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Trouble on Screen

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TEXTE

1 Few directors have dared to delve into the dark waters of the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization with a political aim which the former Grand Wizard David Duke made public by seeking election to the U.S. Senate in 2016 as a Republican candidate in Louisiana. While D.W Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was instrumental in promoting the supremacist ideology of the KKK, being used as a propaganda tool by the recruiters of the KKK ('the Keagles') in the 1920s, few films attempt to challenge the politics of the KKK. The threat posed by the 'Invisible Empire' is often symbolized by cross or church burnings in films that resist its power through portraying its knights as individuals whose extremist racist rhetoric is confined to fiction and to the past. *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988) retraces the FBI's fight against the KKK in the context of the civil rights movement, making the African Americans of the South the passive victims of racist violence.

2 *The Burning Cross* (Walter Colmes, 1947), *Betrayed* (Costa-Gavras, 1988), and *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018) dramatize the activities of the hooded racist sect by drawing attention to its individual members. They adopt different narrative and representational strategies in an effort to show the inner workings of the organization and how its members negotiate their identity as white nationalists. The films show that the KKK relies on visual (performances) and aural tropes (slurs) to construct its supremacist discourse and gather its

ranks. Each of them provoked trouble on the level of reception – *The Burning Cross* was even censored in several states –, suggesting that they strike a touchy chord among American audiences (whereas *Mississippi Burning* was hailed for being based on 'real facts'). This presentation aims to question the sense of discomfort produced by these films investigating into the KKK.

3 Filming the Klan has always been a source of controversy since David D.W. Griffith claimed "historical veracity" in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which he presented as a "faithful representation of the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras"[1]. Griffith celebrated the courage of Klan members who gathered in vigilante groups to bring justice and order when politics turned into chaos during Reconstruction, following the ideologically biased version written by the historians of the Dunning school[2]. Tom Rice writes at length about the relationship between the film and the Klan, which exploited the imagery provided by Griffith to shape a culture of whiteness: "The Klan imagined the film, and the discourses around it, as a means of shaping public behavior, of defining and creating Klansmen and, by extension, American citizens".[3] A lot has been written on the ideological impact of a film which became instrumental in selling KKK membership; Rice adds: "The group utilized *The Birth of a Nation* throughout the decade, whether arranging its own screenings, making very public appearances at cinemas showing the film, or using the discussions surrounding the film to define and promote itself within American society"[4]. The film permitted contemporary white viewers to reconnect with a historical record that Klansmen pride themselves in, providing "a shared, yet wholly personal experience of whiteness, one that would be immediately and intimately familiar and recognizable to its intended audience [...providing] a collective memory, rooted not in nationality or region but in race"[5].

4 Michael T. Martin contends that *The Birth of a Nation* had a traumatizing impact on white audiences by conjuring a conspiracy to build a black empire that aimed at legitimizing the use of terror strategies by the Ku Klux Klan against black people[6]. The film nonetheless redeemed the trauma by offering the shared experience of a victorious Klan, transcending the sense of defeat in the confederate states after the Civil War into a new collective sentiment of solidarity. The success of the film cannot only be measured by its enduring box

office profits[7] but also by the audience's behavior. Melvyn Stokes quotes from different critics that remarked the unusual emotional engagement of viewers who found themselves "caught up in the enthusiasm of 'an audience that cheered and wept and sung'"[8]. Klan sequences not only triggered frenzied applauses, but the film prompted the revival of the organization in the early 1920s. This point demonstrates, if need be, that audiences were enthralled with the spectacle of white men parading in white robes whom they felt ideologically complicit with. The filmed rituals articulated a unique perspective into a group whose members pledge secrecy. The film had a polarizing effect; Michael T. Martin argues that "Griffith's calculated schematic was to simplify race relations for white audience to a black/white binary."[9] While he underlines the traumatic impact of the film as regards white viewers, one may also posit that the multiple incidents of violence happening around the screenings, some of them organized in the privacy of one's home to galvanize Klan supporters, was a traumatic experience for black viewers. Tom Rice notes that: "In one noted example in Lafayette, Indiana, Henry Brock fired three bullets into the body of Edward Mason, a fifteen-year-old African American high school student, 'after witnessing *The Birth of the Nation*'"[10].

5 *The Birth of a Nation* has left such a traumatic mark on American cinema and viewership that every new film dealing with the Klan triggers controversies. The malaise elicited by filmic representations of the Klan is not only rooted in the organization's deadly historical record, but it is also related to the possible danger of reactivating the ideological power of Griffith's film. The Ku Klux Klan's self-produced imagery draws on *The Birth of a Nation*, especially the white robes that serve to differentiate it from other fraternal groups[11]. While African American directors have consistently challenged and countered the film's racist biases by reinventing black models and figures for the cinema, portraying the Klan on screen remains fraught with trouble. Few directors have dared to delve into the dark waters of the Ku Klux Klan – and the films that try to depict the organization from the inside have met with mixed reactions.

