Phil Wintle

The Representation of the Ku Klux Klan in Mainstream American Cinema (1988-2016)

The Ku Klux Klan are America’s most notorious terrorist organisation. In the 1920s membership to the Klan numbered several million, partly resulting from the success of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In this period of Klan popularity, Hollywood utilised their iconography for box office success. In the contemporary age Klan membership has diminished, yet the Klan image continues to be regularly depicted in American film. My research assesses the function of the Klan in contemporary cinema, looking at their representation between 1988 and 2016 to explain the longevity of their depiction in a period of social irrelevance.

The shifting representation of the Klan offers a unique case study in demonstrating the changing attitudes Hollywood has to race and racism. In this thesis, I argue that the Klan have been used in films to paradoxically downplay issues of racism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Klan were presented as a white ‘Other’ to whom racism is isolated. This ‘Othering’ drives melodramatic narratives of white conflict in films such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *A Time to Kill* (1996). The melodramatic simplicity of the Klan image is later accentuated in comedy films between 1999 and 2013. The comedic depiction of the Klan has often been ignored in existing literature on the Klan’s representation in film; this is a significant oversight, as comedy has kept the Klan image within public consciousness during this period. Moreover, representations of the Klan, both melodramatic and comic, have been used to guide the viewer’s understanding of American history, society, and racism. However, in recent years Hollywood has offered a greater focus on the ‘black narrative’, in these films the Klan are utilised to explore America’s history of racism, rather than to marginalise it. My research analyses the Klan’s evolving depiction and the persistence of their representation.
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Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

Approach and Outline .................................................................................................................. 6

The History of the Klan and Their Representation in Film ......................................................... 11
i. The First Era ........................................................................................................................... 12
  ii. The Birth of a Nation (1915) and the Rise of the Second Era (1915-1930) ............... 13
  iii. Morality Films and the Decline of the Second Era (1930-1944) ............................... 18
v. The Civil Rights Movement (1960s) .................................................................................. 21
vi. The 1970s and the Celebration of Black Strength .............................................................. 23

Chapter One: Literature Review ............................................................................................... 29
1.1 Select Works on the History of the Klan ............................................................................ 30
1.2 The Klan’s Representation in American Cinema ............................................................... 33
  1.2.1 The Klan and Cinema (1915-1940) ......................................................................... 34
  1.2.2 The Klan and Cinema (1940-present) ..................................................................... 36
1.3 White Supremacy and Whiteness in Film ......................................................................... 38
1.4 Blackness and Racism in Film ........................................................................................ 43
1.5 Collective Memory and History ....................................................................................... 46
1.6 Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 49

Chapter Two: The Klan Melodrama (1988-1997) .................................................................. 51
2.1 Mississippi Burning (1988) ............................................................................................... 53
2.2 Attenuating Klan Iconography Through Melodrama ..................................................... 62
2.3 Presenting a Just America .................................................................................................. 69
2.4 Black Narrative and the Klan ........................................................................................... 73
2.5 Justice and the Klan ......................................................................................................... 84
2.6 Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 91
3.1 The South and Marginalisation ........................................... 97
3.2 Poverty and Class .................................................................. 104
3.3 Modernism and Integration .................................................. 108
3.4 Conclusion ............................................................................ 112

4.1 Theories of Comedy ............................................................... 116
4.2 *Fletch Lives* (1989) ............................................................... 118
4.3 The Klan and Absurdity ......................................................... 120
4.4 Race and Pseudo-Taboo ......................................................... 124
4.5 Comedy and Critique ............................................................ 128
4.6 Historical Comedies ............................................................... 134
  4.6.1 Bedsheets and *Forrest Gump* (1994) ............................... 135
  4.6.2 Bags and *Django Unchained* (2012) ............................... 141
4.7 Conclusion ............................................................................ 153

Chapter Five: Change and Impasse in Contemporary Depictions of the Klan (2011-2016) .......................................................... 157
5.1 Marginalising the Klan .......................................................... 158
5.2 The Klan and American History .......................................... 164
5.3 The Continuation of Melodrama .......................................... 170
5.4 Conclusion ............................................................................ 176

Conclusion .................................................................................. 180

Appendix .................................................................................... 189

Filmography .............................................................................. 191

Primary (Theatrical Films) ......................................................... 191
Secondary (Non-Theatrical Films, Documentaries, and Other Media) .... 198

Bibliography .............................................................................. 200
Introduction

The Ku Klux Klan are America’s most recognisable and long-lasting terrorist organisation. The Klan’s influence and membership have fluctuated throughout its 150-year history, with membership peaking in the mid-1920s with up to four million Klansmen.¹ Since the 1980s, however, Klan membership has declined to only a few thousand Klansmen nationwide; in 1981 Klan numbers were at approximately 11,000, by the 1990s this membership had fallen to approximately 5,000 and around 3,000 by 2016.² Despite the Klan’s failing strength they continue to be depicted in American cinema; for this research I have identified thirty-four films released between 1988 and 2016 that portray the group, ranging from films that have a substantial focus on the Klan, to films that present them only briefly. In this contemporary period, where the Klan become increasingly irrelevant to society, they have been depicted in American cinema at a significant rate; there have not been as many mainstream films featuring the Klan in any period since the 1920s. The central question of this research is to assess the function of the Klan in contemporary Hollywood, asking why the group continue to be depicted in an era where the real organisation has diminished? It is clear why Hollywood depicted the Klan in previous decades, for instance, Hollywood capitalised on their popularity in the 1920s and again as the Klan re-emerged in the 1940s. But, by the late-1980s and 1990s the Klan had little relevance to American society, why then does Hollywood continue to depict the group in this period?

The Klan are intrinsically linked with American cinema; the now iconic white robes and fiery cross were adopted by the Klan after the success of The Birth of a Nation (1915). D. W. Griffith’s film heralded a new age of American cinema, and equally helped promote the Klan to a wide audience leading to their peak membership. Since the 1930s Hollywood has offered a more critical view of the group but, as shall be discussed, has repeatedly utilised the Klan image to promote interest among cinemagoers. From the late-1980s Hollywood’s depiction of the group has become increasingly distanced from reality; the Klan are instead used as a cinematic shorthand

to further melodrama and, subsequently, comedy. My research begins with *Mississippi Burning* (1988), which was the first mainstream film to depict the Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s. The film was based on the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in 1964, yet the narrative of the film is far from factual. The film drew significant criticism for depicting FBI agents as figureheads of the Civil Rights Movement, whilst black characters were minimalised. Instead of offering an exploration of the Movement, the narrative focuses on a melodramatic conflict between good and bad white men (the agents and the Klan). Subsequent films featuring the Klan in the 1990s typically relate the group to the past, but, like *Mississippi Burning*, do not often depict a forthright exploration of the Klan or racism. As such, I also assess how the recurring depiction of the Klan affects the cinematic perception of their history and America’s history of racism.

In this thesis, I analyse how Hollywood’s use of the Klan informs the portrayal of racism and whiteness. Often the Klan are depicted against ‘white saviour’ figures, driving a narrative of white conflict. This is particularly evident in *Mississippi Burning*, *A Time to Kill* (1996), and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), among others. Through this conflict, I argue that the Klan are presented as ‘Other’, they are separated from ‘normal’ society and ‘normal’ whiteness. Whiteness is typically depicted by Hollywood as the ‘default’ or as ‘invisible’. Recently, however, there has been an increased scholarship that looks at the racialisation of whiteness in Hollywood; Lauren S. Cardon, for instance, looks at white identity through cinematic depictions of inter-racial relationships. Cardon argues that such narratives ‘racialize’ whiteness as the racial ‘Other’ forcing a ‘self-consciousness that nonwhites have experienced for centuries’. Conversely, I explore how the films of my research offer soothing

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5 Mike Moore, ‘Mucking up History’, *The Quill*, 77.3 (1989) 2.
11 Ibid., pp. 206-07.
narratives as they do not challenge whiteness, but rather affirm the ‘default’ position of whiteness by presenting the racist (Klansmen) as the evil ‘Other’ who is distanced from normal society. In demonstrating the Klan as the evil white ‘Other’ my research builds on similar theories, such as that of Annalee Newitz who suggests that ‘lower’ class whites are ‘marked’ as social ‘Others’ separated from other understandings of whiteness. With this ‘Othering’ I question whether the Klan may be paradoxically used to lessen the exploration of racism in the films of this thesis.

Through the representation of the Klan it is possible to assess Hollywood’s changing attitudes to race and racism. In the 1990s, films such as *A Time to Kill* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* presented an absolution to American racism; the white hero works to combat the Klan and bring them to justice in the courts. Contrastingly, in recent years, films such as *Lee Daniel’s The Butler* (2013) and *Selma* (2014) present the Klan as only one factor in America’s elongated history of racism. Within my research period the predominant depiction of the Klan has shifted from a group presented in entertaining melodramatic narratives, to figures that are utilised to critique American history and society. This thesis presents the evolution of the Klan’s representation and theorises the cause for this change. The representation of race in Hollywood is often studied through depictions of blackness; my research offers an opposing view, looking at Hollywood’s relationship with race through its representation of whiteness and white racism. I question how films present the Klan to explore, or conversely to establish, America’s racial hegemony.

Some films in this thesis dedicate significant screen-time to the Klan; *Mississippi Burning*, for instance, presents the group as a focal point for the narrative. In other films, such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) or *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Klan are presented in one or two prominent scenes, whilst further films, such as *Road Trip* (2000) or *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), only briefly reference or allude to the Klan. For my research I have chosen to analyse films regardless of the Klan’s screen-time in the narrative; brief depictions of the Klan often offer a more nuanced understanding of how the Klan function in the Hollywood film. For instance, in films like *Selma* the Klan image is reduced to marginalise their significance and to direct the

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9 For this thesis I refer to the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* by its original shorter title, though the film’s name was later changed to *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, matching its source text.
narrative’s focus towards the black community. Whilst in the comedies at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Klan are presented briefly as they are utilised as a visual joke or ‘gag’. This is a significant difference, I explore why the Klan have been the focus of some narratives whilst they are marginalised in others, and in further narratives utilised as a comical shorthand. The brief allusions to the Klan in comedies are suggestive of the extent that the Klan have become an accepted image in contemporary cinema and also points to their evolving cinematic depiction. The comical portrayal of the Klan has been significantly ignored in works exploring their representation in film, as shall be discussed further in the Literature Review. My research addresses this discrepancy by analysing comical and dramatic representations of the Klan to present a more rounded understanding of their function in this period of American cinema.

There are several reasons why I have chosen the lengthy research period of 1988 to 2016. Firstly, in this period Klan strength and the media attention given to the group had noticeably declined, it is therefore significant to question why their representation in mainstream films grew substantially. Mississippi Burning, I argue, is the first in a line of films that utilises the Klan to present racism as historic, isolated, and otherwise irrelevant to normal society. Though the film was praised by some reviewers for its ‘harrowing’ depiction of the 1960s, it is undeniable that the main focus of the narrative is on the conflict between FBI agents and the Klan, not racism.¹⁰ My research explores how this melodramatic depiction of the Klan continued to evolve throughout the 1990s and is then accentuated into the comedies of the twenty-first century.

By presenting a research period of nearly thirty years it is possible to explore the evolving depiction of the Klan, and, subsequently, demonstrate Hollywood’s changing attitudes to race and racism in the contemporary period. I have decided, however, to resolve this study in 2016, not 2018 (thirty years after Mississippi Burning). This decision is primarily in response to recent developments in American politics and society. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the extreme-right has an unprecedented voice in the White House. Despite this, Klan numbers have not significantly increased; yet, media interest in the Klan has returned, particularly after Trump did not disavow the Klan, David Duke, or their support early in his campaign

The tragic events at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (2017), have also provoked interest in the Klan despite their minor involvement in the rally. As such, films like Mudbound (2017) and BlacKkKlansman (2018) are produced and released in a significantly different environment where the Klan image has found new meaning. I therefore defined my research period as 1988 to 2016 to assess Hollywood’s utilisation of the Klan during a period in which they had fallen into irrelevance.

The focus of this thesis is on mainstream American cinema, this I define broadly as works produced or distributed through major studios and/or produced on a budget of $10 million or more. My reason for focusing on the mainstream is twofold. Firstly, as a matter of practicality, my research incorporates a large range of films of varying genres, to include low-budget and television films as well would be unmanageable. Secondly, I focus on the mainstream film as the Klan image stemmed from what is considered the first Hollywood blockbuster in The Birth of a Nation. I am therefore interested in Hollywood’s continuing relationship to the Klan, and its response to The Birth of a Nation after a century of cinema. I recognise that some low-budget films have pushed the depiction of the Klan beyond that found in mainstream film. For instance, the television film Jasper, Texas (2003), portrays the horrific murder of James Byrd Jr by white supremacists in 1998, whilst Hollywood typically presents the Klan in historic narratives. Other low-budget films, however, such as The Believer (2001) or the comedy Gamers: The Movie (2006), support broad trends found throughout my research on the representation of the Klan in mainstream cinema.

In the 1920s the Klan utilised film to promote their organisation, using The Birth of a Nation as a marketing tool and producing their own films such as The Toll of Justice (1923) and The Traitor Within (1924). At the outset of this study one possible research question was to explore how the Klan respond to contemporary cinema and assess whether film remains to be used for Klan recruitment. However, evidence for


State of the Union with Jake Tapper, CNN, 28 February 2016.


this is difficult to ascertain. Many Klan websites are scarcely updated or are redundant, and social media for the Klan is often banned, though the far-right forums Stormfront and VNN (Vanguard News Network) both feature movie review pages.\textsuperscript{15} Here there is some discussion on the use of film for far-right recruitment, noticeably with a thread on American History X (1998); yet, overall, these websites offered limited evidence of contemporary Klan or right-wing interaction with cinema.\textsuperscript{16} As such, I will not be addressing the Klan’s response or relationship with the films of this research, as Tom Rice did with his study of the Klan’s cinematic depiction in the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{17} Instead, I focus on Hollywood’s utilisation of the Klan and their function in the mainstream film from the late-1980s into the twenty-first century.

\textbf{Approach and Outline}

My approach combines textual analysis with contextual research. I explore how the Klan are represented in film, assessing their physical depiction (the presentation of their regalia, and the use of the fiery cross) as well as the cinematography used to depict Klansmen. The Klan have changed their iconography several times in their 150-year history, only adopting white robes in their second era. Since the 1970s and 1980s the Klan have sought to change their image; David Duke moved towards a suited Klan, with other Klans dressing in militant uniforms.\textsuperscript{18} This variation is rarely depicted in contemporary films. Looking at the representation of the Klan, I explore Hollywood’s manipulation of the group to assess how the Klan’s ‘traditional’ depiction guides the narrative’s understanding of racism. Furthermore, I consider the Klan’s position within the narrative and how they affect the tone of the film. For example, in Mississippi Burning the Klan are essential to the narrative that focuses on white conflict, yet in the similar narrative of A Time to Kill the Klan add little to the film’s plot. Instead, they are used to heighten the racial tension of the court case that is central to the film. Here, I

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Rachel M. Schmitz, ‘Intersections of Hate: Exploring the Transecting Dimensions of Race, Religion, Gender, and Family in Ku Klux Klan Web Sites’, Sociological Focus, 49.3 (2016), 200-14 (p. 212).
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] [Anon.] Movie Reviews, forum, Stormfront <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/f101-2/> [accessed 9 December 2017]
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] FEMALE14WORDS and others, American History X, forum thread, Stormfront, 31 July 2002 <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t796789/> [accessed 9 December 2017]
\end{footnotes}

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\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Rice, White Robes, Silver Screens.
\end{footnotes}
question why the Klan are presented in the film, analysing how their inclusion manipulates the depiction of racism; I also assess how the Klan are utilised to establish the ‘goodness’ of the protagonist. This analysis of presentation and narrative offers a clear understanding of the Klan’s function.

This thesis operates under the understanding that films are at least ‘informed’ by the ‘circumstances in which they were produced’.\(^\text{19}\) Between the 1980s and the 2010s there have been several noticeable events that highlight the complexities of America’s racial relations; this varies from the tragic events of the Los Angeles Riots (1992), to the nomination and election of Barack Obama (2009-2017). I offer a brief overview of significant events in each chapter to place the films of this study in a wider social context. I highlight, for example, the rise of racially themed courtroom dramas after the O. J. Simpson trial (1995), including, but not limited to, A Time to Kill, Ghosts of Mississippi, and The Chamber (1996). Equally, under the Obama administration, Hollywood offered narratives that explored America’s racial history with a greater focus on the black voice, as is evident in Lee Daniel’s The Butler and Selma, as well as films not analysed in this study such as 12 Years a Slave (2013). I assess how the Klan’s depiction relates to social events, particularly how the group are used to address viewer’s anxieties; for example, I explore their depiction in melodramas of the 1980s and 1990s as a pacifying response to social concerns of an increasing racial divide.

A criticism faced by zeitgeist approaches is in the selectiveness of the films chosen for analysis; often ignoring the majority of film production for those of ‘masterpiece’ status.\(^\text{20}\) Whilst I have narrowed my research to focus on the mainstream, I have avoided ‘masterpiece’ selectiveness by analysing films regardless of genre, prestige, target audience, or reception. I include films with high viewership but little ‘prestige’ to best assess Hollywood’s use of the Klan by considering their representation in a wider selection of films. The films of this research include melodramas, biographies, teen-comedies, and horror films (among other genres). Each genre is equally significant in understanding the Klan’s function in the Hollywood film; their representation in less critically respected genres, such as the teen-comedy, is valuable to assess the changing

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use and meaning of the Klan image. I consider the depiction of the Klan within genre tropes; for example, the teen-comedy often acts to shock through taboo or gross-out humour, therefore I examine whether the Klan are presented in such films as taboo humour or, contrastingly, whether their use in comedy shows an attenuation in the Klan’s image – are the Klan now more comical than threatening?

My thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One is a Literature Review, this review places my research within the existing field; I offer an assessment of current literature on the representation of the Klan, highlighting areas where my research advances existing debate. Similarly, in assessing literature on Hollywood’s representation of whiteness, blackness, and history, I intend to demonstrate how my niche research topic on the Klan’s representation aligns and advances arguments from a broader field of film studies. My Literature Review also includes a section reviewing historical texts on the Klan which have helped shape the context of my research.

The following three chapters are divided thematically; in Chapters Two and Three I analyse the Klan’s representation in drama films of the late-1980s and 1990s. This was the predominant genre for the Klan’s representation in the period. In Chapter Two I identify two chief narrative forms in depicting the Klan. Firstly, in films I have termed white melodramas, the Klan are presented in a conflict with the white protagonist. This narrative often undermines the exploration of racism found in the film, as is evident with films like A Time to Kill. However, films like Mississippi Burning and The Chamber at times hint at the nuances of racism, the differing level of such critique is guided through the depiction of the Klan, presenting them as ‘Other’ redneck figures (Mississippi Burning) to convoluted characters (The Chamber). Similarly, the Klan are utilised to guide the viewer’s understanding of villainy in Fried Green Tomatoes and Sommersby (1993).

‘Black narrative’ films of the period focus on black victimhood and activism. They offer a critical view of America’s history of racism, as is found in Malcolm X (1992) and Rosewood (1997), though the melodramatic narrative remains evident, particularly with Posse (1993). Typically, the white melodrama isolates racism to the Klan, presenting a division between ‘white saviour’ protagonists and ‘bad’ white figures; contrastingly, the black narrative presents the Klan as part of wider American society and not solely culpable for racism. Where the white melodrama often minimalises issues of racism the black narrative highlights the longevity of injustice found in America. To this end, the justice faced by the Klan differs between these two narrative
forms, emphasising the varied depiction of America’s history of racism. Looking at these contrasting representations, this chapter explores Hollywood’s relation to race and racism and what Donald Bogle refers to as Hollywood’s ‘cynicism about black subjects’, whilst also looking at how whiteness is paradoxically protected through the Klan’s representation.21

In Chapter Three I compare Hollywood’s depiction of the Klan to that of other ‘modern’ white supremacist groups. I offer specific focus on Betrayed (1988) and American History X, which both depict the Klan alongside other supremacist groups. In comparison to the white melodrama, films that focus on ‘modern’ white supremacists offer a greater depth of social critique. This is reflective of the growing threat from right-wing militant groups in the 1980s and 1990s, that accumulated in such events as the Waco Siege (1993) and the Oklahoma City Bombing (1995). Where the Klan are presented as isolated, ‘modern’ white supremacist groups are depicted as a nationwide threat. Comparing the Klan to other white supremacist groups, I analyse the Klan’s marginalisation in American cinema, noting specifically Hollywood’s depiction of the American south. In this chapter, I advance arguments made by Karen L. Cox who suggests that the south is used by Hollywood as an ‘exotic’ setting; I demonstrate that this ‘exoticness’ is used to isolate the Klan to minimalise issues of racism.22 In this chapter, I also explore Newitz arguments on the lower-class social ‘Other’, which I suggest is echoed in depictions of the Klan, but not with depictions of ‘modern’ white supremacists.23 This comparison presents a contradictory trend in Hollywood as the Klan are used to present racism from a historical perspective, but narratives focusing on ‘modern’ white supremacy groups align with contemporary anxieties.

One of the most overlooked aspects in literature on the representation of the Klan is in analysing their depiction in comedy. As discussed, my research aims to address this discrepancy. The Klan have featured in comedy films since the early-1920s. Comic depictions of the Klan also became a select trend in the films of the early-1980s; Fletch Lives (1989) and Forrest Gump (1994) demonstrate the continuation of this minor trend. Between 1999 and 2013 comedy became the leading depiction of the Klan with no less than eleven comedy films released in the period that depict the group.

23 Newitz, p. 138.
Previously, comedy films featuring the Klan were released during or just after periods of strong Klan membership (as with the 1920s and early-1980s), this is not true of the twenty-first century film. In this chapter I present the comic representation of the Klan as an exaggeration of their melodramatic depictions in the 1980s and 1990s. This demonstrates the extent to which the Klan’s contemporary representation is formed from previous cinematic depictions. I explore the varied use of the Klan in comedy films of the period, sub-dividing Chapter Four between films that use the Klan image as a ‘gag’, such as Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (1999), and those that use the image for critique, such as Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay (2008). This chapter looks at the attenuation of the Klan through their comic representation, but equally explores what the Klan’s continued depiction says of Hollywood’s attitude to race and racism. Equally, I analyse how the Klan are used as a device to manipulate the depiction of history in Forrest Gump and O Brother, Where Art Thou?, which I have termed ‘historical comedies’. I will also assess Django Unchained (2012) alongside these historical comedies, though Quentin Tarantino’s film is not a comedy its depiction of the Klan is comical.

The final chapter of this work, Chapter Five, looks at recent depictions of the Klan from 2011 to 2016. There is a noticeable trend in films of this period to present a stronger critique of American racism. Films like The Help (2011) and Selma refer to Klan violence but avoid visually depicting the group to instead focus on the narrative of black characters. As a variant on this Lee Daniel’s The Butler and Free State of Jones (2016) utilise the Klan’s iconography to highlight America’s history of racial oppression. These two approaches have similar intentions in their critique of racism, but they utilise the Klan differently to do so. As such I analyse the depiction of the Klan questioning why filmmakers have approached their iconography differently and what this says of contemporary understandings of the Klan. Other films of the period such as Live by Night (2016) again present the Klan in melodrama, whilst Imperium (2016) compares the Klan, once more, to other ‘modern’ white supremacist groups. With this variation I consider the evolving nature of the Klan image in a changing Hollywood. Comparing these contemporary representations with earlier depictions of the Klan reveals Hollywood’s changing attitudes. Where possible I have structured my thesis in chronological order. Following Chapter Five and the Conclusion, I have included an Appendix which offers a chronological list of the primary films of this study for clarity.
Before the main body of my work, I conclude this introduction with a brief history of the Klan and their representation in American cinema. This overview acts as a precursor to my own research on the Klan’s representation between 1988 and 2016. This context is needed to demonstrate the prevailing trends in the cinematic representation of the Klan; throughout my thesis I compare the contemporary depiction of the Klan to that of previous decades, demonstrating the evolution of the Klan image. This overview also highlights the longevity of the Klan’s image in the public eye, somewhat explaining their repeated use in contemporary film; the overview equally emphasises how the contemporary film is unique in that it is the first period where the Klan’s cinematic representation does not relate to their social position.

Lastly, a note on grammar, throughout this thesis I refer to the Klan in the plural rather than in the singular. ‘The Klan’ is an encompassing term for varying numbers of Klansmen, whilst Hollywood typically depicts the Klan as one united organisation, in reality the Klan are divided. From the 1940s onwards several groups have referred to themselves as ‘the Klan’. Moreover, since the Klan’s formation in the nineteenth century individual Klan den’s and Klansmen have acted independently of Klan leaders and their doctrine, this has led to uncontrollable violence, as will be explained further in the following section. Referring to ‘the Klan’ in the plural recognises the fragmented nature of the organisation.

The History of the Klan and Their Representation in Film

The Klan’s history is broadly divided into three eras. The first era (1865/6 to the mid-1870s) was the Klan’s shortest tenure and was centred in the south during the Reconstruction era; the second era (1915-1944) saw the Klan become a mainstream organisation, peaking in 1924 with between one-and-a-half and four million members.24 The Klan’s third era (1946-present) is one of divided groups using the Klan’s name and iconography, each group has unique beliefs and exhibit different levels of violence; the ‘Klan’ is no longer one unified body. Despite this, the third era has seen extreme Klan violence, most noticeably committed by the United Klans of America (UKA) during the Civil Rights Movement, though Klan movements also faltered and reformed through the 1970s and 1980s. Because of the variable nature of the Klan in its third era, some scholars have sub-divided the era further. Many point to David Duke’s politically

24 Fryer Jr and Levitt, p. 1889.
minded, suited, and media savvy Klan of the 1970s as being a fourth era of the Klan. However, David Chalmers refers to the ‘fourth period “revival”’ as a localised movement of working-class southern communities headed by Bill Wilkinson’s Invisible Empire in the late-1970s, which was in ‘competition’ with Duke’s Klan. The ‘fifth era’ of the Klan is more readily defined. Klansman Robert Miles coined the phrase ‘fifth era’ when describing the Klans of the late-1970s and 1980s which sought to unite with other white supremacy groups. The shifting composition of the Klan is seldom reflected in cinema.

i. The First Era

The founding date of the Ku Klux Klan is unclear, with sources varying between December 1865 and May or June 1866. The Klan was formed by a small group of confederate veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee. The name ‘Ku Klux’ derives from the Greek ‘Kuklos’ meaning circle and ‘Klan’ to celebrate the Scottish heritage the members shared. The formation of the Klan was supposedly as an attempt to combat the boredom of the men following the Civil War, rather than for ideological or racial purposes. In the first era of the Klan the group did not originally burn crosses nor wear white robes, rather the Klan donned ‘elaborate and menacing costumes’ decorated in occult symbols and completed with tall ‘conical witches’ hats. This ‘uniform’ was

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Ridgeway, pp. 97-123.
Randel, pp. 6-5.
30 Trelease, p. 5.
never wholly adopted; indeed, the Klan wore a variety of coloured robes, masks, and
hoods – far from the iconic white robes the Klan became associated with
cinematically.\textsuperscript{32}

The first era Klan focused on mysticism, creating positions such as the Grand
Dragon (leader of a realm), and Grand Cyclops (leader of a Klan den); equally,
Klansmen had been known to perform dances in their bizarre attire to the amusement of
local residents.\textsuperscript{33} The Klan’s night-time rides, in their elaborate robes, gave them the
appearance of ghosts; realising this the Klan soon began to frighten the newly freed
black community, pretending to be ghosts of confederate soldiers. Whilst disturbing,
these ‘pranks’ remained non-violent.\textsuperscript{34} With the growth of the Klan these ‘pranks’ soon
turned into patrols; Klansmen seized firearms from black communities and
administered whippings.\textsuperscript{35} By 1869 Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest found the
violence of the Klan uncontainable and called for the men to disband and destroy their
robes and masks.\textsuperscript{36} Wyn Craig Wade argues that Forrest’s order was a sign of the
uncontrollable nature of the Klan and that Forrest wanted ‘no further part of it’; yet,
Michael Newton counters this view, arguing that Forrest’s call was not to disband but
to hide ‘deeper underground’, noting how Forrest continued his decree to say how
Klansmen should hold ‘firmly together’.\textsuperscript{37} In either regard, the varied response by Klan
dens to Forrest’s instructions demonstrates how fractured the Klan was even in its early
years; this is worth considering as many academic and fictional works operate under the
false assumption that the Klan are one united organisation.

\textbf{ii. The Birth of a Nation (1915) and the Rise of the Second Era (1915-1930)}

By the turn of the twentieth century public conception of the Klan had been warped
through inaccurate historic accounts and fiction. Authors and historians of the period
fabricated the behaviour of Republicans and southern black communities whilst

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Randel, pp. 48-49.
\item Wade, p. 60
\item \textsuperscript{33} Lester and Wilson, p. 86.
\item Wade, p. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, p. 9.
\item Wade, p. 37.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Michael Newton, \textit{White Robes and Burning Crosses: A History of the Ku Klux Klan from 1866}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Wade, p. 59.
\item Michael Newton, \textit{White Robes and Burning Crosses}, pp. 16-17.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
glorifying the Klan as ‘heroes’, thus reinventing the Klan’s history.\textsuperscript{38} Thomas Nelson Page’s \textit{Red Rock} (1898), for instance, details the Klan’s good deeds in disarming the black community.\textsuperscript{39} The most famous novels to romanticise the Klan are Thomas Dixon Jr’s Klan trilogy consisting of \textit{The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden - 1865-1900} (1902), \textit{The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan} (1905), and \textit{The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire} (1907). Dixon’s work helped popularise the iconography of white robes and invented the concept of the flaming cross, taking inspiration from Sir Walter Scott’s \textit{The Lady of the Lake} (1810), again associating the Klan to their Scottish roots.\textsuperscript{40}

Dixon adapted \textit{The Clansman} for the stage, opening in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1905, where it was well received. The staging of the show featured ‘flaming crosses, fights, black corpses, and charges of Klansmen on live horses’, the furore of the audience was equated to a political rally.\textsuperscript{41} This elaborate setting was transposed into the 1915 film adaptation, D. W. Griffith’s \textit{The Birth of a Nation}. The film was an important step in marketing cinema towards the middle-classes, moving away from ‘Nickelodeon’ cinema; it ran at over three hours, included sensational battle sequences, parallel narratives, and visual effects (such as iris editing). The film depicts the Civil War and Reconstruction and presented the liberated black community as unruly and dangerous. In the film the Klan are depicted in white robes that are embroidered with a cross, and with hooded masks that have large pickelhaubes; they carry a small burning cross. They are heroic figures, they try and lynch black antagonist Gus (Walter Long in blackface); they also defeat a black-militia which has over-run a local town. Finally, the Klan force black voters away from polls at the next election (this is presented as a positive act). Despite the war scenes, the true battle of \textit{The Birth of a Nation} is not found in the Civil War, but in racial conflict – northern and southern whites are united through the common threat of black freedom.\textsuperscript{42}

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Wade, p. 115.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Wade, p. 146
\item \textsuperscript{41} Brundage, p. 34.
\end{itemize}
Such was the influence of *The Birth of a Nation* that the second era Klan adopted the white robes and the fiery cross popularised by the film. In this sense the film defined the Klan; this is particularly noticeable when comparing the Klan of *The Birth of a Nation* to earlier short films that depicted the group (or similar organisations) in a negative manner, namely, *The White Caps* (1905), *The Northern Schoolteacher* (1909), *The Voice of the Violin* (1909), and *The Rose of Kentucky* (1911). The latter two were both also directed by Griffith. In *Voice of the Violin* Klan iconography is utilised to represent an evil vigilante communist group, whilst *The Rose of Kentucky* sees a farmer (Wilfred Lucas) refuse to join the Klan. He defeats them in a gun-battle, in doing so he wins the affection of his love interest (Marion Sunshine). Dixon’s influence is clear in Griffith’s work as the Klan in *The Rose of Kentucky* are presented in robes akin to *The Birth of a Nation*. It is often forgotten that Griffith presented the Klan in a contradictory light in his earlier work; as Melvyn Stokes notes, the success and popularity of *The Birth of a Nation* has erased the memory of early negative depictions of the Klan.\(^{43}\)

Whilst *The Birth of a Nation* had a significant impact in rewriting the public’s understanding of the Klan, it is not accurate to say the film was responsible for the formation of the second era Klan. Other factors were influential in Klan growth, particularly the work of William J. Simmons, who described himself as a professional ‘fraternalist’.\(^{44}\) He sketched out plans for his own fraternity based on the old Klan, timing his formation ceremony on Atlanta’s Stone Mountain to coincide with the showing of *The Birth of a Nation* in the city.\(^{45}\) Atlanta’s racial tensions had been fraught for some time, in 1905 *The Clansmen* was performed with the house-lights left on after heckling and tension from both white and black audience members.\(^{46}\) In 1913, Leo Frank, a Jewish man, was arrested for the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl; he was lynched by men referring to themselves as the ‘Knights of Mary Phagan’.\(^{47}\) Simmons capitalised on this growing tension with his new Klan.

The formation of the new Klan fits within social trends of the period which saw a growth of secret societies and fraternities. Dubbed the ‘golden age of fraternalism’, between 1870 and 1910 as much as half the adult population ‘participated in fraternal

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\(^{43}\) Stokes, *D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,* p. 231.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 30.


lodges, service clubs, and leisure organizations’ with ‘fancy uniforms’ being a ‘big attraction’. In this context the formation of the Klan was neither surprising nor unusual; the popularity of these fraternity groups also partly explains the large membership of the second era Klan. Simmons linked his Klan to *The Birth of a Nation* by adopting white robes and the fiery cross; he also falsely presented his organisation as descending from the first era Klan to further the legitimacy of his organisation. Simmons was opportunistic and used *The Birth of a Nation* to promote his Klan by advertising alongside the film and also by having Klansmen attempt to sign new members outside of screenings. The film was such an effective marketing tool that the Klan utilised it into the 1950s and still screened the film to members as late as the 1970s.

In the 1920s the Klan grew extensively, by 1922 the Klan had spread from the Pacific Coast to the Northeast. In contemporary films Klansmen are depicted as rural, southern, and normally poor; contrasting the second era Klan drew membership across geographical and class lines. Capitalising on this widespread popularity Hollywood produced several films that depicted the Klan. These films ranged in genre from dramas such as *Heart o’ the Hills* (1919), to westerns such as *Cotton and Cattle* (1921) and the comedy-western *The White Masks* (1921), as well as children’s comedies such as *Lodge Night* (1923). Though some films presented the Klan in a critical or negative manner, such as *The Cambric Mask* (1919), the Klan image was often placed in ‘thrilling’ narratives to exploit the ‘excitement’ generated by *The Birth of a Nation*. These films would often transpose Klan iconography onto less politically

49 Wade, p. 146.
charged and uncontroversial groups, as is the case with *The Face at Your Window* (1920) where Klan iconography was used to present the American Legion.\(^{55}\)

Industrial standards and practices in the era affected the depiction of the Klan. In the 1920s and 1930s censor boards and studios aimed for films not to overtly offend or alienate any demographic of the cinema audience.\(^{56}\) Because of this, issues of racism and violence were often avoided; this created a paradox wherein the Klan were scarcely presented in relation to racial tensions. The Klan produced film *The Fifth Horseman* (1924) was challenged by the Ohio censor board, who called for the removal of a scene where a boy talks to a young black character, leaving only a hint of the Klan’s racial position as a black character stares ‘eyes wide’ in ‘amazement’ at the approaching Klan.\(^{57}\) Equally, films like *Heart o’ the Hills* helped legitimise the Klan as it starred Mary Pickford as the leader of a Klan group, seeking justice for the death of her father.\(^{58}\) Hollywood utilised the Klan image for box office success, in doing so it helped to normalise the group and elongated their image in public consciousness.

Hollywood was challenged in the period; for instance, the NAACP have a long history of protesting screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*.\(^{59}\) Oscar Micheaux independently made anti-Klan films including *Within Our Gates* (1920), which offered a critique on the contemporary racial state (although the film does not specifically show the Klan, masked mobs are shown lynching black families). He also directed *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) where the Klan are defeated by the local community. However, even Micheaux capitalised on the Klan’s popularity re-releasing *The Symbol of the Unconquered* in 1921 when public interest in the Klan had risen; he also utilised the Klan in the marketing for *A Son of Satan* (1924).\(^{60}\) Other anti-Klan pictures found difficulty with censorship. *The Hooded Mob* (1923) (later titled, *After Dark*) criticised the Klan and was left without a major distributor for fear of the Klan’s reaction, whilst *Knights of the Eucharist* (1922) (later titled *The Mask of the Ku Klux Klan*) shows the whipping and beating of a Catholic boy and was refused a license to be

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., pp. 182-83.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 184.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., pp. 171-72.


shown in New York due to concern it would anger the Klan.\textsuperscript{61}

The last significant trend to consider in this period is the representation of the Klan in comedy. The depiction of the Klan in comedy-shorts was not uncommon, Rice argues that comedies offered a paradoxical view of the Klan as films like \textit{Lodge Night}, \textit{Kid Speed} (1924), and, I would add, \textit{Accidents Won’t Happen} (1925), show the Klan’s robes provoking fear in comical black characters, but, Rice argues, the comedy of the films suggests the Klan’s iconography was ‘somewhat desensitized’.\textsuperscript{62} Films such as the Our Gang comedies \textit{Lodge Night} and \textit{Young Sherlocks} (1922) present inter-racial groups of children forming Klan-like organisations called the Jesse James Juniors and the Cluck Cluck Klan, respectively. It is questionable whether this normalises the Klan image, as Rice argues, or mocks the Klan by subverting their ideology, as Julia Lee suggests.\textsuperscript{63} Some comedy-shorts were clearly critical of the Klan, for instance in \textit{Alice’s Mysterious Mystery} (1926) the evil nature of the dog-catcher is emphasised through Klan robes. The short sees Alice (Margie Gay) rescue dogs from the evil catcher, disguising herself in Klan robes to fool and defeat him. This is an early example of a running trend in films depicting the Klan, where the Klan’s iconography is used against the group. \textit{Alice’s Mysterious Mystery}, contrasts to an earlier film of the franchise, \textit{Alice and the Dog Catcher} (1924) which presents the Klan in a seemingly positive light. The film sees Alice (Virginia Davis) and her friends form a Klan-like group, including a black child who is pleased with his ‘minstrel’ themed hood. The contrast between \textit{Alice and the Dog Catcher} and \textit{Alice’s Mysterious Mystery} emphasises the shifting representation of the Klan and how the organisation fell quickly from popularity following a series of scandals.

\textbf{iii. Morality Films and the Decline of the Second Era (1930-1944)}

Despite the popularity of the Klan in the mid-1920s, Klan membership fell significantly throughout the late-1920s and 1930s. Scandals and the Great Depression rocked the Klan and by the 1930s Klan membership had dropped to approximately


\textsuperscript{62} Rice, \textit{White Robes, Silver Screen}, pp. 183-84.

100,000.\textsuperscript{64} The most noticeable scandal was in the arrest and trial of D. C. Stephenson, Grand Dragon in Indiana, for the rape and second-degree murder of Madge Oberholtzer.\textsuperscript{65} As with the first era Klan, leaders could not control the excessive violence of local dens; Klan violence was no longer directed only at minorities but violence towards other white Protestants was not uncommon.\textsuperscript{66} The illusion that the Klan were a moral group that defended American values had been broken.

The shifting public perception of the Klan is reflected in cinema. A shortened re-release of \textit{The Birth of a Nation} in 1930 was poorly received; Klan Kleagles again attempted to use the film as a recruitment tool but were unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{67} Later in the decade, films criticising the Klan and vigilante violence were prominent. Anti-lynching films \textit{Fury} (1936) and \textit{They Won’t Forget} (1937) and anti-vigilantism films \textit{Legion of Terror} (1936) and \textit{Black Legion} (1937), reflected the anti-lynching laws that passed through congress in the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Legion of Terror} and \textit{Black Legion} are focused on the Black Legion, a violent splinter group of the Klan; the narratives of both are based on the murder of Charles Poole in 1935.\textsuperscript{69} They criticise Klan-like groups, suggesting they only gained strength by ‘duping and misleading their members.’\textsuperscript{70}

The Klan’s decline happened rapidly in the mid-1920s, yet Hollywood avoided even negative portrayals of the group until the mid-1930s. The delay reflects a wariness to draw attention to the Klan by studios which had previously benefited from depicting the group, indirectly supporting Klan growth. This is further evidenced through the removal of the Klan from the film adaptation of \textit{Gone with the Wind} (1939) which shows how Hollywood treated the Klan as a ‘delicate’ subject.\textsuperscript{71} However, for lower budget films the Klan image still had the potential to draw significant attention. \textit{Black Legion} demonstrated this, as did the anti-Klan film \textit{Nation Aflame} (1937), which was partially written by Thomas Dixon Jr and attempted to replicate \textit{Black Legion’s} success.

\textsuperscript{64} Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, p. 305.
The case has also been adapted into the mini-series \textit{Cross of Fire} (1989), subsequently syndicated as a television movie.
\textsuperscript{67} Wade, p. 257.
\textsuperscript{68} David Eldridge, \textit{American Culture in the 1930s} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 75.
Evidently the Klan’s iconography still drew attention, *Black Legion*’s pressbook advises cinema owners to promote the film with Mannequins of hooded figures, and to display nooses and whips in the theatre lobby, or, more bizarrely, to have a comedian carried out of the theatre on a stretcher by two hooded men.\(^{72}\) Hollywood was cautious about depicting the Klan, but the shock and intrigue promoted by the image still drew audiences and offered potential financial reward.


Klan membership continued to decline into the 1940s with the war-draft also hindering Klan recruitment.\(^{73}\) The second era of the Klan officially ended in 1944 as the Internal Revenue Service charged James A. Colescott, then Imperial Wizard, with $685,305 in unpaid taxes; Colescott could not pay, and so disbanded the Klan.\(^{74}\) However, in October, 1946, Dr Samuel Green formed The Association of Georgia Klans, once again burning a cross on Atlanta’s Stone Mountain.\(^{75}\) Various other Klan groups formed throughout the 1940s. This third era of the Klan consisted of separate splintered groups, unlike the supposedly uniform organisation of the first two eras.

Hollywood responded to the re-emerging Klan, with films warning against the persuasiveness of the organisation. *The Burning Cross* (1947) and *Storm Warning* (1951) presented the dangers of the Klan. *The Burning Cross* challenged the mainstream as it depicted black victims of lynching, a rare image in films at the time; contrastingly, the more commercially successful *Storm Warning* separated the Klan from issues of racism.\(^{76}\) Instead, *Storm Warning* follows the heroic police officer Burt (Ronald Reagan), who attempts to bring Klansmen to justice for the murder of white reporter, Walter Adams (Dale Van Sickel). Burt does not find the support needed to investigate the group, resulting in the death of Lucy (Doris Day) at the hands of her Klansman husband, Hank (Steve Cochran). As well as presenting the danger of the Klan, these films show the regret of Klansmen for their actions. Similarly, in the western *Stars in My Crown* (1950), a Klan lynch mob is dispersed in shame as the protagonist, Josiah Gray (Joel McCrea), forces them to remember the kindness of their

\(^{72}\) [Anon.], ‘Smash Selling Slants’, *Black Legion* Pressbook, Microfiche, Slide Two [Courtesy of BFI]


\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 325.

victim, Famous Prill (Juan Hernandez). In Another Part of the Forest (1948) a Klan raid is orchestrated by Oscar (Dan Duryea), emphasising his amoral nature.

These films were met with a mixed response; Storm Warning was praised in Variety as a ‘touching melodrama’, by contrast The Burning Cross was poorly reviewed as taking advantage of the ‘topical situation’ of the re-emerging Klan, though it was noted that it may suffice as a ‘B’ picture.77 The films of the 1940s and early-1950s show a public interest in the Klan, particularly as the Klan image was again used in marketing; at least one theatre saw ushers dress as Klansmen to try (successfully) to produce excitement about Storm Warning.78 However, despite the topical nature and cinematic appeal of the Klan, as their membership grew and violence rose towards the end of the 1950s and into 1960s Hollywood once again avoided depicting the group. An exception to this is found in The FBI Story (1959). One segment in the anthology film sees the Klan attack Jewish households and attempt to murder local newspaper editor, Walter Craig (Terry Frost), who wrote against the Klan. The Klan act as one of several villains in the film which the FBI defeat in heroic fashion. The film is unabashed in its praise for the FBI and avoids depicting the emerging Civil Rights Movement; this is partially due to J. Edgar Hoover who had influence over the film, even ordering re-shoots.79 This focus on the FBI offers an overtly patriotic vision of America in an era affected by the Cold War and a social divide that was highlighted by the Civil Rights Movement.

v. The Civil Rights Movement (1960s)

By the mid-1960s membership of Klan groups had grown to approximately 42,000 (with many more sympathisers), though this remained a fraction of the Klan’s strength in the 1920s.80 Despite this relatively low membership, Klan violence had become increasingly prominent in the American south, noticeably from the United Klans of America. Between 1947 and 1965 in Birmingham, Alabama, there were no less than fifty racially motivated bombings; the city was dubbed ‘Bombingham’.81 Violence escalated quickly, three times as many violent Klan incidences were reported in the

77 Brog., ‘Film Reviews: Storm Warning’, Variety, 6 December 1950, p. 15.
79 [Anon.], ‘Klansmen Ballyhoo Storm Warning’, BoxOffice, 24 February 1951, p. 35.
mid-1960s than in the mid-1950s. These included noticeable events, such as: the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing (1963), which killed four girls, no older than fourteen; the murder of activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner (1964), which prompted a large scale FBI investigation, which later inspired *Mississippi Burning*; and the murder of Viola Liuzzo (1965), a white mother of five.

*The FBI Story* purposefully avoided connecting the Klan to the emerging Civil Rights Movement; other films in the period presented the Klan rarely and tangentially. The group appear briefly burning a cross and threatening attorney Jonathan Wilk (Orson Welles) in *Compulsion* (1959), based on the Leopold and Loeb murder trial. They feature with slightly more prominence in *The Cardinal* (1963), where Father Fermoyle (Tom Tryon) is flogged by Klansmen for supporting a black priest, Father Gillis (Ossie Davis) – the scene stands mostly to show Fermoyle’s resilience, more than it is an exploration of the Klan or contemporary issues of racism. From the 1960s onwards, the representation of the Klan in mainstream American cinema becomes increasingly fragmented, they are often not the focus on the narrative and appear only briefly.

Again, contemporary developments and industrial practices affected the depiction of the Klan. Because of the spread of television in the 1960s images of Klan violence were widely broadcast, this forced audiences to ‘confront issues of discrimination and segregation’. As such, Hollywood avoided depicting the Klan or the violence of the Civil Rights Movement, cautious of controversy and over-saturation. This follows a wider trend in Hollywood where the Vietnam War was also a subject avoided; these contentious issues were controversial for Hollywood and were already well-viewed through television. However, low-budget productions did not shy from such controversy; Roger Corman’s *The Intruder* (1962) (also released as *Shame* and *I Hate Your Guts!* and in the UK as *The Stranger*), Samuel Fuller’s *Shock Corridor* (1963), and John Waters’ short *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* (1964) all featured the Klan in provocative narratives. Nonetheless, the reception to the exploitation film *The Black

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82 Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al Qaeda* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 27.


Klansman (1966) (also referred to as I Crossed the Color Line) gives an indication as to why Hollywood avoided Klan based narratives. The film follows Jerry (Richard Gilden), a light-skinned African American who is seeking revenge for the death of his daughter by infiltrating a Klan group. In the process Jerry seduces Carole Ann (Maureen Gaffney), the daughter of a Klan leader. The film was labelled ‘highly inflammable’ and ‘aimed at cashing in on present Ku Klux Klan activities’ – an accusation Hollywood intended to avoid.  

Unlike previous decades where the Klan image offered lucrative box office potential, the poor reception of The Black Klansman and the poor box office performance of films like The Intruder, made the Klan a risk for big-budget cinema during the Civil Rights Movement. Hollywood believed that such narratives would alienate the southern market, a fear that stemmed from earlier decades of film production. However, Melissa Ooten challenges this marketing concern, explaining that Hollywood used the south as an excuse to defend its ‘anti-progressive stance’. This hid how widespread racism was nationwide, including in the film industry. Ooten’s assertion is relevant not only to the 1960s, but also to the contemporary films of this study, as shall be discussed further in Chapter Three.

vi. The 1970s and the Celebration of Black Strength

Depictions of the Klan in films of the 1970s highlight the success of the Civil Rights Movement and emphasise the progression of the black community in American society. In Lady Sings the Blues (1972), celebrating Billie Holiday, the Klan briefly appear with Holiday (Diana Ross) defiantly cursing them from her tour bus. A more representative depiction of the Klan is presented in …Tick…Tick…Tick… (1970), which sees Jimmy Price (Jim Brown) elected as sheriff to a southern town; an opportunity only possible

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88 Corman claimed the failure of The Intruder was that contemporary audience felt the film was an personal attack, in contrast, the later Mississippi Burning was produced two decades after the Civil Rights Movement and was not a ‘threat’:
91 Melissa Ooten, ‘Censorship in Black and White: The Burning Cross (1947), Band of Angels (1957) and the Politics of Film Censorship in the American South After World War II’, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 33.1 (2013), 77-98 (p. 82).
92 Ibid.
because of the activism of the previous decade that brought new possibilities to a black voting community. There is tension across racial lines at his appointment, but the townspeople, including Klansmen, are won over by Price’s dedication to the town and to his work.

