The Birth of a Nation (David Wark Griffith, USA 1915)

David Wark Griffith's status as the leading cinematic artist of his time remains undisputed to this day. Among his historical accomplishments were the expansion of filmic grammar, such as the liberation of the camera from its previous predominantly static position, or the use of elaborate montages to strengthen a genuinely cinematic narration. D.W. Griffith set narrative standards and aided the breakthrough of the then still fledging art of film. One film that is regarded as a key work of film history and the cornerstone of Hollywood cinema stands out in particular: The Birth of a Nation (USA 1915). As early as in 1939, Lewis Jacobs wrote about this work: "It foreshadowed the best that was to come in cinema technique, earned for the screen its right to the status of art, and demonstrated with finality that the movie was one of the most potent social agencies in America."[1]

Noticeably here, Jacobs does not only point to Griffith's pioneering work in cinematic aesthetics but also mentions a further component that is inextricably tied to the immense success of The Birth of a Nation: the assertion of cinema as a social institution. In fact, Griffith's film had already become a political issue during its development stages. After the premiere on February 8, 1915 in Los Angeles, there were nationwide protests from black civil rights activists. In particular, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, was outraged by the film's racist affront and organized boycotts and protests that resulted in calls for censorship and bans. The Birth of a Nation subsequently became the first Hollywood studio production that was shown in the White House. In order to not jeopardize the New York premiere on March 3, 1915, Thomas Dixon, whose play

1 Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film. A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1978 [1939]), 171.

The Clansman[2] was the basis for the film, organized additional screenings for members of the Supreme Court to lobby for support. Due to the protection of President Woodrow Wilson, the film could finally be shown uncensored and on schedule at New York's Liberty Theater. Griffith's film soon became a hit: in the first eleven months, three million people saw the film, that was shown 6,266 times during this period.[3]

The NAACP's protests as well as the president's intervention, however, were not the only political reactions that The Birth of a Nation elicited. Alongside regional premieres, the Ku Klux Klan, having been unmistakably glorified in the film, organized massive parades and ritual celebrations which were often accompanied by violent attacks.[4] In the subsequent years, The Birth of a Nation was used at Ku Klux Klan rallies as an effective recruitment tool.[5] In the process, the film unfolded a potential for political impact that sustainably dynamized the racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan: "*Birth*'s romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924."[6] Although the NAACP's protests – in which many well-known intellectuals participated[7] – were not able to hinder the film's extraordinary popularity and dissemination, their campaigns were not ineffective. As a reaction to the controversial discussions

2 This was also the initial title for Griffith's film, based on Dixon's commercially successful play from 1905 that developed as an adaptation of the two historical novels *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865-1900* (1902) and *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905).

3 See Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. *The Celluloid South* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 59.

4 See Maxim Simcovitch, "The Impact of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* on the Modern Ku Klux Klan," in *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from* The Birth of a Nation *to* Judgement at Nuremberg, ed. David Platt (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992): 72-82.

5 See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 128.

6 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 13.

7 Among them were, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. On the black community's reaction to the film and the numerous political protests, cf. at length Thomas R. Cripps, "The Making of *The Birth of a Race*: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 38-55.

surrounding it, the epic film was ultimately shortened by a few sequences,[8] and President Wilson belatedly withdrew his support of the film.

The Birth of a Nation's immense public influence illustrates not only to what extent cinema had established itself as a mass medium but also points to the power of political interference that the new technology possessed. President Woodrow Wilson's famous, albeit apocryphal, exclamation after viewing The Birth of a Nation is one of the most often cited reactions to Griffith's film: "It's like writing history with lightning!"[9] Technical innovation was not the only sensational aspect about Griffith's opus; so, too, was its claim to accurately present American history on the big screen. Thus, contemporary critics were fascinated by the film's historical content, which was often lauded as the first authentic portrayal of historical events. The emotional dynamics of the cinematographic staging of history are particularly observable in a film review of the *Atlanta Journal* in 1915: "Not as a motion picture, nor a play, nor a book does it come to you; but as the soul and spirit and flesh of the heart of your country's history, ripped from the past and brought quivering with all human emotions before your eyes."[10]

