DEVAN WHITEHOUSE

LEVEL 6 FILM STUDIES

An Investigation of the Inherent Politicism of African American Cinema

The ostensible dominant functions of cinema are to entertain and to make money; however, the role of politics in film must not be overlooked. Rather than film simply having the efficacy to carry political messages, several scholars state that it is impossible for a film to be without 'political implications' (Plantinga, 1997, p.14). These implications can either be backgrounded and implicit or foregrounded and explicit (Haus, 1991, p.70). For example, politics can be forced and obvious like the propaganda films of the Second World War or subtle like the endorsements of opposing pacifism missed by censors in some 1930s B-movies, as Leab (2008, p.395) notes. It is to no surprise that Sergei Eisenstein has been quoted as claiming 'there is no apolitical art' (in Esnault, 1970, p. 4). This inherent politicism is amplified when filmmakers actively challenge the hegemony of Hollywood. In Eisenstein's case, this led to the codifying of Soviet montage theory and, in particular, the theorisation of intellectual montage. Rather than the realism illusion of Hollywood's dominant continuity editing, the Marx and Hegel- informed dialectics of intellectual montage act as 'the perfect form for the expression of an ideological thesis' (Kiernan, 1990, p.96). This paper investigates the roots of Black American Cinema to explore how far it is and has been fuelled by politics, even more than the inextricable and intrinsic politicism of film. In particular, much like Eisenstein's ideological opposition to Hollywood, Black American Cinema will be examined as opposing Hollywood, both from outside the system—through the case studies of Oscar Micheaux and Cheryl Dunye—and inside it, through an investigation of Hattie McDaniel.

The birth of Black American Cinema can be seen as directly opposing the birth of the blockbuster—a synecdoche for Hollywood's hegemonic supersystem. *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), was the first blockbuster and a prominent example of Griffith's foundational work in codifying film grammar as we know it (Zimmerman, 2006,

p.122). However, it is also riddled with heinous racism that is central to the film's pro-Confederacy narrative which led to a spike in popularity for the Ku Klux Klan in the 1910s and 1920s (McEwan, 2007, pp.98-100). Five years later, Black American independent filmmaker Oscar Micheaux created *Within Our Gates* (1920), a direct retort.

Figure 1.1 The foregrounded African American boy in the Prologue, *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915). Public domain.

Racism is central to *Birth of a Nation*, with not only a pro-Ku Klux Klan message but also villainous portrayals of Black Americans. The film features very few actual Black actors, instead featuring mostly actors in blackface. Willis (2022, p.17), however, identifies the film's 'African American actor theme', which signifies the sparse usage of actual African Americans, as well as Gus, whose blackface is more 'realistic' as opposed to the more minstrel-esque blackface featured throughout the film (2022, p.30). In these scenes featuring actual African Americans, the actors are often foregrounded, such as the direct address in the film's opening and the innovative double exposure special effect in the

legislative scene. Through the 'African American actor theme', Griffith ties his vision of 'the sense of a growing problematic Black presence bringing a threatening sexualised gaze into white space' (Willis, 2022, p.32) into *Birth*'s film form, and, by extension, the groundwork of all following cinema. Griffith's foundational contributions to film language include parallel editing and impactful close-ups (Pitcher, 1999, p.50), however, these are inextricably linked to the racism also embedded in the film form, as demonstrated by Willis' excavation. This link between cinematic development and embedded racism can be seen again in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crossland, 1927), as Al Jolson not only performed in the very first sound picture, but he also saved blackface 'minstrelsy from extinction' (Rogin, 1992, p.447). In addition, the link between film form and racism is even damning on a photochemical level, as celluloid film emulsions and light meters were initially calibrated solely for white skin (Hornaday, 2013).

Micheaux, however, opposed Griffith not only in terms of battling his racism but also in his pioneering editing. Although Griffith's cross-cutting was groundbreaking, Micheaux instead adopted montage editing, which is particularly poignant in *Gates*' rape scene. Micheaux reverses the Black American villainy presented in *Birth* and presents Gridlestone, a wealthy white man, attempting to rape Sylvie, a young African American girl. During the 'Piedmont riot' of *Birth*, three genuine Black American actors burst into frame (Willis, 2022, p.19), representing Griffith's fear of the increasing presence of African Americans. Instead, Micheaux has Gridlestone slowly creeping into view, seemingly symbolising the power dynamics at play: an insidious, evil presence that has been lurking across and penetrating America for centuries. The attempted rape is then presented with a complex deployment of montage editing, with Micheaux not only relating the attack to the lynching of Sylvie's family but also cross-temporally to the film's 'present-day', suggesting the intergenerational trauma experienced by many African Americans. The rape itself could be read as symbolising the violent racism and colonialism carried out by Gridlestone, the slave-owning generation before him, and their predecessors who committed the Native American genocide. This editing links back to Eisenstein's politically-led codification of Soviet montage, with Micheaux seizing the means of film production. Michaeux's parallel editing is more politically informed than Griffith's, which '[presented] a very simple opposition between white virtue and black villainy [and instead] demands

