Screened Anxieties: Affect and Temporality in *The Birth of a Nation*

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Abstract:
This essay examines attitudes toward the future in D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, focusing in particular on the opposed emotions hope and fear. In doing so, it establishes critical connections between the film's aesthetic philosophy – which is marked by an attempt to control its characters, its audience, and even history itself – and the film's troubling and much-discussed racial politics. Griffith's stated beliefs in the ability of cinema to fully capture the past and in turn to dictate to its audience the terms of the future, manifest themselves everywhere in *The Birth of a Nation* not only thematically but formally. However, the film sets an impossible task for itself, and where it falls short, its own hopes and fears become dramatically visible. This failure indicates that *The Birth of a Nation* is ultimately imbricated in the modernist episteme of uncertainty it works to deny and disavow.

Keywords: D.W. Griffith; cinema; modernism; hope; fear

Studies of D.W. Griffith often cite his exuberant claim, first reported in the *New York Times Magazine*, that the great power of movies lies in their ability to allow the viewer to 'actually see what happened' in the past. Griffith was confident that film technology would revolutionize education: '[the] time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again. [. . .] There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history.'[1] For all the regularity with which it is cited, the quotation has rarely if ever been fully parsed. To the

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twenty-first century scholar, Griffith's optimism about film may seem not to be worth remarking, since it rests on the uncritical and long-refuted assumption that the camera offers us access to unvarnished, otherwise inaccessible historical truth. Moreover, Griffith situates his dream of film's triumph over history within the schoolroom. Film boasts a power to represent history that is beneficial precisely insofar as it is used to teach.

Griffith is discussing film technology in general here, not necessarily cinema or his own work particularly. But as the historical record and other scholarly research has shown, his prediction dovetails with his own filmmaking process and his beliefs about cinema. First of all, Griffith clearly saw film as a vehicle capable of transporting its viewers back into the lived past. Verisimilitude was for Griffith a kind of aesthetic bulwark, both a starting point for the cinematic arts and a realm in which they could not be matched by other forms. Accounts of the making of *The Birth of a Nation* (hereafter *Birth*) indicate that Griffith was keen to push the illusion of history recreated, of the screen universe as identical with the physical one, to its furthest limits. He tended to equate the world cinema represented with the world in which it was represented: 'The whole world is a stage', he reportedly said while filming *Birth*, paraphrasing and repurposing Shakespeare.[2] Billy Bitzer, the cinematographer of *Birth*, later recalled that during filming it was as though the whole production company had been transported back in time to 1865, and that 'in Griffith's mind we were'.[3] Small details were painstakingly researched and double-checked for accuracy. This determination to hew to the historical record wherever possible was later both used to market the film and referenced in praise of it.[4] Indeed, in his public comments on *Birth*, Griffith resorted to the rhetoric of historicity, suggesting that the film was 'only a photoplay reproduction of what actually occurred and what is down in black and white in the pages of American history'.[5]

Griffith was equally insistent that the main goal of *Birth* was to instruct its audience. His belief that art's social role is to teach the public is documented in many places.[6] Of course, *Birth* did not so much educate its audience as transfix a great segment of it while angering another; the film has become at least as well-known for the protests, riots, and arguments over censorship it sparked as for any of its specific content. But initially, it proved massively influential; Melvyn Stokes estimates that along with its fellow prewar blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*, *Birth* 'perhaps did more than anything else to disseminate a romantic and biased view of the Lost Cause to a mass American

audience'.[7] But for Griffith, *Birth*'s success owed primarily to its status as a repository of historical, representational truth.

The Birth of a Nation has been the subject of abundant critical attention, from seminal essays by scholars such as Michael Rogin and Clyde Taylor to more recent contributions by Susan Courtney, Dick Lehr, Eric Olund, Melvyn Stokes, Michele Faith Wallace, Courtney Barrett, and others.[8] The social and historical contexts of the film and its tumultuous reception history have been carefully analyzed. However, relatively scant attention has been paid to the movie's complex relationship to modernism. Given the initial sketch I have offered in this essay of D. W. Griffith's views of art and of history, *Birth* might well be said to be an outlier within modernism, the product of aesthetic principles contrary to those of other key modernist figures. Its nostalgic certitude, too, seems to connect *Birth* more strongly to the past than to the future. However, in this essay I will seek to unveil *Birth*'s modernist tendencies by considering a further underexplored dimension of the film: its affect. Griffith's overweening confidence in the power of cinema and of *Birth* is belied by a deep anxiety in the film over its role and reception, an anxiety which, rendered most plainly in the film's wavering between hope and fear, is *Birth*'s signal affect. I first demonstrate the presence of this anxiety in the facial affects of the film's characters, whose expressions often mirror and evoke the emotional tenor of the film. I then show how the film's formal manipulations of temporality further denote an attempt to exercise control over history and over its audience. In turn, these insights pave the way for a new reading of the film's conclusion.

The prediction by Griffith with which I began this essay ultimately reveals – both poignantly and troublingly – his longing for an aesthetic control that remains necessarily beyond reach. The points in *Birth* at which directorial control falters indicates a fundamental tension in the film, one produced by its imbrication within, and simultaneous attempt to disavow, a basic epistemological uncertainty that also features as one of the key markers of modernist consciousness. In this way, the anxieties present in *Birth* reveal it as a product of its time, but are also the catalyst for a totalizing and finally imprisoning aesthetic, an understanding of which enables us to see anew the connection between the film's politics and its form.