6 *The Burning Cross* (Walter Colmes, 1947), *Betrayed* (Costa-Gavras, 1988), and *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018) are three films that dramatize the activities of the hooded racist sect to question the

ideological underpinning of individual beliefs and actions. They adopt different narrative and representational strategies in an effort to show the inner workings of the organization and how its members negotiate their identity as white nationalists. Using both contextual and textual analysis, this chapter examines three films that dramatize the Ku Klux Klan's visual performances and populist discourses in an attempt to debunk its mythology. While the films are clearly critical of the KKK and conceived as a delayed cinematic response to *The Birth of a Nation*, each has provoked trouble on the level of reception, albeit for different reasons that will be investigated here. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the sense of discomfort produced by these films about the KKK is determined by the specificity of the narrative and filmic devices but also testifies to an enduring troubled political climate.

Politics on The Burning Cross

7 Although *The Burning Cross* was conceived as a response to *The Birth of a Nation*, the film was banned in several states (including Virginia and Ohio) by censorship boards that feared its inflammatory potential. The film shows how returning WW2 veteran Johnny Larrimer is manipulated by white nationalists into pledging obedience to the secret principles of the Ku Klux Klan. The leader of the local chapter Howard Gibbons's political speeches about "Americans Only" strikes a chord with the young man who has sacrificed six years of his life to fight for his country and comes home to a city where no job is waiting. The film portrays social progress among minorities: Italian American Tony Areni has acquired the local gas station and is about to marry Larrimer's former sweetheart Doris Greene; black farmer Charlie West's economic achievements are symbolized by his driving his own car. *The Burning Cross* highlights the capitalist and class underpinnings of the supremacist discourse: a seller complains about the competition with a grower whose products are cheaper, whereas Johnny feels more and more victimized as a jobless veteran. His identity as a white male American is compromised by his status as an unemployed man whose war commitment is hardly a source of pride ("I never gave any blood. I never got even a scratch."). He finds himself wandering around the city on foot and on his own whereas his former friends have built themselves a family life; Johnny's voice-over

adds a noir touch at the beginning of the film, pointing out his growing frustration with his own failure.

8 Dramatic music starts when Johnny signs his application form to the KKK, indicating that he thereby launches a narrative beyond his own agency. The dissolve between Larrimer's KKK application and a newspaper headline ("Vandals loot and wreck Undstrom's flower shop") signifies the implication of the KKK into the assault – and the possible involvement of Larrimer himself in the deed. Gibbons's nativist rhetoric points out a guilty party for the American working men's plight: "Don't let your birthright taken from you by foreigners who have contributed only their presence to our glorious country." Words lead to actions in the film which shows more and more graphic violence – including a sequence where a man is tarred and feathered as a warning to leave town within 24 hours and another one where Tony is shot in the back. By the time the Klan burns Charlie West's farm to the ground and his family to death, Larrimer wishes to regain his freedom but he has become a prisoner of his oath to the Ku Klux Klan. The film portrays how an ordinary man converts to the Klan and finds himself trapped by the intolerant policy of an organization that accepts "no resignation."

9 Low-key lighting adds to the atmosphere of secrecy around the Ku Klux Klan night gatherings. When Larrimer falls for the nativist rhetoric of the 100% American speeches delivered by Gibbons, who helps him get a job in a machine shop where some workers ("rats" in the mouth of Gibbons) hold picket lines to protest low wages, Larrimer's father speaks up in the name of American ideals: "Since when is it sense to favor one group of Americans at the expense of another?" Walter Colmes questions the ideological tenets of the KKK through following the psychological journey of Johnny Larrimer into an organization that promises to restore the 'honor' of its knights; however, the film underlines the causal relationship between the fraternal values foregrounded by Klan members and the atrocities they lead to. Larrimer finds himself entangled in situations that he disapproves of, realizing too late that he was manipulated into believing that his whiteness was deserving of privileges.

10 While *The Birth of a Nation* avoided showing how a black man was lynched by a vigilante crowd that aimed to serve its own justice,

Walter Colmes depicts the inner workings of the Ku Klux Klan and breaks the veil of secrecy around its secret rituals. Darkness enshrouds the initiation ceremony of five individuals into the KKK, expressively conveying the threats harbored by the Klan's code of blind obedience. The scene takes place at night at the foot of a fiery cross – "the emblem of that sincere unselfish devotedness of all Klansmen for the sacred principles we have espoused," explains one of the Klansmen. The screen is so dark that the standing Klansmen appear like ghostly figures in the background, blindly following the guiding male voice of the Grand Wizard directing the ceremony from the foot of the cross. His backlit figure enhances his authority and the dark power the Klan enshrouds itself in. Five white men are introduced and identified as "strangers" who have expressed the desire to be initiated into the Klan. Standing in line face to the camera, they are about to be interrogated by the Grand Wizard but are expected to answer in the affirmative to every question. The ceremony aims to make sure that the men give up all personal volition to fit in the group and abide by the Klan's principles. The mise-en-scene conveys the strict order within the Invisible Empire, a group that aims to conquer by acting in the shadows. The Klan's costume makes individual features disappear behind a common goal – maintaining white power by all means available, including the terror techniques symbolized by their outfits and the burning cross[12]. The men behind the masks answer in unison that all betrayal will be punished, for a traitor "would be immediately banished and disgraced from the invisible Empire without fear or favor and direful things would befall him." Speaking like a choir from behind the future members, the Klansmen embody a threat for each other and a tool of internal surveillance symbolized by their eyes. The camera pans over the faces of the men who are about to take the oath of allegiance and captures the flames of the fiery cross reflecting on their skin, intensifying the solemnity of the moment:

> You will place your left hand over your heart, raise your right hand to Heavens, You will say 'I' pronounce your full name and repeat after me: 'I […] in the presence of God and Man, most solemnly pledge, promise and swear, that I will faithfully obey the constitution and laws of the Ku Klux Klan and will render at all time loyal respect and steadfast support for the edicts, rulings and instructions of the

> Imperial Wizard thereof. I swear that I will promptly pay all demands made upon me to defray expenses of my Klansmanship at such time as they are presented. I most sacredly vow and positively swear that I will never reveal any secret or secret information of the KKK all to which I have sworn by this oath I will seal with my blood. So help me God.

