

# The Birth of a Nation

—  
un film de Nate Parker



# Corrigé Activité 1

## Before the film

### I/Analyse the poster

Identify the nature of the picture. Support your answer with elements you can see in the document.

The document must be a film poster as there are mentions of awards won at the Sundance film festival in the top left-hand corner. Moreover, the bottom line announces that the film will be released in autumn.

Comment on its general layout: what does it remind you of?

The general layout of the picture reminds the viewer of the American flag. Indeed, the top left-hand corner is blue with white letters in it while the rest of the picture is made of red and white stripes, just as in the “stars and stripes”.

Focus on details: what are the red stripes made of?

When we focus on details, we notice that the red stripes are actually made of lines of people in arms. We can see that the stripes are differentiated along racial lines: the people on each line are either black or white and there is no mixed-race line. What do you think the characters are doing? Support your answer with details you can find in the picture. As all the characters appear to hold weapons – rifles in the lines of white people and swords and sticks in the lines of black people – these two groups of people must be opposed in some sort of violent confrontation. What is more, the fact that it looks as if blood were dripping from the lines, it seems quite obvious that the battle will probably end in a bloodbath.

Focus on the title and try to connect it with everything you have said about the picture. Imagine what the film is going to be about.

The general layout of the picture and the title clearly suggest that the film is undoubtedly going to be about the history of the United States of America. It will most probably deal with slavery or post Civil War segregation as the racial element, along with the costumes of the characters show that the event takes place in the nineteenth century. It will certainly depict some form of black people’s rebellion that may have been of paramount importance in the history of America.



## II/ Learn about the origins of the title

When did the movie The Birth of a Nation come out ?

It came out in 1915.

Focus on the first paragraph: what are the two main characteristics of this movie?

This film is said to be both “brilliant and repugnant”.

Pick out all the elements that illustrate the first characteristic.

The Birth of a Nation is considered to be brilliant because its director invented many new film-making techniques that are still in use nowadays. Moreover, the narrative structure of the film, which was revolutionary at the time, is still at the basis of many of today’s Hollywood movies. The film is also outstanding for the figures associated with it: 18,000 people and 3,000 horses were needed to make it and it was the first film to be officially shown at the White House.

Pick out all the elements that illustrate the second characteristic.

The film is also described as the most racist movie ever made. Indeed, it depicts the lynching of black people as a positive thing and eventually reaches the conclusion that black people are particularly despicable beings that shouldn’t have been given any rights. Moreover, it makes the Ku Klux Klan, which was in decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, appear as the organization that saved the nation, thus giving it extensive publicity and helping reviving it. The Birth of a Nation was even used as a recruitment tool for the KKK over the following decades.

Focus on the last paragraph and explain why this movie remains a landmark in the history of the United States.

It remains a landmark in the history of the United States insofar as it shows how racism was prevalent and deeply rooted in American culture and society at that time, which may explain why such odious ideas are unfortunately still present nowadays.

Do you think you’re going to see this movie? Why?

It seems very unlikely that we are going to watch this movie as its contents are extremely racist and such a film would not have been awarded prizes at the Sundance festival.



So, why is the movie you are going to see entitled *The Birth of a Nation*? Think of possible explanations.

Selon les productions des élèves. On attendra les termes suivants: rewriting, new version, criticism, parody...

### III/ Learn about the director's intentions

Read what Nate Parker said about his choice of a title. In your own words, explain what his intention was.

As an African-American director, Nate Parker decided to choose the title of the most racist movie ever made in order to make his audience aware that there are still some forms of racism and injustice in today's society. He aimed at showing that what was put forward in the 1915 movie has not completely disappeared and that is why he wanted his film to make people react and act in order to fight these inequalities and eventually help American society to change and achieve harmony.

The film opens with the following sentences on the screen. Find who Thomas Jefferson was. Then, using everything you have learnt about *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), imagine the sort of film you are going to see.

Thomas Jefferson was one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America: he was the main author of the Declaration of Independence and also the third President of the US at the beginning of the 19th century. Both the quote and the following words ("based on a true story") seem to indicate that the film we are going to watch is a historical drama, probably about some tragic event as the contents of the quote suggest.

a. The context

Identify where and when the film takes place.

The film takes place at the beginning of the 19th century, in Virginia.

Describe the type of society that is depicted in the film:

- Compare the dwellings of slaves and slave-owners as they are shown at the beginning of the film.