Birth and the Modernist Future

The textbook (if by now somewhat well-worn) understanding of literary modernism is that it enacts a rupture with past traditions, thereby

producing and recording a sensation of being unmoored in the present, and – having 'wreck[ed] the old world in order to make room for the new', to borrow Heather Love's phrase – advancing precariously toward an unknown future.[9] If *Birth* participates in this movement, we might surmise that it does so largely through its formal innovations, which include its popularization of a specifically filmic language. After all, in other respects *Birth* reads as antiquarian, as anything but modernist: its unabashed nostalgia has traditionally been understood as working against its groundbreaking formal sophistication.[10]

But while *Birth* is indeed a deeply paradoxical film, the paradox is misplaced insofar as it is understood to subsist in the contrast between Griffith's romanticization of the past and his pioneering mastery of cinematic tropes. No such simple divide between form and content is possible; Griffith's vision of the South, for example, is created and sustained in part by his remarkable camera work.[11] Rather, the tension in *Birth* appears in the distinction between aspiration and reality, between the wishes the film encodes and the limitations it resists. The aesthetic and societal ambitions of *Birth* originate in Griffith's twin convictions that cinema can speak the truth of history and that by doing so, it can teach its audience to live out of that history into the future. As Michael Rogin writes, *Birth* was created to be 'the screen memory [. . .] through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future'.[12] But these convictions, taken together, augur a still deeper one. At its core, *Birth* is a fantasy of historical control, the compendium of Griffith's belief in the power of art to bend society and even history to the artist's will. *Birth* exerts a tremendous effort to control the commitments of its audience, willing them by turns to hope for and fear the various futures it names. Far from excluding *Birth* from the modernist landscape, this determination to recover an idealized past and to shape an ideal future reveals it as documenting a disavowal of the epistemological uncertainty that colors much of what was produced in the modernist era – one by which the film, too, is strongly beset.

In his oft-cited analysis of *Birth*, Michael Rogin elaborates on the film's relationship to the history it seeks to document:

> Griffith's aim was to abolish interpretation; that project made representation not an avenue to history but its replacement. Griffith claimed to be filming history in *Birth*, just as he said he was filming his father, but he also claimed to be bringing a new history into being. [. . .] It replaced history by film. Presented as a transparent representation of history [. . .] the film actually aimed to emancipate the representation from its referent and draw the viewer out of history into film.[13]

I propose here a minor but critical emendation of Rogin's claim. *Birth* is not, precisely speaking, an attempt to replace or to eradicate history, but an attempt to *control* it. No outright denial of history, either overt or covert, is made in the film (though history's malleability and its concomitant shaping towards precise socio-political ends in the auteur's hands is everywhere tacitly assumed). The implications of the distinction between eradication and control become clear when we conceive of history as both past *and* future, rather than simply as past. History is a continuum into which *Birth* arrives not as an attempted endpoint but as a product evincing its creator's strong consciousness of – and determined battle against – his own temporal limitedness and subjectivity.

We can now begin to see why Griffith's avowal of film's educational and representational capacities was so crucial for him. If it can both fully recreate and successfully teach the past, cinema can inaugurate a desired future through the very force with which it overmasters history. As a Griffith newspaper advertisement for *Birth* puts it, 'The mistakes of the suffering past teach us to avoid the terrific pitfalls of the now present and the nearing future.'[14] These 'terrific pitfalls' underscore how *Birth* is a product of modernist pressures that are only further revealed by its attempts to exorcise them. Halfway through the film, an intertitle urges that the past, and not the present or future, is the sole object of focus: 'This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today' (Griffith, *Birth*).[15] This statement conceives of past and present as a chasm across which no influence or connection can be traced. But in fact, *Birth* is an expression of the opposite conviction – that past, present, and future are inexorably intertwined, and that the film alone can untangle these knotted strands in a way that will guarantee a legible future.

The anxieties on display in *Birth* differ from those in other modernist works because they are so intricately tied to the racist beliefs of Griffith, its director, and of Thomas Dixon (who wrote *The Clansman*, the novel on which *Birth* is based). As many scholars have pointed out, one of the most pressing of these fears was the migration of Southern black workers to northern cities which had begun in the early twentieth century.[16] Another was the increasing role African Americans were obtaining in political affairs.[17] But both these fears are secondary to a still more essential one: the fear of miscegenation. It is no exaggeration to say that the whole of *Birth* is propelled, beginning to end, by its terror at the prospect of marital, but especially sexual, union between blacks and whites; Susan Courtney aptly calls *Birth* 'American cinema's

primal fantasy of miscegenation'.[18] Given that these desired and feared futures roil so near the polished surface of *Birth*, the film, while it reads in certain respects as anti-modernist, nonetheless exemplifies an instance of the modernist anxiety to which this essay's title refers.

Before analyzing the film's scenes, I want to situate *Birth* more clearly within modernism by delineating my reading of modernist uncertainty and the film's relation to it. The definition of modernism I offered earlier entails that the era is defined by aesthetic rupture and by increasing doubt in the human ability to use the past as a guide for the future. However, it must be acknowledged that modernist artists valued and responded to this rupture in a wide variety of ways. One trait easily associated with modernist writing, in fact, is confidence. Ezra Pound's era-defining aphorisms and critical bravado come to mind here, as do the brash manifestos of F.T. Marinetti and the futurists. But the presence of this aesthetic confidence, especially when brandished as a sort of salve for, or response to, a deep ambivalence toward tradition, often appears in direct correlation with a tendency toward anti-democratic political views. Overconfidence about the precise social role of art and about its transformative power – sometimes paired, ironically enough, with a derisive attitude toward the public consumption of art – can be easily wedded to (though not equated with) a totalitarian mindset. As a politically and ethically troubling modernist document, *Birth* is a fascinating outlier here in that its apparent assertiveness masks a deep concern about the future and about the capacity of great art to counter this concern.

