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The Birth of a Nation as American Myth

Abstract
The Birth of a Nation was one of the most important films of all time, both for its technical and aesthetic achievements and for its enduring legacy of racism. This paper uses Bruce Lincoln's approach to myth as a form of discourse and Robert Bellah's notion of civil religion to show how Birth might be understood as a mythic component of American civil religion. From this perspective, Birth serves as a paradigmatic story of American origins rooted in ideas of white supremacy. At the end of the article Oscar Micheaux's work, Within our Gates, is used to briefly demonstrate filmic strategies for countering Birth as myth.

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The release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) forever changed the movies. The director, D. W. Griffith, set a new standard for film aesthetic by synthesizing new types of shots and cutting techniques, improving production quality and fidelity to historical sources, integrating music into film more comprehensively, and employing narrative conventions still widely operative in film. Birth's enormous success proved the financial viability of the new medium throughout the nation. *The Birth of a Nation* was also an exceptionally controversial film because of its grotesque depictions of blacks (generally played by whites in blackface), its racism, and its valorization of the Ku Klux Klan as savior and midwife of the new nation. To this day there is tension in criticism of Birth over whether to separate evaluations of its aesthetic achievement from its racist depiction of the American epic.[1]

It is precisely as an American epic, a national heroic myth, that religious studies approaches can help illuminate *The Birth of a Nation* and its relationship to American self-understanding. In general, however, scholars of religion have not explored how film contributes specifically to constructing a sacred sense of "Americanness," or what I will refer to here as "civil religion."

Most studies of film and national identity have instead focused on questions of ideology.[2]

Perhaps more than any other medium of the twentieth century, film has worked to construct civil religion by presenting idiosyncratic images of the nation as reality. A mythological approach to *The Birth of a Nation* can help us see it as an American myth asserted in an argument over what constitutes American identity. By American myth, I mean it is a strategic discourse (Lincoln 1990) aimed at producing a particular sense of American identity and purpose by presenting as paradigmatically true an idiosyncratic account of America's origins. From this perspective *The Birth of a Nation* is not simply a reflection of a racist America, or an exploration of race in America, it is also a strategy for constructing America.

My argument proceeds as follows. After first summarizing Birth's plot and themes, I use Robert Bellah (1975) to define civil religion. I use Bruce Lincoln's (1990) definition of myth to show that myths are a source for civil religion because they make claims about the ontologically true nature of particular societies. I then explore Birth and D. W. Griffith's comments about Birth to show that Griffith, though he often spoke in terms of historical truth, also considered Birth to be true in the mythic sense, and therefore a source for civil religion. In a penultimate section I use Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1919) as an example of a counter-myth deployed in response to Birth.

The Birth of a Nation: a summary of plot and themes

On the surface, *The Birth of a Nation* tells the fate of two families just prior to, during, and after the Civil war. It is important to note that the film actually opens with scenes of the slave trade, predicting future discord in the nation with the first gnostic intertitle: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." Thus, the film's character development and plot are immediately contextualized by transcendent themes of disorder and order.

The central characters of the story are the Stoneman family of Pennsylvania and the Cameron family of South Carolina. Austin Stoneman is an abolitionist politician and the Camerons are cotton plantation owners. The young lads of both families have become chums at boarding school, and the story opens with the Stoneman boys off to the Cameron's estate in Piedmont, South Carolina, for a visit with the Camerons' "kith and kin." In Piedmont, Griffith portrays a prelapsarian order by showing the boys enjoying the Edenic life of the South, complete with visits to the happy cotton fields and the slave quarters, where the slaves do a joyful dance on the occasion of the white folks' visit. While the boys bond, Phil Stoneman is smitten with Margaret Cameron (Ben's sister) and Ben Cameron is taken with a photo of Elsie Stoneman (Phil's sister) which he has snatched from Phil. Though news of war soon interrupts the idyll, and the boys are forced to fight for their respected sides, Phil and Ben pledge fidelity to their loves before leaving. The separation by war, reunion, and marriage of Cameron and Stoneman families will

serve as a surrogate for the separation and ultimately restored bond of South and North. As Wood argues (1984, 127), the fundamental plot of Birth affirms the belief that "the meaning of American history can be read best, or even exclusively, through domestic themes."[3]

Griffith does not glorify war in the Civil War scenes that follow. Instead he shows us the desperation and futility of war with moving intertitles like "War's peace" to describe body strewn battlefields. Throughout the film Griffith never allows the viewer to forget the common humanity of both (white) sides; by emphasizing that each side performed acts of wartime gallantry and humanity towards comrade and enemy, Griffith shows us that even at their most wretched, North and South can recognize humanity in one another. For example, when Ben Cameron, "the Little Colonel," leads a final charge against the Union, he pauses to "succor a fallen comrade" and is cheered by the on-looking Unionists. As he finishes his last heroic charge Ben almost dies, but he is saved when the Union commander, who happens to be Phil Stoneman, recognizes him. Ben is sent to the hospital to recover, and there he meets Elsie Stoneman, whose photo he has carried for nearly three years.

