The Treatment of the Black Character in Hollywood Film







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The Treatment of the Black Character in Hollywood Film

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The subject of the treatment of the black character in and by Hollywood is so vast that it would be impossible to include it all in the space available to me. This treatment is therefore highly selective, dictated by personal interest, relative importance, and the availability of research material.

The Birth of a Nation for it's blatant racism, and Sidney Poitier for his contribution to film as a black actor. The Color Purple for its treatment of the black woman, and Spike Lee, as a contemporary black film maker.



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INTRODUCTION

L Mulvey, (1975), in Mast & Cohen, FILM THEORY & CRITICISM, 1985, pg. 805.

I.

The cinema is a wondrous place. It shows us a world that was, a world that is, and a world that might be. It is the past, the present, and the future, all rolled into one. Early Hollywood soon realised the huge impact cinema had, and through this obtained a certain power. This power is the ability to manipulate us through 'visual pleasure'.

> "The magic of Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell into its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of 'visual pleasure'".

Cinema acts as a separation, a type of escape, people do not feel obsessively voyeuristic or perverse by viewing films, its the perfect way for human beings to play out their fantasies, and it enjoys a worldwide acceptance. And as L. Mulvey points out, the whole cinema set up contributes to these fantasies - the darkness of the cinema itself and the light and shade on the screen.

A crucial element of Hollywood's manipulation of the audience is the structure of the narrative: the treatment of the central character (or characters), with whose emotional ups and downs the audience empathise, and the treatment of the 'other' characters and events in the narrative. These 'other' characters or events usually either try to hinder or help along the main character. Our feelings and experiences are carried along with them, thus affecting our attitudes about elements of the real world which we may know nothing about, or have no first hand experience. These may be attitudes of race, politics, war or sexuality of which we have had no or little experience of in real life, but which we unconsciously assume to be right because of the role or position they hold in the narrative.

> " Historically from the silent film era to the present, bourgeois film has developed various mechanisms for structuring in ambiguity and for keeping us emotionally involved; one of the films hallmarks as a democratic art form in its ability to allow for and co-opt an oppressed groups response". ²

A number of research studies have shown changes in the attitudes and beliefs of film audiences after watching a film, which would lead to the belief that films do play an important role in changing

 J. Le Sage, in HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS 1987 pg. 235.



audience attitudes. Why do we accept this?

The attitudes that film affect are not that clear cut, they lie between the irrational and the rational, the subconscious and the conscious. The problem is that for most of us, forces for attitude change usually operate at an irrational and subconscious level. So in most cases it is virtually impossible to detect the origin of influence for change, or direct the blame!

Another reason why this is accepted is the way an individual reads a film and it is here that the psychoanalytical term 'disavowal' comes into practice. As spectators we are more deceived and cheated in cinema than any other art form. Yet we are in a position which psychoanalysists call 'disavowal'. I know what I am seeing is not real but I will pretend whilst I am here that it is.....

Of course, people do not go to the cinema to reflect rationally on the possibilities for changing their attitudes, they go to be entertained. Ultimately most of cinema is there to entertain us, but it is also used as a vehicle to deliver messages to its audience. The cinema provides us with an opportunity to experience this, for example in regard to drug abuse, AIDS, war etc., but when it comes to the cinema being used to show one mans control over the other, wholly to provide pleasure to one section of the audience, then it is doing nothing but serving a hierarchical and inequitable system of power.

Mulvey has argued that the treatment of women in Classical Hollywood film was for the pleasure of the male spectator, I will argue that the representation of the black character in Hollywood film was for the pleasure of the white spectator.

> "Black is ,in the realm of categories, always marked as a colour..is always particularising, whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything..."³

In other words, whiteness has secured universal consent to its hegemony as the 'norm' by masking its force with an invisibility that makes the 'other' (the dehumanised, the disempowered) as all too visibly - coloured!. Where did this process begin?

The treatment of the woman as an 'object' in painting was moved from the canvas onto the early film screen. The treatment of the African American was taken from the process of racist image making which resonated through Western Literature.

Dyer, Richard. (1988), pg. 44

See John Berger,
IN WAYS OF SEEING



Literature which dealt with colonisation, the process where European Powers reached a position of economic, military and political domination in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America, as did the United States, aswell as colonising on its 'own' territory. They then ridiculed the colonised for lacking in culture and history and why was this? Because colonialism in the name of profit, was destroying the basis of that culture and the memory of that culture, an archetpal instance for blaming the victim for his/her own victimization.

A lot of this early literature deals with the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking wealth away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves. Many of the misconceptions concerning the Third World people derive from the long parade of shifty Arabs, lazy Mexicans and savage Africans which have disgraced our movie screens. Africa was portrayed as a land inhabitated by cannibals in the Lubin comedy, *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), and there was of course the hundreds of Hollywood westerns that made Native Americans appear to be intruders on their own land. All this provided a paradigmatic perspective through which to view the whole of the non-white world.

During the silent period of film making in Hollywood, the major film studios showed little or no interest in Black movies and even when black characters were required they were generally played by white actors in black face. The coming of sound altered this since the trend towards greater realism demanded that the blacks be played by blacks, though their roles were generally confined to the menial or the comic (usually a combination of both). D.W Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) had a large cast of black characters but only one genuine black was employed on the film - the curiously named Madame Sul - te - Wan. It was the degradation of the Afro-American in this film which caused the most uproar in its time in regard to racism.