Similar themes of black progression and public unity are found in The Klansman (1974) and Blazing Saddles (1974). In The Klansman Sheriff Track Bascomb (Lee Marvin) attempts to keep the peace in a racially charged town, whilst Garth (O. J. Simpson) seeks revenge for the death of his friend at the hands of Klansmen. Together they are able to defeat the Klan in a climactic shootout which sees Garth dressed in Klan’s robes to fool Klansmen. Both …Tick…Tick…Tick… and The Klansman celebrated a culture of inter-racial unity and an increased focus of black culture; capitalising on the popularity of Blaxploitation Hollywood sought ‘bankable’ black stars, turning to footballers O. J. Simpson and Jim Brown as figures that appealed to black and white audiences.\(^\text{91}\) However, the presentation of racial tension in The Klansman was criticised as being ‘a ludicrously exploitative chronicle of racist violence’.\(^\text{92}\) With this reception, The Klansman remained the only major studio release to feature the Klan in a dramatic narrative until the mid-1980s, save for a brief appearance in Disney’s children’s adventure Treasure of Matecumbe (1976), set in 1869.

In Blazing Saddles, the town of Rock Ridge is assigned a new, black, sheriff in Sheriff Bart (Cleavon Little). With the Waco Kid (Gene Wilder), Bart works to save the town from the antagonist Hedley Lamarr (Harvey Korman). Lamarr is attempting to take the land of Rock Ridge and recruits villains to help his cause, they include Nazis, bandits, bikers, and Klansmen. The Klansmen are satirised with robes that are adorned with smiley faces and the caption ‘have a nice day’. Furthermore, the Klansmen are lured into an ambush by Bart asking ‘where the white women at?’ playing upon the stereotypical fear of black men’s desire for white women, a racist fear that dates cinematically, at least, to The Birth of a Nation.\(^\text{93}\) Having ambushed the Klansmen, Bart

\(^{91}\) This is how Jim Brown referred to his casting in …Tick…Tick…Tick… explaining how Hollywood made money of his ‘hero’ status: David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch, Chris Watson, Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 18.


and the Waco Kid steal their robes to spy on Lamarr – the image of a black and Jewish actor dressed in Klan robes soon after the Civil Rights Movement is deliberately provocative. The symbolism of the protagonists donning Klan uniforms shows their dominance over the fallen Klan, expressing the success of the Civil Rights Movement. What was previously a violent and intimidating force is now a figure for ridicule. Indeed, by 1974 the Klan had as few as 1500 members with little activity. Cinematic depictions of the Klan in the 1970s reflect this decline.

These films present the Klan’s defeat at the hands of strong black protagonists who unite the wider community against racism. Films such as *Brotherhood of Death* (1976) show black characters defeating the Klan through violence, highlighting their power over racism. However, Riché Richardson suggests that films like *...Tick...Tick...Tick...* and *The Klansman* show that ‘though we may assume that the most egregious forms of racial terror are behind us, the black body has sometimes remained vulnerable in the South’. Though there is some evidence to this, most noticeably in *The Klansman* with the death of Garth’s friend at the hands of the Klan, I argue that these films express black strength and a strength in the united multi-racial community, emphasised through the Klan’s defeat. This is a shift from the glorification of white police offices in the films of the 1940s and 1950s. *The Klansman* demonstrates Hollywood’s attempts to capitalise on the Klan image and the Blaxploitation genre, however, the depiction of the Klan in the 1970s was generally confined to low-budget films. The late-1970s saw the rise of ‘New Hollywood’ and the blockbuster, which appealed to the widest possible market, this decreased the visibility of the extreme and niche narratives found in the 1970s.


Though at the beginning of the 1970s the Klan’s strength had effectively collapsed, towards the end of the decade the Klan saw a small resurgence through the work of David Duke, Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan between 1975 and 1980. Duke attempted to push the Klan away from their image as a robed traditional

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94 Baudouin (ed.), ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hooded Order’.


group, instead dressing in suits and attempting to develop a media presence to market the Klan.\(^\text{97}\) Though his time in the Klan was short-lived, Duke prompted a growth in membership with further successful groups splitting from the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, most prominently Bill Wilkinson’s Invisible Empire. By 1981 the number of members to all Klan groups had grown to around 11,000.\(^\text{98}\)

The worse Klan violence since the Civil Rights Movement came in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1979, when Klan and American Nazi Party members shot and killed five Communist Worker Party activists (wounding several more).\(^\text{99}\) The tragedy at Greensboro was endemic of a new structure which saw Klansmen join with other right-wing extremists. Major Klan figures such as David Duke and Frazier Glenn Miller were first involved in Nazi groups before forming their respective Klans, merging beliefs. In the 1980s Nazi-Klan hybrid groups found more support than regular Klan groups.\(^\text{100}\) Further incidences of Klan violence included the shooting of four elderly ladies in Tennessee (1980), and the lynching of Michael Donald in Alabama (1981) – in both cases the Klan were sued successfully, leading to the bankruptcy of the United Klans of America.\(^\text{101}\)

With the advent of New Hollywood and blockbuster cinema the Klan did not feature in dramas of the late-1970s and early-1980s. However, the Klan do feature in a series of comedy films in the early-1980s which challenge the Klan’s re-emerging threat. Additionally, the Klan are found in Twilight Zone: The Movie (1983) which is surreal rather than comic. The comedies Bustin’ Loose (1981), The Toy (1982), the Canadian-American Porky’s II: The Next Day (1983), and Smokey and the Bandit Part 3 (1983), each openly mock the Klan, undermining their threat. In these comedy films the Klan

\(^{97}\) Ridgeway, p. 164.


\(^{98}\) Baudouin (ed.), ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hooded Order’.


\(^{99}\) Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, p. 421.


are first seen to intimidate black or minority communities, but justice is found as this power dynamic is reversed and the Klan are humiliated. To give one example, in *Bustin’ Loose* protagonist Joe (Richard Pryor) is accosted by Klansmen as he is searching for help after the bus he is driving gets stuck in mud. They follow Joe back to his bus which is filled with troubled school children; one child, Harold (Jimmy Hughes), who is blind, accidentally removes the hood of the Klan leader (Roy Jenson) who becomes enraged. Joe convinces the Klansman that all the children are blind and that he is taking them to the “Ray Charles Institute for the Blind” for miracle operations’, the obvious lie going undetected by the apologetic Klansman. The Klansman then offers to push the bus out of the mud to help. Joe responds to this offer by declaring the Klansman ‘a wonderful human being and a great American’, before kissing him. The shock and comedy of a Klansman sharing a same-sex kiss with a black man undermines the threat of the Klan. The scene starts with the Klan intimidating Joe and ends with them humiliated in the mud having been disarmed of their threat. These comedy films actively belittle the Klan to challenge the re-emerging groups, much like the anti-Klan dramas of the 1940s and 1950s; this attacking critique is not found in the comedies of my research period.

By the mid-1980s other right-wing organisations posed significantly more threat than the Klan with groups like the Sheriff’s Posse Comitatus, The Order, and the CSA (Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord) gaining significant attention of law enforcement. In the 1980s only one Klansman was charged for terrorist related activities, which compares to at least 74 individuals indicted for terrorism from other right-wing extremist groups. As the Klan’s presence was once again reduced, they were depicted in select Hollywood dramas; *A Soldier’s Story* (1984) and *Places in the Heart* (1984), were the first mainstream dramas to feature the Klan since the Civil Rights Movement (with the exception of *The Klansman*). However, as period dramas, set in the 1940s and 1930s, respectively, the films avoid contemporary issues of racism. Contrastingly, Louis Malle’s *Alamo Bay* (1985) offers a contemporary view of the Klan, based on real racial tensions between Vietnamese immigrants and American

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103 Ridgeway, pp. 97-150.
104 Smith, p. 33.
trawlermen in Texas, where the Klan hoped to incite violence.\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Alamo Bay} challenges Hollywood’s typical conflict of good and evil as it portrays both the Vietnamese and the American fishermen from a neutral perspective. The film was unsuccessful in the box office and stands as an exception to other depictions of the Klan in the period. Though less challenging than \textit{Alamo Bay}, \textit{A Soldier’s Story} and \textit{Places in the Heart} are more significant to my research as they reintroduce the Klan to mainstream film, if only briefly. Through their success, and the success of other films such as \textit{The Color Purple} (1985), racism and the Klan became acceptable topics for Hollywood, though they were not related to contemporary society. In this regard, \textit{A Soldier’s Story} and \textit{Places in the Heart} act as precursors to the Klan’s depiction in \textit{Mississippi Burning}.

Chapter One: Literature Review

In this review I assess existing literature in my research field to demonstrate how my work fits within and advances current criticism. I explore previous research on the representation of the Klan in American cinema, assessing works about their early cinematic portrayal, particularly in *The Birth of a Nation*, as well as literature that explores the Klan’s contemporary depiction. This review demonstrates the lack of literature on the contemporary representation of the Klan, particularly in regard to their use in comedy. I also show that the Klan’s long and varied representation in cinema is often ignored by scholars who instead focus on their depiction in *The Birth of a Nation*. Overviews of the Klan’s depiction in film are often selective, a trend I have aimed to avoid in my Introduction and thesis as a whole.

Several areas of research are relevant to my study of assessing the function of the Klan in contemporary cinema. In my research I compare the depiction of the Klan to other white supremacist groups, it is therefore significant to review literature that explores the representation of such groups, assessing how the Klan’s depiction relates to a wider portrayal of right-wing extremism. Equally, I question how the Klan are used to guide the viewer’s understanding of racism and whiteness. I have therefore reviewed works that theorise how Hollywood has created and guided the understanding of ‘whiteness’. Particularly of note to my study is the concept of ‘Othering’ and the division of the white-self, as my work explores several narratives which focus on white conflict. In addition to this discussion of whiteness, I have also included a brief review of literature on the representation of blackness and racism in film. This literature is considered as my research explores Hollywood’s changing attitudes to race and racism, which I argue is apparent through the depiction of the Klan, particularly in the ‘black narrative’ films of the 1990s and 2010s.

The final section of this review explores literature on Hollywood’s use of history and its effect on collective memory. The Klan are routinely depicted in historical narratives, as such in my research I analyse how the group are used to guide the viewer’s understanding of America’s history of racism. There is a wealth of literature that explores Hollywood’s depiction and use of history, for this review I have limited my discussion to select works that chiefly explore how history is manipulated by
Hollywood to, as Robert Burgoyne states, ‘reinforce social belief.’¹ This literature acts as a foundation to my analysis of the Klan’s function in historical narratives and how their depiction relates to contemporary society.

I begin this Literature Review with a brief analysis of texts on the history of the Klan which have been influential to my understanding of the group, particularly of their modern history.

1.1 Select Works on the History of the Klan

There are many historical texts about the Klan which have been produced for over a century; one of the earliest texts on the history of the Klan is found in *Ku Klux Klan: Its Origin, Growth and Disbandment* (1905), which was co-authored by one of the Klan’s original founders, John C. Lester.² Despite the bias of the book, Lester was reportedly unhappy with the text, leading to Susan Laurence to write an ‘authentic’ history of the Klan; although her text is biased and is influenced by myths presented by the emerging second era (for example Davis claims the first era Klan burnt the fiery cross).³ Contrastingly, Henry P. Fry wrote against the emerging Klan in the early-1920s, criticising their structure, propaganda, and lawlessness, though he also praises the first era Klan.⁴ The following texts reviewed are only a small selection of available resources, but are ones I found of particular use during my research. Typically, these histories at least briefly detail the Klan’s modern history (from their third era), aligning with my focus on the depiction of the Klan in contemporary film.

One of the most useful works to contextualise my research has been David M. Chalmers’ *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (third edition, 1987); Chalmers’ details the Klan’s history from their formation in the 1860s to the late-1970s. The focus of the text is largely on the second era Klan, often dividing the exploration of the Klan into their actions in individual states. For example, Chalmers explains that in Mississippi, in the 1920s, the Klan were initially rebuked by the public; when they did find ground in the state they focused on ‘defending’ Mississippi against Catholicism.⁵ This format highlights the varied nature of the Klan nationwide, which

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² Lester and Wilson.
³ Davis, pp. 1-5, 15.
contrasts to Hollywood’s simplified depiction of a unified Klan.

Chalmer’s work briefly explores Klan violence in the 1960s, though he gives a greater exploration of the Klan’s activities in the 1970s. This includes the conflict between David Duke, who pushed for a media savvy Klan, and Bill Wilkinson, the Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire, who was supposedly proud of being a ‘redneck’. In a similar format to Chalmers, Wyn Craig Wade details the Klan’s history from formation to the 1980s, though only a third of the text is allocated to the exploration of the Klan from the 1930s to 1980s. Michael Newton also offers an overview of the Klan’s history, though shorter than the works of Chalmers and Wade, Newton’s text details the Klan from 1866 to 2014. Chalmers and Newton conclude by emphasising the continued existence of the Klan in the contemporary age, quoting the Klan motto ‘Yesterday, Today, Forever’; though Newton’s work goes further, detailing known Klan dens nationwide and adding that despite the Klan’s low membership ‘declarations of its death have been distinctly premature.’

David Cunningham offers more detail on the Klan’s actions during the Civil Rights Movement, exploring the Klan’s growth in North Carolina. Specifically, the text explores the rise and fall of the United Klans of America, who were the most violent Klan of the period. Cunningham begins his study explaining that in the 1960s conventional accounts of the Klan presented them as thriving in the ‘isolated communities of the Deep South’ and ‘lacking organizational sophistication’ – yet, in reality, the UKA were based in North Carolina and had significant publicity among wider society. Cunningham’s case study of the Klan in North Carolina is a useful guide in understanding the reality of Klan recruitment and membership in the 1960s, showing how they recruited across class lines. Newton offers a similar case study looking at the Klan’s presence in Mississippi. He highlights how the re-emergence of the Klan in the late-1970s led to widespread violence (not just in Greensboro, North Carolina); for example, Bill Wilkinson was proud that he hurt and shot at black

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6 Ibid., pp. 397-423.
7 Wade, pp. 257-403.
8 Newton, White Robes and Burning Crosses.
9 Ibid., p. 261.
11 Ibid., p. ix.
12 Ibid., pp. 127-29.
13 Newton, The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi.
protesters in Okolona, Mississippi, in 1978.\textsuperscript{14} Despite Hollywood’s depiction, Newton’s work also emphasises that in the 1990s, in Mississippi, violence was more likely to stem from neo-Nazi groups than the Klan.\textsuperscript{15}

Unlike the works discussed thus far, which offer broad histories of the Klan and their interaction with particular states, Gary May offers a specific case study detailing the controversial infiltration of the Klan by FBI informer Gary Thomas Rowe.\textsuperscript{16} Rowe was given immunity for his actions for testifying against Klansmen, but he, and by extension the FBI, were involved in planning and collaborating in Klan violence including a 1961 attack of a Freedom Rider’s bus, the bombing of 16\textsuperscript{th} Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama (1963), and the shooting of Viola Liuzzo (1965). May’s text gives a detailed account of Rowe and the Klan in the 1960s using FBI records and interviews; the text offers a personal, almost narrative, approach to the violence of the Civil Rights Movement. May’s work is particularly useful for highlighting the complex nature of the Klan, the public, and law enforcement in the era. The text also briefly emphasises the distortion of the Klan and the FBI in fiction, noting that NBC’s \textit{Undercover with the KKK} (1979) reimagined Rowe as a hero and hindered the ongoing legal case brought by the Liuzzo family.\textsuperscript{17}

Lastly, James Ridgeway’s \textit{Blood in the Face} (1995) presents an overview of American right-wing extremism, from the Klan’s formation in the 1860s to modern militant organisations such as W.A.R. (White Aryan Resistance; 1983-present). Ridgeway’s work is particularly beneficial in understanding the links between various extremist groups.\textsuperscript{18} Much of the text looks at the ‘fifth era’ exploring the intertwined relationship between the Klan and other right-wing organisations. This work is a rare example that focuses on the Klan’s modern history after the 1960s; Ridgeway’s exploration highlights the division of the contemporary Klan, offering biographies of key leaders, such as David Duke, as well as descriptions of groups that have spawned from the Klan. Again, the complex history of the ‘fifth era’, that is well detailed by Ridgeway, contradicts the depiction of the Klan in Hollywood’s films.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 190-91.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 197-99.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 322-35.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ridgeway, pp. 32-33.
1.2 The Klan’s Representation in American Cinema

The representation of the Klan in American cinema is a niche field, scholarship looking at the Klan’s depiction from 1940s onward is particularly rare. Two works, however, offer overviews of the Klan’s representation from early cinema to contemporary film. The first of these works, by Nancy Bishop Dessommes, looks at the Klan’s depiction in popular films from *The Birth of a Nation* to *A Time to Kill*.\(^{19}\) Dessommes argues that the Klan have been presented as cliché ‘monolithic image[s] of ignorant and unscrupulous gang[s] of Southern white men’ which besides, historical inaccuracy, has contributed to the ‘misrepresentation of Southerners’ in film.\(^{20}\) Dessommes also suggests that the Klan are presented to align with modern understandings of race; for example, though *Sommersby* is set after the Civil War, the Klan are presented as the ‘weakened’ organisation of recent times and not as the ‘efficient and effective Klan of the Reconstruction.’\(^{21}\) This point is similarly argued by Tom Rice.\(^{22}\) Dessommes’ work is brief and so does not develop these arguments with much detail. The work is also limited by the selection of films discussed, with only one film (*The FBI Story*) offered as an example of the Klan’s representation between 1940 and 1988.

More detail is provided by Melvyn Stokes who explores the depiction of the Klan between 1909 and 2012.\(^{23}\) Stokes divides his work thematically, analysing different eras of the Klan’s representation, looking first at *The Birth of a Nation* and the 1920s; then the anti-Klan films of the 1930s; the post-war films of the 1940s and 1950s; the Klan’s depiction in the Civil Rights era; and, briefly, the Klan’s depiction in films following the Movement. However, these final two sections are relatively brief. Through this divided format Stokes presents his argument that the representation of the Klan is more prominent after periods of Klan strength, arguing they are ‘anachronistically presented in periods when the real Klan was absent or inactive’ showing the Klan as ‘marginalized’ and ‘in a very literal sense, history’.\(^{24}\) Stokes’ work informed my own overview of the Klan’s representation in American cinema, though the work is also limited in its film selection, particularly in comedy. Though Stokes

\(^{19}\) Dessommes, pp. 15-22.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 13.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., pp. 19-20.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 132.
notes the comedic depiction of the Klan in *Blazing Saddles*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Django Unchained*, the comedies of the 1920s, the early-1980s, and at the turn of the twenty-first century are absent. Comedy is also ignored by Dessommes.

Where Dessommes and Stokes offer brief overviews of the Klan’s representation in American cinema, which I have expanded on in the Introduction, most scholarship on the Klan’s representation focuses on select periods and films, particularly *The Birth of a Nation*. For clarity, I have sub-divided this section further, reviewing literature on the Klan’s representation in early cinema (1915-1940), then literature on their representation from the 1940s to the contemporary age.

### 1.2.1 The Klan and Cinema (1915-1940)

Because of *The Birth of a Nation* most of the literature on the Klan’s representation in film is focused on early cinema. One of the most detailed works is found in Tom Rice’s *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan*. Rice provides a history of the Klan’s interaction with Hollywood between the 1910s and 1930s and also details how Hollywood utilised the Klan’s image for box office gain, capitalising on the success of *The Birth of a Nation*. The work highlights trends that are still evident in contemporary films, for instance, the Klan image is still used to market select films. Equally, Rice explains that despite the Klan’s popularity nationwide in the 1920s filmmakers positioned the group, erroneously, in rural southern settings; again, this trope continues in contemporary films. As such, through Rice’s work it is possible to trace the longevity of trends in the depiction of the Klan.

Rice’s text explores the Klan’s engagement with cinema, looking at their use of film as advertisement, the production of their own films, and their position as a ‘social pressure group’, where the Klan protested films they deemed immoral such as Charlie Chaplin’s *The Pilgrim* (1923). To demonstrate this Rice presents archival research exploring Klan publications, as well as responses to the Klan from contemporary presses. Equally, Rice shows how industrial standards such as censorship affected the depiction of the Klan; they were often not connected to racism as such themes were challenged by censors. This led to a depiction of the Klan as ‘non-racist’ and non-violent (unless depicted as ‘just’ vigilante violence); here Hollywood films supported

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26 Ibid., pp. 182-84.
Simmons’ claim that the Klan were a moral group standing for American values. Rice specifically focuses on the Klan and their relationship with film, as such his work does not offer much detail on the Klan’s violence in the 1920s and 1930s. This context could have helped in demonstrating the contrast between the cinematic depiction of the Klan and that of reality, which would further emphasise Hollywood’s role in forming the public’s understanding of the Klan. In his epilogue, Rice offers a brief discussion on the contemporary representation of the Klan, suggesting that contemporary films have sought to ‘desensitize and demystify the costume’, often presenting the Klan as a ‘shorthand for American extremism’. Rice gives the comedies of O Brother, Where Art Thou? and Django Unchained as examples of this ‘demystification’; I expand on this argument in the main body of my research.

Other literature on the Klan’s representation focuses solely on The Birth of a Nation. Paul McEwan offers a concise guide to the film and its impact on society. Though brief, the work is effective as McEwan balances film analysis with evidence from the press, as well as first-hand audience accounts, to demonstrate the impact of the film on the ‘hearts and minds’ of its viewers. Even so, Melvyn Stokes gives a broader and more thorough history of the film. Stokes gives a detailed exploration of the film’s making, including biographies of both D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon Jr. Stokes explains how The Birth of a Nation helped to change the perceptions of cinema, noting that Griffith publicised the history presented in the film (particularly the first half) to attract a middle-class audience. This demonstrates a longstanding trope in depicting the Klan in historic, but inaccurate, narratives to attract interest. Similarly, Stokes also notes how the Klan in The Birth of a Nation are simplified compared to the Klan found in Dixon’s novel, explaining that much of the ritual was removed and the Klan were ‘localized’. This simplification is significantly furthered in the contemporary film; like Rice’s work, Stokes’ detailed assessment of The Birth of a Nation highlights longstanding trends in Hollywood’s utilisation of the Klan which continue into the films of my research.

27 Ibid., pp. 182-92.
28 Ibid., p. 228.
29 McEwan, p. 80.
30 Stokes, D.W. Griffith’s ‘The Birth of a Nation’.
31 Ibid., p. 158.
32 Ibid., p. 180.
Riché Richardson uses *The Birth of a Nation* as a point of comparison, drawing parallels between Dixon’s *The Clansman*, *The Birth of a Nation* and the novel *The Klansman* (1967) and subsequent 1974 film adaptation. For instance, Richardson highlights similarities in the depiction of black males as a sexual threat to white womanhood. This comparison is used to demonstrate the lack of progression in Hollywood’s depiction of blackness and sexual politics. In comparing *The Birth of a Nation* to *The Klansman*, Richardson is able to demonstrate shifts, or lack thereof, in Hollywood’s portrayal of race. This in an appropriate approach for Richardson’s work exploring depictions of ‘the black rapist’. However, in looking at only two films (and two novels), Richardson’s work is selective. *The Birth of a Nation* is often used as a point of comparison in discussions on Hollywood’s depiction of race; it is important, however, to consider a broader representation of racism and the Klan to trace their evolving depiction.

Lastly, Felix Harcourt offers an overview of the wider Klan ‘Kulture’ of the 1920s, detailing the Klan’s inclusion in a range of arts including (but not limited to) theatre and dance, novels, songs, and film; though the section on film is limited, relying heavily on Rice’s work. Harcourt’s work stands to show how in the 1920s the Klan were a ‘deeply rooted cultural movement’ rather than the marginalised group depicted in contemporary films. Harcourt argues that understanding the Klan as a cultural movement allows for a better comprehension of the period and how the ‘fractured’ structure of the Klan was unified through a ‘cultural identity’. My research builds upon this understanding, exploring Hollywood’s erroneous depiction of the Klan and how this has affected the longevity of the Klan in public consciousness.

1.2.2 The Klan and Cinema (1940-present)

Excepting the overviews of the Klan presented by Dessommes and Stokes, there are fewer works that consider the Klan’s representation in cinema after the 1930s. In a similar format to Richardson, Alexandra Mohr discusses the Klan’s representation by comparing Dixon’s novel *The Clansman* and Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* to

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33 Richardson, “The Birth of Nation’hood”, pp. 3-32.
34 Harcourt, pp. 100-22.
35 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
36 Ibid., p. 11.
Mohr’s work predominantly focuses on *The Clansman* and its glorification of the Klan, which follows in *The Birth of a Nation*, but the work goes on to explore *Mississippi Burning* and (very briefly) *The Chamber*. Despite the title of Mohr’s work this section on contemporary film is brief and is not the focus of the text. Nonetheless, Mohr does raise the interesting notion that both contemporary films glorify the Klan through the use of picturesque and bold iconography. I address this argument with more depth in the main body of this thesis. Mohr’s selection of films is unexplained, it is surprising that Mohr would discuss *The Chamber* and not *A Time to Kill* when they were released in the same year and were both based on the works of John Grisham, yet, *A Time to Kill* was vastly more successful critically and financially. Again, this highlights the selectiveness that is a common issue in critical discussions on the Klan’s representation.

A further instance of selectiveness is found in Larry Langman and David Ebner’s *Hollywood’s Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films* (2001), which categorises and details films about the south. A sub-list of films depicting the Klan numbers only thirteen examples (from 1915 to 1996). Mohr’s selection of *Mississippi Burning* and *The Chamber* possibly stems from their narratives focusing specifically on Klansmen; yet, Langman and Ebner present films that only briefly feature the Klan such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* or *Malcolm X*, which raises further questions as to their small selection of films. Rice’s work offers a fairly conclusive exploration of the Klan’s depiction in the 1910s and 1920s, this is not found in texts that explore the contemporary depiction of the Klan. This selectivity restricts the study on the representation of the Klan in contemporary cinema. Stokes’ overview is the most detailed work to explore their contemporary depiction but remains brief and ignores many comedies.

A short article in *Sight and Sound* by Hannah McGill is also of note for highlighting a small selection of films that utilise the simplicity of using ‘pillow cases’ to represent

38 Similar concerns are raised in Roger Ebert’s reviews of *A Time to Kill* and *The Chamber*:
the Klan, as found with *Shock Corridor* and *Django Unchained*. McGill links this simplicity to the monster’s shapeless mask as found with The Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy) in *Batman Begins* (2005), explaining how the simple form of the pillow case can be comical or frightening. Though brief, the article emphasises the shifting depiction of the Klan and their robes, from being romanticised in *The Birth of a Nation*, presented as troubling in *Shock Corridor*, and comical in *Django Unchained*, whilst also suggesting the ease with which the Klan image can be created and manipulated.

### 1.3 White Supremacy and Whiteness in Film

Much of the work on the representation of white supremacy often focuses on Nazism, one such example is Sabine Hake’s *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* (2012). Hake notes how Nazis are rarely ‘fully developed characters; they appear primarily as stereotypical villains, clichéd madmen, and voiceless, faceless extras’. There is a relation between the depiction of Nazism in cinema and the Klan in their role as ‘faceless’ villains who are used as underdeveloped evil characters. Hake relates this simplicity to Hollywood’s ‘melodramatic mode’, noting Hollywood’s historic preference for clearly defined visions of good and evil. The complexities of Nazism are reduced, against this simplified figure the anti-Nazi protagonists have ‘narrative agency’ and their ‘credentials’ are established. The evil figure of the Nazi is used to establish the goodness of the protagonists through contrast. Hake adds that the engagement of the audience is established through this relationship between characters. Depending on the context of the narrative this ‘faceless’ figure of evil is interchangeable, in such regard the representation of the Klan fits within existing trends in Hollywood’s depictions of extremism and the right-wing.

In *Nazism and Neo-Nazism in Film and Media* (2018) Jason Lee questions the depiction of Nazism in ‘authentic’ historical films, noting that they often depict Nazis as ‘the embodiment of evil’ and so offer only a ‘singular depiction’, which makes their

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42 Ibid., p. 21.
43 Ibid., p. 22.
44 Ibid., p. 21.
45 Ibid.
representation less realistic, or ‘authentic’. Similar assertions made by Robert Brent Toplin are explored later in this review. Lee’s work is one of few to explore the representation of white supremacist imagery in comedy, however the section focuses mostly on *Er Ist Wieder Da* (trans: *Look Who’s Back*) (2015). He suggests that in such comedy it is not Hitler or Nazism that is being mocked, instead it is the ‘absolute “other”’ that is mocked to split evil from ourselves.47

Lee briefly explores the representation of the contemporary right-wing, for instance, discussing the popularity of Netflix’s *NSU German History X* (2016) among neo-Nazis on *Stormfront.org*.48 Such discussions on the representation of the contemporary right-wing are rare, and often resolve around neo-Nazism. For example, Tiffini A. Travis and Perry Hardy offer a brief overview of the representation of Skinheads (closely aligned with neo-Nazis) in film, they acknowledge the potential use of *American History X* as a promotional tool.49 They also note the internationality of the Skinhead image, with films such as *This is England* (2006), though these discussions are not the focus of their work.50 Others go into more depth with specific films, as Christopher Grau does with *American History X* (detailed in Chapter Three); there remains a scarcity of literature exploring contemporary depictions of the extreme-right.51

Published late into my own research, Paul B. Rich’s exploration of the depiction of domestic far-right terrorism looks at both the Klan and neo-Nazis.52 Rich notes Hollywood’s fascination with the Klan analysing select films of the 1970s and 1980s in *The Klansman, Brotherhood of Death*, and *Mississippi Burning*. He notes that the central question of *Mississippi Burning* is in the definition of ‘modern Americanism’, arguing that the film hinted towards a ‘liberal optimism’ that issues of racial division were ‘resolved’.53 Rich recognises, as my research also found, a shift in American

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47 Ibid., p. 84.

48 Ibid., p. 70.


50 Ibid.


53 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
cinema in the late-1980s and 1990s where non-Klan white-supremacy groups, such as neo-Nazis, were depicted as threatening and a nationwide issue. Beginning with *Betrayed*, films emphasised the threat of the new militant right, incarnated through real-life tragedies at Waco, Texas and Oklahoma City. Whilst detailing the threatening image of the militant-right in the 1980s, 1990s, and twenty-first century, Rich fails to acknowledge the continuing trend in depicting the Klan. Rich criticises contemporary representations of neo-Nazis, arguing that they are limited by the ‘paucity of tropes’. He suggests that for narratives on the American extreme-right Hollywood needs to move beyond a ‘usable past’ and depict a ‘civic past’, which would account for ‘the memories of marginalized groups’. The ‘usable’ past is history that Hollywood utilises as ‘well-known’ and uncontroversial; for instance, looking at heroic soldiers in the Second World War. By contrast, the ‘civic past’ is challenging, it is of personal memory that objects to the ‘complacent’ history popularised by Hollywood; Rich briefly refers to Casey Nelson Blake who notes that such history is often held by those who feel alienated in America, such as African Americans. In other words, to present a more challenging depiction of extremism Rich argues that Hollywood needs to explore the narratives of the marginalised.

Richard Dyer’s *White* (1997) looks at the representation of whiteness in western culture, looking at paintings, sculptures, and film. Through this analysis Dyer argues that whiteness represents neutrality; as white paint is neutral in Art, the white race has come to be the social group for the ‘human ordinary’. Dyer opens his study explaining that through media and the arts, no other race has had as much control in defining themselves as whites; this is not least demonstrated with the white embodiment of Christianity, highlighted in artwork that depicts Jesus and Mary as white. Another example Dyer gives is of film depictions of white strength, looking at characters such as Tarzan or actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, who in

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54 Ibid., p. 17.
55 Ibid., p. 20.
Also quoting: 
56 Rich, p. 20.
57 Blake, p. 434.
59 Ibid., p. 47.
60 Ibid., pp. 15-18.
films embody the ‘champion’ white body, placed in a ‘colonial setting’. He argues the exposed white body is depicted as ‘ideal’ and that it highlights the superiority of whiteness, especially when the white champion defeats non-white strength. To Dyer, whiteness has been developed as virtuous and the ideal, indeed he notes that whiteness has become the norm in Hollywood, partly as film lighting has developed to light white actors. The ramifications of this continue as black actors often remain under-lit compared to their white counterparts, highlighting ‘who is important and who is not’.

In other work, Dyer argues that in film ‘blackness’ is defined as a whole but that ‘whiteness’ is considered the norm and only defined through subcategories. For instance, The Godfather (1972) is about Italian-Americans and Brief Encounter (1945) is about the middle-class; neither film presents or defines whiteness at large. Whereas, The Color Purple is about blackness before it is ‘about, southern US people.’ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin expand on Dyer’s work noting that Hollywood assumes that all audiences will associate with whiteness (but ‘the reverse is seldom true’), and that whiteness is invisible unless ‘overemphasised’, as with Pleasantsville (1998). Dyer, and Benshoff and Griffin, explain that whiteness can be defined by what whiteness is not; they refer to this as ‘Othering’. The arguments put forward by Dyer as well as Benshoff and Griffin, in some way define whiteness against blackness. However, films like Mississippi Burning resolve around white conflict, as such the arguments of Audrey Forster and Annalee Newitz appear more relevant to my research.

In Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema (2003) Gwendolyn Audrey Forster explores the cinematic representation of whiteness looking at the depictions of good and bad whites, as well as the white ‘Other’. Forster lists examples of the white ‘Other’ such as ‘the ethnic type, the whore, the slattern, the corpse, the fall guy, the queer, the white trash, the homeless, and the disabled’, which are not treated as ‘fully white’. Briefly, Forster considers the racist white trash figure,
suggesting that films like *The Intruder* and *American History X* allow the white audience ‘a comfortable space for projecting its own racism on the bodies of the white other’, as such these narratives do not challenge everyday racism.\(^{69}\) As discussed, similar arguments are made by Newitz who states that the white trash figure has replaced blackness as ‘America’s new savages’.\(^{70}\) Newitz argues that through ‘white trash’ the majority of whites can feel superior to a class of people without feeling racist.\(^{71}\) Both Forster and Newitz express a divide in the white society, where the lower-classes are depicted as separate from ‘normal’ whiteness. Similarly, John Hartigan Jr looks at the terms ‘rednecks’, ‘hillbillies’ and ‘white trash’ which he argues are used to ‘maintain the unmarked status of whiteness’, in other words these ‘Other’ figures are exceptions to whiteness.\(^{72}\)

There is significant literature on how Hollywood reaffirms white goodness. Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon, as well as Matthew W. Hughey, argue that through the ‘white saviour’ figure the normality and absolution of whiteness is found.\(^{73}\) These figures conflict against ‘bad’ whites and show compassion to non-white communities. Moreover, Vera and Gordon explain that through the depiction of the antagonist as an overt evil the viewer is reassured that they do not resemble the ‘brute’ figure and ‘therefore they must not be racists’.\(^{74}\) Hughey adds that by focusing on the individual bad figure as ‘the root of racism’ wider questions of imbedded social and institutional racism are ignored.\(^{75}\) Similar views have been explored by Laura L. Finley and Peter S. Finley who assess the representation of white supremacy in the ‘anti-racist’ film.\(^{76}\) Looking specifically *American History X*, *Higher Learning* (1995), and *A Time to Kill*, they argue that the racists shown in these films (whether ‘rednecks’, Klan, or neo-Nazis) are ‘primarily responsible for hate crimes in this country’, as such there is the suggestion to the viewer that the ‘people wearing sheets or shaving their heads are

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., p. 143.

\(^{70}\) Newitz, p. 152.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.


\(^{73}\) Vera and Gordon.\(^{1}\) Hughey, *The White Savior Film*.

\(^{74}\) Vera and Gordon, p. 42.

\(^{75}\) Hughey, *The White Savior Film*, pp. 166-67.

racists, the rest of us obviously are not.' Equally, James W. Loewen argues that presenting the racist figure as completely ‘Other’ makes them unrelatable to the viewer and lacks critique; Loewen argues that in order to teach about the dangers of racism, racists should be presented as flawed individuals but figures ‘whom one can like otherwise. This is not found in the Hollywood narrative which clearly defines and divides good and bad whites.

1.4 Blackness and Racism in Film

There is a wealth of literature on the depiction of blackness and racism in film. Though my focus remains on the Klan and the depiction of whiteness, it is worth considering these studies, particularly as my research explores how the shifting depiction of the Klan correlates with Hollywood’s changing attitudes to issues of race and racism.

Catherine Silk and John Silk explore the depiction of racism and anti-racism in American popular culture. This study focuses on literature and early film, though a brief section explores race in films from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. They note an interesting juxtaposition in late-1970s/early-1980s American cinema which saw a lack of black roles, especially for black women; yet, they explain that films that did explore black history and the black voice were ‘unusually good’ and ‘popular’. They give Remember My Name (1978), A Soldier’s Story, and The Color Purple as examples of successful narratives to feature the black voice in this era. Silk and Silk’s work is an early observation that shows how Hollywood was incorrect in assuming that a white audience would not watch black narrative films. However, they downplay the significance of comedy, explaining that the ‘only other films in which blacks play significant parts are comedies’. But the depiction of race relations in comedy is significant, it is a genre that can both reinforce stereotypes and challenge them, with comedy often suited to the depiction of ‘taboo’ themes. For instance, Mark A. Reid argues of the ‘hybrid minstrelsy’ in comedy films such as Which Way is Up? (1977).

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77 Ibid., pp. 229, 233.
80 Ibid., p. 172.
81 Ibid., p. 174.
The film stars Richard Pryor in three leading roles, each of which, as Reid explains, demonstrate ‘coon’ qualities; yet, through these characters the film challenges social issues of the era in the conflict of unions and employers. Comedy can offer noticeable challenges to social issues and racial boundaries.

Donald Bogle offers a detailed guide to the depiction of black characters from early cinema to 2015. Bogle’s text is more expansive than similar works, such as that of Gary Null, who offers an overview of ‘Black Hollywood’ from early cinema into the early-1970s, and Ed Guerrero’s similarly themed guide to the black image in film. Bogle’s work is thorough offering case studies on specific periods and artists, and comparing mainstream films, such as *Mississippi Burning*, to the works of black film makers such as Spike Lee. He avoids the limitations of other historical studies by relating his arguments to several films over a large period, as I attempt in my work. Looking at contemporary cinema, Bogle highlights the varied depiction of the black voice, from histories such as *Lee Daniel’s The Butler* to works that challenge ‘casual’ racism as with *Dear White People* (2014); he also notes the success of Quvenzhané Wallis who became the youngest actress to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress. With such variation Bogle points to a ‘hopeful’ future for the representation of the black community in film. Though Bogle also notes the continued difficulties faced by some films, for example *Selma* initially struggled to find financing in a period that saw social unrest in locations such as Ferguson, Missouri (2014). Bogle’s work demonstrates the complexity of racial narratives in the contemporary period, noting that they have had more success and have ‘re-examined the historical past’, but are not without controversy.

My research briefly compares the utilisation of the Klan in mainstream Hollywood to that found in the ‘new black cinema’ of the 1990s. Analysing such films, Manthia Diawara argues that, unlike in Hollywood’s productions, the black community is not

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83 Ibid.
84 Bogle.
87 Ibid., p. 473.
88 Ibid., p. 464.
‘marginalized’ and there is a greater exploration of black lives and black diaspora. Diawara refers to the black films of the early 1990s as those of ‘new black realism’ and explores the response of students to the film Boyz N the Hood (1991). She explains how the students found the film ‘realistic’ in its depiction of policing and its presentation of the black community’s culture; she notes that the style of figures like Ice Cube made the film relatable to the students. Here, I am wary of the term ‘realism’ as viewers may be able to relate with characters without a film depicting realistic narratives. For instance, in Posse and Rosewood, elements of Hollywood’s melodramatic mode are utilised, but they continue to explore the ‘black diaspora’ Diawara describes.

Krin Gabbard looks at black displacement in Ransom (1996) and Fargo (1996); he questions the brief representation of ethnic communities in Fargo. In a similar manner to Benshoff and Griffin, Gabbard explains that ethnic groups ‘are essential in the construction of whiteness’ and that whiteness is established against the ‘Other’, noting ethnic stereotypes in the Coen brothers’ film. Fargo seems a confusing example owing to the relative lack of diversity in the film; though this absence is part of Gabbard’s argument on the ‘displacement’ of blackness in Hollywood’s films. Yet, other films with greater focus on race and racism demonstrate such displacement; a key theme of my thesis lies in such issues in films like Mississippi Burning, which presents the violence faced by the black community as a problem for white characters. Gabbard goes on to look at the depiction of ‘angelic’ black figures as a recurring theme in Hollywood, noting that such portrayals show a white audience that there is ‘nothing wrong’ with race in contemporary America. These two uses of the black figure, as the ‘Other’ and as a figure to sooth racial tension, both point to blackness as a device for the entertainment of a white audience.

Many scholars raise the issue of defining ‘black film’; Thomas Cripps, for example, explores black film as a genre and defines ‘black film’ as works that have a ‘black producer, director, and writer, or that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters’, though he acknowledges that this definition could be expanded to a wider

90 Ibid., pp. 23-24.
91 Ibid., pp. 175-76.
92 Ibid., p. 129.
93 Ibid., p. 127-29.
spread of films that ‘speak to Afro-American concerns’. Certainly, such definitions can be problematic, Heather Ashley Hayes and Gilbert B. Rodman, for instance, question whether Django Unchained would constitute as a black film under such a definition, arguing that to define it as a white film because it is directed by Quentin Tarantino would suggest that only he ‘deserves credit’ for the film, which ignores the work of the cast and crew and the film’s narrative. The definition of ‘black films’ is subjective, Pamela McClintock and Rebecca Ford suggest that it has become increasingly redundant to define ‘black film’ as the notion that white audience’s would not watch films about ‘the black experience’ has been challenged. This is evidenced with recent films such as Lee Daniel’s The Butler, Hidden Figures (2016), and Get Out (2017). Similarly, David Garret Izzo also notes that the success of films like 12 Years a Slave present a hope for ‘black cinema that is no longer “black” but just “cinema”’.

1.5 Collective Memory and History

The analysis of Hollywood’s depiction and manipulation of history is a well-studied field. My research explores how the Klan have been used to isolate and sanitise issues of racism in American history and contemporary society. As such, themes of history and collective memory are evident to this research; though my thesis is not a sociological study it is useful to review select relevant works on Hollywood’s use of history and its effects on collective memory to underpin my study on the Klan.

Looking at the depiction of the Civil Rights Movement, Sharon Monteith argues that collective memory ‘functions to coordinate and to fabricate national identity and unity.’ Monteith notes how issues of ‘presentism’ affect contemporary narratives, explaining that ‘the pressures of the present distort our understanding of the past.’ Similarly, Steven Mintz points to several defence ‘mechanisms’ present in historical

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94 Thomas Cripps, Black Film as Genre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 3.
99 Ibid., p. 124.
films that simplify the difficulties of history. Two of these mechanisms are evident in the films of my research. Firstly, Mintz explains the concept of ‘splitting’, that simplifies narratives by dividing them into ‘dualities’ (in the films of my research this is found in the division of good and bad whites). Secondly, like Monteith, Mintz points to the displacement of contemporary concerns into historical narratives, giving the example of Pocahontas (1995) where modern perspectives of ‘ethnic relations, tolerance, and environmentalism’ are imprinted onto the past. This re-writes history to align with modern sensibilities, pacifying the extremes of American history and presenting a tolerable alternative. The views of Montieth and Mintz have been considered for this study, certainly modern sensibilities are found in the films of this research; though Klan violence is also evident and highlights America’s violent past.

Robert Brent Toplin explains that history is often simplified in film narratives by following the individual ‘great person’, rather than exploring a broader understanding of the history portrayed. However, Toplin defends filmmakers in the matter explaining that historical narratives need some form of simplification to be accessible to audiences (and marketable). Moreover, he notes that historical films can lead to a ‘appreciation of history’ by drawing an audience to the subject through an ‘emotional hook’; through fiction, film can offer a feel and interpretation of history. It would be simple to bemoan the historical inaccuracy of the Klan’s representation in film, however, as Toplin explains, it is more relevant to consider the vision of ‘truth’ that is found through the fictional depiction. Toplin’s assertion that Hollywood has a need to present ‘heavy-handed’ depictions of good and evil to avoid confusing the audience, is of particular note to my study where the Klan and the ‘good’ protagonists are often depicted with a polarised division. Certainly, as Toplin explains, Hollywood has made success in depicting specific visions of ‘right and wrong’; which questions the

101 Ibid., p. 397.
102 Ibid.
104 Ibid., p. 124.
105 Ibid., pp. 126-29.
106 Ibid., p. 130.
107 Ibid.
extent to which Hollywood’s narratives can be considered critical or challenging.

Robert Burgoyne argues that films can be used to ‘reinforce social belief’ in narratives that ‘define the American nation’. For example, Burgoyne notes how Forrest Gump ‘memorializes’ certain aspects of American history whilst ‘creating critical amnesia in others’. He argues that events such as the shooting of President Reagan are downplayed in comparison to Forrest’s (Tom Hanks) personal life, as he receives a letter from his love-interest Jenny (Robin Wright) which is the focus of the scene. In this way, ‘social unrest and political violence’ are detached from the ‘imagined community of nation’. In other words, Hollywood understands history in terms of the personal, offering a selective vision of American history and society. Other literature on Forrest Gump present similar points as will be discussed in Chapter Four, what is noticeable, however, is how the film is considered to distort and sanitise history. Using this literature, and Burgoyne’s arguments of how Hollywood shifts narrative focus away from history, I question whether the Klan are used in ‘refashioning’ the American past to focus on the personal.

Like Dyer, Burgoyne argues that white and black American identities have been established in contrast to one another, noting the contradiction of the ‘mythology of national identity’ in America. He explains that the ideal of comradery between black and white communities is ‘belied’ by constructing identity through racial contrast, though he notes that films such as Malcolm X and Glory (1989) have begun to highlight the divide between national ideals and the reality of racial division. Contrastingly, Charles Ramírez Berg, looking at representations of manifest destiny, argues that depictions of American history are sanitised to present a ‘guilt-free narrative’ that emphasise American beliefs and values (‘liberty, democracy, freedom, equality’ and ‘truth, honesty, fairplay’). To Ramírez Berg, films have distorted history to establish social belief about a fair and united America, whilst Burgoyne argues that even mainstream films are beginning to challenge this sanitisation of history. The works of

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108 Burgoyne, Film Nation, p. 2.
109 Ibid., p. 177.
110 Ibid., pp. 117-18.
111 Ibid., p. 121.
112 Ibid., p. 3.
113 Ibid., pp. 3, 36-37.
Burgoyne and Ramírez Berg highlight the differing attitudes found in mainstream films regarding American history and national identity.

1.6 Conclusion

In this Literature Review I have assessed existing literature on the representation of the Klan in American cinema. Much of this work is focused on *The Birth of a Nation*. I attempt to place the contemporary depiction of the Klan within the context of their historical representation; though I do refer to *The Birth of a Nation* throughout my research I do not limit my study to comparing contemporary narratives to the film. Rather, I recognise the longevity of the Klan image in American cinema and assess how the contemporary representation of the Klan relates to their depiction in films over the last century. Few texts consider the long-lasting depiction of the Klan, though brief overviews on their representation are found. Little work has been produced on the comedic use of the Klan in contemporary cinema; I address this discrepancy giving significant consideration to the representation of the Klan in comedy. I assess why the Klan image is prevalent in the genre and why the image is considered ‘safe’ for Hollywood. The Klan’s depiction in ‘low-brow’ comedies, ignored by works assessed in this review, is significant as it demonstrates the shifting nature of the Klan image and their function in contemporary film. In my work on the Klan’s representation in comedy I assess and expand Rice’s assertion that contemporary films have sought to ‘desensitize and demystify’ the Klan’s iconography.

Rich argues that Hollywood needs to look to a ‘civic past’ to best explore the extreme-right in its narratives. In recent years Hollywood has shown a greater emphasis on the black voice, I consider if this shift offers a more explorative view of racism in America. Films such as *Lee Daniel’s The Butler* and *Selma* are set during the Civil Rights Movement, this may be considered the ‘usable past’, particularly following the release of *Mississippi Burning*. Yet, these films are released alongside other narratives that explore contemporary racism, such as *Fruitvale Station* (2013) and *Get Out*; the narratives of this period focus on voices previously marginalised by Hollywood, I assess how the depiction of the Klan changes with this alternative perspective. Similarly, throughout my research I point to Loewen’s argument that racists are depicted as ‘Others’ which limits the critique of racism found in narratives; I support this view in my analysis of the white melodrama and again consider whether
Hollywood has changed this depiction in recent years to offer a greater exploration of racism.

There is considerable literature on ‘Othering’ of whiteness. Dyer and Benshoff and Griffin argue that whiteness is in some way defined through its contrast to blackness. My research, however, focuses on the ‘Othering’ of the white-self, as argued by Forster, Newitz, and Hartigan Jr. Furthering their arguments, I explore how the Klan have been depicted as ‘Other’ and separated from ‘normal’ white society, especially in the white melodramas of the 1980s and 1990s. In my argument I consider the Klan as an extension of existing tropes that depict lower-class whites, particularly southerners; Ianalyse how the Klan are used as figures to divide the white-self and, in doing so, absolve ‘normal’ white society of guilt. This divide is extenuated further through the Klan’s conflict with ‘good’ white characters who defend the morality of ‘whiteness’, here I draw on the arguments of Hughey as well as Vera and Gordon who explore the white saviour figure.

