# The Stereotype Cycle and Special Interest Propaganda in Film and Theater

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Honors Project, 4th Semester
Spring 2007

# Filmography

**Of African American Interest**
Check and Double Check (1930)
The Emperor Jones (1933)
Imitation of Life (1934)
Song of Freedom (1936)
The Duke is Tops (1938)
Lying Lips (1939)
The Blood of Jesus (1941)
Stormy Weather (1943)
Cabin in the Sky (1943)
Pinky (1949)
Cry the Beloved Country (1951)
Carmen Jones (1954)
Black Board Jungle (1955)
Island in the Sun (1957)
Imitation of Life (1959)
A Raisin in the Sun (1961)
Lilies of the Field (1963)
Nothing But a Man (1964)
A Patch of Blue (1965)
Guess Whose Coming to Dinner (1967)
In the Heat of the Night (1967)
Finian's Rainbow (1968)
The Learning Tree (1969)
Watermelon Man (1970)
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)
Shaft (1971)
Buck and the Preacher (1972)
Coffy (1973)
Claudine (1974)
Cooley High (1975)
Roots (1977)
A Soldier's Story (1984)
The Color Purple (1985)
Hollywood Shuffle (1987)
Coming to America (1988)
School Daze (1988)
Do the Right Thing (1989)
Glory (1989)
Driving Miss Daisy (1989)
Daughters of the Dust (1990)
Boyz n the Hood (1991)
Malcolm X (1992)
Corrina, Corrina (1994)
Losing Isaiah (1995)
The Nutty Professor (1996)
A Time to Kill (1996)
Soul Food (1997)
Amistad (1997)
The Directors: Spike Lee (1999)
Bamboozled (2000)
Remember the Titans (2000)
Baadasssss Cinema (2002)
Barbershop (2002)
Rabbit Proof Fence (2002)
Barbershop 2: Back in Business (2004)
Ray (2004)
Hotel Rwanda (2004)
Crash (2004)
Diary of Mad Black Woman (2005)
Guess Who (2005)
Madea's Family Reunion (2006)
**Of Gay and Lesbian Interest**
Queen Christina (1933)
Rope (1948)
Suddenly Last Summer (1959)
A Taste of Honey (1961)
The Children's Hour (1961)
The Killing of Sister George (1968)
Midnight Cowboy (1969)
Myra Breckenridge (1970)
A Very Natural Thing (1974)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)
Dog Day Afternoon (1975)
Die Konsequenz (The Consequence) (1977)
La Cage aux Folles (1978)
Manhattan (1979)
Victor/Victoria (1982)
Lianna (1983)
An Early Frost (1985)
Torch Song Trillogy (1988)
Paris is Burning (1991)
Philadelphia (1993)
Mrs. Doubtfire (1993)
Hsi Yen (The Wedding Banquet) (1993)
Interview With a Vampire (1994)
The Birdcage (1996)
Love! Valour! Compassion! (1997)
As Good as it Gets (1997)
Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil (1997)
My Best Friend's Wedding (1997)
Being John Malcovich (1999)
The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999)
Boys Don't Cry (1999)
Best in Show (2000)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001)
Le Placard (The Closet) (2001)
Kissing Jessica Stein (2001)
Frida (2002)
The Laramie Project (2002)
The Hours (2002)
Legally Blonde 2 (2003)
Saved (2004)
Rent (2005)
Wedding Crashers (2005)
The Family Stone (2005)
Brokeback Mountain (2005)
Transamerica (2005)

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Film and theater are arts, and as such, they are often evaluated aesthetically. However, there are multiple dimensions to these artistic endeavors. In addition to having beauty or aesthetic value, film and theater have social and political value. They function as reflections of a society and catalysts to change a society. Film and theater are powerful tools; they have been used throughout history as propaganda. Propagandists have included governments, religions, and political groups. However, modern Western societies are not organized like societies of previous eras. They are comprised of many special interest groups who can pool their resources to participate in propaganda and persuasion battles. This phenomenon is an understudied field, with interesting ramifications for society. One good example of special interest groups using propaganda is how African Americans have created a place for themselves in American film and theater, and have used that place to transmit messages about themselves. In order to understand exactly what processes are involved with the phenomenon, it is necessary to think about some common concepts in new ways.