CHAPTER |

The Birth of a Nation departed from the shorter vignettes of former years and in a single stroke synthesised all of the advances and devices developed in the first generation of cinema. Maybe so, but The Birth of a Nation also provoked a national scandal because of its racial content. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel, "The Clansman", it valorised the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, depicting it as a paternalistic, semi-feudal organisation bringing order to a South suffering under the chaos of reconstruction.

" My object is to teach the North,

the young North, what it has never known - the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful reconstruction period. I believe the almighty God anointed the white man during that time......

to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme."

For a white spectator the film itself was one of compelling beauty, rich narrative form, painterly composition and complex visual imagery. For an Afro-American spectator it was a rough, cruel, racist slander upon Afro-Americans.

The Birth of a Nation is an excellent example of the affecting of audience attitudes. "In 1915 the Ku Klux Klan was unheard of", wrote H.L Mencken in the mid - twenties, " in 1925 it is one of the most powerful factors in American life". To a considerable extent Griffith brought about this development: and the Payne report of 1933 states that his racism continued to influence children until well into the 1930s. The basis of Griffiths hostility toward the Afro-American comes from his very strong family values. He needed to be at the centre of the family nucleus in order to work well. This is evident for example in Judith of Bethulia (1913), where Griffiths family conditions encouraged a consistency in the acting and in the handling of crowd scenes.

From this microcosm of the family we are then given *The Birth of a Nation*, where Griffith sought to project the macrocosm of worlds both real and imaginary. His belief in the superiority of his own race is obvious. His main concern is the isolation and virtual expulsion of the alien forces that he feels most threaten the family. From his opening titles in which he states that the "bringing of the African to America sowed the first seeds of disunion", to his

Dixon, Thomas, (1906), Slow Fade to Black pg 44



concluding sequences in which the Ku Klux Klan ride to save some besieged whites, his aim is to show the Afro-American as the greatest danger to the values he most cherished. Formal characteristics of image, its scale and duration are main contributors to the treatment of the black in this film and these contribute greatly to the amount of respect afforded a character and the potential for audience identification. Identification, along with its associated terms - sympathy, empathy, imitation, projection, has always been central to most discussions of spectorial activity, particularily in attempts to account for the viewers experience of pleasure and desire.

In The Birth of a Nation which characters which are afforded close-ups and which are relegated to the background? Do all the black characters in this film look and act or merely appear to be looked at and acted upon?

The audience are permitted intimacy with only the white characters.This is most evident throughout the film but especially in the 'Gus Chase' sequence. This involves Gus - the black character, and the white, 'little sister', and her brother,'the little colonel' from the plantocrat Confederate family. Brightlights are cast upon little sister and her brother while Gus is cast in dark shadows. Whether black or white, male or female the spectator is encouraged to identify with the Camerons and to hate Gus. Mulvey states

> "the look , pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that that crystallises this paradox". ⁵

For example *Mildred Pierce* (1945), the female protaganist is the object of the male gaze: a vision, in beautiful clothes and perfect hair, an object of desire. She is made less threatening to the male spectator by her dependancy on men. She denies her own castration by becoming the father figure but of course does not succeed! The male spectators ego is thus protected. This relation to narcissism and ego in cinema, in regard to the treatment of women, can also be found in relation to the treatment of the black characters in *The Birth of a Nation*. the white spectators ego is protected, his/her feelings are all important. The black race was being made less threatening to the white audience.

" The mastery of the ego is narcissistic but cannot work without another object to master".

 Mulvey, I.
in
FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM (1975)
in
FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM pg. 807.

Easthorpe, A, (1986) pg 87



'Gus' enters from the beginning as the wrongdoer, and his punishment starts with the arrival of the white 'little colonel' as part of the process to restore order and harmony to the South. The narrative thus proposes Little Colonel' as the symbolic white father who will restore the law of patriarchal order by castrating the rebellious black,'Gus'. The paradox of phallocentrism in psychoanalysis can be found in relation to the position of women in film, how they have existed in relation to castration, the lack of a penis symbolizing the castration threat. The phallus therefore represents the symbolic. The woman is rendered inferior because she is in a position outside of the symbolic. Thus the castration of 'Gus' also renders him inferior. 'Gus' is being punished therefore so is the race to which he belongs.

At the time of the release of The Birth of a Nation the National Association for the Advancment of Colored People tried to have it banned or at least have the most racist elements eliminated. As the premiere approached Afro-Americans learned what they had suspected all along : that the film industry was a lily- white preserve, from which they could expect nothing. Blacks were not allowed to go and see it, so only white members of the N.A.A.C.P were able to go the premiere. They then argued that the film was not 'ART' but mob incitement. The fact that men in Ku Klux Klan robes on horses were despatched in the New York area to promote the film was mob incitement enough. The N.A.A.C.P were fighting a losing battle in regard to banning the film and only people like Oswald Garrison Villard, a founder member of the N.A.A.C.P pressed on. He did this by refusing to advertise it in his New York Post and printing articles such as lane Addams caustic review in which she saw the movie as

" a gathering of the most vicious and grotesque individuals Griffith could find among colored people, and showing them as representatives of the entire race..."⁷

White people flocked to the film. Reviewers ,even the most sensitive, accepted the narrative of the film, believing that its reverential treatment of the tragedy of the South *could not* be racist because Griffith "depicted both good and bad negroes". It was even a friend of the N.A.A.C.P who said that, "in the worst parts of it negroes are painted no worse than a bad white man". This was to miss the whole point : that blacks were made out to be bad because they were black.