Lastly, the Klan are often placed within historical narratives. I have reviewed a selection of literature that explores how historical depictions act to enforce contemporary social belief. For Burgoyne, for instance, films help to construct a sense of national identity, he offers Forrest Gump as an example where negative events of American history are ignored to instead focus on a positive romance. The Klan, however, are a stark reminder of America’s troubled past; how then are they utilised to develop an understanding of American society? Building on the literature of this review I analyse how the Klan are represented in the contemporary American film to reaffirm the goodness of whiteness, despite their troubling history. I begin this assessment looking at the depiction of the Klan in melodrama.
Chapter Two: The Klan Melodrama (1988-1997)

In John Singleton’s *Rosewood* (1997) the Klan participate in the massacre and razing of the black town of Rosewood, Florida. The Klan are not the perpetrators of the incident, nor are Klansmen guilty of the most extreme violence, rather ‘normal’ white citizens bear the guilt of the massacre. *Rosewood* focuses on the black narratives of Mr Mann (Ving Rhames) and the Carrier family, although the response of the white John Wright (Jon Voight) to the massacre is also explored. A year earlier Rob Reiner’s *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) opened with a montage of black history and black oppression in America, presenting images of slavery, the Klan, police brutality, as well as black activism and black sporting achievements. The film then depicts the assassination of Medgar Evers (James Pickens Jr), in 1963. Despite this, *Ghosts of Mississippi* focuses on white lawyer, Bobby DeLaughter (Alec Baldwin) and his efforts to prosecute Evers’ murderer Byron De La Beckwith (James Woods). Whilst the film opens with a montage of black history, the narrative focuses on whiteness. *Rosewood* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* emphasise the differing depiction of the Klan and of racism in the period. Jamie Barlowe suggests that ‘both films probe the construct of whiteness’, noting that white audiences are more ‘tolerant’ of films like *Ghosts of Mississippi* that ‘work toward accountability but keeps the focus on whites’.¹ In this chapter, however, I question whether *Ghosts of Mississippi*, among other films, does present whiteness with ‘accountability’, or if racism is marginalised through the depiction of the Klan.

In the late-1980s and 1990s several films were released presenting a conflict between Klansmen and a white ‘hero’ protagonist, namely, *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1992), *Sommersby* (1993), *A Time to Kill* (1996), *The Chamber* (1996), and *Ghosts of Mississippi*. The conflict between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ white characters is representative of the films’ melodramatic modes. This focus on whiteness and white conflict often means that the black community is underrepresented, even in films that purportedly explore racism, as with *Mississippi Burning*. As such, I have termed these films ‘white melodramas’. In this chapter I assess how the Klan fits within this melodramatic mode and how their representation guides the narratives’

construction and presentation of racism. To do this I analyse the narrative focus of these films, comparing the representation of the Klan, the white hero, and the depiction of the black community. Moreover, I look at the presentation of America and how this is formed through the representation of the Klan, looking specifically at the depiction of justice. The extent to which the Klan are used to build a positive vision of America in the white melodrama is emphasised when comparing them to the ‘black narrative’ films of *Malcolm X* (1992), *Posse* (1993), and *Rosewood*.

In the late-1980s and 1990s fear of home-grown terrorism and anti-government militias grew, particularly following the events of Ruby Ridge (1992), the Waco Siege (1993) and, ultimately, the Oklahoma City Bombing (1995).\(^2\) The threat of the right had shifted, the Klan were no longer a significant danger to the American public as membership had declined significantly.\(^3\) The Klan of the late-1980s and 1990s became subdued, though there were rare exceptional incidents, such as the brutal murder of James Byrd Jr in Jasper, Texas (1998), by men associated with the Klan, among other white supremacy groups.\(^4\) Despite their increasing irrelevance, the Klan were represented regularly in mainstream cinema in the period, significantly through the white melodrama. In this chapter I argue that despite the regular portrayal of the Klan their image has reduced significance in American cinema, leading to their use in melodrama and, subsequently, comedy.

Looking at racial melodramas (from fictional works to O. J. Simpson’s trial) Linda Williams argues that ‘American mass culture “talks to itself”’ through ‘Manichaean logic of good and evil and of victim and villain’.\(^5\) The media simplifies news events to comprehensible struggles of ‘good and evil’, as is equally apparent in mainstream film. Such melodramatic divisions are evident in the films of this chapter in the conflict between the Klan and protagonist. There is much critical work that discusses the

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It is argued by some, such as Alan W. Bock, that in the 1990s the militia movement was not seen as a threat until after the Oklahoma City bombing:


complexities of melodrama; John G. Cawelti, John Mercer and Martin Shingler, Barbara Klinger, and Thomas Elsaesser, have all noted how serious themes and social issues can be explored through melodrama.  

Certainly, examples such as Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), which explores racial tensions and ‘passing for white’, demonstrate how melodrama can be used as a challenging genre for exploring social problems through emotional themes. However, this is not necessarily the case in the films I analyse; though films like *Rosewood* present melodramatic narratives whilst raising questions of the social order, other films, such as *A Time to Kill*, utilise melodrama to mask contemporary racial issues by focusing instead on the conflict between the Klan and the white protagonist. This focus on white conflict distracts from issues of racism, as such throughout this chapter I argue that the Klan image is used, paradoxically, to minimise the significance of racism in these narratives.

2.1 *Mississippi Burning* (1988)

The 1980s saw a period of racial divide in America, the black community were alienated by the policies of the Reagan administration, from his economic strategy, to his reservations on introducing Martin Luther King Day. Equally, the Government’s ‘War on Drugs’ led to a high incarceration rate amongst black communities (because of high discrepancies in the sentencing of offences regarding crack-cocaine). However, whilst politically ostracised, ‘black culture’ saw social and media attention with the rise of ‘Gangsta-Rap’, which spoke of the violence and hardships faced by the black community; the genre caused fear and criticism among the media. However, it is

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important to note that the success of ‘Gangsta-Rap’ stemmed in part from ‘white consumerism’.\textsuperscript{10} Equally, black Americans did see a resurgence of roles in mainstream cinema, these films were often comedies, for instance, Eddie Murphy in \textit{48Hrs} (1982), \textit{Trading Places} (1983), and \textit{Beverly Hills Cop} (1984). Such films placed Murphy alongside white actors and ‘isolated Murphy [to] white environments’, appealing to the broadest crossover audience and establishing black talent as comic.\textsuperscript{11} Melvin Donalson suggests that these buddy comedies also gave the false impression of racial harmony.\textsuperscript{12} This was not absolute, noticeably \textit{The Color Purple} (1985) offered a dramatic view of the black community, though the film was not without controversy for its violent depiction of black males, leading to NAACP protests.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Mississippi Burning} was released in an era where racial relations were fraught, but blackness was highly visible in popular culture. Writer Chris Gerolmo was inspired after researching the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, around which \textit{Mississippi Burning} is loosely based.\textsuperscript{14} The film was the first mainstream depiction of the Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s. The willingness to depict the Civil Rights Movement in a mainstream production was perceived by some as a ‘sign of improved race relations’, though in truth relations in the 1980s were more conflicted than the release of \textit{Mississippi Burning} suggests.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the subject matter Gerolmo and producer Frederick Zollo recognised that the target audience for \textit{Mississippi Burning} was primarily white, as such they focused the film on the FBI and not the black community.\textsuperscript{16} The Civil Rights Movement is used to provoke interest, but is not the focus of the narrative; this is not unlike the use of the Klan image in early American cinema. In shifting the focus of the Civil Rights Movement from blackness to whiteness the film mutes the controversy of the period and minimalises issues of racism. As Dyer argues, whiteness is often perceived as neutral; the FBI agents, and the narrative, is protected with this neutrality whilst black characters and Klansmen are

\textsuperscript{11} Guerrero, \textit{Framing Blackness}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{13} Bogle, p. 292.
\textsuperscript{14} Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, p. 393.
\textsuperscript{16} Toplin, \textit{History by Hollywood}, p. 36.
marked as extreme ‘Others’.  

The film follows FBI agents Ward (Willem Dafoe) and Anderson (Gene Hackman) as they investigate the disappearance of three Civil Rights activists (later found to be murdered by the Klan). The investigation of the agents is hindered by Klan violence. The narrative glorifies Ward and Anderson as the film suggests that it is through the work of the FBI that the Klan were defeated, and the black community were saved. The two protagonists act as ‘white saviour’ figures, defending the vulnerable black community. Indeed, for this film, and for other white melodramas discussed in this chapter, Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon’s term ‘white Messiah’ seems more apt as the protagonists not only save but also suffer on behalf of the black community. The focus on whiteness in the film is overt. For instance, Ward and Anderson witness police releasing a black gentleman (Simeon Teague) at night to be beaten by the Klan, as was also the case with the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. The agents find the man injured, though he is the victim, the camera’s focus is instead on Ward’s anger and shock as he embraces the beaten man.

In the shot Ward cradles the man like a child, the image implies parenthood (resembling the messianic). The tableau reduces the position of the beaten man, he is literally underneath Ward, only his head and part of his torso is visible which contrasts to Ward who is nearly entirely framed – the focus of the scene is clearly on Ward. As he questions, ‘what’s wrong with these people?’ Ward’s anger pivots the scene from an exploration of black victimhood to an event that furthers the agents’ ongoing conflict with the Klan. This glorification of the agents and the marginalisation of the black community is the leading point of criticism against *Mississippi Burning*. Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that director Alan Parker’s decision to focus on white heroes ‘drained all complexity out of everyone else, black and racists alike’, adding that real-life details are removed, weakening the ‘simple melodramatic approach’ of the film. I further this argument in suggesting that the melodramatic conflict between the Klan and the FBI agents significantly lessens the impact of racism in the narrative; redirecting the focus of the Civil Rights Movement to that of white conflict undermines the film’s critique of America’s history of racism.

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18 Vera and Gordon, p. 3.
Mississippi Burning does, however, attempt to present the Klan as threatening, as is emphasised through their rugged depiction. The Klan of Jessup County are never presented in full regalia throughout the film. Rather crude hoods are adorned by Klansmen during acts of violence, whilst in daily attire they proudly present the Confederate flag on their cars and in their drinking-establishments to express their pride in the south and Mississippi. The Confederate flag is used to symbolise extremism, it is how Ward and Anderson recognise the Klansmen in public. This depiction breaks from the image of the Klan in films of previous decades, where they were presented in traditional robes. By representing racism through the Confederate flag rather than through robes, the Klansmen are shown to be part of a wider southern society. Equally, the crude hood worn by the men removes the impractical and historic connotations conjured through the Klan’s robes; instead the Klansmen appear threatening, yet no less uncanny. Their faces are masked, but no attempt is made to disguise their bodies, clothes, or their voices. As they beat the congregation of a black church their masks offer minimal disguise and the Klansmen are easily identifiable, demonstrating how open racism was in the period. The Klan’s masks in Mississippi Burning are disconcerting, distorting facial shapes and hollowing the Klansmen’s eyes. There is a jarring balance between the human and inhuman as the Klansmen are recognisable, but the masked face is presented as monstrous. The decision not to present full regalia highlights the presence of the Klan within society, the Klan are not ‘Othered’ through elaborate robes, rather the crude hoods do little to conceal the men’s identities. The Klansmen’s place in society is further emphasised as the Klansmen are shown to work as local police enforcement, craftsmen, and businessmen.

Membership to the Klan is shown to be relatively varied, the film presents Klansmen from all social classes and employment, from police Deputy Pell (Brad Dourif), to Lester (Pruitt Taylor Vince) a shoemaker, and the Klan leader Clayton Townley (Stephen Tobolowsky) who is a respectable businessman. Townley is well-dressed and relatively wealthy, in an interview with news-reporters he expresses his views on Catholics, Jews, and Mississippi; though presenting extreme opinions he speaks relatively articulately and with authority. This respectability is in contrast to the scene that follows wherein Anderson visits other Klansmen drinking in a bar (it supposedly being a dry state). Here the Klan are identified through their howlish laughter, directed towards racist jokes. The Klansmen’s mannerism contrasts with Townley, as they are shown to be stereotypically southern, lower-class, ‘redneck’ figures. This crudeness is
epitomised through the aggression of Frank (Michael Rooker), a Klansman, who threatens Anderson and uses racial epithets. Anderson responds to Frank’s aggression by grasping him by the genitals, threatening him and throwing him to the floor, yet maintaining a cool demeanour that suggests the hierarchy of class between the two (metaphorically presented by Frank’s position at Anderson’s feet). The following scene is of footage from a 1920s Klan rally being projected by the FBI; it features traditionally robed men and women, a fiery cross, and scores waiting to join the Klan. In the clip the Klan speaker declares how inter-racial marriage will turn Americans into a ‘mulatto mongrel class of people’ and be ‘the destruction of both races’.

This sequence of scenes, of Townley, Frank, and the footage from the 1920s, bonds the three variations of Klansmen, linking the respectable front of the Klan to the vulgarity of the beer-drinking Klansmen. Equally, the modern Klan is connected to the historic, as is further emphasised later in the film through a speech by Townley at a political rally, where families watch admiringly (mirroring the footage from the 1920s). Here there is the suggestion that, as Mrs Pell (Frances McDormand) explains, racism is taught.21 Through this political rally, *Mississippi Burning* offers a rare example where the Klan are shown to interact with the wider community. This reflects the structure of some Klans in the 1950s and 1960s which were known to work closely with the seemingly respectable White Citizens Councils.22 Through this sequence, which links the Klan of the 1920s and 1960s, the longevity of the Klan and their influence on American society is acknowledged, however, this is not maintained throughout the film. Townley is absent for the majority of the film, and the predominant image of the Klan is of ‘redneck’ figures and their violence.

The aggression of Frank, the unintelligent behaviour of Lester, and the disorganised and informal manner of Sheriff Stucky (Gailard Sartain), contrasts to the intelligent and well-presented front of the FBI. Annalee Newitz argues that lower-class whites, or ‘white trash’, are depicted as the savage ‘Other’, separating them from the ‘good’ white.23 This is evident in the depiction of the Klansmen, though the complexity of Klan membership is suggested through Townley, ultimately the film focuses on ‘monolithic’ stereotypes of the white ‘Other’ – presenting racism as fault of an isolated

23 Newitz, pp. 131-52.
group of ‘rednecks’, not of whiteness as a whole.\textsuperscript{24} The majority of Klansmen are presented as ‘monopathic’ figures only capable of evil (as is typical for melodrama).\textsuperscript{25} This depiction limits the exploration of American history and issues of racism. Deputy Pell, for instance, is presented as abusive to his wife and corrupted, he has no positive traits. This separates Pell from the viewer as a ‘wholly different breed of people’ which then ‘encourages audiences to deny all identification with the racists’.\textsuperscript{26} This simplification of racism highlights the ‘good versus evil’ cop-drama narrative and reduces the critique offered by the film.

In a similar manner to \textit{Storm Warning} and \textit{The FBI Story}, the FBI agents are presented as the heroes of \textit{Mississippi Burning}. They stand as representations of good whiteness, opposing the evil white ‘Other’ and highlighting the justice of the American system. Throughout \textit{Mississippi Burning} Klan violence is directed towards the agents. For example, early in the film the agents’ hotel is attack by Klansmen who shoot out their windows and burn a cross outside. As Ward stares at the fiery cross it reflects in his glasses. This tableau has two effects. Firstly, it emphasises the white conflict of the film linking the agents and the Klan in one image. Secondly, the shot acts to express Ward’s anger and motivation to defeat the Klan; his anger expressed by the flames reflected in his eyes. Attacks on black community by members of the Klan are shown as hindrances to Ward and Anderson’s investigation and the suffering of the black community is ignored. After Ward attempts to question a black man in a restaurant he is beaten by Klansmen and thrown from a moving vehicle in front of the FBI agents. This is a threat from the Klan to the agents, a warning of further violence. Again, the suffering of the man is ignored (he is swiftly removed from the scene); but the Klan’s actions cause tension between the agents and Sheriff Stuckey, a Klan sympathiser. This also leads to an argument between Ward and Anderson. As such, the black figure is used as a device to drive the conflict between white characters. The suffering of the FBI agents, whether directly or through the black community, highlights their virtue;

Williams explains, that in melodrama suffering is used to show virtue, acting to prove a quality that cannot be seen.\textsuperscript{27} This establishment of the FBI agents as virtuous, suffering on behalf of the black community, presents the American institution as just and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Williams, \textit{Playing the Race Card}, p. 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Loewen, p. 83.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Williams, \textit{Playing the Race Card}, p. 29.
\end{itemize}
whiteness as good, especially as the work of the agents acts to defeat the evil white ‘Other’. This depiction of the virtuous agents in a ‘good versus evil’ melodramatic conflict presents the individual ‘bad white person as the root of racism’ and allows audiences to ignore deeper systems of racism in wider society.28

Throughout the film themes of action and pathos are merged. This, Williams argues, is also typical of melodrama, noting that this balance of action and pathos is not genre specific.29 This merger of tone and genre is exemplified through the opening of *Mississippi Burning* with a shot of two drinking fountains. The fountains are for whites and ‘colored’ respectively; the gap between the two appears vast which is emphasised by the pause between a white man and a young black boy entering the picture to drink, an extended metaphor for the segregation and separation of the period. Following this scene, during the credit sequence, a church burns in the night with melancholic gospel music highlighting the pathos of the image. This score and scenes of churches burning are repeated throughout the film, with brief interjecting scenes of Klansmen firebombing churches used specifically to heighten the pathos and violent tension of the narrative. Melodramatic images that merge pathos and violence are prevalent, for instance, in the beating of a black child, Aaron Williams (Darius McCrary), who is praying, expressing provocative iconography. He is attacked by Frank, who is shown throughout the film to be the most aggressive Klansman; there is a noticeable contrast between the virtuous and innocent child and the aggressive, evil Klansman. This evocative violence is presented to demonise the Klan, emphasising their brutality and heightening the emotional tension of the film.

Such emotive scenes, and the film’s position as the first Hollywood film to depict the Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s, led some reviewers, such as Vincent Canby, to suggest that the film was ‘authentic’ and argued it was ‘so rough and harrowing that one looks for a way out of the film’.30 The balance of violence and pathos provokes a visceral emotional response from the viewer; in this manner, melodrama is used to express the pain of the Civil Rights Movement. Pathos inducing

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Similar arguments have been made elsewhere, for instance see:
30 Vincent Canby, ‘Retracing Mississippi’s Agony, 1964’.
imagery is used to develop a sentimentality for an era the narrative does not truly explore. The imagery the film presents is ‘harrowing’, but the narrative focuses on white conflict not the oppression and struggles of the black community. In this way, melodrama and pathos replace the exploration of the Civil Rights Movement and any critique of racism. There is an implied gravitas to the film that is not shown in the white cop-drama conflict.

Deron Overpeck argues that in the context of the 1980s Mississippi Burning can be viewed as an attempt to ‘negotiate’ conflicting images of blackness in the decade wherein conservative images were praised, such as is found with The Cosby Show (1984-1992), whilst blackness was also villainised with images of gang culture.\(^{31}\) Such negative depictions were epitomised with infamous ‘soft-on crime’ adverts in the 1988 presidential election, where Democrat candidate Michael Dukakis was linked to the crimes of black inmate Willie Horton, who raped and assaulted a couple whilst on weekend furlough.\(^{32}\) Overpeck links Horton to Monk (Badja Djola), a black FBI agent helping Anderson late in the film and who threatens the Mayor (R. Lee Ermey) with castration. He argues that Horton and Monk show that ‘the existing power structure – the fictional FBI, the incumbent Republican Party – can control the rampaging threat presented by African Americans’ and that it is only through the FBI that the black community ‘are freed to join the American dream’.\(^{33}\) In other words, according to Overpeck, Mississippi Burning, presents blackness as acceptable within American society when controlled through white structures; this is emphasised as the black community is shown to rely on the virtuous agents. The conservatism of Mississippi Burning is evident, presenting strong male protagonists akin to that found in Reaganite entertainment, whilst blackness is shown as either controlled or meek, addressing fears of black violence presented in the 1980s media. Equally, the white agent’s action on behalf of the black community, builds the impression of white compassion whilst further marginalising blackness. Again, the focus of the film remains on whiteness and white virtue, and not racism. This is emphasised as one of the most ‘harrowing’ scenes of the film comes in the Klan’s attack on Mrs Pell. This act of white violence inspires the protagonists to change their approach, not the plight of the black community.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
\(^{32}\) Overpeck, p. 206.
The action of the agents is pushed by the sentimentality formed from a pseudo romance between Anderson and Mrs Pell, not issues of race or racism. It is the readdress of ‘evil’ whiteness that is the focus of the film; the agents’ aim to purge evil from society is as much a defence of whiteness as it is blackness. In vengeance for attacking Mrs Pell, Anderson beats Sheriff Pell to the point of unconsciousness; the Mayor is threatened with castration; and, FBI agents dress as Klan and stage a mock lynching of the Klansmen Lester, to frighten him.34 Despite the unofficial and unethical means of the investigation, it is portrayed as a necessary evil to defeat the Klan. Though this violence is Klan-like, these actions romanticise the agents as passionate, clever, and unwavering in their pursuit of justice. The emotional incentive of Anderson helps justify his violence; he remains a ‘good’ figure in spite of his actions, as he is fighting overt evil. Allison Graham compares this to the western genre, specifically The Searchers (1956) as in both films the protagonists use their knowledge of the ‘enemy’ to ‘play as dirty’ as them to defeat them.35 The violence exhibited by the FBI agents is presented as a justified means to defeat the Klan, it also emphasises the melodrama of the narrative that follows broader trends of the ‘vigilante’ films of the 1970s and 1980s, abandoning any critique of the Klan or the Civil Rights Movement in place of a climactic end to the cop-drama narrative.

The film presents ‘good’ progressive whites who worked to purge the evil white ‘Other’ from society, there is no exploration of the continued effects of racism or of contemporary institutionalised racism. Rather the Klan, and Klan violence, is used to provoke emotion whilst offering little critique. In the Mississippi newspaper the Magee the film was praised, though they noted its fiction and added that it ‘in no way depicts any situations or attitudes of the present-day Mississippi.’36 This reception highlights how the film bears little relation to contemporary society, even in Mississippi, the controversy of the narrative is minimalised by presenting racism as an issue of the isolated ‘Other’, who is distanced from the viewer. Moreover, at the film’s end, it is

36 [Anon.], ‘Mississippi Burning to Show’, Magee Courier, 16 February 1989, p. 3.
implied that the issue of racism has been resolved. Ward and Anderson watch as a
group of white and black church-goers sing in the husk of a burnt church; the shots
emphasise the integration of the group moving from white to black members of the
congregation. Such interaction between white and black communities is not seen
throughout the film. The closing scene suggests that once the Klansmen had been
arrested by the agents, racism has been purged from society; the Klan were the only
source of social divide. Ward and Anderson’s position high on a hill, watching from
afar, personifies their messianic saviour status and restores the goodness of whiteness.
The violence of *Mississippi Burning* is emotive, especially given the setting of the
narrative. Equally, the inclusion of Townley and the absence of Klan robes offer brief
illusions to racism within a wider society. Yet, through the melodramatic narrative that
shows the evil white ‘Other’ to be offset by white virtue, a serious critique of racism
and of social divide in America is lacking. Though the film ends with a shot of a
destroyed gravestone reading ‘1964 – Not Forgotten’, the events of the 1960s are
indeed forgotten in place of a melodramatic cop-drama.

2.2 Attenuating Klan Iconography Through Melodrama

In the 1990s noticeable events accentuated America’s racial divide, most
prominently the beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers which led to public outcry.
The acquittal of the officers in April, 1992, triggered six days of rioting; these were
some of the most violent and costly riots in American history.37 Though the violence
affected all ethnicities, the media replayed footage of black youths attacking white
truck driver, Reginald Denny, this ‘reduced’ the riots to a conflict between the black
and white communities and extenuated the racial divide that was undoubtedly a large
factor in inciting the riots.38 The media’s depiction and stereotypes of black criminality
was an equally significant focus in subsequent years with the arrest and trial of O. J.
The media coverage of the Simpson trial led to nationwide interest that also highlighted

37 Insurance estimates for the riots reached $775 million, the highest cost of damage for a non-natural
disaster:
106.
39 Kimberly A. Nuendorf, David Atkin, and Leo W. Jeffres, ‘Explorations of the Simpson Trial “Racial
the racial divide in America. One poll stated that 64% of whites believed Simpson to be guilty compared to just 12% of the black community (polls after Simpson’s acquittal also pointed to a racially divided nation).\(^4^0\) Both the beating of Rodney King and the O. J. Simpson case extenuated the racial tension and divide that had grown in the previous decade and demonstrated a mistrust towards the American courts and police force. The influence of the Simpson case on the American film industry is clear. A year after the nationwide interest in the trial *A Time to Kill, Ghosts of Mississippi*, and *The Chamber* were released, all of which are courtroom dramas that focus on issues of race. This trend later continued with *Amistad* (1997), *The Hurricane* (1999) and *The Green Mile* (1999) which all explore racial inequality in the American justice system. Here Hollywood capitalised on the interest provoked by the Simpson case and on the increased social dialogue that questioned justice and equality in America.

The early-1990s also saw rise to the ‘hood’ genre, building on the aforementioned trends in late-1980s cinema and music. Films such as *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) explored contemporary issues of racism and disenfranchisement in the black community. Contrastingly, films such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Sommersby* appealed to a different audience offering narratives with racially soothing depictions of American history. These films, particularly *Sommersby*, offer an escape from the racial tensions of the early-1990s. In both films the Klan are used to establish the villainous nature of the antagonist; yet neither Frank (Nick Searcy) in *Fried Green Tomatoes* nor Orin (Bill Pullman) in *Sommersby* are motivated by racism, rather both are driven by jealousy. The Klan in *Mississippi Burning* acted as the white ‘Other’ in a narrative that focused on a ‘good versus evil’ cop-drama and minimalised the issue of racism; the attenuation of the Klan’s image is furthered in the 1990s white melodrama as their depiction becomes increasingly distanced from race (and from narratives that revolve around racism). Indeed, with the production of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, more controversy fell around the depiction, or lack thereof, of the protagonists’ lesbian relationship, as is present in the novel but had been toned-down in the film adaptation.

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to appeal to a mainstream audience.\textsuperscript{41} Evidently, these narratives were produced with relatively cautionary approaches, offering a variation from the challenging racial-charged ‘hood’ film.

\textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} follows a friendship between Evelyn (Kathy Bates) and the elderly Ninny (Jessica Tandy) who regales stories of Alabama in the 1920s. These stories focus on the close friendship (implied relationship) of Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth (Mary-Louis Parker) who run the Whistle Stop Café with friends, including their black cook, Big George (Stan Shaw). Angered by Ruth and Idgie’s relationship with the black community, the Klan attack Big George whilst Ruth’s abusive ex-husband, Frank, also a Klansman, terrorises Ruth and her new-born. Frank was previously unaware of his son’s birth and aims to take him from Ruth. Though George is whipped severely, it is Frank’s intimidation of Ruth that is the focus of the scene. This is also key to the film’s narrative as Frank’s death later in the film leads to an investigation which incriminates Idgie and Big George. The Klansmen who attack Big George are presented in full regalia, carrying flaming torches; their threat is emphasised through the flames which light the whipping, along with a fiery cross which lingers in the background. The leading Klansman at Big George’s whipping speaks to Idgie in methodically slow and intimidating tones, his figure is still and the ‘eyelessness’ of his robes is uncanny.\textsuperscript{42} Within the historical setting of \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} the Klan’s regalia remains relatively intimidating. Yet, their threat is directed towards Idgie and Ruth as owners of the Café and as parental figures to Frank’s son, the suffering of Big George and his wellbeing is downplayed. As Idgie rescues him from the Klansmen his concern is only with her safety; this emphasises the scene’s focus on the heroism of Idgie rather than the victimhood of Big George. Similarly, despite the whipping, Big George is not shown to have suffered in following scenes, rather the focus is on the concern of Ruth and, the evil of Frank.\textsuperscript{43}


Also referencing:


\textsuperscript{43} This assertion is based on the theatrical cut, in the extended edition of \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} Big George’s wounds are briefly seen being treated – though this scene still focuses on Idgie’s ‘goodness’.
Frank’s villainous nature is personified through his membership to the Klan, his motivation is in threatening Ruth and taking his son, not one of racism. Unlike *Mississippi Burning* the antagonist is not evil because he is a Klansman, rather his evil is emphasised through membership to the Klan. A similar argument is made by Ann Pellegrini who also notes the use of the Klan to emphasise Frank’s evil, adding that ‘blackness’ in the film is used to define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whites. Whilst, as Pellegrini argues, the whipping of Big George is used to establish Idgie’s heroism, Frank’s involvement in the Klan is not an act of racism but rather one of jealousy (Frank is previously shown to watch the Whistle Stop Café with envy). As such, Frank is not established against ‘blackness’ but is established through the Klan and his contrast to the ‘good’ whiteness of Idgie and Ruth. Here, Klan iconography is used to signify evil more than it is used to highlight racial themes.

As with *Mississippi Burning* there is again a clear division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whites. This is typical for melodrama which excludes the ‘middle-ground.’ This division equally simplifies issues of American racism, suggesting even in the 1920s racism was the fault of select ‘bad’ whites; this ignores the widespread popularity of the Klan in the era. As with the Klansmen in *Mississippi Burning*, Frank is an underdeveloped character, he is defined only through his evil, through his beating of Ruth and his membership to the Klan. Though Frank is a one-dimensional character, Ruth and Idgie’s characteristics are defined against him; in contrast to Frank the suffering of Ruth and the fiercely heroic nature of Idgie is established. Building on Pellegrini’s argument, I note that characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes* are not just defined through their interaction with black characters but are established through conflicting depictions of whiteness. The complex characteristics of the protagonists are projected against the simplicity and underdeveloped evil of Frank and the Klan.

Black characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes* are presented as subservient, as Herman Grey argues, they replay images of the loyal black servant devoted to the white protagonist. This depiction of meek blackness pacifies the racial tension that would otherwise be found in the narrative. The Klan’s hatred towards the black community is

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without rationale, the black community is not shown to seek upwards mobility but are content in the service of Ruth and Idgie. Though Big George is the victim of the whipping, he plays no active part in resisting the Klan and is rescued by Idgie. Amy Corbin argues that having white characters in the active roles of the ‘melodramatic triangle of villain/hero/victim’ makes the film fit with the ‘multiculturalist worldview’ of the period as heroes advocate for equality, but their actions are less threatening than Black Power movements – instead the black community is presented as the passive victim. In other words, whiteness is shown to be progressive through the heroes’ defence of the black community and their opposition to the evil white villain; this ‘multicultural’ worldview of racial unity is established primarily through ‘active’ depictions of good and bad whiteness. Blackness is defended by Idgie and Ruth as they oppose the white ‘Other’ who threatens their ideals. Corbin explains that the southern male figure is tainted through the coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, he is marked as racist, but that the southern woman does not have ‘this moral taint.’ This is typified through Idgie and Ruth, as well as the goodness of Mrs Pell in *Mississippi Burning*; as such, racism is isolated to the rural southern male. This ‘Othering’ is compounded further through the use of Klan iconography, as is demonstrated when comparing Frank to Grady (Gary Basaraba), a Klansman who is a friend to Idgie and is also a police officer.

Early in the film Idgie accuses Grady of being a Klansman, asking why the Klan do not change their shoes during their ‘stupid’ parades to conceal their identities. Despite this accusation, Grady is still presented as a ‘good’ figure, even helping Idgie in stopping the Klan from whipping Big George. The difference between the characterisation of Grady and Frank stems from the use of the Klan’s iconography. The Klan’s robes act to personify the evil of Frank; Grady, by contrast, is never presented in robes and is depicted as a complex character. He is loyal to Idgie, offering to marry her in youth, enjoys gambling, yet as a police officer is conservative in social issues (he looks in distain at Idgie and Ruth’s food-fight, often thought to represent sex). Unlike

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  Rockler, p. 99.
Frank there is an ambiguity to Grady’s character, in an extended DVD release of the film it is revealed that Grady is not a Klansman, this is cut from the theatrical version but it does not change the perception of Grady as a generally good, if flawed, character. This emphasises how the Klan’s iconography is used as a shorthand for evil. Frank is defined through his robes; his characteristics are masked by the ‘evil’ of the Klan. Contrastingly, Grady is removed from the iconography and is viewed as a nuanced character. Frank, and the robed Klan, act as simplified evils that conflict to the goodness of Idgie and Ruth, reaffirming white goodness through contrast with the white ‘Other’. This is similar to the conflict between the agents and the Klan in Mississippi Burning, but in Fried Green Tomatoes the Klan’s actions are distanced from racism and are guided by Frank’s jealousy.

Similarly, in Sommersby, antagonist Orin utilises the Klan to threaten ‘Jack’ (Richard Gere), as he is jealous of his relationship with Laurel Sommersby (Jodie Foster). The film is an American remake of Le Retour de Martin Guerre (trans. The Return of Martin Guerre) (1982), relocated to a southern American town during Reconstruction. An impostor poses as Jack Sommersby fooling the townspeople; Laurel Sommersby realises the deception but falls in love with the impostor. ‘Jack’ saves the town from economic hardship by letting the townspeople farm and even buy his land (this arrangement extends to the black community). Guided by Orin, the Knights of the White Camelia, another supremacy group from the era, appear at ‘Jack’s’ house at night with a beaten black worker, Joseph (Frankie Faison). Despite being dubbed the ‘White Camelia’ the group clearly embody the Klan, as is apparent through the use of the fiery cross. The cross is used anachronously for modern recognisability; but the presentation of the Klan’s robes with elaborate patterns and faces on their masks is accurate to the period and a rare image in film. This merger of history and fiction, depicting accurate robes but an erroneous fiery cross, reflects the tone of the film, which presents an ‘authentic’ Reconstruction south, but a protagonist that reflects the ideology of a ‘1990’s man’.

Both the fiery cross and the beaten form of Joseph are presented as threats to ‘Jack’, the Klan threaten to kill Joseph though it is ‘Jack’ that they are attempting to intimidate.

50 Rice, White Robes, Silver Screens, p. 228.
‘Jack’ sacrifices himself standing between the gun and Joseph. Low-angled shots highlight the Klan’s position of power over ‘Jack’, emphasising his bravery at resisting the Klan. Again, violence towards a black character is presented as an attack on the white protagonist and highlights his goodness. As with *Mississippi Burning* the conflict of the scene is between white figures, whilst the black body is used to aggravate this conflict. Despite this use of Joseph, the conflict between ‘Jack’ and Orin’s Klan is not racial but stems from Orin’s betrothal to Laurel (before ‘Jack’s’ return). Initially, Orin takes ‘Jack’s’ return with good manner. But he soon becomes suspicious of ‘Jack’; discovering he is an imposter Orin scorns Laurel and becomes bitter. Following this he is revealed as a Klan rider (his wooden foot visible under his robes); in the subsequent scene he has a fistfight with ‘Jack’, attempting to murder him. Orin’s involvement with the Klan highlights the transformation in his nature from pleasant to aggressive. Later in the film he conspires against ‘Jack’ in court to get him imprisoned, as to take Laurel’s hand in marriage; for this he uses the help of a Klansman who acts as a witness. This ploy fails as the Klansman is discovered and is aggressive to the black Judge (James Earl Jones), leading to his imprisonment – a clear sense of justice for his involvement in the Klan. With this failure, and as Laurel professes her love for ‘Jack’, Orin leaves the court in tears.

Orin’s descent is emphasised through his membership to the Klan. Whilst Orin is shown with a more complex story arc than Frank is in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the Klan image is again used to emphasise evil. Though in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Sommersby* black figures are abused, the Klan’s actions do not stem from racism but from the jealousy the antagonists have of other white characters. The Klan’s image is simplified, it is used as a shorthand to emphasise evil rather than to explore racism. Furthermore, these evil figures are also utilised to highlight the goodness of the protagonists. Williams has argued that ‘white America needs to believe in its own virtue vis-à-vis either the extreme suffering or the extreme villainy of the black male body.’ This is shown with ‘Jack’, Idgie, and Ruth; their heroism and virtue is established in their defence of the suffering black male body, whose victimhood is underexplored. Hughey refers to the white saviour film as depicting whiteness as an ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’ in that it reaffirms the hegemony of whiteness over

blackness but gives the impression of compassion.\textsuperscript{54} Using this metaphor, the Klan represent the ungloved fist, a group looking to force white supremacy through violence, this contrast between the protagonists and the Klan reassures the audience further that racism is isolated to brute ‘Others’ who are depicted as ‘wholly different’ to the compassionate protagonists. \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} and \textit{Sommersby} further remove whiteness from issues of racism as the Klan are used as a device to emphasise the evil of the protagonists, who act on jealousy. This use of the Klan continues a trend started in \textit{Mississippi Burning}, where the Klan image is as associated with melodramatic conflict as it is racism; they are used as a group to personify evil. Unlike the films of the 1950s and 1970s, films depicting the Klan in the late-1980s and 1990s do not explore issues of contemporary racism, instead they focus on a melodramatic conflict that serves to highlight the goodness of whiteness.

\section*{2.3 Presenting a Just America}

In the white melodrama the Klan are met with justice; in \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} this is found through the death of Frank (who is killed in an act of self-defence), though more often justice is found through legal action as with \textit{Mississippi Burning} and \textit{Sommersby}. This is also reflected in the courtroom dramas of the mid-1990s in \textit{A Time to Kill}, \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}, and \textit{The Chamber}. The punishment of the Klan acts as a precursor to the films’ ‘happy ending’, this is most noticeable in \textit{A Time to Kill} and \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}. As with \textit{Mississippi Burning}, these films suggest that the issues of racism are fixed with the purging of the Klan from society. Again, the Klan are simplified, and the narratives follow a conflict between good and bad whites as the American justice system is fixed through the work of the white protagonists. The melodramatic use of the Klan is furthered in \textit{A Time to Kill} and \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}, with any complexity found in the Klan’s depiction in \textit{Mississippi Burning} lost. This simplicity is challenged somewhat in \textit{The Chamber} where Klansman Sam Cayhall (Gene Hackman) is presented with a changing personality, making it unclear if his punishment is just. This section explores the exaggerated depiction of the Klan and will focus primarily on \textit{A Time to Kill} as the most prominently successful white melodrama of the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{54} Hughey, \textit{The White Savior Film}, p. 8.
In *A Time to Kill* lawyer Jake Brigance (Matthew McConaughey) defends Carl Lee Hailey (Samuel L. Jackson) in court, after Carl Lee murdered Billy Ray Cobb (Nicky Katt) and ‘Pete’ Willard (Doug Hutchison) as revenge for raping his ten-year-old daughter, Tonya (Rae’Ven Larrimore Kelly). Carl Lee is motivated to action knowing that the white Cobb and Willard would likely be released without punishment because of the Court’s racism. The racially driven trial attracts the attention of the Klan through the bereaved brother Freddie Lee Cobb (Keifer Sutherland). Klan violence is directed at Jake: his family are harassed and forced to move; a cross is burnt outside of his home; Klansmen attempt to bomb his house which is then burnt down; and Jake is stabbed. Jake’s work and suffering on behalf of the black community presents him as a ‘white messiah’ figure as with the agents in *Mississippi Burning*.

However, unlike *Mississippi Burning*, the Klan are shown with little complexity. As Freddie laments the injustice of his brother’s death, he exclaims ‘ten years ago that nigger'd be hanging by the end of a rope with his balls in his mouth’. He is then advised by his friend, Winston (Tim Parati), of the Klan’s continued existence. As Freddie first meets the Grand Dragon (Kurtwood Smith) he is flanked by guerrilla militia, the Dragon is lit by car lights producing long-shadows, the silhouette heightening the mystery and tension akin to the imagery of Film Noir. In a later scene of a Klan initiation low-angled shots of the Grand Dragon mark him with a position of authority and power. This representation of power concerned Roger Ebert who argues the Klan in *A Time to Kill* and *The Chamber* could be perceived in a positive manner. Yet, these scenes are brief, and the predominant and lasting image of the Klan is one that is ineffectual, melodramatic, and primarily used to heighten the tension of the court case.

As the jury is selected, Klansmen march on the courthouse in full regalia. Their robed figures contrasts to the militant iconography seen earlier in the film; they appear incongruous in the streets of Canton. The image of robed men marching to the courthouse is less threatening than it is melodramatic. This is emphasised as the Klansmen begin an exaggerated brawl with counter-protestors. In this brawl the Grand Dragon is set ablaze by black teenagers and dies, whilst Jake heroically joins the fray punching a Klansman to save the black Sheriff Walls (Charles S. Dutton), getting stabbed in the process. This scene has little effect on the narrative except to raise the

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55 Ebert, ‘*A Time to Kill*’.
Ebert, ‘*The Chamber*’.
tension of the court case and highlight the extent of Jake’s heroism and dedication. The brawl and the depiction of the Klan was reviewed by David Denby McRedford as a ‘distraction’ to the narrative, and as a melodramatic device that is an ‘insult’ to the viewer’s ‘intelligence’. The violence of the Klan helps to justify Carl Lee’s actions, but the exaggerated nature of the brawl borders on comedy.

This melodramatic, even ridiculous, violence demonstrates the use of the Klan as figures of entertainment. The brawl and the Klan’s regalia adds drama to the scene but offers no exploration of racism. This is furthered as their violence is predominantly focused towards Jake and his family, the white conflict of A Time to Kill is overt. Noticeably, however, scenes of intimidating violence are usually committed by un-robed Klansmen, for instance, with the attempted bombing of Jake’s house or with an attempt to assassinate him. In these two instances un-robed Klansmen cause violence that is more intimidating and serious than the Klan’s melodramatic brawl. As with Grady in Fried Green Tomatoes, this suggests that there is more potential to characterise Klansmen when they are removed from their robes. After the Grand Dragon dies, Freddie becomes Klan leader; he is seen as the most threatening and violent Klansman, this is emphasised, in part, due to his limited association with Klan iconography. For instance, he quickly removes his hood to reveal himself to Ellen Roark (Sandra Bullock), a Law student who assists Jake, after she has been kidnapped and tied to a tree, stripped, and left to die. In A Time to Kill the Klan are treated as elaborately melodramatic (through marches and the brawl), there is a disassociation between the Klan image and credible threat; but, Freddie, who is removed from Klan iconography, remains threatening. As a ‘redneck’ figure, the villainous nature of Freddie harks to the monstrous southern ‘Other’, playing upon existing stereotypes found in films such as Deliverance (1972), as shall be discussed further in Chapter Three. Freddie’s threat as the evil ‘redneck’ figure, not as a Klansman, further highlights the unthreatening melodramatic depiction of the Klan.

In A Time to Kill the Klan serve two functions. Firstly, through the melodramatic mass-brawl Klansmen are utilised to heighten the excitement and dramatic tension of Carl Lee’s case. Secondly, the suffering the Klan inflict on Jake and Roark serves to heighten their virtue through victimhood. Again, the Klan are used to highlight the goodness of the protagonists. The suffering that Jake and his legal team endure

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emphasises their struggle to redeem the white southerner. Jake acts not just for Carl Lee and the black community, but to demonstrate the progression of the white south; presenting a fair legal system and a friendship between white and black communities. This vision of the good, redemptive, white southerner is a trend found throughout films of the 1990s, for instance in further Grisham adaptations including The Firm (1993) and The Rainmaker (1997). The focus on conflict between the good white and the Klan by-passes many questions of racism in contemporary southern society; the Klan function as a throwback to the south’s history of racism, whilst Jake represents modern progression. Jake’s successful legal battle acts to demonstrate the justice of contemporary American courts. A Time to Kill was released four years after the Los Angeles Riots and one year after the Simpson trial which, at the very least, demonstrated racism in the police force and the injustice of the legal system. The film offers an escape from this reality, capitalising on the interest in the racial courtroom drama, but presenting a positive resolution to America’s racial division. Racism is isolated to the Klan ‘Others’ who are arrested and removed from society, whilst the ‘normal’ white southerner and the American courts are depicted as good and just.

Comparing A Time to Kill to the similarly themed To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), it is apparent how the 1990s white melodrama offers a ‘soothing’ rather than challenging narrative. In To Kill a Mockingbird, set in the 1930s, an innocent black man, Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), is falsely accused of rape. As with A Time to Kill, the film follows a progressive white lawyer, Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), who defends Tom. However, unlike A Time to Kill, his defence fails. To Kill a Mockingbird demonstrates the injustice in the American legal system, reflecting the 1960s, whereas in A Time to Kill the 1990s courts are presented as ‘just and fair’ as Carl Lee is found innocent. To Kill a Mockingbird challenged audiences to question the justice of the courts during the Civil Rights Movement; contrastingly, A Time to Kill offers a pacifying narrative, soothing contemporary fears of injustice. Since New Hollywood’s drive towards mass-market appeal in the 1970s, white narratives have dominated screens; the pacifying narrative of A Time to Kill demonstrates how Hollywood targets, not

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58 It should be noted that the focus of To Kill a Mockingbird remains on Atticus and not the emotions and injustice of Tom’s narrative: Roger Ebert, ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, review, RogerEbert.com, 11 November 2001 <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/to-kill-a-mockingbird-2001> [accessed 2 November 2018]
At the film’s end Freddie, Winston, and Deputy Hastings are arrested for their crimes as Klansmen. Though the film shows little police interest or even acknowledgement of the Klansmen’s crimes, they are arrested to offer a satisfying resolve where evil is punished and good triumphs. Moreover, their arrest demonstrates the purging of racism from the American legal system as Deputy Hastings is removed from the police force. Both A Time to Kill and Mississippi Burning acknowledge that racism has been present within the American police force, but they show it to be purged in their climaxes (though Sheriff Stuckey goes free in Mississippi Burning, Deputy Pell is the chief antagonist of the film and is sentenced). These depictions of justice contrast to the continued discrimination faced by the black community at the hands of police in the 1980s and 1990s, not least demonstrated through the King and Simpson cases. The white melodrama attempts to present a fair system, avoiding questions of institutional racism and instead isolating racism to the ‘Other’ (Klansmen and rednecks). This minimisation of racial issues is not shared in the black narrative film which aligns the Klan and racism to the police force with more sincerity.

A Time to Kill, Ghosts of Mississippi, and Mississippi Burning each resolve demonstrating the justice of the American institution. Hughey refers to the white saviour film as repairing ‘white supremacy and paternalism in an unsettled and racially charged time’. The resolution of the white melodrama presents this hegemony by first restoring faith in the American institution, these films suggest that as the American system is just, whiteness must also be good. Only the white ‘Other’ is responsible for racism. This simplification ignores the complexity of race relations in the 1990s, through the punishment of the Klan, it is suggested that racism is purged from contemporary society. I will discuss this depiction of punishment and justice in more detail later in the chapter, but it is important first to consider films that challenge the narrative simplicity of the white melodrama as found in the black narrative film.

2.4 Black Narrative and the Klan

In contrast to the white melodrama, racism is not minimised in black narrative films that depict the Klan. Rather the Klan are presented as one source of racism in American

60 Hughey, The White Savior Film, p. 15.
society; with these films racism is shown to be widespread and continuing into the contemporary age. This section looks at how the Klan’s depiction differs from the white melodrama. I agree with Izzo, as well as McClintock and Ford, who argue that it has become increasingly redundant to divide ‘black film’ from other American cinema, particularly in recent years.\textsuperscript{61} However, for the purposes of this thesis I am defining ‘black narrative’ films as features where the protagonists are black and the narrative focuses on the lives of the black community. Equally, the three films discussed in this section (Malcolm X, Posse, and Rosewood) are directed by three of the most recognised and prestigious directors of the 1990s ‘new black cinema’ cycle in Spike Lee, Mario Van Peebles, and John Singleton, respectively. Despite the success of the ‘hood film’ the films of this chapter were not as financially successful as the most prominent white melodramas.\textsuperscript{62} Though these films are not small budget productions, they are equally apart from the mainstream as is highlighted from their viewership; indeed, the directors of these films are known to challenge the mainstream. As such, this section questions whether the Klan are utilised in a different manner, demonstrating a flexibility to the Klan image in 1990s American cinema. However, these three films offer some similarities to the white melodrama in narrative style, particularly with Posse and Rosewood which also present melodramatic narratives.

\textsuperscript{61} Izzo, p. xi.

\textsuperscript{62} Whilst Malcolm X had a domestic box office gross of $48.2 million, Posse and Rosewood took only $18.3 and $13.1 million respectively. This compares well to the domestic taking of The Chamber ($14.6m) and Ghosts of Mississippi ($13.3m), but poorly to Mississippi Burning ($34.6m), Fried Green Tomatoes ($82.4m) and A Time to Kill ($108.8m).

[Anon.], A Time to Kill, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=timetOk ill.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]

[Anon.], The Chamber, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=chamber.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]

[Anon.], Fried Green Tomatoes, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=friedgreentomatoes.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]

[Anon.], Ghosts of Mississippi, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ghostsofmississippi.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]


[Anon.], Posse, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=posse.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]

[Anon.], Rosewood, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=rosewood.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]
Though the films of this section focus on the black narrative there has been a concerted effort to appeal to a crossover audience. Both *Rosewood* and *Posse* present a prominent ‘good’ white character as a form of ‘tokenism’; there has also been a suggestion that *Malcolm X* was significantly ‘dampened’ to make the narrative less controversial to draw a white audience. Nonetheless, these narratives are provocative.

This is most overt with the opening of Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* with a speech from Malcolm that criticises ‘the white man’ for his violence; the dialogue is played over footage of the Rodney King beating in 1991, with the American flag intercut into this sequence (which burns at the end of the speech). Lee instantly relates the racism of the 1960s to contemporary issues. The film utilises the Klan and images of police brutality to depict the longevity of racism in America, focusing particularly on institutionalised racism.

