
The Fall of a Nation : Thomas Dixon's 'Mighty message of warning'

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Introduction

The Fall of a Nation, a spectacular film made in 1916, was made just before the US entry to European War, and in response to the climate of war. As one advertisement described it, the film was: "A Big Throbbing Message to the American People: A Bugle Call to Arms for National Defence."¹



The film's name strongly suggests the better known *The Birth of a Nation*, made by DW Griffith the previous year. But while many versions of *The Birth of a Nation* are still in existence², *The Fall of a Nation* has probably been lost.³ The similarity of the names of *Birth* and *The Fall of a Nation* was no accident. In fact, the producer of *Fall* was Thomas Dixon, who had written the best-selling 1905 novel *The Clansman*, on which the earlier film had been based. But furthermore, Dixon and Griffith shared deep personal and philosophical connections. They were both from the South, for example, and had known each other at Johns Hopkins University. Griffith's first acting job was with a touring company set up by Dixon to perform Dixon's own scripts.

Dixon had also been involved in the production and publicising of Griffith's *Birth*.⁴

Let's consider the earlier film first. *The Birth of a Nation* narrativised the 'birth' of the United States in the Civil War and the Reconstruction of the South. However, Griffith explained in 1915:

The Civil War was fought fifty years ago. But the real nation has only existed in the last fifteen or twenty years. . . . The birth of a nation began . . . with the Ku Klux Klan, and we have shown that.⁵

¹ Advertisement for *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 16

² H Hendershot, 1992, *Myth, History and The Birth of a Nation*, unpublished class paper, University of Rochester.

³ At least, it doesn't appear in on-line catalogues I've checked. Although the Internet Movie Database summary is claimed by the writer, F Gwynplaine MacIntyre, to be based on a copy held in a private European collection whose owner wants to remain anonymous (email from F G MacIntyre, November 25 2003), I am not sure how reliable this information is.

⁴ M Rogin, 1985, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*,' *Representations*, Winter, p. 151.

⁵ Rogin 1985, p. 151.

Dixon and Griffith shared this sense of a new nation that was, above all, white. The film's original ending—removed in response to protests—had shown 'masses of Negroes being loaded on ships to be sent to Africa.'⁶ Other excised footage included scenes depicting Ku Klux Klansmen castrating and lynching a renegade slave, and white women being 'pawed' by black men.⁷

When Dixon decided to make his sequel to Griffith's film, he set up the National Drama Corporation. He had been an evangelical pastor, and now he wanted to use film to preach a preparedness sermon, urging the country to protect itself against attack. In 1915, preparedness debates ranged from increasing spending on defence and the armed forces⁸, to introducing military training for school boys.⁹ But any argument for preparedness depends on generating fear of a dangerous enemy. While Dixon denied he was 'against Germans'¹⁰, his film dramatised an invasion of the US by troops who wore German-type uniforms.

Birth and *Fall*, it can be seen, both legitimate the use of force as a defensive necessity. In both films, too, the act of defining the enemy simultaneously draws boundaries around the good and familiar 'self' and the fearful and dangerous 'other.' In *Birth*, the 'other' is African Americans; the 'self' is white. *The Fall of a Nation* is less obvious, but nevertheless it opens with a lengthy and self-conscious prologue that explores 'the American people.' The prologue illustrates:

the history of the formation of Americans—that is to show the polyglot nationalities of which we are composed and through a survey of nearly four hundred years of history to bring to us the story of *The Fall of a Nation*, which tells what this polyglot peoples did when threatened by the extinction of national life. . . . the progress of the world's struggle between liberty and tyranny from 1550 AD down to the present time. . . . Neither race, nor creed, nor form of servitude is omitted from this delineation.¹¹

This paper will draw on film industry journals *Variety* and *Motography* to situate *The Fall of a Nation* in its historical, cultural and industrial contexts, in order to suggest how it continued the project of national self-definition that was begun by *The Birth of a Nation*. But before looking at how *Fall* expands on ideas expressed in *Birth*, it is first necessary to consider the making of *Fall*; what it is about; and its cultural and historical contexts, including the cinematic context of preparedness productions urging Americans to arm themselves.

⁶ Rogin 1985, p. 153.

⁷ Hendershot 1992, p. 22.

⁸ S Zeiger, 2003, 'The Schoolhouse vs. the Amory: US Teachers and the Campaign against Militarism in the Schools, 1914-1918,' *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 157.