One vital element of Griffith's portrayal of history is the repeated use of historical facsimiles that function as a filmic strategy to prove authenticity.[11] However, it should not be forgotten that Griffith closely interweaves the depiction of the American Civil War with melodramatic genre formulas. The Birth of a Nation is not just concerned with the most accurate presentation of historical events possible, even if that is the claim of the film itself. Rather, what is pivotal for the film's effectiveness is the fact that the historical material's complexity is applied to a narrative level that operates on previously

8 According to Fred Silva, the cut scenes made up 558 feet of film material, in which, among other things, a letter from Lincoln is presented in which he casts doubt on racial equality and suggests the deportation of blacks to Africa as a solution to racial conflict. See Fred Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

9 Several film historians indicate the anecdotal character of this remark, for which there is no source to this day. According to Kevin Brownlow's documentary D. W. Griffith, Father of Film (1992), after the film viewing, President Wilson supposedly said: "I congratulate you on an excellent production."

10 Reprinted in: Robert Lang (Ed.): *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 179.

11 These facsimiles are made up of, for example, extensive passages from Woodrow Wilson's three-volume history of America that are added to the intertitles, or of references to source material that provided Griffith with inspiration for the film's backdrops, e.g. Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs.

established genre conventions, such as the construction of a strict good/bad schema. This becomes obvious right at the beginning of the film. The first frame is announced by the following title: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." Already the apologetic formulation is striking: neither abduction nor slavery is mentioned. Instead, the quasi-neutral verb "bring" is chosen to describe the abductions. The tendency to falsify history appears as early as within the first few minutes of the film. Griffith shifts the threat to the union of the young nation from the brutality of exploitation to the alleged danger of an ethnic group: the sole presence of the Other, not slavery with its devastating effects, is blamed for America's nationwide dilemma.

A further accentuation is introduced as early as the very beginning of the film: the translation of a Christian eschatology into national terms. The narrative rhythm of The Birth of a Nation has a circular structure, in the course of which a paradise is created, destroyed, and reconstructed. The idyll of the paradisiac Garden of Eden is first presented by the Southern Cameron family's idealized living environment. In the process, Griffith arranges the oppositional juxtaposition of blacks and whites at the level of mise-en-scène in such a way that he contrasts a slave's shaky wheelbarrow with the plantation owner's stately carriage. However, this dichotomy is staged not as a way to aggressively pit the characters against one another but as their harmonious coexistence. This is mainly due to the fact that black characters are presented exclusively as peaceful, happy people who lead a contented life under the supervision and care of the plantation owner. This impression is bolstered by the fact that Griffith conspicuously often places cute animals such as puppies, kittens, and small birds in the shots, which function as visual equivalents for the slaves. Just as with pets, it seems that the slaves are also domesticated savages who, after a successful taming, remain loyal to their master. And just like the animals romping around, the alleged primitiveness of the slaves is choreographed by their song and dance, which is indulgently applauded by the plantation owner's smiling family.

While the encoding of racist subordination in the Southern states suggests the harmony of a paradise, the threat to such an idyll is embodied by the representation of the Northern Stoneman family. Their family structure itself contrasts with the idealized Cameron family because the Stonemans are a fragmented family unit. Instead of both parents, the father alone, Representative Austin Stoneman, is presented as the head of the family. The Stonemans' servants are also juxtaposed with the idyll of the Southern states: instead of

submissive, servile slaves, their servants do not behave peacefully and obediently but rebel against and defy the orders of their masters. This is particularly evident in their body language. With the Camerons, singing slaves cheerfully carry on their work in the cotton fields and interact with the plantation owner exclusively in a bent down posture and with multiple bows. Contrarily, the Stonemans' housekeeper, Lydia Brown, has an entirely different physical dynamic. While Representative Stoneman is consulting with Senate leader Charles Sumner, Lydia struts to and fro in the adjoining room, offers her hand to an imaginary subject for a kiss, and eventually throws her handkerchief to another maid along with a snide gesticulation. Furthermore, and this is crucial, in contrast to the Camerons' anonymous slaves, Lydia is announced in the intertitle with her surname "Brown," which serves as a reference to her mixed-race ancestry. The first visual presentation of the housekeeper solidifies this impression because her skin color appears quite light when compared to the Camerons' dark-complected slaves. Finally, a further reference cements this depiction: the next intertitle explicitly describes Lydia as mulatta.

