Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
October 2016

The Birth of a Nation (dir. Nate Parker, 2016)

On Camera

Nat Turner:	Nate Parker: *The Great Debaters* (07); *Arbitrage* (12); *Beyond the Lights* (14)
Cherry, his wife:	Aja Naomi King: *How to Get Away with Murder* (TV 14-16)
Sam Turner:	Armie Hammer: *The Social Network* (10); *J. Edgar* (11); *The Lone Ranger* (13)
Nat's mother:	Aunjanue Ellis: *Men of Honor* (00); *Ray* (04); *The Help* (11); *Get on Up* (14)
Hark, Nat's friend:	Colman Domingo: *Lincoln* (12); *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (13); *Selma* (14)
Esther, his wife:	Gabrielle Union: *Bring It On* (00); *Running with Scissors* (06); *Top Five* (14)
Elizabeth Turner:	Penelope Ann Miller: *Awakenings* (90); *Carlito's Way* (93); *The Artist* (11)
Slave Catcher:	Jackie Earle Haley: *Breaking Away* (79); *Little Children* (06); *Lincoln* (12)
Isaiah, "butler":	Roger Guenveur Smith: *Do the Right Thing* (89); *Malcolm X* (92); *Dope* (15)
Nat's father:	Dwight Henry: father in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (12); *12 Years a Slave* (13)

Off Camera

Director:	Nate Parker: his first feature; also serves as co-writer, co-producer, and star
Cinematography:	Elliot Davis: lots of Steven Soderbergh movies in the 90s; *The Iron Lady* (11)
Editing:	Steven Rosenblum: *Glory* (89); *Braveheart* (95); *Blood Diamond* (06)
Art Direction:	Geoffrey Kirkland: *Fame* (80); *Mississippi Burning* (88); *Children of Men* (06)
Costume Design:	Francine Jamison-Tanchuck: *Glory* (89); *White Men Can't Jump* (92)
Musical Score:	Henry Jackman: mostly animated and superhero films; *Captain Phillips* (13)

If you liked *The Birth of a Nation*, you might also enjoy…

Burn! (1969) – Historical epic by *Battle of Algiers* director about failed Caribbean slave revolt

Roots (TV, 1977) – Still for many people the defining popular-media treatment of U.S. slavery

Daughters of the Dust (1991) – A rare treatment of slavery (in flashback) that eschews violence

Sankofa (1993) – A slave-revolt tale—with time travel!—that features a woman as its main figure

Braveheart (1995) – Influential historical "freedom" epic that inspired many of *Birth*'s shots

Django Unchained (2012) – A considerably pulpier take on a slave taking up arms against whites

12 Years a Slave (2013) – The most recent addition to the canon of important slavery films, built around a character who heroically endures rather than dramatically rising up into revolution

Unbroken (2014) – Another recent historical epic that frames its protagonist as a Christ figure

Facts about *The Birth of a Nation* you may appreciate…

Parker began drafting the screenplay for *The Birth of a Nation* around 2009 and has been building toward its production through all the years in between. The "Thanks" section at the end of the film name-checks several directors who cast him as an actor in the intervening years who gave him tips or encouragement about the practical and aesthetic aspects of filmmaking.

Most of what we "know" about Nat Turner's life and his side of the rebellion derives from a best-selling pamphlet called *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), written by a Virginia lawyer named Thomas Gray and based on interviews he conducted with Turner in jail from November 1-3, 1831, only days after his capture and less than a week before his hanging. Parker got much material about life on the Turner plantation, Nat's religious visions, and the plotting of the rebellion from here. Parker exercised more artistic license regarding his relationship with Cherry, who is documented as his wife in one historical ledger but who figures less in the 1831 text than in Parker's film. Cherry's rape and its central role in Nat's radicalization are mostly the filmmakers' imagination. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is also the title of a much more speculative, best-selling, first-person novel by *Sophie's Choice* author William Styron in 1967.

