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LMC3254-B: Film History

Midterm Research Essay

Framing Identity: Analyzing the Cultural Impact of Early African American Cinema

Silent films, as the genre states, refer to films that do not have incorporated or synchronized sound featured in the final reel—particularly noticeable where characters lack recorded dialogue. Instead, these films convey their narrative through inter-title cards and musical scores during screenings, often featuring a pianist or orchestral accompaniment. Although silent films are not *truly silent*, their distinctive presentation method enables audiences to emotionally engage with narratives in a way unlike other viewing methods. Thus, creative vision may be clearly conveyed through varying shot sequences and cinematographic techniques, and captivate an audience, even in the absence of spoken dialogue. This era, primarily lasting until the late 1920's, (technological advancements by this time paved the way in incorporating synchronized sound) is characterized by a legacy of unique storytelling techniques. Unfortunately, this legacy has been stunted, as the first recordings were done so on vulnerable nitrate reels. As a result, up to 75% of silent films have been lost due to accidental or deliberate destruction, yet the exact extent of this loss remains unclear (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). This presentation aims to reveal historical realities *beyond the lens* by closely examining the depiction of African-Americans in early Hollywood silent films. Specifically, it contrasts the stereotypical representation of African-Americans in the 1915 "Birth of a Nation" film, (dir. by D.W. Griffith), with the highly acclaimed 1920 race film, "Within Our Gates" (dir. by Oscar Micheaux). By examining their particular narrative styles *within the frame of Reconstruction-era*

America, the films may be used as a historical record of their time and provide insights on socio-economic context of African-American life and representation. Additionally, this study will explore the broader implications of the powerful silent film artform during this initial spark of International cinematographic storytelling.

During Reconstruction, African Americans encountered both increased opportunities and unique challenges. In the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation and the granting of rights through the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, the community that had been largely enslaved in agriculture suddenly found itself legally able to acquire citizenship, pursue education, vote, and even run for political office—all within five years of a devastating Civil War (Matthews, 2020: 1). Despite ongoing discrimination in both Northern and Southern states, there were notable achievements and advancements among African Americans during this period. One such advancement was the unification of the family unit, with efforts to locate lost family members becoming increasingly paramount. Churches also played a central role in facilitating these interactions, serving as central points for gatherings where activism, religion, and education were woven into the fabric of local communities. Ministers often became natural political and community leaders, and associations like the *Virginia Baptist State Convention* and the *Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention* emerged as rapidly growing entities dedicated to advancing freedmen's rights and advocating for future black economic, social, and political advancement following emancipation (Matthews, 2020: 1).

One such emerging cultural leader, now recognized as the “Czar of Black Hollywood”, **Oscar Micheaux** made significant contributions to the early American silent film industry.

Directing over 40 films, including the acclaimed "Within Our Gates," Micheaux pioneered the genre known as "Race Films," which targeted Black audiences and featured all-black casts (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Despite facing technological challenges and low budgets due to production occurring (and funded) outside of Hollywood, Micheaux's work had a substantial impact both in the US and internationally. He specifically provided a more accurate and thought-provoking portrayal of African Americans by addressing racial issues, prejudice, interracial romance, and colorism within the community from a humanistic, contemporary perspective (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024).

Introducing one much-admired perspective, Micheaux's silent film "Within Our Gates," released in 1920, provided a more accurate and blunt portrayal of racial tensions during the time. The film centers around Sylvia Landry, who faces various challenges in her pursuit of love, education, and a fulfilling life. In the film, Sylvia faces sexual violence and watches her father unjustly accused of a crime he didn't commit, resulting in a horrific lynching by a white mob. Despite these challenges, the story ends on a hopeful note as Sylvia marries Dr. Vivian, who inspires her to take pride in herself, her country, and to work for her community's betterment. While Micheaux's plot may not depict catastrophic devastation in literal terms as Griffith's "Birth of A Nation", his narrative effectively captures the real dangers and daily struggles faced by the African American community during this time in history.

