

The effects the film “The Birth of a Nation” had on Race Relations in the USA

“It’s like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true,” were the words of President Woodrow Wilson upon viewing the 1915 film ‘The Birth of a Nation,’ during a private viewing in the White House. The film, created by D.W Griffith based on the novel ‘The Clansman’, depicts two families during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Era after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. According to film historians the film was ‘The first blockbuster Hollywood hit – it has long been hailed for its technical and dramatic innovations but condemned for the racism inherent in the script and its positive portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan.’ It is believed the release of this film had major effects on Race Relations in the United States.

Before the film was released tensions were growing, it had been understood that the film was controversial due to the novel it was based on. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was aware of this and tried to have the film censored, ‘protesters petitioned the city council to ask the censorship board to reconsider its approval of the film,’(s3) initially the group had some successes in cities like Los Angeles ‘city councilmen with their eyes on the negro vote at the next election, were hostile towards the picture’(s1) and it was even banned outright in two states; Ohio and Kansas (s3). Eventually these attempts would prove to be futile and instead ‘provided the film with free publicity’(s3) As thousands of Americans were eager to see this controversial picture.

Although the NAACP failed to have the film censored, it provided the group (which had only been formed six years prior) to evolve. The NAACP had to adopt other tactics in order to combat ‘the Birth of a Nation’. The groups reliance on the Judicial system to obtain recourse could not be used in this situation, ‘the courts would not be sympathetic – Griffith’s film did not violate any laws.’(s3) Ironically, D.W Griffith turned to the courts for protection against the association, obtaining injunctions in order to have the film shown everywhere.

Therefore, the group had to challenge the film in a different way. They arranged marches, rallies and mass gatherings to publicise its concerns, the largest of which took place in Boston in April 1915 when thousands of Americans gathered to express their opposition to the film by making speeches. The NAACP also produced Pamphlets to highlight the historical inaccuracies in the film, and discussed the Black experience in America. These pamphlets were distributed to thousands of people across America. (s3) The effects of these efforts resulted in the NAACP becoming a more prominent group in the fight for civil rights, and encouraged black people to reach out to them for help, ‘the NAACP office is flooded with applications for help from all over the United States.’ - Secretary Nerney of the NAACP.

The film upon release seemed to be an immediate success ‘the picture was shown twice daily from April to September – it broke records in Boston and New York and in other large

cities.’(s2) It was hailed for its technical innovations, the first film to use techniques like special effects, close-ups and jump cuts. Despite the NAACP’s attempts to censor the picture it was instead celebrated, it ‘received the widest endorsement from every board of censorship – a large number of Priests and Ministers have commended it.’ (s1)

The most contentious aspect of the film was The portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in the second act of the film. They were lauded as American heroes ‘hooded figures of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue and portrays the final triumph of decent and orderly government by real Americans over the alien influences’(s2) The film romanticised the group, and introduced fictional aspects of the Klan, such as the white robes and flaming cross burnings. It also had white actors portray black freedmen, one of which sexually preys on a white woman. The worst part of the picture lies in the fact that it ‘shows the Klan only in its best aspects, and before it had been made use of by evil men for the perpetration of outrages even worse than those it was designed to eliminate.’(s2)

Before ‘the Birth of a Nation’s release, a man named William J. Simmons, a preacher and former member of the groups the Knights Templar and the Masons (s4) had been developing the idea of resurrecting the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan that was portrayed in the film and had been prominent during the Reconstruction Era had disbanded in the 1870’s, but due to the ‘increasing public enthusiasm towards the old Reconstruction Klan’ William J. Simmons decided that it was the appropriate time to revive the group. On the nineteenth of October, 1915, William J. Simmons along with thirty-three other men put their signatures to a Georgia Charter Application to create a new organization. On Thanksgiving night, Simmons and sixteen members ascended Stone Mountain. They ignited a flaming cross, and proclaimed the Rebirth of the ‘Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.’(s4)

This revived Ku Klux Klan did not have much in common with it’s predecessor from the Reconstruction Era. It was a militant White Supremacist group that advocated anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism along with racism. This group is the Ku Klux Klan we are familiar with today. ‘The Birth of a Nation’ gave these White Supremacists a motivation to organise themselves, the modern Klan’s recognition of the ‘advertising value of ‘the Birth of a Nation’ seems to be indicated in the proposal to make use of a moving picture as part of the Klan Propaganda.’(s2)

Summary

Due to the release of the controversial film ‘the Birth of a Nation’ in 1915, the Ku Klux Klan resurfaced and the NAACP grew stronger in tactics. Both of these groups would grow in numbers in the following decades, and would cross paths with one another during the Civil Rights Movement. It is clear that both these groups benefited in some way from this film, proving that the film was one catalyst for the raising of race relations as a significant issue in the next fifty years in America. This issue has had a significant impact on American popular culture, and because of American cultural influence worldwide it has shaped in some way world culture.