 Addams. J, in
SLOW FADE TO BLACK
1977

pg101







The Birth of a Nation misreads history for ideological reasons (a common element in the majority of films of that time). The Black experience is rendered absent in the text. The argument that the blacks in the South were happy and docile with their condition as slaves and that black Northeners were only rebellious mulattoes aspiring to be white, is totally unconvincing, once it is compared to historical accounts of the Black American experience. It was not historical truth that the audience was interested in, they were swept along by the broad shots of wheeling calvary ranks, the blare of the orchestra and the costumes.

The Birth of a Nation became a milestone around the neck of the N.A.A.C.P. They were now generating their pressure, not against Hollywood as a whole but against this film, thus wasting Black energy and money. Their aggressiveness against white producers moved these producers to suppress black roles rather than alter them to the N.A.A.C.P's demands, thus reducing black appearance on the screen.

The N.A.A.C.P spent nearly half a century on its crusade against The Birth of a Nation. This time may have been better used if they had forgotten "the cruel slander upon their race ", and instead tried to encourage and support productions which would celebrate black African roots. Would this not have been a more productive plan of action?

Things moved slowly and in the years following *The Birth of a Nation* Hollywood still offered no means of artistic expression to blacks, it just continued to draw on the old Southern Stereotypes of Negroes as happy, lazy workers on the plantation.

Black audiences did not reject Hollywood however, they preferred the slick Hollywood product to the 'race movies' ineptly produced by blacks, movies which came from a black film business that had operated since the early years of film but was never strong. More importantly from the twenties right up until the fifties this black cinema aspired no higher than to mimic white films, and it was white entrepeneurs who held financial control over them. By the end of the great depression, however, popular taste had become more sophisticated and no longer willing to accept so readily the old Southern stereotypes that Hollywood was offering.



CHAPTER 2

In 1942 the N.A.A.C.P and the heads of several Hollywood studios met and codified some social changes and procedures. The studios agreed to abandon pejorative racial roles to place African Americans in positions as extras (corresponding to the actual positions they held in society), and begin the slow task of integrating blacks into the ranks of studio technicians.

" Our utmost wisdom and intelligence must be used by negro actors, present and future, and by the negro public generally on the pledges which have been made by the motion picture industry to broaden the treatment of the negro in films...Negros must realise that there are three vitally important phases of the subject. First and most important is picturization of the negro not as comic and menial figures but as human beings. Growing out pf this is the second phase of more acting roles for negroes in motion pictures. Third is the matter of employment of qualified colored men and women in the technical end of production as for those actors in Hollywood who can only play comic or servant roles, I trust they will not let their own interests spoil the opportunity we now have to correct a lot of things from which negroes have suffered in the past in these movies....

I can assure negroes throughout the country that some extrordinarily fine things are in prospect in the moving picture world so far as negroes are concerned which conceivably play a large part in creating a new concept of the negro". 8

" In a single stroke White's announcement signaled the end of the monopoly of Southern racial stereotypes for negro roles in films, provided new standards for blacks in Hollywood to strive for, and provided a scenario for the race's future in movies - a slow fade to black". A very optimistic statement indeed by a man who also said that the agreement changed "the whole tune and nature of

White. W, Statement to Negro Public (1942) SLOW FADE TO BLACK pg. 387.

Cripps. T, (1977) pg. 387.





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Hattie Mc Daniels: First black woman to win an oscar, for her archetypal 'Mammy' in *Gone with the Wind* (1939)



Hollywood's response to Afro-Americans role in film, and by extension, American life as well". Was it not time for change? Afterall Afro-Americans had been in films for over fifty years was it not time old stereotypes were banished from the screen?

Of course, the old stereotypes did not disappear. In the very same year as these changes were announced *Casablanca* was released. In 1942 *Casablanca* was recognised as having rather advanced attitudes toward race. Of course when we watch it now all we can see is how 'Sam' is portrayed. He treats all the white characters with the utmost respect - he knows his place. It should be remembered that the fact that 'Sam' could interact in scenes with a white woman, that he could actually play a part in the big romance between 'Rick and Ilsa' were remarkable in a film of that time. Three years before this Hattie McDaniels won an oscar for role as the archetypal 'Mammy' in *Gone with the Wind* impossible as it seems now this film was actually praised at the time for its enlightened attitude toward race.

Blame or guilt cannot be put on the actors for taking these roles or the the black audiences for accepting them. In those days it was progress, because for the longest time it was a triumph just to be seen, no matter how demeaning the role or outrageous the stereotype. Often the actors such as Stepin Fetchit^{*} and Butterfly Mc Queen operated on two levels in order to get around this racism. Their performance had one significance for the white audience and another for the black audience. They brought to their roles an ironic exaggeration which allowed them to salvage at least a modicum of self-respect, and of course the Afro-American audiences loved this sly dig at the demeaning roles. Occasional attempts had been made to produce films with an unpatronizing view of blacks in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but they were exceptions rather than the rule. These were led by such films as Home of the Brave (1949), the story of a black veteran undergoing psychiatric treatment after traumatic war experiences, whose condition was brought on more by his fellow white soldiers than by the war. Blacks passing for white was a subject which fascinated filmakers in the 40s and 50s, maybe because it

Hattie Mc Daniels once said that it was better to play a maid in the movies for \$7000 a week than to work as a maid in real life.

- Stepin Fetchit, Gangly, slow moving Afro-American comedian, popular in the films of the thirties e.g In Old Kentucky 1929 On The Avenue 1937
- Butterfly Mc Queen, like most other blck women working in Hollywood Mc Queen was given only roles deemed suitable for her race - Maids. Her performance as Prissy, Scarletts maid in Gone with the Wind was one of the films highlights. Other films include Cabin in the Sky 1943 and Duel in the Sun 1947



let them off the hook by allowing them to cast white actors in the leading roles.