Griffith, known for his controversial portrayal of historical events during the American Civil War in the film "Birth of a Nation," was inspired by his father's experiences as a Confederate soldier. Griffith's upbringing occurred in Louisville, Kentucky, where he initially

engaged in amateur acting at the Temple Theatre, further shaping his artistic style and career trajectory (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). His journey took a significant turn when he started selling ideas for one-reel films to acclaimed director, Edwin S. Porter. This eventually paved the way for Griffith to direct over 400 one-reel films with the Biograph Company, allowing him to refine his cinematographic skills and creative vision along the way. These skills, including the close-up, panoramic shots, and cross-fading techniques, were considered revolutionary for the time and were all incorporated into "Birth of A Nation." The film not only showcased technological innovations but also ignited significant social upheaval due to its messaging, which was considered racist and offensive to the inaccurate portrayal of black characters. The film's polarizing impact divided viewers almost as clearly as its narrative did, and it influenced Griffith's future stance on censorship in filmmaking, as noted in numerous interviews and title cards signed by Griffith himself (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024).

"Birth of A Nation," released in 1915, is a silent epic drama film adapted from the novel "The Clansman" written by Thomas Dixon. Led by the acclaimed actress Lillian Gish, the film not only captivated audiences with its narrative prowess but also revolutionized the art of filmmaking through its pioneering cinematographic innovations. The film follows two families—the Stoneman's and the Cameron's—who respectively support the Union and Confederacy during the Civil War, leading up to the assassination of President Lincoln. Enhanced by an orchestral musical score during its screening, the film features numerous extras in battle scenes to vividly portray Civil War victories. After the intermission, the main message of the film focuses on the subjective glorification and formation of the white terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan.

Stylistic Features and Insights

Beneath the surface, the “Birth of a Nation” film employs a creative array of techniques in order to carefully immerse the audience into each scene’s respective target *emotive message*. Although perhaps akin to the silent movie genre, uses of extended gestures and agonizingly-hypnotic expressions played a large role in the viewer’s engagement and receptivity during the screening process. The viewing experience itself feels more like a conversation rather than a lecture, with its minimalistic presentation allowing for a greater focus on each element. This simplicity proves to be both precise and elegant in conveying the film’s emotive messages.

Griffith's use of color is inferred to employ the concept of "lysis," acting as a subtle form of passive filtration that prioritizes *certain experiences* for the audience to resonate with, while silently disregarding others. This serves his main objective of communicating the forgotten and fulfilling rewards derived from participation in widespread, systematic hatred. For instance, there are examples of various color hues used, including: regular (white/black), blue, green, amber, and red (see Appendix A). In these scenes, especially when considering the stark contrasts in subjective American life experiences following a biblical-like brother-against-brother war, Griffith opts to showcase common overlapping areas that both sides can relate to. In Colonel Ben Cameron’s day-camp scene, he is depicted with a green cast as he and his company prepare to engage in literal acts of bloodshed. However, in Griffith’s environment, uncensored thoughts are seemingly rejected from existence, replaced by associations with nature elements, and more likely, the valor and determination associated with expressions of honorable conflict. Additionally, upon Lt. Governor Silas Lynch’s appointment, he is cast with a red hue, directly associating him with intentional—and unrequited— sexual desire. Griffith effectively illustrates

the slanderous depiction, particularly emphasizing the elevation of the white man's status by demoralizing and dehumanizing black men. His central claim suggests that black men are portrayed as lacking control over their sexual desires, positioning them at the opposite end of the moral spectrum, even on a genetic level. These ad hominem attacks and epithets serve as simplistic yet highly effective tools in propagating white supremacy on a wide scale. This is in stark contrast to the lighthearted portrayal often seen in contemporary romantic comedy films, where a boy is comically rejected by the attractive girl in class.