Griffith makes Ben a metonym for all Southern men, pushed to the limit of endurance by the circumstances of war, but still honorable and noble. After the war he is slated for execution on false charges, just like the South he represents. When

Ben's mother hears of the charge she saves him with a direct appeal to "the Great Heart," President Lincoln. Lincoln's mercy to Ben reflects the President's gracious attitude toward the South. Lincoln vows that he will deal with them "as if they had never been away," despite Austin Stoneman's own desire that "Their leaders must be hanged and their states treated as conquered provinces."

The tragedy of Lincoln's assassination marks the rapid descent of the South into death and chaos. Austin Stoneman, megalomaniacal mulatto mistress at his side, becomes "the greatest power in America," an "uncrowned king," and uses his power to champion equal rights in all respects for blacks. Griffith makes plain the significance of Austin Stoneman's call for equal rights in the placards held by blacks at a political rally in the film, which read "Equality: Equal Rights, Equal Politics, Equal Marriage." These terms foreshadow the trajectory of the rest of the film. The thoughtless good intentions of abolitionists lead to a pollution of the body politic and ultimately to rape of white women and a pollution of white American blood that can only be restored by ritual blood sacrifice and a savior. Griffith continues to remind the viewer of his mythic metanarrative through references in the intertitles to biblical passages which were most likely recognizable to viewers at the time. For example, as Austin Stoneman's mulatto Lieutenant, Silas Lynch, organizes the black vote, the intertitle reads "Sowing the wind" (Hosea 8:7) to prepare us to "reap the whirlwind" (8:7) in another intertitle prior to the upcoming rape

scenes. Significantly, the biblical passage refers to a punishment brought on Israel, the chosen nation, for its illegitimate government (8:4), its idolatry (Hosea 8:4) and most tellingly, for its incapacity to remain pure (8:5).

When Austin Stoneman sends Lynch to organize the black vote the descent down the slippery slope quickens. First "New found freedom turns to rude insolence" in a number of scenes; for example, black soldiers have the temerity to claim as equal a right to the sidewalk as Ben Cameron. The insolence quickly becomes the predicted call to equality in politics. Griffith shows increasing disorder in the Republic with images of unqualified and stupid blacks registering for the franchise. As one disheveled black man says, "Ef I doan' get enuf franchise to fill mah bucket, I doan want it nohow." Blacks are shown cheating in the election, while the most respectable white citizens are denied the right to vote. It is not surprising that with this sort of voting chaos, Silas Lynch, the mulatto, is elected Lieutenant Governor and the state House of Representatives becomes overwhelmingly black. Shots of the clownish assembly are carefully intertitled to project historical verisimilitude, and show liquor swilling, barefoot, chicken-leg eating representatives cheering wildly and dancing as they pass "a bill providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites." Equality as humans has snowballed into equality as citizens, and its predictable dénouement will now be equal claims to white women's bodies. Thus, with his new found power the mulatto Lynch's

"love looks high" toward the pale skinned, blond haired Elsie Stoneman, an indication of worse disorder to come.

In his despair Ben Cameron takes a walk in the woods to mull the fate of his nation. There he sees two white children put a sheet over their heads and scare a group of black children by pretending to be ghosts. Ben is inspired to make his own sheeted costume to scare the local intransigent blacks, and thus the Ku Klux Klan is born. In the midst of chaos, they are a spark of hope for the nation, but the millennial battle of good and evil is still ahead.

As the KKK begins to address injustices against whites, one of their own members is killed by Lynch's band. In the meantime, Flora, the youngest Cameron sister, who has come into sexual maturity in the course of the story, heads to the spring to fetch water. Gus, a "renegade negro" captain spots her, pursues her and declares "I'se a captain now, an' I want to git married." Chaos has reached its nadir here as status, class, and racial order collapse in one profane moment: the rape of Flora = rape of the South = emasculation of white men = loss of all order.