Imagine that we are playing a game. I will say a word and you will say the first synonym of that word which comes to your mind. The word is "propaganda." The synonyms now flooding your mind may include such words as "dupe," "trick," and "manipulate," and none of these are pleasant words.

However, the dictionary definition of "propaganda" says merely this, "Any widespread promotion of particular ideas, doctrines, etc" (Neufelt and Sparks 472).

This denotation is much milder than the average reader would expect to find because the connotations of the term "propaganda" are almost entirely negative. The word itself, however, is not a negative word. In fact, it is a word describing what

countless good, beneficial organizations do every day, and most sane people praise them for doing it. Under this definition an organization that uses television commercials and mailings to convince people to give money to the poor are propagandists.

Of course, this definition is somewhat overly simplified. Many authors have given more elaborate, scholarly definitions such as the one found in *Propaganda and Persuasion:* "Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired end of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell 4).

Even under this longer, more complex definition, the charity to feed the poor is still an example of people using propaganda. Their attempts to gather money are deliberate and systematic. When planning for fund drives charities strive to manipulate cognitive awareness of potential donors  as much as possible in the charity's favor. In fact, they hire people to design brochures to that end. The typical starving child image is designed to produce pity in the viewer so that he or she will send money to the organization.

Propaganda, a term originally coined by the Catholic Church, gained its negative connotation much later during WWII, when it became a term used by the US government to describe information released by the countries the U.S. was fighting and other non-sympathetic parties. (Lee 6-7). In his book *How to Understand Propaganda* Alfred McClung Lee states "Because of this, *Webster's* also notes that 'now, often,' propaganda refers to 'secret or clandestine dissemination of ideas, information of gossip, or the like, for the purpose of helping or injuring a person, an institution, a cause, etc…'" (Lee 7). J. Michael Sproule says, "By 1948, *persuasion, communication,* and *information* were the

favored locutions for what had formerly been known as *propaganda*...The years 1948-1949 marked the pivotal point at which the aggregate number of citations in *Psychological Abstract* to 'persuasion,' 'communication' and 'information' regularly exceeded those relating to 'propaganda'" (Sproule 217). Lee however thinks that the term "propaganda" can be restored. "This propagandist use of the word 'propaganda' should not, and in scholarly usage does not, stand in the way of its employment in its original sense" (7). This redemption of the word is necessary because no other word in modern etymology has replaced the void that redefining the word "propaganda" has left.

Nevertheless, modern research has tried to draw a slightly different picture of what "propaganda" means. Jowett and O'Donnell attempt to distinguish between propaganda and persuasion. Understanding that this is no easy task they write, "propaganda has not been successfully differentiated from persuasion by other writers" (17). They list three purposes of propaganda that are not present in persuasion. The propagandist tries to control information flow, manage public opinion, and manipulate behavior patterns (18). Persuasion, by contrast, "is a reciprocal process in which both parties are dependant on one another. It is a situation of interactive and transactive dependency. Interactive suggests turn-taking; whereas, transactive suggests a more continuous and dynamic process of co-creating meaning" (21).

Jowett and O'Donnell further classify propaganda as white, gray, and black.

> White propaganda comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate…Although what listeners hear is reasonably close to the truth it is presented in a manner that attempts to convince the audience that the sender is the 'good guy'

> with the best ideas and political ideology. White propaganda attempts to build credibility with the audience, for this could have usefulness at some point in the future" (Jowett and O'Donnell 8).

The notion that propaganda can have true or untrue content is not new. Lee states, "Propaganda is not all lies. It can be the simple truth. It can serve our own selfish or enlightened interests. It can be safe or dangerous" (Lee 25). However, Jowett and O'Donnell attempt to draw a line determining between truth and fiction with their classifications. They assert that, "white propaganda is very similar to informative communication. Information is imparted from an identifiable source, and the information is accurate. The distinction between white propaganda and informative communication is that white propaganda informs solely to promote a specific ideology" (20).