The Birth of a Nation has nothing in common plot-wise with the infamous 1915 silent film by D.W. Griffith from which it takes its name. Griffith's epic, frequently credited with inventing many storytelling techniques of popular cinema, is an explicitly anti-black film about the degradation of the mythical Old South during and after the Civil War, with crude stereotypes of black men in Reconstruction-era state legislatures and as sexual predators on current and former plantations. The Ku Klux Klan are the overt heroes of the movie's climax, riding to the rescue of a white woman trapped in a house by a black man who intends to rape her.

Birth premiered at Sundance in January, winning both the Grand Jury Prize in competition and the Audience Award voted by the public. This double-win has happened only seven times in the festival's history, though that includes all of the last four years, following *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Whiplash* (2014), and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015). Even before the awards were announced, Fox Searchlight won a fierce bidding war to release *Birth*, paying $17.5 million for the rights—a record, by far, as the highest price any studio or distributor had ever paid for a Sundance acquisition. The premiere shortly followed the Academy Award nominations and the disclosure that, for the second year in a row, no actors of color had been recognized. Many people felt that studios' enthusiasm hinged equally on the audience's response to the film and its likely status as a likely awards contender with an all-black cast.

Controversy around Parker centers around a night in 1999 at Penn State University when he and a wrestling teammate had sex with a woman who reported the incident as a rape, perpetrated while she was so drunk she was barely conscious. A long jury trial ended with Parker's acquittal and his friend's conviction in 2001. The friend's conviction was overturned on appeal, on the grounds of inadequate work from his lawyers; the original prosecutors said they could not afford to re-litigate. Parker's own acquittal seemed to stem heavily from the fact that he had had consensual sex with the same woman the day before the reported rape—a fact that jury interpreted as a sign of lasting consent. The victim described being hounded by Parker and his friend after her report, and leading up to her trial. She died by suicide in 2012. The rape allegations and trial history have been part of Parker's Wikipedia page for many years.

Broad conversation topics…

Slavery on Screen: Popular cinema has treated plantation slavery less often than many historians would like, and often in romanticized terms. Because the images tend to be superficial or to involve racist stereotypes and because many Americans still insist slavery was less brutal than historical documents and slave memoirs reveal, many scholars and artists believe that film representations must not cower from the graphic details about slaves' spiritual and physical torture. At the same time, many scholars in African American studies have argued more recently that images of graphic torture can be desensitizing, and perpetuate the slaves' own public suffering by inviting more eyes onto their pain. Any screen depiction must balance these competing calls for candor and discretion in how they represent the so-called "peculiar institution." How did you think *The Birth of a Nation* navigated this treacherous water?

Christianity and Ambiguity: Nat becomes the rare slave not only to read and write but to make money as a touring preacher, even if the profits of his sermons largely support his owner, not himself. While many slaves on plantations he visits are euphoric in their Christian faith, many others signal their contempt for Nat espousing the religion of white slave-owners. Nat himself eventually decides that the Bible is as full of verses that protest enslavement as of words that defend slavery as a practice. How did you react to the film's changing relation to the question of Nat's Christianity? When were the tensions related to his faith most powerful? How did you wrestle with the fact that the film ultimately presents the Bible, "the greatest book ever written," as a text that speaks in multiple, even opposing voices at once—even while the film itself might be seen as avoiding ambiguity in making a strong, political point? How did the peripheral presence of African religions and customs complicate the depiction of Christianity?

Gender and Rebellion: Many feminist historians of slavery note that women's roles in day-to-day resistance and in rarer instances of concentrated slave revolts tend to be effaced in scholarly studies and in later storytelling. Women either appear as nurturers of brave men, as skeptical and worried bystanders, or as mute sufferers of grievous physical treatment who inspire enslaved men to action—even when slave literature of the period reveals that many women either led or crucially supported resistance and rebellion efforts. (This bias is not uncommon in historical writing or artistic depictions of many revolutionary movements, including in contemporary times.) Even setting aside the controversies over Parker's real-life, *The Birth of a Nation* has struck some viewers as continuing this pattern, whereby the wives, mothers, and grandmothers in the film are largely sidelined or silenced, even when they support Nat's decisions. The character of Esther does not have any lines, and the wife Cherry drops out of the script for most of the movie's second half; no women are featured even in crowd shots of the rebellion once it is underway. Did this strike you or bother you while you watched?