The film follows the life of Malcolm (Denzel Washington) from childhood to death, focusing on his personal life, conversion, and work with Islam. Issues of racism are often presented as a subordinate narrative, but it remains omnipresent in Malcolm’s life. A follower of Malcolm X, Brother Johnson (Steve White), is beaten by police; this mirrors the footage of King’s beating. Again, Lee is connecting the 1960s and 1990s through imagery of police brutality, emphasising how issues of institutionalised racism persist. This contrasts to the white melodrama where contemporary America is presented as just and racism is purged from the police force. Lee challenges the depiction of racism found in the mainstream which presents racism as a historic issue, he emphasises its continued presence in American society by paralleling contemporary events with the historic. Furthermore, *Malcolm X* highlights the longevity of racism in America through the rhetoric of slavery found in Malcolm’s speeches, and through the depiction of the Klan. Unlike the white melodrama, the Klan are part of America’s problems with racism, they are not the sole cause of racism.

The Klan are depicted in the 1920s and 1930s, firstly terrorising Malcolm’s family in Nebraska because of the preaching of his father, Earl Little (Tommy Hollis). The Klan, in white robes, smash the Little household’s windows and threaten the family before riding away into the night. Here the Klan are silhouetted against the bright, low

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Although this view of a ‘dampened’ *Malcolm X* has equally been challenged: Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 182-83.
moon; the imagery is bold, even romanticising the Klan and invoking *The Birth of a Nation*. This tableau demonstrates the Klan’s historic glorification in American society. Unlike the white melodrama which depicts the Klan as an isolated group of ‘bad’ individuals, *Malcolm X* hints towards the historic acceptance of the Klan by invoking positive images akin to praise found in Griffith’s film. Jonathan Scott Lee furthers this argument, suggesting that in this ‘unexpected allusion to *The Birth of a Nation* […] Lee’s work really is attempting to push us towards the birth of a new nation.’ The Klan’s depiction is drawn from previous cinematic representations rather than historical record; Lee alludes to *The Birth of a Nation* to demonstrate the longevity and acceptability of racism within American society and culture, to which *Malcolm X* calls for continued resistance. This is exemplified by the film’s ending with children declaring ‘I am Malcolm X’.

Lee shows that through activism one can be free of the constraints of racism. This is expressed through Malcolm’s relationship with the Klan. Because of the Klan the Little family are forced to move to Michigan, however Klan violence follows. In flashbacks it is revealed that the Black Legion (a splinter group from the Klan), burnt down the Little house and threatened his father. The Black Legion are presented as Klansmen, though with black rather than white robes. In further flashbacks it is shown that the Legion murdered Earl by tying him to tram tracks. These flashbacks are shown to trouble Malcolm into adulthood (even though some events happened before he was born); with this, racist violence is shown to ‘haunt’ and, to an extent, dictate Malcolm’s life. This is not dissimilar to how memories of the Civil Rights Movement underscore the Rodney King footage; or, as slavery underscores much of Malcolm X’s speeches. America’s history of racial violence is shown to underpin issues found in contemporary society. Malcolm’s early life is full of criminal activity, in this time he has flashbacks of Klan violence; indeed, Todd McGowan notes the parallel between Malcolm and the Klan in this period in that they are fuelled by excessive passion. Yet, as Malcolm betters his life through religion and activism, the flashbacks cease. Through activism Lee shows that it is possible to overcome racial oppression, bettering oneself and the black

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64 This observation is presented by Jonathan Scott Lee who points to *Malcolm X*’s shooting script as evidence for the relation between the scene and *The Birth of a Nation*: Jonathan Scott Lee, ‘Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* as Transformational Object’, *American Imago*, 52.2 (1995), 155-67 (p. 159).
65 Ibid., p. 167.
community. Through the Rodney King footage Lee shows that members of the black community continue to be treated as second class citizens.\(^{67}\) As Malcolm overcomes the injustice of the Klan through activism, contemporary society needs to overcome continued police brutality.

The Klan are presented as one factor in a multitude of American racial issues. Institutional racism is the more significant focus of the film, this is apparent through the aforementioned police brutality, but also through unjust courts and unfair laws. Early in the film Malcolm and his friend Shorty (Spike Lee) are harshly sentenced for larceny because they also slept with white women. Malcolm also delivers a speech detailing the ingrained nature of racism in America, explaining:

‘a hundred years ago they used to put on white sheets and set bloodhounds on us. Well nowadays they traded in the sheets…well some of them have traded in the sheets [he laughs] […] they have traded in those white sheets for police uniforms. They have traded in the bloodhounds for police dogs.’

He goes on to discuss how the enemy bombs, rapes, and lynchess the black community, this is underscored with brief footage of the Klan burning crosses and of debris from bombings. As such, there is a recognition of the violence found in the Civil Rights south, however Malcolm’s focus remains on institutional racism. Though the footage of southern Klan violence is disturbing, Malcolm jokes about the Klan, somewhat minimalising their importance. Lee’s film explores the continuing injustice in the American system, showing the issues of 1960 as relevant to 1990s; this partly explains the reduced screen-time of southern Klan violence in the film, despite being set during the Civil Rights Movement. The Klan have little relevance to contemporary America and, as such, are presented as historic figures, used to present the longevity of American racism. Unlike the depiction of the Klan in the white melodrama Malcolm X does not reduce the significance of the group by depicting them as historic, rather it places the Klan alongside slavery and police brutality as significant ‘milestones’ in the evolution of American racism which is continuous.

In a similar vein, Rosewood highlights that American racism is not isolated to the Klan but is widespread. However, where Malcolm X focuses on institutional racism,
Rosewood explores racism found among society. The film is based on the massacre and razing of Rosewood, Florida, in 1923. It follows the fictional Mr. Mann as he moves to Rosewood, a successful majority black town. However, violence is brought to the town after a white woman, Fanny Taylor (Catherine Kellner), in the neighbouring white town of Sumner, claims to have been beaten by an unknown black man. Fanny was actually beaten by her lover (Robert Patrick), but lied to hide the affair; a rumour spreads that she was also raped by her attacker. A lynch mob forms in response. Sylvester Carrier (Don Cheadle) the patriarch of a black family, resists the mob at his family house; this turns into a shootout where ‘Aunt’ Sarah Carrier (Esther Rolle), Sylvester’s mother and a woman respected by the white community, is killed along with two white men. Events descend into several nights of mob violence.

In Rosewood the racist mob are shown to be jealous of the success of the black community, for instance they bemoan that Sylvester, a music teacher, owns a piano whilst white citizens do not have such luxuries. Unlike the white melodrama the racists are motivated by their jealousy of the black community, not a dislike of other whites. The mob relish the violence; they take pleasure in shooting, hanging, and mutilating the black figures as it re-establishes their ideal social order. In one scene a hanging black man has his ear cut-off with onlookers encouraging their children to watch or even participate, to educate them on their position in society. Such a scene, and many others in Rosewood, are deliberately more graphic and uncomfortable than violent scenes in white melodramas, forcing the viewer to accept the reality of America’s racist history.

The Klan are not presented as the cause of racism, rather they are presented as endemic or symbolic of the widespread racism in American society. As with the mob, the Klan are depicted as opportunistic and bloodthirsty. After hearing word of the events in Rosewood, the Klan in another, unnamed, town leave a Christian baptism ceremony to join the mob. They load guns and put on their robes, the passage from church clothes to Klan robes emphasises how racism can stem from seemingly ‘respectable’ individuals. This transition can be seen as an extension of the people of Sumner, who transform from ordinary citizens into a murderous mob. The white

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Indeed, though the massacre is largely forgotten now, the events made front-page news: [Anon.], ‘Florida Race War Costs Seven Lives’, *Washington Post*, 6 January 1923, p. 1.

With the razing of the town also reported as the last act of the ‘Race War’: [Anon.], ‘Rest of Negro Houses in Rosewood Burned’, *Washington Post*, 8 January 1923, p. 10.
melodrama defends whiteness by isolating racism to the white ‘Other’, contrastingly, *Rosewood* demonstrates that racism is widespread, and that ‘normal’ individuals have the capacity for violence. The ‘normal’ white citizens of the mob are not differentiated from the Klan.

Few films explore the Klan in relation to their Christian ideology; rather the link between the Klan and Christianity is downplayed in the Hollywood film to avoid controversy. In *Mississippi Burning*, for example, Townley refers to religious rhetoric, criticising Judaism and Catholicism, but any visual link between the Klan and Protestantism is lacking. Despite this Megan Hunt argues that ‘white evangelical culture is often conflated with white supremacy’ pointing to *Mississippi Burning* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* as examples.**69** Hunt furthers this argument noting the positive portrayal of Christianity amongst the black community, as they may draw ‘strength and dignity’ through the church; this polarising view of white and black Christianity highlights the segregation of the south.**70** Christianity is indeed presented as a positive attribute of the black community, for instance in *Mississippi Burning* the community find support in one another as they congregate in the burnt husk of a church. However, differing from Hunt’s assertion, in the white melodrama the Klan are only tangentially linked to Christianity; rare rhetoric is suggestive of their religious belief but there is no clear connection to church or faith as there is with the black community. Hollywood avoids linking the Klan to faith for two reasons. Firstly, Hollywood aims to avoid alienating, or potentially angering, large sections of their market. Secondly, linking the Klan to Christianity humanises the group, placing them within normal environments and structures of American society, not as ‘Others’. In the white melodrama there is no relation between the Klan and normal society; contrastingly, *Rosewood* links Klan and Christian iconography, juxtaposing virtue and evil, to demonstrate the duality of the Klan. The Klan hold extreme views and cause extreme violence, but they are not wholly ‘Other’ as they have ‘good’ characteristics as well.**71** This offers a greater critique of American society and the problems of imbedded racism, showing racism to stem from ‘normal’ citizens.


**70** Ibid.

**71** This is not dissimilar from Loewen’s argument that to teach about racism, racist must be presented as ‘people whom one can like otherwise’: Loewen, p. 83.
As the Klan arrive in Rosewood the mob greet them with praise and cheers; before the Klan’s arrival mass violence was already rampant across the town, with several black citizens murdered. The Klan’s entrance to the town is as though a parade, a glorification of the violence; the Klan act as an emblem for the racism of the townspeople. Again, unlike the white melodrama it is regular citizens and not the Klan that first provoked and commit violence. The Klan are a recognisable figure of racism but are least to blame for the massacre of Rosewood. They are used to emphasise the descent and evil of the mob. That violence stems from regular individuals rather than ‘brute’ figures of the Klan raises questions of the prevalence of racism within American society and highlights the oppression of the black community throughout history.

The inclusion of the fictional Mr Mann affects the tone of the film, merging ‘motivating political conviction’ and ‘stylistic straightforwardness.’\(^2\) The tragedy of the narrative is offset somewhat by a romantic sub-plot and heroic action sequences. Mann is the traditionally imposing masculine figure, emphasised through the casting of Ving Rhames; he rides into town a mysterious stranger and rescues the innocent in a climactic finale, a homage to the traditional cowboy figure.\(^3\) Mann leaves Rosewood to avoid prosecution and is chased by several Klansmen. At the baptism the Klan’s MIOAK (Klan emblem) is provocatively glimpsed under a gun; as Klansmen leave to join the mob they find Mann and pursue him into the woods. Unlike other scenes of violence this scene is melodramatic, offering a battle of good and evil. This melodrama is particularly evident through the evocative depiction of the Klan’s robes and emblem which establish the evil of the men, this is an exception to the majority of the narrative where violence stems from normal citizens. Mann resists the Klan, returning fire and scaring away his pursuers. Later the Klansmen claim that ‘fifteen niggers jumped’ them in the woods, emphasising the strength of Mann in contrast to the Klan. Singleton presents strong black protagonists, in contrast to the white melodrama black characters are resilient against the Klan and are not submissive. The Klan are presented as weak in contrast to Mann, this does not alter the suffering faced by those at Rosewood but is a comment on the internal strength of the black community. David Nicholson considers the inclusion of Mann into Rosewood as ‘rewriting history with lightning and giving us

\(^3\) Several reviews make similar comparisons, for instance see:
something very much like a Birth of a Nation for black Americans. As such, despite the horrors of the film, it does not escape ‘cliched Hollywood vérités’ focusing on the heroic and offering a conflict of good and evil. Mann’s position as a strong black hero represents a figure often ignored by Hollywood. The cowboy-like heroics of Mann are melodramatic, but the suffering and injustice of the black community is no-less apparent. Unlike the white melodrama the manichaean conflict of good and evil is not used to avoid critical depictions of racism but to offer a positive portrayal of the strength of the black community despite their suffering.

Similarly, Posse emphasises the strength of the black community presenting a stereotypical ‘good’ hero, again through the cowboy figure; though, unlike Rosewood and Malcolm X, the narrative of Posse is overtly fictional and melodramatic.

The western follows Jesse (Mario Van Peebles) who returns to his hometown of Freemansville to avenge the death of his father, King David (Robert Hooks) at the hands of the Klan. Mario Van Peebles struggled against stereotypes imposed by studios of the 1990s, he originally wanted to make a film about a middle-class black family; this was turned down by studios who wanted black characters to have relation to ‘the hood’ and exhibit an addiction to ‘crack’. Van Peebles moved towards the western genre instead, highlighting the forgotten history of black cowboys and the prominence of the black community in the Old West.

Posse opens with a documentary crew interviewing an elderly man (Woody Strode) who explains that people forget that nearly one third of cowboys were black, pointing to historical black cowboys like Nat Love (1854-1921) and the mixed-raced outlaw Crawford ‘Cherokee Bill’ Goldsby (1876-1896). The scene then transitions to Jesse fighting in the Spanish-American War (1898) with the 10th Calvary Regiment, known for being a black regiment, furthering the pseudo-historic narrative. This relation to historic figures attempts to associate the fictional narrative with black history and society. With this, the film comments on the historic racism of the American army and,

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75 Ibid.
76 [Anon.], ‘Mario Van Peebles Heads All-Star Cast in Posse, a Film about Black Cowboys’, Jet, 31 May 1993, pp. 56-59 (p. 58).
77 Barbora Lee Bloom, Nat Love (New York: Infobase, 2010).
later, the police force. In the army Jesse is under the command of the corrupt Colonel Graham (Billy Zane) who devises a scheme to steal Spanish Gold and frame Jesse and his ‘posse’. Equally corrupt are the law enforcement in Freemansville, where Sheriff Bates (Richard Jordan) and Deputy Tom (Richard Edson) are Klansmen. Like Malcolm X, the historical setting suggests the longevity of corruption within the American institution; this is also emphasised in Posse with the police beating of Little J (Stephen Baldwin), which evokes the footage of the Rodney King beating (if reversing races).79

Sheriff Bates, the leader of the Klan, is depicted as a ‘brute’ racist figure. He is seen hanging a Native American woman for accidently trespassing, as well as murdering King David for educating the black community. Bates’ evil is stylised through cinematography, Dutch tilts are employed for most shots of Bates, acting as an extended metaphor for his unhinged and evil characteristics. In flashbacks of the murder of King David, Bates’ smile is distorted uncannily because of the waving of fiery torches and the tilt of the camera. He is depicted as an overt evil akin to the ‘Other’ of Klansmen in the white melodrama. As such, racism is presented with extremity, not as an issue of regular citizens as depicted in Rosewood. Bates is more often presented in his police uniform than in Klan robes, again this highlights the corruption of the police force, presenting a similar critique to Malcolm X in exploring the racism found within the American institution. The depiction of Klansmen in 1898 is not accurate as they had disbanded in the mid-1870s; here, the Klan’s iconography is being utilised as a recognisable shorthand for extremism, to highlight the racism found within the American police force.

The Klan are shown to be an intimidating force in Freemansville. A distraught resident, Alex (Bob Minor) explains that he and his wife fled Alabama because of the Klan and are now forced to leave Freemansville after Klan threats; they move to Africa believing there ‘ain’t no place for us in this here country.’ Similarly, Jesse’s love interest, Lana (Salli Richardson), explains how the Klan’s intimidation has increased, and the Grandfather Clause had been put into effect, meaning you cannot vote if your Grandfather was a slave, hindering the black community. As with Rosewood and Malcolm X, there is a greater focus on black characters and black suffering. However, the black narrative film also highlights that the black community is not passive, as is

shown through Malcolm X and Sylvester, and with fictional heroes that act as a counter to the white messiah in Mann and Jesse. Like Malcolm X, Jesse is troubled by flashbacks of the murder of his father at the hands of the Klan; his aim is to remedy this by avenging his father. As with Malcolm, Jesse provides his own redemption through action.

The strength of Jesse and the black community is established against the Klan. Jesse’s mentor, Papa Joe (Melvin Van Peebles) uses Klan cut-outs as target practice, presenting an irreverent attitude to the danger of the group. Jesse defeats the Klansmen and the corrupt military in a town-wide shootout involving the black townspeople. Like the white melodrama, Posse presents a simplified melodramatic conflict as its driving narrative. Before this shootout, Jesse frees his men from a prison by dressing as a Klansman, fooling Deputy Tom. As with films of the 1970s such as Blazing Saddles and Brotherhood of Death, black characters utilise Klan robes against the group, metaphorically symbolising their power over the Klan. Despite his violence Jesse is viewed as a ‘good’ figure as he is striving for justice; this is comparable to 1970s Blaxploitation films which often focused on vigilante violence. Films like Coffy (1973), for instance, act as ‘wish fulfilment, a kind of fantasy’ offering justice which was ‘rarely given’ to the black community in courts.80 In Posse, the Klan act as part of this ‘fantasy’, erroneously presented in the Old West to present a clear villain and a personification of America’s racism; Jesse’s violence towards the Klan offers a cathartic vision of black strength and of the Klan’s downfall.81 It is important to consider the context of Posse’s release, coming shortly after the Rodney King beating and Los Angeles Riots. The justice obtained through Jesse contrasts to that found in reality; though transposed to a melodramatic western narrative, Posse reflects the concerns of contemporary society and the feeling of injustice in the 1990s.82 The Old West setting parallels that of Los Angeles, whilst the beating of posse members by Bates and his men mirrors the Rodney King beating, emphasising the longevity and

80 Mikel J. Koven, Blaxploitation Film (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), p. 50.
81 Van Peebles’ New Jack City also explores vigilante justice in response to court corruption (though this injustice is found between black characters).
82 Broadly similar themes of cathartic justice are found also in the bizarre horror anthology film Tales from the Hood (1995); the segment ‘KKK Comeuppance’ sees politician and ex-Klansmen Duke Metger (Corbin Bernsen), a play on David Duke and Tom Metzger, murdered by cursed dolls (spawning from a painting).
83 Neil Campbell, The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 155.
continuation of institutionalised racism in America.\textsuperscript{83} These concerns are transferred to a fanciful narrative offering a form of wish fulfilment through the melodramatic violence between Jesse and the Klan.

The Klan are utilised in the white melodrama and the black narrative to address the divisive events of the 1980s and 1990s. \textit{Mississippi Burning} explored the Civil Rights Movement some two decades later and presents racism as resolved; contrastingly, these black narratives link historical tragedies with events occurring in the 1990s, particularly the King beating. They highlight the continued discrimination felt in the contemporary black community. In the white melodrama the Klan are used to minimise issues of racism, presenting the Klan as ‘Others’ and solely responsible for racism. In contrast, the Klan are not the cause of racism in the black narrative film, even in \textit{Posse} where the chief antagonist is a Klansman, their image is used in relation to the police force. These black narrative films present the Klan as endemic of America’s history of racism and depict equally problematic imagery of long-lasting institutional racism. Here the Klan are used to highlight the longevity of American racism, they are part of a wider and continuous issue. The contrast in the representation of the Klan is further highlighted through the depiction of justice in the white melodrama and the black narrative film.

\subsection*{2.5 Justice and the Klan}

The white melodramas and the black narrative films discussed in this chapter differ significantly in the punishment of the Klan. The white melodrama shows racism as resolved through legal action, \textit{Posse} by contrast offers cathartic violence whilst, in \textit{Malcolm X} the Klan go unpunished. This variation demonstrates how the Klan image has been utilised to present America as both just and unjust.

In \textit{A Time to Kill} the arrest of the Klansmen purges racism from society and the police force, this resolution embodies Hollywood’s ‘happy ending’. The Klan are used to develop the tension of the film, but little focus is given to their downfall or of legal action against the Klan. Unlike in \textit{Mississippi Burning}, where legal action and the arrest of the Klan is the focus of the film, in \textit{A Time to Kill} the arrest of the Klansmen is tangential to the main narrative. The tone of \textit{A Time to Kill} is more light-hearted than \textit{Mississippi Burning}. This is evidenced by the camp Klan brawl, and the jovial relationships between Jake and his legal team, including a suggested romance with

\textsuperscript{83} Travers.
Roark. The narrative style and ‘happy ending’ of *A Time to Kill* is not dissimilar to that of the ‘feel-good film’. The popularity of the ‘feel-good film’ stemmed from the 1970s when such narratives responded to social anxieties. Similarly, *A Time to Kill* acts as a response to the social issues and racial division of the 1980s and 1990s, pacifying these anxieties by presenting racism as resolved by a fair justice system that is founded on the goodness of whiteness (found in Jake). The Klansmen’s arrest heightens the joy of the film’s climax which also sees Carl Lee released, there is a melodramatic simplicity in the contrasting fates as good triumphs and evil is punished. *A Time to Kill* and other white melodramas such as *Sommersby* are aligned with further films from the 1990s, from *Forrest Gump* to *Amistad*, which present a vision of American history in keeping with the supposed multiculturalism promoted by contemporary society and the Clinton administration, accumulating in the One America Initiative. The ‘contemporary multicultural dreams’ presented by Hollywood warp American history and simplify the long-lasting complexities of racism; however, other directors, such as Spike Lee, refuse to abridge American history or offer soothing narratives, as demonstrated through films like *Malcolm X* and his documentary *4 Little Girls* (1997). Where Hollywood offers a soothing depiction of history and contemporary society, others, like Lee, challenge the mainstream and depict a racially unjust America – these more challenging perspectives are also found in the mainstream films of recent years, as is discussed in Chapter Five.

In *Mississippi Burning* the Klan’s punishment is presented with more depth than is found in *A Time to Kill*, though this further glorifies the work of the protagonists. A montage of Klansmen being arrested is intercut with photo-stills and captions that explain the sentence each man received. These sentences range from three to six years imprisonment. These lenient punishments occur as the men were tried for civil rights abuses and not for murder, as Anderson explains in the film, murder is a state charge and would not succeed in Mississippi. Despite this leniency, the Klansmen’s

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84 Noel Brown, ‘The Feel-Good Film: A Case Study in Contemporary Genre Classification’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 32.3 (2015), 269-86 (p. 282).
87 This was true for the case until the 2005 murder trial of Edgar Ray Killen: Shaila Dewan, ‘Rights Workers Honored as Trial in Their Killings Proceeds’, *New York Times*, 20 June 2005, p. 11.
punishment is presented as a significant victory for the FBI agents. The score, a driving beat that is repeated throughout the film to heighten drama, is met with a slow harmony that adds gravitas and a sense of finality to the scene. This swelling score and slow-moving montage strongly imply that justice has been served and offers a satisfying closure to the film.

Because of the weak punishments, and the release of Sheriff Stuckey, Mohr argues that the Klan are presented as ‘unbreakable’; I suggest that the converse is true. Mohr suggests that the arrested Klansmen will be replaced by other Klan ‘marionettes’; yet, I argue that with the arrest of Townley (sentenced to ten years), Klan strength is broken. This is strongly implied through the montage of arrests and the emerging unity in the community, as the agents watch the inter-racial congregation at the film’s close. Though Stuckey is released the Klan are defeated and racism no-longer divides society. Mayor Tilman commits suicide, though he was not a Klansman; however, Ward explains that anyone who is complicit with racism is ‘guilty’ (adding that ‘maybe we all are’). Whilst this scene hints at a wider issue of racism in American society, it feels disingenuous with the message of the film where a select few (the Klan) can be blamed for racism and are punished by a fair justice system. The film resolves with racism purged from society, rather than implying that ‘we all’ are complicit and guilty of racism, the film isolates racism to select individuals. The limited punishments that the Klan face are presented conversely as a victorious conclusion. The injustice of the light sentencing is ignored, and questions of institutionalised racism are removed; much like The FBI Story, Mississippi Burning presents the FBI as heroes, defending American justice and values and demonstrating the goodness of whiteness.

Mississippi Burning, A Time to Kill, and Ghosts of Mississippi each show inter-racial celebrations as Klansmen are arrested. This unity presents a white fantasy, offering a soothing narrative that alleviates white guilt as racism is defeated and is replaced with racial harmony. Manthia Diawara argues that the black figure acts as a device for white entertainment, pointing to the domestication of blackness in films like Trading Places and Beverley Hills Cop, or through the demonisation of the black male figure that re-establishes hegemony, giving the examples of A Soldier’s Story and The

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88 Mohr, p. 85.
89 Ibid.
In the white melodrama the black community is presented as pawns in a conflict between the Klan and the white protagonists, they are used to further the drama (and thus the entertainment) of the white conflict. Yet, *Mississippi Burning*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, and *A Time to Kill* end with a unity between the white and black communities, this superficial depiction of racial relations presents an unreal but pacifying climax. Bogle explains that in *Mississippi Burning* the black community is presented as timid, of the local black community only the child Aaron is assertive, and he is beaten as a ‘sacrificial lamb’ to ‘shock’ the viewer. Here, the black community is shown to need the white community; the justice faced by the Klan is brought by the work of the white messiah on their behalf. In defeating the evil of the Klan, the interracial compassion of whiteness is emphasised. In this way, racism is only shown through white perspectives demonstrating Hollywood’s ‘cynicism’ of ‘black subjects’.

In contrast to this, Diawara argues that independent black films present the ‘cinema of the real’, offering a more rounded and truthful depiction of the black community. The black narrative films discussed in this chapter offer a more detailed depiction of racism and the response of the black community; this is not necessarily depicted through realism, as is emphasised through the melodrama of *Rosewood* and *Posse*, but these films do highlight the reality of racial oppression. The black narrative does not try and alleviate issues of racism, as is found in the white melodrama, this is emphasised by the injustice presented in the narratives.

In *Rosewood*, there is little to no ramification for the violence of the townspeople. Though Mann fights Klansmen and kills some in the mob to save black children, he is still forced to flee, unlike in *Posse*, Mann’s resistance does not defeat the Klan or the mob. Only two figures are ‘punished’ for their crimes; Duke (Bruce McGill) the most bloodthirsty and ‘evil’ member of the mob is abandoned by his son, Emmett (Tristan Hook). Emmett is horrified by his father’s actions and tells him that he ‘is no man’. This shows racism is judged and hints at the possible future progress for race relations in America; though this does not equate to the punishment and resolution found in the white melodrama. Secondly, Fanny Taylor is beaten by her husband for her false

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91 Bogle, p. 303.
92 Ibid.
93 Diawara, ‘Black Spectatorship’, p. 775.
accusations; with this punishment Fanny accrues the responsibility for the mob’s violence and the aggressors remain unpunished. The mob isolate blame to Fanny as the white melodrama isolates racism to the Klan, yet the film emphasises that normal individuals are accountable for the violence; Fanny, Duke, or the Klan are not solely responsible, and no one is justly punished.

*Posse* homages the Blaxploitation film with a heroic black figure battling against corrupted white institutions. Whilst *Posse* provides a black hero figure, the film is framed in remembering the forgotten contribution of the black community to the Old West. A closing caption highlights the continued discrepancy between white and black land ownership in America, though this message conflicts with the fantastical tone of the film. Nonetheless, unlike the white melodrama, *Posse* reflects the inequality of the 1980s and 1990s. At the close of the three black narrative films the Klan are noticeably absent, rather than focusing on the white racist each film focuses on contemporary black America. In the white melodrama contemporary America is established in contrast to the dated Klan; through the Klan it is implied that racism is dated and not a continuing issue. Contrastingly, in the black narrative there is no divide between historic and contemporary society, rather the inequality of the present is shown to be a continuation of historic injustice. In *Malcolm X* and *Rosewood* the Klan are depicted as one part of America’s complex history of racism, they are not punished or purged from society; as Malcolm’s speech explains, racism evolves and continues. In *Posse* the Klan are defeated but the narrative is fanciful, and the closing caption reflects the inequality of contemporary American society.

One exception to the decisive justice of the white melodrama is found in *The Chamber*. The film follows Adam Hall (Chris O’Donnell), a young lawyer who is defending his estranged grandfather Sam Cayhall, from the death penalty. Sam is due to be executed within 28 days for his involvement in a bombing he undertook as a Klansman 30 years prior, killing two young Jewish boys. Unlike other white melodramas Adam is not defending a minority group, instead he defends (and conflicts

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95 Roger Ebert, ‘*Posse*’, review, RogerEbert.com <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/posse-1993> [accessed 11 October 2016]
96 A similar use of the Klan is found in the low budget film *Once Upon a Time... When We were Colored* (1996) where the group highlight the racism of the 1950s but are shown only as a part of America’s wider history with racism.
with) Sam. Again, removed from the Klan’s iconography Sam has the scope for characterisation, starting the film as mean-spirited but slowly developing and repenting for his crimes. Adam reveals that Sam was coerced into committing the bombings, despite this and Adam’s best efforts Sam is still executed at the end of the film. Because of Sam’s transformation his death does not appear as justice; this complexity has been praised for avoiding ‘the facile, fake endings of other Grisham movies’, as found with *A Time to Kill.* The ending complicates the boundary between justice and redemption. Sam’s death is graphically depicted, with him frothing at the mouth from the gas; Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan argues that this graphic imagery is to show that racism can ‘no longer hide behind a mask’ and compares the death to the ‘revolting’ lynchings of racists. Sam is punished for his racism, but the film challenges the morality of retribution as Sam’s death is viewed as equally disturbing. Unlike the justice found in *Mississippi Burning,* *Ghosts of Mississippi,* and *A Time to Kill,* Sam’s death shows that racism can indeed be punished, but the redemption of America’s history is not a simplified process, nor easily resolved.

Unlike other depictions of Klansmen, Sam is presented as misguided, and still redeemable. He is not presented as a ‘wholly different breed of people’, as other Klansmen are; as such *The Chamber* goes some way to exploring the causes behind racism. The film emphasises the indoctrination of people into the Klan, noting how Sam had seen three lynchings by the age of ten. Equally, the film presents Klansmen, such as Sam, as uneducated and poverty stricken who were coerced into committing violence. They are presented as the pawns of higher organisations such as the educated White Citizen’s Councils. Racism is not isolated to the ‘bad’ individual of Sam, he is one of many that infiltrate American society; yet other orchestraters of violence are not punished as he is. Indeed, Sam’s death sentence is carried out largely to aid the political ambitions of Governor David McAllister (David Marshall Grant). Though Sam is guilty, his death feels unjust, arguably he is ‘more a victim than culprit.’ Unlike other white melodramas the responsibility of racism cannot be isolated to Klansmen; the film demonstrates that racism is spread throughout society. Figures like Governor

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98 Loewen, p. 83.
99 There was indeed, at least, collusion between the Klan and White Citizen’s Councils: Quarles, p. 89.
100 Mohr, p. 81.
McAllister isolate blame to Sam to absolve their own responsibility; as such, Sam’s death can be viewed as sacrificial – acting as a figurehead to isolate racism and pardon American society. Crowds gather to celebrate Sam’s death; this bloodlust is disturbing having witnessed his reformation. There is a naïve hope amongst the crowd that Sam’s death symbolises the end of American racism. Again, this highlights how issues of racism cannot be simplified or easily removed from American society as found in other white melodramas. This is furthered in a speech by Rollie Wedge (Raymond J. Barry), the perpetrator who manipulated Sam into the bombing. As Adam seeks an admission of guilt from Wedge, he explains:

Delusion, Mr. Hall, you’re looking for a clean ‘yes’ so that you can identify, quantify, organise a concept of evil. If I did it then I am the evil, and I can be culled from the flock, removed, separated, destroyed. Evil can be destroyed and all you good people can feel safe in the cocoon of your denial.

This statement is a direct challenge to the narratives of other white melodramas where Klansmen are presented as evil ‘Others’ that are ‘removed’ from society and ‘destroyed’. Sam is sacrificed to give the crowds that cheer Governor McAllister comfort in the notion that evil and racism is purged from society, but the film presents this absolution as a fallacy. Despite this, The Chamber continues to present the virtue of whiteness in Adam; Philip Kemp argues that the film does not present ‘moral complexity’ as characters are underdeveloped, particularly Adam who shows ‘no internal conflict’. Therefore, the evil of racism, and its infiltration into society, remains somewhat off-set by the reassurance of the ‘good’ white.

It is noticeable that of the films discussed in this chapter, The Chamber was one of the least successful in the box office. Several factors led to the box office failure of The Chamber; for example, it was criticised for its relatively weak plot, and compared, unfavourably, to A Time to Kill. Yet, the black narrative films also did poorly in the box office even though Malcolm X and Rosewood had fairly positive critical receptions

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101 Philip Kemp, ‘The Chamber’, Sight & Sound, 1 July 1997, pp. 7-8 (p. 8).
102 See footnote 62.
and had reasonable star-power, with Denzel Washington and Spike Lee in *Malcolm X* and Jon Voight, Ving Rhames, and Don Cheadle in *Rosewood* with John Singleton directing. The success of the ‘feel good’ film *A Time to Kill* in comparison to more challenging narratives is suggestive of the popularity of the melodramatic narrative form, where the defeat of evil offers a pacifying and satisfying resolve.

### 2.6 Conclusion

In *The Chamber* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the Klansmen of Sam and Grady are distanced from the Klan’s iconography. These two characters have complex personalities, Sam repents for his previous crimes, whilst Grady is shown to be heroic at times and generally a ‘good’ white. The violence of the Klan is not condoned but Sam and Grady are not represented as overt evils as is found with other depictions of Klansmen in the white melodrama. The Klan’s iconography is used as a recognisable symbol of evil; indeed, Frank in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and Orin in *Sommersby* are defined through their membership to the Klan – their villainous nature is incarnated in their robes. Neither Frank nor Orin are motivated by racism, yet they are marked as ‘Other’ through Klan robes; in this way, the Klan’s iconography in the 1990s begins to be separated from themes of race and racism and are utilised as a shorthand to emphasise villainy. Where Sam and Grady have complex characteristics, Frank and Orin are simplified, in part, through their association with Klan iconography.

This simplified depiction of the Klan is less apparent in *Mississippi Burning*, where the Klan’s historic significance and their relation to society is, at least partly, recognised. The film shows the longevity of the Klan, depicting footage of the group from the 1920s, showing large crowds looking to join the organisation. Similarly, Townley imparts his racist rhetoric to interested crowds. Through these scenes, *Mississippi Burning* hints at the Klan’s infiltration into ‘normal’ society. Furthermore, the film evokes pathos through provocative imagery such as churches burning and children being beaten, this makes the narrative, at times, uncomfortable to watch. Yet, this imagery and critique of racism is framed through white conflict, focusing on white FBI heroes and Klansmen, who for the most part are depicted as ‘rednecks’. *Mississippi Burning* frames a challenging narrative through a melodramatic cop-drama, presenting the Klan as figures used for entertainment. The film begins a trend of depicting the Klan in melodramatic conflicts which has increasingly led to the simplifying of their cinematic representation. *Mississippi Burning* does not realise the complex image of the
Klan it hints at. However, comparing the film to the later *A Time to Kill*, it is clear that the Klan image has been significantly manipulated and lessened by the white melodramas that followed *Mississippi Burning*. In *A Time to Kill*, the Klan are utilised to heighten the tension of Carl Lee’s court case, yet the real threat of the film comes from the unrobed Freddie. The Klan are depicted as an embodiment of evil, as Jake punches a Klansman to save Sheriff Wells, his heroic nature is emphasised, but the Klan have little effect on the overall narrative of the film. In *A Time to Kill* the Klan further the entertainment and conflict of the narrative, as well as heighten the victim-virtue of Jake, but there is little critique of racism.

In *Ghosts of Mississippi* white lawyer Bobby DeLaughter is persecuted for taking the case against Klansman Byron De La Beckwith. DeLaughter’s car is vandalised, he receives bomb threats, his children are bullied, and his wife leaves him. Mississippi is presented as fearful of bringing back historical conflict, though the extent to which DeLaughter is persecuted suggests the continued presence of racism in the state. Yet, as De La Beckwith is imprisoned, an inter-racial crowd celebrates; such unity is not found throughout the film. This harmonious climax isolates the issue of racism to the Klan, as De La Beckwith is sentenced the racial division of society is also removed. The white melodrama transposes issues of racism to a narrative of whiteness, showing the struggle of the white protagonist to provide social unity by bringing the evil ‘Other’ to justice. This is emphasised by a problematic line in which Myrile Evers (Whoopi Goldberg) claims DeLaughter reminds her of Medgar, relating the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement to the white messiah. It is through the compassionate white protagonist that racial harmony is found, ignoring the division of the 1980s and 1990s.

As with *Ghosts of Mississippi, Mississippi Burning* and *A Time to Kill* also end with inter-racial unity; this unity is also found in the communities of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Sommersby*. Depictions of inter-racial friendship were popular in films of the 1980s and 1990s, from buddy-cop narratives to films such as *Glory* (1989) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) – in which it is implied that the Klan have bombed a synagogue. In the white melodrama, through the work of the ‘good’ white protagonist, whiteness is shown to have compassion for other races. Whiteness is not shown to be racist, rather the isolated ‘Other’ is responsible for racism; this ignores questions of social and institutional racism. This is particularly noticeable in *Mississippi Burning, A Time to Kill*, and *Ghosts of Mississippi*, which each allude to injustice found in American courts, before presenting them as fixed through the actions of the protagonists.
Tellingly, the injustice of the short sentencing of Klansmen in *Mississippi Burning* is presented as a positive resolution, supposedly purging racism from society. *The Chamber* does not mimic this absolving climax, though Rollie Wedge is arrested, the film depicts racism as widespread and a problem without a clear resolve.

In *Malcolm X*, *Rosewood*, and *Posse*, the Klan are not depicted as the personification of American racism, instead they are presented as one factor in a complex racial history. These films highlight the longevity of American racism, linking historic issues with current events, particularly the King beating. Unlike the white melodrama, the Klan do not embody the evil white ‘Other’ but are part of wider American society. *Malcolm X* and *Rosewood* both limit the screen-time given to the Klan, instead the focus of *Rosewood* is on the violence of the mob, and the focus of *Malcolm X* is on black activism (this is similar to mainstream ‘black narratives’ of the 2010s, as discussed further in Chapter Five). *Posse*, by contrast presents the Klan with more screen-time, like *Mississippi Burning* the main focus of the narrative is in the conflict between the protagonist and the Klan; though the plots and genres of the films are different, they share this melodramatic conflict of good and evil. In *Posse* the Klan are defeated through vigilante violence, again this is similar to the Blaxploitation narrative which offers a fanciful release against the inequality and injustice found in reality. Each of the black narrative films discussed in this chapter present racism as ongoing and question the justice of 1990s society. This is in contrast to the harmony of the inter-racial communities depicted in the white melodrama, which establish racism as stemming from a dated and irrelevant ‘Other’ and shows America’s racial divide as fixed.

In the late-1980s and 1990s the Klan had little relevance to American society. They are utilised by Hollywood to imply that racism is dated and isolated to the rural south, the white melodrama suggests that racism is not a concern for present society. Despite being set in the 1990s *The Chamber* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* focus on historic violence as their focal point, and *A Time to Kill* depicts the town as though from the 1960s through dated iconography, as shall be discussed further. Though the Klan are presented as historic and irrelevant to modern society, the 1990s saw the threat of right-wing extremism in other forms, most obviously evidenced in the Oklahoma City Bombing. In the following chapter, I compare the dated depiction of the Klan to images of ‘modern’ white supremacy, highlighting the melodramatic use of the Klan and the cinematic attenuation of their once threatening image.

In the films of the late-1980s and 1990s the Klan were predominantly depicted as rural southern ‘rednecks’. Klansmen served to minimise issues of racism by presenting racists as ‘brute’ figures who are ‘Other’ from the protagonist and viewer. Equally, by isolating racism to the Klan, right-wing extremism is presented as past; the white robes of the group have little relevance to contemporary society. The historic image of the Klan is used to dissociate racism from the viewer. In reality, American society in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed racial division and violent acts of right-wing extremism. In the last chapter I referred to the Klan as an isolated force, in this chapter I assess this marginalisation comparing the depiction of the Klan to that of other ‘modern’ white supremacist groups. This comparison emphasises the utilisation of the Klan in the white melodrama as a figure to pacify anxieties of contemporary racism.

To maintain my research focus on the representation of the Klan, for this chapter I analyse films that depict both the Klan and other white supremacist groups, though I relate these films to other depictions of white supremacy. Three mainstream American films between 1988 and 2016 depict both the Klan and ‘modern’ white supremacist groups, namely Betrayed (1988), American History X (1998), and Imperium (2016). Each of these films present the Klan as a waning, even comical, group in contrast to modern organisations – although, both Betrayed and Imperium recognise the significance of the Klan to America’s history of extremism. In this Chapter, I focus on Betrayed and American History X, advancing the discussion of the previous chapter on American film in the late-1980s and 1990s by considering an alternative depiction of racism and the Klan. Imperium will be discussed in Chapter Five in relation to other contemporary depictions of the Klan.

Far-right and anti-government militant movements grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s leading to noticeable incidents, most prominently the events of Ruby Ridge, Idaho (1992), where the FBI held siege to the Weaver family, killing two, and the Waco siege (1993), Texas, which involved a stand-off between the FBI and Branch Davidians (a split group from the Seventh-day Adventists) which lasted 51 days and
resulted in the death of over 80 people.\(^1\) These incidents left many in right-wing groups even more distrustful of the Government, and have been noted as a motivation for Timothy McVeigh to carry out the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995 – killing at least 168 (the worse recorded terrorist attack in America until the September 11\(^{th}\) attacks).\(^2\)\(^\)\(^\)\(^\)\(^\)\(^\)

This ‘home-grown’ terrorism caused fear and paranoia among the American public which is presented in the films of the period. *Betrayed*, for instance, offers a fictional depiction of The Order (1983-1984), Robert Jay Mathews’ short-lived militia-group, which aimed to create a new white-only state. The Order raised funds through a series of heists and bank robberies and were responsible for the murder of outspoken Jewish radio host, Alan Berg, as is portrayed in *Betrayed* as well as *Talk Radio* (1988).\(^3\) Other films highlight the paranoia of the time, such as *Arlington Road* (1999), wherein a seemingly typical middle-class family are discovered to be anti-government extremists who bomb the FBI headquarters. Marketing taglines for the film, such as ‘Your Paranoia is Real’ and ‘How Well do You Know Your Neighbour?’, played on the fear of hidden extremism.\(^4\) This modern threat is depicted as stemming from new racist groups, whereas the Klan are associated with the past. Looking at the Klan’s depiction in an era of right-wing extremism emphasises the detachment between their pacifying cinematic representation and the issues faced by American society in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the late-1970s and 1980s the Klan moved into its ‘fifth era’, where Klan dens merged with other white supremacist groups including neo-Nazis.\(^5\) In the white melodrama the changing nature of the contemporary Klan is ignored, except for brief allusions to neo-Nazis in *The Chamber* and *Ghosts of Mississippi*. Rather than a modern militarised force Hollywood depicts the Klan as a dated, traditionally robed group, adding to their use as the melodramatic white ‘Other’. Conversely, the white supremacists of *Betrayed* and *American History X* are depicted as new, modern threats to contemporary society, this is an oversimplification. *American History X*, for instance,

\(^1\) Ashley Dunn, ‘Surrender Ends Mountain Siege’, *Los Angeles Times*, 1 September 1992, p. 3.
\(^5\) Ridgeway, p. 97.
depicts Nazism, yet American Nazism is not a new phenomenon; indeed, the American Nazi Party has existed since the 1950s. Although never truly finding strength in America, Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell has ‘gained in stature in the annals of the American right.’ Nazism has influenced the extreme-right for a significant period, though cinematically they are depicted as a new threat responsible for right-wing terror in the 1980s and 1990s. Because of their depiction in film as contemporary threats, I refer to the groups depicted in Betrayed and American History X as ‘modern’ white supremacists, who contrast to the dated Klan.

Fictional depictions of racism are often isolated to the lower-classes; as discussed, Newitz argues that such depictions show the lower-classes as ‘marked’ and as social ‘Others’ separated from normal society, as is noticeable, for instance, with the ‘hillbilly’ or ‘redneck’ figure. Newitz argues that this demonising of the lower-classes replaces racism, acting to evoke a sense of white superiority without the discomfort of directing this ‘aggression’ to non-whites. This argument differs slightly from other literature on the divided white-self, with scholars, such as Hughey, arguing that bad whites, often the lower-classes, are depicted as the ‘root’ of racism to separate the viewer and society from blame. In either regard, the lower-class white is demonised as different from normal Americans. This ‘Othering’ of lower-class whites is an issue found beyond cinema; Jennifer Pierce notes that in historical and social science studies of racism the lower-classes are often ‘vilified, [but] white elites [are] rarely studied’. The Klan drew membership across class lines, but this is rarely shown in cinema, instead Klansmen are depicted as lower-class ‘rednecks’ who are distanced from ‘normal’ society; this is not found in the depiction of ‘modern’ white supremacists in Betrayed and American History X.

Melissa Ooten argues that in the 1960s Hollywood claimed that films focusing on issues of racism would be unpalatable for the southern market; in blaming the south Hollywood hid the widespread racism found throughout the nation and the film industry. Of the six white melodramas discussed in Chapter Two, four are set in Mississippi (Mississippi Burning, A Time to Kill, Ghosts of Mississippi, and The

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6 Ibid., p. 86.
7 Newitz, p. 138.
8 Ibid., p. 152.
10 Pierce, p. 57.
11 Ooten, p. 82.
Chamber), only Sommersby (Tennessee) and Fried Green Tomatoes (Alabama) are set elsewhere (though they are still in the south or deep south), this isolates racism from a national to a regional level. Hollywood in the late 1980s and 1990s isolates the blame for racism to the south, as it did in the 1960s. The black narrative films discussed in the last chapter, however, present racism as nationwide; Posse is set in a fictional Old West, Malcolm X sees the Klan in Nebraska and Michigan, and Rosewood is set in Florida, a southern state but one less associated with the so-called deep south. 12 Where the white melodrama isolates racism, the black narrative film attempts to present the widespread prevalence of racism. Similarly, films depicting ‘modern’ white supremacists also present racism as a nationwide issue with Betrayed set in Chicago and the Mid-West, American History X in California, and Imperium in Washington D. C.; other films depicting white supremacy discussed in this chapter continue this trend with Arlington Road also being set in Washington D. C. and The Believer (2001) in New York. As the black narrative film expresses how racism is still a prevalent issue in America, these films explore the widespread threat of right-wing extremism and terrorism in the wake of several tragedies. In the first section of this Chapter I consider the southern isolation of the Klan and how this affects their representation in contemporary cinema.

3.1 The South and Marginalisation

Hollywood’s depiction of the south has been historically complex and mixed, though a common theme in film is to present the south as ‘exotic’ and engaged in American ‘myth making’. 13 Karen L. Cox explains that the south has often offered an image of nostalgia, and also one of luxury where the whites were elite, slaves were happy, housing was grand, and the beauty and simplicity of both nature and character was attractive to the viewer. 14 Cox gives the example of Gone with the Wind (1939) where luxuries were exaggerated beyond that described in the book. 15 This romanticised luxury and the beauty of southern nature has developed the exotic representation of the region, distancing the south from the rest of America. This

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Cox, p. 83
14 Cox, pp. 85-96.
15 Ibid.
presentation of the south as a land of isolated ruralism has continued even though the southern metropolitan area has increased greatly through the 1980s; now three in four southerners live in urban areas.\textsuperscript{16}

Because the rural and the south are cinematically affiliated, the south is depicted as separated and culturally different from the rest of America. This isolation has led to romanticism but has also led to the popularity of the southern horror film, where the local population are demonised as a monstrous southern ‘Other’, as found with the deranged-rapist hillbillies of \textit{Deliverance} (1972) or the cannibalistic family of \textit{The Texas Chain Saw Massacre} (1974). These figures are separated from normal society and conflict with white normality. This monstrous southern ‘Other’ is also found in the Klan who are depicted as ‘brute’ figures, with values that conflict with the social norm. Writing from a purposefully provocative standpoint, Jim Goad criticises the representation of southerners in Hollywood, he asserts that the southerner is a ‘convenient way for America to demonise itself, or, rather, to exorcise the demon and place it somewhere outside of itself.’\textsuperscript{17} As a purposefully provocative writer Goad’s writing should be taken with caution, yet the displacement of guilt he describes is found in the white melodrama. Klan dens still have a nationwide spread, yet Hollywood presents them erroneously as a solely southern organisation.\textsuperscript{18} As the Klan are used as a personification of racism in the white melodrama, their depiction as a southern (normally Mississippian) fault is a clear example of Hollywood ‘exorcising’ the nationwide blame for racism. This marginalises racism to one location and avoids deeper explorations of wider American society.\textsuperscript{19}

In Hollywood’s films, Mississippi is presented as an isolated location and as ‘Other’. James Frazier explores the depiction of Mississippi in the remake of \textit{Straw Dogs} (2011), transposed from the 1971 original film’s setting of rural England. Frazier argues that the state has become a ‘historical signifier’ of racism and that to Hollywood, Mississippi has become a ‘metaphor for violent racial bigotry and hostility to

\textsuperscript{17} Jim Goad, \textit{The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies Hicks and White Trash Became America’s Scapegoats} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 100.
\textsuperscript{18} [Anon.], \textit{Hate Map}, database, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map> [accessed 29 November 2016]
\textsuperscript{19} Hughey, \textit{The White Savior Film}, pp. 166-67.
outsiders.’ Frazier also quotes Kathryn McKee (professor of Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi) who explains ‘Mississippi has functioned in the American imagination as a kind of holding bin for negative things about the nation.’ This is evidenced in the white melodrama which mostly isolates racism to Mississippi and is also noticeable in other films of this research. For instance, in Django Unchained Shultz (Christoph Waltz) warns Django (Jamie Foxx) of the dangers of the state and convinces him to delay his journey. As they eventually enter the state the caption ‘Mississippi’ rolls across the screen (in the style reminiscent of the opening credits of Gone with the Wind), underneath the text chained slaves march through the mud. This tableau gives the connotation that Mississippi was the nadir of American slavery and, subsequently, racism. Mississippi is the most sparsely populated southern state, as such Hollywood risks isolating only a small market, whilst this demonisation ‘exorcises’ the rest of the country from responsibility for America’s history of racism.

