

## It Does Matter If You're Black or White

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**E**arly film theory and debate focused on the legitimising of film as art, questioning the constitution of cinema. Later film theory focused on the politics and ethics of cinema. However, the questions that are now asked of cinema pertain to its power over the spectator and its mechanism of spectator subjugation. This consequently leads us to question what cinema does (or does not do) with this power over the spectator. Does the spectator have any chance of resisting the film, especially when it opposes the very essence and being of the spectator, as Manthia Diawara suggests in “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance” (892)? Film theory and criticism questions the position, psychology and stance of the spectator, and the purpose and function of cinema. Is cinema an ideological, socio-political tool, or does it purely exist for entertainment? Cinema, as a structure of control and power, deals with the subversion and submission of both film and spectator, despite its façade as entertainment. This thus necessitates critical questions about whether cinema functions as mere representation and reflection of reality, or more importantly, as a production of politics and ethics capable of producing and creating *reality* that absorbs the spectator.

Race politics and ethics has long pervaded critical discussion of cinema and the films produced within its structure, which “can be read differently by different people, depending not only on their social location but also on their ideologies and desires” (Stam 230). This tension and struggle between *being* and seeing a representation of what the spectator is *supposed to be* results in a resistant spectatorship. It is thus simultaneously interesting and important to think about how race affects the spectator of a Eurocentric film that expounds and creates racist ideology and its accompanying reality. Focusing on Robert Stam and Louise Spence’s introductory essay “Colonialism, Racism, And Representation: An Introduction”, and Diawara’s “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance”, this essay will analyse cinematic racism in relation to Eurocentric cinema, such as Hollywood cinema, as the locus of the production of politics and ethics. Cinema as interruption, a provocation of sometimes discordant emotional and intellectual responses that form oxymoronic arguments, instead of being a mere reflection and representation of what is perceived as and purported to be fact will be discussed. Therefore, questions that remain to be addressed are: what do we understand by ‘politics and ethics’ of cinema? How do we as the spectator understand this politics and ethics? Through

a discussion and analysis of the position of the *Other*, multicultural spectator in relation to Eurocentric cinema, this paper aims to engender critical thought and discourse on how the structure, and politics and ethics of cinema enslaves the Other via its images, and how this affects the spectator.

Before any meaningful discourse with respect to the problematic position of the multicultural spectator in the face of Eurocentric cinema can be embarked upon, the terms 'politics' and 'ethics' have to be defined. What, exactly, does the politics and ethics of cinema imply? What does it suggest? Is this politics and ethics of cinema static? Or does it change as perceptions change, as societal mindsets change? Does it adhere to a morality? These need to be considered in the discussion of how and why cinematic racism pervades the politics and ethics of cinema and what this means for the non-White spectator. We often associate 'politics' with authority, institutional structures and rules, and also, the struggle for power. It can also be seen as a set of ideas or activities aimed at garnering power and dominance, as well as using that to one's benefit and to establish the dominance of a certain mindset, approach, or perspective, institutionalising it as morally right, or logically sound and rational. This establishment of dominance is cloaked and marketed as organic, but really serves to subjugate and create power. 'Ethics' is often equated to a 'right' set of codes that is generally accepted as a morally right and just, which should be abided by in order to exist as moral creatures of God. It must be kept in mind that morality, however, is inherently manmade – constructed by man, for man, woman and child. It changes as society changes; it is never entirely static. Thus, like

politics, ethics has the potential to be manipulated and moulded in order to influence behaviour and attitudes, manipulated to one's advantage (at the expense of another). Thus, the politics and ethics of cinema can be understood as the structures of cinema that propagate a set of beliefs and perceptions, deemed to be morally right and superior. In the context of filmic racism (and polycentric multiculturalism), the politics and ethics of cinema can also be understood as a set of cinematic structures, both extrinsic and intrinsic, which convey a set of beliefs that asserts the dominance and superiority of a certain ethnic group above the rest. This thereby grants powerful dominance to that particular ethnic group, which in turn defines the ethics, values and morality that suppresses and represses all other values and belief systems. In relation to racism and colonialism, the politics of cinema highlights the Eurocentric (and racist) predominance in society that permeates cinematic structures, placing power, significance and importance to whites, diminishing the visibility of non-whites. This engenders white superiority and declares the Other to be less civilised, less advanced, less humane, less everything positive.

