

Spike Lee's Uses of the Media: Black and White in 'Jungle Fever'

My inquiry focuses on the way the African-American movie director Spike Lee uses the media in order to express his radical point of view and oppose the whites in America.

In the first part of the paper I'll briefly make the connection between the most important episode in the history of African-Americans – the Civil War- and the way it was reflected in the first important movie at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the second part of the paper I'll present some important events in the Motion Picture Industry in the second half of the 20th century, and I'll analyze one of Spike Lee's most famous movies in which he continues, in 1991, to strongly oppose the same old injustices that his ancestors suffered since they were brought as slaves to the American colonies. In 'Jungle Fever' he plays with images of blacks and whites, of how people see and are seen by the others, and, through a forbidden love affair between a black man and a white woman, he, for the first time in movie history, breaks the dominant tradition of white rejection telling us that the time has come for the ex slave to brutally reject the master.

My thesis is that, in spite of the recent Affirmative Action policies that are supposed to calm down the interracial conflicts in the United States and repair the errors in the past, and in spite of, or, on the contrary, because of, the 1990s multiculturalist trend manifested both in politics and entertainment, the fight between blacks and whites is still going on and it won't be finished soon, at least in the media.

As Spike Lee tells us, he was “blessed with the opportunity to express the views of black people who otherwise don't have access to power and the media.”

Speaking about power, media and the Motion Picture Industry in America in the first half of the 20th century, let's remember the extremely racist D.W. Griffith's movie from 1915, namely *The Birth of a Nation*. It referred to a Southern family's experiences during the American Civil War and Reconstruction. When Ben, the main character, returns to the South after the Civil War, he feels that the region is torn apart by black people in positions of power. After a black man attacks his little sister, Ben organizes the Ku Klux Klan to restore law and order in the South. President Woodrow Wilson was so impressed with this version of the Reconstruction that he said it was “like history written in lightning”.

According to Leslie Harris, “for most of the 20th century, mainstream American motion pictures usually offered black actors only stereotypical roles, often as servants to whites”. The 1st Academy Award presented to a black actor went to Hattie McDaniel for her role as Mammy, a faithful slave to Scarlet O'Hara in the 1939 film *Gone With the*

Wind. Sidney Poitier was the first African American actor to become a major star in mainstream American motion pictures. Poitier's films often dealt with politically charged subjects, such as racism and crime.

Other black actors gradually gained starring television series roles. Since the 1960s, Bill Cosby has broken down barriers and stereotypes in films and several television series. Actors such as Whoopi Goldberg have received great acclaim in a variety of roles. Despite such recent successes, black actors and actresses are still less frequently employed than their white counterparts.

In the 1970s African American directors produced a number of urban crime dramas known as blaxploitation films. In the 1980s, a new generation of black filmmakers, independent of major Hollywood studios, began making films with unprecedented critical and commercial success. Director Spike Lee has been the most controversial and commercially successful. Lee's films, produced in his own production company "40 Acres and a Mule", -a reminder of an unfulfilled promise that many politicians made to freed slaves after the Civil War -, explore the complex issues facing black America and rigorously examine race relations in the United States.

In his *Jungle Fever* (1991) he uses the media in order to explore the chances of three important couples who tell us about the advantages and the shortcomings of being or not being white in America: the first is Flipper (African-American) and his wife Drew (who looks white but is mulatto); the second is Flipper and Angie (white Italian woman); the third is Paulie (Italian) and Orin (African-American woman). The main character, Flipper, is an African-American architect, married to Drew, a nonwhite woman who still looks like a white, and they both belong to the African-American elite, as the New York

Times newspaper at their door tries to prove. The Italian woman, Angie, is a temp in his office, has an Italian boyfriend, Paulie, and comes from a very poor neighborhood in New York (Spike Lee's favorite town for making movies about interracial/interethnic relationships). Flipper falls in love with her. So he decides to cheat on his wife in order to see how a love affair with a real white is. According to Ella Shohat, "this 'accidental' combination might be Spike Lee's answer to the more and more Hollywood films and television series featuring such 'accidental' pairings of Black characters with white ones." But in his vision we have black educated male and white uneducated poor female. Generally speaking, in such movies depicting interracial love affairs, the males are usually whites, except for *Who's Coming to Dinner*, and the females are blacks, a sort of exotic erotic attraction. And usually the white family is the one who rejects this combination with an 'inferior' person. While with Spike Lee we have the black as 'superior' and the white as 'inferior'.

The same Ella Shohat argues that "the thinking that people are encouraged, in Baldwin's words "to think of themselves as white", and that racial meanings are located in or generated by people of color, continues to shape a dominant representational field that is more or less unconsciously obsessed with 'race'. If we start with Wahneema Lubiano's question – "what is race in the United States if not an attempt to make 'real' a set of social assumptions about biology?" – it should not surprise us that the dominant cinema and media's efforts to accommodate the challenges of identity politics anxiously rework the boundary between fantasy and reality, a boundary that constantly exhibits its fragility." Most of the dominant ideology's movies, even the multiculturalist ones, try to send us one and the same message : like Cherryl Harris would put it in her article

‘Whiteness as Property’ ‘even since the Affirmative Action program, the property interest in whiteness is still valid.’

In a dominant culture field that privileges visibility, the movie seems to play as much with the question of how people *look* – in both senses of the word – as it does with the discursive war of positions about the meaning of race and of miscegenation.

