

Document Citation

Title	Trouble over "The clansman"
Author(s)	Henry Christeen Warnack
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	1915 Feb
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The birth of a nation, Griffith, D. W., 1915

Bing!

TRouble Over "THE CLANSMAN"

*Council Objects, but Court
Allows Performance.*

*Chief of Police Restrained
from Interfering.*

*Greatest of All Pictures, with
Some Flaws.*

BY HENRY CHRISTEEN WARNACK

Clune's Auditorium is at Fifth and Olive streets. Right across the street is Central Park. I went to the Auditorium at 2 o'clock yesterday afternoon to see D. W. Griffith's master picture, "The Clansman," which is, so far as I know, the greatest picture in the world. I couldn't see it—at that hour. The City Council had told the Chief of Police to keep me out and to keep everybody else out.

I walked over to the park. In the center is a fountain, which, for simplicity and beauty, is equal to any ornament of the kind in any city on earth—with one exception. This fountain is upheld by four children. The figures are in high relief. Like any other children under a shower they are nude and here comes the exception. Two boys wear fig leaves. I saw the City Council's viewpoint. I perfectly understood that they could be relied upon to protect me and the rest of us from "The Clansman" and nude infants.

Last night the curtain went up on "The Clansman" and an audience of 3000 persons. I arrived late and wondered if a riot car had been turned in for my reception. There were seventeen policemen at the door. I was still under the city's protection. I was, so to speak, being chemically purified.

When the intermission came at the end of the first part, A. P. Tugwell, chairman of the board of censors, made a speech explaining what the censors had done, what the Council had done, what the Chief of Police had not done because Judge Jackson wouldn't let him, and what the people might do if they were willing. He said the board of censors had regarded the production of "The Clansman" as something of tremendous worth to the nation and had refused a request of the City Council to reconsider their approval. He desired the people present to say whether or not the board of censors had been just in their appraisal. He was interrupted with loud cries of "Yes!" "Yes!" "Yes!" followed by round after round of applause.

Pretty girl ushers dressed in the fashion which prevailed at the close of the Civil War walked down the aisles, distributing individual petitions to the City Council to permit "The Clansman" to proceed. These petitions were at once signed by a majority of those present. They were afterward collected and will be sent to the Council.

In brief, the facts are that the City Council passed a resolution yesterday morning instructing the Chief of Police not to allow the pictures of "The Clansman" to be exhibited. This put an end to the plan for a matinee yesterday afternoon, and thousands of persons were turned away. Mr. Griffith secured an injunction from the court restraining the Chief from taking action and fixing 2 o'clock this afternoon as the hour when the Chief must appear to show cause why the injunction should not be made permanent, thus allowing the play to proceed indefinitely.

At that hour, I understand, a committee of twenty colored people will appear before the court and report its objection to the piece. If the court sustains the injunction, the Council will be left powerless.

The question that comes to my mind in a case of this sort is not how much the production cost nor if it will pay, but whether it will hurt any child more than it helps. Without attempting to editorialize in the criticism, I want to say that I have seen the production three times and think that it is one of those things that is bound to come out and that it is bound to create feeling, but one that contains vastly more good than evil. It is very foolish to ask whether it creates race prejudice. We all know that we meet not only race but national prejudices every day of our lives. They are touched by the stage just as they are touched by commercialism and by every public school in the land.

A play at best and at worst is never anything but a match. The people are the fuel and they always follow the natural bent of their feelings. I will not pretend that there was an absence of race feeling in some of the applause at different scenes of this play last night, but it must be admitted that there was also much generosity in the applause and that the audience was eminently fair to both sides in that aggravated period which was so vividly depicted.

Petitions were signed at the end of the first half of the play before what might be considered the more inflammatory passages were offered, but I believe that the temper of the audience would have been the same at the close of the performance. Dr. Locke wrote this paper a letter which we published in which he decried "The Clansman" as pernicious. Seated near me last night was Dr. Kramer, pastor of the First Baptist Church, and he declared that it was the grandest historical lesson ever thrown upon the screen, that it was accurate and fair to everybody and that every man, woman and child in America ought to see it.

While I think it is the greatest picture that was ever made and the biggest drama ever filmed, I am not blind to its faults. It is the story of one of the saddest pages of American history and its graphic narration will turn hundreds of thousands of Americans to their histories with a zest that nothing else ever inspired. Some of the acting is wonderful and nearly all of it is good. It takes about three hours to make the exhibition when two hours and a quarter would be much nearer right. Three hours is too long even for the best of pictures. Other pictures have boasted magnitude, but they have nearly always been more bulk than art. This one is prodigious in size and consummate in art. Not a detail has been slighted.

My one criticism is that it runs too much to detail and that we are too long in reaching the central theme which is the organization and the work of the Ku Klux Klan. Nobody

ever saw more wonderful riding in a picture or so large a body of horsemen as this film presents. Nothing could be more dramatic than the manner in which the clansmen take their path on a burning cross after its flames have been quenched in the blood of a southern woman. In developing this theme and in leading up to the climax, the whole cause of the war and many of its most stirring events are portrayed. Mr. Griffith has used 3000 men in two of his war scenes, one a battle of terrific realism and the other the burning of Atlanta and its evacuation. Both of the scenes are tremendous proportions. Many of the love scenes could be shortened and some of the detail entirely eliminated without damaging the splendid and massive picture.

It seems likely that the censors of each community will have their own ideas about what they want to take and leave. Neither New York nor Philadelphia cared to cut any part of it. The hour is so late that if I attempt any comment on the acting of the play I must do so in another issue.