Speaker 1 (00:00):

Well, let's talk about the film, the birth of a nation. What led to this in terms of the times, how did this, how was the time right for such a movie?

Speaker 2 (00:12):

Well, the 19 teens were, uh, years of great ethnic and racial conflict and Griffith was a son of the South. And there was this book by, um, uh, Dixon, uh, and it came out in 1906 11, play out for a fair amount of time. By the time he wanted to recreate this movie, or we wanted to recreate it on cellulite himself. And he had a great vision. It was, um, he had a vision of storytelling that differed, and that brought this film into a new platform. If you will, of movies, it was one continuous story. It took place on many, many locations. It had tens of thousands of extras, and he had a vision of telling the story of the civil war in the 19 teens from the point of view of an emasculated South that was, um, reborn reborn through the KU Klux Klan reborn through the Whitecaps and reborn at the expense of the black population and everything that they had achieved during reconstruction, which had long been lost at this point in time.

Speaker 2 (01:36):

And so what one sees in the 19 teens is a lot of racial violence throughout the South, uh, presumption that the South will rise again through, uh, lynchings, which are, uh, running at the rate of two a week at an effort to turn back the constitutional amendments, uh, voting franchise, uh, property rights, all sorts of protections that the generations, uh, immediately after the civil war thought were constitutionally, uh, laid. And so what Griffith did was he captured this story by showing, um, a love story, a story between a young woman and a Southern bow. In fact, his name was Bo who love, uh, transcended the war, but could not survive the peace. And it was the most inflammatory insulting, outrageous provocative presentation of black people at that time who were living in such a segregated life, both North and South, that there, that the awareness of the accomplishments of the black middle class or the talented 10th, we're really invisible to the rest of the country. And as a consequence, a movie which showed, uh, an ignorant population, which played on stereotypes of violence, which played on stereotypes of inferiority, which confirmed a white supremacists opinion of a black population at that time was wildly attractive to the South and to Southern migrants who moved up North,

Speaker 1 (03:37):

Just the Southern migrants. I think there were some,

Speaker 2 (03:41):

You got a good point too, the population in the North that, but much of what, um, was, uh, Southern migrants at this time, much of which was ignorant, um, of race relations, because you had a huge number of European migrants. You Europe, this was, this was the age of both xenophobia that was driven by to a large degree, the migration that was bringing a million people a year to America's shores, who had never had any kind of relationships with people outside of their own ethnicity pretty much. But then when you introduce a racial component and there were a lot of, um, Northern attitudes that were not hospitable to, um, to cordial race relations in the North. And so what we see at this point in history is a presumption that Jim Crow is a tolerable and an acceptable, uh, separation, even people who were more liberal, even the white liberals who founded the NAACP were not integrationists. They just wanted a sound legal equity, legal parody, but they did not want necessarily integration

Speaker 1 (04:58):

Well, and, and even this revisionism, it's one thing to, to fight a war in the South. Uh, as long as the black people are down there, it's another situation when they're in our backyard.

Speaker 2 (05:11):

Well, you know, it's kind of interesting because Detroit is one of those cities that had very good and very easy race relations up through the middle of the 1920s. And part of those race relations, uh, were predicated on a successful black middle class and what happened in the teens? Well, actually it wasn't the 1920s. It was a lot earlier. So let me re phrase that Detroit had a very interesting race relations in part, because it was the city, it was the place where a lot of slaves wanted to come. It was the place of the Northern star of the legendary Northern star. And so Detroit had always attracted runaway and it had a very small, very stable black community up through the first decade of the 20th century, about 5,700 plaques. It had a very, um, proud and distinctive, uh, community of churchgoers. And the second Baptist church was a breakaway church from the first Baptist church in Detroit that would not grant members of the second Baptist church, any kind of, uh, voting parody or equality within the church.

Speaker 2 (06:31):

And so the second Baptist was a proud and defiant, uh, break away from the first Baptist. And so up through about 1910, there were easy race relations in Detroit. Uh, blacks who lived here, uh, pretty much were, um, probably a disproportionate number of professionals in the black middle class in Detroit, then one saw elsewhere. And then around 19, right before world war one, a Southern Exodus of blacks, uh, populates Detroit as it does Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, New York, lots and lots of cities. And at that point, one begins to see tensions within the black community between the middle class and the lower class blacks, very similar to, um, tensions in the white community, the white ethnic communities that, um, were sending in these waves of immigrants at this time. And at this point, the race relations were becoming more frayed as the middle class. Blacks feared that their more recent, um, Southern cousins would embarrass them with their rural ways.