⁹ Zeiger 2003.

¹⁰ *Motography*, June 24 1916, p. 1444.

¹¹ 'World's History Mirrored in Films: *Fall of a Nation* huge spectacle,' *Motography*, May 20 1916, p. 1153.

The film

Dixon's plans for *The Fall of a Nation* began taking shape while *Birth* was still showing in theatres. The casting of the major roles was announced in *Variety* on November 19 1915¹², around a week after *Birth* finished its 44-week run in New York's Liberty Theatre.¹³ Australian actor Arthur Shirley, who had been working at the Universal studio in Hollywood, was announced as *Fall*'s hero, John Vassar.¹⁴

From the beginning, promotional materials and articles emphasised the links between the two films, referring to them as 'twins,' for example.¹⁵ Given *Fall*'s current obscurity, it is an odd experience to read the frequent claims that it was the superior film in its scope, impact, costs and state-of-the art production. *Motography* reported on Thomas Dixon's own assessment of his project:

With the production of *The Birth of a Nation*, it was thought that no greater play could be filmed. But the author of *The Clansman*. . . claims that in *The Fall of a Nation* he has an even stronger and more wonderful play.¹⁶

One article stated that *Fall* was going to cost \$25,000 more than the earlier film¹⁷, while cameraman William C Thompson was said to have 'achieved some new art-processes. . . which will be publicly exhibited for the first time in *The Fall of a Nation*.'¹⁸

The film's connections with *Birth* were again spotlighted by the choice of venue for the premiere season: New York's Liberty Theatre, which *The Birth of a Nation* had so recently vacated. The deluxe theatrical presentation of the film involved a full orchestra that played a score written by Victor Herbert, who was publicised as 'America's foremost composer.'¹⁹ High-culture pretensions were obvious in advertisements that referred to "The First Grand Opera Cinema."²⁰

¹² *Variety*, November 19 1915, p. 22.

¹³ *Variety*, November 5 1915, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ *Variety*, November 19 1915, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Motography*, June 24 1916, p. 1444: 'the sequel was quite as wonderful as the twin. . .'

¹⁶ *Motography*, May 20 1916, p. 1153.

¹⁷ 'A Hit in Pictures,' *Theatre*, February 1 1916, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Motography*, June 3 1916, p. 1314.

¹⁹ Advertisement for *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 16.

²⁰ Advertisement for *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 16.

A MIGHTY POWER FOR PATRIOTISM AND PROFITS!

Thomas Dixon's
Master Spectacle
"The
**FALL OF
A NATION**"
In Seven Tremendous Parts
MUSIC by VICTOR HERBERT

from the Firing Line
"The Fall of a Nation," which we can readily understand is one of the most important of the year. It is certainly a great production, and it is interesting and full of skillful
"Referring to the fact that a nation is not so much a thing as it is the sum of the lives and the money-making. As we are required for a return date, we are to look to the production!"
DONALD RATES, Mgr.
New Grand Theatre,
Japan, Ind.

GREATER
VITAGRAPH



So how exactly did the film argue the need for preparedness? The storyline involves a love triangle. Virginia Holland, a pacifist and suffragette, is being wooed by Congressman John Vassar, as well as by millionaire Charles Waldron. Vassar is pushing for government support for 'a large American army' while, meanwhile, Waldron secretly plans the invasion of the US by Germany. A huge invading force of 160,000 troops 'with Krup guns and other modern war devices' first capture New York City, then other large cities. As a final insult, the republic of the United States becomes a monarchy when 'Waldron is appointed Viceroy, with the title of Prince.'²¹

At this time, British propaganda in the US was circulating stories of German rape and mutilation of Belgian women.²² *Fall* visualised these scenes of cruelty by having the invading army rape American women. Fittingly, women's seductive wiles are the secret weapons that overcome the enemy's heavy armaments:

With characteristic femininity [Miss Holland] pretends loyalty to the new regime and is entrusted by Waldron with the organising of the Imperial Legion of Honour among American Women. She secretly organises The Daughters of Jael, a million girls and women pledged to the overthrow of the foreign usurpers.²³

As *Variety* concludes: 'With some spirited night-riding by both men and women, America is once more recovered and John Vassar claims Virginia for his own.'²⁴

This 'night-riding' parallels the Ku Klux Klan rescue scenes in *The Birth of a Nation*, and suggests the strong similarities between two stories. In *The Birth of a Nation*, blacks seize power, paw women, and are defeated by a popular grassroots movement, the Ku Klux Klan, along with some 'spirited night-riding.' In *The Fall of a Nation*, an invading army seizes power, paws women, and is defeated by a popular grassroots movement, the Daughters of Jael, along with some 'spirited night-riding.'