The aesthetic confidence to which *Birth* aspires interests me here insofar as such confidence would seem to eliminate the need for either hopefulness or fearfulness on the part of the modernist creator. An aesthetics of power and control rejects hope and fear as unnecessary precisely since they are affects that indicate frailty. For while hope and fear are opposites in that they signal, respectively, an expectation of a positive or a negative outcome, they are alike in that they register human limitation, revealing their possessors as subjects lacking complete control over their futures, subjects conscious that some events, and their causes and effects, are outside their agency. Thus, registering the disposition of any artwork toward the future – not only how it exudes hope or fear, but how it reads its own display of these affects – offers us an index of its reaction to the fact that certain historical processes are beyond its control. In the case of *Birth*, both hope and fear, while resisted, are increasingly visible, as though through a flimsy veneer. Protesting the very social changes that made modernism possible, *Birth* invokes the power of art – literalized in

the sustained cinematic illusion of veracity and the manipulation of temporality – to cling to the belief that the past can be retrieved and the future predicted. It is precisely where this control slips – where the façade of absolute authority is shattered – that we see the film's frailties and anxieties, and how much of its lasting significance ironically derives from its inability to adhere to its own aesthetic codes.[19]

Visual Representations of Affect in *Birth*

Susan Courtney has shown how, beginning with his early work for Biograph, Griffith's films 'invite spectators to identify variously with suffering white women and with white and non-white men in "feminized" conditions to produce the spectatorial "agony" often associated with Griffith's cinema'.[20] Courtney's reading of *Birth* focuses on bound, subjugated, or otherwise 'feminized' figures, all of which are eventually rescued not only by parading Klansmen but, in a manner of speaking, by the carefully orchestrated temporal logic of the film. Building on her work, I wish to pay closer attention here to the way Griffith encourages the potential adoption by his audience of particular attitudes toward the future – ranging from anticipation to terror – by strategically revealing these attitudes in the faces of his characters. These emotions are almost always visible on the faces of white, female characters, since (as Courtney has shown) it is these characters who inhabit the nexus of spectatorial sympathy the film seeks to establish. In this way, sublimating its own fraught attitudes toward past and future, *Birth* becomes a record of its own attempt to wrest control over both domains by replicating, and then satisfying, these attitudes in the mind of an ideal viewer.

Other critics have traced examples of the complex transference of fears related to race and gender through which *Birth* expresses a distinct crisis of white masculinity.[21] I want to focus on one significant aspect of how the film's patriarchal understanding of gender is legible in terms of affect. Broadly speaking, men are the central actors of *Birth*; they *perform*, in physical, bodily ways, and the more heroic their characters, the more their feelings tend to be controlled or masked. (Indeed, by the end of the film, some of the film's white male heroes – Ben Cameron in particular – are literally masked by their Klan hoods, entirely obscuring the potential presence of any affective states that might mark them as feminine.) In contrast, white women in *Birth* are the recipients of actions performed by black or white males; within the purview of the film, their task is less to act than to feel, and thus to become emotional cues for the spectator. For example,

in an early scene, Elsie Stoneman clings to her brothers before they depart for the war; once they depart, she raises her hands to her face in anguish, then collapses on the front steps of the family home. Shortly thereafter, the invasion of the Cameron estate by a Negro militia occasions an opportunity for Griffith to present the viewer with two simultaneous and opposing emotional responses. As the girls hide in the cellar, young Flora Cameron quivers with happy excitement, only to be scolded by her older sister Margaret, who wrings her hands in fear. The two sisters' faces offer a contrast in possible affective orientations toward the future. By showing Flora's carefree silliness checked by her sister's sober apprehension, Griffith reminds the viewer of the grave threat of miscegenation and encourages an appropriate reaction (fear), all while inviting the viewer to identify with besieged femininity.

A wider range of affects is visible soon afterward, when the Cameron family receives news of the death of Wade, the second son, and of Ben's grave injury. After reading the news, Flora Cameron glares with hatred and ineffectually waves her clenched fists, but following an intertitle that reminds us of '[t]he woman's part', the sisters are next depicted in postures of mingled grief and consolation (Griffith, *Birth*). 'The woman's part' clearly provides the film with its textures of feeling, but *Birth* regulates these feelings, overtly indicating which are acceptable and which are not. By doing so, the film downplays the real anxieties at stake while authorizing itself as a controlling force, master of the affects it locates in the faces of others.

Griffith's control of these affects is especially notable during the sequence in which Mrs Cameron and Elsie plead with Abraham Lincoln to pardon Ben Cameron, who is in danger of being hanged as a war criminal. We witness fear give way to hope on their faces as Elsie concocts a plan: 'We will ask mercy from the Great Heart' (Griffith, *Birth*). Their excitement shifts to doubt as they prepare to petition Lincoln, and doubt turns to despair on Mrs Cameron's face as she is initially rebuffed. However, she is spurred by Elsie to persist. Meanwhile, a parallel iris shot reveals Ben waiting in his hospital bed, his face virtually blank, before transitioning quickly to a fadeout – a visual reminder that his life hangs in the balance. In the following scene, Mrs Cameron's head sinks dramatically, evoking her despair; but just as she turns to shuffle away, Lincoln reaches out and touches her shoulder, granting her request. Again, the two female figures in the scene are proxies for the viewer's expected response to this sudden positive turn of events: Mrs Cameron sinks to her knees, overwhelmed, while Elsie clasps her hands to her face in delighted hope. In either

case, while it calibrates them to maximize the visceral enjoyment of its audience, the camera places itself at a remove from these displays of future-oriented affect. If the camera has any analogue here, it is to Lincoln, the 'Great Heart', who benignly pens a pardon for Ben Cameron, his small act of mercy rewriting the futures of the film's principal characters.

These visual representations of hope and fear in *Birth* reveal Griffith to be interested in depicting hope and fear (and thus a whole range of attitudes to futurity) only insofar as he can depict these emotions in a manner that, first of all, adheres with exactitude to his rigid racial, sexual, and economic codes, and that, second of all, exonerates his film from the charge that any uncertainty – any hope, any fear – is imbricated *within* its own narrative logic. This is the same narrative logic by which Griffith promises, through *Birth*, a complete rehabilitation of the disappeared past. Such a promise proceeds from an aesthetic philosophy that insists on the ability of the auteur to consider history objectively, from without – and thus not to be subject to the messy emotions and the indeterminacies that living in history makes inevitable.

