

REPRESENTING HISTORY

Introduction

This study guide focuses on representations of African Americans in two distinct periods in American history – The American Civil War and reconstruction 1861-77 and World War II 1941-45. The two media texts explored are:

- **Bay Area Stories**, a local PBS documentary produced by KQED, which complements Ken Burns' *The War*, but addresses the local impact of World War II on the different ethnic groups living in the Bay Area in the 1940s; and
- **The Birth of a Nation**, an example of creative non-fiction which is set during the American Civil War and the reconstruction of the south.

Through critical media literacy, this guide examines how the struggles of African Americans are represented in these two contrasting genres. The intention is also to evaluate how these differing narratives offer versions of history and pose questions about media representation and historical interpretation.

Suitable for

10-12th grades

History/Social Science/Language Arts/Politics/Civics/Media Studies curriculum

Content areas

American Civil War and Reconstruction

America in the early 20th century

Resurgence of the KKK

World War II

American role in WW II

Role of minorities in American participation in WW II

Bay Area and its role in the WW II effort

Censorship in America

Representation of minorities in the American Media

Racial tension

Media literacy (subjectivity in film)

Subjectivity in history

History vs. historiography

Previewing questions

- Contrast documentary and fiction as genres? Is one or another better suited to the representation of history? Why?
- Why are some voices not heard in historical accounts? Whose voices are so often left out? What is the role of oral history to fill this void?

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

Historical information

- First American Feature (at over 180 mins);
- Cost \$110,000 in 1914 (most films of the day cost only a quarter of that amount);
- First half of the film is based on Thomas Dixon's *Can a Leopard Change its Spots* and the second-half on Dixon's novel *The Clansman*;
- Film was banned in 5 states and 19 cities;
- First film to charge \$2 a ticket, which was the price for theater shows at the time (most films only cost 40 cents);
- Griffith's background: born in Kentucky; father was a cavalry officer in the Confederacy.

For more historical information on the production, please see:

- [The birth of 'Birth of a Nation'](#), by Bosley Crowther
- [The Birth of a Nation: An Assessment](#), by Seymour Stern
- [Advertisement for VHS Release of the film](#), Kino International (See Page #3)

Previewing Questions

- Ask the students to review what they know about the Civil War and the Reconstruction of the South. What was the role of Black southerners in the Reconstruction?
- Ask students to read the following article before showing the clip from *Birth of a Nation*. Based on the article, what was the response to the film when it first came out, and why?

CineFiles Resource: [Decried from Day One](#), by Susan King

View

The Birth of a Nation, Kino International DVD, Chapters 15-17

Discussion questions and activities

1. Who were the carpetbaggers and the southern unionists? How are they represented in the film? In what ways does this film distort the history of Reconstruction and the role of the Ku Klux Klan in the South?

Research Activity

- Have students research the following: What was the role of the film in the resurgence of the KKK?

CineFiles Resource: [Knights of the Ku Klux Klan](#), Advertisement

- Who were the black leaders who rose to power in the South after the Civil War, and what is their legacy?

Censorship

2. *The Birth of a Nation* has generated varied response over the years, from censorship to violent protest. Is censorship the best way to deal with controversial material? Read the articles listed below. What are the different ways in which people have tried to combat the negative images in this film? Can you think of other solutions?

CineFiles Resources:

- [‘Birth of a nation’ bill becomes law](#), The Moving Image World, 1915
- [In Toleranceville, a protest rated ‘X’](#), 1980
- [A statement by the Roosevelt University Film Society](#) regarding the showing of *The Birth of a Nation*
- [Debating an icon’s genius, racism](#), by Robert W. Welkos, LA Times, 2000

Possible activities:

- Form two teams to debate why the film should be censored or not
- Create a classroom charter around censorship

Racism

3. This article by William Grimes asks the question, ‘Can a film be both racist and classic?’ What do you think? Write a letter to the editor in response to this article.

CineFiles Resource: [Can a film be both racist and classic?](#) by William Grimes

Representation

4. The following excerpt is taken from the Program Notes by Ron Mottram, to the **D.W. Griffith Touring Show**, Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1975:

The attitudes towards blacks portrayed in THE BIRTH OF A NATION are essentially no different from those of many other American films. Why then has THE BIRTH OF A NATION been so inordinately criticized? One reason lies in Griffith’s skills as a filmmaker. His film acts more powerfully in moving audiences, even today, than most films do. But another, more specific, reason may be his use of the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic force. Our conception of the Klan has different roots than Griffith’s. Our idea of the Klan is based on a century of violent and hateful actions; further, it is difficult for us to place ourselves in a historical framework that considers the Klan in its formation when the issues that have created it were probably not as clear cut as those that have sustained it in our own time. Then, too, we partially resent the fact that we are manipulated by the film to accept the heroic role of the Klan and to cheer its final success. Had Griffith used a band of individuals not associated with the Klan as his rescuing force, or structured his film in such a way that the political and dramatic problems were settled through the process of time and changing opinion, as they were in actuality, THE BIRTH OF A NATION would be less controversial.

For the entire notes on *Birth of a Nation*, please see [pp.13-15 of the Program Notes](#)

- What do you think of the argument in the text? The author seems to suggest that the film could have been presented in a very different manner, with different consequences. What does this say about films as ‘objective’ documents?
- Does this hold true only for works of fiction, or for documentaries as well?

