White Hoods and Burning Crosses: The Portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in American Film
Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to analyze and discuss the way in which the Ku Klux Klan is portrayed in the American cinematography. The selected movies will be analyzed separately in the cultural, and especially in the historical context. There are five movies to be dealt with: David W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), David O. Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Alan Parker’s *Mississippi Burning* (1988), Costa Gavras’ *Betrayed* (1988), and Joel Schumacher’s *A Time to Kill* (1996). These movies were chosen according to the historical period they cover, their influence on the cinematography and, especially, their relation to the Ku Klux Klan itself.

As a popular film is not a documentary, a certain degree of fictionalization of the history can be expected from every such movie dealing with some historical topic. In my thesis, I will not criticize the movies for their misrepresentation of history. However, I find it necessary to point out certain distortions of historical facts that were made in them, as they are important to the topic of my thesis and, at some points, considered to be very important from a historical point of view. As each of the movies analyzed in this thesis deals with a different period of the Klan’s existence (with the exception of the first two), an individual analysis of each movie will be offered and only in two cases a comparison between them will be done. A conclusion will be drawn as to what image of the Ku Klux Klan these movies offer, whether they have something in common and what cultural impact they had.

With regard to a choice of the topic for my thesis, it is important to mention a few things. Firstly, it is really surprising that although the Ku Klux Klan is the most well-known terrorist organization in the history of the United States, the number of films dealing with this topic is actually quite low. During the research, excluding the movies to be dealt with in the thesis, I have come across only one movie directly related to the
Klan – The Klansman, and only a few other movies where the Klan is present (e.g. To Kill a Mockingbird, The FBI story, Ghosts of Mississippi). Little awareness of this organization among people is yet another striking phenomenon. After hearing what the topic of my thesis is, it was very surprising that many people did not know what the Ku Klux Klan is. I believe that a lack of Klan related movies is closely interconnected with this issue, as films and the internet have been more and more preferred to reading books recently. Because of the fact that popular movies are often more accessible and well-known than any other form of cultural representation, I decided to focus on this form of a Klan portrayal in the thesis. It was also a lack of knowledge on my side about this “country’s oldest terrorist organization” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History) that played a role in choosing the topic of the thesis. A great deal of mystery, violence and terror surrounding it, and the role of this organization in the history of the United States were the primary factors that convinced me to concentrate on a portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in American film.

Regarding the choice of the movies, the selection was made with the objective of covering the whole period of Klan’s existence from the Reconstruction period (The Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind), through the civil rights struggle (Mississippi Burning) and militant era of the 1980’s (Betrayed) to the present Klan (A Time to Kill). Attention was paid to certain historical distortions made in these movies (or accurate depiction of historical facts), and to the significance and cultural impact they had (The Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind). Indeed, a degree to which the movies reflect a certain issue or period concerning the Ku Klux Klan, whether the Klan is the main theme of the movie or it is not, was of high importance in deciding what movies to analyze in the thesis.
Before attempting to analyze the selected movies, I deem it necessary a brief historical background be drawn for the reader’s better orientation in the Klan’s history and the timeline of its existence.

1.1. Ku Klux Klan: A Brief History

“The Klan’s here because we’ve been here for a hundred and thirty-one years. The legacy is that we’ve had a lot of hangings, lot of bombings, lot of shootings…That don’t bother me at all. If somebody wants to go out here and kill niggers […] they’re not our equal. They have no right to breathe free air in America.”

(C. Edward Foster, Grand Dragon of American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1997)

“Why don’t we start a club of some kind?”

(John Lester, spring 1866)

Founded in a little town of Pulaski, Tennessee by six young Confederate soldiers, the First Ku Klux Klan was, according to one of its founders, James Crowe, “purely social and for our amusement […] to have fun, make mischief, and play pranks on the public” (Wade 34). When choosing the name for their club, the founders “picked the Greek word ‘kyklos’ (circle) and added ‘Klan’” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History), as they all were of Scottish ancestry. They draped themselves in sheets, put pillow cases over their heads and began making night rides into the town to scare people. Soon their actions took a more violent turn and, as a reaction to the events of the Reconstruction period, they began whipping and killing freed blacks and their white sympathizers during their night rides. Because of the increased violence and the fact that the Klan got out of
control, General Forrest ordered its disbandment in 1869. (Wade 59) However, many local groups remained active. In response, the Congress passed the Force Act in 1870 and the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871 that brought heavy penalties on the terrorist groups. After the Federal prosecution and the official end of the Reconstruction in 1876, the First Klan came out of existence. (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History)

The premiere of D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation in 1915, which inflamed racial hatred in the South, created great conditions for William J. Simmons to resurrect the Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta. The Second Klan came into existence with Simmons as its Imperial Wizard. Claiming to be champions of the Christian morals and the protectors of the white womanhood, the Klansmen took the holiest Christian symbol of the cross for the purpose of emphasising the group’s values. Based on the slogan “One hundred percent Americanism,” “the new Klan would be a patriotic organization for American born white Protestants only” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History). In the early 1920’s its popularity peaked, with membership exceeding 4 million nationwide. (KKK: Inside American Terror) Roman Catholics, Jews, immigrants, Communists and organized labour were added to blacks in the Klan’s list of enemies. Members of the Klan controlled high political offices and in 1924 all of the elected officials in the state of Indiana were either Klansmen or their sympathizers. After the violence and political scandals came to light, and the Klan became prosecuted by Federal Government, its membership decreased dramatically. The Great Depression of the 1930’s accelerated the decline, and after the Federal suit for income tax delinquency in 1944, the Second Klan went officially bankrupt. (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History)

It was revived again in 1946, by Doc. Samuel Green and his Association of Georgia Klans. The Klan “was now a local affair” (Wade 277) with individual states having their own Klandoms that continued in their violent actions. “The nation itself had grown
weary of Klan violence, however. A number of Southern states enacted their own laws against the Klan.” (Wade 297) The Klan sprang into action “with the Negro lunch-counter sit-ins, freedom rides, and massed demonstrations” (Chalmers 366) – the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. Violent fight for the preservation of the racial segregation in the South started. The most infamous and violent of the Klan fractions of the time were the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. After numerous brutal murders of the civil rights workers, President Lyndon Johnson officially denounced the Klan: “…let it be both an appeal and a warning, to get out of the Ku Klux Klan now, and to return to a decent society before it is too late!” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History) FBI intervention, arresting and the Federal prosecution of the Klansmen increased. The violence of the Klan also started to horrify the nation: “Americans rated the Klan worse than the Viet Cong.” (Wade 367) In the early 1970’s the number of Klansmen reached its “all-time minimum of fifteen hundred, and it seemed as if the Klan was dying out completely” (KKK: Inside American Terror).

Another revival of the Klan came in the 1970’s with David Duke who tried to clean-up the Klan’s image through the media, claiming the Klan to be “not anti-black but more pro-white […] simply an organization that’s working for the interests and the ideals and the culture of the white people” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History). But violent actions of the numerous militant Klan fractions and Duke’s fixation to Nazi ideology were counter-productive to this original intention. In the early 1980’s many Klan groups transferred to paramilitary organizations. Texas Klan leader Louis Beam started opening paramilitary training camps, where children were taught white Gospel of the Klan and trained with men in using weapons. Opposition of the civil rights organizations against the Klan increased, which resulted in the first case of a member of the Ku Klux Klan being sentenced to death for killing a black man in 1987.
“With national membership just over five thousand the Ku Klux Klan today is but a shadow of its former self. [...] The Ku Klux Klan is America’s first society of hate. Although diminished [...] their bigotry lies bubbling under the surface eager to rise at any moment to battle against racial equality.” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History)
2. THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA AND THE FIRST KLAN

2.1. The Birth of a Nation

2.1.1. Plot Summary

Divided into two parts separated by an intermission, this silent movie represents pre-Civil War America together with happenings of the Civil War (Part 1) and the Reconstruction period following the Civil War (Part 2). In the first part, two families are introduced: Northern family of the Stonemans, which consists of a radical Congressman Austin Stoneman and his children – daughter Elsie and two sons, and the Southern Camerons, Southern Carolinian family consisting of the parents and their children – daughters Margaret and Flora, and three sons, the eldest of who is Ben.

