

History HL Internal Assessment

Session: May 2020

Research Question: To what extent did 'The Birth of a Nation' contribute to the growth and ideological development of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s and 1920s?

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will attempt to answer the following question: “To what extent did ‘The Birth of a Nation’ contribute to the growth and ideological development of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s and 1920s?” To evaluate this connection, two sources will be analysed — the first is the film *The Birth of a Nation* itself, the primary source on which the question is based, and the second is an academic article that investigates the “impact of [the film] on the modern Ku Klux Klan”¹, which provides insight into the audience’s response to the film.

D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation*², as the artistic work at the centre of this investigation, is inimitable in its origin as a primary source. Its release in 1915 — just as the second Klan was being revived but over 44 years after its predecessor had been suppressed — indicates that it can provide insight into the public perception of the Klan immediately preceding its revival. The purpose of this source (to provide entertainment for white Protestants) can help explain the growing appeal of the Klan at the time through the dissemination of white nationalist ideas in the popular media. The purpose also imparts value to the investigation by indicating prevalent racial preoccupations through its portrayal of African Americans; however, this may also pose limitations to a historian investigating racial tensions during this era as a work created for the purpose of entertainment is likely to prioritise emotional appeal over accuracy.

The content of the film, especially its “black-as-beast”³ themes and its distorted portrayal of the first Klan are valuable in understanding the racial insecurities that led to the formation of the second Klan, as well as its ideological influences. The novelist responsible for the film’s source material (*The Clansman*), Thomas Dixon Jr., had many direct connections to the Klan within his family — his uncle was the chief of a local Klan in North Carolina⁴ — which may limit the film’s

¹ Simcovitch, Maxim. “The Impact of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation on the Modern Ku Klux Klan.” *Journal of Popular Film*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1972, pp. 45–54., doi:10.1080/00472719.1972.10661639. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

² Griffith, David W., director. *The Birth of a Nation*. Epoch Producing Co., 1915.

³ Kirby, Jack Temple. “D. W. Griffith’s Racial Portraiture.” *Phylon (1960-)*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1978, p. 120. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/274506. Accessed 20 Jul. 2019.

⁴ Bloomfield, Maxwell. “Dixon’s ‘The Leopard’s Spots’: A Study in Popular Racism.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1964, p. 388. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2710931. Accessed 20 Jul. 2019.

ability to represent the viewpoint of the larger white population in its content, instead displaying a romanticised version of it from someone personally invested in the Klan.

The second source⁵ is an essay written by film professor Maxim Simcovitch (from the University of Iowa) for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in 1972. It is limited in terms of its origin as its journal of publication is concerned with research on “film and television from a sociocultural perspective”⁶, which may detract from the historical focus of the investigation on the political development of the KKK. However, its purpose is to academically examine the film’s impact on the Klan, which is valuable to this investigation as it provides a perspective on this relationship beyond merely political history. Simcovitch’s focus on the methodology of the Klan in the essay’s content is particularly valuable, explaining the use of the film as propaganda and its effectiveness in instilling the Klan’s distinct ideology in its members, and his analysis of the film’s perception in theatrical runs throughout the 1920s showcases the long-lasting effect of Griffith’s work on its white audience. The content of the source is nonetheless limited as it only discusses the second Klan’s perceived threat of African Americans, even though their bigotry expanded to target many other ethnic groups, such as Catholics and Jewish people.⁷

Word count: 551 words

⁵ Simcovitch, Maxim. “The Impact of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation on the Modern Ku Klux Klan.” *Journal of Popular Film*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1972, pp. 45–54., doi:10.1080/00472719.1972.10661639. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

⁶ “Journal of Popular Film: Instructions for Authors.” *Taylor & Francis Online*, 7 Jan. 2019, www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=vjpf20. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

⁷ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, p. 2.

Section 2: Investigation

The highest grossing film ever produced for twenty-five years⁸, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was a deeply polarising work from its first release in February 1915 due to its sympathetic portrayal of the first Ku Klux Klan. This investigation will explore the contribution of the film to the Klan's revival and expansion in the United States in the 1920s by examining its distinct influence on the "white" population (the Klan restricted the term "white" to Anglo-Saxon Protestants) as well as its ideological and practical impact on the organisation within this period.