With this, the chief specter of Griffithian racial ideology is expressed. The suspension of racial unambiguity, the diffusion of bipolar grids functions as a metaphor for menace. The resulting danger lies primarily in the suspension of established classification mechanisms. The mulatto/a thus occupies a position opposed to the dominant discourse: he/she refuses to be affixed at racial poles and, as a result, to be affixed to the hierarchical classification system. In the figure of Lydia Brown, this potential threat reveals itself through misguided ambitions as well as through a malicious maneuver of deception. After Senate leader Sumner has reprimanded the housekeeper for her lack of respect and left Stoneman's house, she glares at him with a face full of hatred and, filled with contempt, spits in his direction. The following sequence is full of hysterical movements: Lydia tugs at her clothes, throws herself on the floor, rips open her blouse, and tilts her head back crying. This behavior has often been interpreted as erotic behavior intended to seduce Stoneman.[12] Griffith's alternating editing, however, suggests a different message. Lydia's actions are alternately combined with shots that present Stoneman studying acts of Congress in his library. This form of visual juxtaposition shows that

12 See for example Cripps, who characterizes Lydia's behavior as an "erotic gesture". Thomas R. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47.

Stoneman acts not as the spectator of an erotic spectacle but that Lydia's performance takes place outside his field of vision. One shot, which shows Lydia's triumphant smile in a close-up, visually foreshadows a calculated strategy of deception. Stoneman leaves the library and notices the housekeeper hunched over at the edge of the frame. In a flash, her facial expression changes from a smile of superiority to pitiful crying, whose effect is not lost on Stoneman. Concerned, he asks her what is wrong, whereby her body language seems to re-narrate a sexual assault by Sumner: the repeated pointing to the door as well as the imitative grabbing at her breasts are clear indications of this. And Stoneman's reaction suggests, in fact, a rather sympathetic understanding for her than his own sexual interest in her. Consoling her, he puts his arm around her and tries to cover up her bare shoulders with the torn blouse. The effect of this incident, which presents Lydia as an unscrupulous trickster and Stoneman as a naïve victim of her intrigue, is commented on by an intertitle: "The great leader's weakness that is to blight a nation." The intertitle hints at a political dimension that not only connotes a foreshadowing of events to come but also confirms the potential threat of the deceptive mulatta who negates authority.

This scenario of a threat is condensed, expanded, and ramped up in the second part of the film through the depiction of the mixed-race character Silas Lynch. Here, the dangerous threat of the mulatto does not solely result from the annexation of white privileges but, above all, is sexually determined. At the narrative level, the mulatto, as a half-breed, acts as a sign of the confusion that comes about through a threatening mixing of the races. In the second half of The Birth of a Nation, this theme intensifies when the mulatto, who as a sexual aggressor threatens to destroy the assumed purity of the white race, is presented as a potential rapist of white women. With this thematic accentuation, Griffith draws on a long tradition of hypersexualization of black masculinity:

> "The 'primitive' had long been associated with uninhibited sexuality and promiscuity and belief in these alleged characteristics combined with fears about interracial mixing and served to make the major cause of anxiety about black people a sexual one. […] Expressions of fears for the future purity and superiority of the white 'race' relating to 'miscegenation' and

> 'race-mixing' were bound to the notion that blood varies from 'race' to 'race' and that the mixing of those bloods is undesirable."[13]

Griffith nevertheless undertakes an important transformation. He stages the sexual threat to white women not in the form of the conventional black-white opposition but projects the figure of the potential rapist onto Silas Lynch, who, as a mulatto, is already a living symbol of a mixed-race union.[14] Even the character's introduction by means of the explanatory intertitle is striking: "Stoneman's protege, Silas Lynch, mulatto and leader of the blacks." Above all, the order of characterization is revealing, since it primarily emphasizes Lynch's racial identity before his function as political leader is mentioned. Furthermore, the use of a "telling name" is noteworthy. It gives Silas Lynch a similarly symbolic surname, like Lydia Brown in the first part of the film, and already mentions the adequate form of punishment before the culprit is first presented onscreen. In order to even more clearly emphasize the potential threat of the hybrid and to continue the established portrait of the mulatto character from part one, Griffith creates a further structural connection via mise-en-scène. In his first appearance at the Stonemans' house, Silas Lynch appears in a shot that shows him together with the housekeeper, Lydia Brown.