Parallel Editing and Temporal Control

Birth is a movie captivated by the future but set almost entirely in the past, so I want to remark briefly on how Griffith situates it in relation to the history he seeks to recover. Critics have labeled Griffith's representation of the past in *Birth* as fundamentally nostalgic – 'history without guilt', in Daniel J. Walkowitz's neat phrasing.[22] This nostalgia is especially evident in the film's early scenes, in which slaves dance happily for their masters while the Northern visitors to the Cameron estate look on. Such scenes evoke what Everett Carter has called 'the Plantation Illusion', a fantasy of the supposedly idyllic character of Southern plantation life.[23] But *Birth* is not nostalgic merely in order to rehabilitate a romanticized past or to convince the spectator of the rightness of the Southern agrarian way of life. Nostalgia offers a means of looking back that also, paradoxically, enacts a gaze forward from the past back to the present. Consider the intertitle that introduces us to the town of Piedmont, where the Camerons live: 'Piedmont, South Carolina, the home of the Camerons, where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more' (Griffith, *Birth*). As the phrase 'is to be no more' reveals, nostalgia acquires power in *Birth* not simply as the attempt to restore and sustain a lost (and in some ways fictive) past, but as a means of indicating the film's temporal assuredness. Griffith not only knows

this past, he knows it elegiacally: he can interpret the implications of its vanishing from the vantage point of the present. Any grief over what has been lost is thus mitigated by Griffith's confidence in the film's ability to incorporate that loss into a lesson that will help to shape a narrative of the present and future.

The shaping of that narrative, of course, depends on more than the film's historical accuracy: it depends on its capacity to transmit the lessons of history to its audience. It is for this reason that didacticism, along with verisimilitude, informs Griffith's aesthetic. Where Griffith uses verisimilitude to establish control over the past, he uses didacticism to establish it over the spectator. Griffith's assumption that the filmmaker holds a position of power over his audience is evident in *Birth*'s tendency to compel assent through the power of spectacle. Detailed and authentic-seeming war footage, panoramic wide shots conveying sublimity, dizzyingly rapid cross-cuts, and abrupt shifts from close-ups to long shots and back again all form part of Griffith's strategy to leave viewers 'enthralled by the affective power of his spectacular, driving narrative'.[24] Griffith's goal of spectatorial stupefaction – apparent, as Russell Merritt writes, in the late chase scenes that work to 'cut off intellectual analysis with a nerve-wracking assault on the spectator's emotional faculties' – suggests his patronizing view of the filmgoer, but also further indicates his conception of art.[25] Where other modernist works prize ambiguity, texture, and multiplicity of meaning, Griffith saw film's potential precisely in its ability to remove these features from the project of aesthetic communication. Griffith's affinity for visual spectacle, for the sublime, speaks to his desire to create an image for viewers that will absolutely refute the possibility of other interpretations – an image that, by its very totality, will render superfluous their collective capacities to imagine.

An implied inequality between director and audience manifests itself repeatedly in *Birth* through Griffith's virtuosic manipulation of temporality. One way Griffith highlights his film's control over time is by representing the characters and audience of *Birth* as comparatively in thrall to time's power. The film's farewell scenes offer useful sites for the dramatization of this contrast. Once Lincoln's call for volunteers goes out, crises of impending separation and uncertain return play out in scenes both grand and quiet. The Cameron family members bid goodbye to the three Cameron brothers, and the town of Piedmont to its departing soldiers. The music changes from mournful, as personal goodbyes are exchanged, to brightly celebratory, as the town sees its heroes off, to quietly contemplative, as Elsie tells her father that her

brothers have left for the front. The faces of the Cameron family, of Elsie, and of the people of Piedmont, express a similarly wide range of emotions, from pride to sadness to worry to excitement. The clear subtext here – indicated by the music and its abrupt shifts in mood – is that the characters in these scenes simply do not know what to feel, because they do not know what the future will bring. As if assuring its audience that it is not prey to the same fickleness, the film's next intertitle reads, 'Two and a half years later' – a diegetic jump forward in time that advertises cinema's imperviousness to the very farewell scenes it has just illustrated (Griffith, *Birth*).

While Griffith sometimes used intertitles to speed up time, he is still better known for his ability to slow time down through parallel editing. The importance of parallel editing originates in the simple fact that, as Tom Gunning writes, '[a]ssembling several shots allows temporal relations that are elusive in the single unedited shot'.[26] That is, because the typical film is a composite of edited and assembled shots, a range of possibilities opens up with respect to filmic treatment of temporality.[27] One of Griffith's lasting contributions to the art of cinema was his popularization of the technique of parallel editing (or cross-cutting), which involves the interweaved juxtaposition of two or more simultaneously occurring scenes. One effect of this technique, as Stephen Kern notes, is to 'expand time' for the spectator.[28] The expansion of time requires slowing it down, eschewing 'real time' in order to fully represent simultaneity. Such manipulations necessitate a departure from strict mimesis; Griffith's use of them despite this drawback demonstrates his awareness of the overwhelming effect these techniques generate.