11 The presence of the robed and hooded ghostly Klansmen in the background creates an eerie atmosphere, participating in the construction of the symbolical power of the Klan. The men gain power from hiding their individuality behind costumes that erase their physical traits, making it impossible to distinguish any of them although their speaking enhances their masculine voice; the robe also "appears as a leveling and equalizing instrument" that does away with "social, economic, or political distinctions" and a symbol of the "righteousness" Klansmen strive for[13]. The panning movement of the camera underlines the number of Klansmen, showing that their gathering together reinforces their collective power. The ceremony also borrows from religious rituals as the knights seal their bonding with blood and pray God while the Grand Wizard performs the role of a preacher. The manipulation of a Christian rhetoric allows the Klan to advocate its legitimacy[14]. Entering the order of the Klan allows the men to give sense to an otherwise purposeless life – aren't they endowed with knighthood? The end of the ceremony shows men who may have recovered a sense of self-confidence, for the Klan provides them with a brotherly family that recalls the all-male bonding of the Army; however, the Grand Wizard mentions how traitors are treated when the camera stops on Larrimer's face in a close-up that heralds his future failure to comply with all of the Klan's demands.

12 The images of the burning cross superimpose over newspaper front pages to emphasize the causal link between the Klan's meeting and subsequent factual events, simultaneously shaping the narrative of violence devised and executed by Klan members. The headlines epitomize both the ideological tenets that guide their interventions and the terror tactics they adopt: racist attacks ("Negroes beaten as they seek to register for vote"), anti-Catholic vandalism ("Tombstones toppled in St. Francis Cemetery"), hate crimes ("Night riders feared responsible for disappearance"), anti-Semitic looting ("Synagogue desecrated"). The film further underlines the split between the horror

of those actions perpetrated under the cover of night and the guise of respectability displayed by a political leader, Howard Gibbons, promising "100% Americanism" on the radio. The film interestingly questions the ideological premises of the Klan, portrayed as a criminal organization that abuses its members to serve the end of the "happy few" – some white men whose supremacist beliefs are tied to socio-economic privileges. It develops a political subtext through characterizing the leaders of the Klan as wealthy men who manipulate the working man into believing that their economic plight is caused by immigrant labor.

13 Although *The Burning Cross* was conceived with an anti-Klan purpose, financed by "individuals interested in tolerance" and supported by *Ebony* ("Movie audiences have been waiting thirty years for Hollywood to answer *The Birth of a Nation*... *The Burning Cross* wallops back at the KKK full measure and more."),[15] it gained the reluctant approval of the Production Code Administration[16] and was even banned locally. Joseph Breen, the head of the PCA, explicitly required that African Americans and ethnic Americans be portrayed positively when reviewing the script: "The Negroes throughout the production will at no time be shown as too subservient and [...] their language will be cleaned up so that English will be grammatical".[17] Although Breen also requested the violence of the film be toned down by avoiding graphic descriptions of the burning victim, some local censorship boards were still concerned about its possible impact on minority groups and demanded cuts for fear the film might stir some racial violence[18]. Virginia banned *The Burning Cross* on September 17, 1947, and the censorship board declared that the film "has to do with the KKK and we feel that such a subject is inflammatory and not conducive to keeping the best relations among various racial or religious groups"[19]. This statement dismisses the anti-Klan message of a film which was released at a time when the Klan was springing up across the South after it had almost vanished during the war[20]. The first cross burning since Pearl Harbor happened in Mississippi in October, 1945, and was a sign of the Klan's revival[21]. Historian Chester L. Quarles explains that the Klan was recruiting new members to contain the returning black soldiers' desire to challenge segregation and to resist the refugee (especially Jewish) immigrant wave[22]. While *The Burning Cross* responded to a context where the Klan developed

its underground activities, the film was met with resistance among local censors who alleged concern about the possible troubles its screening might entail. Dealing with the Klan's white supremacist traditions and past remains a contentious topic, which Franco-Greek director Costa-Gavras discovered himself when visiting rural communities in Nebraska prior to the making of *Betrayed* (1988). Attending the Fourth of July festivities in Crawford, he met with a local woman who told him a disturbing story about Charly, his wife and their two children, the only African Americans living in the area. The family suddenly went missing and everybody believed they had left for California until their corpses were found at the bottom of an abandoned mine a few years later. The woman intimated that she knew more information about the case but would never speak up [23]. Costa-Gavras stirs up this type of hidden and troubling memories in *Betrayed*, a film where fiction seems to trump reality.