The association the south has to racism and to the rural environment develops the impression of backwardness and age. This is furthered in the cinematography of Mississippi Burning, A Time to Kill, Sommersby, and later, O Brother, Where Art Thou?, which offer orange and brown palates and hues creating the impression of age, as well as evoking the heat and wilderness of the rural south. Dirt roads, aged architecture, and the encroachment of nature also imply an environment not in keeping with contemporary society; this can be found, for example, with the dilapidated buildings of Mississippi Burning, as well as the dirt roads of the town. Similarly, A Time to Kill is set in the 1990s but the iconography depicted is that of the 1950s and 1960s, with aged buildings and a grand courthouse of Georgian architecture that reflects a past era. The sweat-dripped characters of A Time to Kill contrast to the glamour often found in Hollywood blockbusters and implies a dated, less advanced society. The cars featured in the film give another, specific, example of how the south is presented as a dated landscape; Harry Rex Vonner (Oliver Platt) drives a 1966

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21 Ibid.
22 There is some truth to this, the 1860s census shows that 49% percent of families in Mississippi owned slaves (the highest percentage of any state) and slaves made up 55% of Mississippi’s population. However, slaves made up 57% of South Carolina’s population, and Virginia and Georgia had more slaves that Mississippi, with Alabama almost equalling Mississippi’s numbers: [Anon.], Results from the 1860 Census, database, The Civil War Home Page <http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860_census.html> [accessed 13 July 2018]
Mercedes-Benz 250, whilst Roark has a Porsche 356 A Speedster (produced in the late-1950s), these vehicles replicate the Civil Rights era to which the film implicates. Equally, Jake’s legal advisors evoke aged southern stereotypes; Harry Rex, despite his young age, dresses in beige linen suits complete with bow-tie and suspenders, whilst Lucien Wilbanks (Donald Sutherland) acts as the old, ‘washed-up’ drunk archetype. Together Vonner and Wilbanks make Jake’s progressiveness seem historic, as though once again fighting in the Civil Rights Movement. 

A Time to Kill is not a Civil Rights narrative, being set in the contemporary age, but the film’s cinematography does not reflect this. The Klan are situated within this dated setting, as such issues of racism appear as historic with little association to the contemporary audience. Landon Palmer notes that in depicting racism as historic, for example through the portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement, contemporary films do not ‘comment on how such ideas continue to reverberate in contemporary society.’

A Time to Kill presents the fictional town of Canton with dated iconography, furthering the ‘Otherness’ of the south and presenting racism as an historic issue in a setting which is also geographically separate from contemporary America.

Klansmen are depicted as visually distinct, marking them as ‘Others’. In Mississippi Burning the Klansmen are clichéd misfits: Deputy Pell is bug-eyed and wiry; Lester is unintelligent and slow-paced, as is manifested in his mannerism and appearance; whilst Stucky is the archetype southern sheriff with dishevelled dress and chewing tobacco. In A Time to Kill racists Billy Ray Cobb and Pete Willard are presented with unusual mullets, ill-fitting clothes, and with a garish pick-up truck with a Confederate flag; Klansman Winston is also depicted with long unusual hair, whilst Freddie often wears sleeveless ‘trucker’ tops. The counter-cultural dress of the racists marks them distinctly as ‘redneck’, they conflict with the clean-cut, suited agents of Mississippi Burning, and the lawyers of Bobby in Ghosts of Mississippi and Jake in A Time to Kill, who is sometimes shown in casual-wear but is often smartly suited. The unattractive depiction of the ‘rednecks’ also contrasts to the attractive casting of the films’ protagonists in Willem Dafoe, Alec Baldwin, and Matthew McConaughey, this furthers the divide between the southern ‘Other’ and the good white protagonist in the white melodrama.

Such melodramatic division is not found in narratives focusing on ‘modern’ white supremacists.

In *Betrayed* Cathy Weaver (Debra Winger) infiltrates a far-right militant group (based on The Order) using the pseudonym Katie Phillips. She succeeds by marrying the militia’s leader, Gary (Tom Berenger). Unlike the depiction of Klansmen, Gary is represented as a respectable figure, he is a farmer, shown to be hard working and a staple of American life. Gary is patriotic and has served in the military, he also strikes a handsome figure, and is equally presented as a caring father. In many regards he is representative of ideal American masculinity. In contrast to the white melodrama which clearly defines the boundary between good and evil, *Betrayed* exhibits the tropes of the conspiracy thriller where the antagonist often appears as ‘normal’. Gary represents the transition of white supremacist threat, moving from the rural to urban. Whilst he, a farmer, lives in the countryside, the violence brought by his militia effect the urban environments of Chicago. This is presented through the film’s opening shots of Chicago’s office buildings and apartments, scored by radio commentary of Sam Kraus (Richard Libertini), a fictional version of Alan Berg. The following scene sees Kraus murdered with ‘Z. O. G.’ (Zionist Occupation Government) spray painted on his chest. It is unclear that Gary is initially connected with this crime, he is first introduced positively before his extremism is known. Unlike Klansmen he is presented with complexity; he fits within normal society and presents idyllic traits but is latterly viewed as a threat to contemporary society. There is not the divide between the rural and the urban as is found in films depicting the Klan, which isolate the rural south from the nation. Rather, Gary and his militia are a threat to both urban and rural societies.

While Klansmen are presented with melodramatic simplicity, the depiction of Gary presents racism with more intricacy and as part of a seemingly normal society; Vincent Canby notes that the villains of *Betrayed* are not ‘double-named Southern rednecks’ and are instead representative of ‘Americans caught in an economic squeeze’.24 Indeed, Canby goes on to explain how *Betrayed* looks at contemporary social-political problems (such as the farming crisis of the 1980s) offering a more challenging subject than the ‘history’ presented in *Mississippi Burning*.25 Whereas *Mississippi Burning*, and other white melodramas, look to isolate racism to the American past, utilising the dated

25 Ibid.
image of the Klan and the aged south, *Betrayed* explores current society and anxieties. Rather than presenting Gary as ‘Other’ he is depicted as a proud American, emphasising the issue of extremism within American society. This is further highlighted as Gary and his militia are compared to other ‘dated’ groups including the Klan.

Gary takes his family to a paramilitary training camp with other right-wing groups such as Klansmen and Nazis. The Klansmen are initially depicted in full regalia surrounding a campfire. Similarly, Nazis in the film are not represented as contemporary neo-Nazi/Skinhead figures but are dressed in the attire of the Third Reich; this angers Gary who sees the Nazis as un-American. *Betrayed* is one of few films to explore the interconnection between right-wing groups, which emerged in the late-1970s and 1980s. However, there is a clear divide between the traditional groups of the Klan and Nazis, and Gary’s modern organisation. Visually the attire of the Klansmen and Nazis ages the groups, both wear historical regalia; contrastingly, Gary and his militia do not have a uniform, they are clothed as ordinary citizens. Gary’s organisation exist within American society, they are not distinctly marked as Other and do not live in a distant location, as such, are more threatening to contemporary society. Moreover, at the camp the Klan and Nazis are found singing campfire songs and trading World War Two relics, this contrasts to the violence of Gary’s militia. Though Klansmen join in with the military training, it is Gary’s men who are shown to be expert shooters and the only group who are actively planning violence. These differences emphasise the divide between the dated groups and the threat of Gary’s modern organisation that operates within urban society.

In *American History X* the Klan are twice derided as southern ‘redneck’ or ‘hick’ figures, this contrasts with the film’s depiction of threatening and noticeably youthful neo-Nazis. Set in Venice Beach, California, the film follows Derek (Edward Norton) through his reform; he attempts to stop his brother, Danny (Edward Furlong) from following the same path he did into neo-Nazism. The first reference to the Klan is made by Derek’s sister, in a heated argument Davinia (Jennifer Lien) refers to him as ‘Mr Junior KKK’. Derek rebuffs this, laughing at the suggestion, and explaining ‘I am not, as you well know, a member of a low-rent disorganised, bunch of rednecks like the fucking KKK.’ Indeed, Derek is the converse of the Klansmen depicted in the white melodrama; whilst they are considered dated, ineffectual, and socially ‘Other’, Derek is presented as modern, intelligent, and even desirable. This desirability is not least
emphasised through the focus and glorification of Norton’s physique found throughout the film; he is often shirtless in scenes of violence, workouts, and whilst bathing. Norton’s physique was also used in the marketing of American History X. Beyond physicality, Derek is presented as intelligent, having done well at school; he is also a strong leader, though he is a neo-Nazi he is also presented with positive attributes. The humour he finds in the Klan emphasises the divide between the two, Derek is a modern threat to urban society whereas Klansmen are mocked as ‘rednecks’. Again, the Klan’s link to the rural and the south marks them as an isolated and ineffectual force, in contrast to Derek’s Californian organisation.

Unlike Klansmen in the white melodrama who are simplified, Derek is a developed character. Christopher Grau explains that American History X could have depicted ‘dumb’ and ‘evil’ racists which would alienate the viewer from racism, as is found with the white melodrama. Instead, Grau argues that Derek is ‘idealized’, this is to further the audience’s horror, as they are disturbed not just in Derek’s Nazi actions but in ‘ourselves for having found him appealing’. Evidently, Derek’s depiction is more nuanced than that of Klansmen. However, the positive attributes of Derek are offset by his connection with violence and Nazism. Derek is first introduced through Nazism, as his room is decorated with Nazi flags and posters, and his body is adorned with Nazi tattoos including a swastika on his chest. He proceeds to murder two black men who are attempting to steal his car (later the brutality of the event is further revealed).

Though Grau argues that this scene is accepted by the audience as justifiable in that he is defending his property, Derek’s violence and ‘evil’ is evident from the onset – unlike Gary in Betrayed. This opening construction of Derek’s neo-Nazi identity somewhat conforms to Hollywood’s usual narrative structure of depicting clearly defined representations of good and evil, as is also found in the white melodrama. Nonetheless, the positive attributes of Derek found later in the film demonstrates American History X’s ambition to explore racism, presenting racists as flawed but otherwise likeable. Both Gary and Derek present figures who are, to an extent, accessible to the viewer;

27 Grau, p. 58.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 57.
30 Loewen, p. 83.
this depiction of a ‘likeable’ evil is more threatening than that of the isolated southern ‘Other’.

Set in Chicago, the mid-west, and California, *Betrayed* and *American History X* attempt to present American extremism as a modern and widespread issue. This contrasts to the white melodrama which utilises the rural south to further marginalise issues of racism. *Betrayed* and *American History X* emphasise the contemporary threat of the extreme-right, presenting groups that exist within modern urban society rather than as ‘Other’ to it. Contrastingly, white melodramas marginalise the Klan and racism to the dated and isolated rural south; this difference highlights the utilisation of the Klan image in the films of the 1980s and 1990s to detract and minimalise contemporary racial issues. *Betrayed* and *American History X* present the widespread threat of the modern extreme-right and offer narratives that challenge Hollywood’s soothing white melodramas.

### 3.2 Poverty and Class

*Betrayed* and *American History X* associate extremism with poverty. Similarly, in *Mississippi Burning* Anderson details a story of his father, and how poverty led to his racism. The sequence is one of few moments in the white melodrama that explores the origins of racism, though it is undermined through the depiction of the Klan as ‘Other’. In *Mississippi Burning*, and other white melodramas, social critique is underdeveloped, instead southern stereotypes of rednecks or hicks are used to simplify villainhood. John Hartigan Jr notes that news reports, films, and literature often rely on images of the poor to depict racism, explaining that stereotypes of rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash are used to maintain the ‘prevailing image of whiteness as racially unmarked’. 31 In other words, stereotypes of white poverty, of which I would add Klansmen, are utilised as the white ‘Other’ to isolate the blame for racism. Poverty is demonised not only in film but, as Hartigan notes, within American society and culture. As the southern figure is used to ‘exorcise’ racism from broader society, poverty is used to highlight villainhood and divide whiteness between goodness and the ‘Other’.

This vision of poverty stems from American ideals in capitalism, which Newitz explains leads to a sense of social hierarchy where those who are ‘deserving’ achieve,

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31 Hartigan Jr, p. 111.
imply those in poverty do not deserve.\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{A Time to Kill} the Klansmen are presented as poverty stricken ‘rednecks’, in contrast Jake represents the ideals of the American Dream. He fights for equality, but is also seen to work on household improvements to establish a luxurious house for his family – he presents the ideals of American capitalism. The middle-class idealism of Jake further emphasises his virtue over the lower-class Klansmen; social hierarchy is used to exasperate the melodramatic divide of whiteness in the film. However, it is important to note that not all white melodramas depict Klansmen through class divisions; this is most noticeable with \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} and \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi} which both depict Klansmen that are relatively respected or wealthy. In these examples, particularly De La Beckwith in \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}, the Klansmen are presented as more intimidating than the ‘redneck’ or ‘hick’ because of their uncanny acceptance into society, though De La Beckwith’s distinct deep-southern dialect continues to mark him as ‘Other’.

Hollywood uses the redneck as a shorthand for villainy. Paul Loukides argues that in American cinema the stock character of the redneck is ‘defined by their hostility’.\textsuperscript{33} The violence and the accent of the redneck depicts them as ‘primitive’, though Loukides notes how the hostile redneck does not ‘covet the material goods of those whom he hurts’, explaining that there is an essence of class division but ‘no economic motive.’\textsuperscript{34} Here Loukides is discussing films where the redneck figure is not overtly attached to issues of racism, for example \textit{Deliverance} or \textit{Easy Rider} (1969); but Loukides’ argument is also true of the white melodrama. In \textit{Rosewood} the Klan and the mob are jealous of the wealthy black community, contrastingly, in \textit{Mississippi Burning} the black community is poverty stricken. Though Anderson attempts to explain the economic tensions behind racism, noting the jealousy of his father, this motivation is not expressed by Klansmen in the film’s narrative. Rather the Klansmen are depicted as inherently and needlessly violent; their actions are unmotivated. Instead they act as the simplified vision of the evil ‘Other’, as the redneck figure is depicted in previous narratives like \textit{Deliverance}. By contrast, in \textit{Betrayed} and \textit{American History X} poverty clearly effects the antagonists and is shown to be their motivation; however, as

\textsuperscript{32} Newitz, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 92, 94.
discussed, Gary and Derek are not ‘Others’, likewise poverty is not used to divide the viewer from the antagonist.

Farmers in *Betrayed* bemoan financial issues; they are suffering from the 1980s farming crisis, which leads to their mistrust of the Government. Director Costa-Gavras often explores political issues in his work as is reflected in *Betrayed* with characters like Shorty (John Mahoney) who has his farm taken by the bank, his son was also killed in Vietnam. In *Betrayed* Gary’s militia despise the American Government as much as the Jewish or black communities; Phil Melling notes that the men are ‘alienated by a government that is unduly sympathetic to the claims of immigrants’ and to agendas of multiculturalism.\(^{35}\) Whilst not condoning the violence and hatred of the extreme right, *Betrayed* highlights how the failings of the American Government are at least partly responsible for the existence of right-wing extremism. *Betrayed* involves multiple scenes of family life, with Gary raising his children as a single parent; equally, camp scenes and barbeques present Gary as part of a wider community attempting to lead a regular life. Gary is not depicted as a redneck or stereotypically lower-class figure, rather he is the head of a normal family that are struggling economically. This is reflective of the heightened political tone of *Betrayed* in comparison to the white melodrama. In *Betrayed* poverty is the cause of racism, guiding Gary to extremism; but poverty does not define Gary, it is a factor in a nuanced personality. This is in contrast to the Klan in the white melodrama who are marked as ‘Other’ through their poverty, though their extremism is unmotivated.

In *American History X*, Derek delivers an impassioned speech to neo-Nazis where he criticises immigration that has caused a lack of jobs for Americans. His speech provokes violence and the Nazis vandalise a local store and assault the immigrants that work there. This attack on migrant run businesses echoes news footage of looting during the Los Angeles Riots, which resulted, in part, from growing tensions concerning immigration.\(^{36}\) The film’s connection to the riots are furthered as Derek and his family discuss the violence and the beating of Rodney King. As with *Malcolm X* and *Posse*, which both refer to the King beating, *American History X* links its narrative to political tensions in the period. Equally, Derek’s speech to the Nazis is not the only


scene where characters express concern about white employment. Unlike the white melodrama which depicts racists as mindlessly violent ‘Others’, *American History X* shows racism as founded in contemporary social concerns of poverty and job security. In contrast to the soothing good versus evil narrative of the white melodrama, this depiction of extremism is grounded in reality. There is a clear divide here in the representation of white supremacists; the Klan are utilised as historical figures to minimalise contemporary anxieties. Contrastingly, ‘modern’ white supremacist groups are depicted in a manner that highlights contemporary concerns. With the events of the 1980s and 1990s, anti-government and ‘modern’ white supremacist groups were of political and social concern; *American History X* and *Betrayed* utilise this anxiety and depict poverty and extremism as repercussions of Government policy. *Betrayed* and *American History X* do not explore the ‘usable’ past, but explore current social issues bringing a political tone to their narratives that is not found in the white melodrama.

*Betrayed* and *American History X* also highlight the irrelevance of the dated ‘redneck’ Klan compared to ‘modern’ supremacists, further lessening the Klan image. Derek’s views are challenged in prison as he is associated with the ‘redneck’ Klan he previously mocks. He is assigned laundry duty with Lamont (Guy Torry), a black inmate. Angered by a visit from his mother, Doris (Beverly D’ Angelo), Derek rushes his duties in laundry – frustrating Lamont. Lamont mocks that he is only frustrated by one form of sheets; he then precedes to use a corner of a sheet as a de facto Klan hood, crosses his eyes, and uses a ‘hick’ accent to declare how he is going to ‘hate some niggers […] I don't even know what a nigger is, but you know what? We gonna hate 'em. My cousin Derek is in the Pen right now – working next to a nigger, driving him nigger crazy!’ Despite Derek’s aggression, he begrudgingly laughs, from this point the two begin to form a friendship; that a neo-Nazi and a black man bond over mocking the Klan further emphasises the attenuation of Klan threat in modern society and cinema. Lamont is provoking laughter, but he is also challenging Derek, comparing him to the ‘redneck’ figures he objects to. Lamont’s assertion that the Klan do not know what a ‘nigger’ is makes Derek question if he understands his own hatred. Though Derek is modern and intelligent his views are linked to the ‘primitive’ figure of the Klan; he is being linked to ‘lesser’ men. This is the first scene in which Derek’s ideology begins to change, he does not want the association of the ‘redneck’ figure that his racism links him too.
This use of the Klan as a figure of embarrassment is also evident in *Shaft* (2000), when a black man, Trey (Mekhi Phifer), pierces eye-holes in a serviette and places it on the face of Walter Wade Jr (Christian Bale), who has been racially abusing him in a bar. Many laugh at Walter, his humiliation leads him to murder Trey. Evidently, the Klan’s iconography has become intrinsically linked with the embarrassing ‘redneck’ or ‘hick’ stereotype. In *American History X* Derek’s desire to advance from such connotations are demonstrated as he abandons Nazism and attempts to find work to move his family to a bigger house. In a white collar and tie his new-found virtue is linked with middle-class aspiration. Here, the lower-class Klan image is used to critique and mock racists, their image is used as a belittling insult causing embarrassment even among modern white supremacists.

### 3.3 Modernism and Integration

Whereas the Klan are presented as dated figures, other white supremacist groups are depicted as modern and threatening. The rural southern setting found in films depicting the Klan is used to create an historic atmosphere, for instance, the clothing, architecture, and vehicles in *A Time to Kill* present an environment that is akin to the 1950s and 1960s rather than present day. Through this dated environment the south is depicted as ‘Other’ and is disconnected from contemporary society. Contrastingly, modern white supremacists are depicted in urban geographical settings. Here, right-wing extremism is shown to have an expansive reach, and the antagonists are shown to hide within normal society.

In the films of the last chapter the Klan were presented as having hatred towards the black community, whilst anti-Semitic discourse is limited (except in *The Chamber*). Klan violence is often displaced to the white protagonist who suffers on behalf of the black community – through the protagonist’s suffering, Klan violence is assimilated and contained. In *Betrayed* and *American History X* violence is not contained and is directed at a wide range of individuals. Gary’s militia are responsible for anti-Semitic and racist murders, in one scene they hunt a black man (Kevin C. White) for sport. But the group’s bank robberies also bring fear and death to the white urban community. Equally, Gary is also part of a larger right-wing network who are responsible for the assassination of a presidential candidate, in order to place their own representative into the presidential race. In this way, the extreme-right is presented as threatening to minority communities, wider society, and the American institution. Similarly, in
American History X violence is again directed towards the black community, but also to migrants and the Jewish community. Where Klan violence is borne by the white messiah, the violence of ‘modern’ white supremacists is not contained but is widespread, again reflecting social anxieties of the period.

In contrast to the rural Klan, the white supremacists of Betrayed and American History X are associated with contemporary trends. For instance, Gary uses the internet to communicate with cells around the country (this is presented as impressive and high-tech for the era). This use of modern technology again highlights the integration of the right-wing into contemporary society; there is a level of anonymity found through technology that hides their extremism further. The ‘modern’ extreme-right is shown to communicate and infiltrate nationwide. At the film’s close, after Gary is killed, Cathy explains that the movement cannot be stopped and that ‘they got friends all over.’ Unlike the Klan, modern supremacy is presented as ingrained within contemporary America rather than as ‘Other’ to it, they are undefeatable. Films like Arlington Road, which shows a middle-class family plot to bomb a Government building, mirror the anxieties presented by Betrayed as it demonstrates how extremists live otherwise typical lives. Klansmen are marked as ‘Other’, the ‘modern’ white supremacists, however, lead contemporary lifestyles within normal society and are not identifiable, not least through their use of technology.

Bernard Beck argues that the neo-Nazis in American History X are shocking as they are ‘alarmingly un-American’, I argue the converse is true. In American History X Nazis are shown in normal social environments such as sports-courts and schools. Danny is a student at high-school, though the parties he attends have Nazi overtones, there is little unusual with his teenage interest with Punk music, beer, and relationships. Equally, Derek’s pastime of playing Basketball is quintessentially American. The two protagonists, Derek and Danny, merge Americanism with Nazism, their lifestyles and pastimes are American, even as their ideology is alien. Though they have shaved heads, their attire does not often distinguish them as neo-Nazis, indeed their clothes conceal their identifiable tattoos. Derek’s swastika tattoo is placed symbolically over his heart, a metaphor for his corruption; yet, this tattoo (and Derek’s evil) is easily concealable and he can hide in normal society. Hughey, Goad, and Forster, among others, argue that there is a comfort in projecting racism onto the white ‘Other’ as it alleviates the viewer

of guilt and absolves them from the responsibility for racism. The Klan act as this ‘Other’, they are distinguishably different in their robes, dated nature, and southern isolation. The neo-Nazis of *American History X* are not ‘Other’, rather Derek and Danny live otherwise typical American lifestyles; the film shows the viewer that racism is not isolated to renegade societies like the Klan but is disconcertedly hidden in plain-sight in contemporary America. Early in *American History X*, Danny awaits a meeting with Principle Sweeney (Avery Brooks); he takes a miniature American flag from the reception desk, Danny’s gaze (and the camera’s gaze) focuses on the flag. This editing acts as an extended metaphor to present Danny as an embodiment of contemporary America, his extremism grips the country. This is also highlighted as Murry (Elliott Gould), a Jewish man dating Derek’s mother, leaves the Vineyard household after receiving anti-Semitic abuse, he ruefully glances at the American flag that hangs from the house. Again, this tableau links Nazism and racism to America, it cannot be easily removed or isolated as is depicted in the white melodrama.

The Klan were a threatening image in films from the 1930s to the 1980s, however this threat has slowly attenuated, most noticeably through the 1990s melodrama. The Klan’s position in cinema as a frightening force has been replaced by ‘modern’ groups such as neo-Nazis. This ‘replacement’ is emphasised through the independent film *The Believer*. The film reflects the trends of the mainstream and highlights the perception of the Klan as unthreatening in comparison to the neo-Nazi. *The Believer* follows Danny Balint (Ryan Gosling), a Jewish man who becomes a neo-Nazi; the narrative is based on the life of Dan Burros, who was Jewish but was also associated with Nazism and the Klan in the 1960s – Burros killed himself when his identity was revealed in the press. The *New York Times* article that unveiled Burros’ Jewish identity was published in 1965, it focused on his position as Kleagle for the United Klans of America, rather than his previous involvement in the American Nazi Party. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, where Klan violence was prominent, this focus is logical. *The Believer* transposes the narrative to the early twenty-first century and presents Danny as a neo-Nazi Skinhead (he has a shaven head, roll-up jeans, and a pair of Dr. Martens boots), which represent the perceived threat of the 1990s. Burros’ involvement in the Klan is

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not referenced. The new-found threat of neo-Nazism is emphasised by the motivation of journalist Guy Danielsen (A. D. Miles) who reports on Danny due to interest in American hate groups in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. Cinematically, the Klan are not depicted as part of the extreme-right threat of the 1980s and 1990s; as films like *American History X* and *The Believer* demonstrate, they have been replaced by ‘modern’ socially relevant and threatening groups such as neo-Nazis.

However, despite the Klan’s irrelevance to contemporary society and their cinematic ‘replacement’ with ‘modern’ white supremacists, the fiery cross continues to retain its shock and threat. In *Betrayed*, as ‘Katie’ arrives at the training camp with Gary’s family, the Klan and Nazis sing ‘Amazing Grace’ in the light of three burning crosses. ‘Katie’ struggles to hide her surprise at the sight; the burning crosses reflect in her car window giving the impression of entrapment. The symbol of the fiery cross is imposed over her figure, metaphorically depicting her descent into the extreme-right as the flame is encompassing and conjures a notion of danger. Similar threatening representations of the fiery cross are found in *Mississippi Burning*, in the reflection of Agent Ward’s glasses, as well as in *Lee Daniel’s The Butler*, as a fiery cross is superimposed over victims of a Klan attack. Equally, in *Imperium* the cross again evokes an agent’s descent into the extreme-right. In each of these scenes the fiery cross is used to highlight the dangers faced by the protagonist. The symbol evokes a history of violence, where the Klan robes appear impractical and outdated, the bold contrast of flame in the night-sky remains intimidating.

The fiery cross is used heavily in the marketing artwork for *Betrayed*.\(^\text{41}\) This is true of other films, such as *Mississippi Burning*, but the manipulation of the fiery cross is more noticeable with *Betrayed* as the narrative only briefly and tangentially refers to the Klan.\(^\text{42}\) As discussed in the Introduction, the Klan’s iconography has had a long history in film marketing, as shown with films like *Black Legion* and *Storm Warning*. Despite the Klan’s irrelevance in the contemporary age the fiery cross continues to attract attention being both eye-catching and threatening. This use of the fiery cross, to market a film not about the Klan, demonstrates how it has come to symbolise the wider extreme-right. This is demonstrated latterly with *Imperium* where the cross is flanked

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by burning swastikas. With this, the fiery cross retains its threat but has a wider meaning, relating America’s history of racism to modern fears of home-grown extremism. This merger of iconographies is reflective of the ‘multilayered’ fifth era of American extremism which offered a loose network of right-wing groups.\textsuperscript{43} Though the Klansmen are presented as unintimidating compared to ‘modern’ white supremacists, their influence is found through the fiery cross, though its symbolism is transposed to a ‘new’ more threatening form of extremism.

\subsection*{3.4 Conclusion}

The threat of ‘modern’ white supremacists is in their integration within American society. In Betrayed and American History X the groups are seen to bring violence to the urban environment, this plays on contemporary anxieties and aligns with other films of the late-1980s and 1990s that explore the effects of violence and terrorism in the city, as is shown in films ranging from Die Hard (1988) (set in Los Angeles), to The Siege (1998) (New York) to Arlington Road (Washington D. C.).\textsuperscript{44} Betrayed and American History X capitalise on the public discourse and anxieties surrounding ‘modern’ white supremacist groups to add gravitas to their dramatic narratives. This depiction of the contemporary extreme-right is not dissimilar from the use of the Klan in films of the 1930s and 1940s which used the then topical organisation to advance crime-thriller narratives, such as Black Legion and Storm Warning. This is particularly true of Betrayed as a conspiracy thriller, the modern threat of Gary’s militia heightens the dramatic tension and intensity of Cathy’s infiltration.

Though neo-Nazism is not new to America, Hollywood aligned with media reports of right-wing extremism to present them as new ‘modern’ threats.\textsuperscript{45} In this way, the ‘modern’ white supremacist, particularly Skinheads and neo-Nazis, have replaced the Klan in film as figures that represent the threat of contemporary American extremism. This is further demonstrated through the continued depiction of American neo-Nazism in films such as Green Room (2015) and Imperium. The use of the ‘modern’ white

\textsuperscript{43} Chalmers, Backfire, pp. 63-66.


\textsuperscript{45} For Example, Tatiana Prorokova explains that in the 1990s newspapers helped promote the erroneous and frightening generalisation that ‘all skinheads are Nazis’: Tatiana Prorokova, ‘Film Review: Racism in American History X’, Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice, 27.4 (2015), 538-44 (p. 539).
supremacist group as the embodiment of threat in American cinema highlights the attenuation of the Klan image and the melodrama of their depiction. Where Betrayed and American History X relate their narratives to contemporary events and fears, the white melodramas of the previous chapter present the Klan in historic environments. The Klan are depicted as dated and irrelevant. Furthermore, the Klan in the white melodrama are depicted as an alien group, as Klansmen are aligned with the portrayal of the southern, monstrous ‘Other’, popularised in films such as Deliverance and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. The south, in the white melodrama, is depicted as apart from the rest of the nation. This isolation is typified through lines such as ‘rest of America don’t mean jack shit. You in Mississippi now’ (Stucky, Mississippi Burning). Orville Vernon Burton argues that the southern ‘Other’ exists as the ‘legacy of race has distorted southern history’ noting that the racist ‘Other’ has ‘functioned to allow white northerners to deny their own racism’.46 Because of the legacy of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, which have been erroneously remembered in fiction as only southern problems, the south is intrinsically linked with issues of racism and presented as different to the rest of America. Historically, the south has been used by Hollywood as a setting of exoticness, whether in romances or in the southern horror, the location has been depicted with an element of mysticism. In depicting Klansmen as the monstrous ‘Other’ in southern environments the Klan have come to be viewed as bordering the unreal. Unlike the ‘modern’ white supremacist, the Klan are not depicted as a threatening reality but as a personification of evil; this abstract depiction is utilised for simplicity in the melodrama and accentuated in comedy, as shall be discussed in the next chapter.

The Klan are simplified through their ‘Otherness’; there is little explanation for their violence and racism, rather they are understood to be evil as they align with pre-existing stereotypes of the southern, monstrous ‘Other’. It is unclear why Frank in Fried Green Tomatoes or Orin in Sommersby join the Klan, rather the Klan is utilised to embody and simplify their antagonism. In Mississippi Burning Anderson attempts to discuss the complexities of racism but the depiction of the ‘hick’ white ‘Other’ undermines this exploration. In these films the social and political pressures that

46 Burton goes on to explore whether the south actually is different looking at factors such as migration, religion, politics, and representation in culture, but concludes that racial tension continues to mark the south as ‘Other’:
underlie racism are ignored, even though *Mississippi Burning* is set during the Civil Rights Movement. By contrast, Gary and Derek intimidate because they appear as relatively normal individuals; in these films Government policy, job security, poverty, and the fear of change, are all shown to be foundations for racism – these are issues that challenge American society in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the white melodrama where racism is presented as dated and resolved, *Betrayed* and *American History X* depict racism as ongoing, even unescapable as is suggested in Cathy’s defeated pessimism towards the end of *Betrayed*.

In *Betrayed* and *American History X* the Klan are presented as irrelevant, ineffectual, and are mocked. They are portrayed in dated robes, singing around campfires as Gary’s militia organise and implement bank robberies and terror attacks. In *American History X* the Klan are belittled as ‘hick’ figures that contrast to the urban and youthful neo-Nazis. Association to the Klan is presented as embarrassing, even to those in the extreme-right. The depiction of the Klan as an unreal ‘Other’ and as a figure of melodrama has attenuated their image; they are no longer considered a threat, particularly in an age fearful of ‘new’ home-grown terrorism. *American History X* and *Shaft* connect modern racists to the Klan to undermine the threat of contemporary groups. In the 1970s and 1980s, low-budget action and comedy films acted to belittle the Klan; by the 1990s, however, the Klan are used as a comical device to attack other ‘modern’ threats. By the end of the 1990s until the 2010s the Klan were chiefly depicted in comedies. The next chapter questions the function of the Klan in contemporary comedy films, given that audiences were already significantly desensitised to the group because of their depiction in the white melodrama and through their demeaning comparison to ‘modern’ white supremacists.

The Klan’s representation in contemporary comedies has been overlooked by previous academic work. However, comedy is a significant factor in the Klan’s representation as Hollywood’s depiction of the Klan between 1999 and 2013 was chiefly comic. The films of this period range from the parody film *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999), to the action-comedy *Bad Boys II* (2003), and the horror-comedy *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), among others. Whilst this comedy is varied, these films can broadly be defined as ‘teen’ or ‘low-brow’ comedies. In this chapter I consider this representation of the Klan, analysing why they have been prominently depicted in comedies in this period. These contemporary films were not the first to offer a comic depiction of the Klan, the group have been depicted in comedy films as early as the 1920s. These comedy-shorts emphasised the popularity of the Klan in the period and presented the organisation as fun and unthreatening; this is evident, for example, in *Alice and the Dog Catcher* (1924) which shows children form a multi-racial version of the Klan. As discussed in the Introduction, such multi-racial depictions could be perceived as an attack on the Klan’s values, whilst films such as *Alice’s Mysterious Mystery* (1926) more evidently challenged the Klan after a period of scandal. The comedies of the 1980s mocked the Klan, questioning their supposed strength, as is evident in films such as *Bustin’ Loose* (1981). These films continue trends from the 1970s in presenting the black community as strong and resilient; though comic, they offered a social challenge to the emerging Klan of the late-1970s and early-1980s that was, once again, responsible for violence. This chapter questions whether the comedies of the twenty-first century align with the films of the 1920s and 1980s and assesses what is the function of the Klan’s contemporary comic representation?

As with the melodramas of Chapter Two, the films of this chapter are explored within a cultural context. I analyse whether the comedic depiction of the Klan stems from social factors, or from the desensitising effect of the 1980s and 1990s white melodrama. The relation between melodrama and comedy will also be explored further in this chapter. This relation is best expressed through an early comedy film of this study, *Fletch Lives* (1989), which mocks the Klan through reference to *Mississippi Burning*. I present *Fletch Lives* as a case study to best evaluate the evolution of the Klan’s depiction in comedy films, moving from the early-1980s to the contemporary comedies of 1999 to 2013. Throughout my research period there are three noticeable
comedic depictions of the Klan in films that do not adhere to the ‘low-brow’ comedy genre, namely *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Django Unchained* (2012), and the earlier *Forrest Gump* (1994). Indeed, *Django Unchained* is not a comedy film, though there are comical scenes, including the depiction of the Klan. Significantly, each of these three films utilise the Klan to direct their visions of American history. As such these ‘historical comedies’ are also analysed as individual case studies, exploring how the Klan function as a device to manipulate history, whilst remaining figures of comedy. Firstly, it is important to examine how figures of hate and racism are accepted in comedy.

### 4.1 Theories of Comedy

Though I have argued that the white melodrama has attenuated the Klan image, I have also noted that the Klan are utilised as a shorthand for evil and American extremism. It is important to first consider how such extreme figures can be perceived as comical. Typically, racism is a taboo subject, though race and racism are often used as subjects for comedy. Chirara Bucaria and Luc Barra explore taboo humour as a ‘coping mechanism’, suggesting that minority groups can employ taboo humour to ‘overcome situations of distress and oppression’, as is found, for example, with self-deprecating ‘Jewish’ humour.¹ This form of humour is relatable to the ‘hybrid minstrelsy’ discussed in the Literature Review, as is found in previous comedy films to depict the Klan, like *Bustin’ Loose.*² Many films discussed in this chapter relate blackness to the Klan, as such I consider the use of the Klan as a form of self-deprecating humour, assessing if this is presented as a ‘coping mechanism’ that perhaps reflects a contemporary racial divide. However, the depiction of the Klan in contemporary comedies is varied with some films leaning towards social themes whilst others present the Klan as simplified ‘gag’ figures. After their depiction in melodrama, the irrelevant Klan image arguably does not relate to contemporary anxieties.

Looking at the mechanics behind the comedy of taboo humour Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren’s Benign Violation Theory attempts to explain why potentially offensive jokes and subjects can be viewed as comical. This work builds on arguments originally

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² Reid, pp. 37-39.
presented by Thomas C. Veatch. McGraw and Warren argue that humour is a violation of the norm, but that this violation is balanced by the feeling that the comedy is in some way benign and safe; in other words, shock is balanced by pacifying factors. They argue a violation can be made benign if: ‘(a) a salient norm suggests that it is acceptable; (b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm; or (c) the violation is psychologically distant [for example the joke is overtly fictional].’ Each of these mitigations can explain the comic depiction of the Klan. It can be suggested that the Klan become a comical source as the low-brow comedy acts as a salient norm; ‘teen-comedies’ are known to be purposefully brash, as such taboo humour is expected (a). Equally, the Klan’s decreasing relevance to society and their attenuation in the melodrama has weakened their image (b). Finally, the comedy found in several films of this chapter is exaggerated and absurd, distancing the Klan image from reality (c). Each of these observations are explored further in this chapter; it is evident that the taboo image of the Klan has become benign through a multitude of factors and is, therefore, a ‘safe’ image for Hollywood.

In another paper with Lawrence Williams, McGraw and Warren ‘propose a modification to the popular saying, “humor is tragedy plus time.” Transforming tragedy into comedy requires time, not too little yet not too much.’ By this McGraw et al. suggest that to be comical, historical events and figures need to be distanced from the viewer so as to be appropriate for comedy, but equally the joke must remain a violation relevant to the recipients. If the tragedy is too far removed from the viewer the comedy is benign; the worse the tragedy the longer a timeframe is needed to balance violation and the benign. That the Klan are used in comedy some two decades after they were last significantly active demonstrates how, through time, tragedy has become subject to comedy. The Klan has remained a relevant image for taboo humour because of their continued depiction in film, which has maintained their iconography in public consciousness. Evidently, despite the Klan’s inactivity, their use as a shorthand for evil and racism in film means they remain a potent enough image to provoke comedy.

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Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering argue that humour is not an ‘absolute good’, noting that it does not always absolve social issues but often reinforces prejudices and stereotypes; humour, they argue, is not ‘isolated from other discourses or from wider configurations of sociality and social relations’. To Lockyer and Pickering humour cannot be separated from social themes as the stereotypes presented in comedies act to reinforce social expectations. The stereotypical use of the ‘hick’ figure in comic depictions of the Klan emphasises how comedies can often perpetuate clichés rather than challenge them. With this, like the white melodrama, I consider how the Klan’s representation in comedy continues to reinforce the notion that racism is isolated to the evil white ‘Other’.

4.2 Fletch Lives (1989)

Fletch Lives is a chronological outlier in my research. Released a decade before similar ‘teen’ or ‘low-brow’ comedies featuring the Klan, Fletch Lives offers a good point of comparison between the comedies of the early-1980s and comedies of the twenty-first century. The film, a sequel to Fletch (1985), follows journalist Irwin M. ‘Fletch’ Fletcher (Chevy Chase) as he leaves Los Angeles for Louisiana after inheriting a mansion. The film’s antagonist Ham Johnson (Hal Holbrook), posing as Fletch’s lawyer, attempts to force Fletch from his land; to do this Johnson hires the Klan to intimidate him. However, this fails as the Klan are comically disorganised and easily out-witted. They cannot get their cross to burn, their chants are out of sync, and they are easily fooled by Fletch dressed in a bedsheet mimicking Klan robes (he also changes his name to Henry/Hank Himmler, a play on Heinrich Himmler, which goes unnoticed by the Klan). Fletch is even able to slap the Grand Kleagle (Geoffrey Lewis) in the face, claiming it to be a Californian Klan greeting. Calculus (Cleavon Little), a black FBI agent, acting as the caretaker of Fletch’s house, fires a warning shot with his shotgun causing the Klan to flee.

As the Klan leave, Fletch picks up an abandoned mega-phone and yells ‘Zulu, Zulu’, followed by threats in a clearly fictional language (which the Klan confuse for an ‘African dialect’). Inserted into Fletch’s nonsensical ‘African’ threats, he declares ‘Gene Hackman kick your ass’, a clear nod to Mississippi Burning. This ‘African

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7 Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, ‘You Must Be Joking: The Sociological Critique of Humour and Comic Media’, Sociology Compass, 2.3 (2008), 808-20, available via: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/5599, (pp. 7-8).
dialect’ amuses Calculus, and clearly mocks the racist ideology of the Klan who fear this African influence; their racist ideology is manipulated against them. Jason Sperb argues that *Fletch Lives* presents a form of conservatism that acts to reinforce the ‘ubiquity of whiteness’. Sperb notes that issues of race are downplayed in the film, as is emphasised by the comical depiction of the Klan who pose no real threat. However, there are significant depictions of racial groups throughout the narrative which sees Fletch combat the Klan, Nazi-bikers, and confederate generals at a dress-up party hosted by Ham. The south remains a location divided by racism and racially motivated groups; this depiction of the south acts to separate Fletch, a Californian, from the evil of Ham or the Klan. To Fletch race does not matter, as is emphasised through his friendship with Calculus, highlighting his goodness; though the ‘new south’ is mentioned, in comparison to Fletch the people of the south are presented as racist and as ‘Other’.

Though *Fletch Lives* utilises racist figures to highlight Fletch’s position as the hero, there is little exploration of racism found in the film, supporting Sperb’s argument on the conservatism of the film. The inclusion of the Klan acts as a parody of *Mississippi Burning* more than it is a satire of the Klan or racism. *Fletch Lives* premiered just four months after *Mississippi Burning*; the reference to Gene Hackman emphasises the scene as a parody of the film. In addition to *Mississippi Burning*, *Fletch Lives* references *Gone with the Wind*, which was mimicked in *Fletch Lives*’ poster art. Also, in a fantasy sequence, Fletch dances to a parody of ‘Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah’ from the *Song of the South* (1946). By referring to *Mississippi Burning* the Klan in *Fletch Lives* act as a cultural reference to establish the southern setting, as with other films connotated. As Sperb notes, the southern environment of *Fletch Lives* is the converse of *Song of the South*, presenting the south as run down, ‘filled with rednecks, dim-witted police, [and] KKK members’ replacing one stereotype with the ‘extreme opposite’. Again, racism is isolated to southern stereotypes, as is found in the white melodrama, this use of the southern image separates the rural south from normal whiteness. These cliché characters are utilised for easy humour in their contrast to Fletch.

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9 Ibid.
11 Sperb, p. 190.
Films from the early-1980s such as *Bustin’ Loose* and *Porky’s II: The Next Day* present the Klan as threatening, before demystifying their image through comedy. This threat relates to the Klan’s modest rise in the late-1970s and early-1980s which led to noticeable incidences of violence, such as the Greensboro Massacre (1979). In the comedies of the early-1980s there was a potency to the Klan image, films like *Bustin’ Loose* also presented black resilience to the Klan that is reminiscent of the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. This is not found in *Fletch Lives*, rather the Klan are presented as a spent force, working for paid-higher and with no real threat. This is reflective of the Klan’s decline in the late-1980s, facing several lawsuits. Moreover, *Fletch Lives*’ presentation of the Klan demonstrates how *Mississippi Burning* acted as a forerunner for the contemporary cinematic use of the group. *Mississippi Burning* presented the Klan in a fictional melodrama, utilising the image not for critique but for dramatic tension. Parodying and exaggerating this simplified representation, *Fletch Lives* is an early comedic example where the Klan are not depicted in relation to the real organisation. Instead, the comedy in the film stems from the Klan’s previous melodramatic portrayal, depicting the group as comical caricatures that are distanced from themes of racism. The comedic portrayal of the Klan in *Fletch Lives* is correlated with their simplified melodramatic depiction in *Mississippi Burning*; this correlation is magnified with the comedy films of the late-1990s which follow the Klan’s attenuation in the 1990s white melodrama.

### 4.3 The Klan and Absurdity

In *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, a Klansman (Muse Watson) appears on *The Jerry Springer Show* entitled ‘My Father is Evil and Wants to Take Over the World!’ He appears with his son, a redneck (Scott Cooper), alongside them are a Nazi and his son, a Skinhead, as well as Scott Evil (Seth Green) and Dr Evil (Mike Myers). The scene is an exaggeration of the scenarios of the already absurd *The Jerry Springer Show*, bearing similarities to the episode ‘Klanfrontation’ (22 October 1997) in which the Klan were involved in a mass-brawl with members of the Jewish community. Paralleling this, the scene in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* also descends into one of the show’s trademark mass-brawls after the Klansman insults Dr Evil for labelling Scott ‘the Diet-Coke of evil’. The brawl is resolved with Dr Evil stealing the

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12 Wade, pp. 391-96.
Klansman’s hood as though a bizarre trophy, gleefully yelling ‘I’ve got your hood! I’ve got your hood!’ That the show is being monitored by NATO emphasises the absurdity of the scene; the slapstick nature of the comedy is also furthered as Jerry Springer (himself) joins a second brawl, biting the leg of Dr Evil.

The melodramatic depiction of the Klan, the repeated use of Nazis in several mediums, and the development of the southern ‘Other’ in American cinema, have all served to simplifying these figures as abstract embodiments of evil – each caricature features in this scene. This simplicity demonstrates how people ‘like the face of evil to be clear and unequivocal.’ However, as is found in both melodrama and comedy, depicting evil as ‘unequivocal’ creates an abstract, unreal ‘Other’. In Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me, these overt figures of evil are treated as absurd, as is emphasised through their comparison to the comedic figure of Dr Evil. In this scene the Klan are removed from issues of racism, instead they are presented as desiring ‘world domination’. This depiction presents the Klan as a ‘safe’ image in the contemporary comedy film as they have been exaggerated to the point of absurdity.

In the comedy-horror The Cabin in the Woods a group of friends who embody stereotypical horror tropes (the athlete, the scholar, the whore, the fool, and the virgin) are selected for sacrifice by an omnipresent surveillance team responsible for appeasing the Gods. Two of the group, the fool, Marty (Fran Kranz) and the virgin, Dana (Kristen Connolly), discover the plot and are able to access the surveillance facility and release the mythical monsters that were held by the surveillance team for means of sacrificing humans. These monsters range from giants and zombies, to an evil unicorn and an evil snowman, and perhaps most bizarrely, the Klan. The Klan feature for mere milliseconds, viewed on a surveillance screen patiently waiting for release, nonetheless they stand out as one of few, or the only, non-mythical creatures held in the facility. The monsters of the film are formed from nightmares, as such, the inclusion of the Klan can be viewed as a potent message as to their horrifying nature. However, The Cabin in the Woods presents the ‘horrors’ of the film with a distinct tone of black-comedy, as the monsters are purged from the facility they massacre soldiers; the viewer enjoys the cathartic nature of the violence rather than fearing it. This is evidenced as the evil unicorn impales a soldier on his horn, the tone of the film clearly leans to the abstract and comical. This excessive violence was reviewed as a scene of ‘orgiastic Grand

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Guignol’ and, initially, ‘cool’.\footnote{David Rooney, ‘The Cabin in the Woods: Joss Whedon’s Winking Take on the Horror Genre’, \textit{Hollywood Reporter}, 23 March 2012, p. 84.} As such, the Klan are part of an exaggerated fantasy, their inclusion with mythical monsters emphasises their use in the absurd; surrounded by fictitious characters the Klan are shown as unthreatening, even mythical. The comedy found in both \textit{Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me} and \textit{The Cabin in the Woods} removes the racial connotations of the Klan, instead utilising their iconography among other ‘monstrous’ figures as simplified depictions of evil. In both films the comedy presented is exaggerated and unrealistic; this comedy is psychologically distant from reality, as is particularly evident in the mythical depiction of the Klan in \textit{The Cabin in the Woods}. Little meaning is made from the Klan’s presence, rather their iconography is used to symbolise evil to further the abstract humour.

