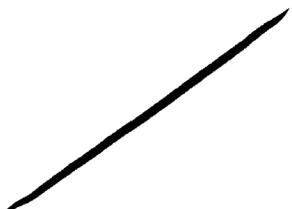


WATCHING HISTORY THROUGH OUR FINGERS:

HANDLING PAST &
PRESENT TRAUMAS
IN TEACHING
THE BIRTH OF A NATION

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Abstract: Any film art and history survey class runs straight into the looming original sin of American cinema: D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, a horrifyingly racist revisionist reimagining of the Civil War and a massive blockbuster which helped reimagine the entire film industry in the first half of the 20th century. At a time when the Charlottesville white supremacist rallies, the Black Lives Matters protests, and the structural inequalities re-surfaced by the COVID-19 pandemic have brought the continuing legacy of slavery and the Jim Crow era to the forefront of our collective consciousness, figuring out how to teach the place of this film in our culture without further exposing students to traumatizing representations of African-Americans has become a continuously evolving challenge. At one of the most diverse campuses in the United States, we have been experimenting with trauma-informed collaborative models which grant students agency while still equipping them with the tools to understand the artistic, technical, historical, social, political, and business contexts and implications of Griffith's work.

Keywords: D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, blockbuster, collective consciousness, film pedagogy.

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I teach one of the most racist films in the 125 year-long history of cinema, D.W. Griffith's 1915 revisionist Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation*, and it's a terrifying experience each time.

For four years now, I have been teaching a one-semester Film Art and History lecture class in Rutgers University's video program in Newark, New Jersey. It is a tall order: for many students this one-semester course is the only chance to dive into the history of cinema and get an overview of its evolution. Adding to the burden is the fact that some of the students in the class come from other programs, and this is their first and last contact with film as a discipline. They expect the experience to be comprehensive, eye-opening, lasting, and maybe, hopefully a little fun. Inevitably, this overview class becomes a "greatest hits" class, cramming into one semester a history of film ideas, technology, and business, and of how it all fits into, well, history itself.

It is a burden I am trained to take on: I once taught one of those monster "Big Books" survey courses that Columbia University forces on its college students and graduate school instructors. I started in academia doing Early Modern Studies from a New Historicist and Post-Colonial Studies perspective, so my intellectual reflexes drive me to look at the import of political context and material culture into art and cultural moments, more broadly. I believe one cannot teach German Expressionism without touching on the economic and political crisis and the embargo on foreign films in the aftermath of World War I, and that teaching the Soviet School means delving into montage theory as a side-effect of film stock shortages, the ban on foreign film after the October Revolution, and the state support for cinema serving the Bolshevik cause. I am also a documentary filmmaker who is simultaneously fascinated and intimidated by equipment and the evolution of technology—and I know first-hand how technological limitations and advances, in close relationship to access to funding and industry structures, play into the kind of art we make at each point in time. In some ways, my whole life has been preparing me to serve an all-you-can-eat buffet in film art and history.

Then there are those challenges that sit outside the strict boundaries of the class, but within our plain view at all times: the environment and moment in which the class

happens. Teaching never happens in a vacuum, and this is even more true of the teaching of history. In terms of ethnic diversity, Rutgers Newark consistently ranks among the top five most diverse campuses in the United States (US News and World Report 2020). Each year, my 35 students come from a vast variety of backgrounds, carrying with them experiences of cinema that are as diverse as the world itself. A good third of the students usually identify as African-American or Black. More than half identify as non-white. I am myself white, an immigrant from Eastern Europe. I started this class in 2017 as an adjunct, a couple of months after the election of Donald Trump on an anti-immigration and anti-minorities platform. That same year, white supremacists and neo-Nazis came from all over the United States to protest the planned removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia; a young woman peacefully protesting against the event was killed. The Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, also went to Charlottesville to cheer from the sidelines — footage of him at the event closes *The BlackKlansman*, Spike Lee's 2018 riff on *The Birth of a Nation*, which was released a year later. And just outside all of our windows, this past year, the Black Lives Matters protests and the trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd have brought violence and structural racism against African-Americans to the forefront of our everyone's consciousness. Perhaps even more than in previous years, these past few years the air has been heavier with the continuing legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and the Jim Crow era.

