



Analyzing Racial antagonism and diverging perspectives in *BlacKkKlansman*

Un film de Spike Lee, 2018

Type d'activité : Préparation au visionnage et analyse d'extraits

Durée : 2 h

Introduction

BlacKkKlansman is a film by Spike Lee, a director inspired by political issues and involved in the struggle for the rights of African-Americans. The movie was released in 2018, under Donald Trump's presidency and at a time of controversy and racial turmoil in the USA, with rising tensions and violence against the African-American community. Through the surprising but nonetheless true story of a Black police officer infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan in 1978, *BlacKkKlansman* illustrates the «Divided States of America», or how the USA prove to be a nation marked by a history of racial antagonism and hatred. Spike Lee plays on the discrepancy of perspectives through humor but also powerful tone and imagery, thus projecting the ongoing complexity of being fully recognized as American, not just as an hyphenated American (African-American, Jewish-American...).

This film can be used in class to illustrate the notion «places and forms of power».

Dans les programmes

Niveau	Objets d'étude	Compétences
Cycle terminal	Lieux et formes du pouvoir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Compréhension orale Expression orale Expression écrite

Blackkklansman

A film by : Spike Lee
Genre : Drama
Year : 2018
 1978, Colorado Springs. Ron Stallworth is a young black man who has just integrated the police force of the city. Being the first African-American officer in this department, Ron is faced with integration issues and biased behaviors from some of his co-workers, which does not alter his will to make a difference. After seeing an ad for the Ku Klux Klan in the local paper, he decides to phone the supremacist organization, and progressively manages to infiltrate it. With the help of his partner, Flip Zimmerman, a white officer of Jewish descent, they will lead an investigation unveiling the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

I / Before watching «Blackkklansman»

1/ Choose the correct answer for each sentence about the history of the Ku Klux Klan (you can work by pair):

a- The Ku Klux Klan is:

- a political party a white supremacist hate group a cult a charity

b- The Ku Klux Klan was established on December 25th...

- 1843 1865 1957 1929

c- This organization was born in the state of:

- Texas Georgia New York Tennessee

d- The ideology of the Ku Klux Klan is:

- racist open-minded socialist compassionate

e- The members of the Ku Klux Klan are known to wear

- uniforms white robes and hoods plain clothes

2/ Observe the poster of the film *Blackkklansman*:

a- Explain the use of three letters “k” in the title.

b- Say why the title can be considered as an **oxymoron**.



Analyze the visual elements of this poster and give their meaning:

1 - The white hood

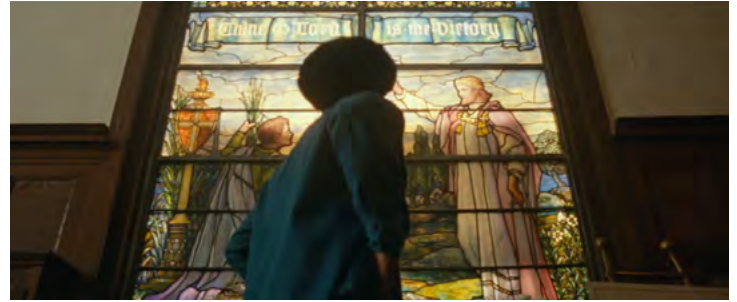
2 - The Afro comb

3 - The raised left fist

4 - The police badge



II / Extract 1: witnessing hatred (from 1:32:05 to 1:44:20)

1/ Observe the following shots of Ron Stallworth at the KKK meeting:



- a- Explain what the visual organization in these two shots symbolizes.
- b- How can the quote from the Bible have a different meaning according to the viewpoint?

2/ Compare the two different meetings we witness in the extract and fill in the board:

Meeting 1		< Organization >	Meeting 2	
		< Place >		
		< People >		
		< Message of the speech >		
		< Attitude of the speaker >		
		< Camera angle effect >		

3/ Analyze the effect of the alongside tracking shot on the klansmen being baptized. What can the repetition of the sentence “Remove your hood” symbolize? (NB: an alongside tracking shot is when the camera moves from one side of the screen to the other, along characters or objects)

4/ a- Pick out the name and the date of the movie watched by the klansmen. Say what the tone and the message of this movie seem to be.

b- Analyze the reactions of the crowd watching that film. Compare them to the reactions to the old black man’s testimony.