Griffith's success in using parallel editing to manipulate time and to induce various affects in his audience anticipates important later movements in cinema, primary among them what has become known as the 'montage' style developed by filmmakers in the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s. While the ambitions of these later filmmakers were not identical with those of Griffith, they do share some important features, among them the general desire to 'overcome the barriers separating life and art' – a goal manifested in, for example, the naturalism of Pudovkin and the utopianism of Eisenstein.[29] In addition, the radical disjunctions effected by the montage style – a style whose central characteristic, Eisenstein writes, is 'the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other,' which produces a 'shattering' force – bespeaks a form of authorial control and mastery, as well as an intent to play on the emotions of its audience.[30] This ultimately rendered the Russian avant-garde movement susceptible to

appropriation by fascist ideology, as scholars such as Mark Antliff have demonstrated.[31]

Griffith's pioneering work in this area owed to his intuitive understanding of the way parallel editing can be used to influence the reception of filmic content. As Tom Gunning details in his book *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Film*, parallel editing is an especially powerful tool for the production of affective responses such as suspense, via what Gunning calls 'a pattern of delay'.[32] Parallel editing gives Griffith another means not only to provide his audience with compelling drama but to subject them to his authorial control, stoking in them both hope and fear, then deferring the outcomes of events to maximize their immersion in his narrative. The film's climax offers a compelling instance of how Griffith uses parallel editing to both increase suspense and challenge the viewer's perceptual habits. As the Klansmen ride to save Elsie Stoneman from a leering Silas Lynch, who has declared his intention to marry her against her will, the intercutting scenes in which we are privy to the actions of Silas and Elsie – never long to begin with – grow shorter and shorter. Elsie faints and Lynch catches her in his arms in a scene that commands less than three seconds of screen time. We are transported to a scene of conflict in the streets, then back to Lynch, who looks up as though having heard something; this scene lasts less than two seconds. In these expertly intercut scenes, Griffith demands the audience's capitulation to the film's control of time and space by overwhelming them with rapid images that provoke a strong emotional response. As the images increase in visual potency, Griffith shortens the length of time they are onscreen, relying on the effect created by their sudden disappearance. When Griffith shifts our attention to the party in the cabin, an intertitle furthers this sensation. Reading simply 'Meanwhile, other fates –', the intertitle remains unfinished, both submitting to the relentlessness of the images around it and evoking the spectator's inability to form complete thoughts amidst the escalating tension (Griffith, *Birth*). Further establishing its narrative control, the film returns only sporadically to the question of these 'other fates' – those of Margaret Cameron, Dr Cameron, Phil Stoneman, and the Union soldiers holed up in the cabin. Indeed, at one point in the sequence, more than three minutes of real time passes between sightings of these characters – an absurdly long deferral in such heightened circumstances. In such instances, *Birth*'s temporal dexterity functions partly to ensure that its characters and its audience lack that same dexterity, and that it alone is capable not only of rendering the past exactly, but of ordering and organizing the future.

Griffith's willingness to manipulate time and history to achieve his aims is often at odds with his stated claim that *Birth* is able to recover and represent a 'pure' history of the South: his formal machinations exist in a strange tension with the strictly mimetic rendering *Birth* purports to offer. The film's inevitable failure to live up to its own unreachable standards creates – as Merritt points out – fissures or cracks, places in which it reveals itself as self-contesting, inconsistent, what Merritt calls 'formally ungovernable'.[33] Some of the film's most crucial scenes remain ambiguous precisely because Griffith, for all his professed dedication to verisimilitude, refrains from explicitly or accurately representing scenes whose potential actualization he dreads. In other words, it is exactly where the *film itself* – not its characters – becomes fearful that its grand project of mastering history falters. As Merritt has shown, this is evident in the film's portrayal of Gus in the much-discussed scene in which he chases Flora, which depends at least as much on an implied shared racial hatred as it does Gus's literal – and potentially harmless – words and actions.[34]

But another aspect of *Birth*'s narrative sleight of hand is worth observing here. It is not only the inconsistency between the actions of Gus and the negative assumptions about his character that betray the film as marked by racial fears. These fears are also strikingly evident – more so, in that they directly pertain to the manipulation of temporality – in the editing of the various shots that compose the scene. As Flora nears the cliff from which she will eventually jump to her death, the camera follows the actions of three characters: Flora, Gus, and Ben Cameron, each covering the same ground in succession. In the moments before the impending standoff, Griffith increases the viewer's suspense by showing each character in isolation. This strategy renders it briefly unclear whether Gus is closer to Flora than Ben is to Gus, granting the audience hope for a happy resolution.

This ambiguity fades as Flora scrambles up the rocky ledge. After beginning with a close-up of her face moving into the frame, Griffith situates the camera at a slightly greater distance to accentuate Flora's perilous position on the cliff edge. The next shot is of Gus ascending the path Flora has just climbed; recognizing it, the viewer becomes aware of her plight just before Flora herself does. Her head turned away from the camera, looking back toward where the viewer must assume Gus is positioned, she waves her hands in panic. The camera backs away, and we view the scene from the same increased distance used earlier; from this vantage point, we see Gus enter the frame, mere feet from where Flora sits distraught. He is visible from the chest up, the rest of his body obscured by an outcrop he has yet to scale. As

Fig. 1. Flora's plea for help. *Source*: *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by David W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915).

seen in Figure 1, Flora extends her arms in front of her pleadingly, emphasizing her helplessness. Griffith then returns to Ben Cameron, who is now in a frenzy. Emerging from between some trees, he yells for Flora and abruptly runs out of the camera's view. We come back to Flora; again, the camera shoots from a middle distance, so that Gus's chest and head are visible behind her. The camera moves to another close-up, making Flora's fright obvious and increasing the audience's dramatic involvement in her predicament. An intertitle appears, indicating her next words: 'Stay away or I'll jump!' (Griffith, *Birth*). Two more close-ups of Flora precede a long shot, shown in Figure 2, in which the dark figure of Gus, silhouetted against the sky, *clearly advances toward Flora*, climbing up the outcrop.

