

Document Citation

Title	A vicious play with vicious methods -- excerpt
Author(s)	Francis J. Grimke
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	pp. 38-41
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Racism in motion pictures
Film Subjects	The birth of a nation, Griffith, D. W., 1915

A Vicious Play with Vicious Methods

is what effect the play, exhibited all over the United States, is likely to produce on the white people of the country, and particularly on the rising generation.

I want to say, in the first place, that it presents an extraordinary misrepresentation of the birth of this nation. It has been a favorite statement of the Southern white men who supported the War, who fought the War through and survived it, that this nation first came into existence at the close of the Civil War. Now, that is not at all true; and it is not expedient, in my opinion, that this false doctrine with regard to the birth of the nation should be taught all over this country to the rising generation, unless it can be immediately and constantly denied, wherever this play is presented. This nation was created, was born, when the Constitution of the United States was adopted. To be sure, the view that the Constitution of the United States was an indestructible contract was firmly established by the War. This Union was then guaranteed to be "one and inseparable."

Secondly, this play is obviously intended to maintain the thesis that the Ku Klux Klan was an inevitable thing and, on the whole, a righteous thing,—that it was the necessary defence of the Southern communities against the colored legislatures led by Northern white men. That argument reminds me of nothing so much as the argument of the German people to-day—at any rate, of the German rulers to-day—that a contract may be destroyed, torn up, utterly disregarded, because of military necessity. The situation of the Southern communities was a grievous one at the time the Ku Klux Klan originated; but that fact did not in the least justify the utter lawlessness of the Ku Klux Klan; and no worse lesson can now be set before the white people of this country, and particularly before the young people, than this teaching of the play that lawlessness, being, as it was wrongly imagined, necessary, was therefore justifiable and indeed admirable. That is a most mischievous teaching in a free commonwealth.

But, again, I hear that one of the objects of this play is to suggest to the mind of the American people that the Fourteenth

A Vicious Play with Vicious Methods

and Fifteenth Amendments to our Constitution ought to be repealed. What are those amendments? What were they meant for? They were meant to secure to all the people of the country, and particularly to the recently emancipated slaves, the ordinary rights of personal freedom and public justice. Are we going to suffer this recommendation of the repeal of those amendments to be set forth in every large community in this country without seeing that the antidote to that poison is supplied?

Again, there is found among the suggestions of this play the proposal that the whole colored race should be removed from this country, and carried over to Africa or some other now unoccupied or barbarous region. It is not conceivable that the colored people of this country should go to Africa except on compulsion; they would have to be driven thither; they would have to be driven by force of arms; nothing short of violent compulsion would get them there. What an abominable outrage that would be, perpetrated by the white people of this country against the colored people! It is inconceivable! It is monstrous! And yet that is one of the suggestions of this play.

It is represented, indeed, that the colored race might find a paradise in Liberia; and it is said that the white race would be much better off here without the colored, and that this is a white man's country. Now, let us recall for a moment how these colored people came here. Who brought them here? What were their sufferings on the way? What have been their sufferings while here? Whose children are many of them to-day? The very worst feature of the Southern legislation concerning slavery was that item which made the child of a white man by a black mother his slave. The American people will never think of perpetrating the outrage of transporting these colored people across the seas against their will.

I come now to a question on which my own mind is not wholly clear, and therefore what I say will probably be obscure. I do not feel clear that it is the interest of the white people of this country to have this play suppressed. I am sure that the colored people have no serious interest in having this play

A Vicious Play with Vicious Methods

suppressed. This play is said to insult the colored people. I beg to say to the colored people here present that they had better not feel insulted. They cannot be insulted. The progress of the colored people in this country since they ceased to be slaves is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of civilization. Just think what the colored people have come up from. No colored person in the Southern States had any property, or could by any possibility hold any, under the regime of slavery. How is it now? They are holding large amounts of property in lands, buildings, and chattels. No colored person, under slavery, could be reasonably expected to make any distinction between mine and thine. He was either foolish or remarkably dutiful, if he did not take all the property of white people that he could safely appropriate. Such was the training which slavery supplied. Its effects will be perceptible for generations.

And how was it as to family relations? Under slavery in our Southern States no man had any legal right to wife or children; no black mother had any right to her children; every black woman was at the mercy of her master and his sons. From that state the Southern negro has now come up; and it is a marvel how quickly and how far he has advanced. My interest is not at all in the effects of this play on the negro race in our country. The negro race is taking care of itself, and has proved that it is wonderfully capable of so doing. It is the mental condition of the white race that I am concerned about, because of the false teaching of history, the false teaching concerning American ideals of liberty and justice, and the perversion of those ideals, which this play contains.

At this point my doubt as to what had better be done comes in. It is quite true, as several earlier speakers have said, that there has been a growing indifference among the white people, and particularly the young people of our country to all these questions about liberty and justice in the conduct of public affairs. This play, shown all about the country, will draw the attention of multitudes of people to those questions of public liberty and justice. If the presentation of this play

A Vicious Play with Vicious Methods

is everywhere accompanied with a new exposition of what the American people stand for in this world, I am not sure that we shall not so win a good result, a beneficial result, a result well worth securing. Therefore I feel it desirable that whatever restrictive law is now adopted in Massachusetts shall be a general law of universal application for the prevention of improper, unsuitable, unpatriotic, unwise plays and moving pictures; and that it should not be based on the particular incident in Boston which we are now considering. I feel that as a teacher. I feel it, too, as one who has had many opportunities of defending the right principles concerning public liberty. I feel it very much as an advocate of public justice for many years. It was a great satisfaction to me to write the inscription on the back of the Shaw Monument on Boston Common; because it testified to what colored troops did during the Civil War in defence of the liberties of the entire American people, and to what the colored race deserves at the hands of that people.

Let us be careful, therefore, that we get a law from the present legislature which will do good by the year and by the decade here in Massachusetts. Let us not ask for it on account of this particular play,* but because we want a just and proper control of all plays, moving pictures, and dramatic representations that are to be set before the American public; and let us all remember what the American ideals are for the guidance of this nation, which has already existed for more than a century and a quarter, and we hope is going to exist for many centuries. They are just the ideals for which the freer nations in Europe are now contending,—liberty for all men, justice for all men without distinction of race, and then universal human brotherhood.