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‘I WILL BUILD A BLACK EMPIRE’: *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* AND THE SPECTER OF THE NEW NEGRO

This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today.

D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915

Most of the more vicious criminal acts of the negroes in the South are caused by the negroes in the North ... They write letters ... They tell of the liberties they are allowed in the North, how freely they may mingle with white men and women.

Thomas Dixon, “Atlanta Views on Riots,” 1906

In the penultimate scene to D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, the normally composed and gentlemanly mulatto Lieutenant Governor Silas Lynch can no longer contain himself. He has become the leader of a rising “black South.” “[D]runk with wine and power,” his maddening ambition for political dominion seethes over into the ultimate desire that seems to drive any black male quest for authority throughout the film: Lynch exclaims, “I want to marry a white woman!” True to the deceptive nature of the duplicitous mulatto, he does not want to marry just any white woman but Elsie, the daughter of his abolitionist mentor, Austin Stoneman. Though Elsie comes from a lineage of radical advocates for equal rights, a proposal of marriage goes too far and she jerks away, offering him only a “horsewhipping for his insolence.” Lynch is outraged. Her rejection sends him into a lecherous frenzy, determined to abduct Elsie if she will not come willingly. For a moment, he regains some composure and with a snide veneer of arrogance, saunters over to the window and pulls back the curtain to reveal white residents cowering in fear to an overwhelming and bloodthirsty reign of black terror. Lynch points outside and proclaims: “See! My people fill the streets. With them I will build a Black Empire and you as a Queen shall sit by my side.”

Birth was pathbreaking in its retelling of the Civil War and Reconstruction with a new level of aesthetic beauty, technological mastery, and even a presidential endorsement. Those both inside and outside of academia continue to debate the film’s significance by focusing on the accuracy of its Civil War and Reconstruction story line. Yet few have recognized the degree to which *Birth* was a cinematic history of its present: a tale of 1915 and the forces of urbanization, migration, and American empire that swirled around the early twentieth century. When Silas Lynch announced the rise of a

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“Black Empire” with a captive white queen, he spoke to what film scholar Thomas Cripps describes as a “generation wanting relief from the clatter of urban change” that brought a “new Negro” to U.S. cities.¹ The film’s opening title read, “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion” just as the trickles of black movement turned into the flood of a Great Migration that transformed an urbanizing America.

What were then called racial groups—both foreign and domestic—unsettled the ground under American cities. The children of slaves were starting to “quit the South” bound for northern Promised Lands while international workers revolted, ladies hit the street, and the nation’s frontier myth took flight to tame a mongrel empire in the Caribbean and Asian Pacific. All of these new race contacts raised the menace of social and sexual “miscegenation” that, in turn, spurred a range of romantic longings for the interracial stability of the Old South and its plantation landscape. Looking at *Birth*’s barrage of black marauders, mulatto villains, and innocent blondes in the film’s 1915 context, helps us to understand Jim Crow as more than a set of segregation laws and folksy local mores. The “anarchy of black rule” represented in *Birth*, justified a so-called Southern Solution that stood as a form of governance, a system of labor management and land assessment, and an intellectual and cultural master trope.

At the end of *Birth*’s first half, the Civil War has ended; President Abraham Lincoln has been assassinated; and the balance of power shifts to the radical abolitionist and U.S. House Representative, Austin Stoneman. The second half of the film depicts the consequences of racial equality under Reconstruction as a determined effort to “put the white South under the heel of the black South.” Just before Silas Lynch leads the “anarchy of black rule,” Griffith inserts an intertitle to anticipate charges that the film was motivated by present-day concerns: “This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today.” But if the film was not meant to speak to the present, no one told the thousands of Klansmen that marched down Peachtree Avenue in full regalia to celebrate the 1915 Thanksgiving opening of *Birth* in Atlanta.²

