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Comparative Film Review: *The Birth of a Nation*

By Hector Lopez and Brittany Kelley

While Hollywood has played a major role in reinventing the past to entertain their audiences, some films are meant to engage viewers in conversation about current and past events. Nate Parker – director, actor, and screen writer – created *The Birth of a Nation*, a film about Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831. He did so in order to engage his audience in a conversation about the injustices in America, his own experiences in facing injustice, and to portray a historic figure as a hero. The title of the film, also a title of a century-old silent picture, was key to Parker. He made the claim that this title would take back the history that was stolen by D. W. Griffith.¹ However, Parker used his film to do exactly what Griffith did—used history to promote his personal agenda regardless of the truth.

The beginning of the film gives a glimpse into the life of Nat Turner as a child. Like many slave children, Turner is playing with his childhood friend, Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer). In the Antebellum South, it was common for the children of slave owners to play and develop friendships with the slave children. The white children eventually leave the plantation to attend school, serve in the military, or start their own ventures while the slave children remain on the plantation to work the fields, tend the stock, and serve their masters. In every case the white child grows up learning to separate himself from the slave child and takes his place on the social ladder that places the slave below in the white man in stature. The white child learns the norm of treating slaves inhumanly, and slaves start to be beaten by their former playmates and friends.

As Nat and Samuel become adults, their relationship changes. However, it did not change in the way previously mentioned. Parker chose to show how Nat has a voice in the decision making of Samuel when Nat convinces Samuel to purchase Cherry (Aja Naomi King), a woman that Samuel stated he did not need, at slave auction. In including this scene, Parker

¹ Nate Parker, interviewed by Anderson Cooper, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, October 2, 2016.

reveals that Nat is like no other slave in that he has a voice that is heard by his master. This suggests that Nat is a valued adviser to Samuel, who shows no agitation to Nat's unwanted advice. When Samuel and Nat return to the plantation with Cherry, Samuel expresses to Nat that he needs to remember his place, but there is no anger or aggression in Samuel's voice. This contradicts the relationship between master and slave as slave owners did not see their slaves as educated let alone humans with the ability to think. Scholar Stanley Elkins argued that the institution of slavery in the U.S. paralleled Nazi concentration camps, especially when it came to the "affliction of psychological damage" that reduced slaves to dependency as a "perpetual child."² Nat, in his exchange with Samuel, showed no psychological damage nor did he act like a child when presenting what appeared to be a logical argument as to why Samuel should purchase the slave woman.

Parker wanted to establish Nat Turner as a hero in his film. In order to accomplish this aim, the character is frequently portrayed as fearless and strong. During Nat's childhood, his father, Isaac Turner (Dwight Henry), was caught stealing food for his family and escaping after killing a slave hunter. Another slave hunter, Raymond Cobb (Jackie Earl Haley), shows up at Nat's cabin looking for Isaac. When Cobb asked young Nat where his father is, young Nat says nothing, lacks fear, and remains calm. Cobb approaches young Nat, holds on to Nat's chin, and demands to know where Isaac is. Young Nat, looking Cobb in the eye, remains calm and silent and never flinches as Cobb becomes more aggressive and angry. Anyone who has a child knows that children become afraid and show their fear, especially when their parents are fearful themselves. During this scene, Nat's grandmother, Bridget (Esther Scott), and mother, Nancy Turner (Aunjanue Ellis), both fear the slave hunter the moment he enters the cabin. The lack of fear by the young Nat fits into how Parker wanted to present the character. Parker continues to show the strength of Nat as an adult when he attempts to return a toy to a white child. The father of the child is upset that Nat spoke to the child and mother let alone approached them. In retaliation, the father begins to strike Nat with his cane, and Nat does not flinch but rather takes each blow as if it was a short sting. What is interesting is that Nat shows a glimpse of submission when he cannot look the man in the eye,

² David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 207.

which is something that Nat can only do when he was a child in a more threatening situation.

