

The censoring of *Birth of a Nation*

The exhibition of motion pictures is a business pure and simple, organized and conducted for profit...not to be regarded, nor intended to be regarded by the Ohio Constitution, we think, as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion. They are mere representations of events, of ideas and sentiments published or known; vivid, useful, and entertaining no doubt, but...capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of their attractiveness and manner of exhibition.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice McKenna's ruling on *The Birth of a Nation* in the case of Mutual Film v. Ohio Industrial Commission.

They say that one cold March morning in 1915 Carl Laemmle, head of Universal Film Manufacturing Company, left his Broadway office to open his new studios in California. It was the way the movie industry was destined to develop. But the National Board of Review—that haven for prosperous New York Protestants, symbol of the industry's complex commitments to pressure groups and the federal government—would not follow the industry to the West Coast. And that worried Laemmle even more than the move Pat Powers was making to dethrone him using his West Coast contacts. The Supreme Court had just found against the distributor Mutual Film, banning D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in the state of Ohio. Laemmle knew that from then on, movies could be treated like interstate trash by local conservative censorship boards in the hands of pressure groups anxious to control such a dangerous and powerful medium and drown it in the deep waters of Prohibition.¹

¹ Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture. 1915-1928*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990, pp. 1-2.

On January 4, 1993, concerned about reactions from the black community, Jill Brett, head of public relations for the Library of Congress, published a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, explaining and apologizing for the Library's decision to preserve *The Birth of a Nation* for posterity. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), still going strong but constrained by the resurgence of black nationalism, is spending part of its time fighting the past by charging the Library of Congress with insulting the black community. Jill Brett is more than cautious in her letter: she argues that the racist film has been chosen as a historical lesson, a reminder of the dark side of U.S. history. Perhaps what's really at work is the memory of the recent disturbances in Los Angeles, together with the dilemma posed by today's racial divisions which many thought had been overcome. The film's message is simply too offensive. It was not a prudent time to pay homage to Griffith's work.²

Building on early Italian achievements, *The Birth of a Nation*

² "The Birth of a Nation Documents History," *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1993.

(1915) is a landmark in the history of film. Griffith forged all the latest cinematographic innovations into a dramatic unity, overcoming many limitations, and giving film a language all its own. Simultaneously, he brought new meaning to the word *spectacle*. Both epic and daily life fit into this film odyssey.

Despite its small size and relative unimportance, the fledgling NAACP attacked Griffith's films from the start. Its members marched against the movie houses that premiered the film, organized different protests asking whites and blacks alike to boycott it, preached against it in their churches and criticized it in their press. Its members felt that the film justified the activities of night riders and vigilantes who were terrorizing blacks, Jews and Catholics all through the South. They blamed it for the increase in lynchings and other violence and for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and its spread to some Northern states. All this was mere speculation. But the film did cause significant unrest: Boston police battled a whole day with a crowd in 1915, and similar disturbances were reported in New York and Chicago.

Naturally, the direct pressure of the NAACP helped get the film banned, but it was the local censorship boards who had the last word, and they saw in the unrest a reason for opposing the film, as the mayor of Minneapolis said, "in the interest of the public welfare and the peace and good order of the city."³ Not only was it offensive to the black community, but it also repudiated the imposition of the North's authority over the South. Only fifty years had passed since the Civil War, an open wound better left alone.

The film is clearly divided into two parts. In the first part, Griffith

³ Richard S. Randall, *Censorship of the Movies. The Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, p. 25.

spares no effort in recreating the customs and culture of the South through the portrayal of the Northern Stonemans' visit to the wealthy Cameron family. We see the work on the plantations, the peaceful and refined life in the master's house, the cotton economy, Southern whites living alongside blacks, a different but happily-adjusted community in the Southern system. With the coming of the Civil War, provoked by ambitious politicians, the two families separate, each fighting for its own side. A series of "historic facsimiles" are presented on the screen, a succession of reconstructed military episodes and, finally, the assassination of President Lincoln. The struggle is presented in all its splendor and cruelty, the abrupt interruption of peace, brotherhood and prosperity in the United States.

The script then moves on with a storyline taken from two books by the Reverend Thomas Dixon, a representative of the literature tainted by racial hatred that poured out of the South at the end of the 19th century, *The Klansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*.⁴ The second half abandons the moderation of the first part, giving free reign to Griffith's resentments as a Southerner whose family was ruined by the war. The film becomes polemical, vengeful and propagandistic, obliterating definitively the fine line between past and present.

The film shows how the defeat of the South and the assassination of Lincoln led to the break-up of black brotherhood. South Carolina suffers the horrors of the vengeance of former slaves, put in power by ambitious congressmen and corrupt politicians who take advantage of the lack of a strong, paternalistic executive to humiliate and exploit a vanquished South.