It was not until the mid-sixties that the situation began to change. Afro-Americans began to appear more regularily on television and movie screens. The public became more sensitive toward the old stereotypes. There was significant social and eco nomic gains made by Afro-Americans, they became more critical of racist and discriminatory policies and practices.

What is more, the black community had produced leaders in the 1950s and 1960s such as Martin Luther King Jnr, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young Jnr. Afro-Americans made clear their demands for integration and equal rights, demands which peaked during the Kennedy Administration. In the 1963 'March on Washington', Afro-Americans made a highly visible, well organized and disciplined bid to be heard, which culminated in Martin Luther's speech "I had a Dream". Coming as it did almost one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln had reaffirmed that the nation had been "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal", Kings speech underlined exactly how little things had actually changed, but more importantly how they must change.

This awakening of feeling among the Afro-American population had a transforming influence on Hollywood in the sixties. Most notably, blacks could no longer be totally ignored or merely cast in subservient and stereotypical roles.





Sidney Poitier : a positive example...



Until then only one African American actor had any claim to be called a film star: Sidney Poitier. This situation resulted in the familiar guip that was to be heard around the studios, " If you can't get Sidney Poitier, rewrite the part for a white man!". He established himself in films such as A Patch of Blue (1966) and Lilies of the field, for which he won an oscar in 1963. Poitier had always been criticised as a black man playing essentially white roles - being the white man's black. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Stanley Kramer's Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967). Poitier plays a young and brilliant doctor who comes to the home of his white fiancee. He becomes a suitable husband only when he is brought into her class and out of his own race. The only thing black remaining about him is the colour of his skin. His role is reassuring for the white audience. He is handsome and sexually attractive, but there is nothing about him that is sexually aggressive. There is nothing to invite jealous resentment from the white male spectator or to activate that old, racial fear of the overendowed black man. Since the beginning of cinema anything other than white sexuality was a potent threat in Hollywood film. It has always linked racial difference to sexual danger. In The Birth of a Nation, 'Gus' automatically wants to hurt 'little sister' because he is black. Black men were said to have oversized sexual organs, and the thoughts of monstrous penises evoked animal like images, thus evoking a threatening danger. So the black character was treated in this whiter than white way in order to protect the white spectator, more specifically the white male.

Poitier did not have much choice but to accept these roles. For years they were the only ones open to him and he was the only black actor of the time who was accepted by both the white and black audiences. The black audience accepted his performances because he was always given characters with a high degree of intelligence, an ego booster for the Afro-American.He was used brilliantly by Hollywood, to keep both the black and the white audience happy.

In In the Heat of the Night (1967), Poitier for once gave signs of identifying with his own colour and race. His passion and rage at the predjudice of the South was allowed to show. It was Poitier's best film of that time - a true and honest representation

Stanley Kramer is also known for his other social - problem productions such as the anti-nazi judgement at Nuremburg (1961) and

> The Defiant Ones (1958), another film dealing with an inter-racial relationship, this time between two men, which also starred Poitier


of a black man, no stereotyping but a <u>black</u> man, gentle and intelligent. His role as 'Mr. Tibbs' showed in my opinion an element of acting for all black actors that was essential, if stardom was their aim - identification and true portrayal of their own race was crucial. This was the new consciousness of America and Poitier put the spotlight on it. At last a black character was standing up for the feelings of his own race and the pleasure of the white spectators gaze becoming less important.

It would be very difficult not to have respect for Sidney Poitier, he gave an individual humanity to a racial stereotype, and he always tried to project a positive example no matter ,how hard it was.

This example was thouroughly appreciated in 1992 when he was presented an Achievement Award by the American Film Institute, for his acting, producing and directing. At the ceremony such words as dignity, nobillty, passion and rage were used to describe his contribution to the film industry. These words did not only come from the mouths of people who had journeyed with him throughout his career but the young actors/directors in America today.

10 Noble. G, CINEASTE Winter 1977-78 pg 17

"Throughout his career, he has sought to present an image of black people that is honest and the same time inspiring".¹⁰ Sidney Poitier improved the representation of the African American image in Hollywood.



In the 70s filmakers discovered that black dollars were the same as any other kind, except in some areas there were more of them. A whole new genre emerged which was called 'Blaxploitation'. This followed the dominant patterns of the white action genres private eye, cop, drug and caper movies. Stereotyping was pervalent in these movies as it had been in the time of Stepin Fetchit. They were mainly substituting black for white, blaxploitation films were not a negative phenonomon however, they provided jobs and openings for black writers, and black people interested in film. They were made expressly for the consumption of the black audience and they elicited a response from the black audience that had never been seen before.

The breakthrough in opening up the white market came with Shaft (1971), in which a super tough super cool, super human private eye, was played by Richard Roundtree - Sambo had become Superspade. Its success in capturing the cross-over audience was largely due to the fact that it combined glossy production techniques, with a storyline that had nothing especially to do with being black. Despite the undoubted qualities of this film ,along with others ,this was their essential problem: none of them told what it really meant to be black in America.

This phenomonon of black films was very short lived and by 1974 the number of black films had reduced to a trickle. Films needed a star, such as Diana Ross or Richard Pryor, to obtain the cross over audience. It is ironic that these actors were entertainers before being actors and it took this to attract the white audience. This is going straight back to the time before Poitier when no actors were acceptable to the white spectators unless they were also show business entertainers. Afro-Americans were being treated as a showcase - only to sing , dance or to be funny.

