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Lindenwood University
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BIRTH OF A NATION EFFECTS – EFFECTIVE USE OF MULTIMEDIA TO PRESENT
CONTENT





by

Brittae Gray-Ross

A Prospectus of a Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Digital and Web Design

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Birth of A Nation Effects – Effective Use Of Multimedia To Present Content

Brittae Gray-Ross, Master of Arts/Social Media and Digital Content, 2019

Thesis Directed by: Andrew Smith, Social Media and Digital Content Strategy Program Chair

This project will investigate the effective use of multimedia, spanning back to 1915, with the film *Birth Of A Nation*. The final deliverable is an interactive web application. The web application will include modern day interactive web graphics. The web application will also include research and effective media that can be applied to any subject or thing.

Introduction

The *Birth of A Nation* film is an example of how to effectively use multimedia. The film is often remembered as being one of the most bigoted and racist films of all time. What most tend to miss and what is often studied in film school, is the innovative and revolutionary impact that the film's director, D.W. Griffith had on film. How Griffith was able to use the technology of his era, with advanced techniques, that would revolutionize film and while promote his social and political views. I plan to use modern day technologies to display the effectiveness of D.W. Griffith's film. The web application I will create, will include augmented reality and virtual reality to better explain and display how Griffith was effective with his film.

Literature Review

In order to understand the effective use of multimedia using the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* as our subject, I'd like to give some background. It is important that we have some historical context about America prior to the film's creation. We have to also understand the film's creator and how he effectively used multimedia during the early 1900s.

The United States was a slave holding country. Many white Americans had slaves who were considered "black" or "negro". Most of the wealth of white Americans, and the country as a whole, was because of the free labor black slaves provided. Along with the free labor that African Americans provided, came their suffering from killings, rapings, beatings, racial epithets, and the idea that they were less than human and were of less value than white Americans. Even under these conditions, African Americans still fought for freedom and the right to be treated as a citizen. One day, the fight for freedom came into fruition. That day came in 1865.

In 1865, the 13th Amendment was ratified, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime. Slavery allowed the extremely horrible treatment on African Americans. With slavery abolished, white Americans had to learn to accept and treat African Americans as equals. This was not a change that some white Americans looked forward to. Some whites continued to beat and abuse African Americans even after the 13th amendment became law. Hate and resentment grew as African Americans began to progress within society.

Shortly after the abolishment of slavery, a number of African Americans began to participate in government and became legislators. There were many African Americans who became legislators in local and state government. In David Barton's "Setting the Record Straight:

American History in Black & White", he states that, "the first 42(black representatives) elected to the State legislature in Texas were all Republicans. And in Louisiana, the first 95 black representatives and the first 32 black senators were Republicans" (Barton 2004). He goes on to state that, "in Alabama, the first 103 blacks elected to the State legislature were Republicans; in Mississippi, the first 112; in South Carolina, the first 190; in Virginia, the first 48; in Florida, the first 30, and the same in North Carolina; and in Georgia, 41 blacks were elected to the State legislature -- all as Republicans" (Barton 2004). Some of the first African Americans were elected to Congress beginning in 1869 (Bridnick and Manning 2018). The number of African Americans elected to congress continued to grow between 1869 and 1877 (Bridnick and Manning 2018). As African Americans continued to establish themselves within society, more harm continued to follow them. A number of African Americans were killed and attacked after the ratification of the 13th Amendment. African Americans were beaten in congressional meetings and were killed for voting or attempting to vote. There were many lynchings of African-Americans. Much of the said reasoning for these violent acts was due to fear that African Americans, with their new freedom, would harm white Americans. Some white Americans spoke of "Negro Supremacy"(Barton 2004). White supremacists began to gather and form their own organization, which was the Ku Klux Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in 1866 (Bullard 1991), the year following the ratification of the 13th Amendment and the abolishment of slavery. This newly founded organization continued to terrorize African Americans. It is also said that the Ku Klux Klan may have been formed by the Democratic Party (Barton 2004). The KKK terrorized African Americans at their homes. They steadily became more violent towards African Americans as time went on. Things were becoming so bad that pressure was put on the federal government to

address the terrorizing of the KKK. As it was stated, "Violence against blacks was so widespread that President Ulysses S. Grant was forced to commit large numbers of federal troops to put down the klan" (Winter 1996).

