


Dark Light

Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib

 College of DuPage

THE EAST ROOM OF THE WHITE HOUSE
FEBRUARY EIGHTEENTH
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN



BY COURTESY OF THE PRESIDENT

D. W. Griffith

PRESENTS

TO THE

Chief Magistrate and his Cabinet

IN A SPECIAL PRIVATE VIEW

HIS EPIC PRODUCTION

The Birth of a Nation

FOUNDED ON

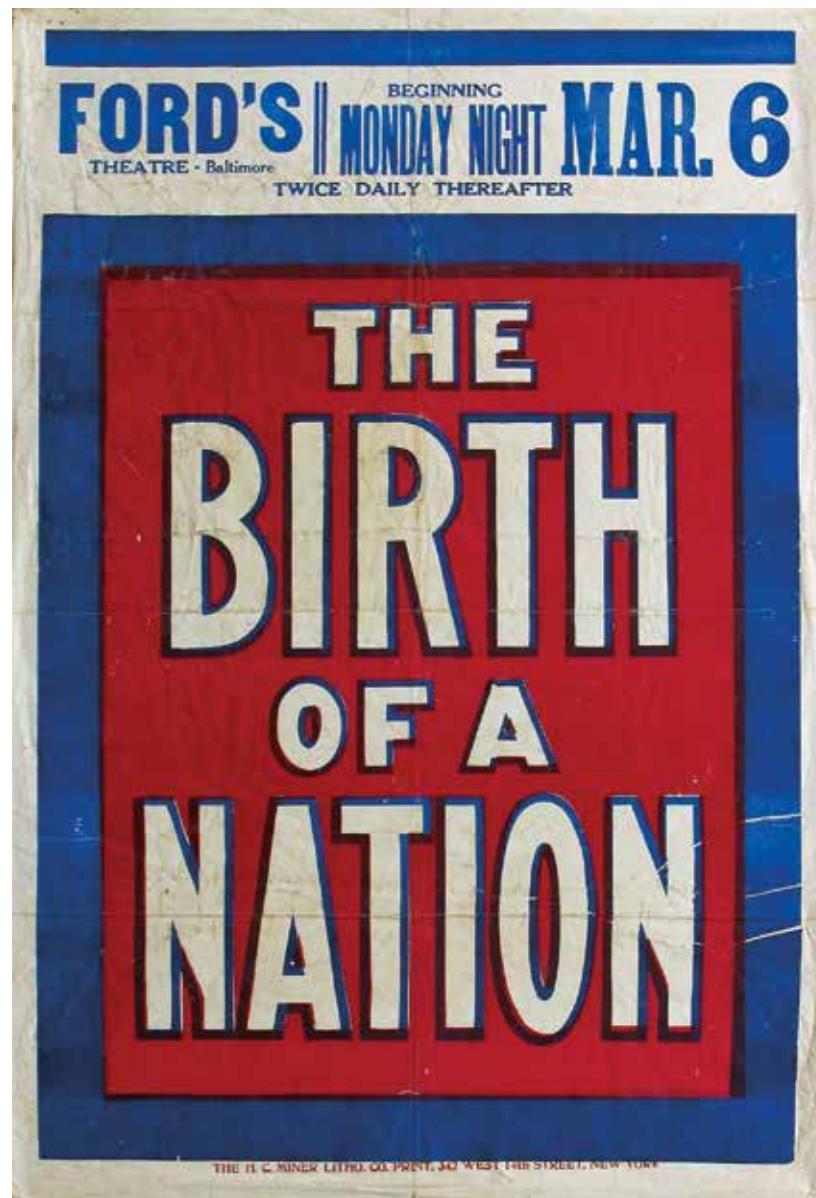
THOMAS DIXON'S HISTORICAL NOVEL

The Clansman

Dark Light

Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib

Cleve Carney Art Gallery
Saturday, Jan. 21 to Saturday, March 4, 2017



All that is solid melts into air

by David Hartt

When it opened in 1915, the Parkway Theatre in Baltimore was opulent in character, it had a grand tearoom and a marble lobby decorated in the Beaux-arts style with chandeliers modeled on those of Versailles. Later, the theater would host D.W. Griffith's controversial 1915 silent feature film *The Birth of a Nation*. A fictional recounting of events surrounding the Civil War and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the film is harrowing in its degradation of African-Americans. The NAACP, formed only a few years earlier, protested the screenings of what, even in 1915, was determined to be racist propaganda.

Concurrently, *The Birth of a Nation* was one of the first films to have been screened in the White House. President Woodrow Wilson, after watching it, was alleged to have remarked: "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

The Parkway Theatre, now derelict, is located at the intersection of North Avenue and North Charles Street, which saw protests following the death in April 2015 of Freddie Gray, an African-American man fatally injured while in Baltimore police custody.

