

## Blackkkklansman: Using the Past to Tell a Story of Today

By: Eliot Dix

Spike Lee's "*Blackkkklansman*" draws the audience's attention to the evil and pervasive ideologies of white supremacy that have sunk their roots in American society. By using a period piece Lee is able to demonstrate that the past can seldom be considered over and done with. We most certainly do not live in a post racial America, and Lee highlights this point by diving into the true story of Ron Stahlworth, the first ever black cop in Colorado Springs. His undercover efforts to uncover potential plans for violence from the local Ku Klux Klan lead to various hijinx including a relationship with KKK grand wizard, David Duke. Throughout the story Lee makes it very clear that his depiction of the 1970s in this film is intended to parallel the climate on race relations when the movie premiered in 2018. Lee made a handful of nods to Donald Trump's administration, and clearly intends to comment on the power the president can have to strengthen hate groups like the ones characterized in this film. It's through Ron's literal double consciousness as an undercover cop that he is able to prevent a violent attack by the KKK, though it is his double consciousness in the way W.E.B Dubois explains it, that creates his personal conflict as a black man in the police force who desires social change. The 2016 presidential election and the far right hate groups that came out in droves to support the president elect created a need for *Blackkkklansman*. Lee demonstrates that now just as much as ever, far right hate groups thrive in America, and they are seeing themselves represented on a national stage.

White supremacy is depicted in many forms all throughout the film. The very first scene is the closing shot of the 1939 film "Gone with the Wind," that zooms out from the carnage on the beach to show a confederate flag waving proudly. Lee has spoken about this choice, and

references a class trip he took as a student at NYU, which left him with unaddressed observations about the stereotypical nature of black characters portrayed in the film. Time journalist Rembert Browne says about Lee, “This selective understanding of American history continued to rear its head as he marched into adulthood.” Lee’s desire to hold a mirror up to Americans, and question the way we understand our past started early. *Blackkkklansman* was no exception to this intention. Immediately after the “Gone With the Wind” clip, a dramatization of a frustrated, hate spewing propagandist from the 1950’s is seen trying to create a video reel of pro white rants. He repeats the phrase, “We had a great way of life,” in reference to white nationalist desires to preserve white culture and way of life. This is not the only direct reference to Donald Trump’s famous campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” that exists in the film. KKK grand wizard David Duke makes the point to Ron Stahlworth over the phone, “...this is why we need people like you and me in public office. For America to achieve it’s greatness again.” These intentional blows to the Trump presidency are not a partisan condemnation of right wing political opinions. Lee wants to address the fact that Trump has gained the public support of far right hate groups, and brought legitimacy to their beliefs in ethnic purity and white superiority. At the home of one of the KKK members in the film, the camera does a long pan to a white lawn sign proudly sporting the slogan, “America, love it or leave it!” It would not be a stretch to assume Lee chose to associate this ethnocentric patriotism with the KKK members due to the way hyper patriotism was a reliable rallying tool in the Trump campaign. In Volume 8 of the “Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric,” Samuel Perry quotes Trump biographer Michael D’Antonio in saying that, “Much of Trump’s campaign was about establishing an us vs them view of our times, which meant that Trump’s side, made up of largely white Americans, was at war with the opposition.” It is highly likely that Lee would not refute D’Antonio’s claims, due to

his framing the Klan in his film as being exactly that, "...at war with the opposition." In this particular case, the battle they were poised to fight was against Colorado's black student union, through the means of a planned attack at one of their demonstrations. The Department of Homeland security declaring white supremacists as the number one domestic terror threat should provide some context for Lee's accurate portrayal of the Klan and other extremist groups' intentions. Showing them in this violent light served to highlight the severity of President Trump not taking an active stance against these organizations. Another one of the many on-the-nose nods to the Trump administration came during a conversation between Ron and a fellow officer discussing David Duke's intention to breach mainstream politics and policy by having his ideologies represented in public office. The officer stated that in order to push racist ideologies past the average American who may not consider themselves racist, you have to slip it beneath other policies like immigration, crime and affirmative action. He completes this not so subtle nod at the current administration with an even less subtle declaration, that America will one day elect someone who embodies these ideals. Ron responds in disbelief, at which point the audience is reminded of why they repudiate the Trump era.