Cross-Film Comparisons: Parker has described being substantially motivated by Parker's specific story, including its omission from many or most textbooks in elementary school, high school, even college. He also cited a broader lack of unapologetic stories about black revolt under extreme racist conditions, and his desire to make something like a "black *Braveheart*" that looked approvingly or at least empathetically on moral revolutionaries. What movies did *The Birth of a Nation* most remind you of, whether or not they directly involved slavery? How unilaterally did the film seem to endorse the tactics and legacy of Nat's revolt?

Specific touches worth discussing…

Prologue: The epigraph by Thomas Jefferson—"Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever"—also appears on an engraved panel at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., so this is not an obscure citation from his private papers. Did you think about the quotation as the movie continued? What did it mean to you?

Spirituality: The first scene around the fire, not just in content but in aesthetics (the drumbeats, the body makeup) is among the few that emphasize Africanist religious practices or ceremonies that have survived in the US. Mostly these recur in the very beginning and very end of the film. How did you react to this sequence at the time, or as the plot continued to unfold?

Production Design: The first book Nat sees has a red-wine-colored binding, all the more striking in color because it is left open on the top of a white chair on an all-white porch. This color will be fairly rare in a film whose cinematography and art direction often tilt toward blue, brown, green, and white, and when the color does appear, it tends to stick out from its surroundings. As a *motif*, it links the book to the blood on Nat's finger the first time he picks cotton, to the seat cushions in the church where Nat first learns to preach, and to the handle of the sword he takes from the wall of a slave-owner as he begins his rebellion. What is the most complicated way in which we can understand these objects as related? What story does this color tell?

Sound: *The Birth of a Nation* certainly features its fair share of graphic violence, especially in its second half, but along the way it makes some choices that insulate us from seeing everything. The scene when Jackie Earle Haley's slave catcher interrogates Nat's family about his escaped father is one example. When he slaps Nat's mother, the editing subtly omits the most graphic impact of the slap, while relying on the emphatic *sound* of him striking her to make us feel we've seen it and to react accordingly. The film repeats this trick at other moments.

Camera: Near the end of the same scene, the camera assumes Nat's literal point of view as he looks upward into the cruel eyes of the slave catcher, who makes one of his many despicable statements about black people and about Nat's family in particular. Keep track of the scenes where the film has us see as if through Nat's own eyes, since these tend to be especially formative moments in his evolution from child to preacher to violent revolutionary.

Acting and Costume: Aunjanue Ellis, the actress playing Nat's mother, looks duly terrified as her mistress inquires whether Nat can read—a crime in slaveholding societies, often punished by wounds or even death. Note, though, that her expression does not soften as it becomes clear that Elizabeth Turner wants to encourage Nat's learning, not forbid it. Even before the downsides of Elizabeth's offer are revealed, such as her desire to have Nat live with her rather than Nancy, his mother looks uncertain that Nat's reading will come to any good. (As for her costume, it is unclear whether the girth of Nancy's dresses around the middle implies that she is pregnant with another child or a desire by the filmmakers to conceal Ellis's slim beauty.)

Editing: As Elizabeth takes Nat into her husband's library and he reaches for some large books on a low shelf, the film cuts to a close-up as she grabs his hand, stopping him from touching what he shouldn't. This choice, abstracting a white hand restraining a black one as a freestanding image, makes the moment speak more broadly than the specific events and characters.

Production Design: Catherine's wedding portraitist makes her complexion and her husband's darker in his painting than they are in life. Why might it have been an aesthetic preference to look less pale in a portrait, even as this society placed such imbalanced value on whiteness?