Speaker 2 (07:49):

And they're less well-educated well, ignorant ways. Um, and so there was some tension there, but what happened, uh, or what makes Detroit, I think interesting is that throughout the teens, there had always been one or two upper middle class or upper class blacks living in white communities, but only one on a block or two at the very most. And so what happens in the twenties is you get this crush of population, um, in the black community and there's no place to go. And so there's a perception that the blacks who are living in paradise Valley in the ghetto are gonna are going to infiltrate the white community. Well, of course that doesn't happen, but that CRE, that feeds of fear and it feeds and it, and it drives the perception, um, uh, perception that makes the white community in Detroit, uh, particularly responsive and sensitive to some of the, um, the lure of the KU Klux Klan when it

Speaker 1 (08:49):

Michigan, um, in the early twenties. Well, you take a look at the pressures and black bottom. I'm going to ask you to, can you put that key that like cable under, from the bottom and underneath it? Yeah, there we go. Okay, here we go. You have, you have the perception, but you also have the real physical pressure that, you know, the, the, the rents are so high. You have typhoid, there are other communicable diseases. You've got people being charged. They're so high and they're so crowded. And here are the, here are the boundaries. Here's, here's black bottom. Here's where you can live outside of that. You're risking your life. Now, I want to go to that later. Certainly when we talk about dr. Sweet, but

I want to drive us back down to birth of a nation. This thing came out in 1915, and you have the president responding to it.

Speaker 2 (09:38):

Well, Griffith knew, um, he had a friend who knew Wilson and he wanted to have a big splash. And it originally opened in Los Angeles at Clooney's and it had a wild, wild, um, reception people loved it. I mean, I think the Griffith had this several minute oration and, um, when it, uh, opened and then word spread spread rather quickly, and the president was asked to look at it. Now, keep in mind, Woodrow Wilson was a Southern president. He had, uh, personally re segregated Washington DC. Uh, a lot of people say, well, that was his wife. Um, but I'm not sure that there's, uh, any evidence that Woodrow Wilson was anything but a carrier of Southern attitudes, uh, towards blacks. I mean, he, um, was never really a friend of the NAACP, the NAACP appealed to him at the time of this movie, but I'm getting a little ahead of my story.

Speaker 2 (10:36):

Anyway, Woodrow Wilson, um, saw the movie in a private showing. He was still in mourning for his wife, although she had passed away many, many months earlier. Um, and so he didn't want to, the rumor is that he didn't want to see it in public. Uh, there were 280 people who viewed this in public, including Josephus Daniels, um, and other, um, uh, members of the Supreme court who were also former members of the Klan. There was one former member of the Klan. And so what you see is Washington, a border city entirely hospitable to Southern, um, attitudes and practices, and recently, um, uh, sort of refounded through the segregation of dining rooms, mrs. Wilson apparently walked through some dining rooms and saw blacks and whites sitting in the same cafeteria and was horrified. And the next week initiated a segregated dining room schedule. Apparently she encouraged her husband, president Woodrow, Wilson to, um, segregate the postal service.

Speaker 2 (11:45):

And so when we think of segregated parts of, of the government as well, that was a domain for blacks. So you had educated college educated black men as postal workers in part that, that stems from the Wilson year. So Wilson saw the film and he was also a former college president. He was a former president of, um, Princeton university. He was a Presbyterian, he was the son of a Presbyterian minister, and he had written a history of the United States, which at that point was in wide use and, and people respected it. And this was many years before he became a politician and he made a remark and he said, Oh, it was also terribly true. And what he was referring to was the need of the South to really subjugate its black citizens for fear of some kind of racial riot, um, some kind of, um, uh, massacre that, uh, the black, former slaves would, um, inflict upon their, um, their, their white, um, citizens in the South.