Exemples de productions: The white slave-owners live in a huge mansion which stands impressively in the middle of a well-tended park whereas the black slaves quarters are composed of ramshackle wood cabins. The space allotted to whole slave families is much smaller than that of a single room within the slave-owners' mansion. There is obviously a sharp contrast between the living conditions of the slave-owners and their slaves. The slave-owners live in considerably more comfortable conditions than the slaves.



# Corrigé Activité 2

## Remembering the film

### I/ The context

Identify where and when the film takes place.

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Describe the type of society that is depicted in the film:

- Compare the dwellings of slaves and slave-owners as they are shown at the beginning of the film.

*Exemples de productions :* The white slave-owners live in a huge mansion which stands impressively in the middle of a well-tended park whereas the black slaves quarters are composed of ramshackle wood cabins. The space allotted to whole slave families is much smaller than that of a single room within the slave-owners' mansion. There is obviously a sharp contrast between the living conditions of the slave-owners and their slaves. The slave-owners live in considerably more comfortable conditions than the slaves.

What does such a document show about the living conditions of slaves at the time? Can you remember at least two instances in the film when this type of document is mentioned?

This document shows that slaves were not allowed to go wherever they wanted: all their movements were controlled by the white people. At the beginning of the movie, white people arrest and Nat's father and ask him to produce his pass as he is walking back home with food for his starving child. Later, Cherry is also asked for a pass even if she is on her master's grounds. And finally Nat has to ask his master for a pass in order to join his wife after she was raped.

To what extent does this reveal that there was a basic contradiction in American society at the time. Use the extract from the *Declaration of Independence* to support your answer.

*The Declaration of Independence* states that all men are created equal and that one of their fundamental rights is liberty but we clearly see here that black people were not considered to be the equals of white men as they could be enslaved and as a





consequence they were not allowed any form of freedom, even such a basic form of liberty as the freedom of movement.

Can you remember other examples in the film that show that slaves were denied these fundamental rights? Comment on the effect these examples have on the viewer.

There are quite a few striking examples that show that slaves were denied the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, they were considered to be the property of their masters who could use them as they pleased. The film thus depicts scenes that are quite traumatizing and aiming at showing that violence was quite common in the plantations. Indeed, there are several allusions to black females being raped and numerous scenes of torture perpetrated by sadistic white men. One of them is particularly unbearable: disobedient black slaves are shackled and prevented from speaking with metal gags. One of them refuses to eat and is then force-fed with a funnel after his front teeth are methodically broken with a chisel. Another example of the utter subjection of black people that is clearly meant to strike the viewer is the image of the little black girl who is on a leash held by a young white girl skipping in front of her parents' mansion. The black girl is reduced to being a pet, a toy for the white child. All these elements aim at horrifying the viewers in order to make them re-assess this dark period of America's history and eventually fight any form of racism.

## II/ A biopic

Sum up Nat Turner's life

Put the following events in the right order.

| Events   | Order |
|--|-------|
| meets Cherry one last time.  | 15    |
| decides to organize a rebellion.   | 11    |
| baptizes a white man.  | 9     |
| Cherry gets raped.   | 8     |
| loses the battle and flees.  | 14    |
| becomes a field hand.  | 2     |
| kills slave owners.  | 13    |
| gets married.  | 5     |
| witnesses abuse and torture of slaves.                                       | 7     |
| uses the Bible to preach subservience to slaves in neighbouring plantations. | 6     |
| plans to get weapons at the armory in Jerusalem.                             | 12    |
| gets whipped.  | 10    |
| makes his master buy Cherry and falls in love with her.                      | 4     |
| surrenders and gets hanged.  | 16    |
| lives in master's house and learns to read.                                  | 1     |
| master has financial trouble and reverend suggests an idea.                  | 3     |

Then sum up the story of his life, using the appropriate connecting words. You may use 2nd official trailer to help you remember details (link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIIUerVomDE> )

Selon les productions des élèves. On veillera à l'utilisation du prétérit pour retracer la vie de Nat Turner et on valorisera tout ajout d'élément correct non mentionné dans le tableau ci-dessus.



Elizabeth : sees Nat's potential and admires his intellectual abilities



Nana and mother love Nat and see him as an exceptional being



Sam : playmates when children / uses Nat to keep his plantation financially afloat



Hark sees Nat as a leader who might lead him to freedom



Cherry admires and loves Nat



Reverend : sees Nat as a tool to control rebellious slaves



### III/ A heroic figure

Focus on the beginning of the film and find two elements that show that Nat Turner is an exceptional being. What sort of expectation do these elements create for the viewer?