Gender: Even amid her grief for her husband, Elizabeth looks crestfallen that his will requires her to send Nat into the cotton fields. Many times, *Birth* cuts to close-ups of Elizabeth despairing at how Nat or Cherry are treated, as if—whatever her limits—she is the rare white character to lament the institution of slavery and its effects on people she knows. This is a marked contrast to Sarah Paulson's house mistress in *12 Years a Slave*, who is represented as a virulent racist, especially toward enslaved women, and as a primary engine of the slavery economy. If you saw both movies, did you react differently to these two representations? Were you sympathetic to Elizabeth or frustrated with her during these repeated images of her silent, sidelined grief?

Writing and Editing: The scene where Nat observes Cherry on the auction block and becomes instantly smitten with her feels complicated. On the one hand, a little romance goes a long way in such a generally (and necessarily) grim film. On the other, through close-ups, exchanged gazes, and other cues of "romance," the film winds up emphasizing Cherry's natural beauty and Nat's liberty to stare at her just when it's making a point about how slaves' bodies were cruelly rendered as objects for other people's lascivious gazes. Was anyone troubled by this?

Cinematography: Parker and his director of photography keep finding ways to do something new with each panoramic shot of the cotton fields. In this instance, the lens keeps catching reflections of the sunlight, which produce bright red spots in the image. This kind of thing would usually be called an error, and urge the cameraperson to switch the angle so they aren't shooting into the sun. Here, though, the pinpricks of red light all over the cotton field reminded me of the droplets of blood on Nat's hand whenever he's forced to work in the field.

Dialogue: As Sam sends his sister Catherine off to live with her new husband, he urges her to contact him "if y'all need anything or he ain't treatin' you right." What does it mean for you that Sam seems fully aware that even white women are persistently vulnerable in this world?

Production Design: Parker makes Nat's presentation of flowers to the newly "beautified" Cherry more striking by choosing such bright pink blooms—a color we see nowhere else in the film.

Cinematography: The camera is much more mobile than usual and much closer to the actors' bodies as they dance at Hark and Esther's wedding. Of course that makes sense given the implied joy of the moment, but it's a revelation that joy is even possible in this world, and it contrasts with other slave films where the camera took a sad, sober view even on moments the characters experienced as happy (e.g., Lupita Nyong'o making dolls in a field in *12 Years*). A similar spirit informs the easy, gliding camera movements in a scene shortly after, as Nat and Cherry share their experiences in conversation on the Turners' lawn, and fall further in love.

Cinematography: "Rack focus" is the technique where a film changes focus within a shot, so that something blurry becomes clear while you watch and something clear gets blurry. Parker uses rack focus on a wide shot of a cotton field but—ironically, and I presume intentionally—there is nothing new to see. Everywhere the camera looks, there is just more cotton.

Cinematography and Sound: In a nighttime shot as Cherry gathers water from a well, the camera hovers and moves near her, as if to imply an encroaching predator. We hear offscreen pigs grunting loudly, which only amplifies our discomfort—possibly about human "pigs" in her midst. She is visibly scared as she sees a figure approaching, from out of focus. It turns out to be Nat, who plants a kiss on her before she can even speak. This is another moment where the film oddly treats Nat the way it would treat a rapacious white person. In fact, when Cherry *is* later assaulted by three white men, the filmmaking is almost exactly the same as in this scene. What did you make of this bait-and-switch, at a moment intended to seal a romantic deal?

Costumes: Nat's grandma wears a pink tartan plaid shawl to his wedding. In this kind of scene, costumers often dress slaves in clothes that suggest a link to African or homegrown black culture, as if they're preserving whatever level of communal or cultural tradition they can, but here, an odd, glaring emblem of white European aesthetics intrudes in an all-black scene.

Sexuality: For a film that treats violence so graphically, and reinforces the physical experience of enslavement in so many ways, Nat's and Cherry's wedding night is treated decorously, with an almost greeting-card aesthetic of silhouetted profiles and two symbolic candles tilting together.