Speaker 2 (12:52):

So that gave a lot of drive to the film, but the film was extremely controversial wherever it opened, because the NAACP, which was a brand new organization at this time had very, um, powerful, uh, people on its board. Jane Adams was one of them, rabbi Stephen Weiss, uh, was another of them. And there were people who, uh, the NAACP five years old as an organization, six years old asks, um, some of these, um, more prominent people, Mary Ovington white, who was at the time as the president, uh, to make personal appeals in the city where birth of a nation is going to be shown now birth of a nation. Uh, well, let me back up at this time, uh, there was something called the national censorship board and censorship board had the responsibility of, uh, trying to guarantee that their, the lascivious scenes

portraying women, uh, that would be suggestive in, uh, the beer halls were on any of the, um, uh, the, the places that immigrants, uh, frequented, uh, would not be, uh, too volatile.

Speaker 2 (14:09):

Uh, but they, they did not take it upon themselves to comment and potentially, um, incendiary violent, uh, racial themes, many appeals to the national board, uh, were declined. Uh, the NAACP had a great effort, uh, had launched a great, um, campaign to yet Griffith to edit it out a scene where a black man rapes a white woman, uh, as well as other very, uh, uh, bellicose scenes of blacks, uh, creating a riot of situations and many mayors of cities also try to appeal to Griffith. And he absolutely refused. And the censorship board absolutely refused to intervene. And there were very close votes. Uh, there were several of them and all of these people, uh, Jane Adams and rabbi Stephen Wise, and Mary Ovington white, and a lot of the people in Boston, uh, because Boston was really the hotbed of liberalism then as it is, um, now, uh, and as a consequence, uh, it was a place where there were outdoor demonstrations, uh, against the film.

Speaker 2 (15:26):

And there were demonstrations against the film in many, many cities in the country, and Griffith refused to remove a single scene, which was well within his purview. And in fact, he did sit through numerous showings of the movie. There were 24 cuts made, and when he didn't like the way the audience responded, he would cut those scenes so that the response was faster or that it, um, told more of the story that he wanted. He thought they were responding to. So it was very common after a movie was distributed to edit it the way he did. He chose not to respond to any of the protests, um, any of the mayoral protests. And there was a big meeting in New York city where the NAACP and the mayor of New York city met with Griffith. He said he would consider it. And then he came back three or four days later.

Speaker 2 (16:22):

And he said, absolutely not. It was quite a political moment and reviews of the movie. Titillated the population throughout the country. The movie was released very carefully, uh, after reviews could travel to those cities. I mean, keep in mind, we're talking about, uh, an age where newspaper and wire services, the principle form of communication. So you're not having something released simultaneously in Los Angeles. And then in New York, you're having word of mouth precede, the distribution and the release of a movie. And as a consequence in order to build the momentum, he would, um, uh, hire buses to go to veterans homes and bring in veterans from the Spanish American war from, you know, whatever caused them to live in these, these group homes. These, you know, the hospitals, some of them were veterans, hospitals, and bring them into the movies. So it always looked like there was a huge crowd.

Speaker 2 (17:29):

And in fact, when the movie opened, when the movie opened in Atlanta on peach street, peach tree street, peach street Avenue, I'm blocking, I have to find it out. I'll it's in the, when, when the movie opened in Atlanta, they hired people to ride horses, wearing cowls and white gowns up and down Peachtree street to create a real media moment. And this was carried throughout all of the newspapers. And of course, um, it drew many, many people into the birth of a nation. Because once again, this was an unprecedented film. People were used to going to nickelodeons. They were used to going to one real films. This was a 12 reel film that lasted three hours. And to create it, he, he not only told a story which was totally unfamiliar, but he told a story with closeups and he told a story with panoramic views.

Speaker 2 (18:45):

He reenacted, he brought in enough people to reenact key scenes of battlefield moments during the civil war. And he actually recreated battlefields. I mean, he measured them and this was, this was live theater. Um, so he needed something to draw attention to the novelty of what he was doing in addition to, to needing something, to call attention to that, by using these, um, these garbed, um, henchmen, uh, in, on horses, riding up and down Peachtree, he had, uh, publicists plastering billboards from New York to Atlantic. And you could be on the subway on the train station, in white Plains, in Westchester, New York. And you would see pictures of hooded, Klansmen crossing rivers, and who wouldn't want to go see a movie like this. I mean, this was truly an extravaganza

Speaker 1 (19:47):

70 piece orchestra. Yes,

Speaker 2 (19:50):

Yes. Live orchestra playing, um, that to all of the battle scenes, to all of the love scenes, uh, urging the audience on, uh, and tickets the costs $2, $2, $2 was what some people were making in a week. And this was the highest grossing film at that time, making tens of thousands of dollars. I forget what, what the initial opening was, uh, was something like $800,000. I mean, we are talking and running for 12 weeks and people are in standing room only, but $2 a seat that was an extraordinary price. I mean, a newspaper at that time was what, three and a half cents. So you could buy a suit of clothes for $10.