There are special problems with using these systems to try to classify art, particularly film, instead of news. Firstly, the film is by nature, a one-time event. The public can communicate only two choices to the creators, "yes it's a go" or "don't make anything else like this." Generally speaking, the public and the producers do not have any communication about the film until the public has given the one of these two replies at the box office.

Thus "interactive, transactive" communication does not usually occur. The audience could decide to shun a particular producer or director's next project, but that would end the process of communication. There is no back and forth. The audience can view the message and thus fund and approve the message, or they can cut off the communication. Often the audience does not respond to the message as much as it does to

the jokes or eye candy the film contained, thus the producer never knows what the audience response was to his idea.

Secondly, art does not readily classify as black, gray, or white. These distinctions refer to level of truthfulness in content. Art is not the retelling of an event with exact facts to be verified, but a revealing of feelings, thoughts, values, and beliefs. In news it is expected that the reporter leave these parts of him out of his work; in art it is required that the participants bring them in. Even in the retelling of a “true” story, artistic liberties are taken. What the film or theater creator can do is make an effort to present human problems in such a way that there is more than one possible answer. When human problems are seen as having multiple answers or the audience is allowed to guess instead of being shown ‘the right answer’ I will call this complex art. When the answer to a problem is spelled out for the audience, it becomes more like propaganda, which I will call simple art.

These terms are an attempt to remedy the fact that there is no exact line where art leaves the persuasion field and enters the propaganda zone, although some films and theatrical pieces have much more of a propagandistic tone to them than others do. However, since the artist is a person with many beliefs and views, it is likely that some part of him will seep into any message he sends.

To abridge the difficulty of determining which art pieces include enough of the artist’s opinion to be considered propaganda, I will assume that each art piece contains something that the artist wishes to deliver to the audience; thus, I will classify all films and theater pieces as propaganda. In so doing, I return to the original definition of the word as it was used by the Catholic Church originally and as Lee suggested that it be

used. He describes his approach as “The middle course to an understanding of propaganda [which] thus becomes one in which we are neither gullible nor negative, neither naïve nor cynical” (Lee 25). Even if every play or film is propaganda, this does not mean that every piece of theater will have to take a stand on every issue, but merely that it addresses somewhere in some form the beliefs of an audience, either confirming or rejecting them.

The study of propaganda as a function of special interest groups is further complicated by the fact that much of the research on propaganda focuses on government activities in times of war. However, sending bodies other than governments send one side’s messages every day during peacetime. Perhaps someday there will be a large body of research devoted to the study of non-government propaganda in peacetime. The topic is certainly worthy of many more studies.

Bear in mind also that one piece can be both art and propaganda at the same time. The categories, which people try to divide the world into, such as political and non-political, and propaganda and persuasion are just ways that they have developed to help organize their world. Whatever people produce, especially in the arts is not rigidly or definitely categorical. In the preface to his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* author Augusto Boal states that the purpose of his book is “to show that all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them” (Boal IX). The practice of creating art is a practice of not only aesthetic value, but also a form of transmitting ideas and attitudes from one mind to another. It is the later process that this paper attempts to clarify. The same piece of art is at once aesthetic and propagandistic. The value of either the form or the message cannot be rated unless a human being applies

to it his own values, but the process can be explained and understood. This understanding requires the recipient to resist the categories, which he has made for “art” as something of aesthetic value only and “propaganda” as something with political value only. This takes effort because the separation of divisions that most people have held for their whole lives is necessary. The effort is worth it because perceiving the two as separate functions limits understanding of the messages that artists give to publics. Boal further cautions against this separation saying, “Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error- and this is a political attitude” (IX).

Author Beverly Merrill Kelley says of the art of film, “Even if a movie deals only peripherally with politics, it socializes the moviegoer to political ideas, values, and behavior” (Kelley 7). Thus, film also has innate political potential and, unlike theatrical creations, one film can reach a wide geographic area.

