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Regent Nicholas
Salve Regina University

Arlene J. Nicholas
Salve Regina University, arlene.nicholas@salve.edu

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Birth of a Nation's 'Story in the Public Square'

Regent Nicholas, B.A. & Arlene J. Nicholas, Ph.D

Accepting Theodore Parker's assertion (made more popular and paraphrased by Martin Luther King (Morris, Roush & Spencer, 2009)) that the arc of the moral universe is, while long, bent toward justice (Boyle, 2007), it is a frustrating reality that obstructions and regressions happen in social and human progress. David Wark Griffith's movie *The Birth of a Nation*, adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* is perhaps the most glaring example of one such stumbling block.

Released in 1915, when the Civil War still occupied a significant portion of the American populace's living memory, *The Birth of a Nation* is ironically a reconstruction era film that aims to deconstruct the memory of any advances and achievements of that period immediately following the war. The new Constitution of the re-admitted states had succeeded in establishing a black political presence including 'colored' lieutenant governors, legislators and in some states, more black legislators and registered voters than white ones (Stokes, 2007).

With *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith framed this rise of the black person toward equality as being what led to the fall of the white man, specifically the southern white man, in America. In the movie there are baseless depictions of black politicians alternately drinking, sleeping, and putting their bare feet on tables in houses of government.

Having friends in high places can do wonders for favor seekers with a political axe to grind, and if you have a decidedly controversial re-telling of American history to get out to citizens, there could be no better like-minded friend than the President of the United States.

Thomas Dixon was a grad student with Woodrow Wilson at Johns Hopkins University in the 1880's.

President Wilson, who swiftly segregated all federal government departments upon assuming his prestigious post, permitted Dixon and Griffith a showing of *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House on February 19, 1915 (Stokes, 2007). Many of the films intertitles (printed dialogues) were gleaned, nearly verbatim, from Wilson's scholarly work. The next night, a screening was attended at a Washington hotel by the Secretary of the Navy, thirty-eight U.S. Senators and nearly fifty House Representatives. Also in attendance was Supreme Court Chief Justice, Edward White, a former Ku Klux Klan member (Stokes, 2007). Certainly, it is hard to imagine that any great leaps forward would be made in the near future for social justice.

Quite to the contrary, *The Birth of a Nation's* ahistorical glorification of the Reconstruction Era Klan as a chivalrous band of heroes helped lead to the emergence of a new iteration of the Klan. Publicity for the new clan would often be linked to showings of the film. Parades were thrown and ushers would, at times, even wear Klan costumes (Stokes, 2007). The film was often used as a recruiting tool. Stokes asserts that the film was probably so effective at getting new members into the fold by its "clear endorsement of white supremacy and intense hostility toward interracial relationships ('mongrelization')" (p. 234).

Not exclusively attributable to the Klan, but also worthy of note is W.E.B. Du Bois' reporting that the number of African Americans lynched went from sixty in 1914 to ninety-nine in the year of *Birth's* release, 1915. The most common reasons for such murders were alleged incidences of black male transgressions toward white women (Stokes).

Revelation is one of the more powerful devices that narratives utilize to capture hearts and minds. What Dixon and Griffith attempted to do (unfortunately with some levels of success)

was “reveal” the “dangers” of integration. When the viewers or readers feel they are given a different insight of issues, possibly unfamiliar, and when certain truths (or information advertised as truths) are revealed, these stories or tales can significantly shape or alter peoples’ understanding. The further this agenda is disseminated, it so follows that the potential for shaping public policy and discourse increases accordingly.

By distorting history and playing to southerner’s basest fears, D.W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon before him, were able to stoke paranoia and manipulate a misunderstanding of American history and black people, causing numerous political upheavals and temporarily stunting the growth of the nation.

References

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