To understand how the 45th president has become associated with the extremist white supremacist hate groups, one must examine the rhetoric Trump uses when discussing their actions. The Charlottesville, Virginia protests lead by tiki toting white supremacist hate groups amounted to the death of a 32 year old counter protestor Heather Heyer, and warranted a response from Trump that would become a defining moment of his presidency. On the day following Heather Heyer's death, Trump stated, "We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides." By attempting to differ responsibility to all parties involved at the Charlottesville protest, Trump

exonerates the violent white supremacists of their actions that resulted in a woman's death. In the 8th Volume of the 2018 Journal for Contemporary Rhetoric, Samuel Perry makes this statement on page 7, "The 'many sides' description created room for interpretation that cast doubt on whether or not Trump in fact condemned violence in the strongest possible terms if he was not ready to directly name white supremacist groups culpable for the death and injury of other Americans." Trump's inability to take a powerful stance against these groups perpetuating hate and domestic terrorism show how he is the manifestation of the foreshadowing Lee added into his film. Lee showed us the startling desire for groups like the KKK to see their ideology represented in national politics, and some experts argue the use of the term, "alt right," is aiding in their success. Utilizing terminology that even places white supremacist or white nationalist views on the existing political spectrum seems archaic, and may even function to provide legitimacy to their point of views. Also in Volume 8 of the 2018 Journal for Contemporary Rhetoric, Stephanie Hartzell discusses the use of the labels we give to these groups, "...all pro-white groups share a foundational commitment to a white supremacist ideology but attempt to gain mainstream legitimacy and acceptance by branding themselves with language that obscures their connection to race and racism." The line is blurring between a domestic terrorist threat and legitimate political opinion that can be seen represented in government, which is a point that Lee strongly seeks to make throughout the film. Lee added the montage of the Charlottesville protest and a clip of Trump's national address after it had already premiered at the Canne film festival. That historical moment became yet another concrete example of Lee's message to the American people.

When overtly racist ideologies are allowed to flourish, progress towards combating the covert forces of racism is set back significantly. The Black Student Union in the film is the

representation of the fight against institutional oppression. Ron gets to know Patrice, the president of the BSU, and conflict between the two grows when Patrice finds out he's a police officer, or in her words, a pig. Ron embodies the double consciousness of a black man in numerous ways throughout the film. W.E.B. Dubois describes double consciousness in The Souls of Black Folk, as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." There is a powerful moment in the film where Lee forces the audience to experience this on Ron's behalf. As Ron goes to tackle a woman who had just planted a bomb with the intention of murdering Black Student Union protestors, a patrol car pulls up to the scene with sirens blaring. We come to a sinking realization that Ron is going to be seen as the perpetrator of the attack due to being a black man restraining a white woman. Despite his pleas of being a cop, and screaming for the fellow officers to check his badge in his pocket, they beat him and put him in handcuffs. Co-author of the film Kevin Willmott explains in a Keynote presentation that "two-ness," was a major theme of the movie. About Ron he says, "his two-ness is not just that he's black and an American, he's also blue." These conflicting identities force the audience to ponder his decision to be involved in law enforcement. Despite being an American, Ron is always seen as black first in the eyes of others, which carries harmful stereotypes and connotations. Even being an officer of the law does not remove Ron from his blackness. His desire to create change within the system, and use his position as a police officer to address violent racists like the KKK, will not truly bring about institutional change to law enforcement that has disproportionately burdened black Americans for centuries. Lee solidifies this point in two ways. The first being Ron's love interest Patrice refusing their relationship if he stays on the police force. Second being at the end of the investigation, when Ron and his team find out that the case has been thrown out, and the evidence destroyed. This injustice was likely added to the plot to show that one man in Ron

Stallworth is not going to single handedly correct a corrupt and broken system of law enforcement. To support his main theme of white supremacy's growth and prevalence in contemporary America, Lee includes sub themes like two-ness. This is done to emphasize the depth of racism on institutional, structural, and systemic levels, all of which we cannot move towards remedying if the ideologies of white supremacists, at the very least, are not condemned by the very top.

Some critics felt Lee missed an opportunity to address the racism we all take a part in each day in America by creating a sort of caricature of racists with the gaudy, low life, comically unintelligent KKK members depicted in *Blackkklansmnan*. The thought was that it may reaffirm a belief in white viewers that they need not feel guilt or responsibility for racism in America because they can comfortably condemn the racist scumbags depicted in the film. These were the same critics however, who felt Lee's references to Trump and modern America were too heavy handed. One could easily see these decisions as being self realized, as Lee likely wanted every soul that bought a ticket to hear his message loud and clear. There was no reason to hide his truth behind dense metaphors and fluff. Lee depicted the Klan members in such a way to wake the audience up to the fact that individuals like this make up a part of our 45th president's voter base that he clearly was not willing to give up. Framing the film around the most dramatic and evil forms of racism also served an important purpose. It set a benchmark for the progress we as a country are making towards true racial equality and justice. By using depictions of police brutality, and white extremist violence Lee badly wanted the audience to recognize that this period piece could have been set in today's era with a few costume changes. He wanted his audience to question how we can begin to progress towards equality through racially conscious policy creation if white supremacist extremists are still infiltrating democracy, and black

Americans are still living double conscious lives. The film's final moments are a heart wrenching reminder of how urgently our country needs to change for the better. Lee wants us to understand our past to show us that it's still our present, and will become our future if we fail to wake up and take action.

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