Emotions *Betrayed*

14 Costa-Gavras's fiction films unavoidably question the abuses of power, which undermine democracies and strengthen totalitarian states. Striving for authenticity and historicity when making a film about far-right activities in US society, director Costa-Gavras and scriptwriter Joe Eszterhas consulted an array of documents (written reports, photographs and films) collected by undercover FBI agents who had infiltrated extremist groups [24]. The opening sequence of *Betrayed* speaks to their desire to dramatize a situation inspired by true events: the first minutes of the film follow Chicago radio talk show host (Kraus) whose provocative statements incite anti-Semitic sentiment and eventually cause him to be murdered by a supremacist group fighting against ZOG (the Zionist Occupation Government), which they believe has infiltrated the US government. Echoing the real-life murder of Jewish radio talk show host Alan Berg in 1984, which provided evidence of an existing terrorist network thriving in the underside of 1980s US society [25], the sequence ties in fiction and fact to raise political consciousness about the dangerous power accrued by far-right groups operating in secrecy. The murder provides a "body" for an investigation to be launched in the rural Midwest.

15 *Betrayed* interestingly has a woman play an FBI agent who is drawn into a supremacist group by the man she falls in love with. The premises of the story drew criticism as a "wildly melodramatic plot" exposing the director's "hysterical exaggeration" in *Chicago Tribune*[26]. *The New York Times* listed plot twists that undercut the film's credibility and disapproved of its "overheated approach to its subject"[27]. Paul Mavis, for his part, argued that *Betrayed* took "a politically charged notion, ripe with possibilities, and reduce[d] it to the level of 'does she really love him or not, is he really evil or not'"[28]. In his autobiography entitled *Va où il est impossible d'aller*, Costa-Gavras devotes a few pages to the reception of *Betrayed* on its release in California and recalls that some viewers left the theater before the film was over. His observation that one of them did so when the protagonist Gary Simmons (Tom Berenger), a farmer who lives in the Midwest with his two young children and his mother, appears to be an active member of a secret right-wing terrorist organization resembling the Klan, suggests that reactions to the film were not just triggered by a convoluted plot[29]. *Betrayed* complexifies the issue it addresses by portraying characters who, while they are consumed by hatred, are humanized by their family bonds.

16 The political discourse of *Betrayed* impinges on the family plot which the film unfolds, fitting the form of popular and commercial cinema that Costa-Gavras aimed for, believing in the power of political fiction:

> It is imperative that the political film be viewed since its purpose is, if not to transform reality, then to influence the viewer by apprising him. One must utilize the traditional type of production – with dramatic construction and use of actors – so that people may feel involved, and so that the film may have some useful purpose. (Braucourt 1970: 40)

17 *Betrayed* foregrounds the viewer's involvement by exploiting a thriller structure: undercover agent Catherine Weaver/Kathy Phillips (Debra Winger) enters Gary Simmons's life as a seasonal combine driver and falls for the family man before she realizes that he inculcates his racism to his children when teaching them how to pray and participates in criminal activities to concretize his nativist belief that "We

have to return America to real Americans" – words spoken by Jack Carpenter, the candidate to the upcoming presidential election, on television [14:00]. While she is attracted by the sincerity of the man whose confidence she has gained, as proven by his prompt invitation to meet his family, she soon discovers a supremacist environment among Midwest farmers fighting to save their lands from the banks. *Betrayed* raises discomfort by placing racism at the heart of an ordinary loving family. Love and hatred inhabit Gary Simmons, a man whose sincere devotion to a nostalgic image of America (embodied by traditional gender roles) rivals his abhorrence of Jews and Blacks. "The white race is an endangered species", reads a sign at the entrance of the camp where he takes Kathy and his children. Klansmen stand in white robes and hooded uniforms around a burning cross whereas children are taught how to shoot a rifle at targets in the shape of black people. Hoping that Kathy will adhere to the same ideas, Gary invites her to join a night hunting party during which they kill a black man. The murder leaves no trace and therefore causes no one to worry about any possible consequences. Although Michael Carnes (John Heard) supervises the FBI operation, he will take no risk to jeopardize an investigation into the murder of a popular figure (Kraus) to retrieve the missing bodies of black men.

18 Adopting the viewpoint of Kathy, whom her superior constrains to pursue the investigation even after she witnesses the murder of a black man and shoots a guard during an armed robbery to prove herself worthy of the Klan, *Betrayed* explores the tension that arises from the trivialization of racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic jokes. As a female investigator playing the motherly role in the Simmons family, Kathy realizes that she is loved by the Simmons but manipulated by the FBI. In an interview where she discusses her role in the film, Debra Winger recalls a conversation with Costa-Gavras who explained to her that his goal was to make people "explore the racism within themselves"[30] which she did by impersonating a character who compromises her values when seduced by a supremacist man. While exposing the emotional link that ties farmers to their lands and draws them to extreme groups which claim to defend their interests, the director also points out the influence of the far-right networks on politics. Quarles observed that Klan's violence intensified into a "hate movement" in 1985, giving rise to a multitude of racial supremacist

and neo-Nazi new groups (the Order, the Aryan Nations, the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord, the White Patriot Party, etc.) aiming for political and social change through terrorist acts [31]. *Betrayed* speaks to this history of secretive groups that promote violence to bear on political processes: the discovery by Kathy of a long list of names indicating secret membership suggests the power accrued by these extremist groups operating in the shadows and looking for political influence by promoting some party candidates. Spike Lee picks up this storyline in *BlacKkKlansman*, another anti-Klan film which stirred renewed controversy.