Created on the centennial anniversary of both the film and theater, *Writing History With Lightning* is a single channel video work by the artists Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib. Produced by selecting and altering various scenes from *The Birth of a Nation*, Hironaka and Suib projected the looped sequences onto the walls of the Parkway Theatre and captured the spectral images with a high-definition camera. Ten minutes in length, the resulting work recasts the conflicted legacies of both the original film and the architectural space—a critical accounting of ideological and spatial obsolescence.

The effects of trauma and erasure are manifest in the built environment. In the case of urban centers like Baltimore, the actors are public policies

of oppression and disinvestment, violence and neglect—over time its entropic force removes any trace of dignity or achievement.

Created in response to police violence against African-Americans, the Black Lives Matter movement saw students at campuses throughout the United States attempt to redress the naming of historical buildings and institutions after figures associated with the exploitation and oppression of blacks. The segregationist legacy of Woodrow Wilson was called into question as students at Princeton sought to rename the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

In December 2015, Yale University released a report on criteria for the



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015

renaming of campus buildings. One of the guidelines asked: Was the relevant principal legacy significantly contested in the time and place in which the namesake lived?

The Birth of a Nation was itself a revisionist concept of the history and treatment of the South in relation to the Civil War. Hironaka and Suib's piece is a contestation of the false reality presented in Griffith's film and an appraisal of the legacy of segregation still acutely felt in contemporary American cities.

Our understanding of history isn't always linear; the Hegelian concept of human progress evolves with recursive digressions. The built environment is similarly convoluted in its development.

The Venice Charter was written in 1964 as a framework for the conservation and restoration of historic sites. Article 7 states that "a monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it occurs."

To understand the status of the Parkway Theatre, one might look at another urban ruin. In Germany, the Allied bombings of Berlin during World War II left the structures on Museum Island severely damaged. David Chipperfield, the architect of the Neues Museum, had to contend with both the history of the original structure, its partial destruction and subsequent abandonment. The building sat vacant for 60 years before the restoration was undertaken and the approach that Chipperfield decided on accommodated not only the fabric of the



original museum but the shifting post-war and post-communist, ideological dimensions of a newly reunited Germany.

Buildings are always negotiating their social, political and economic value within their surrounding context. Vacant since 1998, the Parkway Theatre is now being remade by architects Ziger/Snead as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Parkway Film Center. Their design is part historical excavation of the faded decor and part retrofitting of the structure to serve as a screening venue for the Maryland Film Festival and educational space for Johns Hopkins University and the Maryland Institute College of Art's film programs. The process represents a cycle of growth and decay, one order supplanting another.

The Birth of a Nation begins with a genteel representation of the white leisure class embodied by the Cameron family, their black slaves innocently happy while toiling in the fields. What follows the slaves' emancipation is a polemic by Griffith against what he believed to be a disruption of the natural order but was simply a thinly veiled attempt to justify the exploitation of African-Americans for capitalist gain.

Karl Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." This critique of capitalist exploitation is directly applicable to the unconscionable practice of slavery. The passage suggests



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015

a reckoning, when all markets are exhausted, all resources depleted, what remains is the harsh reality of our own corrupt souls.

The last sequence of *Writing History With Lightning* shows the image of a black child projected on the interior of the Parkway. His eyes stare questioningly and occasionally move about furtively. The figure is vulnerable and full of hesitation, unsure of himself, his place in society, unaware of the perverse machinations of Griffith's portrayal. Hironaka and Suib recuperate his image and dignity through their contextualization and reordering of the original filmic narrative. A recursive act and an elegiac encounter between a transcendent human spirit and the ruin of history.

David Hartt is an artist based in Philadelphia, where he is an assistant professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania.



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015



Writing History With Lightning, film still, 2015

Philadelphia-based artists Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib have been collaborators since 2008. They are recipients of several honored awards, including a 2015 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, Pew Fellowships in the Arts and fellowships from CFEVA and Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Their work has been widely exhibited at venues both domestically and abroad, including Fondazione MAXXI (Rome), New Media Gallery (Vancouver), the Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia), UCLA Hammer Museum, PS1/MoMA, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Arizona State Art Museum. They have been artists-in-residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts, Banff Centre, and the Millay Colony for Arts. Suib is co-founder of Greenhouse Media and Hironaka serves as a professor and department chair of film and video at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Hironaka and Suib are represented by Locks Gallery. The couple, their daughter and one cat reside in South Philly.

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Cover image: **To be no more**, archival pigment print, 2015

Inside front cover image: **Invitation to a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House, 1915**

Image on page 2: ***The Birth of a Nation* poster promoting the film's premiere in Baltimore, MD**

Center spread and inside back cover images: ***Writing History With Lightning*, film still, 2015**

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www.locksgallery.com



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