Speaker 1 (20:43):

Uh, a dinner cost 25 cents cost 25 cents. You can buy dinner for 5 cents in 1915.

Speaker 2 (20:48):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 (20:49):

So what happened where it played? Now, my contention is that there were lots of racial actions out of this movie, but am I wrong? What, what ha what kinds of response to the public, as they were streaming out of the movie, what happened?

Speaker 2 (21:02):

I loved it. They loved it. And it became a recruiting opportunity for the KU Klux Klan, um, which is designed to, um, around the showing the opening of this movie in Georgia. There's a man named William Simmons, who is the son of a former Klansman. And this he's really a ne'er do well. Uh, William Simmons. And he's a member of all sorts of fraternal societies. This is the age of fraternal societies. Anybody that wants to, you know, ask their grandparents or their great-grandfathers, what they did for a social lives. They went to the odd fellows. They went to the Elks, they went to the moose, there was the Shriners, and they were all secret societies. And this man, uh, William Simmons was a member of many secret societies. And they all had little bangles and, and he would walk the streets and he would, you know, carry, they would be on his, his vest.

Speaker 2 (22:01):

And he was, he was, um, uh, ne'er do well. And he was an inch. He would sell insurance for one of these secret societies, the woodsmen of the world. And he had this fantasy of recreating his father's organization of the KU Klux Klan, which was another of these secret societies, but he was going to do it in a way that was much more modern. Now the original KU Klux Klan had long died out. It was not actively soliciting members in the same way that William Simmons, um, initiated a rebirth of the Klan. And what happened was, as he was reading the reviews in the newspapers that were comparing Griffiths to Homer, his storytelling antics, his ability to capture the tension in the society, his ability to portray good and evil. Um, as, as Simmons was reading this, he was getting very excited about his fantasy of recreating, the KU Klux Klan, and the good news for him was he was laid up in bed.

Speaker 2 (23:04):

He had an auto accident, or he was in an accident. And what happened was he bent down to tie his shoes and an automobile hit him. And he was, you know, even in his automobile accident, there was nothing very successful about it. He was just like a bumbling fool on the street anyway. Um, so, uh, Simmons, uh, has this fantasy as he's reading all of these reviews coming from the newspaper, you know, being reprinted in the newspaper, uh, as he's recuperating. And while he's doing that, he kind of is playing with pen and pencil, and he's creating a language. That's a fantasy language of words that start with KL, like Klan and, and clear up. And, and he's making the secret language that he is going to, uh, make a part of this secret society. So he reads that the movie is about to open, and he has this idea that he is going to pull together a group, a Lynch mob, a group of people who had just lynched a couple of months earlier, Leo Frank, the Jewish businessman, who was wrongly convicted of having raped a woman in a factory that he was the director of.

Speaker 2 (24:28):

And he had been lynched and he had been lynched in Marietta, Georgia. And what Simmons did was he and, and, and the Lynch bobs called itself, the friends of Mary Fagan, PHA, G N a, which was the name of the young woman who was murdered, but not by Leo, Frank. And what Simmons did is he gathered this group to go establish a Klan picture. And he took them up to sell now

Speaker 1 (25:04):

On either October 16th or November 25th, and maybe both.

Speaker 2 (25:08):

Yeah. He took them off to stone mountain and there, they, uh, they ignited across that could be seen all the way to Atlanta, which was how many miles, a dozen miles, not, not much more. So it was pretty big. He also, um, apparently, uh, explored the, let me stop, let me stop. Okay. He took this group, um, the night, the friends of Mary Fagan up to this event, uh, it's a stone mountain, uh, where they, uh, dedicated themselves to, uh, uh, to the rebirth of the KU Klux Klan. Now, there were no photographers at this event, and this was a very private event. And years later, when he realized the opportunity that photography and public relations and the press afforded, he dressed up some local blacks that he probably, you know, offered 25 cents to come take a picture. He put them in the white gowns and the hoods, and he staged them as if they were the original gathering at stone mountain.