Satirical BlacKkKlansman

19 *BlacKkKlansman* explores a different tone to articulate the director's anti-far-right activism, which raised conflicting responses among critics. Some of them celebrated the film as Lee's "best nondocumentary feature in more than a decade and one of his greatest" (*The New York Times*), "a hellraising masterpiece" and a "hot-damn triumph—one of the year's best films" (*Rolling Stone*), "a major comeback" (*Variety*). Yet the filmmaker's provocative political style ("the impassioned work of a cinema giant who has again found his voice and the power to make it heard", *Rolling Stone*; "this admirably, unruly filmmaker back at the height of his provocative powers", *The Guardian*) also drew a number of criticisms regarding form and content [32]. Most French critics, for example, recommended the film while expressing some uneasiness about the mixture of politics and entertainment that is nonetheless characteristic of Lee's filmmaking. For example, *Le Monde* explained that "We may find that Spike Lee is overdoing it. That some gags are a little long. That it may not have been necessary to accumulate so much hate speech in the mouths of racist whites. The filmmaker probably chose the caricature style to hammer home his point" [33]. *Libération* argued that "His latest film did not meet with unanimous approval at Cannes, mainly for a reason that one would tend to consider as good news: the author of *Do the Right Thing* (1989) has not lost any of the rage that goes hand in hand with a certain heaviness—that of militant leaflets and incisive rap slogans. In other words: the fact that Lee has not learned to be subtle over time also proves that he has not given up his fights in any way" [34]. *Télérama* was no less ambiguous with the following state-

ment: "Lee has regained his bite, his humor as a dirty kid militant for this anti-racist and anti-Donald Trump charge"[35]. The racial politics of Spike Lee obviously raised some discomfort among these reviewers who disapproved of the blend of politics and amusement in *BlacKkKlansman*, whereas American critics considered it was a somewhat inefficient means of critique: "Yet the point of *BlacKkKlansman* seems to be that laughing at the KKK, dismissing them as an irrelevant group of backward morons, is what got us Donald Trump" (*Vox*)[36]; "*BlacKkKlansman* is the rare American film that doesn't treat the KKK as a joke... The racism on display isn't exactly funny, not unless you find social discomfort humorous" (*Esquire*)[37].

20 Lee artfully combines politics and entertainment in a sarcastic piece, which elicits critical responses rather than emotional reactions, using black humor as a political strategy to level criticism at the buddy film as a popular genre in the so-called post-racial moment. The structural irony of the form creates humorous dialectics between Blacks and Whites that unravel different aspects of race. *BlacKkKlansman* is based on a vaudeville situation where a black undercover police officer (Ron Stallworth/John David Washington) passes for a white supremacist on the phone and has a Jewish colleague (Flip Zimerman/Adam Driver) replace him to attend KKK gatherings. The film, which is based on Ron Stallworth's autobiography as a black man in blue, evokes the investigation into the Klan as an individual and personal enterprise rather than an institutional commitment, a situation which Lee exploits in order to deconstruct the racial discourses of whiteness and blackness. The phone sequence showing Ron Stallworth pass for a white supremacist by using all the racist clichés to entice a Klan member, if not the Grand Wizard himself, into conversation proves unsettling (as the above-mentioned critics' responses suggest). That a Black man assumes the Nativist rhetoric ("I hate Niggers, I hate Jews, Spics and Micks, Dagos and Chinks. But my mouth to God's ears, I really hate those Nigger rats. And anyone else, really, that doesn't have pure White Aryan blood running through their veins" [29:30]) and manages to strike a bonding with a Klan member (Walter/Ryan Eggold) is dumbfounding. The whole scene may be disturbing for viewers who are torn between laughing at the incongruity of Stallworth's performance and the racist rhetoric that makes him pass for White. While the proxy response of his colleagues

helps downplay the importance self-conscious political correctness and disinhibit the viewers of *BlacKkKlansman*, laughter may well occasion a sense of shame in a situation where racism appears to be at the heart of joke. This is a visual and narrative strategy that only the cinematic art can achieve, for laughter comes from the discrepancy revealed by editing in the sequence: Stallworth may be impersonating a Klan applicant, but Walter is unaware of the prank and takes his racist rant as real ("You are just the kind of guy we are looking for" [30:10]). The sequence therefore edges on the danger of a hate speech which serves as an ideology for the "Organization", placing the spectator in a conflicting position by affording him amusement while raising awareness at the violence of a racist rhetoric that passes as the norm amid Klan sympathizers.

21 Most Klan figures of *BlacKkKlansman* are caricature characters, excessive impersonations of the redneck who draw power from boasting of their hateful and paranoid ideology. Felix (Jasper Pääkkönen)'s basement contains a collection of artifacts testifying to his commitment to white supremacy, including confederate flag curtains, portraits of confederate soldiers, and a Remington Model 1900—which he calls a "Jew killer" in a display of anti-Semitic obsession [51:28]. The film underlines this ideological aspect of the Ku Klux Klan's crusade by showing Felix appropriate the negationist arguments of David Duke when asking "where is the proof" of the Holocaust really taking place. Felix is not joking at that moment; his tone is serious and so is his threat against Flip Zimmerman whom he (rightly) suspects of being a Jew. While the scene may sound like an exaggeration because Felix appears too menacing to be taken seriously when pointing a gun toward Zimmerman's penis which he wants to see, his statements echo the real David Duke's views on Jewishness and the Holocaust [38].