As mentioned in 1871, United States President Ulysses S. Grant signed The Enforcement Act of 1871, also known as the Ku Klux Klan Act. This act gave President Grant the authority to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, and use federal troops to arrest and prosecute KKK members. Thousands of people were indicted due to the new act. It is said that this act is what crippled the KKK. The KKK organization was quickly wiped out.

In 1875, just ten years after the Civil War, a boy named David Wark Griffith (D. W. Griffith) was born on a farm near La Grange, Kentucky. His mother came from a wealthy family and his father was a Confederate colonel. His father, was known as "Roaring Jake" and "Thunder Jake" for his oratory skills, and had some victories on the battlefield in the Civil War. But Griffith's father was also a gambler who left his family in debt when he died. Forcing Griffith's mother to move them to St. Louis. Griffith would eventually take a number of jobs to help his mother financially and never finished high school. (Fabe 2014)

Griffith became interested in theatre at an early age. He later began his career as an actor before transitioning to director. Between 1908 and 1913 Griffith had directed over 450 short films for the Biograph Company, molding the film medium into a sophisticated instrument for creating dramatic and suspenseful film narratives (Fabe 2014).

With Griffith being the son of a Confederate colonel, he grew up incorporating a certain set of widespread cultural assumptions and beliefs that historian Everett Carter calls "plantation illusion." Carter argues that the plantation illusion "is based primarily upon a belief in a golden

age of the antebellum South, an age in which feudal agrarianism provided the good life for wealthy, leisured, kindly, aristocratic owner and loyal, happy, obedient slave.” (Fabe 2014) This belief would have influence on his most famous film, *The Birth of a Nation*.

In 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* film was released. Its original title was *The Clansman*. The Birth of a Nation was an adaptation of a play by the white supremacist Thomas Dixon, Jr., which was based on two of his novels, *The Leopard’s Spots*(1902) and *The Clansman*(1905). The hero of *The Birth of a Nation* is Ben Cameron (played by Henry B. Walthall), the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, the terrorist organization Griffith celebrates in the film for restoring white supremacy during the post–Civil War era (Fabe 2014). In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith not only told a story but also conveyed strong ideological and political beliefs. It serves as an example of how, consciously or unconsciously, a director can imbue a story with the director’s beliefs and attitudes (Fabe 2014).

The film came out during a back-lash against progress toward racial equality in this country. Jim Crow laws had recently been instituted in the South, and for the first time in history, black and white government workers were segregated under Woodrow Wilson’s administration. (Fabe 2014)

President Woodrow Wilson had been a classmate of Thomas Dixon at Johns Hopkins University and became friends (Rice 2015). After seeing *Birth of a Nation* at a special screening at the White House arranged by Dixon, Wilson was reported to have exclaimed: “It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” (Fabe 2014).

Along with its ground-breaking achievement in film making, the film was also extremely racist. These depictions became representative of how white supremacists viewed African

Americans. Griffith depicts black men who are not faithful Uncle Toms as dangerous, power-hungry rapists who equate political equality with the freedom to sexually possess white women. According to this logic, the violent overthrow of black power by the Klan at the end of the film is morally justified (Fabe 2014).

The stereotype that black men are violent, is a stereotype that still exists today. In recent crime news findings, it is confirmed that attention to crime news makes people assign harsher culpability to Black suspects than to White suspects. Frequent exposure to news about Black criminals bolsters perceptions of Black individuals as violent (Dixon, 2008). It could be legitimately argued these are deliberate. More research is coming out to suggest this. Reports are stating that, "research has not only repeatedly shown that racial minorities are overrepresented as criminals or perpetrators compared to their White counterparts in the media, but also that this media bias promotes public hostility toward those groups " (Dukes and Gaither 2017).