Allusion: Reverend Zalthall, who disapproves of Nat baptizing white people while profiting off his services, and is a generally gross person in all respects, almost shares a name with Henry B. Walthall, the actor who famously played the male protagonist of the 1915 *Birth of a Nation*.

Costumes: When Nat gives his first sermon at Joseph Randall's place, one of the enslaved men roused from his bed to listen wears a cloth bandage over his eye, with a blood stain that is still bright red. This is a very fresh injury, even on a plantation less egregiously violent than most.

Cinematography: In that scene, as Nat delivers his sermon, he is framed with Sam and Randall out of focus but still behind him in the shot. You could read this as a visual way of suggesting that he is getting some distance from them, but is still more "attached" to them than to the community or the experiences of the black slaves to whom he is forced to recite Peter 2:18: "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect..." He is not framed as one of them.

Music: I will admit the musical score is one of the things I like least about the movie, especially when it goes full-tilt into soaring strings and crooning choirs at sentimental moments, like the interlude where Nat and Cherry welcome their daughter. *12 Years a Slave* trusted us much more to grasp the extremes but also the complexities of the characters' emotional lives without cuing us so obviously about how to feel—especially when so much else in the shots and in the storytelling allows us to experience contrasting feelings at once. But not everyone agrees!

Framing: As an example of that complexity, even in the short, sweet scene where Nat and Cherry enjoy their baby girl's company in their front doorway, the image is designed exactly like the earlier shot of Nat's mother, when she was forced to send him off to live in the master's house. The specter of losing one's children always exists, even in scenes of savoring time with them.

Dialogue: The obviously odious son on the Fowler estate (where the tooth-removal and force-feeding happens) threatens not just Nat but Sam with violence if they disobey house rules.

Style: Parker signals in a range of ways (the actors reacting to bad smells, the dark colors, the sounds of buzzing flies) that all is rotten on the Fowler estate. Consider that name, even! For film nerds, an especially clear sign is the *canted* camera angle on the jailed slaves, meaning the shot isn't horizontal but diagonal on the scene. In early cinema, these angles were repeatedly used to suggest a world "off its moral axis," for worldly or for supernatural reasons.

Editing: I recalled Parker's sermon on this terrible place as unfolding in one unbroken shot, in part because his performance seems especially vigorous and overwhelmed here, having to perform vigorous religiosity while also weeping at what he has seen, and reciting gospel in a way that will "read" differently to the white men and the enslaved characters. In fact, the opposite is true: the scene is *full* of cuts to different people in close-up, proving among other things that not all the slaves are hearing the same thing. Some are reacting euphorically to the promise of heaven. Others seem to be hearing the not-too-veiled message in Nat's oratory about "vengeful saints" taking up their "double-edged swords." Others don't know what to think.

Characterization and Editing: If you haven't clocked Sam's alcohol problem by now, spotting him face-down on his bed, with one boot on and one off as Nat comes knocking, ought to clear that up. More subtle is the treatment of Isaiah, the head house slave, who is aghast when Sam agrees to let Nat borrow a horse and ride out to Catherine's plantation to see what has happened to Cherry. The scene cuts off so quickly that if you aren't already looking at Isaiah, you might miss this early sign that he resents white power but is terrified of the rules changing.

Framing: Viewers often think it's dry or meaningless to think about these aesthetic choices, but Nat's heart-to-heart with his brutalized wife is a case in point of how loaded these filmmaking decisions are, and how much they reveal about the movie's biases. As he attempts to learn who did this to Cherry, and as she counsels him through scripture to let the Lord mete out justice—the first of many scenes, I think, where other characters quote the Bible to challenge Nat's thinking—the camera is entirely on him, not on her. The scene is arguably written that way, and we are spared having to linger on her pummeled face, but the choice is polarizing. (Meanwhile, the obsession with Cherry's beauty continues: look, even now, at her manicure!)