22 *BlacKkKlansman* portrays the performance of the Klansmen during Ron Stallworth/Flip Zimmerman's induction ceremony, which takes place on the occasion of the Grand Wizard's visit to Colorado Springs. Being assigned to the protection of David Duke (Topher Grace), a dramatic twist that was yet no addition to the original story, [39] Ron Stallworth represents a vicarious spectator through whose gaze the audience experiences the Klan's activities. Watching his observing stance has a distancing effect that allows for a critical eye, for his

spying from a window on the Klansmen's secret rites also increases tension. Before the initiation ceremony starts, the Klansmen stand in line wearing their white robes and masks on their faces to listen to David Duke as he refers to Dr. William Shockley, a member of their society and a "Nobel Prize recipient," as a great scientist in the eugenics movement whose research has proven that "each of us here has flowing through our veins the genes of a superior race" [1:35:00]. Chiaroscuro undermines the facts which Duke claims as "truths", literally leading his followers to the dark side of science rather than enlightenment. The ceremony is filmed like a religious service with David Duke standing in front of an assembly of men ("my brothers in Christ"), with candles burning at his sides and blood drop crosses in the background as he praises "God" for giving them "true white men," "men who have honor," "men who will not lie," "real men, courageous men who flinch not at duty" [1:37:15]. His address ties in religious references to the exceptional character of those white men in a ceremony that depicts the performative dimension of whiteness. A low-angle shot underlines the authority and the superiority of the Grand Wizard, facing a line of men whose outfit erases all signs of humanity —which suggests that ideology and conformity prevail over individuality and creativity in the organization.

23 The filmed ceremony dramatizes the inner workings of the Organization and how its members negotiate their identity as white nationalists. It emphasizes its religious rituals as the Grand Wizard performs the role of a preacher blessing the newly accepted knights with holy water. The camera pans the men's faces and creates a visible link between the white-clad men, now members of a brotherly family that recalls the all-male complicity in the Army. *BlacKkKlansman* describes men who gain power from hiding their individuality behind the robe that "appears as a leveling and equalizing instrument" that does away with "social, economic, or political distinctions" and a symbol of the "righteousness" Klansmen strive for[40]. While the costumes erase their physical traits, making it impossible to distinguish any of them when they wear their hoods, their speaking enhances their masculine voice (women being excluded from membership). The end of the ceremony shows men who rejoice of the celebration with boosted self-confidence, welcoming the wives for a screening of *The Birth of a Nation*. The use of cross-editing during

the sequence which cuts from the Klan ceremony to a Black Power gathering is an obvious reappropriation of Griffith's stylistic 'invention' for Spike Lee's own political agenda. The adaptation of Ron Stallworth's autobiography is set in the 1970s, but the relevance of its political message makes it an ironic comment on the current political rhetoric.

24 The ending sequence of *BlacKkKlansman* is completely at odds with the tone of the rest of the film, sacrificing the post-racial fantasy of the plot to the brutal reality of Charlottesville, Virginia, where a thousand white nationalists and neo-Nazis organized a march to protest the removal of a statue of Civil War General Robert E. Lee from the University of Virginia campus. The final sequence of the film is a brutal flashback to reality: a cut takes the viewers amid the white nationalists parading on August 11, 2017, at night, on the university campus. All of them are chanting "Jews will not replace us!" and "White Lives Matter" – echoing the words of (not so fictional) David Duke. The sequence later cuts to some VICE News Tonight footage [41], showing a car blindly heading into the crowd of Black Lives Matter supporters, leaving one dead (Heather Meyer). The two-minute-long sequence is all the more upsetting as a series of close-ups from the middle of the crowd emphasize how quickly the protests turned into a fight. *BlacKkKlansman* immerses the viewer in a culture of whiteness rooted in the distorted memories of the Civil War (as indicated by the opening extract from *Gone With the Wind* and the embedded excerpts from *The Birth of a Nation*), entertained by the Klan's mythology, that produces real trouble as shown in the final sequence. The interweaving of fact and fiction enhances the idea that white supremacy is a fictional construction with real consequences.

Conclusion

25 The three films under study portray the Ku Klux Klan through different lenses. While *The Burning Cross* was conceived as a political tool in response to *The Birth of a Nation* in the post-war context when returning veterans found it hard to adjust to civilian life, *Betrayed* shows the nostalgic impulse that undergirds the myth of a "white America" which serves political opportunism. In the age of Trump where David Duke's ideas find echoes in the US pres-

ident's speeches, *BlacKkKlansman* exploits a sarcastic tone that highlights race as a visual and verbal construct. Because the films developed distinct anti-KKK rhetorical and narrative strategies, they triggered different types of reactions from empathy to critical distance as illustrated by a variety of reviews. The films obviously toe a fine line between politics and entertainment by using fiction to challenge the nativist rhetoric of the Klan. The unease triggered by each film speaks to the troubled waters of history which they represent and the difficulty to challenge the deep-rooted sentiments that Anglo-racialism continues to feed. The flawed nativist rhetoric is also symptomatic of some trouble with white male identity, which each film discusses through the characterization of their white protagonists. From the jobless white working-class men in *The Burning Cross* to the dispossessed farmers in *Betrayed* and the illiterate white men of *BlacKkKlansman*, the films depict white men who embody the socioeconomic frustrations of the unachievable American Dream. Chester L. Quarles has emphasized the continued success of the Klan, which he links to "the psychological and social problems of 'status insecurity' and 'status disorientation'"[42] among white Americans. The Klan's mystique of masculinity seems to offer some degree of compensatory self-confidence in the face of socioeconomic crisis at all times.