In the beginning of the movie the Stoneman boys visit the Camerons in their estate (representing an Old South way of life). The eldest Stoneman boy, Phil Stoneman, falls in love with Margaret Cameron while Ben Cameron idolizes a picture of Elsie Stoneman. Their friendship is violently smothered by outbreak of the Civil War and sons have to join their respective armies. During the War, the youngest Stoneman and two Cameron boys are killed. Making the horrors of the War even worse for Camerons, their estate is pillaged by a black militia; fortunately Confederate soldiers come and rescue them. Ben Cameron is wounded in a heroic battle, in which he gains a nickname “the Little Colonel,” and is rescued by a leader of an enemy troop, his friend, Phil Stoneman. In the hospital, Ben falls in love with Elsie Stoneman who is working there as a nurse. After the war, Abraham Lincoln is assassinated and Austin Stoneman together with other radical Congressmen begins punishing the South for its secession.

In Part 2, the South is being tortured by the radical Reconstruction unleashed by Stoneman and his mullato protegé Silas Lynch. In South Carolina (representing the whole South), black soldiers are parading through the streets, while white Southerners
have no right to vote and are being turned away from the ballot boxes. The all-black Government passes laws forcing whites to salute black officers and allowing mixed-race marriages. Sitting on a rock and watching children play (white children pretend to be a ghost and scare off black children), desperate Ben Cameron has a vision. He forms the Ku Klux Klan, which is put to an outlaw position immediately. Elsie dislikes his membership in this organization and calls off the engagement.

The turning point comes when a former slave, now educated and recognized through the army – Gus – proposes to marry Flora Cameron. His lascivious advances scare her off and she runs away to the forest, chased by him. She rather leaps to death then having her innocence violated. Ku Klux Klan chases Gus, then tries him, finds him guilty and sentences him to death. Gus’s death body is left on Silas Lynch’s doorstep. Lynch orders a crackdown on the Klan and its helpers. The Camerons must flee away from the black militia and find their refuge in a small hut tenanted by two old Union soldiers, who agree to help them in the name of protection of their common Aryan birthright.

Meanwhile, Silas Lynch tries to force Elsie Stoneman to marry him. The city is turned upside-down because of riots of the black mob. The Klansmen unite and in the full power they ride to rescue Elsie and to disperse the rioting blacks. They also manage to rescue the Camerons and Union soldiers surrounded by black soldiers. The Klansmen are successful and celebrate in the streets. In the next election, blacks have no right to vote and are disarmed. The movie concludes with a double honeymoon of Ben and Elsie, and Phil and Margaret.
2.1.2. Deeper Insight: “Writing History with Lightning”

“It is like writing history with lightning,
and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”

(Woodrow Wilson after he saw the movie)

Based on Thomas Dixon’s The Clansman, Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation offers its audience a Southern version of the history – the history of the Civil War and the Reconstruction. Griffith did not come up with anything new but what he had heard while growing up in the heart of the South. He “could recall the bitterness of the Reconstruction through the tales told by his father and others” (Niderost). As far as my work deals with the depiction of the Ku Klux Klan, I will not analyze this movie in its entirety. It is its second part that is crucial for my thesis and I will use the first part only for suggesting briefly a historical context of the Reconstruction period.

In the confrontation of Abraham Lincoln and Austin Stoneman, Griffith shows Lincoln as a last bastion standing between the devastated South and Northern Radicals wanting a hard persecution of the South for its secession: “Their leaders must be hanged and their states treated as conquered provinces.” – “I shall deal with them as though they had never been away.” (The Birth of a Nation) Lincoln’s assassination in the Ford’s Theatre is thus a great turning point and nothing keeps Stoneman away from realizing his plans anymore.

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1 The character of Austin Stoneman was modelled on a Radical Republican leader, Thaddeus Stevens, an advocate of treating Southern states during the Reconstruction as “conquered provinces” and a vehement critic of President Johnson’s Reconstruction policy, which eventually led him to become a leader in the effort to impeach the President. (Kennedy)
A short digression must be made here to mention another historical fact necessary for further analysis of the movie. Soon after the Civil War, Northern abolitionists began badgering Congress to do something for newly freed blacks who were now without a master. Yet, on the other hand, without a shelter and any property, they were wandering around practically homeless. As a response, on March 3, 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedman’s Bureau,\(^2\) administered in the South by carpetbaggers.\(^3\) Its establishment is not mentioned in the movie, but Griffith shows everything that the white Southerners hated about it: “The South particularly hated the thought that carpetbaggers were putting new ideas into the heads of their former slaves.” (Wade 12) These ideas corresponded with the idea of equality of blacks and whites in all aspects of living. Griffith then draws his own interpretation of the historical events. Carpetbaggers and blacks disfranchise all leading whites and give the ballot to all blacks, manipulate the election and create a “negro magistrate and negro jury.” The “helpless white minority” is oppressed by the majority of blacks controlling the State House of Representatives. They even pass the law allowing intermarriage between blacks and whites. Movie captions support the Griffith’s portrayal of the dreadful situation the South was in. According to this interpretation it is inevitable that something needs to be done. Then the Ku Klux Klan finally comes into existence.

Through the allowing of intermarriage, Griffith shows the biggest fear of all the white Southerners which becomes real – the “Negro” does finally have access to a white

\(^2\) “During its brief career, the Freedman’s Bureau established 3,695 schools and three universities, built more than a hundred hospitals, issued more than 21 million rations, and provided free transportation to more than thirty thousand people dislocated by war.” (Wade 12)

\(^3\) a pejorative term that meant “a Southern-based Northerner who didn’t share the Confederacy’s views on race” (Wade 12)
woman. Chalmers explains the status of a woman in the Southern culture in his *Hooded Americanism*:

The woman not only stood at the core of his sense of property and chivalry, she represented the heart of his culture. By the fact that she was not accessible to the Negro, she marked the ultimate line of difference between white and black. Not only was any attack on white woman a blow against the whole idea of the South, but any change in the status of the Negro in the South thereby also became an attack on the cultural symbol: the white woman. (21)

In *The Birth of a Nation* Griffith offers a portrayal of violence and a threat the black man represents in relation to the white womanhood. It is not a coincidence that Ben Cameron’s idea of establishing the Ku Klux Klan comes into his mind a while after his young sister Flora’s (an idealistic portrait of a virgin clear Southern white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes) innocence is threatened by Gus (a black man) – “the renegade, a product of the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers” (*The Birth of a Nation*). Although this depiction of establishment of the Ku Klux Klan is from the historic point of view completely incorrect,⁴ it had a very powerful impact on the audience, because the majority of the common white Southerners believed in the threat of attacking the white womanhood, and thus the whole white society, by blacks. Flora rather chooses to die than having her innocence ravished by Gus, and Elsie Stoneman is fortunately saved from the vicious attacks of Silas Lynch. Saving Elsie corresponds to saving the whole white womanhood in this case.

Knowing all these facts, let us now have a closer look at the portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan itself in the movie. There are some things about the Klan’s portrayal that

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⁴ see 1.1.
correspond with the interpretation offered by the historians. In Ben Cameron’s inspiration, where the white sheet scares off the black children, it is shown why founders of the Klan kept using this form of disguise: “The Klansmen’s posture as real ghosts took advantage of the supposed gullibility and superstitiousness of the freedmen…” (Wade 35) Griffith’s portrayal of the Klan as only scaring blacks to a certain extent corresponds with real actions of the first Klan which at the beginning tried to scare blacks and show some sort of a mental superiority of the white race. In some cases it worked for sure but “there is no evidence, however, that these scare tactics exerted any control of blacks whatsoever” (Wade 36). In one scene of the movie, Griffith uses a well-known story of scaring a black man by a trick consisting of a Klansman drinking a bucket of water completed with a story saying “he had not had a drink of water since the battle of Shiloh and lived in hell and had ridden twice around the world since suppertime” (Chalmers 9). But Griffith stays at this level and does not show the next level of the Klan actions – the level of the extended violence. The Klan is not violent unless it is provoked by actions of the blacks. On the contrary, he depicts blacks as the violent ones, who shed the first blood, and for the rest of the movie the Ku Klux Klan is showed as a noble patriotic group of heroes fighting for the freedom of the white South.