And just as *The Birth of a Nation* provoked protests against its racism, so *Fall of a Nation* provoked protests against its anti-German sentiment. These demonstrations, however, were mild compared to the sustained and wide-spread protests against the earlier film. *Motography* reported Dixon's response to this criticism:

the large number of German faces seen in the host of the invading army was due to the fact that five hundred Germans who were out of work applied to

²¹ Review of *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 23.

²² K Brownlow, 1979, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, Knopf, New York, p. 6.

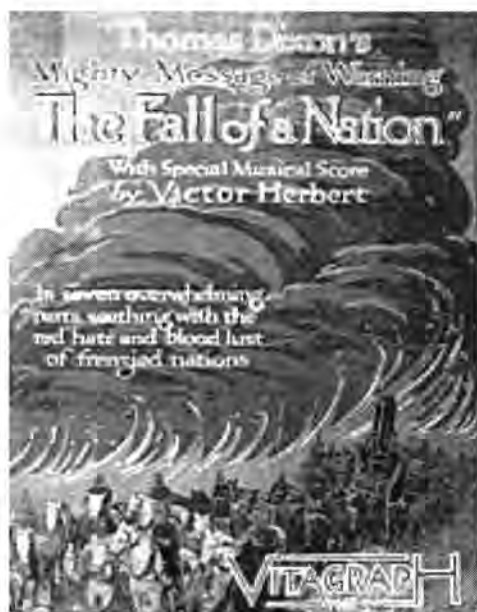
²³ Review of *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 23.

²⁴ Review of *The Fall of a Nation*, *Variety*, June 9 1916, p. 23.

him for a job and he used them in the picture as they represented fairly well the varying types of Northern Europe which he imagined attacking America.²⁵

Cultural and historical context

In sketching the cultural and historical context of the film, there are two dominant features. The first is the rapidly changing and modernising nature of the US in the early twentieth century; and the second is the European War. Both of these gave a sense of urgency to the search for national identity.



The Fall of a Nation was made during a period of almost convulsive social change. At the same time as the population of the United States was increasing rapidly, the country's ethnic makeup was dramatically shifting. After the Civil War, freed slaves from the South travelled to the northern states, looking for work. Simultaneously, there was a tremendous influx of migrants from Europe:

A total of nine million immigrants came to the United States between 1880 and 1900, and fourteen million more arrived by 1914. . . . Between 1910 and 1920, the black population of the North increased from 850,000 to 1.4 million. . . . In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the black population of

Chicago and New York grew at approximately five times the rate of the white population.²⁶

In 1914—that is, two years before *Fall* was made—‘one-third of American citizens were either foreign-born themselves or the children of foreign-born parents.’²⁷

Along with the demographic changes, the forces of modernisation had transformed the country ‘from a rural-based household economy toward a centralised urban-industrial nation state.’²⁸ The changes in demographic and economic conditions converged, with the internal and external immigrants creating ‘an indispensable . . . labour force’ that was nevertheless considered ‘racially inferior.’²⁹

The importance of the second context—the First World War—can be indicated by noting that, when *Fall* was made, the European War had been already been raging for two years. Although the official policy of isolationism persisted within the US, it

²⁵ *Motography*, June 24 1916, p. 1444.

²⁶ M Kimmel, 1996, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Free Press, New York, p. 88.

²⁷ L. Midkiff DeBauche, 1997, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, p. 3.

²⁸ NG Ford, 1997, “‘Mindful of the Traditions of his Race’: Dual Identity and Foreign-born Soldiers in the First World War American Army,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Winter, p. 36.