Moreover, rather than portraying characters in any other manner, the founding of the KKK—a regional terrorist organization—is depicted as a sensitive and innocent decision stemming from deep emotive depths of war and subsequent social shame, as it is cast in blue. Conversely, the depiction of the selling of slaves, while contributing to the forgotten rewards, is presented with emotional distance. This portrayal, marked by a brown, past-tense tone, ironically highlights the detachment from the morally reprehensible act of slavery. It suggests a passive approach, avoiding full engagement with the emotional implications of the depicted actions. Furthermore, Griffith's narrative presentation depicts determined individual hate as rare or unique to one's internal environment, potentially unaware of how many others may have adopted the same mindset. This further reflects the southern white religious ideal of being “the few out of many” within the vast expanse of humane worthiness. On a microcosmic level, this manifests within the “few” who adopt a hard, morally ambiguous mindset for the well-being of “the many.” This strategic use of color serves to guide the viewer's mental engagement with each scene. The narrative spans over three hours, presenting a group considered “fringe in ideals and activities,” even for the time (Easterling, 2020: 1). Additionally, Griffith incorporates elements

of past and present history into his narrative style through the use of "Facsimile," which facilitates a negotiation process between truth and subjective reality. This serves as the basis of the contemporary black experience, portraying a systematic transfer of "experience" from southern white shame to the traumatic survival of blacks through defamatory provocation and widespread violent intimidation.

Furthermore, the scores used in this film play a significant role in shaping the emotional states and narrative themes of each scene. Since the Baroque period (1600-1750), the Doctrine of Affections, validated and still endorsed by religious ceremony and ritual, suggests that the use of specific harmonic progressions can influence a listener, based on the theory that passions can be represented by visible or audible signs (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Ironically, Griffith employs this technique to depict Clansmen as morally obligated to the actions and ideals they uphold. In certain scenes, it was challenging to fully discern a character's stance on a situation solely through facial expressions or interaction vulnerability. However, the score in each scene served as a clarifying and reinforcing element, acting as a fail-safe to ensure the audience's complete alignment with the portrayals of the actors. Unfortunately, this heavy reliance on music exemplifies its damaging impact on scenes featuring African American characters, as it can inaccurately profile them and react adversely with the truth on screen. Depictions of fervent sexual aggression or varying degrees of innate "intellectual inferiority" are among the most damaging stereotypes perpetuated, promoting harmful and narrow-minded ideals.

Some scenes in the film utilize character gestures, music, and shot sizes to reinforce Griffith's narrative, while others exploit these elements to reignite and perpetuate racial

stereotypes and biases of the time. For example, in the film's second historical facsimile, audiences are transported to a scene at the South Carolina House of Representatives meeting. Here, Griffith animates a photograph of an 1871 session known as "The Columbia Senate" as a "negro riot" (Appendix A). In this scene, the audience is immersed as observers from a wide, heightened camera angle, witnessing chaotic clamor in a sped-up time lapse. Representatives are depicted with confused facial expressions, bare feet propped on desks, devouring large turkey legs, and laughing maniacally upon being granted rights such as interracial marriage and social praise from whites if serving in the military (see Appendix A). These depictions not only inaccurately represent historical events but also closely mirror the common slander tactics employed by Southern white journalists when historical attempts to control the narrative of black activism during Reconstruction were common (Easterling, 2020: 1). Such tactics, including racist epithets and ad hominem attacks, were utilized to undermine newly-elected black officials in government, often reflecting white insecurity and concerns about power dynamics during this time.

Although speeches were regarded as eloquent by Northern white peers, transcripts of their speeches were written in early forms of Ebonics, such as "Souf Kerilina," specifically aimed at influencing viewers' moral judgments and perceptions of the mental acuity of entire groups of newly enfranchised people, particularly among Southern audiences (Matthews, 2020: 1). Furthermore, visual elements like Union and Confederate flags, KKK symbolism, and various visual and religious propaganda were stylistic choices utilized in crafting Griffith's visual narrative (see Appendix A). The film's widespread viewership, with 1 in 4 Americans watching it in theaters, and the subsequent surge in Clansman membership across previously uninhabited regions in the U.S., underscores its lofty impact (Easterling, 2020: 1). However, while largely

effective, the messaging of empowerment was intricately bound to the expectation of dehumanization of another, proving to be profoundly damaging to both Northern and Southern African Americans.