Speaker 2 (26:34):

And this is one of the ways that Simmons was able to move the organization because he had a, for him very, very clever public relations people anyway, to come back to your question, the birth of the new KU

Klux Klan rebirth of the KU Klux Klan is designed by this man William Simmons, who considered himself the father of the modern, or was considered the father of the modern movement to correspond to the showing of the birth of a nation. And subsequent to this, wherever the birth of a nation showed the Klan, used it as an opportunity to recruit members. And so they would often hand out leaflets and oftentimes there would be demonstrations and there would be riots. And that's one of the reasons why mayors, including the mayor of Detroit, did not want the, the showing of the birth of a nation to return. And they use this film for many, many, many years for decades. Um, but well into the 1920s, um, as a recruiting device for the KU Klux Klan,

Speaker 1 (27:43):

They even put a soundtrack to it. And it was in use through the fifties. Now I have a contention and, uh, uh, you know, academics were just foolish. So, uh, my contention is that the movie birth of a nation and the revivification of the Klan set the social agenda for racial matters for the next 30 years.

Speaker 2 (28:09):

Well, it's interesting because, I mean, that's one of these kinds of academic questions. I'm not sure whether it's set the agenda or whether it was, um, already part of the agenda. I mean, I think that, that one can see it perhaps at the early part of what happened, but certainly you see, um, incidents like, Oh, like what happens in Waco, Texas with the lynchings, um, 15,000 people standing around watching somebody being lynched, or you see the, um, the pogroms in East st. Louis or, you know, what's going on in Tulsa. I mean, I'm not sure that those would not, I think those were independent examples of the racial hostilities in the conflict and the underbelly of hate in this country. Um, at that time of which I think the birth of a nation was a component part of whether it, it started it or whether it was, um, just a larger piece of it. I don't know, I'm not sure that it's worth arguing, but I think that it is definitely one of the pebbles of that cobblestone of racial hostility, racial conflict, um, racial incitement, um, that made the next, you know, the rest of that century or the rest of that generation. Um, what it was,

Speaker 1 (29:36):

Do you recall any incidents of town by town, by town? I think at, they actually managed to get it tossed out eventually, but you can talk about city by city. What happened in Detroit when it opened there? Do you know?

Speaker 2 (29:50):

Um, no, I don't know what happened when it opened in Detroit New York open, uh, New York. Um, it opened to controversy and, and open to demonstrations because that's where, um, Jane Adams was. And there was a meeting with the mayor in New York as an effort to, to have, um, uh, Griffith, uh, edited reedited. And it, it did not work and it went to, um, it went nowhere, uh, but there were a series of high level meetings there. Uh, same thing happened in, um, Ohio. Uh, there was an Ohio for a long time, refuse to, um, allow it to play different, not I'm, that's a state, there were certain cities that refuse to allow it to play and it became part of, um, I can, can we stop for a second? And I can, I can tell you exactly. Okay. Okay. Okay. In Detroit, um, the movie was gonna open in 1921 and for a second time, and the mayor at that time was mayor cousins, who was a friend of the NAACP, and the NAACP was going to have its conference in Detroit, in April and cousins, who, as I say, was already a friend of the NAACP and had helped the NAACP and the urban league, uh, in the early years of the migration, uh, of Southern blacks and had helped, uh, Southern blacks get jobs.

Speaker 2 (31:21):

And so he, there was no doubt that he was an ally. Uh, he told the producers that they couldn't open the film in Detroit because, uh, there was too many inflammatory scenes and this was a very major statement, a very major statement, but it was also late. This was 1921. Um, and cousin's really showed himself to be a good person, a good ally at that time, the NAACP held it's, it was its 12th annual, uh, conference, and it was a fabulous event. Uh, and it was, uh, it was really a very important moment in race relations in Detroit, um, as a result of this combination.

Speaker 1 (32:10):

So did they open the film perhaps in Mount Clemens or in Pontiac Indian, Ann Arbor or Ypsilanti? Cause I'm sure that they said we're going, people would drive.