Richard Pryor established himsif as the genius of razor edge comedy. This became impossible to be captured on film and what resulted were films like *Silver Streak* and eventually a defunct film career not unlike the acting career path of Diana Ross





Celie : a black woman empowered to reject the role of passive victim and become an active agent in her own life -The Color Purple.



CHAPTER 3

The oppression of the black race up until now is evident in Hollywood productions, whereas the particular oppression of the black woman within that more general oppression is not as clear.

During the period of slavery, under the dominance of the white master, men and women were treated as equal. To have allowed the black male to have any power over the black woman (as in white society) would have threatened the power balance of the slavery system.

> " The man slave could not be the unquestioned superior within the family or community as there was no such thing as the 'Family' provided among slaves". "

It is ironic therefore that the change in the black womans condition is to be blamed on the white members of society. After slavery the black family actually modelled itself on the white bourgeois family of that time. The black male learned to be dominant and the black female learned to be dominated. Black women yielded to their men in deference to a tradition that promised respectability and security. Poet Audrey Lorde puts this situation in its proper place by " seeing sexism in black communities as not original to them but as a plague that has struck".

The problem is that because of the continuing battle against racism that black men and women share, some black women still refuse to recognise that are still oppressed as women . White female critics are outspoken on the treatment of women in film but there is a tendency of these critics to generalize from the situation of white, western women to that of all women. In the face if these shortcomings, feminists working within cultural studies need to rethink their position. Jane Gaines, a white feminist cultural critic, has assessed these inadequecies of contemporary cultural criticism in its practice of examining films only for their significance to white, middle class hetroesexual women. In my view there are two main areas in film where women get a very negative treatment, one is motherhood, the other is friendship. Friendship between women on screen is rare and friendships carrying narrative significance are almost entirely absent. The few that do exist are usually

II Davis. A, The Black Scholar,

12 Gaines. J, 1988 pg 12 - 26



not of any significance in plot development, therefore audience attention is not focussed on them. Those that do figure are generally defined through their adversarial features rather than their supportive ones. Female friendship is thus constructed as the source of problems not pleasure. If friendship between women on screen is rare, then friendship between black women in a film, which is actually about a black woman's experience, is unique.

The release of The Colour Purple by Stephen Spielberg in 1985 was therefore welcomed by black women. The Color Purple is one of the very few films about Afro-Americans, with black lead characters and a virtually all black cast, hence the hieghtened interest of the black audience. The male members of the black audience were not as welcoming of the film. The film started a fierce exchange of opinions on the representation of the men and the women in the film. The black men describing their representation as " the most racist depiction of black men since The Birth of a Nation". (In fact there are quite a few similarities between The Birth of a Nation and The Colour Purple which I will go into later).

The first notable element of The Color Purple must be its director, Steven Spielberg. He is responsible for five of the ten biggest box office hits of all time including, E.T., Raiders of the Lost Ark, and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Everything he touches seems to turn to gold - he has a gift of being able to spot a very commercial successful product. Because of this he has been labelled an opportunist He seems to agree with the idea that as long as radical ideas remain unpopular and uncommercial, theyshould be kept this way. With the ratings success story of (for example) The Cosby Show on television - number one in the United States - the demand for positive images of Afro-Americans is obvious. Spielberg's adaption of the Alice Walker novel was commercially astute, as usual. Spielberg is the great modern narrator of simple desires fulfilled, of reality diverted into the imaginary spaces of aspirations realised, where fears of abandonment and impotence are turned into fantasy and spectacles of security and joyful action. The Spielbergian world is absorptive and distributive, forcing



the spectator into it, obsessively replacing discontent with satisfaction, insisting that the child-adult desire for comfort and companionship is a persistent state that cannot be fulfilled in a mature earthbound communal environment.

The Color Purple was adapted from a Pulitzer prize winning novel by Alice Walker about a poor black girl who passes by the way of incest and lesbianism to womanhood, sisterhood, and selfhood.

It was publicised as Spielberg's "departure from childhood fantasy and cinematic spectacle". It would be more accurate to describe it as a toning down of this spectacle and a relocating of the fantasy. The longings for protection and security are simply transferred from the area of space visitors into a world of rural houses, fields and poor towns reminiscent of older Hollywood productions about Blacks. Spielberg's work had not been previously characterised by a particular interest in women, Usually he absorbs uncertainty and fear and redistribures them into narratives in which they are replaced either by a self-effacing hero who actively engages a threatening world or by an unheroic man or child whose passivity is filled by an external, unearthly presence.

It just so happens that the self- effacing hero in this film is female and is black. This fact ensures the support of the black female critics who defend the work (or more precisely Aice Walker's book) and the right of the film to exist.

The main response to the film can be neatly divided into two main sections of the audience - black male and black female as opposed to the usual set up of black spectator / white spectator in regard to films about Afro-Americans.