13 Young, *Fear of the Dark*, 48.

14 This modification is notable, since it represents a significant deviation from Dixon's novel, in which the freed slaves' political leader is described as a "big buck nigger." Cf. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 46.

Figure 1: Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown

Both figures parallel each other not only in their racial identity but in their demonic grinning as well.[15] This form of visual positioning produces a context of association that effectively stages the supposed affinity between racial hybridity and sexual manipulation.

To intensify this basic ideological message, Griffith follows it with a sequence that is loaded with melodramatic genre formulas: the pursuit of the youngest Cameron sister by the freedman and soldier, Gus. Mary Ann Doane emphasizes how closely the cinematic staging mechanisms of melodrama are connected to sexual issues:

> "In the cinema, melodrama is a particularly crucial site for the elaboration of sexual questions and dilemmas. Indeed, melodrama has been consistently defined as the cinematic mode in which social anxieties or conflicts are represented as sexual anxieties or conflicts. […] Griffith's projection of the melo-

15 Here there is another deviation from the source material. Although both characters derive from Dixon, they never appear in the same work together: the "mulatto housekeeper" character is taken from the novel *The Leopard's Spots*, the "leader of the blacks" appears in the play *The Clansman*. The combination of both characters, as well as the emphasis of their character congruence, can therefore be traced back to Griffith. See Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 330, note 23.

dramatic mode onto that of historical spectacle intensifies the articulation of sexual and racial anxieties."[16]

This principle is already evident in the first encounter between Gus and Flora, which Griffith stages as an oppositional confrontation. The sexual danger emanating from Gus is emphasized above all through the appropriation of the voyeuristic gaze by a black person. Whereas Flora appears as the personification of white, youthful innocence in shots that show her carelessly playing around and laughing in the garden at her parents' house, the cross-cut presents a Gus lying in wait, hiding behind a fence so he can observe Flora undisturbed. His bent posture as well as his lecherous facial expression function as indications of a sexually charged motivation, presenting the white girl as a passive object of the gaze and helpless victim, and the black man, contrarily, as an active holder of the gaze and potential rapist.

This situation comes to a head when Flora, against her brother's advice, decides to go for a walk alone in the woods. The setting for the subsequent chase is carefully chosen, since the choice of location already reveals different levels of association that lead to a condensation of Griffith's intended effect. Already here, the name of the youngest Cameron daughter – Flora – implies imagery from nature that acts as an allegory of her virginity and innocence. Furthermore, as a foreshadowing, her name indicates the threat to which she will be exposed later on in the film: defloration.[17] The aesthetic connection to the natural scenery presented in the first part, which forms the background for the depiction of the paradisiacal southern idyll of the Southern States, is also noteworthy. Particularly striking in this context is the transformation of the animal metaphor: the quasi-tamed, pet-like slaves of the first part are contrasted with the aggression potential of the liberated, predator-like slaves of

16 Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 227.

17 The motif of a flower as a sign of untouched femininity is a common topos whose implications D.W. Griffith focused on a few years later in another work. Broken Blossoms, (D.W. Griffith, USA 1919) also concerns a girlish character whose defloration is already alluded to in the title. Brigitte Peucker remarks on the consistent use of the melodramatic scenario of threatened femininity: "Time and again, the twists and turns in Griffith's narrative exist in order to place the woman in the position of greatest danger: faced with many variants on the 'fate worse than death' – with rape, with defloration, and even simply with the abstract threat to her purity – she chooses death." Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images. Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 58.

the second part. The most important signifier for the association with animals is the physique. The unbuttoned shirt reveals Gus's muscular upper body; additionally, his corporeality is emphasized by his tight pants that are only held up around his waist by a cord. This conspicuous staging of the male black body stands in stark contrast to the previously presented claim of political participation, as Linda Williams stresses: "Its peculiar logic was to exaggerate the very quality of masculinity that granted black men the vote. Excessive, hypermasculine corporeality disqualified him to the status of beast."[18]

The sexually motivated threat to the helpless white girl presented by the animal-like attacker, Gus, is subsequently visualized by a chase sequence that shows a revolutionary development in standards of film technology and aesthetics. Lorenz Engell points out:

> "Before Griffith, sequences like this were still being shown in one single shot, in which the interval of time between the two parties was portrayed in real time. Before the pursuers appeared in the picture, those being pursued had already left it, so that for a moment it was left 'empty.' Griffith avoids such empty shots; he methodizes the discovery that a movement does not have to be shown from beginning to end but that viewers can complete it in their heads. This enables a tremendous increase in the density and speed of both movement and action."[19]

This principle is augmented still by the movement-intensive, rapid alternation of shot sizes, such as close-ups, medium close-ups, mid-shots, medium long shots, and long shots, whereby the juxtaposition of already extremely fast-moving shots further accelerates the tempo. With this elaborate composition technique, Griffith reaches an exact equilibrium of the inner movement dynamics and the dramaturgical structure, which causes a tremendous increase in tension. The sequence's climax consists of a shot that presents the preliminary endpoint of the chase. A montage combines close-ups of Flora's anxious face with shots in which Gus, like an ape, climbs up the rocks and approaches the girl further and further.

Backed into a corner, the persecuted girl seems to have no other way out than a deadly leap into the depths. The shot that shows Flora's lifeless body at

18 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 104.

19 Lorenz Engell, *Sinn und Industrie: Einführung in die Filmgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1992), 80-81.

Figure 2: Flora and Gus

the foot of the rock is finally followed by a commentary intertitle that characterizes her decision as the result of exemplary virtue: "For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death."

In this depiction, the racist antipathy that permeates the film reaches its temporary climax. What is decisive here is the binary structure of the racial schema, which functions as a central and determining factor in the portrayal of the conflict over the young nation. Linda Williams states: "With *The Birth of a Nation* movies became capable of forging a myth of national origin grounded in race to spectacular effect. […] It stages a recognition of virtue through the visible suffering of the endangered white woman."[20] The contouring of the ideal of virtue plays a central role here because Griffith's depiction of sexual intimidation transforms the transgression of race in a significant way. The portentous sexual relationship is shifted from the axis of the white slaveholder as rapist of black women to the axis of the freed slave as sexual aggressor toward white virgins. Mary Ann Doane emphasizes the psychopathological component of this accentuation by interpreting it as compensation for a dwindling potential for power: "Rape undergoes a displacement – from the

20 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 100.

white man's prerogative as master/colonizer to the white woman's fears in relation to the black male. This confers upon race relations an extremely intense psychical charge which compensates a white psychical economy for the loss of the physical constraints of slavery or colonialism."[21]

The film's narrative logic makes this shifting and charging clearly visible. The opening depiction of a paradisiacal, ideal state establishes a conception of order that assigns each individual an unquestionable position within a strictly hierarchical structure. With the slave's liberation, this structure, which Clyde Taylor describes as a "racist European concept of the great chain of being,"[22] spins out of control, so that supposedly unanimous conceptions of identity are called into question. Ed Guerrero points to the economic background of the now unstable social structure and interprets the new white protector role as a compensatory answer to a weakened Southern ideal:

> "Adding a psychological dimension to the issue, the insecurity and economic turmoil rampant throughout the postbellum South had undermined the white southern male's role as provider for his family; thus he sought to inflate his depreciated sense of manhood by taking up the honorific task of protecting White Womanhood against the newly constructed specter of the 'brute Negro.'"[23]

In their respective readings of the film, both Mary Ann Doane and Ed Guerrero take as their starting point a deep-seated upset of traditional concepts of masculinity. In The Birth of a Nation, the film-specific manifestation of this crisis appears in a dramaturgically meticulous and elaborate narrative logic that the film uses to explain its own racism as a defensive stance. Central to this is the use of melodramatic genre conventions in the form of a white, female sacrifice, which acts as the initial impetus for the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.

This causal relation is emphasized by an intertitle during one of the first Klan rallies: "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." Conspicuous here is the reference to blood that runs like a red trail runs through the

21 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 222.