Flora's death scene, in which she, barely an adolescent, resists the attack of a black soldier, and Elsie Stoneman's kidnapping by black political leader Syllas Lynch use the old Klan discourse which portrayed the rape of Southern white women as a metaphor for the downfall of white rule in the South and the attacks against race privilege and regional autonomy. Klan apologists argued that black vengeance was carried out not against their former masters but against their former masters' daughters, wives and mothers. Without the Klan, white men were incapable of defending them and preserving their exclusive rights to masculinity.⁵

The scene in which a Klan cavalry troop supported by two ex-Union soldiers comes out of nowhere to save the main characters' families from the black militia's siege reminds us that white supremacy and brotherhood are inviolable Southern traits. The return of political power to the whites and the exclusion of the blacks in the final scenes, show the audience the return of normality after the disorder imposed on Southern life by the invaders.

Griffith's message is clear: the United States was not consolidated after the end of the Civil War; the North did not impose equality but vengeance. Southern whites rose up as a result of simple instinct for self-preservation when the blacks, insolent and ignorant of the art of government, were manipulated by corrupt Washington politicians to subordinate states rights to the interests of darkness.... This is how Griffith celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Confederacy.

The film projects the fear of the subversion of society's racial hierarchy, the revenge of the inferior orders and

the loss of the white majority's monopoly over political power. Order will be replaced by chaos, brother divided from brother because of non-whites, traditional values broken down and the nation weakened.

But no, Griffith's film did not resuscitate the Klan. The image of the rural, strictly-male, Southern Klan was already a thing of the past. The new Klan embraced the old ideology and some of the rituals, but it spread beyond the old South, included women and took root predominantly in small urban communities.⁶ *The Birth of a Nation* had more impact in another way: it prolonged the romantic myth of plantation life and the Southern aristocracy as opposed to the images created by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. That was not Griffith's aim; all he wanted was to vindicate the South. But his movie extolled revenge and the public got the message: the film gave whites a clear conscience, a moral certainty that was a far cry from the doubts that had plagued the previous generation; it gave them a way of accepting both the previous century's anti-Reconstruction violence and the continued lynching of non-whites as forms of racial and national redemption.⁷

At the same time, it was a reflection of a collective, irrational fear of the period, the same fear that made the second Klan possible. It was a popular movement that sprang up everywhere, particularly in the Midwest, including Ohio. Small urban Midwestern communities, which just like their Southern counterparts were socially very homogeneous and proudly conservative, felt threatened by the enormous wave of domestic and foreign immigration and by the social and technological changes that were taking place in the big cities. The call for continuity, for brotherhood among whites faced with the threat of

⁴ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South. Life After Reconstruction*. Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 339-372.

⁵ Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan. Racism and Gender in the 1920's*. University of California Press, 1991, pp. 15-18, 154-155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, "Organizing 100% American Women," pp. 11-41.

⁷ Ayers, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

an eventual take-over by people of color and the imposition of a way of life foreign to them, was timely and irresistibly appealing.

Besides being racist, the second Klan was "nativist": it said "no" to immigrants, Catholics, Jews and to any kind of mixture between races. It consciously used the symbols of its predecessor, exactly as portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation*, to better preserve white Protestants' religious, national and racial supremacy from the cultural, political and economic influence of non-whites. Its members proceeded to preach that blacks were inherently stupid and socially inferior, and that they should be sent back to Africa; they emphasized all this by showing Griffith's film at their meetings.⁸

⁸ Blee, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

The pressure groups which saw morality dragged through the mud in the world of film were only partially correct; their crusade aimed at preserving a way of life threatened by change; their slogan was the return to normalcy. To a certain extent, the film was the target of the accumulation of charges leveled at the whole movie industry, a suspect business in the eyes of Prohibitionist groups and not highly regarded among members of the Establishment. At the same time, movies were above all entertainment and not vehicles for ideas or means of expressing public opinion; even the producers saw them that way. The First Amendment could not protect them. Censorship was considered a need; what had to be decided was simply the correct criteria and the right judges. Judge McKenna's

opinion attacked the avarice of the movie moguls and their total lack of the spirit of public service. The censors exaggerated when they said that Griffith's film corrupted public morals; at the same time they were incapable of understanding its political and social message. It would take a few years for censorship to include the ideological content of films. Griffith's written defense of the freedom of expression in film was incomprehensible to them, but that did not make their sentence any less hypocritical.

Seven decades later—and four decades after film's right to First Amendment protection was recognized—censorship is not a government question, but up to pressure groups. In this context, the NAACP persists in its persecution of Griffith's work in the name of a militant—and retroactive—multiculturalism that also satanizes *Huckleberry Finn*, and demands that Americans look at their history with a guilt complex. The only thing silenced in the discussion is the artistic merit of Griffith's work; interest groups cannot talk about that sort of thing.

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