Speaker 2 (32:21):

Yeah. I don't know where they opened the film, but I do know that there were Klan rallies in all of those places up and down. Um, you know, up and down Michigan, um, in, uh, 24, 25, um, you know, there may have been smaller ones prior to that, but, but the big, uh, push comes in, um, 24 when a new, uh, uh, head of the, this region, uh, who had shown success in Ohio and Indiana comes to Michigan, which is part of his challenge to grow the Klan in Michigan, the way he had in Indiana.

Speaker 1 (33:02):

That was this David Curtis Stevenson.

Speaker 2 (33:05):

Uh, no, it was, um, uh, it was after, uh, IRA started was, um, I want to say no.

Speaker 1 (33:12):

Mm Hmm. Yeah. And this, I know, uh, Stevenson was, was perhaps this guy's boss, but, uh, at one,

Speaker 2 (33:22):

Yeah, no, this was a regional yeah.

Speaker 1 (33:25):

Yeah. And Stevenson was taking power there as much as he could get it.

Speaker 2 (33:29):

I think this guy was Irish stout and he comes and he's a, um, I dunno, he's a boy scout leader and I mean, you know, these are, um, paramilitary, uh, themes, uh, that are, that move from one organization to another organization.

Speaker 1 (33:47):

Well, the very often one organization served as a cover of recover for another one. I know, in, in Mount pleasant, for instance, the odd fellows was the cover for the client. Yeah. And in big Rapids, it was the United Methodist men. And, you know, and if you needed to cover, you had the, what spend your money with Americans, what was it? The business?

Speaker 2 (34:07):

Yeah. A hundred percent Americans.

Speaker 1 (34:09):

Yeah. Yeah. There was a business organization as well, right. That it was the economic right.

Speaker 2 (34:14):

Well, and, and the Klan newspaper used to, you know, take advertisements from all of the, the, you know, the, the local services, the, the cleaners, the dry cleaners, the auto mechanic, the insurance agent, uh, they all advertised in the fiery cross and there was a regional fiery cross. And, you know, this, this regions may have come out of, um, Indiana, but it had local advertisements, uh, that were key to Detroit. Um, so, you know, it was a very particular, um, set of, you know, it, it was very particular, no matter what they call themselves and, and at a certain point in time, uh, there's a women's Klan that gets going, and it's very big in Michigan as it is, and in other places, um, and there's lots of covers in Detroit, they call themselves, uh, homeowner's associations, which was just a cover for the elections, uh, to bring in the Klan candidates and to recruit and to register people under the names of these associations. So they were, um, there were lots of efforts to disguise

Speaker 1 (35:23):

And why bother? I mean, it wasn't illegal to join the Klan. It wasn't, I mean, the Klans were, were portraying themselves as, as 100% of merit,

Speaker 2 (35:32):

100% Americans. And I think it's important to remember that this meant that, um, their targets were also Jews and Catholics. We're not just talking about blacks were talking about Jews and Catholics along with black. Although we tend to think of it as, uh, principally an anti black or a racist organization. It was opposing all sorts of, um, of, uh, parochial schools and, uh, Jews were targeted with garbage and crosses on their front lawns as well. And, you know, so I don't know why they bothered. I mean, they, they truly thought of themselves as red blooded, uh, protectors of some kind of, uh, moral corruption that people who were not them, uh, threatened the culture with. And, um, and the Klan was very successful in infiltrating, uh, elected office, um, mayors, policemen, police chiefs. It became an, it, it became a front and opportunity to, uh, justify violence in a way that, uh, would not have been sanctioned from ordinary citizens.

Speaker 1 (36:55):

Eventually you have entire city, government of Pontiac. Of course, they were also influenced by the black league, which is black Legion. I'm sorry, black Legion later on at the death of plant. Well, let's, what's the impact been on our culture, and this is a fairly broad question. What's the impact of birth of a nation? What, what's the lasting impact here?

