

white screens

black images

Hollywood
from the
Dark Side

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Birth of a Nation

One of the more useful products of Christian Metz's well-known theory of film semiotics lies in the distinction he attempts to make between "cinematic" and "extra-cinematic" codes. In society, the code rarely is the same as the message, and one of the tasks of the semiological analysis attempted in my study is to move centrifugally from the films' explicit messages to their underlying codes and to the mythologies (borrowing Barthes's term) which clusters of these codes ultimately support. In *Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, the assumption that Elsie Stoneman, or any daughter, will break off her relationship with her sweetheart Ben Cameron at the father's request is an extra-cinematic code, found in Dixon's novel as well in the social text of the last century. The message is that "Elsie decides to leave Ben at her father's request," but the code suggests that here, as in all such circumstances, society expects that "the father's will must be done." Griffith incorporates this extra-cinematic notion of "loyalty to the father" into the film, articulating it through various shots that, in the course of telling the story, we accept as cinematic codes to be recognized and registered on each subsequent repetition. For the sake of their narrative momentum, we tend to leave unexamined the extra-cinematic codes they represent. The Cameron's black maid (played by a white actress—in Griffith's film, *marking* of the color black is achieved by often implausible expedients), in her white apron and cap signifies the message "here is a uniformed housekeeper," but the underlying code is "blacks are

customary as servants; black is the natural color of servility." As Metz suggests:

Between 1911 and 1915, Griffith made a whole series of films having, more or less consciously, the value of experimental probings, and *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, appears as the crowning work, the sum and the public demonstration of investigations that, however naive they must have been, were nonetheless systematic and fundamental. Thus, it was in a single motion picture that the cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language.¹

In general throughout the history of coding the color black in mainstream American films, it is precisely the intentional confusion of narrative, cinematic, and extra-cinematic codes that tends to undermine the color black on screen. Roland Barthes calls these "referential codes"—references to a generally accepted notion of "common sense" or the established knowledge of the time: they enable all manner of extra-cinematic ideologies to hide under accustomed codes of narrative closure.

Birth of a Nation does not merely represent the beginning of many cinematic codes, found here for the first time in any film, but also represents the culmination, refinement, and further dissemination of certain extra-cinematic codes concerning blacks and whites. Here as elsewhere in the over seventy years of film history since Griffith, film language serves, above all, the telling of a story. As Metz suggests, "*it was precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration that, in the course of successive groupings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures.*"² Yet the principal mechanism of cinematic racism—certainly in the films we are considering here—is precisely to sublimate itself under the stronger compulsions of romance, revenge, or sensation that belong to the allure of film narrative. We are, as a rule, more interested in how things come out for the dominant relationships in the film than we are in dissecting the racist codes and assumptions either imported from the extra-cinematic world, or manufactured within the film itself. In unprecedented ways,

film form and racism coalesce into myth here, seemingly myths of entertainment but ultimately ones political in nature, ones that continue to assert their presence today. The powerfully signifying procedure of film language, invented at the service of narration, are at best morally ambiguous and at worst (as in the case of Griffith's title cards, for instance) blatantly tendentious. It is perhaps no accident that, while we owe Griffith the early encoding of cinematic devices like close-ups, pans, tracking-shots, parallel montage, and other ways of signifying successivity, precession, temporal breaks, causality, adversary relationships, spatial relationships, and so on, we also find these narrative figures facilitating our acceptance of the virulence of the extra-cinematic codes—existing in the real world prior to *The Birth of a Nation*—which might be called their raw material.

The plot of *The Birth of a Nation* is quite simple, structurally. The first part encompasses the "Civil War" and the second part might be called the "race and revenge" plot, culminating in the forging of an alliance between Southern whites (Ben Cameron's "Ku Klux Klan"), "good-hearted" Northerners (such as Elsie Stoneman), and "loyal" black servants, all emblems of the harmonious bonds of this newborn nation. Throughout both parts, there are various "courtship plots" which are the true center of the spectator's interest, and which are resolved at the same time as the "race and revenge" plot. It is interesting to note that the scene-by-scene rhythm of the film almost compulsively alternates the "courtship plots" with the others. In the first part, love alternates with war; in the second part, love alternates with revenge against the black usurpers. The effect is to rivet our interest in a favorable romantic outcome while treating the political parts of the plot as mere trifling obstacles to ultimate consummation between Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman. The balance in this oscillation is never lost; one almost supposes that the Civil War and the black were invented to delay a "happy ending," or that solving the nation's intractable racial and economic problems is as easy as two people falling in love.