²⁹ Rogin 1985, p. 153.

divided the nation in complex ways. Pacifism united groups such as women, unionists and socialists, who had little else in common.³⁰ President Woodrow Wilson was adamantly committed to neutrality in the European War, but was a racist Southerner who, on coming to power, had fired black political appointees and civil servants.³¹ Another pacifist was Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. Somewhat surprisingly, so was industrialist Henry Ford—who was at the same time virulently anti-Semitic.³²

The policy of neutrality became increasingly difficult to sustain, especially after over a hundred American citizens lost their lives when Germany torpedoed the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship, on May 7 1915.³³ In the same year, newspapers revealed that the Germans were carrying out espionage and sabotage in the US to prevent US arms reaching the Allies; their activities included breeding anthrax.³⁴

But the defence of the United States against invasion had another strong impetus. Between 1914 and 1917, the security and integrity of the US itself was threatened because of unrest along the US-Mexican border. Against the background of the Mexican Revolution, the US had shelled Veracruz in 1914, with the intention of getting rid of the governor, labelled 'a dictator' by President Wilson. This goal was achieved, but at the cost of the many civilian lives. Then, following 'Pancho' Villas's 1916 raid on Columbus, New Mexico—during which 16 Americans died—12,000 US soldiers launched the Punitive Expedition into Mexico.³⁵

Dixon responded to these current events by making more prints of the film available, especially to theatres in border states like Texas.³⁶ Trade papers also advertised that:

The very National Guardsmen who manned the guns and dared the wild cavalry rides in the picture are now at the Mexican front resisting the onslaughts of bandits and guerrillas.³⁷

The Zimmermann Telegram, intercepted by the US in January 1917, indicated that Germany wanted to form an alliance with Mexico, against the US. It was this intelligence that made entering the war against Germany unavoidable.³⁸ At this point, the emotional temper of the advertising for *Fall* escalated to hysteria.

Preparedness and preparedness productions

³⁰ Zeiger 2003, p. 154.

³¹ Rogin 1985, p. 155.

³² ER Ellis, 1996, *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States, 1914-1918*, Kodansha International (first ed. 1975), New York, p. 253.

³³ Ellis 1996, p. 202.

³⁴ Ellis 1996, p. 179.

³⁵ Veterans Museum, 2003, 'United States Interventions in Mexico, 1914-1917,' <http://www.veteranmuseum.org/us-mexico.html> (viewed December 15, 2003).

³⁶ 'Fall of a nation in Big Demand,' *Motography*, July 15 1916, p. 149.

³⁷ Advertisement for *The Fall of a Nation*, *Motography*, July 15 1916, p. 191.

³⁸ Ellis 1996, p. 311.

Film productions argued both sides of the debates about whether or not the US should launch preparedness programs.³⁹ However, most productions came down on the side of preparedness. There are several reasons for this. One is that conflict is, of course, thrilling and dramatic, and film's melodramatic form excels in telling stories about good defeating evil. The other is that several media moguls, like WR Hearst, strongly supported military action and were able to express their opinions through their media empires.

One spectacular film that put forward the pacifist side of the argument was Thomas Ince's *Civilization*, opening just four days before *Fall*. The fanciful plot involved a submarine, and apparently the film was 'both antiwar and anti-German.'⁴⁰ The advertising for the film somewhat tastelessly declares that it is 'A Sensation Like War Itself.'⁴¹



But this pacifist production was, as noted, an exception. The far more frequent cinematic preparedness messages allowed fascinated audiences to see the new technologies of war (such as submarines), and the plots could be spun around the public's awareness of espionage and sabotage. War-related stories were particularly suited for the serials, as they depended on cliffhanging drama to draw their audiences back every week. Both real and imagined conflicts became the bases for serials. For example, in 1916, the same year that *Fall* was produced, Pathé made the serial *Patria*, with funding from publisher Hearst and promotions in his newspapers.⁴² Its storyline topically depicted the Mexicans and Japanese invading the southern US. Ironically, the serial

was released at exactly the same time the US Punitive Expedition was invading Mexico.⁴³

Even serials that didn't directly feature conflicts indulged in 'vicious racial assassination. . . under the guise of "preparedness."' ⁴⁴ Asian villains appeared in Pathé's 1915 productions, *The Exploits of Elaine* and *The New Exploits of Elaine*. All

³⁹ In discussing preparedness in this section, I don't differentiate between defensive preparedness—armed and trained readiness in case of invasion—and offensive preparedness, or preparedness to fight wars overseas. My gut feeling is that there must have been those who supported defensive but not offensive preparedness, but I didn't uncover any evidence in my reading for this paper. It seemed that support for arming and training was associated with belligerence; that the 'pre-emptive' strike was considered defensive.