an engaged and thoughtful spectator to discern conflicting and contradictory social and political claims about the power structure of race relations in the United States' (Siomopoulos, 2006, pp. 111-112). By embracing the inherent politicism of non-Hollywood filmmaking—as demonstrated by Eisenstein—and imbuing it with a searing rebuttal of Griffith's foundational Hollywood film, Micheaux's independent, intelligent filmmaking established Black American Cinema and injected even greater politicism. There were no commercial Black directors during the Classical Hollywood era, with the first emerging in the mid-1960s (Donalson, 2003, p.1). As Black filmmakers could not actively attack Hollywood from the outside, they had to find a way to battle their underrepresentation and misrepresentation from inside the system through subtle subversions of the stereotypical roles Black actors were usually relegated to. In his seminal homonymous book, Bogle (1994, pp. 3-18), outlined and defined these stereotypes as: Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks. These stereotypes can be traced back further to the caricatures of African Americans found in minstrelsy, acting to bolster the racial hierarchy and power dynamics of the time (Frost, 2008, p. 41). Black actors were limited to these roles during Classical Hollywood—however, the death of that era did not mark the end of this stereotyping (Mason, 2017, p.50)—and were restricted to being portrayed as villains and jesters (Bogle, 1994, p.18).

It is near-impossible to mention African American stereotyping in the Classical Hollywood era without exploring the case study of Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel is famous for her portrayals of characters abiding by the Mammy stereotype (Jewell, 2009, p.172), which encompasses seventy-four of her roles. McDaniel's most recognised performance is that of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), which made her the first African American to win an Academy Award. McDaniel was one of the few Black actors in the 1930s to become a major star. As well as her acting prowess and commanding presence, this was largely due to the fact she both played into and against the very stereotype she was confined to, acting as a 'nondirectorial auteur' (Bogle, 1994, p.37). This juxtaposition between conforming and nonconforming was labelled a dilemma for African American actors, aiming to appeal to both white and Black audiences (Muse in Watts, 2005, p.76). This, then, can be seen as an extension of Du Bois' theory of double consciousness: the innate two-ness of African Americans being both African and American. To break out of

her stereotypical role in *Gone with the Wind*, McDaniel 'took ownership [...] drawing from her early dramatic experience reciting Shakespeare and Dunbar, her rebellious satire of minstrel stereotypes, and her independent blueswoman defiance' (Watts, 2005, p.166). For example, McDaniel opposed the use of the 'N-word' in the screenplay and refused to say it, which was one of the leading factors for its entire omission from the film (Leff, 1999). The stereotype is inevitably adjoined by Snead's (1994, p.5) notion of marking— highlighting the colour of a Black actor's skin through white pieces of costuming—due to the minstrel-esque white aprons and bandannas typically worn by actors portraying Mammies (Manring, 1995, p.21).

Figure 1.2 Hattie McDaniel as Mammy, *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Fair use.

Despite the innate racism of the minstrel-inspired Mammy character in *Gone with the Wind*, McDaniel was given room to improvise on set due to the chaotic production, laden with quick changes and re-writes (Watts, 2005, p.166). By taking control of the character—once again, seizing the means of production—McDaniel stole all of her scenes and 'never delivered a subservient line' (Collins in Abramovitch, 2015), despite the

inherent subservience of her maid character. It could be said that, by both leaning into the Mammy tropes and asserting control and agency over character, McDaniel's double-conscious performance offered a contemporary version of the 'cakewalk': a subtly satirical dance performed by enslaved people to mock plantation owners (Sussman, 2001, p.81). After claims of continuing the harmful stereotype, McDaniel published an article defending herself, stating 'I believe my critics think the public more naïve than it actually is' (in Eschner, 2017), suggesting something of her nuanced, subtly rebellious (and notably, Academy-acclaimed) performance acting to break down the apparatus of industry-wide, embedded racism.

Nearly sixty years after *Gone with the Wind*—after massive advancements in Black American Cinema, including the Hollywood race movies of Sidney Poitier, the L.A. Rebellion, the Blaxploitation movement, and the debuts of some of the biggest names in African American cinema, including Spike Lee, John Singleton, and Julie Dash—Cheryl Dunye tackled the Mammy stereotype once more. Dunye emerged from the New Queer Cinema scene, which was then dominated by the gay white male gaze (Mason, 2017, p.50). Dunye was the first 'out' Black lesbian to direct a widely distributed feature-length film (Sullivan, 2000, p.448): *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). Dunye's debut highlights the contemporary rareness of Black lesbian representation in film, allowing her to '[seize] the power of the filmic gaze' (Richardson, 2011, p.100)—and, by extension, the means of production—on the community's behalf. This control of the gaze is made apparent and explicit through the film's blending of mockumentary and traditional fiction modes. Dunye (who plays a fictionalised version of herself) handles the camera in the film's opening scene, in which she and Tamara, her business partner and friend, are working as videographers at a wedding; by inserting the viewer into her viewfinder, she 'literally [decentres] the white male gaze' (Mason, 2017, p.54).