Flora rejects Gus and flees, but he pursues her undeterred to the edge of a cliff. There, learning the "stern lesson of honor," she throws herself off. Ben finds Flora and she dies in his arms, but not before he has wiped her blood-stained brow with the Confederate flag she had girding her waist. Ben and the KKK find and

lynch Gus (in earlier versions of the film the Klan castrates Gus - reversing the threat of "equal marriage").[4] Then Ben hears the news that his parents, sister Margaret and Phil Stoneman are under attack - in this topsy-turvy world the former masters and the kin of abolitionists are now mercilessly at the hands of former slaves. Ben summons the Klan to restore order, and in a ritual consecration to their mission the Klan raises the "fiery cross of old Scotland" and extinguishes the flames with water that has been commingled with Flora's bloody Confederate flag. Ben tells the other Klan members, "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." The imagery is clear, invoking both the Eucharist and the Gettysburg Address. Flora's body and blood give life to the new nation. Earlier an intertitle told us not to mourn her for "finding sweeter the opal gates of death." As her blood consecrates the Klan we know why, for as Lincoln told us at Gettysburg:

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

To strains of Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyrie" the newly empowered the Klan rides off to save Piedmont, the Cameron family, and the nation.

Unaware that his own demise is near, Silas Lynch confesses his love to a horrified Elsie. He is furious at her incredulous rejection and turns instead to tempt her: "See, my people fill the streets. With them I will build a black empire, and you as Queen shall sit by my side." Elsie, another Christ figure alone in the black wilderness, rejects the mulatto tempter and threatens him with a horsewhipping. In the meantime Austin Stoneman arrives. He is delighted to hear that Lynch wants to marry a white lady, but his delight turns to outrage when he finds out that the lady is his own daughter. His outrage is met by the tip of a bayonet as Lynch begins to take Elsie away. But the KKK arrives to save the day before Elsie or Austin Stoneman is hurt. The Klan then rides off to save the Cameron household, which has taken shelter in the small cabin of two Union veterans.

Griffith again takes pains to point out the humanity shared by white North and white South, and in case the viewer misses the symbolism, the intertitle tells us that "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright." Later versions are less racially explicit with their intertitles: "The former enemies of North and South unite to resist the mad results of the Carpetbaggers' political folly." Besieged on all sides, it looks as though the Klan won't arrive in time; father Cameron is even ready to bludgeon poor Margaret to death to spare her the dishonor of being caught by the black troops. But at the last moment the Klan arrives and saves everyone.

The film ends with a victory parade through Piedmont and images of restored order (e.g., Klansmen supervising elections) followed by the marriages of Ben and Elsie and Phil and Margaret. The earliest versions of the film also reportedly showed "Lincoln's solution:" the deportation of blacks back to Africa. In all versions of the film the North and South are bound together in a new way now - a new nation, a new family, has been born. That this new nation is a chosen nation, a millennial nation, is brought home with an image of reestablished unity, harmony, and peace under Jesus in the final scene. Perhaps even more incredibly, the 1933 version contains a waving flag and a call for the audience to sing together the national anthem (and thus to participate ritually in the new nation). Birth makes no attempt to hide its celebration of American millennial aspirations or its articulation of America's sacred identity. It is in the latter respect that the film can properly be said to attempt to provide a foundational myth for American civil religion.

Civil Religion and Myth

In 1967 Robert N. Bellah published his landmark article "Civil Religion in America," where he argued that in addition to specific denominational religions, there also exists in the United States a general religion, rooted in the documents, characters and events of American history that shapes America's self-understanding. Though many others have written about various formulations of the concept,[5] in this article I use the term in Bellah's (1975, 3) sense of "that religious

dimension, found I think in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality." Civil religion provides a transcendent framework for understanding what it means to be an American, thus it not only reflects American self-understanding, but also stands as a guide for what American behavior should be and provides a normative mold for who we become. For example, American civil religion often links American identity with particular constructions of the idea of "freedom;" consequently certain notions of "freedom" become normative for American behavior. Even if American practice does not adhere to American identity as put forth in civil religion (and it seldom does), civil religion continues to provide a basis for identifying and modeling what is distinctively American.