After the worst possible nightmare of every white Southerner of those times becomes real and the black man tries to steal an innocence of the white woman (Gus and Flora), Klan’s actions take more violent course and Ben Cameron and his fellow Knights chase Gus and lynch him. In this case, the most common practice of the Ku Klux Klan against blacks – lynching\(^5\) – is shown as a legal and righteous form of vengeance. Griffith, however, does not use this, quite a strong term. He refers to the

\(^5\) “Although a substantial number of white people were victims of this crime, the vast majority of those lynched, by the 1890s and after the turn of the century, were Black people. Actually, the pattern of almost exclusive lynching of Negroes was set during the Reconstruction period.” (Gibson)
lynching of Gus as “he may be given a fair trial in the dim halls of the Invisible Empire” (The Birth of a Nation). Gus is found guilty and killed. The lynching of Gus served in the movie as an exemplary punishment and the “answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers.” The Klan is shown in a defensive position, using violence only because it had to, provoked by actions of blacks. However, historians say something different from this interpretation. Local administrators appointed by Union League throughout the whole South reported of violent actions the Klan committed against blacks and carpetbaggers: “Local dens seemed hellbent on using any degree of violence necessary to ‘restore’ the black man to his condition before the war.” (Wade 47)

In the scene displaying some of the Klan rituals, that also includes burning of the cross, the Klan’s portrayal as a patriotic Southern Christian organization is confirmed by Ben Cameron’s declamation: “…this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization” and “Here I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland’s hills…” (The Birth of a Nation) The first sentence refers to the Confederate flag and a Southern woman. These were the two symbols of the Southern patriotism (the woman representing some sort of a heart of the South, as already mentioned above). In the second sentence, “the fiery cross of Scotland’s hills” represents the Klan’s Christianity, its claimed Scottish ancestry (that is why its founders chose the word ‘Klan’ to be a part of the group’s name), and, given by the Scottish ancestry and American citizenship, Protestant beliefs.

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6 “The racist myth of Negroes’ uncontrollable desire to rape white women […] rape and attempted rape – 25.3 per cent of the victims. Concerning this figure, Myrdal states: ‘There is much reason to believe that this figure has been inflated by the fact that a mob which makes the accusation of rape is secure from any further investigation; by the broad Southern definition of rape to include all sexual relations between Negro men and white women; and by the psychopathic fears of white women in their contacts with Negro men…’” (Gibson)

7 Cross-burning ceremony, which is now the most important one of the Klan’s rituals, “had never been part of the Reconstruction Ku-Klux. It had come from the exotic imagination of Thomas Dixon.” (Wade 146)
“The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright.” (The Birth of a Nation) Although historians agree that actions of the first Klan were oriented towards white Northerners living in the South (most notably teachers and others who helped ‘Negroes’) almost as much as towards blacks, Griffith shows his vision of the white race in its entirety which is endangered by blacks. In this case, it could be seen as the danger that still persists in the time the movie was shot, not only in the time it tells the audience about. His intention was clearly to create a memento for the white people: “Do not allow this to happen again!”

The ecstatic ending of the movie shows the atrocious behaviour of blacks controlling the town. In this twisted view they are committing actions associated with the behaviour of the first Klan of that time: “the victims of the black mobs” (The Birth of a Nation) are humiliated, tarred and feathered, this medieval form of humiliation was often used by Klan, mostly against carpetbaggers and white teachers in black schools (Wade) scared whites afraid of lynching are awaiting their end in jail. All are saved by the United Klan riding on their horsebacks to rescue the fate of the white race. Although outnumbered, they scatter the black mob, showing their courage in the fight. This portrayal of the Klan corresponds to its image in the view of the white South in two historical timelines. On the one side there is the view of the Southerners living through the Reconstruction period in 1860/70’s who directly witnessed the actions of the Klan, on the other hand there is a new generation of the Southerners living in the 1910/20’s witnessing the Klan actions watching The Birth of a Nation in the cinema: “The Klansmen were aristocrats, they were heroes, and they were a hell of a bunch of fellows… The resulting view of the Klan as a regulating force for protection in lawless times captured the hearts of those who rode and of future

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8 This medieval form of humiliation was often used by Klan, mostly against carpetbaggers and white teachers in black schools (Wade)
9 However, Dr. Allen Trelease in his White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction claims that “there was not a single incident in all of his research where he could find Klansmen participating in any confrontation which might be loosely described as a ‘fair fight.’” (Mark Pinsky)
generations of Southerners.” (Chalmers 20) A view of the Klan as a protecting and lawful organization is crucial when watching the movie. Disarming all blacks and regulating the next election (depriving blacks of their right to vote which they will not get back till century later) seems absolutely right, reasonable and inevitable for securing rights of the white race in the reconstructed South to Griffith and the Southerners of that time; the view which will prevail in the South for many decades later. A little white blonde girl scarred in a cabin surrounded by black brutes trying to get in and hurt her, who is saved by the heroic Klan, and white citizens cheering the Klan cavalry while terrified blacks are running away restored to the position where they belong to, is a great illustration of the legendary role of the Klan in the Southern folk tales, the Klan which brings peace and liberty to the white race: “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!” (The Birth of a Nation)

2.1.3. Summary

Today’s viewer of Griffith’s movie will not be able to understand the way those historical events were depicted in, and also the great success of the movie, unless he/she understands the mind of the Southerner living on the turn of the 19th and 20th century.

The question has been asked: “Does not the ‘Birth of a Nation’ exaggerate? Does it present conditions as they really were?” Only those who lived through Reconstruction days can answer the question, and the answer has been given by a devoted woman of the Confederacy who, after seeing the play, remarked: “It does not tell half enough of the horrors of those dark days.” (Rose)

Griffith, who was surrounded by the people with the same opinion as the above cited devoted Southern woman had, hearing stories of the Civil War and Reconstruction,
especially from his father (a former Confederate soldier wounded during the war), did not even consider these to be anything else but the truth; the way of thinking which at least helped, but, more precisely, led to the revival of the organization seen by the people of those times as a group of “brave men who rode side by side with death during the darkest hour in the South’s history to redeem the land from carpetbag and negro rule” (Rose) and by historians of today as “the country’s oldest terrorist organization which engaged in murder, intimidation, violence, rape, pillage and worst kinds of crime.” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History) Villains considered to be heroes, the oppression of blacks considered to be a defence in fighting for the rights of the white race, the killing of blacks considered to be a protection of the innocence of the white womanhood – these are the patterns of the Southern thinking we must bear in mind to be able to understand the popularity and the influence The Birth of a Nation had on the American history of the 20th century.

2.2. Gone with the Wind

2.2.1. Production Problems

Released twenty-four years after The Birth of a Nation, the adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s novel of the same name, Gone with the Wind, became one of the most successful and impressive products of Hollywood. This, more than three-hour long, love story deals with the same theme as D.W. Griffith’s masterpiece – American Civil War and the following Reconstruction of the South. But this adaptation was created in very different conditions from those The Birth of a Nation came into existence in.

The movie producer, David O. Selznick, found himself in quite a complicated situation right from the moment he bought rights to Mitchell’s book. Ku Klux Klan
seemed almost non-existent at those times, and members of the black activist organizations were determined not to allow anything to happen to help this organization rise again, as The Birth of a Nation did. Naturally, in the adaptation of Mitchell’s novel, which they found anti-negro, they saw a great danger of producing another anti-negro movie and they, as Leff claims, took a strong interest in the movie, and thus put Selznick under a constant control and guidance, especially by the black press. While some of the readers found Mitchell’s Southern romance powerfully written and black characters depicted as really authentic (as screenwriter Howard did), black organizations were concerned, to say the least, about Mitchell’s treatment of the black characters in her work: “We consider this work to be a glorification of the old rotten system of slavery, propaganda for race-hatreds and bigotry, and incitement of lynching.” (Leff) Howard and Selznick produced a movie that was full of contrasts. They deleted many scenes to, according to Selznick, “make the blacks come out on the right side of the ledger” (Leff). On the other hand, they allowed use of the words like “darkies” and “inferiors” in the movie, and kept portraying blacks according to popular black stereotypes of the time. They also left Mitchell’s division of blacks into “faithful good slave niggers” and “violent black apes” without a slightest change. One more thing that Selznick did in order not to anger the members of black organizations, and which is the most important in the movie for this thesis, was the deletion of any

10 see 1.1.
11 “The book, a commercial and cultural phenomenon, sold a million copies during its first month in print.” (Leff)
12 The word “nigger” had originally stayed in the script, but under the pressure of the black organizations and actors themselves, “nigger” was eliminated from the screenplay, which “temporarily halted the war against Gone with the Wind.” (Leff)
13 These stereotypes were developed from generalization of behavior of African Americans, black movie characters were acting only according to one of these stereotypes (e.g. mammy, uncle tom, coon, brute, sambo…) Audience found such a depiction funny, but scholars pointed out the negatives of such portrayal: “stereotyping objects in popular culture that depict blacks as servile, primitive, or simpleminded and explains how the subtle influences of such seemingly harmless images reinforce antiblack attitudes.” (Turner)
reference of the Ku Klux Klan whatsoever. However, even though the Klan is not mentioned directly, its presence can be felt. Only white hoods and sheets are missing.