Characterization: Samuel looks disgusted at his dinner guests groping the female slaves, but as the camera cuts to his grimace in close-up, he also has a huge cigar in his mouth: a frequent, even clichéd symbol of male prerogative, implicating him in the sexist power he recoils from.

Writing and Editing: When a white man demands access to Esther's body in the Turner house, the filmmaking again has a huge impact on how the story reads. Because we get no scene with any of the women before this happens, we have no idea if they are as shocked as Hark and Nat are or if (as seems likely) they are much more aware that even "good" masters like Sam will fail to protect them. Even after Esther is assaulted, we get many more shots of her outraged, despondent husband and even of Nat than we do of her. And she never gets a line of dialogue. (A brief, sad detail from one of the few images she is granted: the extremely delicate lace work on the dress she has worn to the house, the nicest garment she ever sports, for terrible reasons.)

Sound: Before we see Nat chopping wood, the loud sound of the axe announces the end of this scene and the start of the next—and possibly divides the first hour of the film from the second.

Camera: Approaching the scene of Nat baptizing a white man through the reeds by the river, the camera again acts like a human voyeur. And we soon find out, folks were certainly watching.

Acting and Framing: Parker gives Nat a beaming smile after baptizing this stranger in the river, as if unaware or unpreoccupied by the danger he has invited to himself. You could imagine playing the moment as more conflict. Then again, the framing of the shot, with Nat absolutely alone in the water after the baptized man exits, suggest how riskily he has just isolated himself.

Religion: While Nat endures his lashing while tied to that post, he has his first vision of a black angel hovering above him—proving that, in his own mind, standard icons of Christianity have started to blend with signifiers of blackness. This figure returns ecstatically at the film's end.

Acting and Production Design: In Grandma Bridget's final monologue to Nat, relating her final memories of Africa and her gladness that her husband died before experiencing the horrors of the New World, it is even more striking that the actress has elected against even the slightest trace of any African accent. She was old enough to live an adult life before her capture, but her life now is totally distinct... so it is especially striking that, when she dies, her body is wrapped and tied in a style connoting many African funeral traditions more than any American ones.

Gender: Many op/eds, for a variety of reasons you can guess, have noticed how Nate Parker has scripted *The Birth of a Nation* such that Nat Turner is roused to action by the impulse to avenge a woman's rape. In that spirit, but more distantly from the complexities of Parker's own biography, Nat literally begins to plot the rebellion while sitting at Grandma's graveside.

Editing: As *The Birth of a Nation* continues, time starts to enter some subtly confusing spirals, as if the film is passing from a literal re-telling to a more mythic one. Images of Nat and Hark plotting the rebellion, of the eclipse, of meeting in the forest, of consulting with Cherry at her bedside, of Nancy's face observing her son's whipping, of Cherry at the clothesline when she hears Nat speaking to her, and of the rebellion itself are sometimes spliced in where they probably "couldn't" be if time were simply advancing in a forward way. The future is already haunting the past, and vice versa—often in ways that only become obvious in retrospect.

Writing: When Nat visits Cherry in her bedroom before the revolt begins—the first time we have seen her in almost a half-hour of screen time—she reverses her earlier position and wishes him well as he undertakes this almost inevitably fatal errand. Are we to understand her transition from urging against violent revenge to giving her blessing as part of her healing process? Is her will weakened by an ongoing convalescence? Is she simply relenting because Nat will not?

Repetition: The shot where a groggy Sam suddenly sees Nat standing above his bed—in blue light, centered in the frame, only gradually coming into focus—repeats many aspects of the shot where Nat approached Cherry on the path at night and forcibly kissed her. Meaning...?

Production Design: As Sam dies in the hallway, the shot emphasizes a huge, alcove-shaped stained glass window in Sam's stairwell. Not only are we reminded of Christ's example as Nat starts wielding his axe, but the *colors* of this window, principally red and yellow, clash totally with the film's overall palette. Does Christianity just not "fit" in this world anymore?