In *The Broken Covenant* Bellah (1975) uses American myths to explore what is American civil religion. The key structural element of American civil religion that emerges from these myths is an ongoing tension between inclusion and exclusion, expressed religiously as covenant and conversion, expressed politically in republicanism and liberalism, and carried in biblical imagery and themes of chosenness and closeness to God. But although Bellah uses myths to elaborate the structural dimension of American civil religion, he does not systematically explain how myths contribute to civil religion other than as narratives conveying American values. A more nuanced understanding of myth

suggests that it is not just the narrative structure of myth that conveys Americanness, but the truth claims implicit in myths that make the mythic dimension of American civil religion so important. In other words, myths not only convey values, they also claim that those values are true at the most fundamental level. This broader sense of myth derives from Mircea Eliade's (1963, 1) sense of myth as "true story," where truth is understood not only in terms of facticity, or historical accuracy, but also in terms of ontic reality and, therefore, meaning. That is, myths claim to take us beyond what seems to be the case to show us the truth of existence. As an ontologically true story, a myth claims to be both a model of and model for ultimate reality; myth claims to be paradigmatic.[6]

Eliade's approach to religion has been criticized for being tautological, a-historical, and failing to account for the social functions of myth (McCutcheon 1997), but that does not detract from his essential phenomenological insight: myth narrates (what it claims are) realities. That is, myths claim to tell us what is true or real at the ontic level - what is "really real." Myths tell us about "origins," describing what reality was before it started to degenerate. What Eliade does not tell us is that all attempts to narrate reality are inherently political.

Bruce Lincoln (1990, 3) recognizes the political nature of myth when he locates it in the realm of discourse, which can be used to reproduce, deconstruct and reconstruct society. For Lincoln, society is a synthetic construct held together

primarily by sentiments elicited from discourse. "And like all synthetic entities, a society may either recombine with others to form syntheses larger still, or - a highly significant possibility ignored in most Hegelian and post-Hegelian dialectics - it may be split apart by the persisting tensions between those entities that conjoined in its formation, with the resultant formation of two or more smaller syntheses." (Lincoln 1990, 11) Therefore, part of the political nature of myths is their ability to elicit sentiments that mobilize people into specific social formations, conserving or reworking the social synthesis, by virtue of claims to paradigmatic truths.

In Bellah's account, the underlying myths of American civil religion are undifferentiated from American history, but Lincoln (1990, 24) offers us a taxonomy that lets us consider the point at which history and myth diverge. Lincoln's taxonomy revolves around three questions. First, does a particular narrative make a truth claim? If not, it can be considered "fable." Second, is the narrative's truth claim credible to a primary audience? If not, it can be considered "legend." If so, it can be considered "history." Third, does the truth claim possess "authority?" By authority, Lincoln means that truth assigned to the narrative is paradigmatic for, or a model for, society. If a narrative is accepted as paradigmatically true (that is, worthy of being a model for the present and future) it can be considered "myth." In other words, myth is a form of discourse that claims to be and is accepted as paradigmatically true. "Thus, myth is not just a coding

device in which important information is conveyed, on the basis of which actors can then constitute society. It is also a discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively created." (Lincoln 1990, 25) Myths, then, not only narrate reality, they can also be used to narrate alternative realities that maintain, deconstruct or reconstruct social groups. The mythic dimension of American civil religion narrates the reality of national social boundaries. It is precisely such a narration of social boundaries that D. W. Griffith attempts in The Birth of a Nation.

***The Birth of a Nation* as Myth**

The meaning of *The Birth of a Nation* is clearly overdetermined. At one level, Birth is Griffith's personal odyssey writ large - an attempt to free himself from an oppressive father and domineering women through castration, lynching and redemptive violence (Rogin 1985). At another level, Birth marks the beginning of a project to make the Southern understanding of the nation (the myth of "the Lost Cause") an understanding of the nation as a whole. [7] At yet another level, *Birth* reverses the South's loss in the Civil War by making the South, in the guise of the KKK, the true midwife and savior of the nation (Scott 1994). Perhaps most obviously, Griffith's film tells the story of the origins and identity of the United States: though the life of the nation was peaceful in its early years, the presence of blacks has been a persistent source of disharmony. The Civil War and

Reconstruction marked the nadir of America's internecine fighting, but out of that struggle, and by virtue of the blood of honorable sacrifice and redemptive violence, the new nation, a true Union of North and South, is born. In the original version of the film there was a corollary: the black seeds of disunion should be expelled back to Africa so that the nation could now live its millennial destiny.