The generally positive white response to the film⁹ catalysed white nationalist sentiment and racial insecurity leading up to the Klan's revival. Although civil rights organisations and liberal Northern cities did attempt to curb the spread of its racially-charged message, including the organisation of "eggings" and protest riots¹⁰, the film was able to appeal to characteristic prejudices of this era in an entertaining format, showcasing black men as "animalistic" aggressors violating the purity of white women, in both the racial and the sexual sense.¹¹ The Klan, conversely, was shown to be a heroic organisation whose existence was almost necessitated by the vulgar disposition of African-Americans.¹² This distorted representation of history strengthened hostility towards non-whites in the South, leading to a desire for racial security. The formation of the new KKK itself cannot be attributed to the film — the new organisation had been founded months prior to its release. However, W. J. Simmons (the new "Imperial Wizard" of the Klan) capitalised on the nostalgic sentiment that had developed towards the old Klan as a result of the film to glorify the new one. He achieved this through newspaper advertisements and mass demonstrations in the

⁸ "The Birth of a Nation (1915) - Financial Information." *The Numbers*, [www.the-numbers.com/movie/Birth-of-a-Nation-The-\(1915\)](http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Birth-of-a-Nation-The-(1915)). Accessed 5 Aug. 2019.

⁹ Abrams, Alyse. "An Essay Discussing the Reception of The Birth of a Nation, 1936." *Digital Public Library of America*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. The New York Public Library, dp.la/primary-source-sets/second-ku-klux-klan-and-the-birth-of-a-nation/sources/1741. Accessed 4 Aug. 2019.

¹⁰ Chalmers, David M. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Duke Univ. Press, 2007, p. 26.

¹¹ McVeigh, Rory. "Thomas R. Pegram. One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 119, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1294–1294. Accessed 4 Aug. 2019.

¹² Griffith, David W., director. *The Birth of a Nation*. Epoch Producing Co., 1915.

South¹³, which steadily increased Klan membership. As such, the romanticisation of the Klan became a natural response to the insecurity that had developed due to the perceived threat of racial integration and intermixing at the time.

Historian John Hope Franklin has argued that *The Birth of a Nation* was the “midwife” in the Klan’s rebirth¹⁴ — the centrepiece of its revival efforts — but this is not entirely true. As highlighted by Linda Gordon, racial insecurity was prevalent in the South before the film was released, which means that the social conditions created by the film were hardly extraordinary. Moreover, the lynching of Leo Frank¹⁵ (a Jewish man convicted of murder) was another event that was also considerably important in stirring pro-Klan sentiment in 1915, which shows that the film’s release was not a singular turning point for their popularity.¹⁶

Still, Griffith’s film continued to be important in Klan efforts after its theatrical run, gaining further significance within the Klan not only as propaganda for recruitment, but also as the source of their reformed ideological system. The concept of “cross-burning” was derived from *The Birth of a Nation*’s literary source material, *The Clansman*, and later popularised by the film.¹⁷ This particular idea both indicated the Klan’s new religiously-rooted beliefs and their increasingly ritualistic behaviour, especially in Texas and Oklahoma, which experienced zealous vigilantism throughout this period.¹⁸ The desire for such vigilante justice and heroism stemmed from the Klan’s idolisation of its predecessor, which was escalated by repeated screenings of the film at their meetings.¹⁹ The Klan’s focus on moralistic issues may also have been prompted in part by the film — its sequences concerning the purity of women and moral corruption were met with particularly

¹³ Simcovitch, Maxim. “The Impact of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation on the Modern Ku Klux Klan.” *Journal of Popular Film*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1972, pp. 45–54., doi:10.1080/00472719.1972.10661639. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

¹⁴ Franklin, John Hope. “‘Birth of a Nation’: Propaganda as History.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1979, pp. 417–434. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25088973. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

¹⁵ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Chalmers, David M. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Duke Univ. Press, 2007, p. 430.

¹⁸ Chalmers, David M. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Duke Univ. Press, 2007, p. 52.

¹⁹ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, p. 97.

emotive responses from audiences.²⁰ However, it is more likely that these social concerns were already prevalent amongst white Protestants, to whom the film (and the Klan) attempted to cater. Thus, the film may function better as an indicator of the political preoccupations that led to the rise of the Klan rather than a distinct point of influence for it.

The ideological disparities between the first Klan and Simmons' new organisation can also be viewed as a testament against *The Birth of a Nation's* position as the "urtext"²¹ of the Klan's revival. Its crusade against "Catholics, Jews, immigrants and bootleggers"²² was a considerable shift from the film's categoric demonisation of African-American freedmen. The broader moral agenda of the new Klan meant that they had a fundamental opposition to the behaviour they believed non-whites exhibited, as opposed to crimes committed by them. This preoccupation with morality likely stemmed from the Protestant exclusivity of the new movement, and subsequently, religious bigotry became a key feature of the Klan. The film does exhibit some of the Klan's religious connections — it would be hard to deny the Christian origins of a burning cross — but they are largely implicit and never used as direct justification for the Klan's actions.