⁴⁰ Ellis 1996, p. 248.

⁴¹ Advertisement for *Civilization*, *Variety*, June 23 1916, p. 18.

⁴² Ellis 1996, p. 267.

⁴³ RW Stedman, 1977, *The Serials: Suspense and Drama by Instalment*, University of Oklahoma Press (first ed. 1971), Norman, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Stedman 1977, p. 40.

these entertainments contributed to the rising climate of fear and suspicion of foreigners.⁴⁵

The serials were full of action, but were not prestigious. At the other end of the scale, there were big budget feature-length preparedness films that, like *The Fall of a Nation*, offered spectacle on a grand scale. Another of these big productions was *The Battle Cry of Peace*, produced by J Stuart Blackton for Vitagraph, with behind-the-scenes support from Theodore Roosevelt.⁴⁶ After its September 1915 premiere, more than fifty million people⁴⁷ watched its version of the invasion of the US.

While public responses to the question of preparedness were very complex, *The Fall of a Nation* distilled reactions down to three different positions, embodied in the three main characters. First, there is the hero, John Vassar, a preparedness advocate who wants to raise a large army to protect against invasion. As a senator, he has a prominent social position as well as authority. This was typical of many preparedness advocates, who 'were individuals with community standing, money, and the respectful, even deferential, attention of the mainstream press. . . .'⁴⁸ Theodore Roosevelt was one of the best known of those pushing for preparedness.

The second position on preparedness is embodied by the film's villain, Charles Waldron. He represents the need to be prepared, because he is working both within the country and in conjunction with a foreign enemy. This character reflected the fears of many Americans that foreigners within the United States would remain loyal to their home countries. This anxiety was addressed officially after the US had joined the war in 1917. It was necessary, because of the proportion of immigrants in the population, to draft them into the army. This wasn't done without controversy, however; first, the loyalty of these men was categorised according to a three-tier system. Those from enemy nations were put into the 'enemy alien' category.⁴⁹ The film, however, contrasts the disloyal immigrants with an assimilated Italian family, whose son 'enlists and dies serving the Stars and Stripes.'⁵⁰

The third main character in *The Fall of a Nation* is the pacifist, suffragist heroine, Virginia Holland. She represents the historical fact that a large proportion of anti-preparedness campaigners were women. Furthermore, many were educated wage earners, the so-called New Woman. Teachers, for example, were very active in resisting the nationwide move to introduce military training with weapons for school-age males.⁵¹ It is also true that many of these same women were involved in the campaign for female suffrage, which in the US was not won until 1920.

Given that the peace movement attracted so many female teachers, it's not surprising to learn that:

⁴⁵ Stedman 1977, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Brownlow 1979, p. 30.

⁴⁷ Brownlow 1979, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Zeiger 2003, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Ford 1997, p. 36.

⁵⁰ T C Kennedy, review of *The Fall of a Nation*, *Motography*, June 24 1916, page unknown.

⁵¹ Zeiger 2003, p. 148.

Some preparedness advocates linked peace history explicitly to the undermining of American youth; one college professor labelled the authors of the new social studies texts ‘sentimentalists’ who would make ‘mollycoddles’ of American boys by disparaging militarism.⁵²

This fear of the feminisation of boys echoed throughout western culture at this time, and in the US was used as a justification for school-based military training for young boys. Preparedness advocates argued that this military and physical training would protect a boy from the ‘violence’ that ‘woman tutelage’ would do to ‘his masculine nature.’⁵³

This early twentieth-century crisis of masculinity was also linked to race hygiene; for the good of the white race, men had to possess ‘the hardy virtues of rugged manliness.’⁵⁴ The resulting ‘cult of the strenuous life’ was one expression of a middle-class ‘worship of force [that] presented paths to class revitalisation’ which was, in itself, ‘strongly reinforced by an unprecedented outpouring of racism among the middle and upper classes.’⁵⁵

Thus the topic of preparedness connected with a range of social issues: class; gender definitions and roles; immigration; women’s place in the public sphere; and race purity.