Black Male : These spectators called The Color Purple "most racist depiction of black men since The Birth of a Nation. Up until The Color Purple the focus was always on the black <u>man</u>. It is the men who suffer the dehumanising effects of racism, it is the men who deserve better at the hands of the whites. The women were always in the background - not treated, as Laura Mulvey's Woman, even as objects of desire . In The Color Purple it is the black women



who are the focus of the representation of the black community. Men are not important in the long term in the lives of the female characters, men are only there to be dealt with daily - not the centre of their emotional existence. In Mildred Pierce, the woman is the protaganist but men are still the central point of her existence, affecting every move she makes. Essentially the film tells us that even though a woman may be capable of being independent, she still cannot survive without a man . None of these elements exist in The Color Purple. On the contrary, the women do not depend on men for satisfaction of any sort, be it emotional or sexual. The story of Celie is one of a black woman empowered to reject the role of passive victim and become an active agent in her own life, through her relationship with other women : sister, lover, daughter in law and friends. Her character is not stereotypically glamourous, she solves the problems facing her without being rescued by the male protaganist. She is defined by action not romance or sex. Whoopi Goldberg who plays Celie has a rare ability to appear ugly sometimes but mostly plain .So the male gaze is diverted to the only other possible desirable female character which is Shug (Margaret Avery). Spielberg even subverts to the conventional male gaze at the female performer, in the scene in a bar full of admiring men, where Shug sings a love song but directs it to Celie. Mulvey proposed that the spectator position in relation to classical narrative in films was inevitably a masculine one; that to consume the spectacle, to engage with the narrative, the spectator must identify with the male protaganist. This theory does not apply to The Color Purple where the female spectator definitely identifies with the Celie. At last a film offering images of women that do not depend on the traditional active male / passive female representation.

The Main reason for the harsh criticism which came from the Black male critics was because of the treatment of Mister - Celie's husband. The treatment of this character is very similar again to the representation of D.W Griffith's black characters in The Birth of a Nation but whereas in The Birth of a Nation evil and lust are attributed to black men and women, in The Color Purple they are attributed to the



black male only.

As with 'Gus' the amount of or lack of respect afforded to him is based on the question of image, scale and duration. Telephoto lens are used in *The Color Purple* to exageratte 'Mister's' features, as if to emphasise his inhumanity or bestial nature. 'Mister's' character is stereotyped, he is portrayed as unnecessarily harsh and brutal, depicted as perverse and irresponsible. So it is understandable that black men should feel angered by their detrimental depiction in the film.

 "New Womans Pictures" Films which feature a strong, female character, Among these are Klute (1973) and Desperately Seeking Susan (1986). **Black Female**: The fact that the woman's strength of character, and eventual independance is treated positively in the film, immediately placed it in the category of "New Womans Pictures" - films which have a strong central female character. The Black female audience related greatly with this character and all their sympathy lay with her and her plight.

In the scene where Celie is shaving Mister we can see her desire to kill him.Black female spectators looked upon Celie here as their hero, as if killing Mister would symbolize the end of black male tyranny and a liberation of the black female.ls she not being used, duped into assistance of the castration of the black man, as with 'Gus' in The Birth of a Nation , hence the castration of her own race. The basis for this observation is the linking shots of Africa (ritualistic scarring and other initiation cermonies) with shots of Celie and Mister. We have Celie's wish to kill Mister because of his cruelty to her juxtaposed against imgages of the black mans place of origin, implying that this is the source of his essential evil and cruelty. Could this not be read by the white spectator as the origin of sexism itself thus exonerating them from sexism and that the punishment of the black man would act as a resolution to this conflict.

It would be easy for me to say that the black female audience have been deceived into a false consciousness by the cinema, that they are unable to work out when a film portrays them and their race in a negative manner.But this has already been proved as not the case,



13 Bobo. J,

Female Spectators: looking at film and television 1988, pg 90 - 108 for example Jacquelines Bobos¹³ work with black womens responses to the film has shown how black women, because of their low expectations of the media (and their expectation of encountering racism) can read through and around a Hollywood text.

The film basically was a portrayal of violent black men and long suffering black women, there were demonstrations outside the cinemas at which the film was being shown and a sanction was imposed by the N.A.A.C.P which declared that it 'misrepresented' black people. But it did achieve something for black women as women, and this cannot be ignored. It dealt specifically with their experiences, bringing the subject of black females to the forefront - a subject that has never been adequetely dealt with before. It was still not adequetely dealt with in The Color Purple(but there are so few films about the black female experience, you cannot expect one film to cover every aspect).But despite its imperfections and criticisms from certain areas of the black audience The Color Purple cannot be dismissed. It is an important film for black females and its most enduring memory was the portrait of the bonds that exist between black women. It also shows that a film about blacwomen can make money, the ideal encourgament for Hollywood to produce more films about Afro-Americans and more so Afro-American women.



CHAPTER 4

" In order for black people to survive in the ninties, we have to stop consuming, and start focusing on our own share of America". Spike Lee.

It is obvious to any film goer that more films about Afro-Americans are being produced now in Hollywood. One of the main reasons this is happening is due to independent film maker Spike Lee. He has already had his share of the American dream. Noted for his mighty mouth, Lee is also known for being so politically correct - he would rather rant and rave than answer a simple yes or no. Always in the limelight, he must receive as much attention as the great goddess herself, Madonna.

His undoubted achievement is in bringing the black issue to attention since he started making films in the mid-eighties. His films have also made money, the greatest incentive for Hollywood to follow his lead. He has shown Hollywood that there is a black audience willing to support black films. In fact it was confirmed in the U.S in 1992 that blacks go to the cinema more often than whites. Before, the black audience had always been regarded as too small to bother with. Lee, along with other Afro-Americans such as Whoopi Goldberg and Eddie Murphy have changed this.

Lee criticized Goldberg for her role in *The Color Purple*, calling her and indeed the whole film - "a sell out". What has he done lately for black women? Goldberg managed him perfectly by asking, " how many black women that look like me have you seen in Spike's films?"The answer to that is, of course, very few, only a steady flow of brown skinned babes, and his depiction of women in general has made him unpopular in America with female critics. He has done very little to broaden the range of roles for Afro-American women, but has given a succession of strong dramatic roles to actors such as Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes and even rap star Ice T. His female characters are, more often than not, vague shadows in a story about men.