Film also has a unique place in forming the ideas of the young. In 1955 authors Katz and Lazarsfeld noted that research already revealed, “that there is a strong relationship between movie going and age… it is young people who go to the movies” (296). This is important because young people are often the most open people. The tendency to commit to ideas means that once a person is committed, it is less likely that he or she will recommit to an opposing idea. “Political Immunization” is a term describing how older people cling to the ideas and values that were popular when they were young. *The Dictionary of Sociology* definition states, “The theory suggests that political ideas formed in youth are held fairly consistently into old age, being immune to alternative influences. Therefore it is important in explaining any generation’s political preferences to examine the situation that existed when they were young” (Lawson and

Garrod 183). This tendency elevates the impact of movies. If young people were the ones whose opinions were the most open to change and film was a medium whose primary audience was young, then films of past eras have had a powerful hold on the ideas of an important segment of society. The generations being raised when both of these studies were new have affected the world with their ideas and attitudes. This reality of commitment also explains why the process of social change is slow. If each generation commits to certain ideas, then it takes educating a whole new generation before a new principle can be established.

Sometimes catastrophic events force people to rethink their positions. For instance the Holocaust made Americans think more seriously about anti Semitism. The topic showed up all of a sudden in films like *Gentleman's Agreement* when there previously had not been any open discussion of the topic. However, usually this process is slower in times of stability because people cling to what they have already decided.

These ideas about propaganda coupled with the study of special interest groups have lead me to the following hypothesis. I did research in both African American film and gay and lesbian film, however, for the sake of time and clarity only the research on African American film is presented. These hypothesis developed out of both research areas and are rooted in a sociology background.

**Hypothesis 1:** How groups obtain money and power

A. In order to send effective messages the group's members must have a clear enough enemy or objective that they are pushed to respond as a unit. The group must become a primary identity rather than a secondary concern. The members of the minority

group must see themselves as having something very important in common. This commonality will create a core group, which will target the population for change.

B. The minority group will use any resources it can find to enhance their standing. These may include contacts with elite groups, media channels, and sheer numbers of people attending protests or events. Money is one asset that is valuable, but it is not the only asset that groups use. Power, channels, and money are often held by elite groups. The minority group may appeal to more than one elite group for different power resources. The group will use whatever resources they have to gain the ones they lack.

**Hypothesis 2:** Phases of social change

The first goal of a minority group is that the general public may accept the positive portrayal of group members as a normal way of thinking; in other words, to change public opinion or cultural values. The second goal is that the group itself can produce art celebrating and cementing its own cultural heritage. This process can be divided into general phases.

Phase 1 – Visibility

The minority group is underrepresented and abused in theater and film. They seek group unity and mobilize seeking visibility. The majority audience is interested in films that portray minorities as monsters, freaks, or clowns. The minority characters are exaggerated portrayals of easily recognizable traits that majority group members

associate with that minority group. The minority seeks to make itself visible as a first priority and normal as a second priority. At this point, they do not feel that they can make very many demands concerning their image.

Phase 2 – Equality

The majority cannot deny the existence of the minority group. They tolerate the existence and some feel sympathy for minority group members. The favorite stereotype of majority audiences is the minority victim or a deculturized flattened portrayal that is just like “normal” people. This flattened representation is the result of an attempt by majority groups to remove the traits that were offensive in earlier portrayals. It is most important to producers that the minority group seems nice or decent, which removes most complexity from minority characters resulting in a new stereotype that includes almost no minority group traits. Minority group members seek equality as a primary goal and will sometimes allow themselves to be portrayed as victims, but for themselves they may create the defiant minority hero. Majority group members see the minority as homogenized rather than diverse due to the victimized characters they are watching.

Phase 3- Sending group friction

The minority group now has enough resources and acceptance that different members can make art expressing their own opposing opinions about their group. As tensions that have long been held are expressed in art, they cause disagreements about what is the best way to portray group members. Some group members may use

stereotypes to turn a profit or openly criticize minority group leaders. The result is that the group for the first time acknowledges the presence of minority group members that do and do not fit the list of traits that majority groups identify them by. Thus, stereotypes are multiplied to include various categories of persons within a minority group. At the same time the image of minority group representatives loses its punch for a majority audience. It is no longer exciting to see a character just because he is the member of a minority group. The majority audience now expects new enticements in the form of humor, gore, and complex plots.

**Hypothesis 3- The permanence of stereotypes**

The stereo type is a function of how human beings operate. Minority and majority groups have favorite stereotypes, which may change over time. Because frightening and funny characters are two of the things that the general public always wants to see, these will usually make a lot of money and though there may be attempts by minority groups to kill off stereotypes this will not be a permanent solution. Stereo types never go away, but they can be redeemed and re-appropriated.

