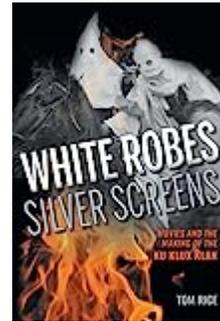


Tom Rice. *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-01843-4.



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Breaking away from the slew of recent local area studies looking at the Ku Klux Klan revival of the 1920s, Tom Rice's *White Robes, Silver Screens* provides a useful new lens through which to consider the white Protestant nativist movement. Some of this book will be overfamiliar to those conversant with the history of the second Klan—it is hardly necessary at this point to once again discover that the Klan of the 1920s was generally more preoccupied with the “threat” of Jewish and Catholic immigrants than with African Americans. Yet Rice's focus on the Klan's relationship with film offers interesting possibilities.

As might be expected in a monograph on the Ku Klux Klan and film, Rice delivers a thorough examination of the historical and social context of *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Although the history of D. W. Griffith's box office smash is a well-trod one, this well-researched consideration of *Birth* reaches beyond trite clichés about the film as an inspiration for the organization's revival. As Rice makes clear, the Klan's relationship with *Birth of a Nation* was a complex story of appropriation and reappropriation. Griffith's film was both a foundational text for the second Klan and arguably the organization's most effective recruiting material. In appropriating the image of the Klan, Rice contends, the popular film helped lay

a foundation of support for the revived organization in urban areas. Yet, in appropriating the film as a tool to garner members, the Klan actually undermined not only the film's mainstream appeal but also—by extension—the broad support for the Reconstruction Klan in post-war public memory. This argument would benefit from greater support at points, but overall offers a thought-provoking take on what could otherwise be a tired topic.

Rice's major contribution really lies in broadening the scope of the Klan's relationship with film beyond *Birth of a Nation*. Here, the 1920 Fox film *The Face At Your Window* is almost as important to understanding the rise of the Klan as Griffith's work. While not a film about the Klan, resourceful Klan recruiters made a valuable promotional tool out of the onscreen vigilante heroics of the American Legion—a group that Rice frequently uses to ground the Klan in its contemporary context. The self-proclaimed Invisible Empire enthusiastically coopted modern media to attract new members, and was not shy about twisting apparently unrelated popular entertainments to its own end.

Key to this process was the Klan's use of film to publicize the organization and define the Invisible Empire's public identity. It was through image and display, pri-

marily by borrowing the Klan robe from *Birth of a Nation*, that the second Klan was initially able to differentiate itself from the many other fraternal organizations of the time. As such, a visual medium like film was vital to consolidating popular understanding of the character and function of the Klan. This process was not limited to appropriating the films of others. The Invisible Empire made multiple forays (some more successful than others) into producing its own motion pictures. Rice provides readers with a well-researched analysis of often overlooked films like *The Fifth Horseman* (1924), *The Traitor Within* (1924), and *Toll of Justice* (1923), all of which effectively attempted to brand the organization as an appealing and positive force for white Protestant Americanism.

Rice also astutely situates this struggle within the larger context of two contemporary debates. First, the use of film as propaganda had serious implications for the question of whether movies were nothing but a commercial entertainment (and therefore not deserving of protection under the First Amendment) or whether cinematic innovation had wider ramifications for society. Second, the issue of whether the Klan could successfully define its own visual identity was crucial given the group's deep interest and investment in the postwar ideological brawl over what it meant to be an "American." This wider struggle also fueled Klannish condemnation of a film industry seen as tainted by Jewish influence—most notably here in the largely successful protests against screenings of Charlie Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* (1923).

Rice situates this enmity within a conscious effort by the Klan to retain relevance by attacking modern media while positioning the group's moralizing tendencies—and the group itself—within contemporary norms. Although interesting, this analysis threatens to reach beyond the evidence provided. The argument also stumbles in places in seemingly taking the rhetoric of Klan officials and pub-

lications as indicative of internal consensus, when the fractured organization was far from monolithic in opinion on almost any subject. More successful is Rice's consideration of *how* these films were viewed, with the picture theater itself a hotly contested site.

With regard to the Klan's protests and propaganda, the book emphasizes ideological reasoning, with little attention to possible economic motivations. The latter are far more evident in Rice's consideration of how "mainstream" cinema responded to the Klan (although it is never made entirely clear how "mainstream" is defined here). The multifarious depictions of the Klan that could be found on screens across the country in the 1920s, particularly in comedies and westerns, were shaped by the clash between the desire to exploit public interest in the group and the fear of alienating audiences. As Rice makes clear, movie studios' resulting tightrope act was made even more precarious by industrial regulations that made it difficult to portray the Klan's hatreds on screen in any concrete way. As a result, the image of the Klan—that is, the costume that defined its visual identity—largely became divorced in popular cinema from its ideological baggage. As a result, studio films (even those critical of the organization) often had the effect of moderating and inadvertently legitimizing the Invisible Empire for mass audiences. Rice makes this particularly clear in a compelling comparison between the visually attractive appearances of a largely depoliticized Klan in the films of the 1920s and the far more critical depictions of the organization in the social problem films of the 1930s. It is only a shame that the analysis ends in 1944 with the formal disbanding of the second Klan organization, as Rice's argument would be enriched by the inclusion of 1951's anti-Klan message picture *Storm Warning*. Nonetheless, Rice offers a stimulating and fresh approach to the subject that will be of interest to scholars of the Ku Klux Klan, public memory, and the interwar period more broadly.

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