Under these circumstances, not facing *The Birth of a Nation* in a class dedicated to film history would feel like, at best, avoidance or, at worst, cowardice. Eliding this original sin of the American cinema would mean not only skipping over the impact of a profoundly racist vision that influenced the experiences of generations of both African-American and white Americans to come, but also neglecting a massive financial success that set in motion a series of events that shaped the motion pictures industry as we know it. After all, the Hollywood studios were made possible by the money made by people like Louis B. Mayer, *The Birth of a Nation*'s East Coast distributor, which allowed them to weather the Spanish flu pandemic and consolidate in its aftermath (Eyman 2005). It would mean skipping over its consequential ripple effects elsewhere (Lev Kuleshov taught his students montage by re-cutting copies of Griffith's films in post-Revolutionary Moscow, and Abel Gance was said to claim that Griffith's was the only view that mattered to him) and in America, where *The Birth of a Nation* helped turn cinema from a populist novelty into a high art form on an social and economic par with theater and a terrain for public debate.

So the question is not whether to look, but *how* to look. And *how* has been the question hovering over this film since the beginning of film classes. Standard film teaching handbooks stay mum on how universities could tackle this shameful elephant in the room (see Grant 1983 and its no less avoidant update Fisher and Petro 2012). Even as more recent academic books have dared to tackle the heavy legacy of the film itself (especially Melvyn 2007; Martin 2019), no such discussion has opened up around the *teaching* of the film in American classrooms or, for that matter, elsewhere. In the absence of such a discussion, teachers are left grapple with the issue on their own, with no public open conversation on the matter (Lacy 2018).

The precedents are far from encouraging. For far too long film classes have tended to have students swallow *The Birth of a Nation* and the myths surrounding it whole, with no context. Director Spike Lee remembered being taught *The Birth of a Nation* as a “masterpiece” while in New York University’s graduate film school—no context, not even a recognition of the issues surrounding representation in the film. In response, Lee made a Faustian satire about a young African-American director hired by the Ku Klux Klan to remake *The Birth of a Nation*, and very nearly got kicked out of school for it (Nordine 2016). It must be nothing short of traumatic for an African-American student to see Griffith’s representations pass unquestioned in class and then be sanctioned when they raise it themselves.

Power imbalances are baked into any classroom structure, perhaps even more so into conservatory-style education which relies more heavily on skills mastery under guidance from experienced, career artist teachers than on informed intellectual debate and the free flow of ideas. To build the confidence of students to eventually become our colleagues as artists in their own right, we need to work against those power imbalances in the classroom as best we can, not add to them the burden of additional unexamined external inequities like racism. Life, as the saying goes, is hard enough. The point is not to reproduce the terrors of the world inside the classroom, but to show students a way to face and break down those terrors themselves and free themselves to become their own instruments.

Thus, grappling with the terrors of *The Birth of a Nation* has been a process of trial and error over the past four years. If nothing else, we learned that we need some preparation. I am not talking about trigger warnings. The use of trigger warnings in the absence of actual trauma-informed pedagogy,¹ which involves proper follow-through and follow-up in the course of teaching, ends up all too often working merely as a hall pass for exposing students to disturbing material. Trust me, I tried it the first year I taught the film, with less than stellar results: I did a spiel on Griffith, gave a trigger warning, and sent the students home to watch the whole three-hour film on their own. More than half of the class confessed to not being able to stomach it (that was probably the brave half). As one student put it, in the present tense: “What is this crap?” I realized that my work, if I were to earn the right to continue to teach that class, was to answer precisely that question, both in the past tense and in the present: what *was* that “crap” and what *is it now*?

One answer has to come from constructing the early parts of the syllabus. By the time we get to Griffith, students should face the abiding mythology that surrounds his work from a prepared, assured position. That process starts with looking at how narratives of film “firsts” (the first feature film, the first epic, the first instance of parallel editing, etc.) are embedded with economic interests and artistic territory claims since the days of the first Edison patents, and at how early film techniques were pioneered by figures that have since been eclipsed by the overarching narrative imposed in the first decades of Hollywood. On the American side, this deep dive in the early part of the

1 The simplest and in some ways most useful overview of issues relating to trauma-informed pedagogy that have fed into my own understanding of how to handle such matters in the classroom can be found in Cless and Nelson 2017.

syllabus culminates with looking at Lois Weber's 1913 short *Suspense*, which exemplifies many of the techniques which have since been mythologized as Griffith "firsts" in *The Birth of a Nation* two years later.