National self-definition

Because *The Fall of a Nation* no longer exists, we cannot know for sure just what inflection *Fall* would have given these values. However, I am assuming that clues can be found in *The Birth of a Nation*, as well as Dixon’s novels. On that basis, I suggest that *Fall* defines the ideal American citizen as middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, committed to ‘American ideals,’ and fully committed to patriotic preparedness. There is no surprise here, since white middle-class men are exactly the group privileged within hegemonic patriarchy. Yet the rhetorical impact of the film’s strategy comes from precisely the way that patriotism and preparedness are embedded within the cluster of values that both high and low culture repeatedly reinforces.

To look at the individual dimensions of this identity—class, gender, sexuality, whiteness and ‘American ideals’—a good place to begin is with the **class** associations of the film’s genre. The production of expensive feature-length spectacles was a tactic in the bourgeoisification of the cinema, a process by which film was transformed from a medium many saw as a low, cheap, dirty entertainment for the working class and migrants into something respectable that middle-class families could attend. ‘[B]y 1915, [that process] had just about run its course.’⁵⁶ But it was a

⁵² Zeiger 2003, p. 159.

⁵³ Zeiger 2003, p. 159.

⁵⁴ M Kimmel, 1994, ‘Consuming Manhood: The Feminisation of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920,’ in *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*, ed Lawrence Goldstein, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, p. 20.

⁵⁵ TJ Jackson Lears, 1981, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, Pantheon Books, New York, p. 108.

⁵⁶ R deCordova, 1982, ‘The Emergence of the Star System and the Bourgeoisification of the American Cinema,’ in *Star Signs: Papers from a Weekend Workshop*, BFI Education, London, p. 65.

process that worked in two directions, both on the films themselves, and also on audiences:

Catering to the 'masses' required a leisure firm to develop a marketing strategy and product that would appeal to many classes and groups at the same time. Ironically, the result was not a class-neutral product or marketing approach but one 'with class,' encouraging consumers' identification with the upper class and its luxury in an effort to promote consumption as a value.⁵⁷

Fall's 'opera' pretensions flattered the audience that they were participating in high culture. The elaborate presentation and high ticket prices—sometimes up to \$2.00⁵⁸—also emphasised its elite nature. (Serials, by contrast, were considered 'the lowest form of cheap entertainment.'⁵⁹) The goal of attracting mass audiences, across demographic categories, appears to have worked: *Motography* commented that the film 'is attracting all classes and all nationalities and it is a truly cosmopolitan audience who fills the theatre at each performance.'⁶⁰ The word 'cosmopolitan' is a deft manoeuvre, allaying any alarm that such a mixed crowd is simply rabble.

Furthermore, within the film the main characters—the senator, the millionaire, and the suffragette—are all bourgeois figures, embodying different kinds of education, leadership and political authority.

Pacifism is connected by the film to inappropriate **gender** behaviour, both male and female. Male pacifists—like William Jennings Bryan or Henry Ford—are satirically feminised in the film. In one incident, they hand flowers to the invading forces, which capture them and force them to peel potatoes.⁶¹ Such feminisation deliberately raises questions about their **sexuality**. By contrast, male preparedness advocates—like the hero, John Vassar—are not only unequivocally heterosexual, but are successful in the hetero competition for a woman's love, as proven by the romantic plot of *The Fall of a Nation*.

Women, as represented in the film, are plucky, energetic and resourceful. This seems to be a nod to modern women, and was apparently well received:

The third act seems to be especially popular with the audience and great enthusiasm is shown at the thrilling scene where the American woman takes her place beside the American man to drive the imperial conqueror from the shores of the United States.⁶²

But the film seems to have been deeply ambivalent about women taking assertive public roles. In 'real life,' the suffragist-pacifist woman was a troubling figure. Her

⁵⁷ R Butsch, 1990, 'Introduction: Leisure and Hegemony,' in *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, ed Richard Butsch, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Midkiff DeBauche 1997, p. 7.

⁵⁹ B Singer, 2001, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 200.

⁶⁰ *Motography*, July 1 1916, p. 34.

⁶¹ Ellis 1996, p. 247.