'Angie' and 'Flipper' - Jungle Fever



'Nola' and one of her lovers - Shes Gotta Have It



Lee said of his film Shes Gotta Have It (1986),

I think this film should be the antidote to how the black male is percieved in The Color Purple.....the film's black men... are just one-dimensional animals...because if you read Alice Walker's book, thats the way she feels about black men.She really has problems with them...To me its just justifying everything they say about black men in general, that we are animals." ¹⁴

If Lee accuses Alice Walker of having problems with black men, the same can be said of him with regard to black women. Lee's films reiterate the points of people like Malcolm X, that the essence of black power is black manhood. The black woman is not allowed to do anything to get in the way of this manhood ,or, more importantly threaten it.

The most dominant image of black females is that of a breeder. This has its roots in the history of slavery.

 black sexuality was used to the economic advantage of white slavers, particularily after the banning of direct importation of enslaved Africans, when the reproduction of an enslaved workforce had to be ensured".¹⁵
So the image of the black female as breeder played a crucial role in the reproduction of the workforce:

" The market required that a brutal emphasis be placed on the stud capabilities of the black man and on the black woman's fertility... she was labeled sexually promiscuous because it was important that her womb supply the labour force". ¹⁶

People like Alice Walker are trying to redefine black women's sexuality. Lee, however, does the opposite: he seems to want to restrict black women's independence. This can be seen in Shes Gotta Have It. The focus of the film is the sexual life of a young black american woman, Nola Darling. She is economically independent, with her own apartment ,nice clothes etc.What Nola wants is to be a sexually free woman. She has three lovers, one of whom

 Simmonds. F, (1992),
pg. 214

14 Lee. S,

(1986),

pg. 48

I6 Gossett T.F, (1965), in F. Bonner (1992), pg. 214



is played by Spike Lee. She is portrayed as odd from the point of view of her men for having more than one lover, and the narrative is constructed around the three men trying to convince her which one of them she should choose, and why she should give the others up.

The film is based almost exclusively on her relationships with men, not women. The only relationship we see with another woman is one with a black lesbian, ironically another person who wants Nola sexually. It is telling us that she does not wish to live without men, or more specifically, sex. Nola is raped by one of her lovers, and the underlying message Lee is giving us from this scene is : that a woman who needs so much sex, and as the title suggests 'has gotta have it' deserves whatever she gets from men. Lee has done nothing except join the ranks of black men, themselves products of white racist views of a black woman's sexuality, and contributes to the myth of the promiscuous, sex- mad black woman. His new image is the same as the old one, but without the racist overtones.

"It is men who occupy the privileged position in the film, silencing women's voices. Nola is a lonely woman. By constructing Nola Darling as a woman, free and independant, yes, but one that has no need for female friendship. The film forces us, to view all the other women in terms of the positions they occupy in relation to men. It is this isolation that undermines Nola's professed independance." ¹⁷

The pleasure of the male gaze takes priority, whether black or white. The black womans sexuality is defined by Lee as inferior, less complex than the man's, the most detrimental aspect of this depiction being the over emphasising of the woman's need for men, portraying this as the most important factor of a black womans sexuality.

Jungle Fever is a Lee film that was supposed to be about miscegenation, an interracial couple who begin a relationship.Natural curiousity brings them together, a curiousity based on sexually mythology. 'Angie'(Annabella Sciorra),

17 Simmonds. F, 1992, pg 217.



from an Italian family is attracted to Flipper Purify, because of all the things she has heard about black men...."The Dick thang", as 'Bleek', the hero in Mo' Better Blues, (Lee, 1987), calls it, "The D.I.C.K thang". 'Flipper' is attracted to her because when growing up, the white woman was considered the epitome of beauty and he was as curious as her as she was about him.

Lee's sex scenes are usually good, we can always see Lee's totally uninhibited outlook on sex. He is unembarassed by the human body, sex is a big part of life and one which must be dealt with. The scene in *Jungle Fever* is no exception, but there is something missing. The bottom line is that Lee is not comfortable with relations between black and white. They make love, and then it is as if Lee cannot wait for the scene to be over so he can get on with the racial element of the film.

" when your male characters are engaged in sex....

I don't know... theres always a feeling that they are betraying something else, that really men are at their best and truest when they are in the company of other men." ¹⁸

Mixed relationships never work out in the end. When asked,

" what about the erotcism of black and white? Given that eroticism finds itself in fear and risk and opposites, shouldn't the colours have a bit of fun with one and other?".

He answers," I never said that, I think its a personal choice"!

He does not give much away but it is obvious from this film what his personal choice is. The moral of the romance is: that black and white lovers must, in the end, stick to their own kind. The white woman comes off worse than anybody else, as she is the object of spectacle for the male and the black female. The latter occurs in the scene where Flipper's wife and her Afro-American friends discuss why black men want black women, describing white women as evil and devious. The Afro-American women being portrayed as strong and opinionated , **but only in regard to one and other**. It is the black men who come across as

Jacobsen. H, in Observer Magazine, 1993

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superior in regard to all the women characters and all other men.

Lee tells us that his main objective in his films is to tell how it really is in black America: to show black people, as real people. His characters in Jungle Fever are middle class, well dressed, credit card holding, Afro-Americans. These are the kind of people Lee really seems to want to portray. Is this a positive image of a black American? Is this what Lee's 'share of America' is all about? What we see in Jungle Fever is the narcissism of 'nouveau riche' yuppies . For Lee to realise his objective he must reflect the image of ordinary America, whose black citizens, like its white, are not politicised or well dressed, and whose only desire is to get on with life.