Even when black men are victims of death they are dehumanized. A recent content analysis by Smiley and Fakunle, highlights these facts. As presented in their analysis”

Recent media coverage of the deaths of six unarmed Black males (Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, and Freddie Gray) by law enforcement uncovered four major recurring themes: (1) fixation on victims’ past and/or current behavior as criminal, (2) focus on victims’ physical composition (e.g., large stature) and attire, (3) emphasis on the location where the victims were killed or lived as crime-ridden and impoverished, and (4) negative, stereotypical elements about the victims’ lifestyles. (Dukes & Gaither 2017)

The day-to-day living under these conditions make many black men feel they have to prove to society that they are not violent. As was once quoted, "The young black male is approached with a deficit model: he must prove himself to be law abiding and trustworthy, which he is seldom able to do to the satisfaction of his white counterparts in the short time allowed"(Brooms 2016). Even though there has been much outrage and study about the depictions of black men in the media, it is important to understand that these depictions are not new. These depictions occurred over 100 years ago, and they continue to be produced.

Research Methodology

There were a few different methodological approaches I took in producing this research paper. The first would be Reception Theory. Reception Theory method will show how these contextual factors influenced people. The second would be Structuralism. Structuralism will allow me to put the film in its proper context. There is more to the film than what is actually being shown. The third approach would be post-colonialism. Post-colonialism will allow me to show how someone, or something, who doesn't consciously believe in white supremacist ideology, but can still practice it.

Production and analysis

The ending of slavery, blacks creating wealth for themselves and participating in government, while being protected, created a lot of animosity towards blacks. The national acceptance of the ideology and practice of exploiting and harming blacks with impunity was gone. Dead to some. To some, there needed to be a birth or re-birth of this ideology and practice. D.W. Griffith, with the help of Thomas Dixon, would use film as a medium to propagate this ideology.

D.W. Griffith was able to effectively propagate strong ideological and political beliefs using very advanced innovative techniques. These techniques hadn't been used in film prior to Griffith and made his film that much more popular and effective in delivering his message as a director. The three core techniques that he used were mise-en-scene, the enframed image, and editing. The Mise-en-scene technique, involves the director's choice of actors and how they are directed, the way the scene is lit, the choice of setting or set design, props, costumes, and make-up (Fabe 2014). The term mise-en-scène denotes all the elements of film direction that overlap with the art of theater (Fabe 2014).

The enframed image technique was summed up by Karel Reisz as "Griffith's fundamental discovery . . . lies in his realization that a film sequence must be made up of incomplete shots whose order and selection are governed by dramatic necessity". Where Porter's camera had impartially recorded the action from a distance (i.e., in long shot), Griffith demonstrated that the camera could play a positive part in telling the story. By splitting an event into short fragments and recording each from the most suitable camera position, he could vary the emphasis from shot to shot and control the dramatic intensity of the events as the story progressed (Fabe 2014).

The editing technique was a process in which Griffith had taken the first crucial steps of breaking a scene down into numerous shots (instead of photographing the action in one lengthy, static long shot); he was faced with the problem of reconnecting the shots smoothly, so that what was in reality a discontinuous sequence of separate shots would appear to the viewer to be a smooth and continuous action taking place in a unified time and space. He wanted spectators to maintain the illusion of watching a seamless flow of reality and not become distracted or disoriented by jerky edits that called attention to the film medium. In order to accomplish this

effect, Griffith systematically developed the editing device known as the “match” or the match cut (Fabe 2014).

He also chose costumes, props, and settings with an eye to providing narrative information that would enhance the film’s dramatic effect. Griffith realized, moreover, that blatantly artificial painted background details, common in early films, would undermine the realism of filmed fictions. In a pre-Griffith film such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), for example, a fairly realistic rendering of a railroad telegraph office is marred by a painted clock on the wall, its hands perpetually set at nine o’clock. Griffith insisted on the construction of authentic-looking three-dimensional props and sets for his films. He also brought increased realism to the screen by directing the players to act in a restrained, natural, less flamboyantly theatrical style (Fabe 2014).