The cinematic production of racism that permeates societal mindsets and cultures encapsulates the essence of the politics and ethics of cinema. Cinema as a productive machine that provokes, addresses and argues over racial power and the struggle for and manipulation of it. Similarly, cinema is also a tool by which society's morality is derived, which leads us to ask this of the politics and ethics of cinema: for whom and by who is a film is made?

Cinema's psychological and political power lies not in cinema being a representation of reality, a theory so commonly perceived and espoused, especially with Italian neo-realists such as André Bazin, and feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey. Cinema does not provide a mere reflection or representation of reality. Instead, cinema is *reality*. Cinema is a *production* of reality, positioning itself as reality. Cinema does not simply say, "Hey, look at me, I'm a reflection of the reality you are in. I'm a mirror." It appears to be, but is in essence not, a mirror of reality. Instead, it creates situations and plots that the spectator mistakenly perceives to be a reflection or mimicry. However, the "real-ness" of cinema is not any less significant or real when juxtaposed against the reality that society perceives itself to be in; it is not an imitation. Cinema produces the reality and "real-ness" that the spectator is subjected to. Nevertheless, cinema's productions are real – its arguments are real, its emotional provocations are real – especially so when this cinematic production of the real includes the production of cinematic racism. Cinema, in the context of polycentric multiculturalism and racism, is a "multiculturalist project (as opposed to the multiculturalist fact)" (Stam 270). It is a site where political and ethical structures culminate in a productive project that creates relations, portrayals, realities and stereotypes. Cinema thus rewrites the boundaries of cinema, transforming our understanding of it as a static representation of fact, to an understanding of it as an everchanging production of fact. Cinema creates the reality that we currently perceive and experience. It engenders stereotypes and preconceived notions, such as DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which posited the idea of the black Other as an

overtly sexual, bestial being. Thus, the idea that reality exists before and outside of the cinema or film is illogical and invalid. As Munsterberg proposes, the film, and by extension the filmic experience, occurs entirely in the film of the mind. If we were to look at the human experience, we will realise that the human consciousness that lends meaning to and creates relations between things anchors events and objects in the tangible and concrete sphere. The human consciousness transcribes the intangible to the tangible. For example, fear and uncertainty of the *Other* takes shape in *Birth* via the dark, violent, bestial portrayal of the blacks. The human experience all but occurs within the human consciousness where "reality" takes place, just as how the film takes place within the human consciousness. In this sense, the film invades the human consciousness, producing a human experience – much like how in reading, one experiences the life and adopts the perspectives of the book's character(s). Cinema and reality cannot be separated, because there really is no separation between the two. Cinema is a machine, an apparatus of production. It produces reality; it does not merely represent or reflect reality. It produces an argument for something; an address toward the spectator. Eurocentric cinema is an apparatus that produces racist arguments – arguments that create the 'reality' that spectators perceive, reinforcing the same 'reality' that spectators inevitably find themselves situated in. It is the apparatus by which the master-servant relationship between whites and non-whites is concretised. It is a provocation of responses both intellectual and emotional through the production of desire and identifications, and is an argument for equity, not equality.