Parker solidifies his view of Nat Turner as a hero as the rebellion comes to a halt. Nat voluntarily turns himself in, and his hanging was made into a proud spectacle where all the Southampton County residents showed up to celebrate the end of Nat's life and his rebellion. When asked if he had any final words, Nat simply replied, "I'm ready."³ A slave boy takes center screen and sheds a tear, and as the camera pans out, that boy is now a man fighting in the American Civil War. This ending is problematic if Parker, as he stated in many interviews, wants to bring the conversation about Nat Turner to his audience. First, Nat did not surrender willingly; he was caught and tried before he was hung. Second, the image of the young boy turning into a Civil War soldier leads an audience to believe that Nat Turner's Revolt was the only event that led to the war. It omits other instances that built up the hostilities between the North and South including the Fugitive Slave Act, "Bleeding Kansas," and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Parker's ending also gives the illusion that the Civil War was initially fought to end slavery. However, it was not until 1862 when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation did the North begin to make attempts to free slaves under Confederate control. Historical accuracy was sacrificed in order to promote Parker's heroic narrative.

Parker also wanted to start a conversation about the injustices taking place today with his film. Gabrielle Union, actress who played Nat Turner's friend and slave woman Esther, commented, "This is perfect timing at a time when this country and the world desperately needs it." Union explained her comments by discussing the killings of young African-American men that have recently emerged in social and news media. Parker, along with the cast, adds to the discussion of dealing historical injustices. Parker wants to contribute not only to the discussion of today's injustices but to the discussion of what is left out of traditional histories.⁴

This conversation begins with the title, which Parker admitted he chose before writing the script in an interview with

³ *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by Nate Parker (Century City: 20th Century Fox, 2017), DVD.

⁴ Rebecca Ford and Etan Viessing, "After Nate Parker's Controversy, Can 'Birth of a Nation' Be Reborn in Toronto?," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/birth-a-nation-at-tiff-926835>.

Anderson Cooper on *60 Minutes*. He commented, “It’ll give us a better understanding of why we’re having conversations about diversity now.”⁵ In 1915, D. W. Griffith released a film also titled *Birth of a Nation*. This silent film told the story of the American Civil War and Reconstruction through the lens of racism to justify the South’s implementation of the Jim Crow Laws. Griffith created this film based on a novel written by Thomas Dixon Jr. titled *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Klu Klux Klan*. Just as the title suggests, the book and the film both promote the Klan as the good fighting against the evil of the North during the Civil War and Reconstruction. This film was Hollywood’s biggest blockbuster of the time and the most controversial as Griffith added to intermission the following statement: “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.”⁶

There are many specific examples in the original *The Birth of a Nation* that would have led Parker to appropriate the title. The silent movie focuses on two families, the Camerons from South Carolina and the Stonemans from Pennsylvania, during and after the Civil War. The captions prove beyond a doubt that the movie sides entirely with the Confederacy. When focused on the Southern characters, the captions read: “Piedmont, South Carolina—the home of the Camerons, where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more”; “the kindly master of Cameron hall;” “victory or death for our cause is just”; “A mother’s gift to the cause—3 sons off to war.”⁷ At the beginning of the movie, the Stoneman family visits the Cameron plantation. The Camerons take the Stonemans to the slave quarters, and the slaves⁸ demonstrate how happy they are by dancing. During the war African American soldiers are shown running wildly around the Cameron’s home, shooting people in the street and the Cameron women hiding in their basement in fear. They are saved from potential harm by the Confederate army.

When the war ends, a mulatto named Silas Lynch goes around the South getting African Americans to register to vote and convinces them to stop working in the fields. After they follow him out of the fields, they dance in the streets. Following the first

⁵ Nate Parker, *60 Minutes*.

⁶ *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. D. W. Griffith, 1915 (Wellington: Inspired Studios, 1998), DVD.

⁷ Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁸ Portrayed by white actors in black-face.

election in which African Americans vote during the Reconstruction Era, the movie shows its interpretation of “the negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites.”⁹ The African Americans in the House of Representatives are shown drinking booze, eating fried chicken, and putting their feet on their desks. The film goes on to bewail over the lot of “the helpless white minority” and even goes so far as to show a case in which a white man is tried by an African American magistrate and an all-African American jury.¹⁰ Griffith treats this situation as if it were a horrible thing as if a white man did not have a chance of being found innocent unless he was tried by members of his own race.