Such a public display of white authority in the capital of the “New South” was at least partially a response to the massive race riots that had rocked Atlanta in 1906. When the *New York Times* wanted a “race expert” to comment on the meaning of the Atlanta pogroms, they had asked Thomas Dixon, author of *Clansman*, a book on which much of *Birth* was based. Dixon had blamed Atlanta on the “liberties the negro is allowed in the North” that not only “inflamm[e]” black southerners but will ultimately “cause some of the bloodiest race riots in Chicago and New York that this country has ever known.”³ Years later, Dixon insisted that the caricatured depictions of “low down black trash,” amidst a wider cabal of “crazed Negroes” in the film were designed to “create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men.”⁴ The second half of *Birth* overwhelms the viewer in scenes depicting racial equality as a dastardly reign of black terror imprisoning an innocent white South. The Jim Crow world surrounding the film’s screening, by this logic, becomes a necessary evil born of history.

Many point to the massive reenactment of Civil War battle scenes to highlight the film’s capacity for leveraging the latest cinematic techniques to form an epic melodramatic narrative. However, *Birth*’s capacity as a history of the present rests more in its

fine-grain and intimate portraits of black “anarchy.” Griffith powerfully juxtaposes a multitude of long shots and close-ups to create a single montage of psychological affect. His use of the camera as an intrusive eye gives the viewer a sense that she is inside the mind of the character, not witnessing but experiencing the film’s narrative telling of Reconstruction as a miscegenated morass of terror and impotence, forbidden temptation and horror, “black villainy and blond innocence.”⁵ The film represents the perils of miscegenation in part by offering villainous portraits of the mulatto characters Silas Lynch and Lydia. A feeble Austin Stoneman is mesmerized by his mulatto maid Lydia, as she trades on her sexual allure to envelop Stoneman in her vision of black power. Lydia looks on “in an ecstasy of private glee” right before Stoneman sends Silas Lynch South, “as a symbol of his race,” to orchestrate an unholy alliance between northern, white carpetbaggers and freed blacks.⁶

Once South, Lynch offers “false humility” to whites and orders black southerners to “quit work,” dance, and eat watermelon.⁷ Lynch then rallies the voting power of freed blacks ignorant of politics: “Ef I doan get ‘nuf franchise to fill mah bucket, I doan’ want it nohow.” An Election Day scene reverses the white political violations of Jim Crow: a black voter sneaks a second ballot in the box when the white official is not looking. Armed black guards violently push away white men attempting to vote. Black residents celebrate their victory and shoot rifles in the air. Bolstered by “Stoneman’s radical doctrines,” Lynch is elected Lieutenant Governor. He leers at Elsie Stoneman off to the right.

The film’s focus on the mulatto villainy of Lydia and Lynch then gives way to a montage of “outrages.” A once-tranquil Piedmont has become a “town given over to crazed negroes” wielding the power of a black South. One of the most compelling and outlandish scenes is termed “The riot in the Master’s Hall,” when black politicians take control of the South Carolina state house. Griffith describes the scene as a “historical facsimile”: black representatives in gaudy checked suits eat and drink liquor during the session. When one takes his shoes off, placing his bare feet on the desk, the political body rules that “all members must wear shoes” and “all whites must salute negro officers.” But the final ruling sends the entire session into a lust-filled frenzy. Black representatives look longingly at white women in the gallery as an intertitle announces a bill that legalizes interracial marriage.

But more powerful than the depictions of Lynch and Lydia’s plots, or the black legislators’ incompetence, were the scenes vividly detailing black sexual aggression. The infamous “Gus scene” sets a series of events in motion that justify white redemption in the form of the Ku Klux Klan. We see the renegade soldier Gus “unkempt in a union army” uniform leering bugged-eye between two trees at the young white Flora Cameron. Gus is locked into a bestial pursuit of his prey; scurrying between rocks, chewing on blades of grass, and peering hungrily. His prey, the “little sister” Flora, embodies the innocence of the pastoral landscape that surrounds her; playing with a squirrel, she fails to detect Gus craning his neck from behind the bushes. Like Lynch, Gus comes out of the shadow to expose black political power as a blind primal lust for white women pleading, “You see, I’m a Captain now—and I want to marry.” Rather than be defiled by a Negro, Flora jumps off a cliff to her death.