The Klan image has been desensitised through their representation in the white melodrama, leading to their comic depiction in films like \textit{Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me}. Moreover, the Klan’s relevance to twenty-first century society had significantly lessened. In the late-1990s the media focused on ‘modern’ right-wing organisations and home-grown terrorism in the wake of the Oklahoma City Bombing, this media attention was then suppressed by the September 11\textsuperscript{th} attacks.\footnote{Paul Smith, ‘American History X (1998)’, in \textit{America First Naming the Nation in US Film}, ed. by Mandy Merck (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 244-58 (p. 249).} Paul Smith offers evidence for this, noting the minimal media attention given to the 2002 sentencing of Terry Nichols for his role in the Oklahoma bombing; Smith also points to the mini-series \textit{The Grid} (2004) where white supremacists were depicted as ‘yokels’ compared to ‘real’ terrorists.\footnote{Ibid.} Though the Southern Poverty Law Center reports Klan growth in the years following 2001, the media focused chiefly on foreign threats rather than internalised groups.\footnote{Mark Potok, ‘Racists Skinheads, Klan Groups up in 2002’, \textit{Intelligence Report}, 20 April 2004, [no pagination] <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2004/racist-skinheads-klan-groups-2002> [accessed 4 May 2018]} With this the Klan were not perceived as threatening to a society in fear of foreign violence and, previously, ‘modern’ white supremacists. Their use in comedy is understandable as the viewer is ‘weakly committed’ to the taboo of the dated Klan. With this, the question remains as to why the Klan were repeatedly depicted in the era.

Part of the reason for the Klan’s continued depiction is that they offer an extreme image that can be used to distract from the heightened nationalism of the period.
Hollywood promoted an overt national image after the September 11th attacks, for instance consider the popularity of the Western or Superhero film in the decade after 2001. Only rare examples challenged this depiction of nationalism; Crash (2004), for instance, attempted to show the division of the nation and the effects of islamophobia (although the film appears equally exploitative of these themes). In mocking the extreme ‘Other’ of the Klan, Hollywood masks the nationalistic, some would argue racist, rhetoric found in American culture during the period. Whether in comedy or drama, the depiction of the extreme right-wing ‘Other’ separates the ‘brute’ racist from normal society, reassuring the viewer of their distance from racism. Even in Crash the Klan are referenced in a song mocking country music, again isolating the Klan to stereotypes of the ‘hick’ rural southerner. The Klan image remains one that evokes evil but has little relevance to twenty-first century society. In this manner, whether in comedy or melodrama, the extreme image of the Klan can be perceived as reassuring; mocking racists through absurd depictions of the Klan acts to minimalise the significance of extremism to contemporary society. There is comfort and humour in the irrelevance of the Klan image that has been exaggerated to the point of comical absurdity and meaninglessness.

In Step Brothers (2008), Brennan (Will Ferrell) and Dale (John C. Reilly) attempt to prevent the sale of their parent’s house. To do this they enact a series of comedic sketches to deter potential house buyers; one such sketch sees the two dress as a Nazi and a Klansman, greeting house-buyers with contrasting pleasantries such as ‘You’re gonna love this neighbourhood. Every single house here recycles.’ The potential house buyers, both of whom are white, quickly leave. Though the Klan robes are crudely made and misshapen (there is a large gap in the robes around Dale’s mouth and nose), they clearly act to perturb. The scene of a Nazi and a Klansman greeting neighbours in full regalia is fanciful, though characters in the scene appear shocked. I refer to such an occurrence as ‘pseudo-taboo’ in that the Klan image is being treated as though threatening to characters in the narrative but provokes only laughter from the viewer. In previous comic depictions of the Klan taboo images were prominent, for instance with the adorning of Klan robes in Blazing Saddles or the same-sex inter-racial kiss between

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18 Indeed, Robert Jensen and Robert Wosnitzer have argued that the film minimalised the reality of white supremacy:
Richard Pryor and a Klansman in *Bustin’ Loose*. These taboo images highlighted the strength and cunning of the black protagonist and mocked the Klan, a potent image at the time. Contrastingly, the Klan image in the contemporary comedy is unthreatening and is used for absurd humour; they are utilised in comedy films of the twenty-first century because they are unrelated to contemporary issues of racism or extremism. This distancing has made the Klan an unthreatening, even ‘safe’, image to be utilised as the comic ‘Other’; where the 1980s comedy film depicted the Klan as a taboo image, there is an irreverent meaninglessness to the Klan’s portrayal in the twenty-first century comedy film.

Of the films discussed thus far in this chapter, the Klan have not been linked to issues of racism. This demonstrates an evolution in the Klan image. White melodrama films at least partly related the Klan to racism, however, in these comedy films the Klan are used as a figure to depict absurd visions of evil and are not related to race. This comical depiction further lessens the ‘taboo’ of the Klan image by removing connotations of racism which, in turn, makes their image usable in narratives with no racial context, as with *The Cabin in the Woods*. This is not a universal feature among comedy films depicting the Klan, many of which still link the group to themes of race. However, even in such films the depiction of the Klan remains absurd, whilst the continued use of ‘pseudo-taboo’ emphasises the acceptance of the Klan as a cinematic device to provoke humour.

### 4.4 Race and Pseudo-Taboo

In *Road Trip* (2000), *Bad Boys II*, *Scary Movie 3* (2003), and *A Madea Christmas* (2013) comedy is found in the juxtaposition between the Klan and black characters. In *Bad Boys II*, the Klan heighten the position of the protagonists, much as is found in the white melodrama. In *Road Trip* the Klan image is again utilised by the black community to show their resistance to racism; and in *Scary Movie 3* and *A Madea Christmas* comedy lies in the over-reaction of black figures to Klan iconography.

In the opening scene of *Bad Boys II* Marcus (Martin Lawrence) and Mike (Will Smith) perform a drugs-raid on the Klan; the two officers dress as Klansmen to disguise themselves. The drama of their reveal is heightened by low-angled slow-motion shots of Mike removing his Klan robes and drawing two guns; the shot emphasises his strength compared to the Klan and establishes his position as the hero. Marcus mocks the surprise of the Klansmen declaring, ‘oh shit, it’s the niggras’. However, the raid
goes wrong and results in Marcus being held at gunpoint by a Klansman; despite the seriousness of the situation Marcus questions the need for the Klansman to call Mike a ‘cocky nigger’ and proceeds to make comedic comments about letting the Klan ‘off with a warning’. A shootout commences in which Mike and Marcus defeat the Klan.

Mike and Marcus’ battle with the Klan establishes them as heroes, the contrast between the black men and the Klan remains potent, though the Klan offer no real threat in contemporary society. Though they are arresting the Klan on drug related charges, conflict between the officers and the Klan remains racially charged, as is demonstrated through the use of racial epithets. Typically, the buddy-cop genre features a white officer and an ‘Other’, often a black officer, highlighting the ‘odd couple’ differences between the partners.\(^1^9\) The *Bad Boys* films were the first mainstream buddy-cop film to feature two black leads, but continue to maintain the tradition of the ‘odd couple’. The Klan act to emphasise the blackness of the protagonists through contrast; yet, the humour and action of the scene aligns with the traditional buddy-cop film, keeping the narrative accessible to a crossover mainstream audience.

Unlike other films of this chapter, the Klan are not presented as comic, rather the comedy is found in Mike and Marcus’ bickering dialogue, as well as the slapstick expressions of Marcus as he is shot in the backside. However, the ‘redneck’ image of the Klan is manipulated later in the film as the protagonists blackmail a Klansman, Floyd (Michael Shannon). They force him to take photos with them, pretending to be friends; the scene presents Floyd as an easily manipulated ‘hick’ figure, which is perpetrated through his membership to the Klan. As with *Blazing Saddles* and the films of the 1970s, the officers use the Klan’s iconography against them, hiding in their robes in the opening scene, and utilising Floyd’s membership to the Klan against him through blackmail. This manipulation of the Klan in *Bad Boys II* is not as potent as is found in the 1970s films, considering the waning influence of the Klan in the twenty-first century; but, as with *Blazing Saddles*, it mocks the unthreatening nature of the group in contemporary society and highlights the progression and strength of the black community.

Like *Bad Boys II*, *Road Trip* also demonstrates black dominance over the Klan image. In *Road Trip* the four (white) protagonists pretend to be part of a fraternity, only

to discover that it is a nationwide fraternity for black students. Whilst the response from the fraternity is tense, they are invited to stay. However, while the protagonists eat, black students find Klan robes in Kyle’s (DJ Qualls) luggage. Scared by the reaction of the students, Kyle faints. It materialises that the black students had planted the robes as a prank, from which point the black fraternity members laugh and party with the white protagonists. Here the Klan’s robes are being manipulated by the black community, in a sense this is self-deprecating comedy as the black students are invoking their history of oppression at the hands of the Klan. As with *American History X*, the Klan image is being used to breakdown racial barriers; the black students use the Klan’s iconography as a source of amusement which suggests progression in America’s racial division. In mocking the Klan the tension of America’s history with racism is removed, this is also evident through the students’ partying and an inter-racial romance that follows. As with *Bad Boys II*, the humour of the scene stems from the contrast between black characters and the Klan, but the comedy of *Road Trip* acts to dilute this racial division.

As with *Step Brothers*, pseudo-taboo is found in *Road Trip* as characters act in shock, whilst the viewer laughs; it is noticeable that the Klan’s iconography is only presented as taboo when placed within an aggravated racial environment. This is similar to the comedy of *Scary Movie 3* and *A Madea Christmas*. In *Scary Movie 3*, and the *Scary Movie* franchise, there are several jokes about race and race relations. This is especially obvious at the beginning of a rap-battle sequence where the black audience are asked to withhold their gunfire until the end of the show, to the disappointment of the crowd. The scene, a parody of *8 Mile* (2002), also involves jokes about Asian drivers, shows black audience members shooting Simon Cowell (himself) in a ‘gangster’ fashion, and has the protagonist, George Logan (Simon Rex), a white farmer and hopeful rapper, perform a rap about white stereotypes.\(^{20}\) George wins the affection of the crowd; pretending to be ‘gangster’ he raises his hood, unfortunately this gives the effect of a Klan hood which makes the crowd silent in shock. He then lifts his arm to acknowledge the crowd’s boos, which he mistakes for cheers; this appears to the crowd as a Nazi salute. The angered crowd then throw George out of the window.

Arthur Asa Berger argues that ethnic humour is only acceptable in American society and mass-media when self-deprecating, for instance when ‘blacks tell jokes

\(^{20}\) Perhaps not insignificantly, the scene that is parodied from *8 Mile* also includes a reference to the Klan which is used to mock ‘B-Rabbit’ (Eminem) and emphasise his out-of-place whiteness in the black club.
about blacks’.  

Berger notes that these jokes show that the subjects mocked are not bothersome and so ‘disarms’ others of the jokes, though there still might be ‘discomfort and resentment’ at being in the position of targets. The racial jokes in *Scary Movie 3* mock most races, however they are not used to disarm but to heighten the racial tension of the scene and, in doing so, emphasise the taboo and shock-comedy of the Klan and Nazi sight-gags. These jokes play upon ‘discomfort’ to further the inappropriate nature of the comedy; however, this humour is accepted because of the ridiculousness of the scene. As Geoff King notes, comedy allows for the use of controversial material that would not normally be included in the mainstream film, but ‘without entirely removing the racist edge.’ It is this ‘edge’ that creates the tension, or violation, needed for ‘taboo’ humour, that is commonplace in the teen-film. The image of the Klan, which is clearly George’s hoody, would not be provocative without the scene first building a form of comedic racial tension. Alone the Klan image lacks meaning, it is only taboo inducing, even in a comic sense, when placed within racially heightened scenarios.

In *A Madea Christmas*, Madea (Tyler Perry) looks for a restroom on a trip to Alabama and accidentally opens a door to a Klan meeting. The Klansmen turn to face Madea in a confused unison, their comic confusion emphasised with a chord from a banjo or slide-guitar. As Madea flees another confused Klansman leans out of the doorway in a clichéd comedic manner. The comedy of the scene comes in the over-reaction of Madea. For a black woman to meet the Klan would be a cause for alarm; however, the reaction of Madea is comical in its excess, particularly as she jumps into the backseat of a friend’s car which drives away while Madea’s legs frail frantically outside the moving vehicle. The scene is reminiscent of early comedy-shorts where humour arose from the fear of black characters; for instance, the black co-driver (Spencer Bell) in *Kid Speed* (1924) leaps from a moving car as a sheet falls onto Speed Kid’s (Larry Semon) face, giving the impression of Klan robes. Much of the critical work on the *Madea* franchise is focused on the depiction of black womanhood and whether Perry perpetuates or challenges stereotypes.

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22 Ibid., p. 71.
criticised Perry for presenting black ‘coonery’ and ‘buffoonery’. Minstrel’ comedy is evident in Madea’s reaction to the Klan; the comedy of the scene is at the expense of black stereotypes. However, the Madea franchise is targeted towards a black audience, this acts as an example of Berger’s acceptable ‘self-deprecating’ humour. In this way, as with Road Trip, the Klan image is controlled by blackness suggesting the unthreatening nature of the Klan in twenty-first century America. The comedy in A Madea Christmas, Road Trip, and Scary Movie 3 is not found in mocking the Klan but in mocking and exaggerating black stereotypes, such as Madea, whose over-reaction provides comedy. To present this over-reaction the Klan are depicted as lacklustre and unthreatening, further attenuating the threat of the Klan’s cinematic portrayal. Evidently, whether the comedy films of the twenty-first century explore race or not, the Klan image is primarily utilised as a distanced and comedic figure, their threat is not evident even in relation to racial narratives.

4.5 Comedy and Critique

Unlike other films discussed so far in this chapter which utilise the Klan and racial humour for comedy, only two ‘teen’ or ‘low-brow’ comedies use the Klan to critique contemporary America, namely Head of State (2003) and Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay (2008). Head of State follows Mays Gilliam (Chris Rock) who is tricked into running for President following the death of the original party candidate. Party advisers expect Mays to lose but field him so that black voters will support their party at the next election. Like Scary Movie 3, the film exaggerates racial stereotypes for comic effect; for example, early in the film Mays proudly discusses his neighbourhood: ‘I got my first bike stolen right there. My daddy got his bike stole right there. When I have a son, I hope he’s fortunate enough to get stuck up right there.’ Yet, unlike Scary Movie 3, Head of State depicts this racial humour to present a serious message about the under representation of the black community in politics and America’s underlying fear of black power. This is typified late in the film when it is announced that Gilliam is leading the polls on the east coast causing the white population in the west to panic and flock to polling stations to stop his victory. Here the film is emphasising the racial division that underlies American society. Though Gilliam

wins the election, much of the comedy in the film revolves around the unlikeliness of a black President (there is a quaintness to watching the film in light of Obama’s election, and a tragedy in the light of Trump’s presidency).

Much of the film’s satire offers a ‘wickedly cynical’ view of the American political system beyond issues of racism, for instance, ‘superwhores’ are recruited for presidential candidates as the parties ‘got tired of getting caught up in sex scandals’. The Klan are included for similar political satire in parodying American smear adverts. Gilliam’s political rival, Brian Lewis (Nick Searcy), releases an absurd advert that suggests Gilliam supports cancer. In retaliation Gilliam creates an advert wherein a Klansman (Michael Ahl), in full regalia, offers his support for Lewis exclaiming, ‘Hi, I’m a Klansman. I hate niggers, Jews and fags, but I love Brian Lewis’. The Klansmen speaks slowly and is accompanied with a banjo score. This depiction plays upon the southern stereotype, presenting him as an uneducated southern ‘hick’ figure, highlighting the unthreatening nature of the Klan and the comical absurdity of the political advert. This is followed by poorly voiced-over footage of Osama bin Laden who also advocates his support for Lewis.

There is an unusual imbalance between the culturally irrelevant Klansman and the relevant figure of bin Laden (the film being released only two years after the September 11th attacks). Director’s commentary for the film reveals that the scene was originally meant to compose of a Klansman and O. J. Simpson advocating support for Brian Lewis; however, director Chris Rock explains that Simpson was deemed too controversial a figure for the studio. Again, this demonstrates the desire for clear and unequivocal villains; O. J. Simpson is a divisive figure, but both the Klan and bin Laden are figures of near universal ire – though controversial, they are not divisive because of this contempt. The use of bin Laden in Head of State serves to undermine him, using taboo humour to disarm his threat by positioning him against the simplicity of the ‘hick’ Klansman. The Klan are used as a comically inept caricature to belittle a more serious threat.

Both the Klansman and bin Laden are figures that personify evil, and are used to exaggerate and critique the ridiculousness of American political adverts; this is emphasised retrospectively as in 2008 Nikki Tinker ran a smear campaign which

27 ‘Commentary’, Head of State, dir. by Chris Rock (DreamWorks Pictures, 2003) [on DVD]
erroneously suggested a link between her opponent, Steve Cohen (who, incidentally, is Jewish), and the Klan.\textsuperscript{28} The Klan are not the taboo or shocking image of the scene in \textit{Head of State}, this is bin Laden; rather the association between the ‘hick’ Klansman and bin Laden is intended to mock and disarm his threat. This is not dissimilar to the use of the Klan in \textit{American History X}, where the Klan image is used to disarm the threat of neo-Nazism. Even in a film that has significant focus on issues of race, the Klan’s simplified image is not used to explore racism but used as a desensitised image to mock and belittle. The Klan are used to satirise political adverts and bin Laden but have little relevance to racism in contemporary society. Although, the Klansman does act as an exaggeration of the southern republican (Mays clearly represents the Democratic party). The Klansman decres southern voters as old-fashioned ‘hicks’, this is particularly potent in a film that questions the lack of progression in American politics.

Despite their use as the absurd comic ‘Other’, the Klan are utilised to explore themes of racism in \textit{Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay}. The \textit{Harold & Kumar} franchise has a clear focus on challenging stereotypes. The first film of the franchise \textit{Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle} (2004) (also known as \textit{Harold & Kumar Get the Munchies}), challenges profiling by showing Korean-American Harold Lee (John Cho) and Indian-American Kumar Patel (Kal Penn) break away from their respective labels (the nerdy Asian and the Indian-doctor) during an implausible, and epic, voyage to White Castle. The film emphasises their position as individuals, and more importantly as American citizens who oppose racial stereotypes and stand for the joy of hamburgers. In \textit{Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay}, the second film of the franchise, the two protagonists represent ‘normal’ Americans, whereas other characters are stereotyped as extreme visions of whiteness. These visions include ‘redneck’ hunters and crude Homeland Security agents, these depictions subvert Hollywood’s norms by presenting ethnic groups as relatable and whiteness as ‘Other’.\textsuperscript{29}

With this subversion, the ridiculousness and dangers of stereotyping are highlighted, as the film acts to demonstrate the unfairness and prevalence of profiling in post-September 11\textsuperscript{th} America.

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\textsuperscript{29} Benshoff and Griffin, p. 53.
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Paranoia is evident throughout the film, not least through the thoughts of an old lady (Julie Erickson) as Harold and Kumar board her flight. She glances at them nervously before envisioning Kumar as a bin Laden-like figure, complete with turban and comical beard, who laughs at her and imitates a plane crashing with his hand; in reality, Kumar is simply putting his bag away, clearly presenting the paranoia of post-September 11th America. This paranoia and stereotyping is also emphasised as Kumar’s smuggled bong is confused for a bomb and both Harold and Kumar are arrested as suspected terrorists; as Joe Leydon explains ‘if characters as harmless as Harold and Kumar […] can wind up unfairly imprisoned, even in the context of a broad comedy, something is terribly wrong with the system.’ Furthermore, Homeland Security Agent Ron Fox (Rob Corddry) embodies and exaggerates the racist and ignorant views perceived to be held by the Government. For instance, he assumes because Harold is Korean that he must be working for North Korea alongside Kumar, who must work for Al-Qaeda. In other scenes Fox’s racism is presented to be ironically accurate, an example of this is found in a scene where he interrogates Harold and Kumar’s closest friends, the Jewish duo of Rosenberg (Eddie Kaye Thomas) and Goldstein (David Krumholtz). Fox pours coins on the table to prompt the duo to help his investigation (acting on the anti-Semitic stereotype that Jews are greedy). Whilst insulted, Rosenberg and Goldstein end the scene nonchalantly taking the coins; here, the stereotype is fulfilled, but, through Fox, the stereotype has been overemphasised to the point of absurdity and shown to be perverse. These scenes highlight the ridiculousness and dangers of profiling, particularly in contemporary America. This is furthered through the inclusion of the Klan.

Harold and Kumar find themselves lost in a wood when they stumble across the Klan. They are clearly frightened; the danger of their situation is emphasised as they are lit in the orange glow of the fiery cross. The directors Hayden Schlossberg and Jon Hurwitz explain that they wanted the scene’s opening to appear akin to *Mississippi Burning*, this is noticeable in the use of the fiery cross. However, the tension of the

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32 ‘Audio Commentary with Director/Writers Hayden Schlossberg & Jon Hurwitz, ‘the Real Harold Lee’ and James Adomian (‘George W. Bush’), *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* [Two-Disc Extended Version], dir. by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg (New Line Cinema, 2008) [on DVD]
scene’s opening is soon lost as in the next shot the Klansmen are seen drinking beer and listening to metal music; their traditional robes juxtapose to their ‘frat-boy’ behaviour. Harold and Kumar disguise themselves in Klan robes to hide, evoking a longstanding trope in the mocking of the Klan. Each subsequent scene moves the Klan further from an image of threat to one of comedy; for instance, several Klansmen are found petting a white Labrador (also dressed in specialised Klan robes), and the Klan leader (Christopher Meloni) is a stereotypical comical redneck with a horseshoe moustache and an overly pronounced lazy eye (additionally, in the extended version of the film his strangeness is furthered with peculiar outbursts such as ‘punch-monkey-cake!’). The initial threat of the Klan is reduced, and though Harold remains concerned, Kumar is relaxed as the Klan are easily fooled by the protagonists’ disguises.

Kumar is comfortable in the environment and enjoys himself at the Klan party; he is overheard discussing foods, complementing the Klan on their ‘[hot] dogs’ and exclaiming to Harold that ‘the Klan know how to party.’ The scene shows that there is little difference between the ideals of the party-going Klan and that of Harold and Kumar. Though presented as stupid, the Klan find common ground with the protagonists. Shilpa S. Dave explains that when masked in Klan robes, Harold and Kumar are ‘normative American[s]’, their accents and habits are undistinguishable from the Klansmen’s. Again, this is a reversal of the typical approach taken by studios who assume everyone will associate with white characters but ‘seldom’ depict other races as relatable to a mass audience. Harold and Kumar represent normal Americans, and paradoxically are able to bond with Klansmen over partying, beer, and fast-food. Evidently, ethnicity does not define what it is to be American, Kumar and the Klan bond through American stereotypes, demonstrating their similarity and showing that race erroneously divides the two.

The film questions what it is to define an American. As with the comedies of the early-1980s, the Klan are first presented as threatening but then are shown to be unintimidating to the more intelligent and likeable minority figure. Whilst the early-1980s comedy had potency because of the recurring violence of the Klan, in Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay the Klan image has purpose as they are linked with other absurd depictions of whiteness to highlight the unfair political and social

34 Benshoff and Griffin, p. 52.
views of the period. In exaggerating stereotypes of whiteness, the film reverses the racist profiling of the contemporary media. The Klan are used as an absurd stereotype of whiteness and serve to emphasise the Americanism of Harold and Kumar who are as equally American as the Klansmen, if not more so as they do not hold extremist ideals. David C. Oh explains that in other inter-racial buddy comedies, for instance *Rush Hour* (1998), whiteness is protected as the two leads are defined through ‘binary stereotypes’. In other words, as Oh explains, whiteness is defined through the stereotypical understanding of other races. Contrastingly, Harold and Kumar’s Americanism is defined against stereotypes of whiteness, emphasising their ‘normal’ and relatable nature. The film highlights the position of Harold and Kumar as individuals, they are not the stereotypes assigned to them by contemporary society, just as whiteness is not typified by the absurd stereotypes presented in the film.

As with *Head of State* the Klan are presented as southern ‘hick’ figures, expressing idiotic views in statements like ‘send them Indians back to Africa’ and mistaking Harold and Kumar for Mexicans. As with other scenes in the film, the comedy is purposefully perverse, starting with Harold and Kumar being urinated on as they hide beside a tree and descending into Klan campfire stories about their treatment of minorities (Harold and Kumar share stories they inflected upon each other, Harold explaining ‘I did knee an Indian guy in the balls’). This ‘gross out’ humour demonstrates the younger target audience of the film, to whom the Klan have less relevance. Rather than a threatening figure, the Klan have been established over the last two decades of film as ineffectual southern ‘hicks’ aligned with overgeneralised comedic stereotypes. The *Harold & Kumar* franchise has been compared to the stoner films of Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong. There are indeed similarities in the narratives, often rambling-drug induced journeys, found for instance in *Cheech & Chong Up in Smoke* (1978). The similarity that is most noticeable, however, is in the challenging of stereotypes. In the works of Cheech Marin all ethnic groups are stereotyped absurdly, forcing ‘the audience to consider that ethnic stereotypes are overgeneralizations.’ Similarly, these challenging ‘overgeneralisations’ are found in *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* but are not used to present the

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36 Dave, p. 115.
protagonists, rather they are used to depict whiteness through characters like Fox and the Klansmen. The first film of the Harold and Kumar franchise used ‘counter-stereotypes’ to show the protagonists as individuals, breaking from what is expected of them.\textsuperscript{38} Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, utilises stereotypes to critique American paranoia; reversing media profiling by offering absurd stereotypes of whiteness. Against these extreme figures the ‘normal’ Americanism of Harold and Kumar is established. The film suggests that to view Harold and Kumar as terrorists equates to viewing whites as Klansmen, demonstrating how stereotyping is unfair, illogical, and divisive.

4.6 Historical Comedies

In this period of ‘low-brow’ comedies two comic depictions of the Klan stand tonally apart in O Brother, Where Art Thou? and Django Unchained. These two films present more complex narratives than the ‘low brow’ comedies of the period. Equally, they do not depict the modern, irrelevant Klan, but place the group within historical contexts. In this sense, these two films are aligned with Forrest Gump which offers an earlier example of, what I term, a ‘historical comedy’. Looking at each film as an individual case study, this section assesses the depiction of the Klan to explore what effect the group has on the narrative’s historical perspective.

Whilst the relation between the Klan and history is significant, the use of comedy to present the group is no less apparent in these films. As discussed, Tom Rice argues that the contemporary film has sought to demystify and desensitise the Klan’s iconography, linking his argument to O Brother, Where Art Thou? and Django Unchained.\textsuperscript{39} I consider the extent to which these films ‘seek’ to desensitise the Klan, noting that they are not the first films to depict the Klan comedically. I also consider these ‘historical comedies’ in regard to the other depictions of the Klan around their respective releases, particularly as Forrest Gump was released during a period of white melodramas. The production of these films is also considered alongside the director’s previous work. With the possible exception of Spike Lee and Malcolm X, the films of this section present the most noticeable examples of auteur work in this thesis, being directed by Robert Zemeckis, the Coen brothers, and Quentin Tarantino, respectively. Whilst my


\textsuperscript{39} Rice, White Robes, Silver Screens, p. 229.
research focuses on Hollywood’s utilisation of the Klan, I will also consider the use of the Klan by the auteur, looking at how the Klan and comedy is used to advance the direction and understanding of their narrative.

4.6.1 Bedsheets and Forrest Gump (1994)

Forrest Gump presents a nostalgic and selectively positive vision of American history between the 1950s and 1980s. The film follows Forrest (Tom Hanks), the narrative is presented through his unintelligent and innocent viewpoint. Visual effects are used to insert Forrest into archival footage, this gives the impression that Forrest participates in historical events, interacting with key figures of the era such as President Kennedy. The technique impressed critically and was used to create a photorealistic narrative which follows Forrest from childhood, through education, serving in the Vietnam War, captaining a shrimp boat, and eventually marrying his childhood sweetheart, Jenny (Robin Wright).\(^40\) Forrest Gump is reflective of director Robert Zemeckis’ previous work, noticeably through the use of superimposing and digital composite technology that is also found in Who Framed Rodger Rabbit (1988) and later in Contact (1997). In Forrest Gump Zemeckis depicts an idyllic vision of small-town America through colourful, highly exposed cinematography, that is also reminiscent of Back to the Future (1985). In the 1990s Paramount Pictures saw noticeable financial and critical success with Forrest Gump, Mel Gibson’s Braveheart (1995), and James Cameron’s Titanic (1997), each of which won the Academy Award for Best Picture with their pseudo-historical narratives. These films balanced the high-concept simplicity that underlies Hollywood’s narratives with the work of the auteur, who is able to ‘work within the system’.\(^41\) The use of the Klan in Forrest Gump emphasises the high-concept traits of Hollywood in simplifying American history, though their representation also hints towards the idyllic depiction of America found in the work of Zemeckis.

The film opens with Forrest sitting waiting for a bus; a black nurse (Rebecca Williams) sits next to him. After a brief antidote about Forrest’s first ‘shoes’ (leg braces


\(^{41}\) Julian Ketchum, ‘Forrest Champ’, Empire, November 1994, p. 103.
to straighten his spine), Forrest proceeds to explain the heritage of his name to the nurse; it materialises that he is named after Nathan Bedford Forrest, to whom he is distantly related. As Forrest narrates, a picture of Nathan Bedford Forrest (also Tom Hanks) fades into vintage film footage where it is revealed that Bedford Forrest, and his horse, are dressed in Klan robes. Bedford Forrest proceeds to put on his Klan hood and turns to lead a charge of Klansmen; this footage is taken from The Birth of a Nation. Forrest’s narration over the scene demonstrates that he does not understand the significance of the Klan, as he explains, dismissively, that Nathan Bedford Forrest ‘started up this club called the Ku Klux Klan. They’d all dress up in their robes and their bedsheets and act like a bunch of ghosts, or spooks, or something. They’d even put bedsheets on their horses and ride around.’ To Forrest the Klan and their robes are akin to children dressing up. Rather than understanding the significance of the group he finds them amusing.

Forrest does not understand that it is inappropriate to discuss the Klan with a stranger, especially one who is black. He also refers to Nathan Bedford Forrest as a ‘great Civil War hero’, again failing to understand the connotations of praising a Confederate officer that later became Grand Wizard of the Klan. These social faux pas and lack of comprehension establish Forrest’s innocence; he does not understand racism, nor the significance racism has to American history. As the film is structured through Forrest’s perspective, his innocence is used to explain the absence of racism and the events of the Civil Rights Movement from the film’s narrative. In other words, because of Forrest’s innocence, contentious issues of the period are either ignored or significantly reduced. A good example of this can be found later in the film as Forrest witnesses George Wallace’s infamous ‘stand in the schoolhouse door’ at the University of Alabama, where Wallace attempted to stop the integration of the University.42 Forrest does not understand the importance of the situation. As such the film’s focus remains on Forrest, the shot pans from Wallace to the protagonist’s confused face. As Forrest does not understand the speech, the attention given to Wallace is removed, simplifying the event. In this way, Forrest Gump is not a history but rather history according to Forrest.

Forrest’s confusion restructures the history of America, focusing on select moments with little detail. His innocence goes some way to reshaping, even removing, America’s history of racial inequality. He does not understand racism, making his ‘best good friend’ in Bubba (Mykelti Williamson), a black soldier whom he meets in Vietnam; Forrest also helps black student Vivian Malone (archive footage) as she drops her book at Wallace’s stand. This depiction of racial harmony is at odds with the events of the Civil Rights Movement; this transgression is accepted because of Forrest’s innocence which is first established through the depiction of the Klan. Robert Burgoyne argues that through superimposition Forrest is ‘inscribed’ into the historical archive and challenges the racism of his namesake; in doing so Forrest ‘serves the exemplary function of “redeeming the past, rescue the real, and even rescue that which was never real”’. Here Robert Burgoyne is quoting Thomas Elsaesser’s argument that there is a ‘postmodern hubris’ in the notion that cinema can ‘redeem the past’, but that cinema also has an ability to create a seemingly real historical narrative through fiction. Burgoyne argues that Forrest Gump does indeed rewrite history through fiction, in a fashion that ‘dovetails’ with conservative policies of the 1990s. This revisionist history undercut the severity of the Klan, replacing their history of violence with depictions of riders in ‘bedsheets’. There are several examples of revisionism and conservatism in Forrest Gump that attempt to present a traditional, idyllic view of America; for instance, there is a noticeable absence of southern segregation and the liberal lifestyle of Jenny is criticised as immoral. Equally, Forrest’s close relation with the black community ‘rewrites’ the racial tension of the period, offering a warped vision of 1960s America.

The inclusion of Wallace and, later in the film, the Black Panthers, hints towards the racial conflict of the period. Nonetheless, the rewriting of history in the film is noticeable, when comparing Forrest Gump to its source text it is evident how the Klan’s history has been re-envisioned in the film. In Winston Groom’s Forrest Gump (1986), as with the film, Forrest explains that he is named after Nathan Bedford Forrest;

rather than finding them amusing however, he acknowledges that they were ‘a bunch of no-goods’ and is shown to be scared of them, explaining:

When I was born, my mama name me Forrest, cause of General Nathan Bedford Forrest who fought in the Civil War. Mama always said we was kin to General Forrest’s fambly someways. An he was a great man, she say, cept’n he started up the Ku Klux Klan after the war was over an even my grandmama say they’s a bunch of no-goods. Which I would tend to agree with cause down here, the Grand Exalted Pishposh, or whatever he calls hissef, he operate a gun store in town an once, when I was maybe twelve year ole, I were walkin by there and lookin in the winder an he got a big hangman’s noose strung up inside. When he seen me watchin, he done thowed it around his own neck an jerk it up like he was hanged an let his tongue stick out an all so’s to scare me. […] So whatever else ole Genreal Forrest done, startin up that Klan thing was not a good idea – any idiot could tell you that. Nonetheless, that’s how I got my name.47

Though mocking the Klan (‘Pishposh’) Forrest is aware of the evil of the group, moreover their presence is felt in the contemporary age (then the 1950s and 1960s). Whilst the film presents the Klan as historic, the novel notes their continued existence and effect on Forrest. Furthermore, the novel highlights the racial division and prevalence of racism in the period as Forrest uses terms such as ‘coon’, ‘boon’, ‘sambos’, and ‘niggers’ to describe black people.48 Whilst the novel highlights the realities of racism and the Klan in the 1950s and 1960s, the film presents the Klan (and consequently racism) as dated, resigned to the 1800s. As such, comparing the two mediums, it is evident that the film emphasises Forrest’s innocence, removing his assertiveness that is described in the novel to depict a skewed, positive, history of America and the Klan.

Presented in grainy footage and with a piano score (a comedic rendition of ‘Rise of the Valkyries’), the Klan are noticeably presented as historic. Though The Birth of a Nation popularised the image of the Klan’s white robes and the fiery cross, the large

48 Ibid., pp. 40-41, 132-34.
picklehaubes and face masks appear dated compared to modern depictions of the Klan.\textsuperscript{49} The use of \textit{The Birth of a Nation} also confuses the history of the Klan, as it uses the 1915 film to present the post-Civil War group; in presenting \textit{The Birth of a Nation} as though historical footage from the 1860s, the Klan’s long history and their second era is compressed to depict the Klan as a small marginalised group. The movements of the 1920s and 1960s are ignored and the Klan are presented as a force isolated to the 1860s. The re-envisioning of the Klan’s history in \textit{Forrest Gump} is not dissimilar from Griffith’s depiction of the Klan; as Ruth Elizabeth Burke argues, both films use ‘historical facsimiles to create a reality that never happened’.\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The Birth of a Nation} made the Klan appear heroic and more significant to American history than they were, using the same footage \textit{Forrest Gump} isolates the Klan to history and presents them as less significant than reality.

There is an enduring history in attempting to demystify the Klan by comparing their robes to bedding; early Klan publicity documents referred to the public’s perception of the robes as ‘bedsheets and pillow cases’ and attempted to ‘correct’ this misconception.\textsuperscript{51} It is a concept that is found in several contemporary films; \textit{Fletch Lives}, \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes}, \textit{Sommersby}, and \textit{American History X} all relate the Klan’s robes to bed sheets and pillowcases in an attempt to mock and desensitise the group.\textsuperscript{52} When Forrest describes the Klansmen and their ‘bedsheets’ it is not an original concept. Rather, \textit{Forrest Gump} is trying to link the Klan with pre-conceived notions that demystify the group to make them appear weak and childish. This creates the impression that the Klan are unintimidating and insignificant. This is also furthered by depicting the Klan with the dated iconography of \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, whilst Forrest’s reaction to the Klan also downplays their significance. Here the film is ignoring the popularity and strength the Klan had in the 1860s and 1920s, to explain their absence in the 1960s.

By undermining the Klan, presenting them as comical and dated, \textit{Forrest Gump} downplays the importance of race and racism in modern American history, as is also

\textsuperscript{49} Though, as discussed, modern depictions of the Klan are still dated, depicting robed Klansmen and ignoring the militant movements of the contemporary Klan.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Shock Corridor} (1963) is an earlier example that also relates the Klan masks to pillow cases, though in the context of a mental ward this does not necessarily to desensitise the Klan.
evidenced through the limited depiction of Wallace and Forrest’s relationship with the black community. In effect, the Klan are belittled early in the film to minimalise issues of racism in the narrative, this helps to emphasise Zemeckis’s idealism. Johan Nilsson argues that the depiction of the Klan and Nathan Bedford Forrest at the film’s opening is a way of ‘satirizing Southern conceptions of the past.’ Yet, the south in *Forrest Gump* is presented idyllically as an exotic land of peace (typified by the grand Gump manor and surrounding nature); indeed, excluding Wallace’s stand (which is mostly ignored), the only images of conflict and of the Civil Rights Movement are presented in Washington D. C. and so are shown as a northern issue. The Klan are not used to satirise southern perspectives of history, rather they are used to minimalise the importance of both racism and history to the location. History is manipulated, or rather ignored, to create an idyllic landscape, one in which Forrest presents the ideals of America. Because of this manipulation questions have been raised as to what extent *Forrest Gump* should be deemed a historical film, Burgoyne, for instance, argues that the film appeals to popular memory, for example with scenes of celebrities, to provoke ‘amnesia in other areas’, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, James Amos Burton notes how the film’s marketing presents *Forrest Gump* as a ‘love story set against a historical backdrop.’ Because of the film’s ‘playfulness’ it could not be compared to historical dramas, especially after the release of *Schindler’s List* (1993); equally, by marketing *Forrest Gump* as a romantic-comedy and not a historical narrative Paramount avoided the controversy surrounding the creative use of history in *JFK* (1991). Hollywood often focuses on the personal rather than the historical, this is noticeable in *Forrest Gump* wherein history is used fleetingly to guide a narrative surrounding Forrest and Jenny’s romance; as with the Wallace scene, the confusion and pain of history is ignored and replaced with Forrest’s heart-warming narrative. Furthermore, the use of *The Birth of a Nation* as ‘historical’ footage emphasises the film’s foundations in fiction. In this way, the Klan’s appearance at the start of the film

54 Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p. 122.
56 Ibid., pp. 233-34.
57 Graham, *Framing the South*, p. 191.
serves to set a precedent on the treatment of history in that it is to be warped, trivialised, and often ignored as a backdrop to Forrest’s narrative.

4.6.2 Bags and *Django Unchained* (2012)

As *Forrest Gump* uses history as a backdrop for Forrest’s narrative, slavery is used as a backdrop for the fictional rescue/western narrative of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. The film follows Django Freeman, a free slave who partners German bounty hunter, Dr King Shultz, to save his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). As with *Forrest Gump, Django Unchained* is focused on the ‘exceptional individual’; whilst the horrors of slavery are implicit throughout the film, the narrative is focused on the actions of Django. Noticeably he frees only his wife, he does not fight against slavery *en masse* and is ‘not a cause of black liberation’.

In a flashback scene, Broomhilda is brutally whipped in front of Django as a punishment for their attempted escape. This is one of many scenes that show the terrors of slavery; however, this scene is less an exploration of the era than it serves to show slavery’s personal impact on Django and to emphasise the protagonist’s struggles.

Django’s narrative is the focus of the film, not America’s history of slavery. Kalle Pihlainen compares *Django Unchained* to Tarantino’s previous film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) wherein the course of history is radically changed (Hitler is shot by American soldiers). Pihlainen notes that in *Django Unchained* there is little alteration of important history, and the film acts ‘less of a rewriting of history and more as an exploration of the options available to the individual.’

History is warped to aid the protagonist’s narrative, but it is never rewritten as with *Inglourious Basterds*. *Django Unchained* is about what could realistically have happened in the period, rather than what did. A good example of this is the focus on Mandingo fighting, where two slaves are forced to fight to the death. This is inspired by the film *Mandingo* (1975); there is no historical evidence of such an event. Yet, the fighting serves to demonstrate the power slave-owners held over their slaves; it is an event that could have happened.

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60 Terri Francis argues that in this way slavery is ‘exaggerated and exploited’ for the narrative: Terri Francis, 'Looking Sharp: Performance, Genre, and Questioning History in *Django Unchained*', *Transition*, 112 (2013), 32-45 (p. 44).

rather than what did.\textsuperscript{62} This flexible depiction of history is also found in the inclusion of the Klan. As previously discussed, the first incarnation of the Klan dates to 1865, whereas \textit{Django Unchained} is set in 1858-9.\textsuperscript{63} Tarantino has acknowledged this, noting that the group in \textit{Django Unchained} would actually be an organisation that pre-dated the Klan known as ‘the Regulators’.\textsuperscript{64} Yet, Tarantino depicts his group using white hoods, clearly signifying to a modern audience that they are Klansmen – this is similar to the erroneous representation of the Klan in \textit{Sommersby}. Though the Klan had not formed at the time, they act as a recognisable shorthand to express the racism of the period. More notably, the evil of the Klan is used to establish the heroic nature of Django through contrast.

Early in the film Shultz and Django hunt the bounty of the Brittle Brothers (M.C. Gainey, Cooper Huckabee and Doc Duhame) and find themselves on the plantation of Big Daddy (Don Johnson) for whom the Brittles work. Having murdered the brothers, Django and Shultz hastily leave the land and the angered Big Daddy, who later seeks revenge with help from the Klan. The following scene is simultaneously one of the most violent and comic in the film. The Klan are introduced with the deliberately jarring and highly ominous music of ‘Dies Irae’, from Verdi's Requiem. The Klan’s crudely fashioned white hoods are eerily lit by their fiery torches; as the Klansmen ride over a hill crest there is a striking chiaroscuro between the torches of the riders and the bleakness of the night. The contrast of the flames in the night coupled with the score create a threatening and violent mise-en-scène, emphasised through crowded mid-shots of Klansmen which demonstrate the ferocity of their charge. Each shot is an assortment of movement, furthered through close-ups of galloping horse legs. Equally, the sound of charging of horse’s hoofs, along with Native American war-cries, adds to the tension and violence of the scene. The juxtaposition of Klansmen using Native American cries presents a disregard for American history. Nonetheless, the sound signifies heritage, a belonging to the land of America that the Klan feel is their birth-right – they are defending it against the foreigners of Django and Shultz. It is an intimidating sound. Equally, the Native American war cry harks to villainy in the western genre, establishing Django in the traditional position of the good cowboy.

\textsuperscript{63} David M. Chalmers, \textit{Hooded Americanism}, p. 8.
Inter-cut into the attack, however, Tarantino inserts a scene of the Klan preparing for the raid. In contrast to the charging Klan, this scene is slow-paced and still. The Klan appear as children waiting, depicted through high-angle shots over Big Daddy’s shoulder looking down at the Klansmen, as well as contrasting low-angle shots of Big Daddy (as though the Klansmen look up to him for guidance). After a threatening speech to rouse the Klansmen, Big Daddy puts on his hood, only to struggle with visibility. This triggers complaints and a lengthy comical debate from the Klansmen about the hoods and their quality. The dialogue is simple and dim-witted; to see the group complaining about such mundane issues is comic and heightens the impression of child-like stupidity amongst the men. Big Daddy is visibly put-out by having to organise the group as he attempts to restore their focus:

**Big Daddy:** Now look. Let’s not forget why we’re here. We’ve gotta kill a nigger over that hill there. And we gotta make a lesson out of ‘im.

**Bag Head # 2** (Jonah Hill): Okay, I’m confused. Are the bags on or off?

**Robert** (Spuds McConnell): I think... we all think the bag was a nice idea. But - not pointin' any fingers - they coulda been done better. So, how 'bout, no bags this time - but next time, we do the bags right, and then we go full regalia.

[The Klansmen agree and remove their hoods]

**Big Daddy:** Wait a minute, I didn’t say no bags.

**Bag Head #2:** But nobody can see.

**Big Daddy:** So?

**Bag Head # 2:** So it’d be nice to see.

The conversation purposefully juxtaposes the sinister opening of the scene, where the Klan ride in unison. Here they are shown as divided and comically disorganised, humanising the Klan and minimalising their threat. Moreover, in the opening of the scene the Klan’s masks, lit by torches, initially appear inhuman and intimidating; here, however, they are shown to be impractical and comical. As Rice notes, this scene seeks to desensitise the Klan’s robes using their own ‘cinematic constructs’ (their iconography) against them.65 Yet, as I have shown, through the white melodrama and

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comedy, audiences have already been desensitised to the Klan’s iconography. Though, as with *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the historical narrative found in *Django Unchained* gives partial credence to the Klan image, emphasising how the group have come to embody American history. The teen-comedy film presents the contemporary Klan who are irrelevant and comic; contrastingly, in the historical narrative of *Django Unchained* the Klan’s presence is relevant, then through comedy it is demystified as to mock and criticise the group. Tarantino notes that his riders were meant to be the antithesis of the Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*, hating how the Klan were praised in the film; he notes how hard and comical it must have been for the actors in *The Birth of a Nation* to ride with hoods on.\(^66\) The Klan are used to emphasise the racism of the period, and remain a potent image in context of the narrative, but humour is used by Tarantino to attack the group and to present the extended metaphor that ‘racists are blind’.\(^67\)

The focus on the impracticality of the Klan’s robes and their child-like complaints helps to humanise the group. The comedic scene contrasts with the earlier depiction of the inhuman ambiguity of the fiery-lit Klan mask. The humanisation of extreme figures is a trend in the works of Tarantino, for instance, in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) assassins Jules and Vincent (Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta) discuss the fineries of Europe’s McDonald’s menus. As Tarantino explains, he uses dialogue to give the audience a glimpse of the character’s personality outside of the situation they are in.\(^68\) Evidently, in *Django Unchained* this dialogue is used to remove the inhuman ambiguity and threat of the Klan, instead presenting the group as foolish and divided. As the scene returns to the raid, the score of ‘Dies Irae’ is removed, the fiery glow of the torches is lessened, and the quick cutting close-shots are replaced with long-shots. Audibly one Klansman is still complaining about the visibility of his hood. This changing cinematography emphasises the removal of the Klan’s threat following the humanising and demystification of the group through comedy.

It materialises that Django and Shultz have tricked the Klan; their wagon is loaded with explosives killing and scattering the men. With his first shot of a rifle Django kills Big Daddy from distance and is dubbed a ‘natural’ by Shultz. As *Forrest Gump* uses

\(^{66}\) Gates Jr.


the Klan to establish the innocence and goodness of Forrest; *Django Unchained* utilises the Klan to establish the heroic nature and natural ability of Django. The Klan act as an unambiguous evil, heightened through racial conflict, this provides a moral justification for Django and Shultz to kill them. With this delivery of justice, the goodness of the protagonist is also heightened. The Klan’s use is again as a contrasting evil, but in *Django Unchained* the Klan are also depicted to emphasise the racism of the era, establishing the setting and Django’s struggles.

The Klan’s representation in *Django Unchained* is not dissimilar from the ‘Klan’ in ‘Part VIII’ of the television mini-series *Roots* (1977). As with *Django Unchained* the men in *Roots* are also nightriders that historically would not have been Klansmen; the group also wear homemade white masks. Yet, the association with the Klan is clear and is emphasised by ominous music as Evan Brent (Lloyd Bridges) burns holes in sheets to create the group’s uniform, implying that the viewer should be aware of the sinister symbolism of the iconography. Equally, the mise-en-scène of masked men lit with flame clearly invokes the Klan. Again, the Klan are used as a recognisable evil, their iconography evokes American history, which is in keeping with the narrative style of *Roots*.

The Klan are used in both *Roots* and *Django Unchained* to establish the character and heroic nature of the protagonists. In *Roots*, after Tom (Georg Stanford Brown) is beaten by Brent’s Klan, his father Chicken George (Ben Vereen) returns after a long period away and helps his family to flee the town. To do this the family first trap Brent so that he does not hinder their travels; with Brent tied up, Tom is given the opportunity to whip him in revenge. However, Tom turns down this opportunity, invoking a message of peace. This, as Chicken George explains, demonstrates Tom’s ‘good-heart’. However, Tarantino thought this ending was unrealistic and lacked emotional payoff.69 The Klan members in *Roots* are not punished for their crimes, they are tricked by the former slaves who escape to freedom, but there is no cathartic retribution as found in *Django Unchained*. In Tarantino’s film there is a strict notion of punishment and justice that idealises Django and Shultz (again this violent justice is prominent in much of

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Themes of justice are previously established in the film; as Django kills the first two Brittle brothers, a low camera tilts towards him with the score of ‘La Corsa’, a heroic piece, emphasising Django’s moral superiority. Yet, it is in the Klan scene where Django’s natural ability is shown. Whilst Roots uses the Klan to develop the goodness of its characters, the Klan in Django Unchained serve to emphasise Django’s lethal natural ability and his firm but fair sense of justice. Both works use the Klan erroneously as a distinct evil for a modern audience to recognise, in both cases to establish character, though in contrasting manners. The violent justice of Django Unchained is not dissimilar from the fanciful narrative of Posse and similarly offers a cathartic release, this emphasises the Klan’s use as figures of entertainment.