5/ Analyze the structure of the following shots and explain how Spike Lee uses the idea of perspective and viewpoints.



6/ Pick out elements reinforcing the opposition between the slogans «White Power» and «Black Power».

7/ Comment on the gradation in the facial expressions of the waitresses/waiters in the alongside tracking shot at the end of the extract: what feelings are expressed? What does it reveal about these characters' viewpoints?

8/ Turner, the old black man, says: «One of the reasons they had done that to Jesse was a movie (...) It was so powerful that it gave the Ku Klux Klan a rebirth». Discuss Spike Lee's artistic choice of a film within a film. What could it suggest about the role of cinema in history?

III / Extract 2 : the cycles of history? (from 2:05 :45 to 2:09:28)



1/ Explain the symbolism of the image of the cross burning in the klansman's eye.

2/ Say how Spike Lee goes from the film to real footage from 2017. Explain the meaning of this transition.

3/ Fill in the quotes:

«Not all of those people were....., not all of those people were white, you also had people that were very people.» Donald Trump.
 «This is the first towards taking America,» David Duke.

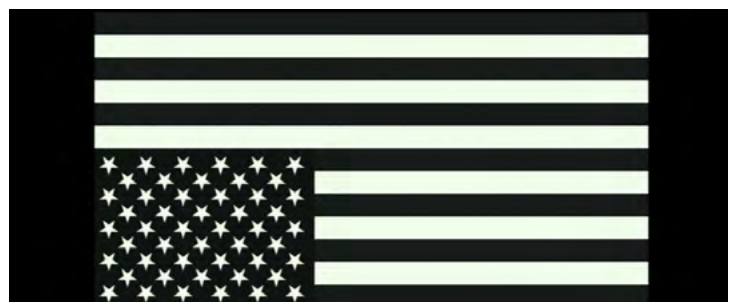
c- Explain what these two speeches suggest about the opposition between ethnic communities nowadays.

4/ Account for the atmosphere and feelings triggered by the music in this extract.

5/

a- Say what the upside down American flag symbolizes.

b- Explain the transition from a flag in color to a black and white flag.





Éléments de correction

I- 1/ a- a white supremacist hate group = it advocates the superiority of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the USA.

b- December 25th 1865 = after the Civil War, by former Confederate soldiers.

c- Tennessee.

d- racist = it used eugenic theories asserting the white blood is «pure».

e- white robes and hoods = part of their rituals and ceremonies.

2/ a- The use of three k's in the title refer to the white supremacist group, one of the topics of the movie. They connect the word «black» to the word «klansman», illustrating the very plot of the film. These letters create a visual transition between the two elements.

b- This title can be seen as an oxymoron because, knowing the racist ideology of the Ku Klux Klan, it seems impossible and unconceivable to associate black and klansman.

c- The hood = a reference to the costume of the Klan, hiding the real face and identity of the character, as this character is an undercover policeman, infiltrated in the organization. / The badge = the character is a police officer, he stands for the law, his duty is to struggle against crime and protect the citizens. / The Afro comb = the character's identity as a Black man. He holds it almost as a weapon or as a shield, to protect his roots. / the raised left fist = the symbol used by the Black Panther movement in the 1970s, representing the struggle for equal treatment between white and black people.

II- 1/ a- In the first shot, Ron, the African-American policeman, stands between two white men, who are members of the Klan. They are facing the camera, in a very straight position. Behind them, there's a stained glass illustrating a biblical episode and a quote «Thine O Lord is the victory» (Chronicles 29:11). The black man seems oppressed by the presence of the two other characters, illustrating the domination of white people, the so-called superiority of the white race which is advocated by the Klan. Ron's attitude suggests challenge, defiance, a rebellion to come. However, in the second shot, Ron is alone and turns toward the stained glass, symbolizing emancipation, freedom for the black community, away from the bullying of the white community. African-Americans can now stand on their own.

b- In the first shot, the message seems to be favorable to white supremacist ideas: reducing the black community to slavery is the victory of the «white race», white superiority is a gift from god. But in the second shot, the word victory hints at the power of the black community to overcome hardship, to liberate from oppression and become «free at last», as Reverend King said.