2.2.2. The Klan Omitted?

There is only one short sequence in the whole movie related to the Klan. As I have mentioned already, the idea of a black man’s lust for a white woman was the phenomenon of the white Southern mind at those times. Scarlett O’ Hara (the main female character of the film) rides alone to the mill, passing Shanty town on her road. It is a poor, dirty and ugly slum outside the town where former slaves unable to adapt to the new way of life (Mitchell’s black apes in the novel) live together with poor whites. Such a place is very dangerous for a lonely woman to be around. Scarlett is attacked by two men, one black and one white.\textsuperscript{14} Being aware of the impact \textit{The Birth of a Nation} had on the minds of the white people and the strengthening of the racial hatred it caused, Selznick has a white man try to rape Scarlett in the movie while the black one is only helping him. Scarlett is saved by ‘Big Sam’ (one of the “good darkies”\textsuperscript{15}) who escorts her home. After hearing what happened, Frank (Scarlett’s husband), claims he has to go to a “political meeting.”

In Mitchell’s work, the Klan is again depicted as an organization of white noble Southerners protecting honour of their women and that of their own. Every Southern gentleman belongs to this group. Trying to erase any sign of the Klan in \textit{Gone with the Wind}, Selznick uses the phrase “political meeting” instead of the “Klan meeting.”

After Scarlett is attacked and her honour is put in danger, the Klan meeting is held, where gentlemen decide to raid Shanty town to take a revenge for Scarlett. In the movie,

\textsuperscript{14} Here is another change Selznick and Howard made. In Mitchell’s novel Scarlett was attacked only by a black brute.

\textsuperscript{15} “Good darkies” in this case were simple minded good slaves blindly loyal to their masters who did not want slavery to be abolished and were not able to free oneself from the influence of their former masters.
Melanie Wilkes helps Scarlett understand the noble thing their men are doing: “That’s what a great many of our Southern gentlemen would have to do lately for our protection.” (Gone with the Wind) But the Northern authorities know about their plan and the Southern gentlemen are riding into the trap. Women are really worried about them, because they understand the price of such a protection. Judy Wilkes clarifies this to confused Scarlett: “And if they’re captured, they will be hanged…” (Gone with the Wind) Here, the omission of the Klan can bring a great deal of confusion into one’s mind. Why would there be an imminent death sentence of any kind for doing a virtually noble thing? Why should be the Northern authorities interested in local affairs of such kind whatsoever? Why would they want to capture and punish gentlemen instead of criminals who tried to rape a Southern lady? There has to be something else hidden in the nature of this act of revenge. And the missing piece, one is looking for in order to answer these questions, is the fact, that these men are Klan members. “It’s about time you rebels learn you cannot take a law into your own hands!” the Yankee captain says while trying to arrest the Southerners for the raid on Shanty town in the movie. Let me digress here briefly to make this clear from the historical point of view.

During the Reconstruction, on March 29, 1871, the controversial Ku-Klux Act was passed by the Congress to prevent violent actions of the Klan against blacks and carpetbaggers in the South. It gave Congress and the President a great power in dealing with the Ku Klux Klan and with Southern states as such. “Sections three and four allowed the President to use the military to put down any civil disturbances that deprived citizens of their constitutional rights and, for a limited time, to suspend the writ of habeas corpus ‘when in his judgement the public safety shall require it…”’ (Wade 90) The U.S. Army thus superseded the local authorities and represented the

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16 For further information on Ku-Klux Act see Wade 90-111.
highest authority in the South. However, there is not any evidence of a death sentence for the Klan members for their actions, the “Klansmen who were tried and found guilty were sentenced to prison” (Wade 103). The threat of hanging of the noble Southerners belonging to the Klan existed only in the mind of a Southern writer.

Without knowing these facts, action of the Union Army seems out-of-place in the movie. In order to understand such a portrayal, the reader (and the viewer of the movie) must again consider the historical context these were created in. Mitchell in the novel offers a biased Southern view on the Reconstruction period, sympathetic with the white Southerners oppressed by Yankees and burdened by freed black people unable to integrate the society. Having this piece of work serving as the original, Selznick tried to produce a movie that would be friendly to both sides. “He wanted nothing – and certainly not racial tyranny – to harm the potentially ‘enormous Negro audience’ for the picture. He was nonetheless wary of offending southern whites’ racial sensibilities.” (Leff) But he considered Mitchell too big an expert on the minds of black people and the South during the Reconstruction period to question her. This and the prevailing stereotypical portrayal of black characters precluded his intentions of creating a movie that would be friendly to everybody. Selznick produced a piece of work that is respected as one of the greatest films in the history of Hollywood and “remains a testament to the Technicolor glory of the Hollywood studio system” (Leff). Yet, on the other hand, not everyone was so pleased with this highly anticipated movie and many critics condemned it for its racism and historical inaccuracy: “…Gone with the Wind offered up a motley collection of flat black characters that insulted the black audience […] weapon of terror against black America.” (Leff)
2.3. Summary

D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* could be considered to be one of the most influential movies in the American history. Praised by critics for its technical craftsmanship and condemned for its historical inaccuracy, it offers a mythical Southern tale of the Civil War and the Reconstruction. The tale where the black race is dangerous and needs to be controlled and the Ku Klux Klan is celebrated for saving the white South from black oppression. Because this view was shared by almost the whole white South at the beginning of the 20th century, Griffith’s movie is considered to be the most important factor in the resurrection of the most infamous terrorist organization in the American history.

Created two decades later, the film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*, was intended by its producer David O. Selznick to be a sweet Southern romance that would not harm anybody. The film dealt with the same theme as *The Birth of a Nation* did. In order to be racially friendly, any reference of the Ku Klux Klan was omitted together with many scenes depicting blacks offensively that were rewritten in the screenplay. Even though Selznick deleted any reference to the Klan, he did not make anything to condemn its actions either. As a result, although the Klan was not celebrated in *Gone with the Wind*, the stereotypical portrayal of black people and the historical inaccuracy of the movie was the cause of the great discontentment of the black audience.
3. THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE: MISSISSIPPI BURNING

3.1. Plot Summary

Mississippi Burning takes place in the mid 1960’s in Jessup County, Mississippi during the civil rights movement. It begins with three civil rights workers (one black and two white) driving in a car in the night. They are chased by members of the Ku Klux Klan as well as a police car, which stops them. Three young activists are then killed. Two FBI agents, Alan Ward (William Dafoe) and Rupert Anderson (Gene Hackman) are sent down to Mississippi to investigate the case of the missing civil rights workers. Each of them chooses a different track for solving the case. Although the Mississippian's claim the disappearance of the three civil rights workers is a hoax, FBI continues searching for the bodies. After the missing boys’ car is found in the swamp, Ward calls for more manpower, including Navy, to search the swamp for the missing bodies. This fuels the hatred of the town’s white people against FBI and the black community. Ku Klux Klan members set fires to houses and churches of the black people and use beating and killing to intimidate them from speaking to FBI agents. As the search for the missing bodies continues, Anderson keeps visiting the Deputy Sheriff’s wife (Frances McDormand) and they grow closer. Eventually, she tells him where to search for the bodies and subsequently is severely beaten by her husband because of it. This persuades Ward to adopt Anderson's tactics and they begin fighting the Klan in its own way, using bullying and intimidation. They finally get the names of the people involved in the murders by kidnapping and terrifying the town mayor, and then, by intimidating one of the Klan members, they get the evidence. The movie concludes with arresting of the guilty Klansmen and with snapshots of the Klan members with their sentences beneath. All but Sheriff Stuckey are sent to prison for three to ten years for the violation of the civil rights. The mayor, who was not even charged, hangs himself.
3.2. The “Freedom Summer” in Mississippi

Alan Parker’s *Mississippi Burning* was based on the real historical events of the 1960’s – the murders of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964. Before approaching the movie itself I deem it necessary a historical background be drawn in order to gain basic knowledge about these events.

In the 1960’s, the state of Mississippi is still a “closed society.” Blacks live here in terrible poverty, are subjected to intolerable segregated public facilities “and only 6 percent of its sizeable black population is able to vote” (Wade 333). The rest of the black population is intimidated from registering to vote by being arrested on trumped up charges, economic retaliation of the White Citizens’ Council\(^7\) and predominantly by the vicious terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan.\(^8\) Movement activists, trying to help blacks, suffer severe beatings, arresting and assassinations. A challenge to this “closed society” comes in 1964 when COFO\(^9\) announces a “Mississippi Summer,” during which trained volunteers (consisting mostly of the Northern white students) would be transported to Mississippi to educate blacks and help them to register to vote.