Public Perception and Impact

Exploring the early stages of cinematography presents a unique challenge as it marks our initial exploration of vision-enabling technology. Like with any emerging technology, there was a wide array of applications by the general public, each serving different purposes. For example, the impact of "Birth of A Nation" has a lofty toll as the narrative presented in "The Clansman" and its cinematic adaptation epitomizes the essence of racism, portraying white individuals lamenting perceived black characteristics and harboring unfounded fears. As a historical artifact, although the film was initially first screened at the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, the film is now seen as heavily controversial due to the stereotypical, racist depiction of African Americans, instances of blackface, and portrayal of the KKK as a heroic entity in the wake of the U.S.'s Reconstruction time period.

The Race Film genre (1915-1954) emerged as an alternative use of such cinematic power, catering to contemporary black audiences with themes and characters that resonated with their experiences. Breakout films like "The Homesteader" and "The Green-Eyed Monster" featured all-black casts and exhibited significant popularity among African American viewers. These films played a crucial role in providing a sense of resonance in an otherwise dissonant environment, fostering understanding and bridging gaps between Northern blacks and newly

freed Southern blacks. Additionally, they served as platforms for promoting black voices and showcased literature on black lives (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024).

Micheaux's creative approach to black activism centered on empowerment through both novels and films, presenting an educated and progressive portrayal of African Americans in his works. Following his passing in 1951, he received posthumous recognition from numerous awards and achievements. Some of his surviving films have been reintroduced to audiences, as they have been aired on Black Entertainment Television (BET), archived by the Library of Congress, and he himself has even been commemorated with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his impact on Black culture and American cinematography (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024).

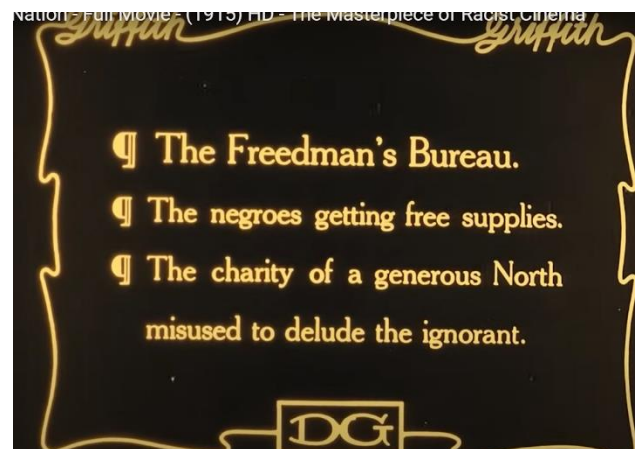
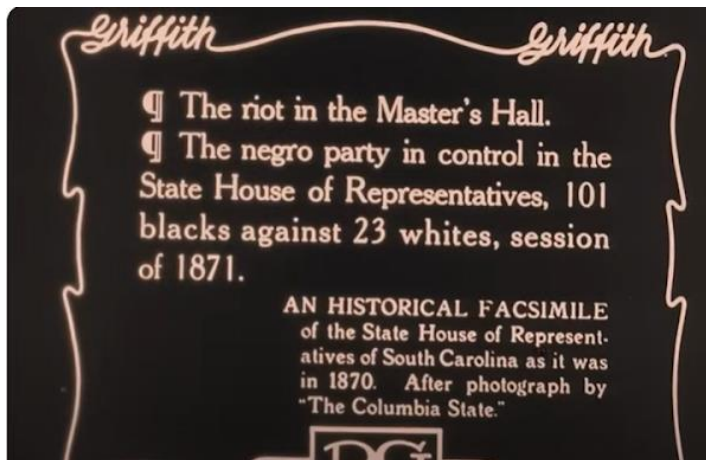
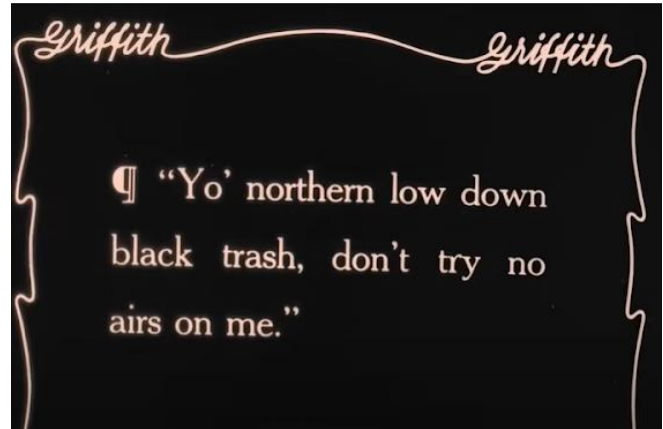
In conclusion, the analysis of silent films such as "Birth of A Nation" and "Within Our Gates" provides valuable insights into the historical context and contrasting narratives surrounding African American representation in early Hollywood cinema. Interestingly, the personal experiences of both Griffith and Micheaux significantly influenced how they depicted race in their respective films. These films not only reflect societal attitudes of their time but also highlight the importance of accurate and diverse representation in historical artifacts for a nuanced understanding of cultural memory.