Then there is looking at the very notions of "feature-length film" and "blockbuster," both of which are reflexively traced back to *The Birth of a Nation* in traditional narratives about Hollywood, not without Griffith's own complicity. Here we have to separate, on the one hand, precedence from survival, and, on the other hand, either of those from the need for canonic inclusion. We learn that the form started elsewhere with the now mostly lost 1906 *The Story of the Kelly Gang* made in Australia, and that Italian historical epics like *Quo Vadis* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914) were not only immediate precedents, but models of combining high artistic claims with box office success that Griffith himself sought to emulate. Moreover, *The Birth of a Nation* is not even Griffith's first feature: in 1914 he made a five-reel biblical adaptation, *Judith of Bethulia*, which, being less successful, was conveniently lost in the mist of time. But survival of the fittest, in this context, meant survival of the most profitable—a calculation that still drives much of the thinking in the American film industry today. No one tracked box office receipts at the time, but a credible estimates claim *The Birth of a Nation* to have taken in about \$50 million worldwide, having been made for an advertised \$500,000 (Landry 1958).

But the hardest part in many ways is looking at the film itself. Griffith smears burned cork makeup on Caucasian actors who play African-Americans—large, stocky figures moving uneasily about the screen like children who are not fully in control of their bodies or impulses. It's blackface at its worst: without so much as the pretense of the vaudeville convention, we are left with menacing African-American men who are violent, sexually aggressive towards presumably pure and defenseless white women, and eat fried chicken barefoot during parliamentary proceedings in the Reconstruction South. This dehumanizing, animalistic vision is hard enough to stomach for students who have experienced literally on their own skin how pernicious, lasting, pervasive these stereotypes have been in American culture and beyond. But when the Ku Klux Klan sweeps in to save the day as the orchestra plays the cue for Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" and restores white supremacist order by means of violent repression, the question becomes not only what do we see in the film but, frankly, *why should we see the film at all?*

The choice to see the film is something that each of the student in my class has come to make for himself or herself or themselves. For those who want to watch some fragments in class, we watch them, with the clear, explicit understanding that no student is under the obligation to watch any scene that would re-traumatize them. The exercise amounts to a guided mediation on racialized horror and on facing historical and not-so-historical demons. Those students who do it report afterwards that, with proper preparation, the experience feels like shared grief, like all of us joining in the loss and mourning experienced by our larger communities.

But there are those who opt out because they do not feel they should or can engage with the imagery (especially between the COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement of the past couple of academic years, we all have felt more fragile in so

many ways and thus more careful about our psychic boundaries). Those who choose not to watch report feeling empowered in their own way: they know the film won't turn them to stone, but they also feel liberated to know that they are not obligated to approach old films with reverence. They know they can see a lot of the innovations tied to the myth of Griffith elsewhere, and that they already have done so in the class. They can be critical, they can make choices, they can skip, they can do everything that any audience could ever do, because over a century after its release, we are still the audience for *The Birth of a Nation*, in the present. And each generation is bound to wrestle with the film from its own perspective.

The same principle applies to the first cinematic response to Griffith's film, Oscar Micheaux's 1920 *Within Our Gates*, which is the earliest surviving feature film by an African-American filmmaker. For those who chose to see both films, the contrast is stark, not only in terms of representation, which is to be expected, but also in terms of means—Micheaux, who did not do his films on the heels of an already established career, was limited to smaller budgets and to distributing the film sometimes out of the trunk of his own car, to theaters serving African-American audiences and selling tickets at a fraction of the cost of the kind of theaters that were exhibiting *The Birth of a Nation* with large accompanying orchestras and intermissions, luxuries reserved for expensive Broadway-style performances (McGilligan, Patrick 2007; Bowser and Spense 2000). But the third half, which delves into lynchings and rapes perpetrated by whites on African-Americans, is just as hard to stomach, even if the representation is sympathetic to the African-American experience. So, *Within Our Gates* too is framed in the classroom but is left as a personal, conscious, informed choice for the students to watch.