Following Bruce Lincoln's taxonomy, two routes for analyzing *Birth* as myth are to explore the type of truth claims it makes and who accepts those claims. I will bracket who accepts the claims made in *Birth* because that question has more to do with whether the film was successful as a myth than whether it tries to present itself as myth. Since the film was controversial from the start, and clearly appealed to (and repulsed) different audiences, it is not possible to know for whom it succeeded and why without detailed historical reception studies.[8]

On the other hand, the truth claims made by the director and by the film remain salient to the question of how the film attempts to work as myth. On the surface Griffith and the other promoters of the film seem to confuse claims for the film's historical accuracy (historical truth) with claims for its ontological truth and meaningfulness (mythic truth). But Griffith was aware of these ambiguities in the concept of truth. At the least he became aware of the difficulties of defining truth after the controversy that surrounded the film. In a 1930 filmed interview of Griffith, Walter Huston asks him about *Birth*, "Do you feel as though it were

true?" Griffith responds by both asserting and problematizing *Birth*'s truth: "Yes, I think its true," he says, "But as Pontius Pilate said, 'Truth? What is the truth?"

In this case and others Griffith spoke about the film's truth in terms of both historical accuracy and in terms of ontological truth and meaningfulness. According to Lillian Gish (1969, 131), the actress who played Elsie Stoneman, Griffith initially told the troupe about his interest in championing historical truth: "I've bought a book by Thomas Dixon, called *The Clansman*. I'm going to use it to tell the truth about the War Between the States. It hasn't been told accurately in history books. Only the winning side in a war ever gets to tell its story." When the film sparked controversy Griffith responded by emphasizing the film's historical accuracy, offering one critic $10,000 if he could prove that there were historical distortions in the film (cited in Cripps 1963, 354). Even after he was forced to cut parts of the film, Griffith fought censorship of film, "the Laboring Man's University," on the grounds that it limited access to truth (Griffith 43).[9] Griffith's intentions to produce an historically accurate account of the emergence of the new nation after the Civil War are further borne out in reports of his attention to detail and research.[10] In each of these instances Griffith uses the term "truth" to refer to historical accuracy. But Griffith's fidelity to detail in production is a vehicle for the other type of truth-claims made by the film, mythic truth claims.[11] On a closer view it is clear that Griffith's larger purpose was to

convey a sense of the ultimate meaningfulness of the Civil War in terms of American identity. The medium of film was, in Griffith's mind, central to that task.

As Griffith himself said (Geduld 1971, 29), "I believe in the motion picture not only as a means of amusement, but as a moral and educational force." In his 1915 interview with Richard Barry (in Silva 1971, 10) he is even more explicit about the role of film in teaching history: "The time will come, and in less than ten years…when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again." He continues, "There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression." One gets the impression that Griffith understands that historical stories require editing, yet somehow he sublimates consciousness of his own politics into a fantasy of photographic accuracy as historical accuracy and mythic truth.[12]

We can be sure that Griffith wanted to convey mythic truths because he and the film's distributors also attempted to frame the film's accuracy with political and ecclesiastical authority. For example, *Birth* was framed as historical truth and true national myth through, among other things, repetition of the famous statement President Woodrow Wilson made to Dixon after an initial screening of the film at

the White House: "It is like history written with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." The White House later repudiated that the comment had been made, but only after the story had been widely circulated for three months and Griffith and Dixon had used it for publicity. Since Wilson was not only President, but also former president of Princeton University and a widely respected historian, his comments carried extra weight. Similarly, in the longer versions of the film Griffith includes caveats that he intends no disrespect to any race, then follows those caveats with excerpts from book five of Wilson's History of the American People that defend the historicity of the racist images. In other words, Griffith mobilizes history in support of myth. That is to say, Griffith presents and defends the historical details of his film as accurate, and in doing so he implicitly defends as accurate his presentation of the ontological truth of the nation (i.e., as white).

The desire of Griffith and the film's other promoters to convey more than just historical accuracy is also visible in their attempts to frame the film with an aura of moral and religious authority by "obtaining statements from ministers, teachers and other prominent citizens to the effect that they liked *The Birth of a Nation* and recommended it to others" (Aitken 1965, 61). Dixon (Dixon in Silva, 75) provides a clear example of this strategy when he responds to an editorial in the New York Globe by claiming to have recorded history faithfully in his novel. He

warrants his claim by describing how the film was submitted to an ecumenical jury of clergymen who agreed with the praise given the film. Among other things they said:

1. [The film] united in common sympathy and love all sections of our country.
2. It teaches our boys the history of our nation in a way that makes them know the priceless inheritance our fathers gave us through the sacrifices of the Civil War and Reconstruction.
3. It tends to prevent the lowering of the standard of our citizenship by its mixture with Negro blood.
4. It shows the horror and futility of war as a method of settling civic principles.
5. It reaffirms Lincoln's solution of the Negro problem as a possible guide to our future and glorifies his character as the noblest example of American democracy.
6. It gives Daniel Webster for the first time his place in American history as the inspiring creator of the modern nation we know today.