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NOTES

1 Melvyn Stokes, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, 171.

2 John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning framed Reconstruction as a time of "chaos and corruption, when ignorant newly-freed men, supported by the bayonets of the federal government, had been allowed to rule over the South." Their biased perspective provided a distorted lense through which to remember the political gains of African Americans during Reconstruction. Claire Parfait, "Reconstruction Reconsidered: A Historiography of Reconstruction, From the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s", *Études anglaises*, vol. vol. 62, no. 4, 2009, 440.

3 Tom Rice, White Robes, *Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008, xv.

4 *Ibidem*, 2.

5 Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, "The Politics of CineMemory: Signifying Slavery in the History Film", in Robert A. Rosenstone and Costantin Parvulescu (eds.), *A Companion to the Historical Film*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 447.

6 Michael T. Martin (ed.), "Introduction", *The Birth of a Nation The Cinematic Past in the Present*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2019, 7.

7 "Within five years after its release in 1915 it would earn $15 million, thirty years later had grossed some $48 million, and it went on earning. Its popular success, despite a banal and vicious message, was an ominous sign of the hypnotic power of the technology of the new art to overwhelm its content." Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination*, New York, Vintage Books, 1993, 743.

8 Melvyn Stokes, *op. cit.*, 126.

9 Michael T. Martin (ed.), "Introduction", The Birth of a Nation The Cinematic Past in the Present, *op. cit.*, 10.

10 Tom Rice, *op. cit.*, 21.

11 *Idem*, 18.

12 Other symbols of the Klan included the Bible, flag, sword, water, robe and the mask. Juan O. Sánchez, Religion and the Ku Klux Klan, Biblical Appropriation in the Their Literature and Songs, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016, 19.

13 Juano O. Sánchez, *op. cit.*, 20.

14 *Ibidem*, 127-147.

15 Quoted in Melissa Ooten, *Race, Gender, and Film Censorhip in Virginia* 1922-1965, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2014, 105.

16 Ellen C. Scott contends that "the PCA's passage of the film is surprising and probably explained by the fact that the PCA anticipated minimal distribution for this low-budget film, produced and financed by white leftists (Scott 2015: 59).

17 Joseph Breen, letter to Walter Colmes, May 12, 1947. The Burning Cross. PCA file. Margaret Herrick Library, AMPAS, Beverly Hills, CA.

18 In Ohio, the censorship board issued this statement: "To the people who are not near the minority problem, this film will undoubtedly produce a high emotional reaction. On the other hand, members of minority groups wear an entirely different color of glasses and must see the picture in terms of their historical backgrounds, past experiences and present problems. Many minority groups are undoubtedly feeling the pressure of invisible control. Some members of such groups may so ally themselves with the 'underdog' that they might find in the picture a pattern for militant leadership. We have no evidence that such would be the case, but there is a possibility of militant minority group members of an audience harboring such an idea and waiting for psychological stimulus to move aggressively 'for the new day for his minority group' with consequent violence." Elle C. Scott, *op. cit.*, 92.

19 Melissa Ooten, *op. cit.*, 103.

20 The organization was mainly active in the South, especially in Birmingham, Alabama, where Klansmen bombed a house purchased by African Americans in a previously all-white neighborhood to enforce racial zoning (Newton 1999: 93)

21 Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2020, 102.

22 Chester L. Quarles, *The Ku Klux Klan and Related American Racialist and Antisemitic Organizations, A History and Analysis*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland, 1999, 83-84.

23 Costa-Gavras, *Va où il est impossible d'aller*, Paris, Seuil, 2018, 348-349.

24 *Ibidem*, 350.

25 Kraus reenacts Alan Berg's talk shows in Betrayed. Alan Berg "used satire, sarcasm and ridicule on his radio talk show in one-sided (he would hang up on them if he didn't like what they were saying) verbal duels with racists and anti-Semites." Chester L. Quarles, *op. cit.*, 123.

26 Dave Kehr, "Director's Hazy Vision Makes 'Betrayed' Simplistic", *Chicago Tribune*, 26 August, 1988.

27 Janet Maslin, Costa Gavras's 'Betrayed,' the World of Bigotry", *The New York Times*, 26 August, 1988.

28 Paul Mavis, *The Espionage Filmography: United States Releases, 1898 through 1999*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland, 2001, 31.

29 Costa-Gavras, *op. cit.*, 350-357.

30 Commentary section to the French DVD released by United Artists in 2017.

31 Chester L. Quarles, *op. cit.*, 119.

32 A.O. Scott, "Spike Lee's BlacKkKlansman Journeys Into White America's Heart of Darkness", *The New York Times*, Aug. 9, 2018. Peter Travers, "BlacKkKlansman Review: Spike Lee Delivers a Hell raising Masterpiece", *Rolling Stone*, August 6, 2018; Peter Debruge, "Film Review: Spike Lee's BlacKkKlansman", *Variety*, May 14, 2018; Mark Kermode, "BlacKkKlansman Review – a blistering return to form for Spike Lee", *The Guardian*, Aug. 26, 2018.