Following this scene, a law is passed legalizing marriage between whites and African Americans and is again treated as if this were a horrible thing. African Americans are also shown pushing white people out in the street and abusing African Americans who refuse to register to vote. The film makes it appear that anarchy follows the election of the African American representatives and that whites are only able to regain their lost rights (and power) and protect their women from the apparently lecherous African American men by establishing the Ku Klux Klan. The end of the movie even shows reconciliation between the North and the South in the form of a marriage between a Northern woman and a Southern man, and it indicates that this reconciliation is only possible because African Americans have had their new rights repressed by the Klan and are back in their “proper place.” It is historically inaccurate and horribly, infuriatingly insulting.

Seeing a movie like this in 1915 and believing the things it shows would serve to justify the horrible Jim Crow laws in place at that time. It is as if the film is warning the audience about what would happen if African Americans were treated as equals and given positions of power by showing that it had been done before. There was anarchy and chaos and white women were at risk for being violated, and the only way to protect legitimate government and white women was to keep the segregationist laws in place. To make this “warning” even worse, excerpts from Woodrow Wilson’s *History of the American People* are shown during the movie and agree with these horrible depictions. These captions read, “In the villages the negroes were the office holders, men who

⁹ Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

knew none of the uses of authority, except its insolences”; “The policy of the congressional leaders wrought...a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South...in their determination to ‘put the white South under the heel of the black South’”; “The White men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation...until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern Country.”¹¹ After having this narrative prevalent in society for so long, Parker wants his audience to understand what D. W. Griffith did to Hollywood and take back the history he tainted with his film.¹²

As Parker pieces the events that led up to Turner’s Revolt, Parker forgets to include the lives of slave women. None of the women in the film are shown working in the fields or suffering the cruel discipline that slave owners gave their slaves. Women, even when pregnant, worked the fields, but the women in Parker’s film were seen working in the master’s house, lighting pipes for guests, or mending clothes. No women were present even when Parker showed scenes of slaves retaliating in a hunger strike. It is known that retaliation was common for slaves especially within the master’s own home. Cooks would add ingredients to the food making their white owners sick and possibly killing them. The only time Parker showed any injustice toward women slaves was when Cherry was gathering water, and three slave hunters approached her. Though the film cuts the scene as the men grab Cherry, her face is shown brutally beaten as she tells Nat of what happened. In an interview on *60 Minutes*, Parker stated, “How will I use my art to address injustices in my life?”¹³ Parker used this scene to address the rape allegations he faced in 1999. He was found innocent while Jean Celestin, his friend, co-script writer, and college roommate, was found guilty. Although the raping of slave women by white males was common in the Antebellum South, Parker’s comments take away from the discussion of the injustice of slavery and of black men in America today he wanted to create; Parker instead made the discussion about his own past. Ever since the film debut at the Sundance Festival in January 2016, Parker’s

¹¹ Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*.

¹² Ford and Viessing, “After Nate Parker’s Controversy, Can ‘Birth of a Nation’ Be Reborn in Toronto?”

¹³ Nate Parker, *60 Minutes*.

rape allegations became center stage and took the focus away from the film itself.

Parker excellently portrays Nat Turner as he sees the historical figure—a hero whose rebellion who sparked the Civil War. Parker wanted to start a conversation about Nat and add to the teaching of slavery in the classroom. Parker also brings the events of Nat to modern issues in the U.S. today. Before Nat turns himself in, he visits his wife in secret and asks her what is going on around Southampton County. Cherry says, “They killing people everywhere for no reason at all, but being black.”¹⁴ This line links Parker’s film to the injustice of unarmed black men killed by police officers that have gone viral over different social media outlets. Even though Parker showed great artistry and proved he is a force in Hollywood, his film did not get the recognition it deserved as Parker’s past out shadowed his work.

¹⁴ Parker, *The Birth of a Nation*.

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Author Bios

Hector Lopez (left) graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in 2014, with a Bachelor's degree in History. Since graduation, Hector has worked at the Hemet Unified School District in Hemet, California, as a substitute teacher and instructional aide while attending the Social Sciences and Globalization Master's Program at CSUSB, in which he will graduate in the winter of 2017. Following graduation, Hector plans to earn his teaching credential in special education and coach athletics at the high school level.



Brittany Kelley (right) is a graduate student in the Social Sciences and Globalization program. She hopes to have a fulfilling career using her knowledge and love of history to inspire others. She wants to thank Dr. Jones for the opportunity, and Heather Garrett for all of her support and assistance.

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