Other relevant documents in CineFiles:

- [Exhibitor Manual](#), Dixie Film Exchange, c1940
- Response to 1947 screening of the film by Executive Director of NAACP. [‘Birth of a Nation’ revival here seen as a good turn for reds](#), by Walter White, New York Herald Tribune, 1947
- An article in the Village Voice that examines the legacy of the film, both negative and positive. [Our troubling birth rite](#), by J. Hoberman, Village Voice, 1993
- [Various Historical Perspectives](#), Prof. Daniel J. Leab, Seton Hall University

THE WAR: BAY AREA STORIES

Introduction

Directed and produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, **THE WAR** explores the Second World War from an American perspective, following the experiences of a handful of men and women—on the home front and on the battlefield—whose lives were transformed during devastating years of war from 1941 to 1945. The film honors and celebrates the bravery, endurance and sacrifice of the generation of Americans who lived through the conflagration.

KQED and KTEH have produced three documentaries about Bay Area World War II veterans that serve as local complements to the seven-part PBS/WETA series **THE WAR—A Ken Burns Film**. **Bay Area Stories** is one of these local KQED productions

Bay Area Stories is a one-hour look at the impact of World War II on the Bay Area and its diverse communities. Northern California served as a port of embarkation for the Pacific Theater and due to the area's strategic and coastal location, residents feared the possibility of another attack. The increased climate of paranoia served as the rationale for the arrests and internment of Japanese, Italian and German Americans.

The countries of birth for many of the Bay Area's ethnic communities became battlefields during World War II. Members of these populations, including Chinese, Filipinos and African Americans enlisted in the armed forces in large numbers, often encountering discrimination and prejudice within the military, but eager to help their country and prove their patriotism. Racism also played a part in the largest single loss of life in the United States during the war. In 1944, an explosion at Port Chicago, a Navy ammunition loading base in the San Francisco Bay Area, killed hundreds of sailors, most of them African American. Dewhitt Jamison, one of the last survivors of the explosion, shares his experience. The subsequent fallout from Port Chicago eventually led to the desegregation of the armed forces.

This guide focuses on the representation of the African American experience in World War II.

“There were very few opportunities outside of service. African Americans were mess men in the Navy. They were valets to officers. They loaded ammunition.”—Betty Soski, **Bay Area Stories**

“You had a white water fountain, and a black water fountain. And a black would get into trouble if he went and drank at the white water fountain. My friend at Brookley Field had his head busted wide open because he drank at the white fountain.”— John Gray, **THE WAR**

During World War II African Americans found themselves with conflicting feelings about supporting the war effort when their own country did not offer them the freedom America was fighting for overseas

The War web site – for educators http://www.pbs.org/thewar/edu_lesson_plan.htm

“I can't think about World War II without thinking the 20 years that followed. So that the entire Civil Rights movement seems to have been created the cauldron under which that the work that we were doing in Richmond and other places lit the fire under that cauldron of social change, which unfolded over the next 20 years.”—Betty Soski, **Bay Area Stories**

Statistical information

- African Americans served in every branch of the military, although the armed forces were segregated. More than 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft; 909,000 served in the Army. In 1944, the Army (limited by a 10% quota) enlisted 700,000 African Americans.
- By 1945, the number of blacks in San Francisco rose from under 5,000 to more than 50,000. The black population in Richmond and Vallejo grew more than 10 times.

Previewing questions

- Ask students what they know about the role of African Americans who served in World War II.
- “Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth, but not its twin.” — Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams*. What is the issue here? Ask students to explain her meaning and comment on it.

Draw on students’ responses to discuss the role of oral history and personal testimony as historical evidence. How do these stories, as primary source material, offer insight into what happened? Is oral history of equal validity, in terms of historical evidence or accuracy, to the interpretation of a historian? How does personal narrative differ from the narrative of the historian?

Discussion questions

1. Ask students to reflect on the stories told by African American veterans in Bay Area stories. How did they feel they were perceived and treated by Americans during WWII? How have these stories broadened their understanding of the dilemmas faced by African American communities in America during the 1940s and 1950s? Do these stories add to their understanding of that period in history?

Research activities:

- What was the legal status of segregation in 1941?
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline/building_01.html
 - What was Executive Order 8802? What were President Roosevelt’s stated reasons for ending discrimination in the defense industry? <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=72>
 - What organizations existed in 1941 to fight discrimination against African Americans?
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline/building_01.html)
2. Ken Burns’ *The War* offers three views in relation to the participation of African Americans in WWII. Do students agree with John Hope Franklin who decided that his country did not deserve his service? Do students agree with Barbara Covington that it was best to “make the best of it” and work in a segregated army base? Do students think that participation in the war effort would help or hinder African Americans’ quest for civil rights after the war?

Does the clip privilege one perspective or viewpoint?

3. Comment on the propaganda piece celebrating the role of African Americans, as Americans, contributing to the war effort.
4. Ronald Takaki has written, “World War II was the transition to the Civil Rights Revolution.” (*A Different Mirror, A History of Multicultural America*, Little Brown & Company, 1993, p. 399.)

How were the demands for social justice and equality met? How long did the “transition” take for African Americans? What were the key milestones? Has this civil rights revolution taken place?

Research activities:

- How did the experience of fighting, even in segregated units, empower African Americans and others to come home and fight for their civil rights?
 - When did the armed forces finally become integrated? What was the effect?
 - How long would it take from the end of the war to abolish segregation in the South? What were the next steps in the civil rights movement?
5. How is the representation of African Americans in the KQED documentary *The War: Bay Area Stories*, different from that in *Birth of a Nation*? Has the representation of African-Americans in the media changed over time? How?

Possible activities:

- Have students keep a log of all the images of African-Americans they see on television in one evening (in TV Shows, Ads, News, etc.). Are there patterns?

Other Resources at:

- *The War* web site – for educators http://www.pbs.org/thewar/edu_lesson_plan.htm
- KQED/KTEH – for educators <http://www.kqed.org/programs/tv/thewar/educators.jsp>
- *African American World, Building Democracy 1866-1953* at http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline/building_01.html