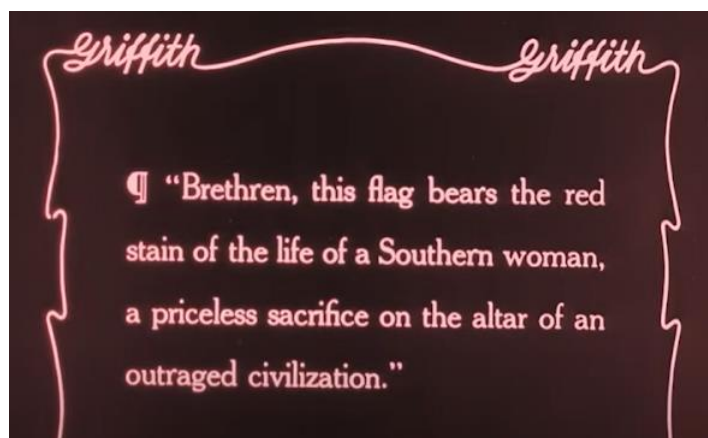
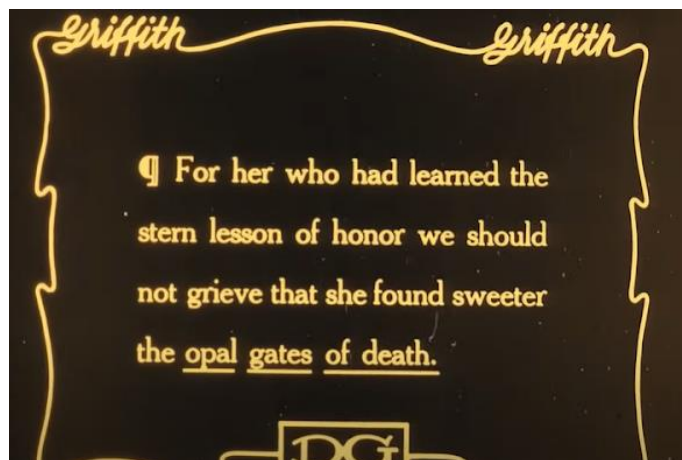
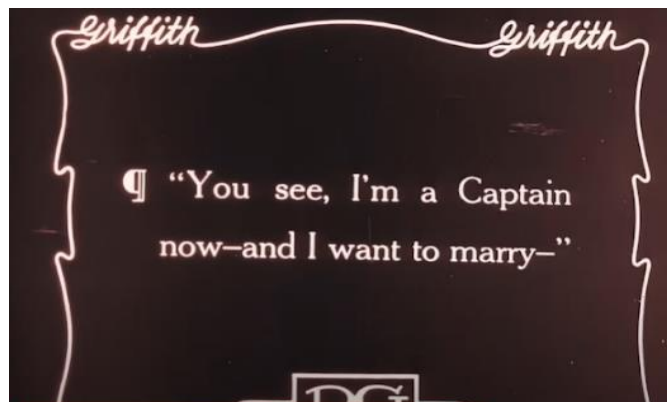
Appendix A