⁶² *Motography*, July 1 1916, p. 34.

public activism already placed her outside the acceptable female role of quiet, private domesticity. But additionally, the New Woman's employment frequently depended on her remaining single, so she was considered dangerously beyond the benevolent patriarchal control of a husband.⁶³

The film expresses this ambivalence by describing the heroic women as a 'gang of Amazons in breeches,' and a 'band of hell cats.'⁶⁴ And Virginia's support for both pacifism and feminism are proved to be misguided; her inability to see the truth about the need for preparedness shows that women need firm, wise, male guidance. This theme is found in other places in Dixon's work. In *The Clansman*, Elsie Stoneman begins as a New Woman. She later admits that she had been 'vain, self-willed,' and through the influence of her fiancé, has 'grown into an impassioned, serious self-disciplined woman.'⁶⁵ The domestic containment of women, within marriage and within the house, is a class-linked solution, one that is not available to working-class women, many of whom worked as seamstresses, milliners or domestics to maintain the lifestyle and comfort of the middle-class woman.

Without seeing the film itself, it's not possible to know for certain, but it seems very likely that all the characters are **white**. Reviewers do not comment on any characters who are not white; race is not an issue, whiteness is taken for granted. Thus, the enemy in *The Fall of a Nation* is not defined racially or ethnically, but ideologically as belonging to 'the old world'; the enemy are those who don't share **American ideals**, which—on the evidence of industry journal articles—the film defined as republican, democratic, modernistic capitalism. The enemy's proclamation of the villain Waldron 'prince' of the US encapsulates 'old world' values of imperial, totalitarian feudalism.

The film's idealisation of American values mirrored the wider cultural efforts at 'stamping out all traces of Old World identity among the foreign-born'⁶⁶ that went on before, during and after World War I. The military, for instance—at this point, 18 percent foreign-born⁶⁷—instigated a training program that also aimed at 'Americanising' its immigrant members, many of whom didn't speak English.⁶⁸

The film industry can be seen to have played a part in this 'Americanising' project. Even in 1916, the film industry distributed its products across the United States (and beyond). Within the nation, film was, says one commentator, 'one of the strands helping to weave the still outlying, island communities together with the newly vital urban-industrial centres.'⁶⁹ Thus the film industry in general—and both *Birth* and *Fall* in particular—were agents in the 'polyglot melding' that was valorised in the film's prologue.

⁶³ Zeiger 2003, p. 163.

⁶⁴ T C Kennedy, review of *The Fall of a Nation*, *Motography*, June 24 1916, page unknown.

⁶⁵ T Dixon, 1902, *The Clansman*, qtd Rogin 1985, p. 171.

⁶⁶ David Kennedy, 1980, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, qtd. Ford 1997, p. 49.

⁶⁷ Ford 1997, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Ford 1997, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Midkiff DeBauche 1997, p. 5.

Interestingly, the Ku Klux Klan, in Griffith's conception, functioned in a similar way. He saw the KKK as a 'visionary brotherhood [that] melded diverse individuals into a purposeful union'; it was made up of migrants who had 'given up their inherited, local identities to embody American ideals.'⁷⁰ Thus it can be seen that—disturbingly—for Griffith and Dixon the ideal American citizen was a KKK member.

Conclusion

The US entered World War I on April 6, 1917, exactly ten months after *Fall* opened. But can it be determined, then, whether *The Fall of a Nation* hastened the US entry into World War I?

It is, of course, ridiculous to identify any one source as responsible for changes in government policy and public opinion, but it can't be doubted that *The Fall of a Nation* was part of the current that finally swept a divided, reluctant nation closer to war.

Some reviews dismissed the film itself and its preparedness message. The *New York Times* objected to a 'few points that offend against good taste and several points that outrage intelligence,' while the *New York Clipper* wrote: 'National defence propaganda. Very bad story, poorly constructed, ridiculous in action, and lacking in elementary values.'⁷¹

However, in an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability, it seems very likely that *The Fall of a Nation* both exploited and exacerbated the fear of invasion. One of the most emotive ways it did this was by ramping up the impact of British propaganda, providing graphic images of atrocities relocated from Belgium to New York and Long Island. Another forceful tactic was advertising its use of real National Guardsmen who were later deployed to the Mexican border.

Beyond the scope of this paper is another question, this one concerning cultural imperialism. Given the intensely national goals of the film, one wonders how it was understood by audiences in South America, when two companies 'fully as sumptuous as the New York and Chicago ones' presented the film in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Sao Paulo, Santiago, and Lima.⁷²

⁷⁰ Rogin 1985, p. 154.

⁷¹ Both qtd Ellis 1996, p. 248.

⁷² 'Dixon Films to Buenos Aires,' *Motography*, not dated, p. 382.

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