One of the most devoted COFO volunteers in Mississippi was 24-year-old Jew Michael Schwerner who, together with his wife Rita, were sent there to set up headquarters before the other volunteers arrived. With the help of a local black CORE member Jim Chaney they gained trust of the black community. In summer, after the COFO orientation meeting took place in Ohio, they were joined by another Jewish

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\(^7\) “In response to Brown v Board of Education white business leaders and politicians organize the White Citizens Council to defend white supremacy, resist integration, and supress all efforts on the part of Blacks to improve their lives. Quickly spreading across the South, the councils use economic retaliation, public condemnation, legislative lobbying, and legal strategems to preserve the ‘Southern way of life.’” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)

\(^8\) In the 1960’s there was not one and the only Ku Klux Klan. It was divided into multiple fractions representing every one of the Southern states. “With the multiplicity of Klan groups scattered throughout the South in the 1960’s one of the most bloodthristy was the White Knights of Mississippi.” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History)

\(^9\) The Council of Federated Organizations, “a vehicle through which civil rights organizations working in Mississippi can work together.” Its members consisted of CORE, SCLC, NAACP and SNCC and it focused on the education and registration of blacks to vote. (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)
Northern student, Andrew Goodman. “Meanwhile, white Mississippians prepared themselves for the rape of their sovereign state by ‘carpetbaggers,’ ‘Communist students,’ and ‘tennis-shoed beatniks.’” (Wade 337) The number of acts of violence and hatred against “freedom riders” in order to defend “the Southern way of life” was increasing rapidly. But still, the Government showed no willingness to intervene whatsoever. The Mississippi authorities openly acknowledged their violent intentions: “Mayor Allen Thompson tells a reporter: ‘This is it. They are not bluffing, and we are not bluffing. We are going to be ready for them… They won’t have a chance.’ […] FBI Director Hoover does, however, tell the press: ‘We will not wet-nurse troublemakers.’” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans) Without Federal intervention, Klan members were virtually invincible in their actions. Michael Schwerner’s activities in Mississippi had been uncomfortable for them for a long time and eventually he was marked for elimination. And when the other two students joined him in the community “they too were included in the White Knights’ final solution for Schwerner” (Chalmers 393).

Knowing these facts, let us now finally have a closer look at the movie itself. Mississippi Burning is highly acclaimed for its cinematographic achievements – it won many awards (e.g. Academy Awards for the Best Cinematography) and it also received many nominations. On the other hand, it has been criticized by many historians for its fictionalization of the history. I will now analyze the movie and show to what extent its interpretation of the history disagrees with the portrayed historical events as interpreted by historians.

At the beginning of the movie, the viewer is shown a short scene displaying the racial segregation in Mississippi. Historians agree that in the 1960’s, Mississippi was the most segregated of American states and that is why it was targeted by COFO for its “Freedom Summer.” The civil rights activist Julian Bond clarifies: “Civil rights
organizations decided to target it on the theory that if you can break the back of segregation here, you can certainly do it in other states where the resistance is not that great.” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History) The status of the black race remains here still the same as it was half a century ago. The presence of the segregation and the racial hatred is visible throughout the whole movie. White Mississippians see blacks as their “nigger problem,” all claiming that “Negroes have been all good” and “treated all fair for a long time” (Mississippi Burning). Alan Parker uses short cut-ins of dirty pigs during the scenes with white people expressing their opinions on blacks: “They’re not like us. They don’t take baths, they stink, they’re nasty…” (Mississippi Burning) Important here is a character of Clayton Townley. In his speech at a “political meeting” he represents views of the white Mississippians, speaking about the civil rights workers: “They hate Mississippi! They hate us because we present a shiny example of a successful segregation!” (Mississippi Burning) Asked earlier by the journalists if he is a spokesman for the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, he claims to be a “businessman and a Mississippian and an American.” Being actually the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan he represents the Klan views as identical with the views of the white Mississippians using the Klan rhetoric for this purpose:

We do not accept Jews, because they reject Christ! And their control over the International Banking Cartels is at the root of what we call Communism today! We do not accept Papists, because they bow to a Roman dictator! We do not accept Turks, Mongrels, Tartars, Orientals, nor Negroes, because we are here to protect Anglo-Saxon Democracy in the American way! (Mississippi Burning)

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20 based on the character of the Samuel Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, according to C. Edward Foster, the Grand Dragon of American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan: “The greatest Klan leader that ever lived.” “…suspected of ‘masterminding’ at least nine murders, nearly seventy-five bombings of black churches, and three hundred assaults, bombings, and beatings.” (Wade 334)
The members of the black community are scared of a violent repression for talking to the strangers about their situation, they “fear white retaliation [...] hesitant to offend these white strangers, but terrified of what will happen to them if their boss or the sheriff thinks they are defying the ‘Southern Way of Life’” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans). The white retaliation strikes upon the black community through violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan, which is in the control over the county. A young black man is kidnapped and killed because Agent Ward asked him questions in front of everybody in a segregated restaurant. The Klan burns down black houses and churches and beats people to intimidate them from “causing troubles,” doing so without any fear of prosecution. This is demonstrated in the dialogue of Frank Bailey and Agent Anderson: “You’d kill Frank? Is that what you’re saying? - I wouldn’t give it no more thought than wringing a cat’s neck! And there ain’t a court in Mississippi that’d convict me for it.” (Mississippi Burning) I will return to the issue of the judicial system later on in this chapter.

Let us now have a closer look at the second frame at the beginning of the movie – the burning church. There are more scenes with the Klan burning down black churches in the movie. But from the historical point of view, this first one is the most important. As it was already mentioned above, Mike Schwerner was marked for the elimination by the Klan. Since COFO had formed a relationship with Mt. Zion Methodist congregation, they decided to kill him at the congregation’s meeting. However, Schwerner was not there by the time the Klan arrived. “They therefore contended themselves with beating two black men close to death and burning Mt. Zion

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21 based on the character of Alton Wayne Roberts who personally shoot two of the three murdered civil rights workers
22 “…some of the churches that had agreed to host Freedom Schools are firebombed. (In many cases, shortly before churches are burned their fire insurance policies are suddenly cancelled by their white insurance agents — a typical example of the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen Council working in tandem.)” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)
Methodist to the ground. The incident wasn’t even reported in the local papers.” (Wade 338) Schwerner and his associates drove to Neshoba County (Jessup County in the movie) to inspect the remains of the church (the one displayed at the beginning of the movie) and to interview local blacks. “After leaving the church, the trio was arrested on a fabricated charge of speeding by Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price.” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History) In the evening they were released, but they drove to the hands of the Klan.

In the movie, three boys are chased, driven off the road and then stopped by a police car (followed by two other cars full of Klan members). The driver is shot in the head and then other shots are heard, with one Klansman making the infamous comment after he shoots the black boy: “You only left me a nigger but at least I shot me a nigger.” (Mississippi Burning) It seems that the only thing important for the director was the act of killing of the three civil rights workers. It is proved that this portrayal does not correspond with what actually happened. When the movie is taken in its entirety, it can be seen that one of the most important elements here is to make the audience feel horrified about the terrible actions of the Klan. But Alan Parker did not depict the murder in its whole dreadfulness. In a matter of fact, when the three bodies were found and autopsies were done, it was found that “Mickey and Andy had been shot once through the heart. Jim, the black member of the trio, had been beaten before being shot three times” (Wade 342).

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23 In Mississippi Burning three civil rights workers are not mentioned by name. In the film credits they are identified as “Goatee” (Michael Schwerner), “Passenger” (Andrew Goodman) and “Black Passenger” (James Chaney).

24 “Dr. Spain discovers obvious evidence of horrendous torture and brutality suffered by James Chaney. He tells reporters: ‘I could barely believe the destruction to these frail young bones. In my 25 years as a pathologist and medical examiner, I have never seen bones so severely shattered, except in tremendously high speed accidents or airplane crashes. It was obvious to any first-year medical student that this boy had been beaten before being shot three times’” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans)
What underlines the horror of these events of the three young and unarmed men being brutally murdered is the police involvement\textsuperscript{25} in these murders. William Bradford Huie wrote for the \textit{Saturday Evening Post}: “What makes this lynching a high crime against humanity is the role of the police.” (Wade 342) There is one more scene in the movie openly displaying the police cooperation on the Klan actions. A previously arrested young black man is released from jail only to be caught by the Klan in front of the police officers and eventually castrated in the woods. With such a protection, the Klan basically had the power to do almost anything it wanted to.