22 Clyde Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 29.

23 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 12.

entire flag. Remarkably, it is not the blood of heroic warriors but the sacrificial blood of a virgin that had to be shed to escape defloration. This shift via the renewed appropriation of blood imagery becomes even clearer in a further intertitle in the sequence: "Here I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland's hills," declares Flora's brother, the Klan leader, "I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of time!" The reference to blood is paramount, since herein lie the origins of a taxonomy that forms the basis for defining the black-white polarity. Mary Ann Doane explains: "The legal criterion for racial identity in the United States has historically been linked to blood rather than skin. The polarization of white and black ensures that there are no gradations in racial identity – one drop of 'black blood' effectively makes one black."[24] This enables an ideological fixation with serious consequences: the threat of defloration becomes the fear of contamination. This shift results in the following racist logic: Flora's blood is "sweet" because it is pure, and the Klan's founding is justified because it is prepared to combat any attack on white virginity.

The narrative justification of the Klan as a defensive militia is highlighted by several sequences that condense and expand on the theme of a threatening transgression of race. Silas Lynch's harassment of Elsie Stoneman, whose sexual assault is euphemistically termed a "proposal of marriage", is crucial to this justification. In this scene, Griffith noticeably digresses from Dixon's original: "Griffith's other scene of sexual attack in the Elsie/Lynch episode is without parallel in Dixon, or in the history of film, for its depiction of black lust. Indeed, Dixon's novel has no scene depicting Lynch's sexual assault – Lynch does not even ask for Elsie's hand."[25] This deviation is accompanied by another deviation: Silas Lynch's sexual attack is presented in the film as premeditated. It is striking that Griffith demonstrates Lynch's growing political power in the preceding scene, thus establishing a causal link to the sexual subject matter. One of the first official acts of the newly elected South Carolina legislature, where Lynch has now become lieutenant governor, is the passing of a law that legalizes mixed-race marriage. It is important to know that Griffith's depiction of the Reconstruction-era legislature is without any historical basis. His staging of political debates is not an exact, documentary rendition but one of racist defamation. In fact, his cinematic portrayals of legislation are not based on historical sources but on caricatures: "The film's

24 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 229.

25 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 123.

notorious depiction of black dominance and corruption in the South Carolina State House of Representatives had been based not on governments records or still photography from the period but on a series of political cartoons that caricatured black political participation as inherently absurd."[26]

Lynch's sexual assault on a white woman appears to be an egregious escalation of the conflict that had previously been presented. Again, the white virgin is presented as the pivotal point within a context that defines the freed slave as a political, economic, and, above all, sexual threat. However, Griffith escalates the scenario in order to intensify the film's tension. This has to do with the fact that Silas Lynch, unlike the animal-like Gus, is not dark black but brown. As an ambivalent figure, as an uncanny personification of transgression, the mulatto calls the schema of binary opposition of black and white into question, since by embodying the coexistence and fusion of – in themselves incompatible – parts, he denies the ordering hierarchy and, therefore, the film's inherent ideology. Furthermore, the hybridity visualized by the half-breed's appearance represents the breaking of the taboo of sexual contact between the races. The mulatto's body is unsettling and upsetting in that it exhibits an open sexuality. It represents not the possibility but the result of the crossing of racial boundaries.

Lynch's assault on Elsie is tied to the chase sequence with Flora and Gus in order to make the motif of sexual harassment more dynamic. Of note in Lynch's assault is his closing in on Elsie, which conspicuously emphasizes his body, a depiction that is in stark contrast to the first scene, in which Flora and Gus do not once touch each other. Like Gus, Lynch is first presented as a voyeur who appears to be sizing up his victim with lustful eyes. Unlike before, perpetrator and victim are now located in an enclosed space that limits their range of motion. As soon as Lynch is alone with Elsie, his attempts to get closer to her become more explicit and threatening. Elsie's desperate attempt to flee is immediately thwarted by the door's being locked. In the subsequent shots, a claustrophobia develops that is primarily due to the narrowness of the interior space and that emphasizes the victim's helplessness in a visually effective way.