That life is of course deeply tainted in some way each day by racism, and that is what must be represented. That is not to say that only black directors can direct black subject matter and white directors direct white subject matter, but obviously colour makes a difference. It is also not to say that the task of portraying racism, as it is, is totally left to Spike Lee. But it is he who proclaimed,

" If black people want to see different images of black people on screen, then they would have to create them themselves".

If Lee wants this to happen he must make films without compromise. He does offer us quite a refreshing view of black men, rather than the stereotypes that we are used to. He is improving the image of the Afro-American male on the screen but the black female within the world of Spike Lee movies is still struggling for a new and more equal portrayal.





1

Dororthy Dandridge - the tragic mulatto.



CONCLUSION

This thesis has been my journey through Hollywood, to assess the treatment of the black character in film, and what you have read is my log book, my research and thoughts on my findings.

Racism is difficult, and to measure racism in films is difficult, but it is there.

Close to 100 million people were destroyed by slavery, were murdered, seperated, maimed, castrated, lynched, and burned. The anger still remains. Young black people look at young white people with eyes that say, "look what your ancestors did to my people", "look at how badly you have treated us". The problem of the representation of the Afro-American in film today stems from slavery. Blacks are still angry and white society feels guilty and threatened by this anger.

The black character has been oppressed in the majority of Hollywood productions, for the sake of the protection of the white spectator, protection from their own guilt. The white-dominated world of Hollywood is still active,or to be more specific, the white male dominated world. Cracks are beginning to appear, this hegemony seems to be crumbling slightly. We are beginning to be allowed to witness the anger and frustration of the Afro-American in mainstream film.

John Singleton, a young black director has given us Boyz 'n the Hood and we only have to compare this to Hollywoods 80s " Brat Pack" films to see how things have changed. Singletons black teenagers see life in terms of survival, the Brat Pack teenagers see it in terms of fun. Real problems are being addressed by Singleton, but as in Lee's case, black male problems only. Whereas Lee gives us a middle class portrayal of black life, Singleton moves back into the ghetto, showing it as the root of cultural identity and the site of real masculinity, again black women are practically forgotten about, still hovering on the edge of American cinema. Mainstream movie opportunities have at last opened up to young black film artists, but a men-only club has emerged (Lee, Singleton, Van Peebles, Duke) and the power they posess in Hollywood has come more to attention recently in America with the release of Lee's epic,



Dorothy Dandridge, successful nightclub singer, first black woman to appear on cover of 'Life'. First black woman to be nominated for oscar for best actress, for her role in Carmen Jones 1954, other films include Island in the Sun 1957 and Porgy and Bess 1959, committed suicide 1965. Malcolm X. Lee can get a multi-million dollar deal with Hollywood whereas a black woman director such as Julie Dash cannot get in the front door. No matter how many female characters there are on screen, they can still be categorised into two types. The first is the Hattie McDaniels type. big bosoms, bulging eyes, put on this earth to serve and comfort their men. The other is the Dorothy Dandridge type, a beautiful brown skinned woman who is always getting entangled in dangerous miscegenatious relationships. The latter being the type of each of Spike Lee's heroines. Whoopi Goldberg is the only actress who has avoided these stereotypes, yet she is still not noted only for her acting. She is essentially a comedienne: an Afro-American woman must still offer something to the audience other than her talent as an actress, in order to be accepted.

Hollywood is really in a state of confusion over the issue of race. White directors are more in the firing line to be accused of racism because their productions are not solely based upon it. The Hand that Rocks the Cradle (1992), a modern tale of a white, middle class, all-American family has racist elements. It had a nice, gentle, caring black character but he had to be mentally retarded to be so, whereas The Unforgiven (1992), a western, had a strong black character and although he was murdered, we are shown the punishment of the white characters for doing so.

The films produced by black directors address black issues. These are the only ones who do so and are well recieved. There is a reluctance by white film critics to be critical of films by black film makers because they feel not qualified to do so, or to put it more bluntly, they are afraid to do so. This has allowed people such as Spike Lee to get away with the more actual sexism (and a certain degree of reverse discrimination) in their films than white directors. A black film by a black director is not automatically 'progressive' because it is made a by a black film maker, why should it be? Their blackness is the only thing they wish to talk about, and they, of course, are the only ones who can talk about it, in any realistic sense.

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Yet there are many other genres and subject matters to talk about and I feel that black directors are limiting themselves to making films exclusively on the issue of race, in a way, hiding behind their blackness.

The 'new wave' of black film makers must be commended for bringing to our attention the problems that black people face in their day to day life in America. The work of black feminist writers must also be acknowledged for the bringing to the attention the black female's oppression within the film industry, by both white and black. The work of other black female writers must also be recognised and considered for adaptation for the screen. Otherwise the representation of black women will not change.

The more outrageous / blatant stereotypes can no longer be countenanced, but this racism still persists both genderwise and colourwise albeit in a more subtle way. The most frightening aspect of this in Hollywood today is the fact that these images are sometimes presented to us by the black artists themselves. In the case of these black artists, the more usual points for criticism, such as sexism, are usually left unexplored by critics: subject matter being the most important factor. Their films are regarded more as 'social problem' movies or 'social protest' movies than as Art.

Until all films by all film makers, be they black or white, male or female, are viewed as equal works of Art ,then racism will always exist in film, both in front of, and behind the camera. The pleasure of all spectators must be considered, spectators who are treated as one unit, not segregated groups.

Where is it written that there should be an unquestioned superior within Hollywood, and one which is white? Hollywood must be elevated to a state beyond colour.



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