With this letter Dixon asserts the historicity of the film, but like Griffith he elides his defense of the film's historical accuracy with a defense of its relationship to the mythological goals of preserving a particular national identity and white bloodline.

Though the story of the Camerons and the Stonemans is fiction, Griffith's statements and techniques demonstrate that he viewed, and he wanted others to view, *The Birth of a Nation* as both historically accurate and ontologically true. That is to say, for Griffith and others close to the film, *Birth* showed how the United States came into being and of what it really consisted. It is in this sense that

Birth can be seen as a myth, a form of discourse that makes a paradigmatic claim for truth.

Birth claims that at an ontological level the United States is a white nation, and it explains problems in the United States as resulting from a black presence. It thus attempts to arouse sentiments (through imagery, narrative and music) that will lead to a reconstitution of the national identity as explicitly white. At the minimum, the end of the film shows white supremacy and white familial order as the keys to restoring the nation's God blessed millennial role. The earlier versions of the film, and Dixon's comments above, which advocate deportation of blacks to Africa, also show a model for reconstituting the sacred space and character of the nation in its pure state. If we accept Bellah's (1975, 3) definition of civil religion as "that religious dimension, found I think in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality," then Griffith's film is clearly a discursive strategy for altering American civil religion and reestablishing it on another basis. Birth reinterprets the meaning of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the light of an ontologically white nation.

Counter-myths in Response to *Birth*

Many audiences loved *Birth*. Reviewers tell of audience members cheering wildly when Gus is lynched or when the Klan rides to save Elsie and the Cameron

family. Schoolchildren were even taken to view the film as history. But not everyone loved the film. Even before *Birth* was released in most markets, controversy surrounded it. The protests came from quarters where people disagreed with Griffith's vision of American identity, and they took two forms: calls for censorship and production of films to counter it.

Calls for censorship were widespread and of mixed success. More interesting from the perspective of how film is used to create civil religion were films that portrayed a different view of black Americans, a different view of what it meant to be American, and thus a different truth of American identity.[13]

Oscar Micheaux, the most well known and most prolific producer and director of "race films," released at least two films that directly countered Griffith's film.[14] *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), for example, directly challenged the moral legitimacy of the KKK. Another of Micheaux's films, *Within Our Gates* (1920), challenges *The Birth of a Nation* even further. For example, in Within Micheaux reverses the black on white rape scenes in Birth with a near rape of a black woman by a white estate owner. Not content to merely reverse the claims of victimization, this scene ends when the white estate owner realizes that he is the father of the black woman, thus blurring the boundaries of race and uniting the two antagonists with a common history and destiny in the end. Within also challenges Griffith's mobilization of Christian religious symbols by presenting its own parody

of an Uncle Tom black preacher. In contrast to the lynching scene in *Birth*, which depicted the Klan's lynching of Gus as a limited application of deserved justice, Within shows clearly innocent men, a woman and (though he escapes) a child being lynched by an enthusiastic white crowd. Within also challenges *Birth* merely by showing a range of black characters, from deceitful crooks to upstanding doctors. Finally, Micheaux explicitly presents a counter-claim to what constitutes American identity in the final soliloquy of Within:

> Be proud of our country, Sylvia. We should never forget what our people did in Cuba under Roosevelt's command. And at Carrizal in Mexico. And later in France, from Bruges to Chateau-Thierry, from Saint-Mihiel to the Alps. We were never immigrants. Be proud of our country always.[15]

Micheaux claims Americanness through shared sacrifice in the military, and he openly constructs his version of Americanness against immigrants as "other."