The violence of the Klan scene in Django Unchained is also inspired by Sergio Corbucci’s Django (1966). Several allusions to Django are found in Django Unchained, for instance the film uses music from the original as well as the same title design and includes a cameo from the original Django (Franco Nero). This influence clearly places Django Unchained as one of the collection of ‘Django films’ inspired by Corbucci’s work.

In the original film, Major Jackson (Eduardo Fajardo) seeks retribution against Django who had previously murdered some of his men in a tavern; he arrives with scores of Klansmen to attack the protagonist. Django waits patiently for them to advance before firing at them with a chain gun that had been previously concealed in a coffin. This is one of the most violent scenes in the film, and indeed one of the most violent for any western at the time, which is partly responsible for the film being banned in the UK. However, this violence is also why it was revered by many including Tarantino; clear similarities are found between Big Daddy and Major Jackson, and with the protagonists’ violence towards the Klan. Again, in both films the Klan are used as overt evils that are morally justifiable to kill; in both films the Klan are utilised for cathartic, entertaining, violence. Tarantino’s use of the Klan, as a reference to other work, emphasises how contemporary depictions of the Klan are cinematic constructs with more relation to previous portrayals than reality.

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71 Christopher Frayling, Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 82.


Django Unchained straddles two themes in the representation of the Klan. The scene depicts the Klan in a melodramatic conflict but also, latterly, as comical, reflecting the trends of the Klan’s depiction in the films of the past two decades. Yet, the Klan also act as an example of the racism found in American history; their recognisable iconography is used to highlight the racism of the period and present the persistent oppression faced by the black community. This critical depiction of American history is reflective of broader trends in Hollywood in the 2010s. As shall be discussed further in Chapter Five, in the 2010s Hollywood sought to explore America’s racial history and the black narrative to a greater extent than previous decades. Indeed, Django Unchained was released alongside other films that focused on slavery in Lincoln (2012) and 12 Years a Slave (2013). This demonstrates how Hollywood reacts ‘to the pulse of change’ and that in the Obama era ‘race’ was the dominant theme in social dialogue. Though the Klan are mocked in Django Unchained, the film at large addresses contemporary discussions on race and racial history in America. Whereas Forrest Gump soothed depictions of America’s historic racism, as with many films of the 1990s, Django Unchained presents the violence of America’s history – including the violence of the Klan. Many have compared Lincoln and Django Unchained considering their contrasting representations of slavery. Lincoln focuses on the politics surrounding slavery, rather than the suffering of the black community, though as a historical-biography this is fitting with the genre. Yet, several critics have argued that, though fictional, the violence depicted in Django Unchained offers a bleaker and more representative depiction of slavery and racism than Lincoln. In this way, though focusing on Django’s narrative, Django Unchained is able to emphasise the horror and continuation of American racism; indeed, Yarimar Bonilla argues that the film links to contemporary questions about ‘what the past means today’ in regards to developments in the Obama era. Whereas Lincoln presents the end of slavery as a resolution to America’s racial issues, Django Unchained offers no such resolution. Django’s story is resolved as he saves Broomhilda, but slavery and racism remain unchallenged. Unlike

74 Izzo, pp. vii-viii.
Bonilla, pp. 74-76.
77 Bonilla, p. 74.
the white melodrama where the Klan are defeated, and racism is shown as resolved, in *Django Unchained* the Klan are defeated, but racism continues.

There is a duality to the depiction of the Klan in *Django Unchained*; initially they offer a threatening image that demonstrates the longevity of racism in American history. This aligns with contemporary depictions of the Klan (as discussed in the next chapter). Yet, they also remain a comical image, one also utilised to establish the goodness and skill of the protagonist and to provide cathartic violent entertainment. Much like the black narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, the Klan are not depicted to consolidate American racism; their iconography is used to emphasise the oppression and violence of the period to a modern audience, but they are presented as part of America’s wider history of racism, which Tarantino criticises through comedy.

4.6.3 Crosses and *O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)*

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the Klan are used to establish the setting of rural Mississippi in 1937. The plot, a loose adaptation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, follows prisoner Ulysses-Everett (George Clooney) and his two fellow inmates Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) who he convinces to escape with him to find lost treasure. This is a ruse, as Everett is actually attempting to prevent his wife, Penny (Holly Hunter), from remarrying. A series of misadventures follow which see the protagonists accidentally help bank robber Baby-Face Nelson (Michael Badalucco); record a song entitled ‘Constant Sorrow’ which becomes a sell-out hit; and, be attacked and mugged by a giant ‘cyclops’ bible salesman, Big Dan (John Goodman). There is an irreverent tone to the film’s comedy which follows the quick paced eccentricity of the screwball comedy.

Several cultural and historical references are used to create the southern setting; though much of this referencing is unspecific, for instance, Baby-Faced Nelson died in 1934, three years before the film is set, and Governor ‘Pappy’ O’ Daniel (Charles Durning) was actually the Governor of Texas, not Mississippi. Nonetheless, these cultural references are utilised to create a southern, historic setting. The historic allusions are coupled with a dated mise-en-scène of orange and sepia tints that suggests both heat and age. The southern setting is also furthered through the use of local dialect.

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by characters such as Wash Hogwallop (Frank Collison), and through a score of southern music styles (blues, country, and bluegrass). This development of setting is typical of the works of the Coen brothers which each portray a ‘radically different setting and “feel”’. Consider, for instance, the Texan summer of Blood Simple (1984), which adds to the heat and passion of the film, or Fargo which is set in snow infused Minnesota, where much of the comedy comes from the regional mannerisms of the characters. Again, in O Brother, Where Art Thou? the rural south offers an exotic land that frames the mysticism of The Odyssey.

Such framing is also found through the Klansman and bible salesmen Big Dan, who embodies Polyphemus, an unruly and violent giant cyclops that Ulysses must overcome in The Odyssey. As Big Dan attacks Everett and Delmar, close and low-shots are used to embellish Big Dan’s size. He is often depicted with an eye patch, highlighting his connection to Polyphemus; this imagery is also embellished later in the film as Big Dan’s robes are shown to have only one, very large, eye hole. Furthermore, the Klan has a position entitled the Grand Cyclops (sometimes Exulted Cyclops); here the Coen brothers are making a pun between The Odyssey and the Klan. The mysticism of the Klan is utilised to frame The Odyssey in the American south, highlighting the absurd nature of the Klan’s mythology. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Three, the Klan are associated with the rural south, as such they further develop the southern setting of the film. The Coen brothers go to some length to build a dated and southern environment, with this Douglas McFarland argues there is a need to explore the racism of the period, explaining that the Klan’s inclusion provides the ‘ethical response that the setting demands.’ For McFarland, as historical references are used to create setting, the racism of the 1930s must also be recognised; the Klan’s inclusion addresses this racism. O Brother, Where Art Thou? demonstrates how racism and the Klan are synonymous with Hollywood’s south, though the mythical nature of the narrative neutralises any critique found in this association.

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The three protagonists, having escaped the law for a second time, apply black polish to their faces to blend into the night. Fighting amongst themselves the three stumble across a Klan meet; they hear a synchronised and ominous chant; the protagonists are lit in a fiery orange light and stare dumbfounded at the scene ahead of them. Despite the scared expressions of the protagonists, they are beholding a comical scene as the Klan are participating in an elaborately coordinated dance in a manner reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley musical – Berkeley having clearly inspired the works of the Coen brothers as is noticeable in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). The imagery of the dancing Klan is comical in its excess; the contrast between the protagonist’s shock and the comedy of the dance heightens the humour. The Klan’s chant is the same number sung by the soldiers in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), further emphasising the mythical representation of the Klan and the absurdness of the scene. McFarland takes this further comparing Everett, Pete and Delmar to the Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion as they rescue their friend, black blues musician Tommy (Chris Thomas King) from the Klan’s noose, which links the scene to the ‘pleasure in witnessing a childhood fantasy defeat evil.’ This connection with fantasy helps to maintain the light-hearted, mythical tone of the film.

However, despite this comedy and connection to fantasy, there is a sinister undercurrent to the scene. Indeed, unlike most of the ‘low brow’ comedies released at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Klan are presented as threatening – they are moments from lynching Tommy. Following the Klan dance, the comical tone of the scene shifts as the town’s potential new Governor and Klan leader, Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall), sings ‘O Death’ – a melancholy and ominous piece that is reminiscent of a mourning song. Stokes is shot in low-angles and flanked by flaming torches with his arms outstretched between them; this mise-en-scène emphasises the seriousness and changing tone of the scene. The threat is compounded as Tommy is led through the Klansmen with the fiery cross looming above him. However, to prevent Tommy’s lynching, the protagonists dress as Klansmen and act as the guard for the Confederate flag. Their clumsiness in the role reinstates the comedy of the scene.

As discussed previously, there is a sizable cinematic history of Klansmen being defeated by heroes guised in Klan robes (this is especially true of black protagonists).

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84 McFarland, pp. 48-49.
In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the Klan are again defeated by protagonists utilising Klan iconography. The protagonists approach Tommy, disguised in robes; however, Big Dan reveals their identities, the Klan are shocked as the polish applied earlier in the scene leads the Klansmen to believe they are ‘coloured’. Delmar uses the Confederate flag as a weapon against the attacking Klan; they are shown to be too afraid to touch the flag out of respect. Delmar utilises this fear, distracting the Klansmen by throwing the flag into the air; the Klan watch it with comical synchronised gasps and applaud as Big Dan catches the flag with the pole inches from his face. Using this distraction Everett cuts the support to the fiery cross which then crushes Big Dan as the heroes flee.

The seriousness of the near lynching of Tommy is offset by the opening Berkeley style dance and the screwball antics of the protagonists saving him. In other words, the racism and danger of the Klan is flanked by scenes of comedy. This bookending works to maintain the comedic tone of the film whilst acknowledging the racism of the period with the lingering memories of lynchings. Unlike *Forrest Gump* or *Django Unchained*, the Klan in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are not utilised to further the heroic position of the protagonists. Certainly, the scene presents them as heroes, and as McFarland argues presents a ‘pleasure’ in their defeat of evil, yet, the protagonists’ heroics are already firmly established through their various misadventures, albeit with the tone of a screwball comedy.85 The Klan act as an embodiment of the period and of mysticism and, therefore, are utilised to further the setting, rather than character. The group are presented as absurd as the Coen brothers exaggerate the ritual of the Klan to a point of excessive comedy; the Klan’s own mysticism is used to disarm their threat through this humour.

Following the Klan meet, Homer Stokes attends a political event. To this point, his campaign for Governor has been successful, and he looks likely to win the election. The protagonists and Tommy are also at the meeting, disguised and performing as the ‘Soggy Bottom Boys’. Stokes notices the group and stops the music declaring that ‘these boys is not white’ and explains how they ‘interfered’ with a lynch mob and ‘desecrated a fiery cross’. Confidently, Stokes declares his membership to the Klan and stops the protagonists playing their music further. However, Stokes miss-judges the crowd, they are not impressed by his membership to the Klan, but rather heckle him for

85 Robert C. Sickels, “‘We’re in a Tight Spot!’: The Coen Brother’s Screwy Romantic Comedies’, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36.3 (2008), 114-22 (pp. 119-20.).
his declaration and remove him on a wooden plank for the punishment of ‘rough
music’. His political rival, Pappy O’ Daniel, by contrast, aligns himself with the
developing society that accepts the Soggy Bottom Boys and their integration. O’ Daniel
accepts progression, whereas the confidence and pride Stokes exhibits in his
membership to the Klan challenges the public’s ‘ability to change’, here he is mistaken
which is the cause of his downfall in the public-eye.86 The Klan are shown to have
isolated themselves from society, the views they hold are rejected from the masses and
so lead to their own defeat. The Klan’s ideology leads to rejection; as with Django
Unchained, there is a prevailing message against the short-sightedness of racism.

The films of the Coen brothers often focus on the ‘little man’ who barely
understands the world around him, yet who succeeds against superior figures.87 This is
evident in their previous comedies, for instance, The Dude (Jeff Bridges) in The Big
Lebowski who wonders through the film world with a White Russian in hand. Or, the
lovable fool Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) in The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), who is
oblivious to the malevolent plots surrounding him as he rises to success, here the ‘little
man’ is able to defeat ‘tyrannical’ businessmen through a ‘unifying vision’ of
enjoyment and Hula Hoops.88 Likewise, in O Brother, Where Art Thou? the
protagonists stumble through their farcical world, seemingly with little control of the
events surrounding them. Stokes is the dominant political force (in Government and the
Klan), yet, he is defeated by the protagonists. In O Brother, Where Art Thou? the ‘little
man’ protagonists represent the everyman, whereas Stokes and the Klan isolate
themselves by assuming a position of superiority. This is not so much a critique of
contemporary society as it is a timeless statement against bigotry. To an extent this is
not dissimilar from Frank Capra’s populism, often seen as an inspiration for The
Hudsucker Proxy; but equally found in O Brother, Where Art Thou?, as the underdog,
or ‘little man’, overcomes the oppressive and the elite.89 The oppressive nature of
Stokes is emphasised through the bigotry of the Klan; he believes he is superior

December 2011.
167.
Paul Coughlin, ‘The Past is Now: History and The Hudsucker Proxy’, in The Philosophy of the Coen
204-05).
because of his membership to the organisation. The film presents his defeat as a success for the ‘little man’ and the masses; racism is again isolated to the Klan who are an exception to the attitudes found in wider American society. This populism is coupled with a jovial tone, in the comedy and light-heartedness of the screwball narrative. Ultimately, the Klan are isolated from society, and belittled through the film’s comedy.

4.7 Conclusion

O Brother, Where Art Thou? demonstrates the flexibility found in the Klan image by the twenty-first century. In the historical comedy and the white melodrama the Klan image is presented to evoke history; in the white melodrama the Klan are depicted to suggest that racism as dated, whereas in the Coen brothers’ film the Klan are utilised to develop the southern historic-mythical setting. The depiction of the Klan also guides the narrative’s exploration of racism. Through the Klan and the near lynching of Tommy, the racism of the 1930s is addressed, offering a relatively critical depiction of America’s history of racism, yet in the film the Klan’s iconography is also used to provoke humour. The Klan’s stylised dancing undermines the gravity of the scene; the serious subject of racism is placed into the absurdity of the screwball comedy, generating humour by presenting violation and the benign. The protagonists’ use of black-face also acts as a violation, however, in the scene, where comedy arises from excess, this taboo image heightens the absurdity of the comedy and mocks the ignorance of the Klan. The significance of racism to American history is further undermined in the image.

The Klan are similarly utilised to guide the depiction of history in Django Unchained and Forrest Gump. In Django Unchained the erroneous inclusion of the Klan highlights the film’s focus on Django’s narrative, and not the history of the period. Equally, in Forrest Gump the use of the Klan is to paradoxically minimise the importance of racism to the narrative; by mocking the group in the opening scenes, the film establishes Forrest’s innocence which, subsequently, explains why racism is not explored in the ‘historical’ narrative. Django Unchained and Forrest Gump also utilise the Klan in a similar manner to the white melodrama in that the protagonists of the films are established in contrast to the Klan as heroic and innocent, respectively. Evidently, the Klan are used as recognisable figures that appear dated to a contemporary audience, which helps to guide the narratives of these historical
comedies. But they also continue to be depicted as a shorthand for evil which, in turn, highlights the goodness of the protagonist and simplifies America’s history of racism.

However, these three films also clearly act to belittle the Klan. Rice argues that in Django Unchained and O Brother, Where Art Thou? the Klan is desensitised as they are defeated through the use of their own iconography, respectively the poor visibility of the Klan hoods and the fiery cross that crushes Big Dan. What is more apparent, I argue, is how the Klan are defeated in these films because of their racism. In Django Unchained the Klan’s lack of vision acts as an extended metaphor to show that racists are blind; they are defeated by the black hero as they do not recognise his strength. Homer Stokes, in O Brother, Where Art Thou?, believes he is superior because of his membership to the Klan, which leads to his public downfall. In the white melodrama the Klan are defeated by the ‘good’ white protagonist in narratives of white conflict. By contrast, in these two historical comedies the Klan collapse under their own racist ideology – this is a more challenging view of racism than is found in the white melodrama, albeit presented in a comic and belittling manner.

Forrest Gump does not offer as strong a critique as racism is not defeated so much as it is ignored in the narrative; though Forrest does dismiss the Klan as childish because of their robes. This difference between Forrest Gump and the later historical comedies demonstrates Hollywood’s changing attitudes to racism and the Klan that is apparent though my research period. The white melodramas of the 1990s did not offer a detailed exploration of the Klan or racism, rather their use as the white ‘Other’ paradoxically minimised the exploration of racism – much as the depiction of the Klan undermines themes of racism in Forrest Gump. By contrast, Django Unchained is aligned with other mainstream films of the 2010s, discussed in the following chapter, that offer a greater exploration of the black voice and America’s history of racism. Where Forrest Gump utilises the Klan to mask historic issues of racism, Django Unchained presents the group to emphasise to a contemporary audience the prevalence of racism and violence in American history.

In Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay the Klan continue to be depicted as the white ‘Other’; they are unintelligent ‘hick’ figures, found in the rural woods of the deep south. This depiction of the Klan as the southern ‘Other’ is now a repeated and accepted stereotype, that the film draws upon to critique contemporary America.

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90 Rice, White Robes, Silver Screens, p. 228.
Klansmen, along with other absurd characters such as Homeland Security Agent Fox, present an extreme vision of whiteness, whilst Harold and Kumar are shown to stand for ‘normal’ American values. Unlike the comedies of the early-1980s the Klan are not being mocked to belittle the group, there depiction as idiotic ‘hicks’ has already been established through melodrama and comedy. Rather, their absurdity is used to challenge issues of profiling in contemporary America, demonstrating that race does not define Americans. This is one of the only ‘low-brow’ or ‘teen’ comedy films of the period to utilise the Klan to offer critique; though, Head of State also uses the ‘hick’ figure of the Klansman to undermine the threat of Osama bin Laden and to parody American political adverts.

As is demonstrated through Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay and Head of State, the ‘hick’ depiction of the Klan is an accepted exaggeration. This comic depiction has stemmed from their use in the white melodrama. In the comedy films of the 1970s and 1980s the Klan were depicted as southern, but not necessarily as idiotic ‘hicks’; only Smokey and the Bandit Part 3 overtly links the Klan to comical southern stereotypes. Indeed, in The Toy the Klansman is presented in business attire. Furthermore, Fletch Lives suggests the ‘hick’ nature of the Klan as they flee in pick-up trucks, but the Klan leader does not speak with a particularly strong accent nor is he visually ‘Other’. Yet, in the twenty-first century comedies, which follow the ‘Othering’ of the Klan in the 1990s white melodrama, the Klan have been habitually linked to the comical ‘hick’ stereotype. This is evident across the range of comedies discussed in this chapter from Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me to Bad Boys II. This demonstrates the evolution of the Klan image through the 1990s into the twenty-first century. The Klan have become increasingly stereotyped, their use as the southern ‘Other’ in the white melodrama has been exaggerated in the comedy film. The taboo shock of the 1980s comedies is not evident in these contemporary films that depict the Klan as absurd. Indeed, in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me, The Cabin in the Woods, and Step Brothers the Klan are used as simplified evil caricatures and are not depicted in relation to race or racism.

In these ‘teen’ comedies the Klan image is only presented as taboo when included in racially heightened scenes, as is found in Scary Movie 3, Road Trip, and A Madea Christmas. However, the normalisation of crude humour in the ‘teen’ film means that the use of the Klan image is not significantly shocking. This is particularly apparent with the racial jokes of Scary Movie 3 that present racism with irreverence. Before
George lifts his hood, jokes in the scene have already been made of the black, white, and Asian communities; though in the film the audience of the rap-battle are shocked by George’s ‘Klan’ hood, the viewer of Scary Movie 3 is not. The outdated Klan image is only relevant because of the heightened racial environment of the scene, provoking ‘pseudo-taboo’. This is not to say there are no racial connotations to the Klan’s iconography. There is a prevailing racial tension in the image that in Bad Boys II serves to further the heroic nature of the protagonists through their contrast with the Klan. But, as is found with A Madea Christmas, Road Trip, and Scary Movie 3, the racial comedy that arises from this tension is often from the exaggerated reaction of black characters. In the films of the 1970s and early-1980s strong black characters defeated the Klan (in comedy and drama), demonstrating social progression and the continued tension after the Civil Rights Movement. In the comedy films of the twenty-first century, black characters are comically scared and angered by the Klan’s iconography. Yet, this self-deprecating humour reflects the pseudo-taboo, the audience are not threatened by the Klan image – but rather laugh at it. The comedy that arises from the over-reaction of the black characters highlights the attenuation of the Klan’s threat in American cinema. These films are not suggesting that racism is comical or non-existent in American society but show that it is not found in the absurd ‘Other’ figure of the Klan. By depicting the Klan ‘Other’ they avoid explorations of contemporary racism. Some comedy films such as Head of State, Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, and Django Unchained, utilised the Klan image as a form of critique, though not necessarily about racism. However, the most common portrayal of the Klan in the period was as an absurd, bordering meaningless, depiction of villainy. Moving into the 2010s, however, Hollywood’s films focus more substantially on the black narrative and the representation of the Klan changes significantly.
Chapter Five: Change and Impasse in Contemporary Depictions of the Klan (2011-2016)

In recent years the Klan have again been depicted in a series of drama films. The genres of these films range from gangster thrillers, to Civil Rights narratives, and horror. In this chapter I look at this variety, noting that some films reflect a changing approach to the representation of the Klan; these narratives focus less on the Klan and instead detail the plight of the black community. This is in-keeping with several of Hollywood’s narratives in the period which offer a greater exploration of the black voice. Yet, other films continue to utilise the Klan for melodramatic tension to heighten the drama of the narrative. In this chapter I consider the change and impasse in the contemporary representation of the Klan to explore the evolution of Hollywood’s attitudes to the Klan and racism.

Films such as Selma (2014) and Lee Daniel’s The Butler (2013) (herein referred to as The Butler) focus on the activism of the black community, both films depict Klan violence, though they represent the Klan differently. In Selma, Klan violence is evident with bombings and murders, but Klansmen are not clearly depicted. In the first section of this chapter I look at this absence, exploring how the Klan have been marginalised to guide the focus of the narrative towards black activism and victimhood. Contrastingly, The Butler utilises, rather than avoids, the Klan image to explore the extremity of racism historically found within American society. In the second section of this chapter I assess how the Klan image is used to critique American history and society; this contrasts to earlier depictions of the Klan which present racism as isolated. The films discussed in these two sections offer narratives that are similar to Mississippi Burning and Malcolm X, in that they explore the events of the Civil Rights Movement and/or the longevity of racism in America. This then offers a good insight to the changing depiction of the Klan throughout my research period.

The final section of this chapter explores films that continue to depict the Klan with melodramatic simplicity; this is most noticeable with Live by Night (2016). I assess whether this contemporary melodrama presents any change in the representation of the Klan, or rather if the Klan image has reached a nadir and is now intrinsically linked to simplified melodramatic modes. In an era where Hollywood is increasingly conscious of the black voice it appears a contradiction that the Klan continue to be depicted in simplified narratives of white conflict. This chapter considers the extent to which the
Klan image continues to evolve in contemporary cinema by comparing the Klan’s representation in white melodramas, such as Live by Night, to contrary narratives that focus on the black voice, such as Selma.

5.1 Marginalising the Klan

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, black narrative films have gained a firmer place in the mainstream, with a range of critically and financially successful films such as 12 Years a Slave, Django Unchained, The Butler and, recently, Moonlight (2016), Get Out (2017), and Black Panther (2018). Further films readdress historic perspectives of the black community such as The Birth of a Nation (2016), whilst others offer narratives about the position of the black community in contemporary society as with Fruitvale Station (2013) and Dear White People (2014). This age of cinema provides the greatest focus on the black voice since the films of the early-1990s. As discussed, at the turn of the twenty-first century race relations within America were not a significant focus of public and media discourse compared to the threat of international terrorism. This partly led to the prevalence of the Klan’s use in comedy. Under the Obama administration, however, race was once again at the forefront of American social dialogue.

Hollywood often focuses on the themes that dominate public consciousness, after the election of Obama this was of America’s history of racism and of black progression. However, the election of Obama is not the only factor that has driven the public’s and Hollywood’s interest in race relations. During this period there have been several noticeable incidences of black citizens being fatally wounded by police officers, most noticeably with the shooting of Michael Brown (2014) which acted as a catalyst for unrest and riots in Ferguson, Missouri, which bore similarities (if on a smaller scale) to the events in Los Angeles, 1992. In addition to fatalities resulting from police action, there have also been several public incidents that have highlighted the continuing racial divide in America, such as the shooting of the unarmed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin (2012) by a member of a neighbourhood watch. The Black

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1 McClintock and Ford.
2 Izzo, pp. vii-viii.
Lives Matter movement has attempted to publicise and challenge this divide.\(^5\) Contemporary public discourse on race stems from factors that are both positive (the election of Obama) and negative (publicity of police brutality and shootings). This has led to increased questions of how America’s history of racism continues to impact contemporary America. This is epitomised by the debate surrounding the stance of Civil War statues, as well as the display of the Confederate flag in contemporary America, particularly after the 2015 shooting in Charleston by Dylann Roof.\(^6\) With this social debate it is unsurprising that Hollywood has produced narratives exploring America’s racial history, particularly as the diversity of Hollywood has been repeatedly challenged in recent years, for instance with the \#OscarsSoWhite backlash.

As with Malcolm X and Rosewood in the 1990s, two contemporary films minimalise the presence of the Klan to instead explore issues of racism within society. The Help (2011) and Selma both refer to the Klan but marginalise the group, focusing instead on the struggles of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement. The Help is set in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963. The film follows white journalist Skeeter (Emma Stone) who publishes a book about the experiences of the black maids of Jackson. With the help of maids Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) and Minnie Jackson (Octavia Spencer), Skeeter collects several harrowing stories of mistreatment and oppression; when her book is released the local population are captivated. Because of Skeeter’s involvement it has been suggested that The Help constitutes a white saviour narrative.\(^7\) Certainly, the black narrative of the film is framed through whiteness and the work of Skeeter; nonetheless, The Help offers a significant focus on black victimhood. This is especially noticeable with Aibileen whose son was killed due to the neglect of white superiors at his mill. Moreover, the film’s depiction of Klan violence demonstrates how the narrative focuses on the suffering of the black community, rather than on whiteness. The Help explores the impact of the Klan on the black community; this is unlike white melodramas such as Mississippi Burning, which explores the response of good whites to Klan violence.

\(^7\) Matthew W. Hughey, The Whiteness of Oscar Night, article, Contexts, 19 January 2015 <https://contextsmagazine.org/blog/the-whiteness-of-oscar-night/> [accessed 20 February 2018]
News breaks of the murder of Medgar Evers, the broadcast is watched by Skeeter and her mother’s ‘help’. Evers is shown to be an inspiration to the black community, which is worrying to some in the white community, such as Skeeter’s mother (Allison Janney) who turns off the television so as not to ‘encourage them’. Radio announcements continue over scenes of the black community, torn between protesting and mourning. Seeing this confusion and unrest, Aibileen runs home after ‘coloured people’ are ejected from buses. Once home, Minnie explains to Aibileen how the Klan shot Evers in front of his children and expresses her concern that they may be equally at risk for helping Skeeter. Unlike Ghosts of Mississippi which shows Evers’ death briefly to establish a narrative between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whites, the death of Evers in The Help emphasises the sacrifices and struggles of the wider black community, from their leaders (Evers) to less obvious, but equally significant activists (Minnie and Aibileen). Klan violence is referred to through Evers’ assassination, but the focus of the following scenes is on the response of the black community. Shortly after Evers’ death, a maid Yule Mae Davis (Aunjanue Ellis) is arrested and beaten by police – because of this more maids begin to help Skeeter with their stories, following in the activism of Evers.

The Klan are not pictured in the film, but their violence is evident, for example with Evers’ death; the threat of the Klan lingers in Jackson. The white melodramas of the 1990s separate the Klan ‘Other’ from good white figures. By contrast, in The Help there is no clear distinction between the Klan and other figures of white society. Rather the Klan are presented as ingrained into society; their violence is present, but their identities are unknown. Moreover, seemingly respectable groups appear to share Klan ideology. A women’s ‘league’, headed by Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard), expresses extreme views and supports segregation, forcing maids to use different toilets for fear of their uncleanliness. Though they are not linked to the Klan through iconography, Holbrook threatens Skeeter with ‘real’ racists in the state (implying the Klan); this threat gives the impression that the league, or some members of the league, are linked with the Klan. This is a rare example of a film that links women to the Klan; Hollywood typically depicts the group as thuggish men; however, there is a precedent to female membership to the organisation, starting with the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) in the 1920s.\(^8\) As discussed with The Chamber, the Klan were often

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associated with respectable fronts such as White Citizen’s Councils. Whilst Klansmen are typically depicted as lower-class figures by Hollywood, groups like Holbrook’s league demonstrate that racism is not isolated to the lower-classes but may be exhibited from all classes of society.\(^9\) In reality Klan membership has drawn a varied demographic; for instance, David Cunningham explains how the North Carolinian United Klans of America had a membership that proportionally represented the class structure of the region.\(^10\) Unlike the white melodramas of the 1980s and 1990s, The Help emphasises the widespread and ingrained position of the Klan and racism into American society in the 1960s. In this way, by minimising the Klan, a more critical understanding of racism and society is offered by The Help. Racism is not isolated to a small group but is shown to be a problem among wider society. Moreover, instead of focusing on white conflict, The Help emphasises the suffering faced by the black community and their activism against their oppression.

In Selma the suffering and activism of the black community is also the focus of the narrative. The film follows Dr Martin Luther King Jr (David Oyelowo) during the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965. Like The Help, the Klan are not shown in the film, but their violence is again evident. For instance, the film opens with the bombing of 16\(^{th}\) Street Baptist Church (1963), Birmingham, Alabama; the bombing was committed by the Klan and killed four girls, all fourteen or younger.\(^11\) The girls converse trivially before an explosion splits the scene, shocking the viewer. In slow-motion, debris from the explosion drift across the picture, two of the girls’ bodies float through the blood and dust. The scene is not directly connected to the overall plot but serves to present the violence found in Alabama in the period and to demonstrate the injustice and the victimhood faced by the black community. This injustice is also emphasised in the following scene where Alice Lee Cooper (Oprah Winfrey) is undemocratically refused the right to vote.

The Klan’s violence is found throughout the film, but the men responsible for the violence are not visually distinguished as Klansmen. For instance, the film portrays Sheriff Jim Clark (Stan Houston) and his men (citizens he recruits) violently dispersing the Selma marchers. However, the narrative does not identify these men as Klansmen.

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9 Allison Graham, “‘We Ain’t Doin’ Civil Rights”: The Life and Times of a Genre, as Told in The Help’, Southern Cultures, 20.1 (2014), 51-64 (p. 58).
10 Cunningham, pp. 127-29.
11 May, p. 87.
who Clark had been known to recruit.\footnote{Michael Newton, \textit{Unsolved Civil Rights Murder Cases, 1934-1970} (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), p. 70.} Rev. James Reeb (Jeremy Strong), a white minister who joined the protests upon the request of Martin Luther King Jr, is murdered by two southern men; again, these men are not presented as Klansmen, as they were in reality.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 69-70.} Like \textit{The Help}, \textit{Selma} removes the distinction between Klansmen and the public, not isolating the violence and racism of the Civil Rights Movement to the ‘Other’. In doing so racism is presented as a widespread problem; equally, by having undefined antagonists there is a greater emphasis on the victim than the aggressor. For instance, the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson (Lakeith Stanfield), at the hands of a state trooper, is filmed so that his assailant is not visible, instead the focus of the shot is on Jackson and the suffering of his mother, Viola Lee Jackson (Charity Jordan). Unlike \textit{Mississippi Burning}, there is a greater emphasis on the suffering and sacrifice of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement; focus on aggressors is minimalised to instead offer a fuller understanding of the actions of the black community.

The only direct reference to the Klan in \textit{Selma} is in the post-script which details the murder of Viola Liuzzo (Tara Ochs) who was murdered by the Klan five hours after King’s speech in Montgomery. Liuzzo’s death, as a white mother of five, shocked the nation; however, in the context of \textit{Selma} Liuzzo’s role was minor.\footnote{Mary Stanton, \textit{From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo} (London: University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 6.} The post-script of the film contrasts with images of King performing an impassioned speech. Low-angled shots of King and a swelling score develop the sense of his victory, as there was for black voting rights, but the text informing the viewer of the deaths of King and Liuzzo demonstrates the continued violence of the era. Unlike the climax of films like \textit{Mississippi Burning} and \textit{A Time to Kill}, which present racism as resolved, \textit{Selma} emphasises that there is no easy solution to racism. Liuzzo is included in the narrative to highlight that, despite the voting reform, there remained a struggle against inequality, racism, and the Klan.\footnote{Director Ava DuVernay explained this post-script was to avoid ‘fabricated triumph’ and to show the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement as ‘ongoing’: Hilary Higgins, ‘David Oyelowo and Director Ava DuVernay Show a Very Human Dr. King in \textit{Selma},’ Chicago Tribune Online, 6 January 2015 <http://www.chicagotribune.com/redeye/redeye-selma-interview-20141230-column.html> [accessed 20 April 2017].}
Like *The Help*, in *Selma* the Klan are presented as an omnipresent threat, though not visible their violence is felt by Civil Rights activists. *The Help* and *Selma* demonstrate the widespread acceptability of racism in the American south and the lingering influence of the Klan in the period. The distinction between racists and non-racists, or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whites is confused, and the division between class and racism is removed. In both films the influence, violence, and racism of the Klan is felt across social classes. In *Selma* the racism of police officers and politicians also demonstrates institutional racism. Other films of this study have shown Klan infiltration of the police force, films like *Mississippi Burning, A Time to Kill*, and *Posse*, all present Klansmen who are police officers. In these films the protagonists address this injustice, fixing the system by punishing the Klan. By contrast *Selma* presents the Klan’s racism as imbedded into American society and Klansmen go unpunished (though Clark does not win the next election for sheriff). Much as *Malcolm X* links Civil Rights violence to the racism of the 1990s, *Selma* emphasises that there is no easy resolution to America’s race relations – this is a powerful message in an age that sees the first black presidency, yet also sees the continuation of police brutality. As with *Malcolm X*, the minimised focus on the dated Klan in *Selma* helps to draw links between the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary age, as racism is shown to be pervasive in normal society in the narrative, the film challenges viewers to consider America’s current composition of racism.

The relation between the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary age is also emphasised through the use of the Confederate flag. In *Selma* George Wallace (Tim Roth), who stubbornly rejects the work of King, addresses the public after a protest at Selma’s registration office. He is flanked by Confederate flags, he speaks of confederacy, the founding fathers, and the possibility of a ‘mongrel’ future; his speech harks to a Klan rhetoric. Similarly, Confederate flags are used by angered locals as a threatening image, replacing the Klan’s iconography with one found readily in the

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16 Wallace had initially criticised the Klan who supported his political rival John Patterson (in 1958), after he was soundly defeated, Wallace declared that he would never be ‘out-niggered again’ and took a firm stance on segregation. After, Klansman Asa Carter worked as a speechwriter for Wallace; Carter helped write Wallace’s infamous ‘Segregation Now! Segregation Tomorrow! Segregation Forever!’ speech, possibly based of the Klan phrase ‘Yesterday, today, forever’:


Unlike the dated Klan image, the Confederate flag is recognisable and relevant in the contemporary age. The Klan’s iconography is replaced by an image that remains controversial in present society, like the 1990s black narrative Selma parallels historic racism with current anxieties. In American cinema the Klan have previously been depicted as ‘Other’, they were used to absolve the viewer of the responsibility for racism. By removing the group Selma does not offer this escape. Rather racism is depicted as imbedded into society; with this, the widespread oppression of the black community is emphasised. Racism is not simplified through the Klan image, instead the film focuses on the activism of the black community against social persecution.

Both The Help and Selma end highlighting the positive actions of the black community but equally demonstrate the continued struggle they face. In The Help the success of Skeeter’s book is celebrated in the black community, though the maids are still treated poorly as Aibileen is fired on false charges. Selma sees King’s actions result in the removal of voting restrictions but highlights the continued violence of the era with the deaths of King and Liuzzo. The two films differ in tone; The Help has comic interludes and is framed through whiteness, this contrasts to the focus on blackness in the biographical Selma. Yet, in both films the struggles of the black community are highlighted through Klan violence, though the absence of the Klan’s iconography means that themes of racism are not depicted as simplified or resolved. The Help and Selma demonstrate how Hollywood has become more comfortable in depicting a challenging vision of America’s history of racism.

Two contemporary films, The Butler and Free State of Jones (2016), also explore negative attributes of American history, yet unlike The Help and Selma, they utilise the Klan’s iconography to explore these themes.

5.2 The Klan and American History

The Butler follows Cecil Gaines (Forrest Whitaker), a butler who witnesses America’s social and political changes as he serves in the White House from 1957 under the Eisenhower (Robin Williams) administration to the mid-1980s under Reagan (Alan Rickman). His son, Louis (David Oyelowo), meanwhile, turns to activism and is

\[^\text{17}\] The association between the Klan and the Confederate flag are well linked in the public eye. John M. Coski argues that news media has ‘allowed’ the Klan to ‘seize control’ of the Confederate flag in the 1950s and 1960s, associating Klan violence to the Confederate flag:

involved with the Woolworths sit-ins, works with Martin Luther King Jr (Nelsan Ellis), and is a Freedom Rider. The film shows the different approaches taken to further the position of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement in presenting a hard-working ethic (Cecil), peaceful activism (Louis), and violent activism, which is hinted at through the Black Panthers.

The film depicts the Klan’s firebombing of a Freedom Rider’s bus on the 14th May 1961 in Anniston, Alabama, which local police, led by Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor, helped orchestrate. In reality, Klansmen in plain clothes attacked the bus in broad-daylight; and attempted to hold the Freedom Riders in the bus as it burnt, brutally beating them as they escaped. Here, The Butler takes some artistic license as the Klan attack the Riders’ bus at night, dressed in full regalia. Lewis sees an electronic cross (attached to a truck) approaching the bus; he implores the driver to turn, but they cannot avoid the Klan’s ambush. Robed Klansmen and members of the public emerge from the mist, they surround and attack the activists. Slow-motion is used to emphasise the lighting of a fiery cross, which causes panic among the passengers. Again, the fiery cross is used to emphasise threat. Like Betrayed the cross is superimposed over the scene, the flames developing a sense of claustrophobia and entrapment. A Klansman then throws a petrol-bomb onto the bus; this is also shown in slow-motion to emphasise the brutality of the violence. The scene then fades to a photo of the real burnt Greyhound bus.

The juxtaposition between members of the public and Klansmen in the assaulting mob is purposefully shocking. This contrast is most noticeable with an enraged middle-aged woman who, in a pink flowing dress, embodies the archetype of the southern housewife. Yet, she runs towards the bus holding a sign reading ‘Alabama Hates Niggers’ and screams insults; her presence is a challenge to the romanticised cinematic depiction of the southern woman. As discussed briefly in Chapter Two, Amy Corbin explains that because of news footage from the Civil Rights Movement, the southern white man is often associated with racism and is presented as such in film; however, southern women do not have this ‘moral taint’ and are instead marketed by Hollywood as having the ‘moral weight of victimhood’. This is apparent with characters such as Mrs Pell in Mississippi Burning, who is an innocent figure that contrasts to her Klansman husband; or, looking beyond the Civil Rights Movement, in Ruth and Idgie

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19 Ibid.
20 Corbin, p. 16.
in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, who create a multi-cultural society in their café. *The Butler* subverts this idyllic depiction, with the southern woman being depicted as one of the most shocking and threatening images in the scene. The film emphasises that extreme racism comes from white robes and pink dresses alike. Rather than isolating the Klan from society, as is found in the white melodrama, *The Butler* associates the violence of the Klan to the southern public by linking their iconography with the mundane. This is similar to *The Help* which links racism to the Women’s League. These contemporary works give a broader view of racism presenting it across gender and class lines. Where the white melodrama offers a soothing narrative that depicts the Klan as an isolated cause of racism, contemporary films offer a more critical view of racism found within American society.

However, *The Butler* offers little relation between the violence of the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary age. Rather the film ends with the election of Barack Obama in 2008; this is presented as the accumulation of decades of black activism. Obama’s election is depicted as though a resolution to racism in America. Though the film explores the longevity of political repression and violence from groups like the Klan, there is an absence of images that have relevance to contemporary society, for example police brutality. The Klan, distinguished in their robes, are presented as a past force, one that did cause serious violence but who are not relevant to contemporary America. The election of Obama offers a soothing climax for contemporary audiences by suggesting that racism may once have been widespread in America but is not so in the present day. *The Butler* aligns with other films of the period in offering a more critical view of American history and society, especially by linking the Klan to the public; however, the ‘feel good’ resolution to the film remains apparent, potentially as an attempt to hold a crossover audience.

The films discussed thus far in this chapter have been focused on the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, the critique of American history in contemporary cinema extends further with films such as *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave* which explore slavery. *Free State of Jones* continues this trend, exploring slavery and the American Civil War. The film, based on a true story, follows Newton Knight (Matthew McConaughey) who rebels against the Confederacy with ex-slaves to form the Free
State of Jones (seceding from Jones County, Mississippi). Knight falls in love and has a child with ex-slave Rachel (Gugu Mbatha-Raw); the couple also live with Knight’s ex-wife, Serena (Keri Russell), who is white and had also mothered a child with Knight. A subplot of the film follows Newton’s ancestor, the seemingly white Davis Knight (Brian Lee Franklin), who is unable to marry in Mississippi in the 1940s because of miscegenation laws as he is unable to prove if he is a descendant of Rachel or Serena.

Though the film focuses on Knight, the leader of the Free State, Richard Brody and Jennifer Schuessler have argued that the film is not a white saviour narrative; rather they suggest that Knight offers a figure allied to equality, the black community, and the post-racial south. Alongside Knight the black community is presented as equally resilient and risk their lives to challenge the American racial order. For instance, ex-slave, Moses (Mahershala Ali), is seen tirelessly working to recruit voters, for this he is lynched by white men (presumed to be Klansmen). The first reaction to Moses’s death is of his wife (Kesha Bullard Lewis) who reacts in fear as she realises he is missing, this is followed by the tears of Knight as he finds Moses’s body. Unlike the white melodrama which focuses on white reaction to black suffering, in Free State of Jones the pain of Moses’s death affects black and white characters as equals – this is developed further in the joint mourning at Moses’s funeral. The Klan’s inclusion in Free State of Jones serves to emphasise the oppression of the black community, rather than advancing Knight’s position as a ‘good’ white figure.

On robed horses, the Klan are first presented performing a night-time raid wherein they burn down a black church. The Klansmen are styled in two forms, some Klansmen are guised in simple hoods, whereas others are dressed more elaborately in the manner

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22 Though Schuessler also quotes Kellie Carter Jackson’s counterargument that Hollywood has a ‘hard time’ in depicting non-white leads and questions why should Knight be the focus if he is an ‘ally’. Equally Jenny Barrett notes that Civil War films continue to follow white characters and do not have black characters as a central focus, which risks white bias and the reiteration of the ‘coherent myth of origins’:


Barrett, p. 194.
of the Klan of *The Birth of a Nation* (with large pickelhaubes). This depiction merges the iconography of a newly forming group (in a similar manner to *Django Unchained*) to imagery taken from *The Birth of a Nation* which evokes historic threat. By utilising the iconography of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film moves to critique American fiction as well as history. The narrative challenges the historic misrepresentation of slavery, the black community, and the Klan in fiction, as slavery and racism are not shown to have simplified conclusions, as is often found in other narratives exploring the emancipation.\(^{23}\) *The Birth of a Nation* ends with the unification of whiteness, with blacks ‘rightfully’ oppressed; other films like *Glory* (1989) present the events of the Civil War as uniting white and black Americans. *Free State of Jones*, however, emphasises how violence and contempt continued to divide the American people long-after the War; the film depicts the Klan to emphasise the elongated struggles of the black community after the emancipation proclamation. As such, unlike other films to depict the period, history is not simplified. This readdressing of fiction, specifically *The Birth of a Nation*, highlights a minor trend in contemporary films that is mirrored by *Django Unchained*, where the Klan are also used as a critique of Griffith’s film, and *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), which reutilises the title but instead focuses on Nat Turners revolt of 1831, attempting to refocus American history.

In *Free State of Jones* the threat of the Klan is emphasised through the contrast of the night and the flames that light the Klansmen; this gives the impression of a ghoulish figure, which is furthered by the crude holes their masks have for eyes and noses that offer an uncanny illusion of a face. Later in the film, the Klan are shown to beat and murder black voters, whilst a caption explains that before the 1876 election the Klan attacked thousands of southern blacks.\(^{24}\) Here, the actions of the Klansmen parallel that of *The Birth of a Nation*. In both films the black community is seen to vote

\(^{23}\) Sue Matheson offers a similar argument of how *Free State of Jones* readdresses *The Birth of a Nation* looking at other aspects of the narrative:


\(^{24}\) This violence had a significant effect on the black Republican vote and hastened the end of Reconstruction:

(successfully in *The Birth of a Nation* and unsuccessfully in *Free State of Jones*), before the Klan intimidate them to ensure that they will not vote again. The oppression faced by the black community is overt; the Klan feature directly after instances of black progression. For instance, the Klan’s razing of the church follows a scene in which Moses declares to a Union League, populated mostly by ex-slaves, that they now have the right to vote. In the rubble of the church, Knight bemoans to another white friend, Jasper (Christopher Berry), the inaction of the white Union League members. Jasper explains that for white members ‘their war is over’, their struggles ended with the Civil War; evidently this is not true for members of the black community who still face violence and fight to vote. Similarly, the second appearance of the Klan follows a scene where Knight and his men (mostly black) vote Republican at the 1872 elections, they face intimidation by men in the polling office and only two votes are counted. Despite the rigged count, the following scene shows Klansmen intimidate and murder black voters to dissuade them from voting again. As with *Selma, Free State of Jones* emphasises that racial struggles are not resolved with specific events (such as the liberation of slaves); Klan violence juxtaposes scenes of black progression, showing the continued oppression of the black community and the constant need for activism.

The bi-racial community found in the Free State mirrors that found in *Sommersby*. In both films the community can only survive through the united work of both black and white groups. These idealist societies are formed by the white protagonists of Knight and ‘Jack’; thematically, these narratives are similar, but they offer a difference in their depiction of race. As discussed, the black community is shown to be proactive in *Free State of Jones*, more so than in *Sommersby* where they are shown to be reliant on ‘Jack’, with the exception of Judge Isaacs. The depiction of the Klan in the two films highlights this difference. The Klan in *Sommersby* are presented as a threat to ‘Jack’, even the beating of the black worker Joseph is used to demonstrate the struggles of the white saviour. In *Free State of Jones* the Klan are presented as a force that oppresses the black community, the Klan’s violence is evident after milestones of black progression. Though *Free State of Jones* has a white lead, Hollywood’s response to the black narrative has clearly differed since the 1990s. In the film the Klan are not used to isolate racism or to establish the heroic nature of the white protagonist, as with the white melodrama, but to emphasise the unrelenting violence of the era faced by the black community despite the end of the Civil War.
It is noticeable that the four films discussed thus far in this chapter have offered a greater exploration of the black narrative than found in previous mainstream films that depict the Klan. This focus on black suffering also highlights the issue of white hegemony within American society as racism is not depicted as isolated to the Klan but as widespread. Looking at *12 Years a Slave*, David M. Jones notes how the film creates a ‘national awareness’ of white supremacy challenging ‘the internalization of established white supremacist scripts’ that forget black suffering through ‘antebellum nostalgia’.25 Similarly, the films discussed in this chapter challenge the soothing narratives of the white melodrama, they highlight the oppression of the black community and show racism as a complex issue with no resolution. These films demonstrate the imbedded nature of racism in American society by entwining the Klan with normal citizens (whether visually depicting the Klan or not). Unlike the white melodrama, these films do not significantly focus on the Klan, rather these narratives offer a greater level of empathy to the black community by demonstrating how Klan violence affects them. It is this empathy that challenges the simplified visions of the white melodrama, highlighting the effects of racism rather than minimalising the issue. The depiction of the Klan is varied in the four films discussed so far, divided between marginalising the group and utilising their iconography. However, these films show how in recent years the Klan have been used to offer a complex understanding of racism, Hollywood has shifted from presenting soothing white melodramas to films that depict America’s troubled history and offer a strong black voice.

5.3 The Continuation of Melodrama

In contrast to the previous films of this chapter which present the Klan in challenging historical narratives, three films of the period continue to present the group with a melodramatic tone, namely, *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* (2013), *Imperium* (2016), and *Live by Night*. These melodramatic depictions appear on the fringes of the mainstream; *Live by Night* was a large-scale production but was a box office flop as shall be discussed. *Imperium* and *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* had limited theatre runs, alongside video-on-demand releases, therefore the popularity of these films is hard to establish. They are included in this study of the

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mainstream because of their star power, such as Daniel Radcliff’s leading role in *Imperium*, or because of the success of their franchise; *The Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* is a low-budget production but its predecessor, *The Haunting of Connecticut* (2009), was moderately successful taking $77.5 million in the global box office.\(^{26}\) It is important to consider how these melodramatic images relate to popular trends in contemporary Hollywood and the re-emergence of the black narrative.