2/

Meeting 1		Meeting 2
organized by the Ku Klux Klan	< Organization >	organized by Black students
a large room	< Place >	a room in a house, small and intimate
only white people, mostly men	< People >	black men and women
eugenic superiority of the white race, use of religious vocabulary, very strong and solemn intonations in a mock preaching, message of hate	< Message of the speech >	description of the horror of a lynching, inequality and injustice against black community, violence against black people
dominating, allegedly powerful, blinded by hatred	< Attitude of the speaker >	the old black man is moved, touched, deeply affected
mostly low angle shots to assert power and domination	< Camera angle effect >	mostly close-ups, the character directly looks at the viewer, a way to convey strong emotions

3/ The alongside tracking shot helps the viewer focus on the number of men present, and proves that the Klan has a mock religious structure and imagery. The sentence «Remove your hood» which is repeated insists on the revelation of the identity of the klansmen; under each hood is an ordinary man.



4/a- They are watching *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915 (the old man mentions the lynching of Jesse Washington which took place in 1916, and he says the movie was released the year before). The tone of this film appears derogatory and insulting towards the black community. It conveys a message of hate and incites violence.

b- The reactions of the members of the Klan are lacking measure, they are very loud, disorganized, expressing disgust, contempt against black people. They cheer at unjustified violence, reinforcing hate. They are the opposite of the reactions to the old man's testimony: we have expressions of fear, sadness, suffering and compassion, but also contained emotions.

5/ These shots use a game of stares, like a crossfire of stares between the klansmen, Ron and us, showing how one scene can be observed from different viewpoints. The window through which Ron looks is a reminder of the cinema screen and its function: to re-present reality.

6/ There are different colors: white, grey, cold colors for the Klan vs. warmer shades for the black community. The hands of the klansmen remind of the Nazi salute vs. the raised fists correspond to the Black Panther salute.

7/ We move from fascination and admiration (the 2 white women) to disgust and disbelief (the black men). It illustrates division, separation. Their opinions are diverging, they have very different interpretations of the same speech.

8/ This artistic choice is a way to illustrate the historical power of cinema. Films have the ability to change mentalities, whether they are used as propaganda or as eye-openers. Spike Lee shows films have the power to change things, for better or for worse. So it is the director's duty to denounce inequalities and injustice through his films.

III- 1/ This shot proves the sadistic power of the Klan's imagery. Hatred marks the spirits of the members, like a persistence of vision: an image that blocks your sight.

2/ This transition is made through the slogan «blood and soil», chanted by the klansmen. It proves the situation has not exactly evolved between 1978 and 2017. The idea of white supremacy and hatred is unfortunately still present in American society, and is still expressed in violent gatherings.

3/ a- «Neo-Nazi / supremacists / fine» **b-** «step / back»

c- These recent speeches illustrate that these ideas can have a political echo, they can be used as political tools, even at the highest level. The opposition between the communities is far from being solved if these ideas keep being conveyed.

4/ The music illustrates tension, it strengthens a very heavy atmosphere, shown by the real videos and photos. It triggers a feeling of injustice and resonates like a wake-up call.

5/ a- The upside down American flag is a sign of distress and impending danger (it was a military code). It shows the American nation is in danger, American people need to unite around this symbol to stop hate and division.

b- The flag goes from color to black and white to symbolize the ongoing racial antagonism, the division of the nation. There is still a dichotomy between white America and black America, even if those colors are more complementary than opposed.

Pour aller plus loin

- ▶ The man who inspired Blackklansman : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7SGVbQLCrI>
- ▶ *Sironia, Texas* a novel by Madison Cooper (1952)
- ▶ *Mississippi Burning* a film by Alan Parker (1988) (dossier pédagogique par Zérodeconduite) : ...
- ▶ *A seat at the table* an album by Solange Knowles (2016) : <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcxds-t6awVjzgnMOQmTfxbYrRmstv7aC6>
- ▶ *The Birth of a Nation* a film by Nate Parker (2016) (dossier pédagogique par Zérodeconduite) : <https://www.zerodeconduite.net/film/2703>