These deviations between the film and the reformed Klan do not, however, necessarily detract from its influence. Although racial insecurity was prevalent throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a considerable sociological shift in the United States that included growing xenophobia in response to immigration. Consequently, the film may have catalysed the desire for a Klan-like organisation to protect white Protestant interests without carrying an identical agenda. An argument in favour of the film's influence is that the Klan did not necessarily change its central purpose, but instead narrowed its definition of "white" Americans to exclude all ethnic and religious groups except Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Another perspective that can be considered is that the Klan did not abandon its older prejudices in the 1920s; it simply added new ones.

²⁰ McVeigh, Rory. *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 20.

²¹ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 105.

²² Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, p. 2.

It can be seen that contemporary xenophobia was at the heart of the Klan's agenda, to a greater extent than the threat of blacks portrayed by the film. They often used the perceived perversion of non-whites as an argument against "alienism"²³, characterising "booze" as a violation of not only the Prohibition-era laws but also a moral deviance that was destroying the fabric of American society. The idea of a central figure (the Pope) controlling Catholic beliefs was easily spun into conspiracy theories about a Catholic takeover aimed at alarming white Protestants of the immigrant threat.²⁴ Jews, conversely, were accused of being Communists and Bolshevik co-conspirators²⁵, which played on the existing prejudices of the Red Scare²⁶ to raise the Klan's popularity. This religious and ethnic bigotry may have contributed to the second Klan's focus on the protection of Protestants, and thus serves as a more feasible explanation for the Klan's religious connections than the film's influence does.

The Second Ku Klux Klan was undoubtedly dexterous in its effort to expand its membership from the very year it was founded. It effectively used the intense cultural impact of *The Birth of a Nation* in order to rally support for the revival of the "heroic" organisation the film seemed to deeply romanticise, and then successfully used it as propaganda for over a decade. To this end, the film was essential to the growth of the new Klan. However, it was not as important in shaping the new Klan's ideological system - they were as militant in their actions as the depiction of the first Klan in the film, but their bigotry was aimed at a wider range of "non-whites" and firmly rooted in the protection of Protestant purity. The beliefs of this Klan were dictated largely by the contemporary fear of immigrants, which extended far past the film's limited anti-black message. Thus, the film acted as a catalyst for intensifying white nationalist beliefs and the romanticisation of

²³ "The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s: Collected Commentary." *America in Class*, 2012, americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/divisions/text1/colcommentaryklan.pdf. Accessed 5 Aug. 2019.

²⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, p. 56.

²⁵ Trepp, Leo. *A History of the Jewish Experience*. Behrman House, 2001, p. 229.

²⁶ Mauldin, Bill. "Man frightened by the Red scare." *The Library of Congress*, 1946, www.loc.gov/item/2016685585/. Accessed 1 Mar. 2020.

the Klan in the South and introduced a heightened sense of ritualism and heroism to the Klan, but it was not influential in defining the organisation's agenda.

Word count: 1,257 words

Section 3: Reflection

The nature of my investigation — examining the impact of an individual film on a massive cultural movement — naturally brought up several issues related to the historical method. The most obvious roadblock in dealing with emotionally polarising subjects such as the KKK and racism was the reduced reliability of recent sources, which understandably seemed to suffer from considerable bias against the Klan as an organisation. I learned to tackle such issues by considering a wide range of academic pieces across different time periods and including primary sources that directly showcased popular sentiment. As I personally detest both racism and political dogmatism, it was difficult for me to keep my ethical objections separate from my historical analysis. I had to start recognising the Klan as historical subjects rather than a villainous contemporary force, which taught me a larger investigative lesson about detaching personal interest from academic analysis.

Another intriguing problem that surfaced in my attempt to reconcile different historical perspectives was related to causality and consequence. Often, it seemed easier to accept a convenient but unrealistic claim than to fully consider a deeper argument, but as the investigation progressed, I realised that the revival of the Klan, much like any other historical occurrence, could not be narrowed down to a single factor. It became increasingly evident that the confirmation bias existed in all sorts of secondary sources, including those authored by acclaimed historians such as David Chalmers, and I learned how to maintain a certain vigilance while trying to assess the sufficiency of evidence in my argumentation.

Through the course of this investigation, I also realised that historical research did not need to be limited to obvious primary sources and historical journals. I used several sources oriented towards providing a ‘history of film’²⁷ or artistic theory of some sort, but they provided valuable historical insight that a historical review may have failed to provide, which forced me to reconsider the limited understanding of sources that I had previously held. The focused nature of my

²⁷ Simcovitch, Maxim. “The Impact of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation on the Modern Ku Klux Klan.” *Journal of Popular Film*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1972, pp. 45–54., doi:10.1080/00472719.1972.10661639. Accessed 18 Jul. 2019.

investigation also lent itself to other constraints while examining a source - each academic article or book would acknowledge the influence and importance of Griffith's film but I had to learn to synthesise arguments out of limited tangible information, which was particularly useful in the analysis of abstract ideas such as the involvement of ideology or manipulation.

Word count: 389 words

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