



March 2020

Burden

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2020) "Burden," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 48.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/48>

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Burden* (2020) directed by Andrew Heckler.

Keywords

White Supremacy, Ku Klux Klan, Racism, Redneck Shop

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Burden (2020), dir. Andrew Heckler

Director Andrew Heckler has waited over two decades to see his film *Burden* distributed to theaters, since he first visited the small southern town where the true story is set. In Laurens, South Carolina, the “Redneck Shop and KKK Museum” opened in 1996, and it immediately became a focal point for the nonviolent protests of local African American minister David Kennedy. The film dramatizes his struggle against the shop and his efforts to see it close, but more so, the transformation and conversion of Mike Burden, the Klan member who has a change of heart and provides a surprising solution for the community.

First time director Heckler tells his story impressively with a stark realism that befits the setting, depicting with measured pacing the dilapidated structures and broken lives that fill the small town. Repo man Mike Burden (Garrett Hedlund) is embraced by the Klan, especially Tom Griffin (Tom Wilkinson), the surrogate father-figure who leads the local chapter and who started

the museum. Like other poor young men who have accepted the white supremacist beliefs and community, Burden's identity is caught up in a narrative of resentment and anger that blames minorities for their alleged loss of white power and privilege—missing the fact that the blacks there are suffering from the same poverty. Burden avoids social contact with blacks, even his childhood friend Clarence (Usher Raymond), and participates in a cross burning in Klan regalia. There, Griffin announces that the whites are the chosen people who will take back what is rightfully theirs, and their museum celebrates this mythology of white supremacy through its own version of history, accompanied by the sale of racist t-shirts and bumper stickers.

We see Rev. Kennedy (Forest Whitaker) lead protests outside the store daily—increasing the Klan's wrath against him—as well as his struggles within his own community to maintain nonviolent means of protest. But it is Mike's girlfriend Judy (Andrea Riseborough) who is the catalyst for his transformation, as she cannot accept his role in the Klan. Her young son's best friend is a black child—Clarence's son—and Mike finds himself taking both of the boys fishing, which starts to erode his prejudices. Afterwards, when Judy finds her son with Mike at a Klan event, being taught to stab a dummy clearly representing a black man, she tells Mike he has to choose between her and the Klan. His moment of truth comes when he is asked to shoot Kennedy from a rooftop and refuses to do so: afterwards, he tells Griffin he's not in the Klan anymore. Reprisals follow, as he and Judy lose their home and jobs. Kennedy finds them on the street, homeless, and takes them in—to the shock and outrage of Kennedy's wife and son. But this kind gesture has a surprising fruit, as Mike chooses to be baptized by Kennedy and then sells him the deed to the store and museum—which Griffin had given Mike, mistakenly assuming his support was unquestioning. Burden's conversion is shown as one of humility as he confesses his former racist acts, including badly beating a young black man, and Kennedy accepts his repentance as

genuine. Burden and Kennedy have remained close friends to this day: it is a beautiful story of nonviolent love transforming hatred, and one that needs to be told.

The film does not glamorize the ease of this transition. Nor does it neglect the humanity of the racists, or the possibility of change within them. True, there was no mass conversion from the Klan in this small town, but Kennedy had faith and hope enough to be there for Burden, which allowed a nonviolent solution. Although it has taken decades to make, this film does not seem dated: white supremacy is more prominent than ever, and inspires legitimate anger from those who rightfully object to it, but this film shows that creative solutions exist which neither countenance the evil nor respond to it with violence.