The techniques implemented by Griffith grew to be very effective and popular. The film grew very popular in Atlanta, GA. *The Birth of a Nation* enjoyed the greatest box office in Atlanta’s history and was the first theatrical attraction ever held over for a second (and third) week in the city. Reports and posters claimed that 19,759 people attended within the first week, with thousands turned away and lines running from 9 am to 6 pm each day (Rice 2015). *The Birth of a Nation* would reappear on Atlanta’s screens virtually each year, playing on at least nine separate occasions over the next decade. At the end of November 1916, it returned for a two-week engagement, bringing with it electricians, mechanics, and a thirty-piece symphony orchestra from New York. Press reports now emphasized the film’s global success—in “the various cities of South America, Europe, Australia and Japan”—while its popularity in Atlanta remained undimmed with a thousand people turned away at its first matinee (Rice 2015). By the end of the film’s initial run in Atlanta, William Simmons, a former preacher and fraternal

organizer in the Ku Klux Klan, had recruited ninety-two members (Rice 2015). The KKK would go on to use the film as a recruiting tool for new members.

The Birth of a Nation, which was a phenomenal box-office success, would never have become the enormously popular film that it did unless it struck a chord with members of the dominant white society who flocked to see it, and who were all too eager to accept Griffith's filmed "history" as truth. The study of Griffith's pioneering techniques in The Birth of a Nation illuminates his achievement in molding the film medium into a vehicle for transforming ideologically and psychologically charged fantasies into dramatic fictions that seemed stunningly real (Fabe 2014).

Just as Griffith used core techniques to maximize the effectiveness of his film, I'll be using modern day technologies to display the effectiveness of the film. I'll be using a web application, virtual and augmented reality in this project. Web applications are very popular and one of the most used type of modern day technology we use. A web application (or web app) is application software that runs on a web server, unlike computer-based software programs that are run locally on the operating system (OS) of the device. Web applications are accessed by the user through a web browser with an active network connection. Web applications are accessed via internet. According to Statista, as of January 2021 there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide - 59.5 percent of the global population. Of this total, 92.6 percent (4.32 billion) accessed the internet via mobile devices. There are 1.82 billion websites according to Internet Live Stats.

Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality are very popular modern day technologies. According to Statista, the augmented reality and virtual reality (AR/VR) market is expected to reach to \$192.7 billion by 2022, after starting at \$6.1 billion in 2016 (Alsop, 2021). Predictions

estimate the combined market size of AR/VR will increase in revenue more than 50 times by the year 2022. Virtual reality used within businesses is forecasted to grow from \$829 million in 2018 to \$4.26 billion in 2023, according to ARtillery Intelligence (Higginbottom, 2020).

Conclusion

The implication that can be derived from this project is that effective multimedia use can be applied to anything. No matter the topic or subject, it can be successful using the right methods and techniques. As my project is dissected, the fruitful direction would be to advance the methods and technologies I used to display historical content. Creatives will be able to add various new creative content to history and make it more palatable for people to digest. Many of the analysis done for the *Birth of a Nation* film has been done by authors and professors, using literature as their medium. There are some video analysis done in select documentaries. But there are little if any that addresses this historical content while incorporating web applications, virtual and augmented reality. If time weren't an issue, I'd create an augmented/virtual reality experience of what it was like to experience the *Birth Of A Nation* film when it was first released. There was a lot of excitement and activity in the theaters back then. There was a lot of shouts and the screen and jeering from the crowd. It would really give people a strong understanding of what it was like back then.

The *Birth of A Nation* film is an example of how to effectively use multimedia. Whether it's content is liked or not, doesn't change how effective it was during the time it was released in the early 1900s. Remembering this film and breaking it down from a historical context using a web application, virtual reality and augmented reality is unique.

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