For Stam and Spence in their essay “Colonialism, Racism, And Representation”, films are “constructs, fabrications, [and] representations” (878) – both a production and conscious creation that is a production of reality. Cinema, then, is the apparatus by which film becomes an argument, an address to the spectator’s consciousness, and a provocation of desires. This essential feature of cinema (i.e. its productive, and not merely reflective, ability) is what enables the propagation of filmic racism. Consequently, the creation of stereotypes in Eurocentric films encourages the propagation of racist tendencies, such as the widespread and seemingly naturalistic portrayal of blacks in cinema as violent and overtly sexual, with an inferior intellectual capacity, and inherently bestial in nature. This stereotypical portrayal leads black filmic characters to be viewed at with a spectatorial desire to tame and make civil, or to annihilate. For example, the portrayal of Gus in D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* distorts him, through the manipulation of the camera lens to create a distorted close-up of his features, reducing Gus to a one-dimensionally bestial character. Likewise, this produced reality is also conveyed to the spectator via the narrative of *Birth*, which contributes to this bestial characterisation of Gus. The spectator, sutured to the white characters’ points of view through point of view shots and the film’s narrative, is forced to forge an emotional connection with Little Sister and Little Colonel (with the whites in general), turning away in ‘natural’ repulsion from the black character. The spectator, trapped by the cinematic apparatus of filmic identification, is thus forced to identify with the white characters.

The consistent portrayal of the Other as inferior to white superiors in film is

neither a representation of reality nor an accurate mimetic attempt. It would be a great travesty to think so. However, the crux here, for Stam and Spence especially, is not about the accurate representation or portrayal of minority ethnic groups, the focus is not on mimetic accuracy. Rather, what is important is the productive characteristic of cinema. The engenderment of stereotypes through cinematic production of reality stems from this: what appears on screen is universally deemed to be real, or at the very least, wholly realistically possible. The stereotypes that are produced and widely disseminated are thus absorbed and greedily consumed by the spectator. The stereotype of blacks as violent, overtly sexual, and with little or no sense of morality as compared to the whites, as embodied in the filmic portrayal of Gus, is “not an error of perception but rather a form of social control, intended as what Alice Walker calls ‘prisons of image’” (Stam 275). This filmic production in *Birth* of the argument for the moral and intellectual inferiority of the non-white Other is dangerous – it does not hold a mirror to society; society seeks to become its mirror. That is the power of the film.

Racist Eurocentrism that permeates cinema does not just lie in the production and dissemination of stereotypes, it also lies in the cinematic production of the spectatorial desire to identify with the main (in this essay, the dominant white) character in the film that traditionally embodies heroic qualities. Take for example, classic Hollywood westerns like John Ford’s *The Searchers*. The film’s framing of the Native American Indians involve “images of encirclement” (Stam and Spence 787), achieved via framing of the Indians in the background, “premised on exteriority” (Stam and Spence 787) with the

whites in the middle. This is further substantiated and indoctrinated when Ethan says, “Looks like you’ve got yourself surrounded”, suturing the spectator into Ethan’s point of view. This creates the spectatorial desire to identify with the supposed ‘victims’ caught in the middle and surrounded, rather than with the ‘attackers’ circling on the outside. The spectator rarely gets a close up shot of the non-white character. Even when that happens, it does not happen without visual distortion of that character. The spectator also does not get to hear the non-white character speak. On the off chance that they are allowed to speak, it is often distorted with the racist preconception of how the Other speaks, with grunts and in an intelligible, animalistic language. Also, when the Other is allowed to speak, especially in Hollywood cinema, even till today, they typically speak in the language of the oppressor, i.e. English. There is thus the sense that the Other is only allowed to meet the white according to the white’s terms and conditions. For example in *The Searchers*, when Ethan finally meets Scar, Scar speaks in English, not in Inuit. Cinematic structures such as framing and sound is thus capable of producing this racism that determines who gets to be seen and heard, and *how* are they seen and heard. This intricate manipulation of power can thus be said to be produced by cinema’s structure.