The film also makes use of direct address—in the opening scene for example, Dunye metatextually discusses the subject of her documentary-within-the-film, stating that it was unquestionably going to focus on Black women, as their stories had never been truthfully told on screen. For most of Hollywood's history, portrayals of Black women were typically incredibly harmful, mostly conforming to the aforementioned

stereotypes outlined by Bogle, the Mammy and the Mulatto, as well as the Jezebel. Bobo (1995, p.33) expands on this, stating that Black women had been limited to being domestic servants, dominating matriarchs, victims, villains, and deviants since film's genesis, and 'welfare mothers' in the latter part of the 20th Century. With *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye acts to highlight this misrepresentation, while inviting the viewer to critically engage with the historical, systemic racism tied to portrayals of Black women (Sullivan, 2000, p.449).

Figure 1.3 Cheryl miming along to *Plantation Memories*, *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996).

Mason (2017, pp. 57-59) outlines four ways in which Dunye radically altered the depiction of the Mammy stereotype through the characterisation of Fae—a fictional Classical Hollywood actor, the focus of Dunye's faux documentary. These are: rebuffing the usual asexuality of the Mammy character by foregrounding her sexuality as one of the central focuses of the film; highlighting her as an object of desire for the fictional Dunye, specifically in a queer context; depicting Fae as fluidly conforming to both ends of the 'butch/femme continuum'; and combining elements of the Jezebel *and* Mammy stereotypes to create

nuanced characterisation as opposed to Hollywood's strict, pernicious confines for Black women. Dunye demonstrates agency over this historical racism in a scene wherein she exaggeratedly mimes along to a moment from a fabricated Classical Hollywood film, '*Plantation Memories*', with her costume including a bandanna tied around her head (Sullivan, 2000, p.450). As well as Dunye's direct address, control of the camera-gaze, and the narrative focus of exploring Black history in film (especially Black *queer* history), her awareness and subversion of stereotypes are central to the film's politicism.

In addition to its faux-historical excavation, the film centres on the relationship between Cheryl and Diana—a white woman—which Dunye uses to investigate the nuances and 'complexities of interracial lesbian relationships' (Allen, 2022, p.129). The film was one of the first to contain explicit, sexual scenes of an interracial lesbian couple; during one of these scenes, a zoom foregrounds Cheryl and Diana's intertwined hands, showcasing the tenderness of their unity and 'documenting the existence of interracial lesbian romances' (Sullivan, 2000, pp. 450-451). However, Dunye also shrewdly highlighted the complicated politics of interracial lesbian relationships, such as Tamara's criticisms of Cheryl—claiming she is 'acting like she wants to be white'—as well as the complexities of Cheryl and Diana's power dynamics. For example, Diana's claims of liberalism and her family's history of relationships with Black people, are seen as at odds with her actions, as she stays silent when Mrs Fletcher berates Cheryl and vehemently opposes the idea of her sister having been in a relationship with a Black woman (Allen, 2022, pp. 127-129). By both breaking new ground and depicting the realistic complexities of her intersectional experiences—highlighted formally through an archive-like mix of film formats (Derk, 2018, p.296) and weaving her film styles between traditional filmmaking, her postmodern direct address, and faux documentary—Dunye inserted herself (and genuine representations of the Black lesbian experience) into the film canon. She '[searched] for a Black lesbian cinematic foremother and instead claimed a piece of history for herself' (Allen, 2022, p.138), and by having to fabricate a predecessor, the urgency of her need for representation—and, as such, the film's politicism—is made even more apparent.

It is often said that all art is intrinsically political, and this is emphasised and foregrounded when opposing the hegemony of Hollywood. The birth of the Hollywood blockbuster intrinsically tied racism to the grammar of film language, as seen through the 'African American actor theme', Griffith's formal innovations, and the minstrel- informed caricatures and harmful stereotypes of *The Birth of a Nation* which continue to be present in media to this day. Since the emergence of Oscar Micheaux, Black independent cinema has acted as an escape from the 'constraints of the major studios [... enabling filmmakers] to put on the screen Black lives and concerns that derive from the complexity of Black communities' (Diawara, 1993, p.7). Thus, Black filmmakers have been able to authentically and radically depict the nuances of their existence as a community and as individuals, from the intellectual montage of Micheaux to the subtly defiant performances of McDaniel to the postmodern experimentation of Dunye, as well as myriad pioneer filmmakers whose integral work has been only mentioned in passing in this essay, such as the iconoclastic, avant-garde work of Melvin Van Peebles; the overtly political, visceral dynamism of Spike Lee; and the heritage-focused films of Julie Dash, among many others. Despite perennial challenges in getting their films funded and distributed (Allen, 2022, pp. 121-122), Black filmmakers strive to 'collectively continue to affirm African American culture and experiences' (Donalson, 2003, p.322). Whether inside the Hollywood system or directly opposing its systemic, grammatical, and even photochemical ties to racism, Black filmmaking is inherently political on an ontological level, precisely because of those barriers.

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