The very beginning of the film introduces Nat as an exceptional being as the Shaman says that the boy's marks on his chest are the sign that he is to be a leader among the community who is to be listened to. Then, when Elizabeth discovers that Nat can read, he is again singled out as a particularly gifted being. As a consequence, the viewer expects this character to have a great destiny and to play a major part in the events that will follow in the movie.

Focus on the scenes when Nat Turner is punished at the whipping post and when he is executed. To what extent can he be compared to a Christ-like figure?

Just like Christ before the crucifixion, Nat Turner is whipped. Moreover, the way he is tied to the post is reminiscent of the cross while Sam's ambivalent feelings that alternate between anger and guilt turn him into some sort of Pontius Pilate who lets his overseer in charge of the torture. After the whipping session, Nat is left as almost dead. The different close-ups on his face emphasize his heroic and almost godlike stature (which is also underlined by the candles that are lit behind him) and when he finally manages to stand up, it looks like a resurrection. The scene of his execution similarly reminds the viewer of the trial of Christ when the crowd shouts abuse and jeers at him and asks for his death. And finally, his smile while he looks up and the image of the black angel as he dies most definitely mark him as a saintly and maybe even godlike figure.

Do you think that Nate Parker managed to rehabilitate Nat Turner as a hero? Did he reach his aim with this film?

Selon les productions des élèves. Valoriser les réponses qui prennent appui à la fois sur la citation de Nate Parker et sur des éléments concrets du film.



# Corrigé Activité 3

## Dealing with the legacy of Nat Turner's rebellion

### I/ How is Nat Turner's rebellion perceived in today's America?

What remains of Nat Turner's rebellion?

There doesn't seem to be a lot of historical remains of Nat Turner's rebellion: the tree on which he was hanged no longer exists but his sword has been preserved.

What are the interviewees' reactions when they evoke Nat Turner and his rebellion? What do these reactions reveal about American society and its relation to the period of slavery that is part of its past?

The interviewees are quite emotional when they evoke this period and this shows that America's relation to its past is still quite complex. The woman in the first video says "You shouldn't be allowed to drive through Southampton County and not know what happened here", which reveals that a lot of Americans do not know about him and his rebellion. Then Frederick Douglass is quoted in order to show how difficult it is for America to bear such a heritage and how hard a possible final reconciliation might be.

The second video shows the great great grandson of Nathaniel and Lavinia Francis whose house was visited by the rebels led by Nat Turner. Lavinia was hidden by a slave so that she could escape from the killing. Then when she gets out of her hiding place, a slave tries to kill her but again she is saved by another slave and she eventually survives. Here again, the viewer sees how difficult it is for all Americans to accept and to deal with that part of their past

**Note:** citation de Frederick Douglass, tirée de *Letter to William Lloyd Garrison*, January 1, 1846:

"In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky—her grand old woods—her fertile fields—her beautiful rivers— her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked, my joy is soon turned to mourning. When I remember that all is cursed with the infernal spirit of slaveholding, robbery and wrong,— when I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers, the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten, and that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing, and led to reproach myself that any thing could fall from my lips in praise of such a land. America will not allow her children to love her. She seems bent on compelling those who would be her warmest friends, to be her worst enemies."



## II/ Nat Turner lives

Focus on what Cherry tells Nat when she meets him for the last time: “They killin’ people everywhere for no reason at all but being black. They say the killin’ won’t stop...”

Can you connect this statement with the following picture?

Cherry’s statement clearly echoes what is happening nowadays in the United States and is denounced by the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, it appears that an impressive number of black people were recently killed by the police for no other reason than their being black as they were not armed and were not directly threatening the officers who shot them. When we see this picture, it seems as if things haven’t really changed since Nat Turner’s time: racism and discrimination still exist and have dramatic consequences on the lives of African-Americans.

To what extent Nate Parker’s film may help African-Americans today in their fight to achieve full equality?

Nate Parker’s film brings to the fore the unbearable horrors of slavery and rehabilitates an African-American hero who decided to rebel against injustice. Maybe this story may help today’s African-Americans in their fight for full equality as it will definitely make the whole of America aware that they have to deal with the heritage of slavery and find some way of compensating for the sufferings of black slaves and for the consequences of such a system on today’s black community (discrimination, poverty, etc).

