconstruction-era KKK, the film amplified racial tensions and legitimized violence against Black communities. The analysis highlights how the film's release contributed to the rise of the Second KKK, illustrating the connection between cinematic depictions and real-world socio-political movements. The findings underscore the film's enduring legacy as a tool of systemic racism and a catalyst for both organized white supremacy and early Black protest movements. This research contributes to the discourse on how media shapes public perception and perpetuates historical injustices, emphasizing the importance of critically examining cultural artifacts within their broader historical contexts.

Keywords: *The Birth of a Nation*; Racism; Propaganda; Ku Klux Klan; Racial violence; Black protest movements

1 INTRODUCTION

When people are inquired about films that have a significant effect on the political history, many will nominate *The Birth of a Nation*. It is considered one of the most controversial movies in American history. Some profess that the film should be banned due to its absurd portrayal of African Americans, always depicting them as unintelligent and sexually aggressive towards white women. However, during the premier of this movie, it was touted as a general history of the racial problem in the South and "it is like writing history with lightning." Putting this film as eventful and helpful. Among all of the disputes, denounces, and praises of this film, I believe that *the Birth of a Nation* as a propaganda, casts a negative influence on American history.

2 SCENE ANALYSE

The Birth of a Nation intensified racial hate and white supremacist throw presenting African-Americans as lustful and uncivilized predators.

In a particularly infamous scene, Gus, a freedman, pursues Flora Cameron through a forest while professing his desire for marriage. In an effort to escape, Flora tragically leaps to her death from a cliff. The sequence is charged with dramatic intensity, as Flora is depicted fleeing in terror, her facial expressions conveying profound fear, with tears streaming down her face. Gus, in contrast, is portrayed as a savage figure, his eyes emphasized starkly against the darkened tone of his skin. Notably, the character of Gus, like all other Black characters in the film, was played by a white actor in blackface. The producer justified this casting choice as being essential for the "perfection" of the film [1], though it also reflects the unwillingness of Black actors to participate in such blatantly racist depictions.

In another scene, Black legislators are shown eating fried chicken and propping their bare feet up on desks. Simultaneously, the film glorified the Reconstruction-era KKK. Klan members are portrayed as fearless saviors fighting an unjust government and are described – in an intertitle quoting Woodrow Wilson – as "a veritable empire of the South" roused by "a mere instinct of self-preservation." The climax of the film occurs when Benjamin Cameron leads a group of Klansmen to rescue Elsie Stoneman from her kidnapper, a mixed-race man named Silas Lynch. In *The Birth of a Nation*, Blacks were portrayed with all of the dirtiest and rude words while the Whites were being lifted up towards the sky, praising them of being virtuous and justice.

3 THE BIRTH OF A NATION AS PROPOGANDA, CASTING NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON POLITICS AND RACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Birth of a Nation casted a great effect in the rise of racist activities and police brutality, also causing the rebirth of the second Ku Klux Klan. To be more specific, the movie's release marked the beginning of a period of widespread racial violence and unrest across the nation, including a spate of lynching and race riots.

3.1 Evoking Police Brutality and Black Protest

Firstly, Police brutality and black protest arises due to the racist content of *The Birth of a Nation*. The fight against *The Birth of a Nation* had transformed into the first mass black protest movement of the twentieth century. In cities such as Philadelphia and Boston, the local campaigns came to emphasize police brutality and the role of law enforcement in the protection of private property. White supremacist defended the film. For example, during the premier of *The Birth of a Nation*, many Black people including Puller decided to protest against the movie. In the chaos, Puller recalled Sergeant King shouting, "lock that nigger up." Two officers grabbed Puller by the throat, and another, by the back of the neck. Puller gasped for air. The officers dragged him for at least fifteen city blocks as he faded in and out of consciousness. Back at the theater, the chaos continued as plainclothes officer Dennis Harrington punched William Monroe Trotter in the jaw. Some even recalled: "The officers that had me by the throat were choking me couldn't remember anything," Reverend Aaron Puller shortly after his arrest on April 17, 1915 [2].