To be sure, *Birth’s* depiction of Reconstruction was absurdly fantastical. But the early twentieth-century emergence of what the film’s loyal mammy described as “[d]em free-

niggers,” was palpable. The film justifies a Jim Crow response to the real assertion of a black racial consciousness, also described as the rise of a “new Negro.” African Americans traveled alongside “foreign races” from Southern and Eastern Europe not only to transform America’s industrial cities but to join in the labor and social unrest against the unyielding gears of the machine metropolis. At the same time, black assertions of equality were met with waves of violence and the efforts to assert a modern racial order of hierarchy without the security of slavery. The early twentieth century saw race riots or conflicts erupt in small towns and big cities across the country from Wilmington, North Carolina (1898) and New Orleans (1900) to New York City (1900) and Springfield, Illinois (1908). Many times violence was sparked by the stock rumor of black men attacking white women. Black communities faced white terror with organized political mobilization or an armed response of guns, bricks, pots, and fists. Such incidents inspired the all-black Niagara Movement (1905) that gave shape to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (what Dixon called the “Negro Inter-marriage Society”).⁸

The formal mobilization of African Americans against white violence loomed over the writing of Dixon’s books and Griffith’s film. But arguably, it was the specter of black boxer Jack Johnson that most haunted the production and promotion of *Birth*. On July 4, 1910, Johnson, “The Negro’s Deliverer,” trounced “The Great White Hope,” Jim Jeffries, to retain the heavyweight championship of the world. Black communities took to the streets in both impromptu parades and gun battles with white soldiers on leave, igniting possibly the first-ever nationwide race riots in U.S. history. But probably most damaging was that this virulent display of black superiority in the ring had been filmed. Within three weeks Congress passed a bill they had long refused to even consider: the prohibition on transporting boxing films across state lines. It is telling that right after Johnson’s victory, the media focused on the potential black response as much as the fight itself. The *Los Angeles Times* offered warnings to black residents that would become daily admonitions during the Great Migration to come: “Do not point your nose too high. Do not swell your chest too much. Do not boast too loudly. Do not be puffed up. Let not your ambition be inordinate or take a wrong direction ... Your place in the world is just what it is.”⁹ New Negroes gave Dixon and Griffith much material to draw on as *Birth* depicted an apocalyptic end of days in the moment of a very real black challenge to white supremacy.

Just as I finished this essay commemorating the Centennial of *Birth*, yet another black person was assaulted by a white police officer or vigilante. We can add the video streaming of a 15-year-old girl in a bikini slammed on the ground face first, to a growing list that most recently includes Oscar Grant, Aiyana Jones, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. The eerie resonances with *Birth* rest in the drastic contrasts of interpretation. All across the country, on social media and on television, white-on-black violence—sometimes death—is justified on the grounds that black subjects were failing to obey, questioning procedure, making suspicious or menacing movements, posing a potential threat, etc. In the face of actual but nonviolent criminal behavior or simply suspicious movements, *behavior* has become a legitimate cause for black death. In the current world of camera phones and the

24-hour news cycle, *Birth* reminds us that visual images do not provide a self-evident truth but are shrouded in the contexts in which they are viewed. But in the end, whether 1915 or 2015, the frustration that black people fail to perform greater humility and deference will never rationalize Jim Crow subjugation or death ... #blacklivesmatter.

NOTES

¹Thomas Cripps. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Films, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.

²Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 14.

³*New York Times*, September 24, 1906. Thanks to Lynn Lyerly for this citation.

⁴Quoted in Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*" in *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director*, ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 279.

⁵Quoted in Rogin, 267.

⁶Lang, 97.

⁷Lang, 102.

⁸Quoted in Rogin, 279.

⁹Quoted in Davarian Baldwin, "'Our Newcomers to the City': The Great Migration and Making of Modern Mass Culture" in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 166.