As already mentioned above, Alan Parker’s \textit{Mississippi Burning} was criticized for its inaccurate depiction of the history. It is the portrayal of FBI agents and the whole investigation when these inaccuracies become more evident. One of the most outspoken critics of the movie is the historian Howard Zinn: “Mississippi Burning, I suppose, does something useful in capturing the terror of Mississippi, the violence, the ugliness. But after it does that, it does something which I think is very harmful: In the apprehension of the murderers, it portrays two FBI operatives […] as the heroes of this episode.” As it is not relevant to the topic of my thesis, I will not devote too much space to the role of FBI investigation. But I find it important to mention several facts at this point.

The most important reason for the Federal intervention in the case was the fact that two of the missing civil rights workers were white Northerners. Otherwise, FBI showed reluctance towards their involvement in affairs concerning the civil rights movement. Both, FBI and the media became interested only in the cases of white activists being attacked or threatened. “The number of FBI agents assigned to Mississippi is increased from 15 to 150, but when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover opens the new FBI office in

\textsuperscript{25} There were many other cases of the cooperation of the police and Ku Klux Klan. One of the most infamous was the attack on the “freedom riders” in Birmingham which was fully backed up by the Birmingham police: “A detective on the force had told them they had exactly fifteen minutes to ‘beat them, bomb them, burn them, shoot them, do anything [they] wanted to with absolutely no intervention whatsoever by the police.’” (Wade 310)
Jackson, he assures white Mississippi that the FBI will give ‘No protection’ to civil rights agitators.” (Civil Rights Movement Veterans) It was only after President Johnson ordered Hoover to treat this situation as a kidnapping, the case where the Federal intervention is necessary, that FBI finally became involved.

In the movie, the process of investigation is really complicated. Agents Ward and Anderson deal with a wall of reluctance and silence, and are forced to use rather unconventional methods of investigation. Although they soon get help of one hundred more agents and the Navy, they are not able to break the case until the Deputy Clinton Pell’s wife tells Agent Anderson were to look for the corpses of the three murdered. It was only then they manage to break Mayor Tillman and the Klansman Lester Cowans to give them information about the murderers. In reality, by an extended interrogation FBI agents soon learned that the White Knights could be bought and they hired two Klansmen as informers. “With the undercover information of these men and the confessions of two other panicky Klansmen, the case was broken a little over six weeks after the three COFO workers had disappeared.” (Wade 341) Twenty-one Klansmen were accused of the COFO murders and sued under the Ku-Klux statuses. The charges against them were, however, dismissed when Judge William A. Cox decided that Ku-Klux statuses could not be applicable in that case. He also determined the murder to be “a state, not a federal matter, and the U.S. government had little if any jurisdiction in the case” (Wade 344).

There has to be some reason why the Klansmen are so self-confident in the movie. When Frank Bailey said that there was not a court in Mississippi that would convict him he knew what he was talking about. It is shown in the scene of the legal proceeding,

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26 based on the character of the Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price  
27 based on the character of Edgar Ray Killen  
28 “Cox had interpreted the case in the light of the 1951 Williams decision, which had seriously restricted the range of crimes indictable under the Ku-Klux statuses.” (Wade 344)
where the trial is held over the three Klansmen for firebombing a black house but they are acquitted by the judge. Most of the state officials in Mississippi were themselves segregationists and strong believers in the notion of white supremacy. Eventually, the Federals rearrested most of the group and charged them with conspiracy to deny the civil rights of the three workers. Seven of the defendants were convicted and sent to prison with sentences ranging from 3 to 10 years. Snapshots at the end of the movie show that the Sheriff Deputy, Clinton Townley and Frank Bailey were sentenced for maximum of 10 years for Federal conspiracy charges and Sheriff Stuckey was acquitted (which corresponds with the historical reality).

None serve more than six years for lynching three young men. Meanwhile, the other murderers who were acquitted or had mistrials go about their lives, though everyone knows who they are and what they did. Rainey continues in office as Sheriff until his term ends and acquitted defendant E.G. Barnett is elected in his place. (Civil Rights Veteran Movement)

3.3. Summary

Alan Parker’s Mississippi Burning has been criticized by numerous historians for its historical inaccuracies. The director tries to depict the infamous events of the “Mississippi Freedom Summer” in the worst light possible, which is partially achieved by putting the Klansmen in contrast with the idealized FBI agents. His portrayal of the situation in the Mississippi during the civil rights struggle in the 1960’s and the Ku Klux Klan of the time can be considered historically accurate. However, the unrealistic portrayal of FBI in the movie is criticized by many historians. The movie, except for its

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29 the same men who in the earlier scene speaks to the journalists in front of his dirty stall and pigs and tells them that “Negroes have been treated all fair for a long time” (Mississippi Burning).
30 based on the character of Sheriff Rainey
technical qualities, represents the horrors that happened in the South in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when lynching, beatings and bombings were present on the daily order.

4.1. Plot Summary

Set in the American Midwest, Betrayed begins with murder of Sam Kraus, a Jewish radio host, in Chicago. Catherine Weaver (Debra Winger), an undercover FBI agent, is sent as Katie Phillips to infiltrate a farming community members of which are suspected of the murder. She makes the acquaintance of a leader of the community, a widower and a Vietnam War veteran, Gary Simmons (Tom Berenger). She meets his family and receives warm welcome and starts to believe that FBI lead about this man is erroneous. However, she is invited by Gary to join a hunt. Shocked Cathy discovers that they are hunting a black man. Gary turns out to be a leader of a Klan-like white supremacy group involved in terrible acts of violence. Against her will she is forced to keep working on the case. Gary asks her to marry him and she moves into his home. Cathy visits a Ku Klux Klan training camp and witnesses gun traffic. Wes, one of Gary’s associates, who does not like her from the beginning, suspecting her of being a “grasshopper” (a spy), sees her and is subsequently shot by FBI agents during a bank robbery. Gary gets an assignment to kill an ultra-conservative president candidate Jack Carpenter. He also receives documents revealing Cathy’s true identity. Heartbroken, he takes her with him to the spot of the planned assassination and, by threatening to kill Carpenter, provokes her to kill him. However, a moment later, Carpenter is shot by another assassin from a different location. Depressed Cathy quits FBI. In the end, although denounced by the local community, she travels back to bid farewell to Gary’s daughter Rachel.
4.2. At War with ZOG

The murder of Sam Kraus at the beginning of the movie is loosely based on murder of Alan Berg in 1984. Masked murderers are dressed in camouflage fatigues and after Kraus is killed, letters “ZOG” are spray-painted over his car and body. These two facts are closely interconnected with a new heading of the Klan in the 1980’s.

“By 1980, a major shift had taken place in the Klan’s historic role. As the Klansmen saw it, they were not so much fighting to protect white dominance in America as they were to regain it.” (Chalmers 426, 427) Lost battle during the civil rights movement in the 1960’s, increasing Federal prosecution and nationwide awareness of the Klan’s violence, created conditions very difficult for the group to exist in. A new enemy occurred in the Klan rhetoric – America’s “Zionist Occupational Government” (ZOG). Many Klan factions became associated with Neo-Nazis. The most dangerous of these was the Aryan Nations and its “underground” adjunct - the Order. “On November 25, 1984, thirteen members of the Order signed an eight-page ‘Declaration of War,’ vowing to kill all politicians, judges, journalists, bankers, soldiers, police officers, and federal agents who got in their way.” (Wade 400)

In Betrayed, there is a group of simple-minded farmers who feel threatened by federal government and are worried about losing their jobs and property. Fighting back seems inevitable for them, and the best way of doing so is to join the Klan. “For a small-town, blue-collar mill worker or a truck driver, upset over integration, busing, and job pressures, the Klan is meaningful because it speaks to his concerns.” (Chalmers 429) The impact of the rhetoric surrounding “ZOG,” poisoning the people’s minds, is

31 Alan Berg was the Denver radio talk-show radio host, critical of right-wing vigilantes. He was murdered by members of the Order in the June 1984. (Wade 400) “...Alan was massacred in the driveway, 13 bullets to body and face.” (Estés)

32 “As indicated by the ubiquitous reference to the state as “ZOG” (“Zionist” is equated with “Jewish”) within these publications, the state is depicted as inherently “Jewish,” a racial identity within the discourse. The government, as well as the corporate elite, is supposedly “occupied” and controlled by Jews.” (Daniels)
most visible in the dialogue between Cathy and Shorty. Shorty, otherwise a kind-hearted man, is the representation of a worried farmer who joined the group because he feels threatened. “I don’t even like to see a fight. But if we don’t fight back they’ll take it all away from us, the whole country. Jew-boy judges, and bankers, and politicians with their nigger police, and orientals […] I don’t like it either. Hell, I have to close my eyes every time I pull the trigger.” (Betrayed) The racism, deeply rooted in the South, has always formed a favourable ground for Klan’s recruitment tactics. In the movie there are two scenes reflecting this phenomenon, scenes where people of other race are considered inferior to animals. In the first one, the whole family grieves over a death of a calf; Gary himself is not even able to shoot it. And a few moments later, the same Gary leads a fire-hunting of a black man. In the second scene one of the huntsmen groans over his dog being shot but his intent is to kill a human being. It is clear, that although the Klan’s structure and methods have changed, in its way of thinking it is still the old Klan.