In the elaborate configuration of the mise-en-scène, one can already see a clear escalation of the situation surrounding the assault. Griffith achieves a

26 Robert Jackson, "The Celluloid War before The Birth: Race and History in Early American Film," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, eds. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 42.

further intensification of distress through the accumulation of sexual gesticulations that serve as the main elements of both the aggression and the threat. After the first chase through a narrow room, Lynch presses Elsie's white lace dress to his lips, whereupon she fights back while crying. The sexual connotation becomes even more salient in a shot laced with innuendo, in which Lynch sticks his hips out and rubs his thighs. The fact that Elsie knows what these gestures mean can be seen in a counter-cut that shows her arms raised toward the sky and thus illustrates her feelings of panic. In addition, an iris shot accents Elsie's terrified face and her eyes wide open in fear. Lynch reacts with a sneering grin and chases Elsie into the middle of the room. In addition, his increasing brutality is accentuated by the fact that he wildly shakes one fist and beats his chest with the other. After crying out in fear, Elsie faints, whereby Lynch picks her up with a triumphant smile and then presses her tightly to his body.

In a cross-cut, this scene of sexual intimidation and gleeful sadism is conflated with the Ku Klux Klan's arming itself. In doing this, the Ku Klux Klan's function as a heroic savior is already anticipated because the film's cinematic arrangement suggests that assaults on white women were the only thing motivating its actions. By associating shots in such a way, the metrics and rhythms of the filmic staging are further perfected:

> "The editing becomes almost invisible because it seems to be so casual and logical. [...] In this way, Griffith achieves an interplay of formal means with the dramaturgical structure and the ideological fixations that rest on the aforementioned simplistic juxtapositions. Form, content, and meaning form an organically ordered whole."[27]

The montage sequence that culminates in the finale, which presents the Ku Klux Klan as the superior savior and protector of the white race, has been repeatedly praised on account of its formal-aesthetic brilliance and its inner dynamics of motion. However, in judging Griffith's artistic achievements, we must not lose sight of the fact that the film's formal strategies are only effective in relation to its ideological intent. Both levels do not function independent of one another but in a context of relative effect. The new feeling of solidarity and unity, which is portrayed as the young nation's fundamental constant, is primarily constituted by the shared defense against the threatening Other, as

27 Engell, *Sinn und Industrie*, 82-83.

an intertitle underlines: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright."

This stance, which resists each form of racial transgression in order to preserve the white race's supposed purity, manifests itself in an increasing predominance of white signifiers on the visual level. This staging strategy becomes obvious in the scene in which the Ku Klux Klan frees Elsie, the famous "last-minute rescue." As the embodiment of the last-minute rescue, eight Klansmen in white robes immediately enter the room and push Silas Lynch to the left side of the frame until he is almost no longer visible. Even Elsie's father, who is dressed in a black suit, has a marginal position at the right edge of the frame, while Elsie, whose white dress corresponds in color and light-staging with the Klansmen's white robes, is moved into the center of the picture.

Figure 3: Elsie's Rescue

The Klan's subsequent ride through the streets of Piedmont implies a type of visual "purification," a "white-washing" that unmistakably emphasizes the claim of the white race's superiority. Not one of the black characters is present in the shot; instead, the representation of a purely white image evokes the cathartic purification of the imperiled nation.

Griffith's formal strategy of gradually replacing black characters with white characters proves itself to be an effective ideological tool. While the

Figure 4: The Parade of the Ku Klux Klan

black perpetrator's brutal punishment is only implied but not shown in full consequence, the visual erasure of blacks implies a form of discipline that corresponds to the Ku Klux Klan's form of lynch-mob justice. Linda Williams points out:

> "I think that the much more insidious suppression accomplished by the film is not a missing scene of castration[28] but the systematic and much more 'natural'-seeming disappearance of blacks over the course of the film. Griffith's film achieves its power to the extent that it does not appear to be an exhortation to race hatred, but a natural process of heroic rescue that, in the process, just 'happens' to wash the screen 'clean.'"[29]

Griffith's formal-aesthetic staging is designed to establish the unity of the nation by shifting conquest from the territorial to the racial plane. The defining criterion of national unity, therefore, is not the defense of a territory but the subjugation, indeed the erasure, of an ethnic group. This accentuation has

28 Williams is alluding to the report of the film critic Seymour Stern, who thought that he remembered a castration scene as Gus's punishment after a showing of the film in 1933. See Seymour Stern, "Griffith I – '*The Birth of a Nation*,'" *Film Culture* 36 (1965): 114-132.