If we read *Jungle Fever* in its social and historical context, the film seems to be predicated on a critical challenge to fantasies about race as *visible*, a challenge that works at the borderlines where some things become visible at the expense of the others. Like Barbara J. Fields very well explains in her article “Ideology and Race in American History”, “The first false move in this direction [to assume that race is a phenomenon outside history] is the easiest: the assumption that race is an observable physical fact, a thing, rather than a notion that is profoundly and in its very essence ideological [...] Ideas about color, like ideas about anything else, derive their importance, indeed their very definition, from their context. They can no more be the unmediated reflex of physical impressions than can any other ideas. It is ideological context that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them into ideas about that world. It does not bother Americans of the late 20th century that the term ‘black’ can refer to physically white people, because an ideological context of which they are generally unaware has long since told them which details to consider significant in classifying people.” (Fields, 147)

A very important scene in the movie is the women’s ‘war council’. They address everyone and no one; their only back-and-forth exchanges consist of accusations and counteraccusations about color designed to push the buttons of white racial paranoia that

these characters so prominently display. Significantly, we might note that the war council eventually establishes the generally metaphoric or figurative status of color. This scene acknowledges the complexity of contemporary social relations. Some examples of their comments would be: the only black men who are not drug addicts, or in jail, or 'homos', are married, or have 'ten women'; white women continually 'throw' themselves at black men (here I think Lee subverts the classic pattern of erotic attraction of the white male to the black female); that black men feel successful only when they have 'a white woman on their arm' ; that black women are looking for men in the wrong place, that they need to be able to consider men who are not professionals; and that men who are not professionals have difficulty living with women who are. Later in the discussion, one participant proposes to de-emphasize 'color', as she announces that she dates "the whole spectrum: Chinese, Jews, Asians" as long as the man is "nice and sweet and loves me". I think we have two important elements here: one is the fact that she doesn't date 'white' mainstream males; the second is, in my opinion, the subversion of the classic pattern that says that generally speaking the Asian, Chinese or Jewish women are the erotic attraction for white males. In this framework Drew becomes a kind of central switchpoint for the meanings of color, owing to her ambiguous position in this imaginary spectrum as a woman of racially mixed ancestry. At a certain moment one of the group tells Drew that "back in the days" black men privileged women like Drew herself, "light-skinned", but that now that category of privilege has been displaced onto white women, even if we are actually talking about an Italian, not about 'mainstream'.

The family point of view is extremely important. Neither the blacks nor the white Italians agree with this love relationship. The blacks, like Flipper's father for instance,

hate the white people and especially the white women. And the Italians don't want a black in their family. But I think the black's point of view, even Flipper's own way of provoking the breaking up is much more radical, more categorical than the Italian's one. In a kind of subversive language, towards the end of the movie, Flipper says something very important to Angie: he doesn't want their children to be a mixture of black and white in the country they live. So they finally break up, because of his family, because of her family, and because of him. I think that she was a sort of forbidden fruit, that this was the sense of his erotic curiosity towards her. Generally speaking, most of the movies show white Americans and the blacks as best friends, but not as lovers, or even more, as husband and wife. So, in my view, this might, among many other things, be a sort of an answer to that kind of movies, too. After he managed to taste the 'apple' he doesn't need it any longer. So these two couples (Flipper and Drew, Flipper and Angie) have no chances of success, in Lee's movie, in the American society. On the other hand, the third couple, Paulie and Orin (Italian shop saler and the black intelectual woman) seem to be given a chance to succeed, like in the classical Holywwod movies where white males have licence to combine with black women, apparently. Only this time it is she, the black woman, who is the intellectual, even more, a journalist, the female equivalent of educated Flipper. This is, in my opinion, another important form of subversion.

To conclude, one might argue that Spike Lee uses a Bakhtinian perspective, that is 'heteroglossia'. The Russian theorist and philosopher applied this concept to the novel defining the novel form by its use of "a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices" (B, 262). He calls this diversity of languages, and the notion that words and sentences take on their meaning based on their context and timing,

heteroglossia. The novel form is built around interpretation and a diversity of meaning. More recently Robert Stam applied this concept to the “Ethnic/Racial Representation”. In his view, “a Bakhtinian approach to the issue of ethnic representation, [...], would shift attention from the question of realism and positive and negative characters to one of voices and discourses. What are the ‘accents’ and ‘intonations’, to use Bakhtinian language, discernable in a filmic voice? Which of the ambient ethnic voices are ‘heard’ in a film, and which are elided or distorted?” (Stam, 158). As Stam explains later, Bakhtin is mainly interested in the effects of social power, and in the nonofficial viewpoint – the marginalized. Finally, Stam defines ‘heteroglossia’ as “another name for the socially generated contradictions that constitute the subject, like the media as the site of conflicting discourses and competing voices. The same person, within a Bakhtinian perspective, can be traversed by a racist and by an antiracist discourse. The same person can have an antiracist discourse and a racist behaviour, or vice-versa, be anti- by day, but racist by night.” (Stam, 257). So here we have a movie made from the point of view of an African-American, speaking about race in America, playing with images and conflicting discourses based on ‘black’ and ‘white’, racism and tolerance, inviting the viewers to participate in the action and decipher the message by themselves, decide whether this combination is good or bad in the historical context in which they live. This is Lee’s response to the Affirmative Action policies supposed to calm down interracial conflicts and to the multiculturalist trend manifested both in politics and entertainment.