There is an important thing to mention regarding this shift in the Klan’s behaviour. In the 1980’s, “many Klansmen traded in their robes for the camouflage fatigues of a paramilitary uniform” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History). This new Klan was highly organized and its army-like structure made it even more dangerous. “In Texas, Grand Dragon Louis Beam was running four paramilitary training camps […] participants at Beam’s camps had access to such sophisticated weapons as AR-15 semiautomatic rifles, the Atchisson Assault 12 […] Many of Beam’s trainees were Vietnam veterans, and film clips proved their expertise in military tactics.” (Wade 384, 385) All of these innovations created by the Aryan Nations and their impact on the Klan are also portrayed in the movie.
There is a sequence showing a paramilitary training camp just like it is described by the historians. Members of the Aryan Nations are being trained here for the “day of revolution.” The interconnection of all white supremacist organizations is presented – white robed Klansmen burning crosses and singing, and men dressed in Nazi uniforms selling pictures of Adolf Hitler and old German weapons. Recreation camp for friends and families is connected with a military training. What is the most shocking about this training is the involvement of little children in the process. Their young minds are poisoned with the racist ideology of their fathers in a “school” and they are trained in using guns. One can see how alarming this strategy really is in the scene where nice little Rachel is talking to Cathy about “rabbis and Negroes”: “One day we’re going to kill all the dirty niggers and the Jews and everything’s gonna be neat.” (Betrayed) Throughout its existence, instilling their ideology to the children is one of the most important factors aiding to Klan’s survival. Succeeding generations of the Klansmen have been raised, helping the Klan to persist and rise from its ashes every time it seemed to be dead. “This is what this organization is about – our children! Our children’s children! […] You raise your children as white Christians!” (Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History)

4.3. Summary

Betrayed offers a portrayal of the 1980’s militant Klan which shifted from its old tactics of intimidation through terror to quick and organized violent actions including robberies and assassinations of their enemies. Members of the group declare war to the Zionist Occupation Government and all of its helpers and prepare for the war in paramilitary

33 In the movie, Gary shows Cathy a computer bulletin board called the “Liberty Net,” where the declaration of war (already mentioned above) is written. “The most striking innovation of the Aryan Nations […] Anyone with a home computer and modem could tap into the lower access levels of the Net and read twenty-first-century versions of the Reconstruction Klan’s spook shows.” (Wade 401)
training camps, being trained in using new weapons and learning a military strategy. However dangerous these innovations in the Klan’s behaviour might seem, the most alarming is the fact that parents are indoctrinating their children with ideology of racial hatred. By poisoning these young and innocent minds the succeeding generation of Klansmen is raised so that the Klan’s heritage would be able to survive.
5. THE KLAN OF TODAY: A TIME TO KILL

5.1. Plot Summary

Set in Canton, Mississippi, the adaptation of John Grisham’s novel of the same name begins with a violent rape of 10-year-old black girl Tonya by two white “rednecks.” They attempt to kill her but she survives and the men are arrested. Tonya’s father, Carl Lee Hailey (Samuel L. Jackson), worried that they could be acquitted, acquires a rifle and shoots them in the courthouse, unintentionally injuring Deputy Looney. He is soon arrested without resistance. A young lawyer Jake Brigance (Matthew McConaughey) provides defence for Carl Lee and intends to enter a plea of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Brother of one of the dead rapists Freddie Cobb (Kiefer Sutherland) calls for the help of the Ku Klux Klan and they establish a Klavern in the county. The district attorney Rufus Buckley (Kevin Spacey) seeks a death penalty. The defence is denied the change of venue and all-white jury is appointed in the trial. Jake is approached by Ellen Roark (Sandra Bullock) a law student and a member of ACLU and, although initially reluctant, he accepts her offer to help him. As the trial begins the Klan marches down the town and meets with a large group of the black protesters. During the clash, the Grand Dragon is hit with a Molotov cocktail and burns to death. The Ku Klux Klan makes threatening calls to Jake and his family, forcing him to send his wife and daughter away. The Klansmen burn down his house and kill a husband of his secretary, but he still refuses to quit the case. Freddie tries to kill him in front of the courthouse but misses and hits a member of the National Guard. Roark is stopped by a policeman belonging to the Klan, kidnapped, beaten and left to die in the wilderness, but she is saved by an informant “Mickey Mouse,” who appears to be one of Freddie’s associates. In his final speech Jake convinces jury by telling them a story of Tonya’s

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rape, adding: “Now imagine she’s white” (A Time to Kill). Carl Lee is acquitted and the Klansmen are arrested. The movie ends with Jake bringing his family to a barbecue at Carl Lee’s house, visiting the black neighbourhood for the first time.

5.2. Under the Surface

Twenty-five years passed since the civil rights struggle and the “Freedom Summer” in Mississippi took place. Comparing A Time to Kill to Mississippi Burning, it can be seen that a lot had changed during this period. The once powerful Klan which controlled the Southern way of life in this “closed society” in the 1960’s, helping to preserve segregation by violent actions against civil rights workers and the black community, does not seem to exist anymore.

Firstly, there is no sign of official segregation present in A Time to Kill. Blacks are working together with whites. The fact, that the town Sheriff is a black man, is the most striking example of a desegregated society. I used the word “official” because the offspring of American racial politics of the past are still visible here. Blacks live in their poor neighbourhood with their own church and congregation. Deep racial prejudices are still seated in white Mississippi, not only in racist “rednecks,” but also in “good” whites who seem to accept black people integrated into their society. This is demonstrated in a dialogue between Carl Lee and Jake: “When you look at me you don’t see a man. You see a black man. – Carl Lee, I am your friend. – We ain’t no friends Jake. […] America is a wall. And you’re on other side.” (A Time to Kill)

An important closely related issue is the issue of all-white jury. Carl Lee shoots the rapists because he is aware of the possibility of them being acquitted by an all-white jury. Jake is also afraid of having an all-white jury judging Carl Lee and requests change of a venue. But Judge Noose denies it: “I think it’s impossible to find a fair and
impartial jury here in Canton; in fact, I think it’s impossible to find a fair and impartial jury anywhere in Mississippi. And as such, a jury here would be as a jury anywhere else, so I decided to deny your request…” (A Time to Kill) In the movie, Canton represents old Mississippi with the largest white majority, and thus the most firmly established white way of thinking, in the state. Rufus Buckley presents statistics showing that in other counties there would be chance of a black man being a member of the jury, but not in Canton. His associate then adds: “It means without blacks on the jury Hailey haven’t got a chance in trial.” (A Time to Kill) This offers yet another example of the above mentioned racism. Racism that is still present in Mississippi, although hidden more under the surface, as an open demonstration of racial hatred through violence against blacks, is now persecuted by the law. It seems that the change in American racial policy triggered the end of the Klan.

A Time to Kill presents that “one of the Klan’s main appeals in the twentieth century has been the fellowship of like-minded people” (Chalmers 426). This means that wherever a group of men identified themselves with the Klan ideology, favourable conditions for the Klan to exist and be active in were created. Freddie Cobb is a demonstration of such a man: “Ten years ago, that nigger would be hanged by the end of the rope with his balls in his mouth. You tell me what’s wrong with this country.” (A Time to Kill) After he meets Stump Sisson, the Grand Dragon of the “good, God-fearing Klan” (A Time to Kill) of Mississippi, he and his associates are initiated to form their own Madison County Klavern. “The Klan is not dead,” as Sisson tells Cobb, “it has always been right there, under the surface, just waiting for the opportunity to deliver God’s justice” (A Time to Kill). A considerable decline of its previous power can be noticed throughout the whole movie. The Klansmen have actually very limited power

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and their only chance to affect the trial is to intimidate Jake from defending Carl Lee. Freddie Cobb and his Klavern try to firebomb his house (but he is warned by an informant), then they kill his secretary’s husband, burn his house down and eventually try to kill him, but they fail. It is interesting that all of these violent acts are committed only by Cobb and his close associates. In fact, the Klan as such is not able to do anything except for demonstrating in front of the courthouse demanding the death sentence for Carl Lee. It is in the front of the courthouse where the decline of the Klan’s power is the most noticeable. *Mississippi Burning* could, once again, be used for comparison at this point. In one scene of the movie, blacks are marching down the town demonstrating for their civil rights; determined but quiet and fearful not to do anything to give the authorities and the Klansmen an excuse for bursting out into violent action towards them. However, in *A Time to Kill*, one can see that the situation has changed. A sparse crowd of the Klansmen faces an angry crowd of outraged blacks, who do not show any emotion but anger towards the Klan members. No longer supported by authorities, the Klan is beaten and the Grand Dragon is killed.

