



FILM: **BLACKKKLANSMAN**

FDG RATING: 3.7

Spike Lee: *director, writer*  
John David Washington: *actor, Ron Stallworth*  
Adam Driver: *actor, Flip Zimmerman*  
Tophir Grace: *actor, David Duke*

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## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **BLACKKKLANSMAN**

How does a black police officer infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s and why would he? The premise is hard to believe but watching the events unfold on screen, it's even harder to believe that this actually did happen.

Ron Stallworth is the first African-American officer hired by the Colorado Springs Police Department on a kind of provisional basis. His chief sticks him in the records room, but eager to make an impression, he jumps at the chance to go undercover, even if it means potentially betraying his own people. His first assignment is to attend a meeting where the black students' union at the local college has invited civil rights leader, ex-Black Panther, Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) to speak. The sergeant calls it a gathering of subversives.

That assignment is small potatoes compared to what comes next. Evidently, the Grand Wizard, David Duke and his allies are developing an electoral strategy based on divisive issues like immigration, affirmative action and tax reform that could eventually lead to the White House. After hearing his sergeant argue that Duke has mainstream political aspirations, Ron states that the premise is laughable and confidently says, "America would never elect somebody like David Duke president." His sergeant's response is, "Why don't you wake up?" This spurs Ron to suggest infiltrating and undermining the Klan. As strange as it sounds, the idea actually works because Ron reaches out to the Klan over the telephone — "whitening" his voice. But when Duke invites Ron to a meeting, a more seasoned "white" colleague, Flip Zimmerman (who happens to be Jewish) is recruited to hang out with the leaders of the organization. Together, Ron and Flip team up to take down the extremist hate group giving us an unsettling, behind the scenes look at the hateful racist minds of the men and women in the Klan, the arrogant, controlling but charismatic demeanor of the Grand Wizard, and the horrific actions his followers are eager to take.

It's the early 1970s, but the white supremacist rhetoric and images we witness in the film are eerily the same as current white supremacist activity we see in the news. Also, sadly similar to scenes in "The Birth of a Nation," the 1915 D.W. Griffith epic that is credited with spreading and normalizing the Klan's ideologies. A screening of the film is seen at the opening of the film and is the closing scene juxtaposed with a video from the deadly white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017. From 1915 to present day, things haven't changed.

True to form, Lee's film is in your face; too heavy handed for some of our film discussion participants. One resident reviewer thought the film dragged with terrible editing. Others thoroughly appreciated Lee's fictionalized portrayal of this actual event, enlightening many of us about the inside machinations of the Klan. One viewer felt ashamed and wanted to stand up and apologize to any black people in the movie audience. For another, the film was an eye opener into how powerful the Klan was and is. One reviewer whose distant family members were members of the Klan, pointed out that these people were poor and not very intelligent, they were easily lured by the Klan's code which promised to take care of the Klan family and they would be part of that family, but actually, they didn't have much of a choice: it was either join or get lynched.

We agreed that the performances were outstanding. But some felt the characterization of the people in the Klan was too cartoonish. Recognizing that Lee is being purposely manipulative, one discussion participant described BlackKkKlansman as a well-made propaganda film. Mostly high scores, and even a 5, were undercut by a few 2 and 2.5s resulting in 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).

*Note: The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is a historically violent American organization that has operated in three periods to promote white supremacy and white nationalism and resist immigration. Founded after the Civil War as a secret society by Confederate generals, the First Klan's primary focus was subverting Republican Reconstruction policies and preventing emancipated African Americans from receiving the benefits of citizenship. Despite its success disrupting black political participation through threats and actual violence, federal government efforts to suppress the Klan in 1870-1871 forced in a major decline in its activities.*

*The emergence of the United States as an industrial nation, coupled with the influx of immigrants into the country at the turn of the twentieth century, led to a resurgence of the KKK. Racist propaganda fueled its reorganization and appeal to new members. D. W. Griffith's massively popular 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, set during Reconstruction, is credited with spreading and normalizing the Klan's racist ideologies. Based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel The Clansman, The Birth of a Nation used white actors in blackface to portray African Americans as lazy, ignorant, and violent. The film suggests that if granted full citizenship, African Americans would abuse it and threaten the security and "purity" of the white race. It positions the First Klan as the protectors of whiteness.*

*Officially reorganized as a fraternal organization in 1915, the Second Klan paid full-time recruiters and operated in every state from a national headquarters. At the peak of its popularity in 1924-5, the organization claimed four to five million men as members, or about fifteen percent of the nation's eligible population. It espoused nativist ideologies, discriminated against any group it deemed "un-American," and supported the culture of Jim Crow segregation with threats and violent acts, such as lynching. The Second Klan was the KKK's period of greatest popularity and centralized organization, which lasted until 1944. Today classified as a terrorist organization, the Third and current Klan began in independent local groups in 1946 to oppose the Civil Rights Movement, but its membership numbers remain much lower at 5,000-8,000.*



See you at the movies!

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