The film's movement from order to chaos and back to restored order resembles the structure typically found in horror or disaster movies, and by all measures, one must call blackness, in all its shades, the dark nightmare at the center of this disaster fantasy, one which



7. *The Birth of a Nation*. Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) marches with the Klan.

must be removed for order to be restored. Yet the paramount claim of Griffith's film is precisely that it is not a collective anxiety dream, but that it is archival, a mere filmic record of events that happened not too long before. Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman* (later made into a play), certainly intended to re-write history, asserting both that things were better when blacks were docilely upholding the plantation economy, and yet that the nation would be better off without the specter of their presence. Griffith's film, to the extent that it is full of wonderful visual detail, can only compound its precursor's confusions. One title card claims that the "Old South" was a time of idyllic wonder, "a way of life that never would be again," but another, coming within seconds of the first, asserts that "the bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion," and that a unified nation could only be born after the black man, restored to his place, gave up all pretensions at equality. This is the basic ideological message of the film: some blacks can be loyal retainers, more devoted to whites than to themselves, but they must universally be barred from intercourse, of any kind, with white purity.³



8. *The Birth of a Nation*. Gus (Walter Long), "a renegade negro." The white actor as black villain.

The term "history" is not casual here. Even if one does not find concrete evidence that U.S. President and erstwhile Princeton historian Woodrow Wilson actually said after a private White House screening of *The Birth of a Nation* "It's like writing history with lightning!," it is still a self-conscious aim of *The Birth of a Nation* to write history with cinema, particularly with its so-called "historical facsimiles," which are both obtrusive and dilatory to the plot, but which are crucial to ideological, rather than narrative, aims. These "facsimiles" include: "Lincoln conscripting 75,000 volunteers"; "The Confederate surrender at Appomattox"; "Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre"; "The Negro Party in control in the State House of Representatives"; "Historic incidents from the first legislative session under Reconstruction." The film seems to procrastinate, delaying its love and revenge plots



9. *The Birth of a Nation*. "The Negro Party in control in the State House of Representatives."

for a moment, to say "and not only is this fictional story compelling, but the historical facts are true as well."

Of course, the enterprise of selecting out a particular moment of history to serve as "origin" or "birth" is never completely free of the possibility of distortion. Most ask neither "what breed of 'nation' is being born here, with the violent founding of the KKK?" nor "what happened to the previous 300 years of American history?" As we have seen, one of the earliest paradoxes in the title-card narrative occurs when we read: "the bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." Never mind the absence of the enslaving subject here (*who* brought "the African . . ."?), and the complete obfuscation of the motives and greed at the center of the slave trade. By this simple phrase, years of crimes and unsavory motives are effaced. Even on the surface, though, the title-card narrative clashes with the visual evidence. The shots of blacks in cotton fields and the close-up of the cotton boll shown soon after this title card themselves return us to

the "seed" metaphor. While blacks happily picking cotton seeds in the fields are represented as the pride of a lost Golden Age (their labor being the "seed" of wealth which made antebellum Southern aristocratic life in Piedmont, South Carolina, or anywhere, possible), they themselves are being called the "seed of disunion." Somehow, they cannot be both. The overarching irony of the film is implicit in the contradictions of the film's opening moments, but effectively disguised by the momentum of narrative: the "seeds of disunion" were not the blacks who picked the cotton, but literally the cotton seeds themselves. Griffith's close-up reveals the "seeds" of discord, even as he displaces the guilt from the white cotton planters to the black hands that reap the cotton. The widespread avarice and lust for wealth, leading to a labor-intensive agricultural economy that was both comfortable and insupportable, ultimately set North against South. Blacks, innocent bystanders and victims of this system, become, by mere visual juxtaposition, the convenient repositories of blame for its fated collapse. It is as if Griffith's visual narrative here displays the contradictions of Dixon's written narrative to which it is trying to be faithful: the image tells us that cotton was to blame, but the title cards blame the bringing of the "African to America." The "Birth," then—a title chosen only at the last minute to replace *The Clansman*—becomes a moment of false origination, false "birth," for America, one that is well belated; the film allows a complete erasure of the slave trade, the economic motives behind it, and the suffering it unleashed; America is "born" in the 1880s. The first thing that must be said of Griffith's "history," then, is that, even on its own terms, it has a confused sense of history.