So far, this system works. We always have a post-class discussion in which we evaluate our experiences, and then another one at the end of the semester, when the dust has settled on the earlier parts of the syllabus. The surprising thing is that a large number of students choose to watch both films and write papers on them—the topic feels less intimidating *because* it is not mandated. As one African-American student wrote to me this year after the class:

The way we addressed it was much better than how I figured it would occur. I think for something like that, since... the content is deemed extremely offensive to a lot of people, if someone wants to look into it, allow them the access of course but summarize it as a part of a lesson... that would be a better way to address that since it's such a touchy subject. It's best to keep it in, though... You never want to try to erase any points of history or brush over it no matter how uncomfortable because then we're not getting the full historic experience. (Issiah Harris e-mail to Mona Nicoară April 6, 2021)

Indeed, there are ways to understand the weight of *The Birth of a Nation* on film history without engaging with its imagery. Its long comet tail begins even before the launch, with the much-publicized screening inside the Woodrow Wilson's White House before its premiere. This is another opportunity to discuss Griffith's own myth-making: was this presented as the first film screened in the White House because it was, well, during winter, and so the story told around the film conveniently left out an earlier

screening outdoors, during the sweltering Washington summer (Kramer 2015)? More importantly, was this an honor bestowed on the film or a precautionary measure for a screen adaptation of Thomas Dixon Jr.'s revisionist novel *The Clansman*, which was already stirring protests even before the film's premiere? Was changing the title from original *The Clansman* to something more neutral on the surface right before the premiere part of these pre-premiere precautions?

Then there's the power of the film as a recruitment tool for two forces: on the one hand, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which organized protests around the country, some successful enough to convince theaters to cancel runs and to turn Griffith's next project, *The Mother and the Law* into the self-victimizing anti-censorship screed *Intolerance* (Weinberger 2011).² And, on the other hand, the Ku Klux Klan, which lay largely dormant after the Civil War and was revived in the South by the film — so much so that *The Birth of a Nation* screenings were part of the Klan's recruitment arsenal as late as the 1970s. Again, Lee's *The BlackKlansman* riffs off the parallel editing usually associated with the film in cutting between a recruitment screening and Jerome Turner, played by civil rights legend Harry Belafonte, recounting an actual lynching around the time the film was released, in a nod to Micheaux's own response to the film, which featured the kind of lynching that had increased in popularity after the launch of *The Birth of a Nation* (Ang 2020; "A Tarnished Silver Screen" 2021). We have three hours of class to touch on all these issues — in some ways, we are lucky. We have enough space to teach *around* the film enough to understand the place of the film in our history and current culture, even if some of us choose to not engage with it directly.

Responses and reframings over time are one reason to bring in contemporary cinema into discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*. But there is another one: reconnection. How we relate to a film that is over 100 years old is never limited to our intellectual understanding of history or to our own private emotional experience of that film. There is also, always a communal aspect to the long comet tail of the film that is both intellectual and emotional. We all have shared understandings and experiences in the recent present that speak to the way we process works like *The Birth of a Nation* and allow us to live with them. Early in preparing this class I remembered one of the few funny stories surrounding the production of the film: the American Western director John Ford claimed to have been cast in his youth as one of the hooded Klansmen in Griffith's film. The hood obstructed his vision, and Ford managed to fall off his horse (itself a funny detail for a guy who would make a name for himself making Westerns, if you think about it). He was knocked out and woke up with Griffith by his side, holding a bottle of whiskey — turns out, the bottle was not intended for Ford, the injured extra, but for the Griffith himself. Quentin Tarantino, ever the hoarder of film history anecdotes, satirized the moment in his 2012 *Django Unchained*, in the preparations for the Klan raid during which the posse argues about visibility and the quality of the makeshift hoods improvised

2 Though that, too, like everything else in life and therefore the movies, is complicated: some theaters, seeing the publicity garnered by the protests as a good thing, hired African-American day laborers to stand with signs in front of their theaters in the hope of attracting curious passers by (Fleener-Marzec 1980).

by an enthusiastic wife out of pillowcases. We usually show that clip at the end of the class because it teaches us about memory across the ages of cinema and because, well, it makes us laugh. We need the release of laughter: it gives us a sense of communal connection and shared understanding, a sense of fun, but also the reprieve of mutability. It is that simple, and it works.

Ultimately, approaching the teaching of a work like *The Birth of a Nation* rests on our ability to honestly connect the outer historical, factual elements with our inner emotional reactions to a disturbing artifact with undeniable current resonance. Erasing it from the syllabus is as cowardly as erasing its sins. But facing it means facing a series of questions that are as uncomfortable as the film itself: Do you watch? If you do, what do you watch for? What does film do? What do we do to film over time? What are the roles that cinema plays at particular times? What do we do about the past? What is our role and responsibility as both audiences and potential filmmakers? We make a point to ask these questions in my class. But not necessarily to answer them. The asking is the point. The best we can do is to show the skeleton of history, to surface complexity, rather than smooth over asperities with the spackle of an authority that we, educators, ourselves participants in a long and brutal history, do not have.

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