Brought back to Ben Cameron's location down below, we watch as he spots Flora's location and sprints in her direction. Yet another close-up of Flora, now overtly panicked, heightens the tension further. Then the camera moves back again to its more removed position, enabling us to situate Flora with respect to Gus – and we see that Gus is still at chest-level below Flora, most of his body blocked out by the outcrop (see Figure 3). From a crouching position, Flora rises to her feet. The camera shifts to a close-up of Gus, whose advance on all fours symbolizes his predatory, animalistic nature. He moves past the camera's vision; then, following a brief long shot in which Flora waves her arms one last time, we are returned again to the framing middle

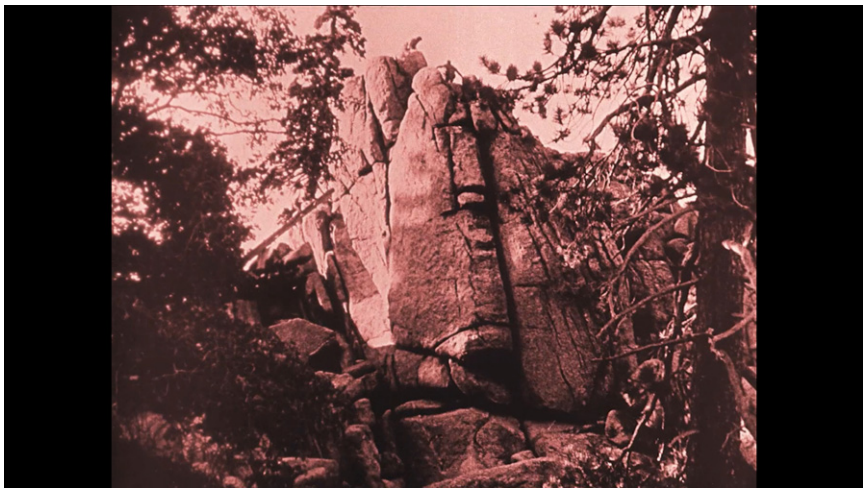

Fig. 2. Gus ascends the precipice. *Source*: *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by David W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915).

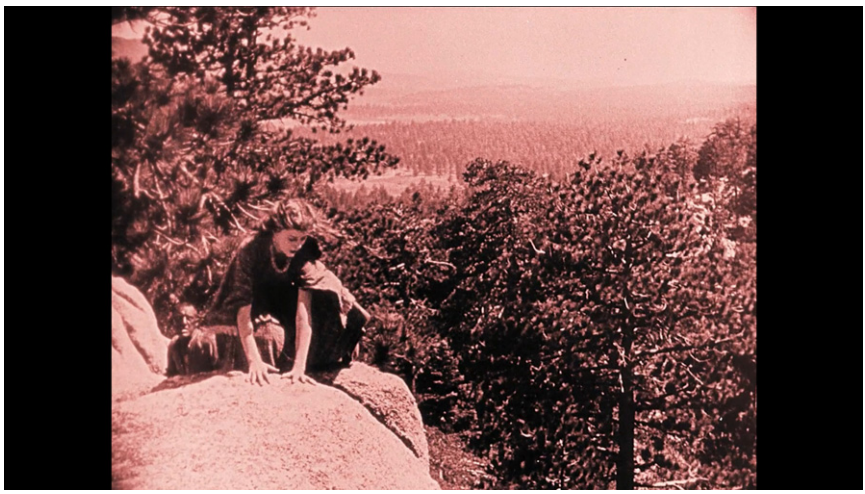

Fig. 3. Flora prepares to leap, with Gus framed behind her. *Source*: *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by David W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915).

distance view of the clifftop, this time to watch as Flora jumps to her death. Another long shot depicts her body falling down the cliff face. As it rolls to a stop, Gus climbs to the promontory where Flora was, and a final long shot shows him standing there, legs aggressively wide, before he flees.

The purpose of the above exhaustive description of the movements leading up to Flora's death emerges in three key moments I have isolated. In the first, shown in Figure 1, Gus appears in the background as Flora realizes that she has nowhere to turn. The second, Figure 2, shows Gus moving further up the path, taking several distinct steps toward Flora and inviting the possibility that he is now close enough to physically harm her. The third, Figure 3, shows Gus after his recent advance; but *he is not any closer to Flora* than he was in Figure 1, even though he just took several steps up the hillside. He remains visible only from the chest up, still having to surmount a final ledge to reach Flora. In other words, a small but critical spatio-temporal incongruity problematizes the scene. Gus manages at once to climb up after Flora and to remain rooted to a spot just far enough from her that he cannot attack her. Given the obvious care and attention to detail in Griffith's editing and choreographing of this sequence, it's worth probing why Gus is simultaneously – and contradictorily – ascendant and immobile, approaching Flora and all the while remaining where he is.

To understand this apparent mistake, we must recall the fear that most animates the film and the history of its making: that of miscegenation. Gus's attempted rape of Flora, while it caricatures black males as violent and sex-starved, also metonymizes an anxiety over potential interracial unions. To read this climactic moment in the film symbolically is to see this anxiety in full flower. And it is death that intervenes: Gus's desires are stymied by Flora's honor-saving suicide. But while Flora flees to her death to evade capture, it is also the careful orchestration of *Birth* that prevents Gus from reaching her. In showing Gus below the outcrop even after he has been depicted ascending it, Griffith manipulates time and space to defer the realization of *Birth*'s most-feared outcome. To do so requires surrendering the pose he has tried to maintain throughout, that of the absolute accuracy of the film's dramatization of history – the equivalence of its universe with our own. Keeping Gus suspended on the mountainside even as it sends Flora to her death, *Birth* abjures the eventuality it documents, thereby exposing itself as subject to the whims of history. The fascinating bind in which *Birth* is caught reveals the paradox bound up in Griffith's aesthetic: his film, when it finally reveals glimpses of the longings and the dread it encodes (a white America and miscegenation, respectively), does so by straying from its agenda of perfect verisimilitude – the very point of which is, by imagined extension of its temporal control into and over the present and future, to render both longing and dread unnecessary.

Modernist Uncertainty and the Ending of *Birth*

Capitulating to its own anxieties, *Birth* is a product of its moment in that it represents that era's sense of unknowing, its susceptibility to an unpredictable future. I have argued that *Birth*'s uniqueness among works of its time period results from the film's determination to suppress the affects that reveal these uncertainties. These affective postures include hope as well as fear; and the ending of *Birth*, because it occurs furthest forward in time, even depicting an unrealized future, offers us an accurate reading of some of its unvoiced hopes.