But part of the purpose of Griffith's film is precisely to reproduce "nostalgia" as "history," rather than to advance plot. The establishing shots of blacks dancing in the slave quarters, or picking cotton in the fields are more akin to the novelistic statement "here is the way it was" than "here's what happened next." They, though not labeled "historical facsimiles," are similarly designed to give a "documentary" view of "the way things were" in a time and place that most of the audience could not have known first-hand.

Siegfried Kracauer's opposition of the two basic "tendencies" of cinema—the "realistic" tendency (Lumière), and the "fantastic" ten-

dency (Méliès)—is relevant here.⁴ Simplistic as it may sound, one must never forget the apparently phenomenological “truth-value” of a medium that is in fact custom-made (to a greater extent than still photography) to produce true-seeming lies. Kracauer presupposes a constitutive delineation: some films use the medium to truthfully record what the camera sees; others deliberately use camera tricks to create an imaginary scene that never existed. Even those which combine the two tendencies must have a “balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency. . . .”⁵ It is perhaps in the earliest stages of film that we notice this split in its most naive form, possibly chuckling nowadays at the rather obtrusive way in which Griffith’s title cards intrude on the plot to tell us periodically: “you are watching the absolute truth . . . seeing is believing.” Particularly the convention of claiming that his “facsimiles” were taken from actual eyewitness photographs (the State House of Representatives scene is “after a photograph by The Columbia State”), or accounts (the Appomattox surrender is rendered “after Col. Horace Porter in ‘Campaigning with Grant’”), seems on retrospect Griffith’s poignant attempt to pass off a false representation as a true “reconstruction,” and to make us somehow forget the cinema’s falsifying potential. Yet at the time of the film’s release, and ever since, many seem to have been completely taken in. The merging of the “archival,” the “ideological,” and the “narrative” here becomes the seminal recipe for coding subsequent propaganda films.

So Griffith’s “reconstruction” film also attempts its own kind of cinematic reconstruction, contradictory on the surface perhaps, but well hidden by the rapid and pleasing succession of images and title cards. Yet despite its vituperativeness against blacks, mulattoes, scalawags, carpetbaggers, and Northern troops, *The Birth of a Nation* is in fact a conciliatory film, and one of the more puzzling of its missions is both to castigate the behavior of some Northerners after the war, while at the same time offering a symbolic reunification of North and South (at the expense, it should be added, of black claims to justice).

It is perhaps the extreme tension between vituperation and glorification (often of different members of the same group) that exacerbates the already present extremes of racism in the film. Although many

have complained about the one-dimensionality of the black images in *Birth of a Nation*, it must be said that the entire film hinges on a flimsy superstructure of scanty stereotypes, from the well-intentioned but misguided Austin Stoneman to his abolitionist comrades to his angelic daughter, to the cadaverous-looking, skeletal Lincoln himself, defined solely by whiskers and stovepipe hat (and the epithet "the Great Heart"). Recall that his "fostering hand" kindly helps the downtrodden South, with this Northerner even pardoning the falsely accused Confederate soldier, Ben Cameron (in a scene to be exactly borrowed two decades later in the Shirley Temple movie, *The Littlest Rebel*), at the request of his loving mother and the Congressman's daughter, Elsie Stoneman.

Throughout the film, in the manner of vaudeville and stylized theatrical conventions since the 18th Century, only the grossest physical differences (whether of skin color, gesture, or physiognomy) were used, in order to signify identity at a great distance in no uncertain terms. The entire characterization of the lovers, familial relationships, courting behavior, and rituals of honor derive from long-standing extra-cinematic codes which cannot be solely attributed to Griffith's racism. Finally, simplification and reduction to type are the motors of every narrative, and the only moral or artistic question that remains is one of degree. Yet most would agree that the distortions here are not piecemeal or gratuitous, but systematic and fully interwoven with the larger diegesis of the film.

A word about the title cards is appropriate here. They serve the typical function of the gap, the space, the hiatus in all sorts of discourse, providing that articulation that both interrupts and sustains the narration. Their impact here might best be termed "diacritical," since, as we have seen, their written message may have little or no concordance with the visual image on the screen, but merely, as it were, "interprets," or "slants" that image in a tendentious direction.