However, just as cinema produces racism ready for spectatorial consumption, it also produces pleasure. Spectatorial pleasure lies in the fulfilment of the desire to identify, in the fulfilment of the desire to belong in a position of power. Conversely, this spectatorial pleasure created by the fulfilment of desire in turn regenerates this very same desire. The pleasure of the spectator upon identification with the *hero*

of the film, who is mostly white and mostly male, in turn generates increased spectatorial desire to further identify with the heroic white male and reject the non-white character. Diawara posits that just as “Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator[...] the dominant cinema situates black characters primarily for the pleasure of the white spectator (male or female)” (895), where the white spectator takes pleasure in the generated spectatorial desire to identify with the dominant white character, via the pathway of objectification and reduction of the black character to one-dimensional representations of bestiality and moral inferiority, such as in Griffith’s representation of Gus. However, this pleasure is also ambivalent. With cinema’s structures – production, filming, distribution, etcetera – situated *outside* the filmic experience, it is truly impossible for films to escape the culture and politics it is born out of. As Stam and Spence so aptly state, “The filmic experience must inevitably be infected by the cultural awareness of the audience itself, constituted outside the text and traversed by sets of social relations such as race, class and gender” (890). There is thus always the possibility of “reading which go against the grain of the discourse” (Stam and Spence 890), the possibility of the spectator, while taking pleasure in the identification with the hero of the film, arriving at discomfiting disagreement with the identification that spectator realises he or she has been sutured into. This results in what Diawara terms the “resisting spectator” (892). According to Diawara, the “resisting spectator... resist[s] the racial representations of dominant cinema” (892), even though the spectator is set up via cinematic codes and structures, such as

point of view, shot-reverse-shot, to identify with the heroic white character(s) and repel the mere thought of identifying, empathising, or sympathising with the antagonistic non-white character, as in *Birth*, to “identify with the Camerons and encouraged to hate Gus” (Diawara 894). Concurrently, the spectator is also able to resist – to refuse to read the film in the way intended by the filmmaker. The non-white spectator could therefore have, what Stam and Spence term, an “aberrant reading” (890) that resists “the racist reading of the black man as a dangerous threat” (Diawara 899), thus resisting the implied natural reading of the non-white character as inferior, bestial, violent, and/or immoral. Instead, however ironically via such cinematic codes, this aberrant reading produces a highly resistant reading of the non-white character, due to the spectator’s own social and cultural background. The logic at play is that cinema produces equity instead of equality. There is no equality, however differently other theorists may argue, because each spectator is inherently different. Black, brown, white, yellow; tall, short, skinny, fat, average; rich, poor, middle-class – the influence of the differences in each individual’s social, cultural and economic background, or physical makeup, cannot be ignored or assumed to be uniform. People are not equal, and should not be assumed to possess the same, equal reaction. For example, a white male spectator living in the South in the 1900’s is less likely to find the white supremacist tone of Griffith’s *Birth* troubling. Likewise, one cannot expect a black spectator in the 1900’s, who comes from a lineage of enslaved ancestors, to revel without some form of resistance in Griffith’s portrayal of Gus and biasness toward the Camerons, without thinking –

“I’m not like what they say!”. No one spectatorial reading can be applied across the board, because nothing is fixed or equal.

Films in dominant Eurocentric Hollywood cinema are very often dominated by notions of white supremacy, tailor-made for spectatorial consumption and enslavement by suturing the spectator’s point of view to that espoused by the film. Classic examples are Griffith’s *Birth* and Ford’s *Searchers*. However, it is essential to note that aberrant, resistant readings will always surface. Readings, informed by different spectatorial experiences and contexts, will always be different. But this is also where the allure of cinema lies – its ability to influence, and the ideologies, right or wrong, it helps to perpetuate. With cinema, everything is relative and generative. Readings change with the perspective the spectator adopts. Conversely, as an interlocutor that provokes change, interchange and dialogue between the film and the spectator, cinema can become an interruption. It is certainly capable of provoking resistance, or causing senseless submission. Cinema produces arguments, provocations and addresses, and in relation to racism, continually challenging the spectator, such as by pressuring the spectator with seemingly irresistible racist representations. Through this, the resisting spectator starts to think actively, and the power to disagree awakens amidst cinematic viewing pleasure and desire. However, this politics and ethics of cinema, the power and influence of the cinema to either actively engage the spectator or reduce the spectator to a submissive position, is never static. Power relations are continually redefined with the mercurial and productive nature of cinema, always reassessed.

But ultimately, I believe that it is the spectator's that shape the arguments that cinema produces.

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