In *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* the Wyrick family move to a rural Georgian house; shortly after the move, the young daughter of the family, Heidi (Emily Alyn Lind), sees visions of a mysterious figure, as well as slaves. It materialises that the land once was a station on the Underground Railroad. A flashback shows the Stationmaster (Wayne Pére), a taxidermist enthusiast, being beaten by other landowners in revenge for assisting the slaves; they lynch the Stationmaster and stuff him with his taxidermy equipment. The landowners wear white hoods and hold flaming torches, whilst never described as Klansmen, their attire clearly identifies them as such. As the film progresses it materialises that the Stationmaster was actually evil, he would starve the slaves then perform taxidermy on their corpses. His spirit haunts the land and the Wyricks, he is defeated when Heidi’s mother Lisa (Abigail Spencer) learns the truth and releases the spirits of the slaves who seek revenge on the Stationmaster. The slave spirits form a mob that mirrors that of the Klan, and ‘murder’ the spirit of the Stationmaster. The two ‘deaths’ of the Stationmaster are superimposed, or layered, onto one another, showing a similarity between the mobs of the Klan and the slaves. This depicts the Klan and slaves as equals, bound by a common enemy; the superimposition of the Klan and slaves even gives the problematic suggestion that they are the same figures. The use of the Klan’s iconography is confused, it is unclear as to their purpose in the film excepting that they are used to heighten the tension and melodrama of the narrative whilst evoking a racial past.

Even though the film focuses on the white protagonist the American racial past is an evident theme in the film. Frank Scheck reviews this as an attempt to ‘add socially conscious thematic heft to the storyline’, though the film ultimately fails to make this ‘convincing’.\(^{27}\) Issues of race and racism were popular trends in cinema of the period

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and so the Klan are used in the film to capitalise on such themes. This is not dissimilar to the manipulation of the Klan image in films of the 1920s, where the Klan were depicted in a range of genres as studios attempted to benefit from their popularity. In *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* the Klan are equated to slaves, this is a strange construction which does not offer a social comment on American history or contemporary society. In this way, the Klan are not used to critique history, they are used as a provocative image in an attempt to present the narrative with a heightened gravitas to fit within popular trends of contemporary American cinema.

In a contrasting genre, a similar use of the Klan is found in *Live by Night*, set in the 1920s. In the film a fiery cross is burnt outside of a speakeasy to intimidate protagonist Joe Coughlin (Ben Affleck). As armed Klansmen ride slowly away, Joe stares at the cross abashed whilst the party (of mostly black and ethnic cliental) fall silent. The scene reflects the power and threat of the 1920s Klan and utilises the fiery cross, which remains a powerful image in contemporary cinema. Joe, an Irish-American gangster, is a bootlegger in Florida; he falls in love with Graciela Corrales (Zoe Saldana), a black-Cuban woman. The Klan form part of the opposition that Joe encounters, chiefly through Klansman R. D. Pruitt (Matthew Mhaer). Pruitt begins to rob Joe’s establishments at gunpoint, exclaiming ‘this is what happens when Catholics try and sell liquor down here.’ In a meeting between Joe and Pruitt this anti-Catholic rhetoric is repeated, Pruitt also expresses his distaste for Joe’s relationship with Graciela; this failed negotiation leads to a mob war between Joe and the Klan.

There is a contrast in the depiction of the Klan in *Live by Night*. Joe and his men discuss the strength of the organisation noting their spread of five million members nationwide. The film is a rare example that highlights the Klan’s anti-Catholicism and their position as an enforcer of social morality (in the form of prohibition laws).\(^{28}\) The Klan’s ‘defence’ of moral values and their disdain for other minority groups, such as Catholics, presents the Klan with a greater depth than is portrayed in other white melodramas. The Klan’s position within society is further compounded as Klan Grand Dragon (J. D. Evermore) threatens Joe with the breadth of Klan membership explaining that they incorporate a wide variety of men including ‘clerks and bankers and police officers, and deputies, and hell, we even got a judge’. The film highlights that the

Klan’s historical membership was widespread and crossed social boundaries. Despite this, Joe repeatedly dismisses the group as ‘inbreeds with fourth grade educations’ and ‘inbred shit-pickers’. This disparagement undermines the film’s exploration of the 1920s Klan and instead re-establishes the cliché of the ‘hick’ Klansmen.

Similarly, Pruitt is depicted as an unusual figure for an outlaw; he wears tweed and a bow-tie, and is easily distinguishable with a high pitch voice, popping eyes, and a cleft palate. Pruitt’s presentation, especially when compared to the handsome and suave Joe, marks him as ‘Other’. This, as Martin F. Norden explains, is representative of Hollywood’s use of disabilities to mark characters visually as ‘Other’. This use of disability is a device that is also used to signify Klansmen in other films of this study, for instance, in Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay the Grand Dragon has a prominent lazy eye (and in the extended edition, a comical version of Tourette’s syndrome) and Orin in Sommersby has a prosthetic foot that exposes him as a Klansman to the observant ‘Jack’. In the white melodrama and in comedy the Klan are visually presented as the ‘Other’, using disability, or abnormality, to distinguish them from the good white protagonists. This division between good and evil, or handsome and ‘marked’, is evident in Live by Night which presents a melodramatic contrast between Pruitt and Joe. Like Mississippi Burning, the film acknowledges the historical significance of the Klan and their historic popularity but undermines this critique by presenting Klansmen as ‘Other’.

The Klan are once again used to heighten tension through melodramatic conflict; this is evidenced as the group are defeated by Joe’s men in a montage of mob violence. This battle, resulting in the defeat of the Klan, presents them as a minor group, not one that has millions of members. Rice argues that contemporary depictions of the 1920s Klan have reimagined the organisation as a ‘renegade and marginal racist group.’

Certainly, Live by Night marginalises the Klan; the depiction of the group in the film aligns with other white melodramas, such as Sommersby, which presents the Klan as a small band of ‘renegade’ men. These men are easily overpowered, in Live by Night

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29 Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, p. 176.

Also quoting:


31 Rice, White Robes, Silver Screens, p. 229.
their threat is resolved within twenty minutes of screen-time through dramatic violence; they have little effect on the plot. This melodramatic use of the Klan has been noted in reviews, Dan Jolin, for instance, argues that the Klan are presented in an attempt to add ‘flavour’ to the narrative, whilst Peter Bradshaw notes that the Klan are included to ‘insist’ on Joe’s status as the ‘righteous underdog’ and labels the film ‘narcissistic’. This depiction of the Klan, popularised in the 1980s and 1990s white melodrama, conflicts with modern sensibilities and film narratives. In a period where American cinema has challenged American racial order and offered a critical exploration of America’s history of racism, *Live by Night* reverts to a ‘reassuring’ image of racial hegemony. With mixed reviews, audiences turned away from *Live by Night* and looked for ‘ fresher’ narratives with films such as *Hidden Figures* (2016), which was released at the same time but was significantly more successful at the box office. Recent cinematic trends have shown how the ‘ black narrative’ film can appeal to a crossover audience. The white melodrama of *Live by Night* conflicts with Hollywood’s developments, demonstrating the flexibility of the Klan image, but the film’s failure at the box office suggests that audiences now expect a more challenging vision of racism and history.

*Imperium* is an exception in contemporary film as it explores the current composition of the Klan and the extreme-right. The film is loosely inspired by the work of FBI Agent Michael German and demonstrates his understanding of the diverse contemporary right-wing movement, in which individuals are not stereotypical ‘ evil’ caricatures. The film warns of the spread of the extreme-right in contemporary America, offering a similar narrative to *Arlington Road* which shows extremism as hidden within middle-class society. *Imperium* follows FBI Agent Nate Foster (Daniel Radcliffe) who infiltrates various extremist right-wing groups in Washington D. C. to prevent a dirty bomb attack. The extreme-right is shown to consist of Skinheads, Nazi Aryan nationalists, Klansmen, and, perhaps most uncannily, seemingly respectable


34 ‘Making *Imperium*’, *Imperium*, dir. by Daniel Ragussis (Lionsgate Premiere, 2016) [on Blu-ray]
middle-class families; the latter of which is typified by Gerry Conway (Sam Trammell) who leads the bomb plot. Conway normalises the right-wing, adding a ‘happy face’ to the extremist movement.\textsuperscript{35} This avoids the cliché simplification found in the white melodramas and comedy films of this research; in \textit{Imperium} members of the extreme-right are not presented as ‘Others’. Furthermore, the film demonstrates the continued threat of the right-wing in a period where media focus often overlooked the subject; early in the film Agent Angela Zamparo (Toni Collette) explains this oversight arguing that ‘we all create a narrative based on what we think is important […] But just because you’re not looking at something, doesn’t mean it’s not there.’ Preceding this statement there is a montage of headlines noting crimes that were committed in recent years by white supremacist groups including the Klan. These stories of home-grown extremism had been largely ignored by a society fearful of international terrorism.

\textit{Imperium} features several montages of right-wing groups; these montages are used to emphasise Nate’s entrapment in the right-wing movement. For example, as Nate researches the extreme-right he listens to a supremacist radio-podcast, its rhetoric is scored by pictures of the contemporary right-wing. The sequence acts to educate Nate, and by extension the viewer, of the wide breadth of the extreme-right and the dangers that await him. Noticeably, in these montage sequences images of the Klan, especially the fiery cross, are prominently used. As discussed, the flames of the fiery cross continue to evoke danger, further highlighting Nate’s descent into the right-wing. Historic images of the Klan are also used in these montages, the recognisable iconography of the Klan is merged with images of ‘modern’ white supremacists emphasising the longevity of racism and the extreme-right in America. The Klan’s iconography also featured heavily in the marketing for \textit{Imperium}, which utilises the fiery cross to promote intrigue and heighten the dramatic tension of the film.\textsuperscript{36} This demonstrates a continued interest in the Klan’s image, their distinct iconography is still used in marketing to shock and excite, as it has been throughout a century of American cinema. Yet, Klansmen and Klan action only feature in the narrative tangentially.

Local Klansman, Ernest Walton (Davide Aranovich) is presented as a ‘nerdy’ figure; in checked-shirts and glasses he breaks from the usual depiction of Klansmen as uneducated southern ‘redneck’ figures. He is less physically able than others in the

\textsuperscript{35} Andrew Barker, ‘\textit{Imperium}’, \textit{Variety}, 16 August 2016, p. 103.

right-wing (who are typically depicted as muscular and intimidating); he also struggles to construct a fiery cross. Again, like *Flett Lives*, the inability to make a fiery cross presents the Klan as unintimidating as they are unable to produce their only remaining essence of threat – they are inept. Walton is rebuked for wanting a higher place in a right-wing parade, with leader of the Aryan Alliance, Andrew Blackwell (Chris Sullivan), exclaiming ‘You’re not “the Klan”. You’re the Invisible White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan! Which is what? The third Klan group in the D. C. metro area!’ With this, *Imperium* is one of few films to portray the divided structure of ‘the Klan’, which is normally erroneously presented in films as a united group. Compared to the seemingly organised and inter-connected groups that are the focus of *Imperium*, the fragmented nature of the Klan is highlighted, demonstrating their irrelevance to the contemporary right-wing movement. Though the Klan image is used in montage sequences to link historic and contemporary extremism, the contemporary Klan are not seen as a threatening component of the modern movement.

At a wedding many Klansmen are in attendance, the ceremony is lit by a fiery cross and two burning swastikas. The contrasting image of love and hate adds to the uncanny nature of the right-wing movement. The Klansmen in *Imperium* are not themselves intimidating, but the fiery cross is used to further the tension of Nate’s investigation as the viewer shares his unease at the contradicting scene. The fiery cross retains some residual potency especially as it is used in films like *Imperium* and *Betrayed* to represent a wider right-wing society, not just the Klan. Unlike, *Live by Night*, the Klan image is not used to develop Nate as a ‘good’ white figure, rather it is used to emphasise the threat of the contemporary extreme-right. The dated image of the Klan is linked to modern threat through the fiery cross, emphasising the longevity of American extremism. This is similar, to *Malcolm X*, *Selma*, and *Free State of Jones* which emphasise that there is no soothing resolve to American racism.

### 5.4 Conclusion

Through the Klansman Ernest, *Imperium* mocks the contemporary Klan. Though he is a ‘nerdy’ character rather than a brutish ‘hick’ figure, his portrayal continues the trend in depicting the Klan as comically inept. The film demonstrates the varied demographic of the extreme-right, presenting Skinheads and Nazis as contemporary threats, as well as showing the danger of extremism from ‘normal’ citizens. Yet, the Klan have no place in this modern movement. The attenuation of the Klan image over
three decades of film has led to the perception in American cinema that the Klan offer no threat and are displaced in the contemporary far-right. However, their iconography is utilised in montages to express the longevity of American racism, and the fiery cross is used in the wedding scene to offer an uncanny tableau that shows racism as imbedded in individuals who are not wholly ‘Other’. The racists have relationships, friends, and families; they are not the isolated ‘Others’ depicted in the white melodrama.

I have argued that the fiery cross retains some of its potency, this is noticeable in Betrayed, Mississippi Burning, The Butler, and Imperium. The Butler places the Klan within a historical narrative, it shows the fiery cross superimposed over scenes of panicked stricken Freedom Riders. The fiery cross emphasises the danger faced by the activists and evokes America’s violent history of racism. However, in Mississippi Burning, Betrayed, and Imperium the cross acts to present the danger surrounding white characters, all FBI agents. In Betrayed and Imperium the cross is only tangentially linked to the Klan as the narratives focus on ‘modern’ white supremacists. The continued use of the fiery cross in American cinema is suggestive of how the legacy of the Klan lingers in American consciousness. Yet, the cross has gained new connotations, it is no longer linked to the unthreatening and dated Klan but is utilised to represent a broader community of American white supremacy. Hollywood has undermined Klansmen as ineffectual but have given the fiery cross continued meaning.

Melvyn Stokes argued that the Klan are depicted in films most often after periods of Klan strength; he notes that their presence in films may continue but will look to history and not at the weakened contemporary Klan.37 Stokes’ statement is evidenced with the minimal focus on the contemporary Klan in Imperium. Yet, the Klan are repeatedly depicted in American cinema over three decades since they were last a significant threat to society (in the early-1980s). As has been discussed, the Klan’s continued representation is partly due to their utilisation as the ‘Other’ in the white melodrama, including Live by Night, and their use as a simplified evil in comedies. In the 2010s, however, the Klan have developed a new significance to American cinema. In this era where racism is at the forefront of American social dialogue, Hollywood has given greater consideration to the black narrative and to America’s history of racism. Unlike the white melodrama, which isolates racism to the Klan, films like The Butler and

Selma demonstrate how racism is found within wider society. Both films acknowledge the significance of the Klan to American history, depicting real incidences of Klan violence in the Civil Rights Movement and linking the Klan to society. In The Butler this is shown with the anger of citizens alongside Klansmen, whilst in Selma it is unclear whether violence is caused by the Klan or ‘normal’ citizens until the post-script. The Klan are viewed as an extension of the racism found within society, their racism and violence is not different from that caused by citizens. These films offer a critical view of American history and society noting that racists and the Klan are not ‘Other’ but share their views with a significant number.

The Help and Free State of Jones, like The Butler and Selma, emphasise the continuing struggles of the black community and present their activism against oppression. Free State of Jones presents white resistance to black progression, this is highlighted through the Klan who attack the black community after they gain the right to vote. These films explore Klan violence through its effects on the black community and depicts their response. In The Help and Free State of Jones maids and ex-slaves resist their oppression, they are as important as white characters or Civil Rights leaders. Here, Hollywood is depicting a ‘civic past’, offering a more nuanced view of the black community and of America’s history of racism than is found in the white melodrama. The Klan are marginalised in these films to focus instead on the black voice. However, there is still some reservation to these narratives, tellingly The Help and Free State of Jones remain framed through white characters. Nonetheless, with the removal of the white ‘Other’ these films depict racism with more complexity than is found in the mainstream films of the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, challenging the ‘happy ending’ of previous films, Free State of Jones demonstrates the continued oppression of the black community following the Civil War, which is highlighted through Klan violence. Like the black narratives of the 1990s, these contemporary films demonstrate that there is no easy resolution to racism and show the Klan as a part of a long and complex history.

Yet, despite this critical depiction of America’s history of racism, the Klan’s image continues to be utilised as melodramatic. In the Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia the Klan are used as a provocative image to suggest a potency that is not found in the narrative; here the Klan are depicted to capitalise on recent interest in racial

38 Rich, p. 20.
narratives. This utilisation of the Klan, and their use in *Live by Night*, again presents them as a cinematic shorthand for ‘evil’. As discussed, this use of the Klan in both films was poorly reviewed; the melodramatic depiction of the Klan conflicts with modern Hollywood, wherein racism and history are explored more critically. However, the continued use of the Klan as a device to heighten drama emphasises how, cinematically, the Klan image has been warped through the past three decades of cinema. Because of their previous simplified depictions, the Klan image remains somewhat fantastical in the contemporary age. Their depiction in horror, particularly in *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* aligns them with the mythic – as was also found in *The Cabin in the Woods*. Such depictions suggest how irrelevant the Klan image is to contemporary society. This is also expressed through the mocking depiction of the Klan in *Imperium*. This desensitisation of the Klan, and their use as the ‘Other’, somewhat explains the avoidance of the Klan image in *Selma* and *The Help* as to avoid simplifying or lessening the depiction of racism in these narratives. However, in these two films, as well as *The Butler* and *Free State of Jones*, the Klan have potency as they are associated with normal citizens. These narratives offer a critical view of America’s history of racism by depicting the Klan as part of American society, presenting racism as widespread rather than isolated. There is a juxtaposing duality in the depiction of the Klan in contemporary film.
Conclusion

From *Mississippi Burning* in 1988 until the 2010s, the Klan regularly featured in films as an image to depict racism as an isolated and dated problem. The white melodramas of the 1980s and 1990s began a trend that saw the Klan portrayed as the white ‘Other’, a group responsible for racism that have little relevance to contemporary society or ‘normal’ whiteness. Through this repeated melodramatic depiction, the Klan image has become disassociated from the real organisation and are used as a cinematic shorthand to personify evil. They are utilised to heighten the tension of the narrative and to emphasise the goodness of the protagonist through contrast, even in narratives with little exploration of race or racism. Historically the cinematic depiction of the Klan has often been melodramatic, for instance, the heroic ride of the Klan in *The Birth of a Nation* generated an excited furor among the audience, whilst in the 1970s the Klan were used as a provocative symbol to conflict with strong black protagonists. Films from 1988 onward, however, differ from previous depictions of the Klan in that they are founded on earlier cinematic portrayals; they are released in a period where the Klan have little relevance to society and their cinematic representation bears no relation to their position in contemporary America.

*Mississippi Burning* isolates the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement to a single rural town, the film depicts racism as being resolved by white FBI agents and ignores the activism of the black community. The narrative divides whiteness into good and evil; the protagonists’ conflict with the Klan serves to emphasise the goodness of ‘normal’ whiteness in the face of the white ‘Other’. The ‘brute’ figures of the Klan are distanced from the viewer; responsibility for the nationwide violence and struggles of the Civil Rights Movement is reduced to the marginalised white ‘Other’. In this way, *Mississippi Burning* not only presents racism as resolved, but also minimalises the significance racism has to American history. As Rice argues, contemporary films have depicted the Klan as a ‘renegade and marginal racist group’, such depictions, as found in *Mississippi Burning*, offer soothing narratives where questions of racism within American society are not explored.¹ Even in *Live by Night* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, set in the 1920s, the Klan remain depicted as a small and marginalised force, noticeably being mocked as ‘hick’ figures in *Live by Night*. The widespread membership and

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national violence of the Klan is forgotten, instead they are shown as outliers to American society, only affecting the rural, exotic south. Racism is presented as irrelevant, and only a small factor in American history.

Furthering arguments made by Karen L. Cox, I have shown that the south is used as a dated location, presented as apart from the rest of America. This is emphasised in Mississippi Burning as director Alan Parker chose extras for the film himself, looking for ‘ugly’ people with ‘stereotypically redneck features’ that perpetuate the ‘cracker’. Here, the depiction of the south is developed as ‘Other’; stereotypes of southern lower-class whites are used to separate racism from the rest of America and whiteness. This trend continues through other white melodramas. In A Time to Kill, for instance, racists are depicted with mullets, ill-fitting clothes, and garish pick-up trucks, again evoking the redneck or ‘cracker’. Their membership to the Klan, a group irrelevant to contemporary society, emphasises how different the men are from understandings of ‘normal’ whiteness. In the Mississippian newspaper The Clarion-Ledger, Robert S. McElvaine claims the film ‘gives all Mississippians a time to cheer’, explaining that the narrative is fictional but ‘sheds important light on the realities of race in our state and nation a quarter century after the civil rights movement’. Yet, I question if A Time to Kill does reflect contemporary issues of racism; rather, it shows the Klan as dated and racism as disconnected from contemporary America. Hollywood avoids alienating market places through the melodramatic Klan, their ‘Otherness’ offers an unreal vision of history that marginalises racism to the ‘brute’ figure. In this way, paradoxically, the Klan have become an uncontroversial figure in Hollywood’s dramas, even in the southern market. Their ‘Otherness’ disconnects racism from reality. They are used as an abstract evil that absolves the viewer and contemporary society from the responsibility of racism; this simplification is accentuated in comedy.

The Klan’s representation in comedy is an underexplored area in existing literature; my research has aimed to address this. Where the early-1980s comedy films mocked the Klan to demystify the group during their last significant revival, many of the comedies at the turn of the twenty-first century presented the Klan as absurd, with little or no critique of racism. For instance, in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me the Klan are presented in a bizarre interlude, fighting Dr Evil on The Jerry Springer Show.

2 Toplin, History by Hollywood, p. 43.
Released in 1999, after a decade of melodramatic depictions, the film demonstrates the attenuation of the Klan image through fiction; the absurdity found in these comedies is a clear exaggeration of previous melodramatic depictions of the Klan, they are not linked with racism but are presented as a comical personification of evil. In films such as *Scary Movie 3* and *A Madea Christmas* where comedy does stem from the Klan’s connection to race, there remains little exploration of contemporary racism. Unlike the early-1980s comedy which presented provocative images (such as a black man kissing a Klansman), the comedy films of the twenty-first century present only ‘pseudo-taboo’; humour lies in the over-reaction of black characters, but the Klan image does not shock or provoke the audience. This comedy challenges and subverts black stereotypes, but does not attack the Klan as the early-1980s comedy did – rather they are utilised as an unthreatening image.

*Django Unchained* and *A Madea Christmas* were released in 2012 and 2013 respectively, they offer rare comic depictions of the Klan in a period where Hollywood’s films provide a greater exploration of racism and the black voice. This shifting focus is also evident in the main narrative of *Django Unchained*. The comic depiction of the Klan is less evident in the 2010s, the majority of ‘low-brow’ comedies to feature the Klan were released in the early-2000s. The prevalence of the Klan’s comic depiction at the turn of the millennium is reflective of two factors. Firstly, these films followed a series of white melodramas that attenuated the Klan image by presenting the group as the evil ‘Other’; this simplification is furthered in their absurd depiction in comedy. Secondly, the 1990s saw the threat of ‘new’ right-wing home-grown extremism, realised in the Oklahoma City Bombing; furthermore, following the September 11th attacks, media attention focused on international terrorism – in this environment the Klan became increasingly irrelevant to society. Their iconography was dated and no longer represented a threat. Rice argues that in contemporary cinema films have sought to ‘desensitize and demystify the [Klan’s] costume’, citing *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Django Unchained* as examples. Yet, through the white melodrama and the diminishing presence of the Klan in society, by the 2000s audiences were already significantly ‘desensitised’ to the Klan and their iconography – as is evident in their repeated use as a ‘gag’ figure in films of the period. Moving into the 2010s, however, race and racism returned to the forefront of American social dialogue.

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The Klan image did not significantly gain relevance in this period, but it is noticeable that comic depictions of the group became rarer as Hollywood began to offer a more overtly critical view of America’s history of racism with films like *The Butler* and *Selma*.

This renewed racial dialogue stemmed, in part, from the election of Barack Obama, which led many to the erroneous hope that America was now ‘post-racial’. In the same period shootings and protests in Oakland, California (2009), Ferguson, Missouri (2014), and Baltimore, Maryland (2015), among many others, highlighted the continued racial divide in America. In this period there has been an increased interest and a noticeable acceptance of the black narrative in the mainstream, with films such as *12 Years a Slave*, *Get Out*, and *Black Panther* (2018) being both commercially and critically successful. Hollywood’s shifting attitudes to race and racism in the 2010s are particularly noticeable when comparing the contemporary depiction of the Klan to that found in the black narratives of the 1990s. *Malcolm X*, *Posse*, and *Rosewood* presented the Klan as one part of America’s long history of racism; the narratives also highlighted the longevity and continued issue of racism. They challenged Hollywood’s notion of the white ‘Other’, emphasising the prevalence of racism within ‘normal’ society. These themes are also reflected in the 2010s with *The Butler*, *The Help*, and *Selma* where the Klan is again linked to wider society. However, the 1990s black narrative film stood in opposition to the prevailing soothing narratives of Hollywood, whereas the films of the 2010s are typical of the era. Narratives that once challenged the mainstream, have now become mainstream.

That *Selma* and *The Help* avoid the Klan’s iconography is significant, these films ensure that racism is not simplified to the white ‘Other’. Instead, the Klan’s violence is shown to be indicative of racism found in ‘normal’ society. Even in *The Butler*, where the Klan are clearly presented, focus remains on the anger of the citizens who support the organisation. These films depict a more complex representation of society, history, and racism than that found in the 1980s and 1990s white melodrama. The focus on black victimhood in these films shows how Hollywood has moved towards depicting, what Rich refers to as, a ‘civic past’. Where white melodramas offered simplified and soothing depictions of American history, contemporary black narrative films focus on

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5 Izzo, p. x.
the longevity of oppression faced by the black community and their activism against it, emphasising how maids, butlers, and ex-slaves have impacted America as much as Civil Rights leaders. By contrast, *Live by Night* presents the ‘usable past’, depicting a simplified vision of the 1920s through the white saviour; rather than exploring the racial division of the period, the film presents a protagonist with modern sensibilities, through his actions the Klan, and therefore racism, are overcome with relative ease. This narrative aligns with Hollywood’s ‘great person’ approach to history.⁷ In this way, the Klan continue to be depicted in two forms of historical narratives, the challenging black narrative and the traditional melodramatic narrative. Yet, the poor reception of *Live by Night* in comparison to black narrative films emphasises the ‘new’ preferred approach Hollywood and its audience have to the depiction of American history and racism.

Though recent mainstream films often depict America’s history of racism with more intricacy, the Klan image continues to be utilised in other films as a simplified evil. *Haunting of Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* depicts the Klan to provide gravitas and align its narrative with that of successful black narrative films of the period. Nonetheless, the use of the Klan in the film confuses American history, relating slaves to the Klan. Here the Klan function as a provocative image but with little meaning – again, emphasising how the image relays the melodramatic. Similarly, *Imperium* highlights the significance of the Klan’s history to the extreme-right, and also presents the fiery cross as intimidating, if symbolising the threat of ‘modern’ extremism rather than the Klan. Yet, in the film Klansmen are belittled as unthreatening and out-dated, this is similar to the Klan’s representation in *Live by Night*. Though films like *Free State of Jones* and *The Butler* utilise the Klan image for critique, there is a continued variation to the representation of the Klan. This flexibility demonstrates the extent to which the Klan are treated as a cinematic device, far removed from the real organisation. Hollywood has come to offer more sincere depictions of America’s history of racism; but the Klan image has been warped through decades of melodramatic and comic representation. Though a rarer depiction in an era where Hollywood and American society are more aware of the black voice, the use of the Klan as a comic and melodramatic figure prevails as a minor trend.

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My research has shown how the Klan have been depicted in a variety of genres and in films with different production values and narrative styles. But the representation of the Klan prevails further into American culture than the Hollywood film. Felix Harcourt details the ‘Ku Klux Kulture’ of the 1920s, explaining how the Klan were prevalent in films, literature, music, and theatre of the period. My thesis focused on film to explore Hollywood’s relation with the Klan, but as with the 1920s the representation of the Klan also continues in other contemporary media. The Klan continue to be depicted in literature ranging from John Grisham’s legal thrillers *A Time to Kill* (1988), *The Chamber* (1994), and *Sycamore Row* (2013), to the children’s novel *Stella by Starlight* (2015). The comical stage-play *The Foreigner* (1984) has been reprised several times into the current decade, with other contemporary stage plays also featuring the Klan as with *The Best of Enemies* (2012). Similarly, the Klan feature in a range of television programmes from *South Park* (1997–) episodes ‘Pinkeye’ (S01 E07) and ‘Chef Goes Nanners’ (S04 E07), to the historical period-drama *Alex Haley’s Queen* (1993), and in a shoot-out sequence in episode ‘21’ (S02, E01) of *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014). The Klan are also represented in new mainstream mediums, appearing in video games such as *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (2017) and *Mafia III* (2016). The Klan image permeates American culture despite the irrelevance of the actual organisation to contemporary society.

There are several reasons for the Klan’s continued representation in American culture, not least is Hollywood’s manipulation of the group from *The Birth of a Nation* to the present day which has normalised their image. In the documentary *Accidental Courtesy: Daryl Davis, Race & America*, black blues musician Daryl Davis explains that the Klan are ‘shameful’ but as ‘American as baseball, apple pie, and Chevrolet’; the continued presence of the Klan image in American culture partly-stems from this Americanism. The robes and fiery cross of the Klan represent a history America cannot escape, though the white melodrama attempts to marginalise this history and the comedy film mocks it, the Klan image prevails as a symbol of American racism.

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8 Harcourt.

9 This work is based on:

10 The Klan had previously been depicted in *Ethnic Cleansing* (2002), an independent game designed by and for those in the extreme-right. For more on white supremacists’ interaction with video games see chapter ‘Gaming the Racial Order’ in:
Several Klan groups since the 1970s have moved away from such iconography, but the Klan’s robes and the fiery cross are imbedded in the public’s consciousness through fiction. The Klan have had low membership since the 1980s, however, through their prevalence in contemporary film and culture the Klan continue to exist as a largely fictional image. A wider study building on my research, and looking at the Klan’s depiction in other mediums, could be undertaken to assess the extent to which fiction has entrenched and maintained the Klan image in public consciousness.

In _Malcolm X_, Spike Lee associated slavery, the Klan, and the Civil Rights Movement to the police brutality of the 1990s. He uses a similar technique in the recent release of _BlacKkKlansman_ (2018), which is based on the life of Ron Stallworth (John David Washington), a black police officer who infiltrated the Klan in the 1970s. With the help of white-Jewish officer ‘Flip’ Zimmerman (Adam Driver), Stallworth is able to deceive the Klan, including David Duke (Topher Grace). Despite the success of Stallworth’s infiltration, the Klan are still active at the end of the film and racism is shown to continue, this is similar to the black narrative films of the 1990s. The final image of the narrative is of a fiery cross reflecting in the eye of a Klansman, after which the film transitions into archival footage of the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This editing links the dated Klan to contemporary violence, though the appearance of racism has changed, Lee emphasises the similarities of present society to previous racial conflict.

Since 2016 the extreme-right in America has found an unprecedented voice in Trump. In the final scenes of _BlacKkKlansman_ footage is shown of David Duke explaining that Charlottesville is as ‘Trump alluded to […] the first step toward taking America back’. Though no-longer claiming to be a Klansman, Duke remains an active figure in the extreme-right; in 2016 he won 58,581 votes in Louisiana’s primary for the Senate.\(^\text{11}\) Whilst a fraction of the electoral vote at 3%, these results show that in one state alone tens of thousands are willing to vote for a figure of extremism. Though Klan numbers nationwide are as low as 3000, Klan influence in the new Alt-Right remains through figures like Duke.\(^\text{12}\) Despite the prominence of the Alt-Right and the Klan’s low membership, since the election of Trump media attention given to the Klan has increased, for instance, with the coverage of the arrest of Klansman Richard Preston for


\(^{12}\) Anti-Defamation League, _Tattered robes_, p. 1.
firing his gun at the Unite the Right rally. Rice warns that this media attention risks revitalising the ‘rump’ organisation. The most shocking images from the Unite the Right rally were not that of Klansmen or neo-Nazis but of regular young and angry men; these violent scenes came from individuals who would otherwise fit within American society. In a similar manner to the white melodrama, by focusing on the Klan as the root of racism the media ignore the disturbing spread of racism in American society. However, breaking from this media focus on the ‘Other’, several contemporary films do not isolate or minimise contemporary racism.

In BlacKkKlansman, Lee presents ‘normal’ individuals at the Unite the Right rally equating them to the racism of the Klan. Like Malcolm X this presents the longevity and continued problem of racism in America, and like Rosewood, The Help, The Butler, and Selma, BlacKkKlansman shows that racism prevails within American society and is not isolated to the ‘Other’. Malcolm X had a mediocre performance in the 1990s box office, though the film was praised critically with Denzel Washington being nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor. Films like Rosewood performed even worse in the period. Yet, BlacKkKlansman, like The Help and The Butler, was a financial and critical success. Malcolm X challenged the mainstream depiction of the Klan, where Hollywood’s white melodramas presented racism as isolated through the group, Lee’s film presented the Klan as only one factor in America’s complex history of racism. Similarly, BlacKkKlansman presents ‘normal’ individuals at the Unite the Right rally as akin to the Klan; however, unlike Malcolm X, this depiction of American racism is no longer a challenge to the mainstream but one that is accepted and portrayed in Hollywood’s films. My research has presented Hollywood’s evolving depiction and utilisation of the Klan, through this it is evident that Hollywood’s attitudes to race and racism have changed; contemporary mainstream films often depict a more nuanced view of American racism that is not isolated to the ‘Other’. Films like Mississippi

13 Hauser and Jacobs.
15 Equally, the Klan have been used as a symbol to satirise Trump as the white ‘Other’, as found with covers of The New Yorker and The Economist. These depictions ignore the mass numbers that elected him, though his voters are satirised in the Saturday Night Live (1975–) sketch ‘Racists for Trump’ (S41 E14).
16 [Anon.], BlacKkKlansman, database, BoxOfficeMojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=blackkklansman.htm> [accessed 11 February 2018]
*Burning and Ghosts of Mississippi*, presented America’s history of racism as past; the Klan are depicted as a historic force that are defeated, implying the progression of contemporary society. However, films like *Malcolm X*, and, more recently, *Selma* and *BlacKkKlansman* present American history and the Klan as a commentary on the present. In these films the Klan act as a reminder of the longevity and entrenched nature of American racism, relating history to contemporary society and showing how racism continues to divide a nation.
Appendix
Chronological List of Mainstream Films Featuring the Ku Klux Klan Between 1988 and 2016

*Betrayed*, dir. by Costa-Gavras (United Artists, 1988)

*Mississippi Burning*, dir. by Alan Parker (Orion Pictures, 1988)


*Driving Miss Daisy*, dir. by Bruce Beresford (Warner Bros., 1989)

*Fried Green Tomatoes*, dir. by Jon Avnet (Universal Pictures, 1991)

*Malcolm X*, dir. by Spike Lee (Warner Bros., 1992)

*Sommersby*, dir. by Jon Amiel (Warner Bros., 1993)

*Posse*, dir. by Mario Van Peebles (Gramercy Pictures, 1993)

*Forrest Gump*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Paramount Pictures, 1994)

*A Time to Kill*, dir. by Joel Schumacher (Warner Bros., 1996)

*The Chamber*, dir. by James Foley (Universal Pictures, 1996)

*Ghosts of Mississippi*, dir. by Rob Reiner (Columbia Pictures, 1996)

*Rosewood*, dir. by John Singleton (Warner Bros., 1997)


*Road Trip*, dir. by Todd Phillips (DreamWorks Pictures, 2000)

*Shaft*, dir. by John Singleton (Paramount Pictures, 2000)

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?,* dir. by Joel Coen (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2000)

*Head of State*, dir. by Chris Rock (DreamWorks Pictures, 2003)

*Bad Boys II*, dir. by Michael Bay (Columbia Pictures, 2003)

*Scary Movie 3*, dir. by David Zucker (Dimension Films, 2003)

*Crash*, dir. by Paul Haggis (Lionsgate Film, 2004)
Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, dir. by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg (New Line Cinema, 2008)

Step Brothers, dir. by Adam McKay (Columbia Pictures, 2008)

The Help, dir. by Tate Taylor (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011)

The Cabin in the Woods, dir. by Drew Goddard (Lionsgate, 2012)

Django Unchained, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Weinstein Company, 2012)

The Haunting in Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia, dir. by Tom Elkins (Lionsgate, 2013)

A Madea Christmas, dir. by Tyler Perry (Lionsgate, 2013)

Lee Daniels’ The Butler, dir. by Lee Daniels (Weinstein Company, 2013)

Selma, dir. by Ava DuVernay (Paramount Pictures, 2014)

Free State of Jones, dir. by Gary Ross (STXfilms, 2016)

Imperium, dir. by Daniel Ragussis (Lionsgate Premiere, 2016)

Live by Night, dir. by Ben Affleck (Warner Bros., 2016)
Filmography

Primary (Theatrical Films)

8 Mile, dir. by Curtis Hanson (Universal Pictures, 2002)

12 Years a Slave, dir. by Steve McQueen (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013)

48Hrs, dir. by Walter Hill (Paramount Pictures, 1982)

Accidents Won’t Happen, dir. by Charles R. Bowers and Bud Fisher (Short Film Syndicate, 1925)

Alamo Bay, dir. by Louis Malle (TriStar Pictures, 1985)

Alice and the Dog Catcher, dir. by Walt Disney (Winkler, 1924)

Alice’s Mysterious Mystery, dir. by Walt Disney (Winkler, 1926)


Amistad, dir. by Steven Spielberg (DreamWorks Pictures, 1997)

Another Part of the Forest, dir. by Michael Gordon (Universal Pictures, 1948)

Arlington Road, dir. by Mark Pellington (Screen Gems, 1999)


Back to the Future, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Universal Pictures, 1985)

Bad Boys II, dir. by Michael Bay (Columbia Pictures, 2003)

Batman Begins, dir. Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros., 2005)

The Believer, dir. by Henry Bean (Fireworks Pictures, 2001)

Betrayed, dir. by Costa-Gavras (United Artists, 1988)

Beverly Hills Cop, dir. by Martin Brest (Paramount Pictures, 1984)

The Big Lebowski, dir. by Joel Coen (Gramercy Pictures, 1998)

The Birth of a Nation, dir. by D. W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915)

The Birth of a Nation, dir. by Nate Parker (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2016)

BlacKkKlansman, dir. by Spike Lee (Focus Features, 2018)

The Black Klansman, dir. by Ted V. Mikels (U.S. Films, 1966)
Black Legion, dir. by Archie Mayo (Warner Bros., 1937)

Black Panther, dir. by Ryan Coogler (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018)

Blazing Saddles, dir. by Mel Brooks (Warner Bros., 1974)

Blood Simple, dir. by Joel Coen (Circle Film, 1984)

Boyz n the Hood, dir. by John Singleton (Columbia Pictures, 1991)

Braveheart, dir. by Mel Gibson (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

Brief Encounter, dir. by David Lean (Eagle-Lion Distributors)

Brotherhood of Death, dir. by Bill Berry (Downtown Distribution Company, 1976)

The Burning Cross, dir. by Walter Colmes (Screen Guild Productions, 1947)

Bustin’ Loose, dir. by Oz Scott (Universal Pictures, 1981)

The Cabin in the Woods, dir. by Drew Goddard (Lionsgate, 2012)

The Cambric Mask, dir. by Tom Terriss (Vitagraph Company of America, 1919)

The Cardinal, dir. by Otto Preminger (Columbia Pictures, 1963)

The Chamber, dir. by James Foley (Universal Pictures, 1996)

Cheech & Chong’s Up in Smoke, dir. by Lou Adler (Paramount Pictures, 1978)

Coffy, dir. by Jack Hill (American International Pictures, 1973)

The Color Purple, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Warner Bros., 1985)

Compulsion, dir. by Richard Fleischer (20th Century Fox, 1959)

Contact, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Warner Bros., 1997)

Cotton and Cattle, dir. by Leonard Franchon (Westart Pictures, 1921)

Crash, dir. by Paul Haggis (Lionsgate Film, 2004)

Dear White People, dir. by Justin Simien (Lionsgate, 2014)

Deliverance, dir. by John Boorman (Warner Bros., 1972)

Die Hard, dir. by John McTiernan (20th Century Fox, 1988)

Django, dir. by Sergio Corbucci (Euro International film, 1966)
Django Unchained, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Weinstein Company, 2012)

Driving Miss Daisy, dir. by Bruce Beresford (Warner Bros., 1989)

Easy Rider, dir. by Dennis Hopper (Columbia Pictures, 1969)

Er Ist Wieder Da (trans: Look Who’s Back), dir. by David Wnendt (Constantin Film, 2015)

The Face at Your Window, dir. by Richard Stanton (Fox Film Corporation, 1920)

Fargo, dir. by Joel Coen (Gramercy Pictures, 1996)

The FBI Story, dir. by Mervyn LeRoy (Warner Bros., 1959)

The Fifth Horseman, dir. by E. M. McMahon (E.M. MacMahon Productions, 1924)

The Firm, dir. by Sydney Pollack (Paramount Pictures, 1993)

Fletch, dir. by Michael Ritchie (Universal Pictures, 1985)


Forrest Gump, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Paramount Pictures, 1994)

Free State of Jones, dir. by Gary Ross (STXfilms, 2016)

Fried Green Tomatoes, dir. by Jon Avnet (Universal Pictures, 1991)

Fruitvale Station, dir. by Ryan Coogler (Weinstein Company, 2013)

Fury, dir. by Fritz Lang (MGM, 1936)

Gamers: The Movie, dir. by Christopher Folino (Monterey Media, 2006)

Get Out, dir. by Jordan Peele (Universal Pictures, 2017)

Ghosts of Mississippi, dir. by Rob Reiner (Columbia Pictures, 1996)

Glory, dir. by Edward Zwick (TriStar, Pictures, 1989)

The Godfather, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola (Paramount Pictures, 1972)

Gone with the Wind, dir. by Victor Fleming (Loew’s, 1939)

The Green Mile, dir. by Frank Darabont (Warner Bros., 1999)

Green Room, dir. by Jeremy Saulnier (A24, 2015)

Hail, Caesar!, dir. by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen (Universal Pictures, 2016)
Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, dir. by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg (New Line Cinema, 2008)

Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle, dir. by Danny Kahane (New Line Cinema, 2004)

The Haunting in Connecticut, dir. by Peter Cornwell (Lionsgate, 2009)

The Haunting in Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia, dir. by Tom Elkins (Lionsgate, 2013)

Head of State, dir. by Chris Rock (DreamWorks Pictures, 2003)

Heart o’ the Hills, dir. by Joseph De Grasse and Sidney Franklin (First National Exhibitors Circuit, 1919)

The Help, dir. by Tate Taylor (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011)

Hidden Figures, dir. by Theodore Melfi (20th Century Fox, 2016)

Higher Learning, dir. by John Singleton (Columbia Picture, 1995)

The Hooded Mob, dir. by Jack Noble (Lee-Bradford, 1923)

The Hudsucker Proxy, dir. by Joel Coen (Warner Bros., 1994)

The Hurricane, dir. by Norman Jewison (Universal Pictures, 1999)

Imitation of Life, dir. by Douglas Sirk (Universal Pictures, 1959)

Imperium, dir. by Daniel Ragussis (Lionsgate Premiere, 2016)

Inglourious Basterds, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Weinstein Company, 2009)

The Intruder, dir. by Roger Corman (Pathé-America, 1962)

JFK, dir. by Oliver Stone (Warner Bros., 1991)

Kid Speed, dir. by Larry Semon and Noel M. Smith (Educational Film Exchanges, 1924)

The Klansman, dir. by Terence Young (Paramount Pictures, 1974)

Knights of the Eucharist, dir. by Hopp Hadley ([Creston Feature Pictures?], 1922)

Lady Sings the Blues, dir. by Sidney J. Furie (Paramount Pictures, 1972)

Lee Daniels’ The Butler, dir. by Lee Daniels (Weinstein Company, 2013)
Legion of Terror, dir. by Charles C. Coleman (Columbia Pictures, 1936)

Lincoln, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2012)

Live by Night, dir. by Ben Affleck (Warner Bros., 2016)

Lodge Night, dir. by Robert F. McGowan (Pathé Exchange, 1923)

A Madea Christmas, dir. by Tyler Perry (Lionsgate, 2013)

Malcolm X, dir. by Spike Lee (Warner Bros., 1992)

Mandingo, dir. by Richard Fleischer (Paramount Pictures, 1975)

Mississippi Burning, dir. by Alan Parker (Orion Pictures, 1988)

Moonlight, dir. by Barry Jenkins (A24, 2016)

Mudbound, dir. by Dee Rees (Netflix, 2017)

Nation Aflame, dir. by Victor Halperin (Treasure Pictures, 1937)

New Jack City, dir. by Mario Van Peebles (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1991)

The Northern Schoolmaster, dir. by Sidney Olcott (Kalem, 1909)

O Brother, Where Art Thou?, dir. by Joel Coen (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2000)

Once Upon a Time...When We were Colored, dir. by Tim Reid (BET Pictures, 1996)

The Pilgrim, dir. by Charlie Chaplin (Associated First National Pictures, 1923)

Places in the Heart, dir. by Robert Benton (TriStar Pictures, 1984)

Pleasantville, dir. by Gary Ross (New Line Cinema, 1998)

Pocahontas, dir. by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (Buena Vista Pictures, 1995)

Porky’s II: The Next Day, dir. by Bob Clark (20th Century Fox, 1983)

Posse, dir. by Mario Van Peebles (Gramercy Pictures, 1993)

Pulp Fiction, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax Films, 1994)

The Rainmaker, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

Ransom, dir. by Ron Howard (Touchstone Pictures, 1996)

Remember My Name, dir. by Alan Rudolph (Columbia Pictures, 1978)

*Road Trip*, dir. by Todd Phillips (DreamWorks Pictures, 2000)

*The Rose of Kentucky*, dir. by D. W. Griffith (General Film Company, 1911)

*Rosewood*, dir. by John Singleton (Warner Bros., 1997)

*Rush Hour*, dir. by Brett Ratner (New Line Cinema, 1998)

*Scary Movie 3*, dir. by David Zucker (Dimension Films, 2003)

*Schindler’s List*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1993)

*The Searchers*, dir. by John Ford (Warner Bros., 1956)

*Selma*, dir. by Ava DuVernay (Paramount Pictures, 2014)

*Shaft*, dir. by John Singleton (Paramount Pictures, 2000)

*Shock Corridor*, dir. by Samuel Fuller (Allied Artists Pictures Corporation, 1963)

*The Siege*, dir. by Edward Zwick (20th Century Fox, 1998)

*Smokey and the Bandit Part 3*, dir. by Dick Lowry (Universal Pictures, 1983)

*A Soldier’s Story*, dir. by Norman Jewison (Columbia Pictures, 1984)

*Sommersby*, dir. by Jon Amiel (Warner Bros., 1993)

*Song of the South*, dir. by Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946)

*A Son of Satan*, dir. by Oscar Micheaux (Micheaux Film, 1924)

*Stars in My Crown*, dir. by Jacques Tourneur (MGM, 1950)

*Step Brothers*, dir. by Adam McKay (Columbia Pictures, 2008)

*Storm Warning*, dir. by Stuart Heisler (Warner Bros., 1951)

*Straw Dogs*, dir. by Sam Peckinpah (Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 1971)

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*Symbol of the Unconquered*, dir. by Oscar Micheaux (Micheaux Film, 1920)

*Tales from the Hood*, dir. by Rusty Cundieff (Savoy Pictures, 1995)
Talk Radio, dir. by Oliver Stone (Universal Pictures, 1988)

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, dir. by Tobe Hooper (Byranston Pictures, 1974)

They Won’t Forget, dir. by Mervyn LeRoy (Warner Bros., 1937)

This is England, dir. by Shane Meadows (Optimum Releasing, 2006)

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A Time to Kill, dir. by Joel Schumacher (Warner Bros., 1996)

Titanic, dir. by James Cameron (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

To Kill a Mockingbird, dir. by Robert Mulligan (Universal Pictures, 1962)

The Toll of Justice, [unknown director] (Miafa Picture Company, 1923)

The Toy, dir. by Richard Donner (Columbia Pictures, 1982)

Trading Places, dir. by John Landis (Paramount Pictures, 1983)

The Traitor Within, [unknown director] (Cavalier Pictures, 1924)

Treasure of Matecumbe, dir. by Vincent McEveety (Buena Vista Distribution, 1976)

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The Voice of the Violin, dir. by D. W. Griffith (Biograph Company, 1909)

Which Way is Up?, dir. by Michael Schultz (Universal Pictures, 1977)

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Who Framed Rodger Rabbit, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1988)

Within Out Gates, dir. by Oscar Micheaux (Micheaux Book & Film Company, 1920)

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Secondary (Non-Theatrical Films, Documentaries, and Other Media)

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Alex Haley’s Queen, CBS, 14 February 1993 – 18 February 1993

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‘Commentary’, Head of State, dir. by Chris Rock (DreamWorks Pictures, 2003) [on DVD]

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