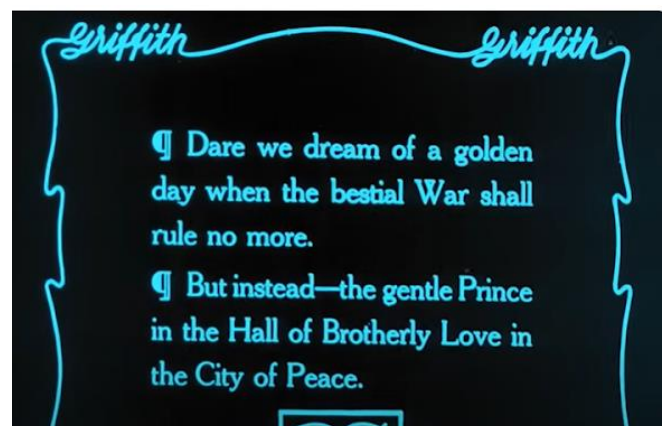
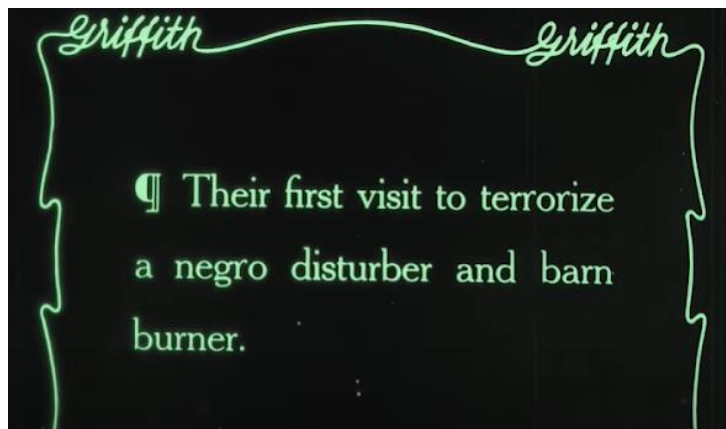
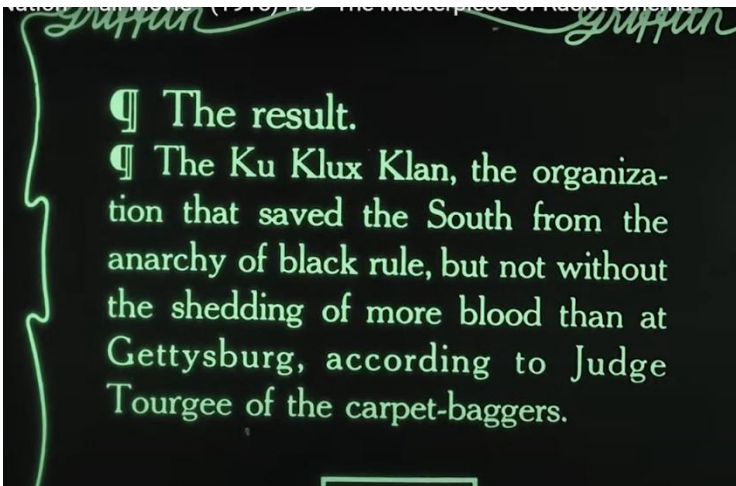
The following screenshots are from "Birth of A Nation," providing a visual immersion into D.W. Griffith's creative vision and narrative style, focusing on aspects such as color/hue, historical context, stereotypical and racist depictions of Black Americans, and KKK symbolism/propaganda.











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