The dramatic action of *Birth* concludes with the victory of the Klansmen over Silas Lynch and his militia, punctuated by a celebratory parade. The 'helpless whites' who could do no more than 'look on' earlier in the movie, to cite one intertitle, now clap and wave, their exuberant relief serving as a visible analogue for the spectator's emotions (Griffith, *Birth*). Three brief postludes follow this scene, each enriching the film's record of its own hopes. The first is set during the election following the Klan's triumph, and depicts political disenfranchisement – blacks prohibited from voting by Klansmen on horseback. The second concludes the character arcs of the Cameron and Stoneman families by providing glimpses of the happy marital unions of the two principal couples. The third and final postlude differs from the other two – and from the whole film – in that it is set in the future, not the past. An intertitle longs for the replacement of the rule of 'bestial War' by the dominion of 'the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace', and two tableaus briefly depict each (Griffith, *Birth*). First, captive souls struggle within a hellish landscape overseen by a god of war astride a bull; then, a Christ-like figure presides over an all-white garden party. Parallel edits link the scene of Ben and Elsie on their honeymoon, gazing wistfully at the ocean, to the joyous gathering above which Christ is seated, such that in the last scene, Ben and Elsie seem to be looking at the heavenly city that contains that gathering rather than at the ocean. The film ends with a final intertitle: 'Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!' (Griffith, *Birth*).

The first two of these three postludes celebrate a nation united by its exclusion of black citizens from basic civic and societal institutions. Blacks are withheld the right to vote, and the film's white characters unite in marriages that symbolize a final erasure of the specter of interracial relationships. Insofar as these scenes spell out the hopes of *Birth*, its hopes are clear, and clearly racist. However, the inclusion of the final postlude – the only one set in the future – makes reading

the film's ending a less straightforward task. Arthur Lennig rightly observes a disjunction between this last coda and the rest of the film: 'It is hard to conceive the relation between the allegorical finale and the play proper.'[35] I contend that the reason for this disjunction is that the scenes of hell and heaven are the only ones in *Birth* that fully depart from its rigorous bent towards verisimilitude, its treatment of the camera as an instrument for the retrieval of historical truth. At the very last, Griffith admits, as it were, the capacity of cinema to imagine rather than to merely record.

We must consider, then, from Griffith's perspective, what value could inhere in these final religious tableaus that outweighs the appeal to historicity so prevalent in the film. Barrett suggests that the death of Lincoln requires the instantiation of a new governing authority which can only be God Himself.[36] Courtney, too, sees the invocation of supernatural authority as central, commenting that the ending depicts 'a new white order divinely envisioned by [Ben Cameron], the film, and its spectator'.[37] Nonetheless, no turn to explicitly religious figures or doctrines appears anywhere else in *Birth*, which makes its sudden borrowing from Christian iconography disorienting.

In this case, an insight into the process of the film's composition is crucial. Rogin reminds us that '[t]he original ending of *Birth*, "Lincoln's solution", showed masses of Negros being loaded on ships to be sent back to Africa'.[38] In this scene – eventually removed because it too obviously demonstrated the film's obsession with racial purity[39] – an intertitle reasserts Lincoln's authority, and *Birth*, while still depicting an envisioned future rather than the historical past, avoids straying too far from the willed mimesis that has patterned it throughout. Given the consistently racist subtext of *Birth*, and the absence elsewhere in it of religious symbolism, its rendering of a surge in the still-nascent Back-to-Africa movement would likely capture the film's true hopes more accurately than do its closing images of the god of war and the Prince of Peace. Thus, we should read *Birth*'s religious ending less as a record of its *own* hopes than as a concession to the likely hopes of its audience, and as an attempt to meld its supremacist reading of history with the nation's still predominantly Christian beliefs. Griffith's invocation of Christ and his New Jerusalem functions as a final effort to convince his audience – an audience he has thus far patronized and denigrated – that his worldview is commensurate with their own. The film even abandons its verisimilar style to make this plea.

And why must *Birth* do this except because it is uncertain of its own success? *Birth*'s ending admits to a final anxiety it everywhere denies,

a worry that its object – the pure representation of history, the wielding of cinema as aesthetic didacticism – will still leave room for varying interpretations or ambiguities. *Birth*, a filmic attempt to banish the need for hope and fear in art, finally proves to be hopeful and fearful about its own reception. That these fears were to prove justified, both in the immediate aftermath of the film's release, which incited riots and protests, and on a timeline extending to the present day, hardly needs stating. The film remains a useful object lesson in part because of the intricate connections, laid out in part here, between its racist ideology and its aesthetic of historical and authorial control. The originating vision that inspired the film, in Thomas Dixon's novel and in D.W. Griffith's imagination, was a toxic one; but this vision was abetted by, and may have even helped to inculcate, the film's misguided aesthetic goals. *The Birth of a Nation* has been hailed as a formal marvel and at the same time denigrated as racially poisonous; but this essay has shown that in one sense the movie is not only an ideological but a formal failure, since it is unable to live up to its own impossible aims. That is to say, *Birth* is a failure on Griffith's own flawed terms, and the fact that the film outstrips them is its own curious testament to Griffith's brilliance and to the rich complexity of *Birth*.

In any one artwork, the precise relation of cause and effect between politics and aesthetics must typically remain mysterious, and we cannot extrapolate a general principle regarding their connection within this film beyond that the two can emerge in consonance with each other and can directly influence each other. But in the case of *Birth*, at least, the unifying theme behind this link can be more precisely established. What the film evinces above all, in both form and theme, is a longing for control – over its subject matter, over its audience, and finally over history itself. I've argued that this longing, which emanates from and reflects a powerful fearfulness and uncertainty due to the rapidly changing cultural landscape of America in the early twentieth century, renders *Birth* a kind of unwillingly modernist document. In the end, Griffith's reductive aesthetic philosophy already presages that the troubling social hopes invested in *Birth* would go unrealized. More than this, the film cannot sustain its own totalizing vision, finally surrendering its pretensions to control over the future and over its own self-contesting significations. *Birth*'s lasting message, then, may be an unintended one: that the kind of control – aesthetic, historical, political – for which Griffith agitates remains something art, in all its unpredictable dynamism, is unable to provide.

Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Baylor University for granting me a Summer Research Sabbatical during which I wrote the initial draft of this essay. For helpful and memorable conversations, thanks also to Will Brian and Chris Stevens.

1. Dick Lehr, *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), p. 100. The same quotation, in full or in part, appears in much of the scholarship on Griffith and on *The Birth of a Nation*. See for example Geoff Pingree, 'History Is What Remains: Cinema's Challenge to Ideas about the Past', in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), pp. 36–37; Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 17; Michael Rogin, '"The Sword Became a Flashing Vision": D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*', *Representations*, 9 (1985), p. 184; and Robert Lang, '*The Birth of a Nation*: History, Ideology, Narrative Form', in *The Birth of a Nation*: *D.W. Griffith*, ed. by Robert Lang (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 4.
2. Lehr, p. 136.
3. Quoted in Jenny Barrett, *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History and American National Identity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 128.
4. On Griffith's efforts to market Birth as historically accurate, see Brian J. Snee, *Lincoln before Lincoln: Early Cinematic Adaptations of the Life of America's Greatest President* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), p. 38. On its enthusiastic critical reception, see Arthur Lennig, 'Myth and Fact: The Reception of "The Birth of a Nation"', *Film History*, 16 (2004), 117–141 (pp. 123–24); Rogin, p. 184; Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 20; and Lehr, p. 199.
5. Lennig, p. 125. Griffith was so confident about the historical accuracy of *Birth* that he publicly offered $10,000 to the president of the NAACP if he could find anything erroneous in it; see Rogin, p. 184 and Lehr, p. 178.
6. According to Jenny Barrett, Griffith 'approached film as a morally and socially educational tool' (pp. 151–52). Terry Christensen uses the same phrase, suggesting that Griffith 'saw film as an educational tool, and [. . .] set out to use it as such' (Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from* Birth of a Nation *to* Platoon (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 20). In Lennig's words, Griffith made a 'sincere effort to use the screen as a pulpit' (p. 118).
7. Melvyn Stokes, *American History Through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 120, 129.
8. Much of the literature on the film cites and draws on Rogin, 'Sword', and on Clyde Taylor, 'The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema', in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. by Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 15–37. Recent contributions to the scholarship on *The Birth of a Nation* include Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903–1967* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lehr, *The Birth of a Nation*; Eric Olund, 'Geography Written in Lightning: Race, Sexuality, and Regulatory Aesthetics in *The Birth of a Nation*', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103 (2013), 925–43; Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation*: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* (New York: Oxford University Press,

2007); Michele Faith Wallace, 'The Good Lynching and "The Birth of a Nation": Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow', *Cinema Journal*, 43 (2003), 85–104; and Barrett, *Shooting the Civil War*. See also *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 14 (2015), an issue dedicated to reassessing the film's legacy.

9. Heather K. Love, 'Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Queer Modernism', in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 19.
10. Elaine Frantz Parsons, 'Revisiting The Birth of a Nation at 100 Years', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 14 (2015), 596–98 (p. 596).
11. Clyde Taylor offers perhaps the most compelling rejection of the possibility of divorcing the film's formal achievements from its political claims; see Taylor, 'Re-Birth', p. 17.
12. Rogin, p. 151.
13. Ibid., p. 185.
14. Lennig, p. 126.
15. *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. by David W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Birth*.
16. Davarian L. Baldwin, '"I Will Build a Black Empire": *The Birth of a Nation* and the Specter of the New Negro', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 14 (2015), 599–603, p. 600; Olund, p. 927; Fabe, p. 22; and Christensen, p. 18.
17. Olund, p. 926.
18. Courtney, p. 19. See also Baldwin, p. 600; Barrett, p. 140; Courtney, p. 5; and Rogin, pp. 166–67, 175–78.
19. Here I concur with Merritt, who argues that *Birth* 'bristles with discordant elements, overtones out of control, that fight the dominant themes' (Russell Merritt, 'D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*: Going After Little Sister', in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. by Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), p. 233).
20. Courtney, p. 23.
21. Ibid., p. 65; Rogin, pp. 166–84; Olund, p. 937; Everett Carter, 'Cultural History Written with Lightning: The Significance of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)', in *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, ed. by Peter C. Rollins (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 15.
22. Daniel J. Walkowitz, 'Re-Screening the Past: Subversion Narratives and the Politics of History', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger, 1998), p. 49. On *Birth* as a nostalgic work, see also Stokes, *American History*, p. 38, and Carter, 'Cultural History', p. 12.
23. Carter, pp. 11–12.
24. Olund, p. 937.
25. Merritt, p. 220.
26. Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 26.
27. On Griffith's sophisticated use of these techniques with respect to temporality, see also Rogin, p. 157.
28. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 30.
29. Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p. 169. On Pudovkin's naturalism, see David Harrah, 'Aesthetics of the

Film: The Pudovkin-Arnheim-Eisenstein Theory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 13 (1954), pp. 164–5. On Eisenstein's utopianism and the broader utopianism of the avant-garde, see Hagener, *Moving Forward*, pp. 167, 202.

30. Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram', in Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), pp. 37–38.
31. See Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).
32. Gunning, p. 103.
33. Merritt, p. 219.
34. Ibid., pp. 227–28, 234–35.
35. Lennig, p. 119.
36. Barrett, p. 147.
37. Courtney, p. 97.
38. Rogin, p. 153.
39. As Lennig reports, a Censorship Board deemed the scene 'too inflammatory' and demanded its removal (p. 125).

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