29 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 128.

remained long unconsidered in interpretations of the film that largely concentrate on the evaluation of formal achievements. Clyde Taylor states:

> "If […] the central theme of the work is the unification of national sentiment around the theme of miscegenation as a threat to 'civilization', then the neglect of this theme in the aesthetic dialogue surrounding the film amounts to a curious evasion of the question of meaning. This indifference to meaning explains an extraordinary lapse in the worshipful exegesis of the film's cinematic innovations. It goes unnoticed that virtually all of the films formal achievements – its editing, close-ups, iris shots, manipulation of crowds, camera movements, scenic set-ups, literary titles etc. – are deployed in the cause of aestheticizing and sentimentalizing the principal characters as White people."[30]

One must add that the act of equating humanity with a racial characteristic, that is, whiteness, comes to a head in Griffith. By using melodramatic formulas, the white woman's body becomes the focal point of the white ideal. The white woman appears whiter than white: she is not only virtuous and radiantly beautiful but also immaculately pure. Her perfection is based on her being untouched, on her virginity that is brought to the fore by the color white. A film stylistic example of this type of perception is the photograph of Elsie Stoneman, which visually introduces the character. The viewer's first impression of her is mediated by a static image that acts as an erotic signifier. The photograph first appears during the Stoneman brothers' visit in Piedmont, where it is shown during a walk through the cotton fields and instantly beguiles Ben Cameron. Immediately after seeing the picture, Cameron "finds the ideal of his dreams", as the intertitle has it. The photograph is presented several times in close-up, with a circular aperture visually accentuating the image and clearly directing the viewer's gaze to Elsie Stoneman's face.

The gentle face circled with light-colored curly hair and a wistful look is thus consistent with conventional attributes of beauty, which are further emphasized by the photograph's soft focus. Throughout the entire film, the image circulates not only as an indicator of desire but also as the symbol of a racially determined ideal of beauty, as a sign of moral and racial purity, and as a metaphor for national unity. Mary Ann Doane notes: "The fact that the white woman is represented by a photographic portrait which is displaced, circulates, and gains value within a certain political economy of desire, gives to

30 Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema", 22.

Figure 5: The White Ideal

that portrait a symbolic status. […] In *Birth of a Nation*, it is white womanhood which becomes the stake of representational politics."[31]

In Griffith's Birth of a Nation, one can observe and track the process of a politics of differentiation and defamation. The claim to make differences visible and identifiable is apparent in the compositional linkage of melodramatic genre conventions to a pseudo-historical, quasi-authenticating representational style – whereby both ultimately serve the formation of a rigid good/bad dichotomy. At the same time, a trace of resistance arises in the visual mode of representation of racial identities, which permeates the propagated binary schema and indicates the instability and ambivalence of identity construction. This internal conflict is externalized in the figure of the mulatto. As the disruptive factor in the polarization, he attains a special meaning that Griffith extensively stages as a sexually connoted threat. The ambiguity of racial identity finds its most concise expression in the visual representation of biracial characters. Here is where a crisis of the black/white dualism becomes apparent, forming an image that reflects the instability of taxonomy.

The solution to this identity conflict consists of a type of disciplinary action that Griffith develops both narratively and formally. The overcoming of

31 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 230-231.

a threat that arises from linking mechanisms of representation and identity takes place at the visual level and consists of a successive emptying of the picture of racial deviations. This process is plainly expressed in the film's final resolution, which transforms the orgy of brutality and terror into a peaceful image of white superiority.

In this regard, the formation and perfection of film-aesthetic techniques is inextricably bound to the forms of visual identity politics and the ideological intentions associated with this politics. Daniel Bernardi notes:

> "Griffith is a pioneer of 'narrative integration' (…) not only because he helped develop parallel editing and other stylistic techniques in support of storytelling, but also because he perpetuated a discourse supported by racist practices – which is to say that Griffith's articulations of style and of race are involved in the same cinematic and discursive processes; pragmatically, they co-constitute the filmmaker's narrative system."[32]

With The Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith not only established a stable framework for forms of filmic staging but also laid the foundation for the construction of film stylistic formulae for discrimination. On the one hand, Griffith's narrative system emanates from a fundamentally racist perspective; on the other hand, his aesthetic achievements produce that perspective itself in a condensed pictorial form. It is this simultaneity that grants the film its special place in history.

32 Daniel Bernardi, "The Voice of Whiteness: D. W. Griffiths Biograph Films (1908-1913)," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 104.