33 "On peut trouver que Spike Lee en fait trop. Que certains gags sont un peu longs. Qu'il n'était peut-être pas nécessaire d'accumuler tant de propos haineux dans la bouche des Blancs racistes. Le cinéaste a sans doute pris le parti de la caricature pour mieux enfoncer le clou." Clarisse Fabre, "BlacKkKlansman: Spike Lee attaque le suprémacisme blanc", *Le Monde*, Aug. 22, 2018.

34 "Son dernier film n'a pas fait l'unanimité à Cannes, essentiellement pour une raison que l'on tendrait plutôt à considérer comme une bonne nouvelle : l'auteur de Do the Right Thing (1989) n'a rien perdu de cette rage qui va de

pair avec une certaine lourdeur - celle des tracts militants et des slogans rap incisifs. Autrement dit : le fait qu'avec le temps, Lee n'a pas appris à faire dans la dentelle prouve aussi qu'il n'a en rien renoncé à ses combats." Marcos Uzal, "BlacKkKlansman, gugusses Klan" Libération, May 15, 2018.

35 "[Spike Lee] a retrouvé son mordant, son humour de sale gosse militant pour cette charge antiraciste et anti-Donald Trump." Guillemette Odicio, "Avec BlacKkKlansman, Spike Lee retrouve son mordant", Télérama, May 15, 2018.

36 Alissa Wilkinson, "Spike Lee BlacKkKlansman draws a ham-fisted line from white supremacy's past to this present", Vox, Aug. 9, 2018.

37 Tyler Coates, "BlacKkKlansman is the Rare American Film That Doesn't Treat the KKK as a Joke", Esquire, Aug. 13, 2018.

38 David Duke, "Thoughts on the Holocaust", *NAAWP News*, quoted in Michael Zatarain, Davie Duke, Evolution of a Klansman", Gretna, Pelican Publishing Company, 1990, 261.

39 "In the latest twist of fate in this investigation, the chief said he wanted me, Ron Stallworth, to act as Duke's personal security detail while he was here." Sgt Ron Stallworth, Black Klansman, *Race, Hate, and the Undercover Investigation of a Lifetime* [1998], London, Century, 2014, 133.

40 Juan O. Sánchez, *Religion and the Ku Klux Klan, Biblical Appropriation in the Their Literature and Songs*, Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016, 20.

41 <https://video.vice.com/fr/video/charlottesville-race-and-terror-vice-news-tonight-on-hbo/59921b1d2f8d32d808bddfbc>, accessed on April 22, 2020.

42 Chester L. Quarles, *op. cit.*, 125.

RÉSUMÉS

English

Few directors have dared to delve into the dark waters of the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization with a political aim which the former Grand Wizard David Duke made public by seeking election to the U.S. Senate in 2016 as a Republican candidate in Louisiana. While D.W Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was instrumental in promoting the supremacist ideology of the KKK, being used as a propaganda tool by the recruiters of the KKK ('the Keagles') in the 1920s, few films deal with the KKK in a straightforward manner. The threat

posed by the 'Invisible Empire' is often symbolized by cross or church burnings in films that resist its power through portraying its knights as individuals whose extremist racist rhetoric is confined to fiction and to the past. *The Burning Cross* (Walter Colmes, 1947), *Betrayed* (Costa-Gavras, 1988), and *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018) dramatize the activities of the racist sect by drawing attention to its individual members. They adopt different narrative and representational strategies in an effort to show the inner workings of the organization and how its members negotiate their identity as white nationalists. The films show that the KKK relies on visual (performances) and aural tropes (slurs) to construct its supremacist discourse and gather its ranks. Each of them provoked trouble on the level of reception – *The Burning Cross* was even censored in several states. This article questions the sense of discomfort produced by these films investigating the KKK.

Français

Peu de réalisateurs ont osé plonger dans les eaux sombres du Ku Klux Klan, une organisation secrète à visée politique que l'ancien Grand Sorcier David Duke a rendue publique en se présentant au Sénat américain en 2016 en tant que candidat républicain en Louisiane. Si *Naissance d'une nation*, de D.W. Griffith, a été utilisé comme outil de propagande par les recruteurs du KKK (« les Keagles ») dans les années 1920 pour promouvoir l'idéologie suprématiste du KKK, peu de films tentent de traitent de manière frontale de l'histoire du KKK. La menace posée par l'« Empire invisible » est souvent symbolisée par des croix ou des églises brûlées dans des films qui expriment leur résistance en décrivant les chevaliers du KKK comme des individus dont la rhétorique raciste extrémiste est réduite à la fiction et au passé. *The Burning Cross* (Walter Colmes, 1947), *Betrayed* (Costa-Gavras, 1988) et *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018) dramatisent les activités de la secte raciste en attirant l'attention sur ses membres individuels. Ils adoptent différentes stratégies narratives et de représentation afin de montrer le fonctionnement interne de l'organisation et la manière dont ses membres négocient leur identité en tant que nationalistes blancs. Les films montrent que le KKK s'appuie sur des tropes visuels (performances) et sonores (insultes) pour construire son discours suprémaciste et rassembler ses membres. Chaque film a provoqué des troubles au niveau de la réception - *The Burning Cross* a même été censuré dans plusieurs. Cet article interroge la sensation de trouble produite par ces films qui investiguent le KKK.

INDEX

Mots-clés

racisme, suprématie blanche, David Duke, Spike Lee, nationalisme

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