There is yet one more symbol of the Klan’s “defeat” in *A Time to Kill*, directly related to the acquittal of Carl Lee. Jake in his final speech uses the worst fear of the white Southern man for the purpose of defending a black man. The fear that is most remarkably depicted in *The Birth of a Nation* in the scene of Gus chasing Flora: “Shots of the terrified girl are intercut with those of Gus in hot pursuit. He runs low to the ground with his shoulders thrown back like an ape. He froths at the mouth…” (Wade 130) The scene became the representation of the white womanhood being threatened by black men. The need for protection of white women has been a vital part of the Klan’s rhetoric since. “Today’s Klansman gives himself the status […] by appointing himself defender of the traditional American symbols: flag, Constitution, Bible (King James
Version), white womanhood, and racial separation.” (Chalmers 425) What is more horrifying than a picture of a raped little girl? So when Jake tells the jury to imagine the victim white, he exposes them to a horrible image of a white girl being brutally raped, the image that has been used by the Klan for decades as one of the main reasons providing justification for their violent treatment of blacks. He uses one of the most important parts of the Klan rhetoric for saving the black man’s life.

5.3. Summary

In A Time to Kill the position in which the Ku Klux Klan of today finds itself is presented. Although hiding under the surface, it is still ready to preach its Gospel of hatred and violence. Its message remains the same, however times have changed, and shift in the attitude of American society towards the Klan has gone hand in hand with the decline of the group’s power. Still racism has always maintained its position in minds of many white Southerners. The movie shows how such racism provides a fertile soil for the Klan to become active. “In the South, people speak with understanding and perhaps pride about their great-grandfather having belonged to the Klan. […] Like the Klansmen themselves, the various Klans come and go, but in times of trouble, there is usually a Klan available. […] The Klan is an available Southern tradition.” (Chalmers 429)
6. CONCLUSION

Each of the movies discussed in the thesis offers a different image and interpretation of the Ku Klux Klan and its specific role in a historical period dealt with in the movie. The Klan’s portrayal in the movies depends not only on the Klan era depicted, but also on the period a certain movie was created in, which is interconnected with the director’s intended presentation of the group.

The Birth of a Nation (1915), dealing with the First Klan of the Reconstruction period, offers a fictional image of the heroic Klan. D.W. Griffith presents the Klan as a noble force coming into existence to save the South, oppressed by blacks and carpetbaggers, and to restore dominance of the white race. Although this image is proved by historians to be historically incorrect, the director’s intention was not to lie to the audience. Influenced by the environment he had grown up in, Griffith simply recreated stories he was told, mainly by his father, and put them on the screen presenting a Southern version of the history.

Although Gone with the Wind (1939) presents the same era as The Birth of a Nation, a different approach was chosen by its producer David O. Selznick. The movie was shot in the period of the Second’s Klan decline and its creators were under constant control and critique of black organizations and press. Selznick’s intention was to create a non-controversial movie that would be friendly to both blacks and Southern whites. In order to achieve this, any direct reference to the Klan was deleted. The movie is an adaptation of a novel by a Southern writer in which the Klan is again presented as a noble group of gentlemen protecting honour of Southern ladies. Against the director’s initial intention, such a representation is preserved in the movie, only the Klan itself is missing.
In Alan Parker’s *Mississippi Burning* (1988) the civil rights movement of the 1960’s is portrayed. Based on real historical events – the murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi – the movie shows viewer an ugly and terrifying image of the 1960’s Klan. The Klansmen rule the county and, supported by local authorities and protected by the Southern legal system, they terrorize blacks. Parker’s intention seems to be to draw the Klan in the worst light possible, using various tactics for doing so; one of the most visible being putting the Klan in contrast to heroic FBI agents.

In *Betrayed* (1988), shift in Klan’s organization and behaviour is presented. Many of the groups are transformed into paramilitary units with an army-like organization. This militant Klan declares war to ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government); they believe that American government is controlled by Jews. Children are being prepared and trained alongside their parents in paramilitary camps, brainwashed and inseminated with hatred.

*A Time to Kill* (1996) offers a portrait of the Klan of today. Although it is “only a shadow of its former self” (*Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History*), condemned by the society and looking powerless, the Klan is hiding under the surface, still dangerous and ready to rise again whenever given chance by people endorsing their ideology of racial hatred. The director warns the people about the persistent threat and evil the Klan represents.

When all of the Klan representations in these movies are compared, one can see that as the time passes and the awareness of the people grows, the Klan portrayal in the movies is getting uglier and the stress is laid on the horrors associated with this organization. Selznick’s attempt to omit the Klan in *Gone with the Wind* is also related to this fact as he was aware of the far-reaching consequences of *The Birth of a Nation*, which with its notion of the noble White Knights created great conditions for the Ku Klux Klan to be revived, unleashing another wave of terror in the United States.
Although Selznick managed to avoid such a course of events, the influence of the Southern way of thinking in the written original made him create a movie that insulted black people, although in a different way. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* can be considered the most important work related to the Ku Klux Klan not only because of its above mentioned impact, but also because of the fact that it reflects the Southern mentality - mentality that helped the Klan come into existence, mentality that, in some cases, remained virtually unchanged up to this day.

Watching these movies today, one can feel astonished by the horrors that are portrayed in them and, in some cases, might not believe that something like this might have happened. In spite of being condemned for historical inaccuracy, *The Birth of a Nation* is today seen by many critics as a masterpiece. Although diminished, the Klan still forms an inseparable part of American history. Sitting deep in the sofa with the eyes covered, experiencing a spectacle of white hoods and burning crosses, one should remember that those white hooded characters are not just a figment of author’s imagination, but they write America’s chronicle of intolerance and racial hatred. “As long as the concepts so powerfully expressed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence are less then fully realized in America, the Klan will be around to turn things backwards whenever Americans let it.” (Wade 403)
7. WORKS USED AND CITED


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8. RESUMÉ

8.1. In Slovak


Rozhodol som sa pre výber nasledovných filmov: The Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind (zobrazujúce Prvý Klan, ktorý vznikol po Občianskej vojne a bol činný v období „znovubudovania“ Juhu), Mississippi Burning (Klan v 60. rokoch 20. storotčia v období boja za občianske práva), Betrayed (militantný Klan 80. rokov) a A Time to Kill (súčasný Klan). Tieto filmy sú v práci analyzované z historického a kultúrneho hľadiska. Záver práce je zhrnutím a, v niektorych prípadoch, porovnaním rozličných zobrazení a pohľadov na Ku Klux Klan, ktoré filmy prinášajú. Ukázalo sa, že spôsob zobrazenia úzko súvisí s obdobím, v ktorom konkrétnej film vznikol, nielen s obdobím, o ktorom vypovedá.
8.2. In English

This thesis deals with the Ku Klux Klan, the oldest terrorist organization in the history of the United States, and its portrayal in the American cinematography. Surprisingly, the Ku Klux Klan is rather unknown term in our region. I believe that film is one of the most accessible information sources these days and that is why I decided to focus on film as the primary source of Klan portrayal. As I try to cover the whole history of the group since its founding till present, a historical period that movies cover formed the main criteria for their selection. A degree to which the movies reflect a certain era and their impact on the American culture and society was definitely of great importance too.

Five movies were selected to be dealt with: The Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind (depicting the First Klan founded after the end of the Civil War and active during the Reconstruction period), Mississippi Burning (the Klan of the 1960’s during the civil rights struggle), Betrayed (the militant Klan of the 1980’s), and A Time to Kill (the present Klan). These are analyzed separately from historical and cultural point of view. In the conclusion, a summary and, in some cases, a comparison of different ways of the portrayal and views of the Klan, which the movies offer, is drawn. It was also proved that a certain way of the Klan portrayal is closely interconnected with a period which a movie was created in, not only with a period it is dealing with.