Speaker 2 (37:23):

Well, it certainly gave the impression that it's okay to demean. It's okay to trivialize it's okay to be racist. It certainly gave the impression that there were no sanctions against a literary license. It left the message that a white supremacy was a necessity to be brought into the 20th century. And by conveying that cinematically, it basically, uh, removed it, removed the hypothesis, removed the argument from any

kind of analysis, any kind of, um, cogent, uh, challenge, because it was really the first use of that emotional message to, um, excoriate, to challenge, to undermine, to present a false hood and to get at an emotional level. And what was the emotional level? The emotional level was a, a naked conflict based on race, a naked threat based on sexuality, a naked violence. And when you viewed the screen, you didn't have to be anywhere near any of the civil war.

Speaker 2 (39:00):

You didn't even have to have been alive at the time. But when you saw the, the marauding, the image of marauding, blacks being subdued in the name of law and order and justice, you had a story that you didn't have to witness that you did not have to logically think about. It touched an emotional fear that lingered well after that movie. And I mean, just like today, when people will point to some, some ridiculous item that they see on television or in the movies as if it were real, um, it's, it speaks to a very fundamental understanding, uh, without all the fancy words and without all the fancy studies of the impact, uh, the V the impact of a picture, the impact of a visual image, uh, on the psyche. I don't know if I'm getting to your question.

Speaker 1 (40:03):

Absolutely. Uh, it's amazing Griffith, you know, he was well within his rights to, to not compromise what he had created. If he believed in it, he makes all this money on the birth of a nation. He turns around and he makes intolerance, and he loses every dime that he made on a movie about tolerance

Speaker 2 (40:29):

Doesn't compute. Does it, he got carried away with a intolerance. I think that he, um, my sense is that he was so into his megalomaniac, uh, you know, a sense of himself as an artist that he just went hog-wild and thought that he had no boundaries anymore, no limitations. Um, you know, he, he, he didn't also figure out, I mean, he, he also did not, um, palpated the, the culture. He did not have his finger on the pulse of that one. And I think that's why the birth of a nation took off because he was already speaking to fears of displacement. I mean, we're talking about, um, an agrarian, um, uh, Southern, um, displacement that, uh, is characterized by Watson and, you know, the, the fear of, uh, industry displacing a quality of life that, um, you know, that Leo Marx has talked about is the machine in the garden.

Speaker 2 (41:32):

So we are about all sorts of fears about a future that birth nomination tapped into. And I think a way that he perhaps didn't even intend, I mean, I think at some level he considered himself an artist, but also I think he thought he was setting out a documentary because why else would he have gone to such great lengths to reconstruct the battle scenes with such precision to bring in so many tens of thousands of extras and horses? I mean, I think there was some like 4,000 horses. I mean, we're talking about, you know, an effort to reconstruct the past. That's, that's almost documentary and it's and it's ambition.

Speaker 1 (42:18):

Well, of course his approach was documentary. He pioneered so many uses of the camera that are still in use today. I mean, this, what we, when we go to a movie, we see the legacy of Griffith in terms of technique. Uh, sometimes we see the legacy of Griffith in terms of storytelling as well. He managed to live to regret this movie, didn't they, you know, I don't know. Okay. Yeah, he did. Um, but, but, Oh, I do have one question. You know, that the movie actually was a combination of two of Dixon's books, the

leopard spots and the Klansmen, and put these two together. And in these, in the copies of the books, you'll see, um, here's a photo play presented. Now these look like scenes from the movie, but are they really, you have the book, you have a photo play, and then you have the movie, or what, what is this middle ground that how come these books that are supposed to be 1906, 1909 before the film have these pictures in them? What are,

Speaker 2 (43:21):

Well, I think that he, he called it a Photoplay. He actually called it a photo play in some of his conversations or some of his communications. And, and, um, I think what it was, was he was trying to, uh, basically reproduce the pictures that were painted by these stories. Now, I don't know which versions of the films you're talking of, the books you're talking about. I mean, are you talking about pictures that were actually in the 1906 and 1909? Um, I've not seen those. You've not seen those. No, but he, but he was very clear about wanting to replicate on the screen exactly what he saw on the page or what he read on the page. So I wouldn't be surprised if some of those, um, were the equivalent of the scenes that he wanted to reproduce. Exactly. I don't know.