Micheaux's efforts to present a different truth about black Americans represent a counter-discourse to D. W. Griffith's vision of American identity rooted in whiteness and his portrayal of blacks as the source of disharmony in the nation. From one perspective, then, it would seem that American cinema at the start of the 1920s was poised for a great debate on the nature of American identity. At the very least, we might have expected that the streams of myth in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates* would continue to develop separately in Hollywood and independent black cinema. But no debate over race emerged in the cinema;

Hollywood did not continue with Griffith's myth, considering it far too controversial. As Bogle (1973) has pointed out, Hollywood did not want the controversy that Griffith generated, and it therefore self-censored villainous representations of blacks. Instead it opted for stereotypes, such as Toms, Coons, and Mammies, that were less blatantly racist and that would persist for decades. Official censors were even more restrictive with Micheaux's films than they had been with Griffith's, prompting him to turn increasingly to less controversial films. As the 1920s drew to a close and film costs increased with sound pictures, independent black cinema was largely absorbed into the Hollywood production system.

Conclusion

The Birth of a Nation offers us a glimpse into how film works as a form of discourse that can be employed to assert truths about American identity. In this regard film functions like other sources for American civil religion. Birth clearly presents a limited vision of American origins as the paradigmatic truth of American identity. But Charles Long (1974, 212) has written about this tendency in the context of civil religion more broadly: "The religion of the American people centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors." He continues, "Indeed this approach to American religion has rendered the religious reality of non-Europeans to a state of invisibility, and thus the invisibility of the

non-Europeans in America arises as a fundamental issue of American religious history at this juncture." American civil religion is not white supremacist by nature; by creed (e.g., the Declaration of Independence) American civil religion is egalitarian and universalist. But if we examine the production of American civil religion we find another story: there are discursive practices which ground some ideas of American identity in myth and exclude others. The Birth of a Nation was among the most influential myths of American identity Hollywood every produced.

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[1] As Clyde Taylor (1996, 16) points out, "Mainstream cinema scholars and aestheticians ... have kept the race issue at arm's length from their exploration of the film's technique, refusing to synthesize these discussions." He argues that by engaging the film solely at the level of technique and aesthetics, and by refusing to see the connection of aesthetics and racism, cinema studies adopts a passive racism that leads it to ignore the meaning of Griffith's film as American epic and the role of racism in the American epic. Rogin (1985) has also commented on this tendency. Carter (1971) is an earlier example of a scholar who does deal with this problem. Some reviewers, such as Hackett (in Silva 1971), made the connection of aesthetics and race early on.

[2] On the other hand, scholars have long viewed film as a reflection of and producer of social values. Scott (1994), for example, describes how film works on a mythic level to resolve contradictory social values. Martin and Ostwalt (1995) devote a section of their book to explorations of film and ideology. Greene (1998) offers an insightful glimpse of how the producers of the *Planet of the Apes* series played with national ideological issues in a more dialogical fashion. Miles (1996) shows how films create a space for individuals and groups to explore ideological and other cultural issues. Of course there are many studies of how particular films reflect patriotism. Auster (2002), for example, shows how *Saving Private Ryan* gained popularity by tapping into ideals of "patriotic transcendence." Though civil religion might be considered a form of ideology (or hegemony), the literature on religion and film has not generally used the term civil religion to systematically analyze how film sanctifies aspects of American identity. Carter's (1971) article on *Birth* as cultural history or, as he also phrases it, "epic manqué," does not use the phrase "civil religion" but does address the relationship of the film to imagined forms of American identity.

[3] If the real story of the film is clearly indicated in the title, part of Griffith's directorial genius was to tell that story through the lives of sympathetic characters. As Griffith's biographer, Robert Henderson (1972, 158) has pointed out, "Griffith also demonstrated than an audience became most involved with the "truth" of a motion picture when they were involved with the lives of "real"

people. The secret of *The Birth of a Nation*, perhaps, is that the audience cared about the Camerons."

[4] Griffith edited *Birth* continuously, sometimes in response of the requests of censors. He also revised it for screening in later years. Thus, there are many different cuts of the film. Unless I note otherwise, I rely on the longer version now considered "official."

[5] Discussions of civil religion are legion. A recent summary of literature and argument for the continued importance of the concept can be found in Michael Angrosino (2002). Other important articles can be found in Richey and Jones (1974), Bellah (1975), and Bellah and Hammond (1980).

[6] For Eliade (1963, 5) "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality - an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior and institution." Or, we might add, a nation.

[7] Wilson (1990), for example, details the transformation of the Southern civil religion into a universal myth starting shortly after the time of Griffith's film. Carter (1971) also analyzes Birth as an extension of the "Plantation Illusion" or "Southern Illusion" to the nation as a whole.