For Black activists, *The Birth of a Nation* represented more than offensive imagery; it symbolized a growing system of racial oppression, enforced by segregated venues, police intervention, and white supremacist promotion. Contemporary reflections on the film recognize it as a profound yet troubling emblem of America's racist history, serving as a reminder of the systemic discrimination that society has worked to overcome.

3.2 Reviving and Inspiring the Ku Klux Klan

Secondly, *The Birth of a Nation* played a pivotal role in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which had disbanded in the late 19th century. At the time of the film's release, the original Reconstruction-era Klan, formed by former Confederate soldiers to target Black political leaders and their white allies, no longer existed. This earlier iteration including at most half a million members [3], operating primarily in the South, dissolved following the passage of the Enforcement Act of 1871, which outlawed many of its violent tactics. However, six months after the film's premiere, William J. Simmons reignited the Klan's existence by burning a cross atop Stone Mountain, Georgia. Influenced by the lynching of Leo Frank and media coverage of the film, Simmons declared himself the "Imperial Wizard" of the newly-formed Second Klan on Thanksgiving Day 1915 [4], branding it as "a high-class order for men of intelligence and character."

Although the Klan's membership grew slowly during the film's roadshow, the establishment of the Klan's Propagation Department in 1920 catalyzed its rapid expansion [5]. By 1924, the Second KKK had established chapters in every state and amassed over four million members, representing nearly 10% of the nation's white male adult population. While historians have often attributed the film's glorification of the Klan and its racist depictions of African Americans to the resurgence of the KKK and heightened racial tensions [6], direct empirical evidence for these claims remains limited [7]. Nonetheless, counties that screened the film were over 60% more likely to establish a chapter of the Second KKK, underscoring its significant influence.

In addition to spurring the creation of the Second KKK, *The Birth of a Nation* inspired many of its most infamous practices. After Flora Cameron's suicide, the film shows Klan members burning a cross drenched in her blood before lynching her pursuer. By all historical accounts, the Reconstruction-era KKK never burned crosses. The first recorded instance of cross-burning in the United States was at the founding of the Second KKK. While Simmons described the act as symbolic of "a service of love and sacrifice to our age and generation," it had no actual history in the Klan and was in fact drawn from the Scottish traditions of The Clansman's author, Thomas Dixon Jr [8].

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Birth of the Nation*, as propaganda has casted a negative effect on American history. It not only sprinkled the rise of racism, causing more Black people to be discriminated and treated with rudeness and disrespect. It caused the large scale of Black protest and police brutality. With hundreds and thousands of Black people enduring violence behaviors from White police and racist language at the same time. Lastly, it triggered the rebirth of the second Ku Klux Klan by beautifying them in the movie, portraying them as organizations pursuing justice, and cleaning the threats -in their minds Black people-for America. Therefore, *the Birth of a Nation* casted a negative effect on American history.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Franklin John Hope. Birth of a Nation': Propaganda as History. The Massachusetts Review 20, 1979, 3: 417–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088973>.
- [2] Caddoo Cara. THE BIRTH OF A NATION', POLICE BRUTALITY, AND BLACK PROTEST. The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 14, 2015, 4: 608–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43903545>.
- [3] Baudouin R. Ku Klux Klan: A history of racism and violence. Montgomery, al: Southern poverty law center, 2011.
- [4] Stokes M D W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time. Oxford University Press, 2007.

-
- [5] Fryer R G, S D Levitt. Hatred and Profits: Under the Hood of the Ku Klux Klan. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2012, 127 (4): 1883–1925.
- [6] Simcovitch M. The impact of Griffith's birth of a nation on the modern Ku Klux Klan. *Journal of Popular Film*, 1972, 1 (1): 45–54.
- [7] Ang D. The Birth of a Nation: Media and Racial Hate. *American Economic Review*, 2023, 113(6): 1424-1460.
- [8] Simmons, W. J. *The Klan Unmasked*. Wm. E. Thompson publishing Company. 1923.