Speaker 1 (44:12):

This is obviously something I need to find out. It could be these books, even though they have a year are subsequent to the film, even though it says 1906 or 1909,

Speaker 2 (44:23):

I mean, who are the actors and who are the,

Speaker 1 (44:26):

Well, I haven't seen Lillian Gish yet. So this is one of those areas where I need to go and do some more

Speaker 2 (44:32):

Work. Yeah, no, I don't know. Well, you know, the, the archives are at the museum of modern art, his, his papers, and they're great. They're absolutely fantastic documents. Um, and I mean, you should do what I did. You should just call up and say, I want to come see him and go, you'll have a ball. It's great fun. And you get a lot of, you get a lot of the correspondence in them. And another place where you get a lot of the correspondence, the NAACP, um, Oregon, the crisis, because what they are doing is they are telling you city by city where it's not going to play. It's not going to play in st. Louis st. Louis already knows it has. And this comes back to your question. It's not gonna play in st. Louis because st. Louis already has tender race relations and they don't want anything to inflame the race relations. So there are a number of cities that exercise their prerogative to, um, not show it, not to give a license to show it.

Speaker 1 (45:33):

And you said this is Oregon of crisis.

Speaker 2 (45:36):

Well, I mean, the NAACP is, um, magazine is the crisis, the crisis, the crisis,

Speaker 1 (45:44):

Because I don't know this magazine at all. One of the,

Speaker 2 (45:46):

Oh, you are in for a treat. Oh,

Speaker 1 (45:48):

Well, so, so, so tell me about the role of the crisis, what this magazine was and what it meant.

Speaker 2 (45:52):

Well, this was the NAACP magazine, and it went out to all its readership and web Dubois was the editor of it. And what they would do is they would tell you all of the, the cities that, uh, they would tell you lots of things. But when it came to, to this movie, they would tell you all of the cities that they were taking actions and what that action was and who was involved in it and who was writing letters. And so if you go to the NW, if you go to the, um, crisis, you will see a picture of a big demonstration in Boston against this movie. And this is going to be a great thing for you to be able to show what almost riots

Speaker 1 (46:38):

Well, and, and I wound up with $2,000 to pay a student to do research, uh, uh, for the opening reviews of this film and where, and when, and you've just given me, I bet we could buy this the whole, uh, cereal on microphone.

Speaker 2 (46:57):

You know, I have no idea. Oh, the prices. Yeah. Oh, for sure. It's probably on, well on the website. Well, I don't know if it's on the website, but you can, and you don't need the whole thing. You just need

Speaker 1 (47:08):

1915, 1916, 19.

Speaker 2 (47:11):

I'd take it out to 1924.

Speaker 1 (47:15):

So in 1915 through 1920. Yeah.

Speaker 2 (47:18):

Well, yeah, I would do that because what you're going to find our city, you know, events or incidents like the one in Detroit we're cousins, actually, I actually don't know if you're gonna find that there, I got that in private correspondence, in the NAACP correspondence. Um, but anyway, you should definitely take a look at this and, um, it's there. Oh, it's there, it's very rich. It's extraordinarily rich.

Speaker 1 (47:49):

What did I not ask about birth of a nation that we should have covered? I can you're Kevin talks about all the actors and the actresses and the fact that all the blacks were in black face, they didn't use any blacks,

Speaker 2 (48:02):

Um, that it showed in so many cities simultaneously after, after it was released. I mean, it was a staged release. It was not. Um, as I said, you know, like a big Hollywood release, it was a stage release so that they could gather the crowds subsequent city by city. And it was shown so many times that they, uh, were out 24 copies. That's all they had. And there are no two copies. There were no two copies the same because when Griffith would go to various cities and watch it in the theaters and he would cut, he would cut, you know, six frames here. And then, you know, the next week he would cut 17 frames there, depending once again on the audience reaction. So there are no two of the 24 that were identical. And so at some point they had to figure out which of these is going to be the official one, because you can go to your local video store now and get it, of course.

Speaker 2 (49:02):

Um, and who knows which one that is, but he would stand up and he would see the light coming off of the projector and he would stand up and then he would just clip. Um, and of course they were talking about reels and then they would stop and they would, you know, Mount a new reel or he would even stop it. Um, it was amazing. It was an absolutely amazing accomplishment. Um, and, uh, it's, it's hard to imagine any of that today because of the, um, uh, the license that he took and the presumption that the public could affect the way in which this film was going to be seen. And he just defied any effort to, um, to cut his wings, to clip his wings. Um, so.