[8] In fact, though Steiger's (1992) study of *Birth* shows that its reception changed dramatically over time as audience and socio-historical contexts changed, there is also much evidence from early reviews that the film was wildly applauded and cheered in its initial receptions. See, for examples, the reviews in Silva (1971). It is also clear from some of those reviews that the film was understood by many viewers to be history.

[9] Fred Silva (1971, 8) notes that in Barnet Bravermann's 1941 unpublished interview with Griffith, Griffith ultimately agreed that the film should not be publicly exhibited because it was not clear enough and was embarrassing to Blacks.

[10] Roy Aitken (1965, 10) notes that Griffith employed four historians to check background facts for the film. Dixon (in Silva, 94) defended the historical accuracy of the book on which *Birth* was based, noting in particular that it had been approved by Secretary of State and historian John Hay. Gish (1969, 145) mentions an erroneous account of a half-dozen historians working on the film and thousands of extras employed to make the film as realistic as possible (cf. Cripps 1963, 354). Henderson (1972, 150) verifies that Griffith was "almost obsessed" with research, though only of the sort that bolstered his own ideas. Gish (1969, 136-138) describes how Griffith constantly consulted, among other historical texts, Mathew Brady's *Civil War Photographs: Confederate and Union Veterans - Eyewitnesses on Location* so he could restage "many moments of history with complete fidelity to them." He restaged parts of *Our American Cousin*, the play being performed at Ford's Theater when Lincoln was assassinated, so that the scene would correspond as closely as possible to what actually occurred. He consulted veterans about troop movements, and he obtained authentic Civil War artillery for close shots of battles. He had authentic uniforms made to specification for the soldiers and consulted Brady's photographs for hairstyles of the period.

[11] Griffith's attention to historical detail may also unintentionally reveal the film's mythic dimension. For example, Taylor (1996) argues that a discrepancy in Griffith's aesthetic of historical representation underscores the film's larger purpose. Despite striving for historical accuracy in everything else, most blacks in the film were played by whites in blackface. As a result, the aesthetic of the story carries Griffith's politics: the inauthentic element in the picture is the same as the inauthentic element of the nation -- blacks.

[12]Others intimately involved with the film were less opaque about their political aspirations for the film. Cripps (1963, 349) tells how Dixon revealed his purpose to President Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty: "I didn't dare allow the President to know the real big purpose back of my film - which was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in the audience into a good Democrat!" It is important to remember that at this stage in American history Republican and Democrat signified regional affiliations as much as anything else. Thus Dixon's goal was to bolster the power of the South.

[13] Though black directors like William Foster had made movies prior to *Birth*, it is widely agreed that *Birth* spurred a boom in black cinema in the late teens and early twenties. Films like *The Birth of a Race* (1916) and *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916) avoided black stereotypes prevalent at the time. But these films were not without their own problems. For example, disagreements over what *The Birth of a Race* (1916) should portray ultimately fractured the group that had coalesced to produce it, scared away Hollywood money, and led to the project being taken over by those not interested in telling a black story. Finally, Cripps (1996, 45) tells us, war fever and profit seeking "transformed the focus from a story of black 'progress' into a neutrally shaded universal 'progress.'" *Realization* (1916) has been criticized as merely a black Horatio Alger story that also does not show the real situation of most black Americans. (See Cripps 1997.

[14] In addition to releasing films with content that challenged *Birth*, Micheaux also responds to the conventions of filmmaking and narrative that Griffith made normative. Thus Micheaux's directing challenges Griffith's techniques of portraying truth and reality. Ciraulo (1998, 76) argues that Micheaux "challenges dominant accounts of history and race relations by using an unusual filmic approach to single shots and to larger narrative construction." For example, his use of tableaux shots can be seen as a reference to an earlier documentary style that simultaneously makes a claim to documentary veracity and places African Americans at the center of the story. As Ciraulo (1998, 79) states, "The 'reality' Micheaux documents is daily black life and race relations in the United States." His narrative structure also implicitly challenges Birth. Micheaux uses extensive flashback sequences, not to push forward the plot, but to introduce the viewers to ever-deeper insights into who the characters are emotionally and how they became that way. In contrast to Griffith, who conveys the present tense as one moment in the linear path of progress, Micheaux uses flashbacks to show the present as a moment pregnant with the past. "Over and over again in *Within Our Gates* we see that memory bursts into the present tense of the narrative with material force." (Ciraulo, 1998, 88)

[15] *Within* also ends with a wedding scene, so it too falls into the convention of representing America through images of a nuclear family.

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