**Hypothesis 4- The train of progression – sending group, elite group, populace.**

At any given time, the products made for in-group edification will be at least one phase ahead of what the majority population is ready to consume. If the minority group is successful, elites among the majority group may be influenced by films or plays created by the minority group for their own in –group edification. Sometimes producers misread

the general public and produce a product, which they are not ready to receive. This results in financial failure, but may be successful amongst elite majority group members.

**Background and Theory**

Propaganda comes from some sort of social movement. “Propaganda is most helpfully viewed as an important aspect of social unrests, competitions, and conflicts, of social control, and of struggles for power and against domination” (Lee 25).

The first part of understanding the game is to know who is playing it. The first step to understanding what makes social groups a powerful force is to deal with how and why they are created or are cemented.

“The term ‘group’ designates a set of persons tied to each other through repeated interaction and a collective identity. Groups are amorphous social phenomenon without a formalized structure…Examples are families, sects, peers, gangs, and ethnic groups” (Fuhse 236). This definition from *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* brings up several important points. Firstly, a group is based around a “collective identity.”

In his book, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Noam Chomsky praises the social movements of the 30s and 60s and blames the government for squelching them (32). Chomsky is here talking about movements against the Vietnam War, but this principle is not limited to protests against government. This gathering of people to share thoughts and principles is the first step to creating any social movement. Forming a group involves shared identity. He says:

> Organization has its effects. It means that you discover that you’re not alone. Others have the same thoughts that you do. You can reinforce your thoughts and learn more about what you think and believe. These are very

> informal movements, not like membership organizations, just a mood that involves interactions among people (Chomsky 41).

Thus, the formation of a group involves beliefs, thoughts, and values. The groups we will be discussing are not groups united primarily by class (or monetary interests) although this may play a role. They are groups united by values. Jowett and O'Donnell define a value as "a special kind of belief that endures and is not likely to change. A value is a belief that is prescriptive and is a guideline for behavior (honesty, sensitivity) or a desired end (success, power)" (23). It is important to note that the word "value" does not signify a morally positive belief. Because of the connotations the word value has gained in regular speech, it is hard for people to use it in relationship to something negative. However, for scholars studying sociology, "value" means any belief that guides a person or group of people in thought or deed. Under this definition, the anti-Semitic ideas that caused the Holocaust are classified as values.

The idea of the moral correctness of any group or belief is not the issue this paper will attempt to discuss. Even Jowett and O'Donnell's classification of the truthfulness of propaganda is based on value judgments; thus they are rendered useless to this study. However, it is possible to measure the success of a group in obtaining power resources.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence* presents several theories which are useful to explain how public opinion changes. *Spiral of Silence* is written by Noelle-Neumann in post WWII Germany. The author's personal experience of massive manipulation of public opinion and the fact that the polls were performed on people who had been through experiences very different than those in other places, are sufficient conditions to induce caution in their use. However, the basic gist of the theory stands to

reason, if not the extreme application of it. The book speaks of the results of some groups being more willing to speak out than other groups as a process of changing public opinion. The author explains her theory succinctly in the following overview of her ideas:

> This very restraint made the view that was receiving vocal support appear to be stronger than it really was and the other view weaker. Observations made in one context spread to another and encouraged people either to proclaim their views or to swallow them and keep quiet, until in a spiraling process, the one view dominated the public scene and the other disappeared from the public awareness as its adherents became mute. This process can be called the spiral of silence. (5).

This grim vision does not necessarily always complete itself because people are capable of fighting this process. Fear of the spiral of silence, not fear of propaganda, is what prompts minority groups to action. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the pioneer leaders in civil rights who took great interest in African American theater, suggested that his minority group should use the power of propaganda rather than fearing it:

> All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of [black folks] to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (Du Bois qtd. in Hay 5)

It was and is not the use of propaganda that is to be feared; rather it is the total domination of power resources that enable only one group to produce propaganda that people should fear.

Noelle Neumann lists key factors that she perceives as being important to changes in public opinion. “(1). the human ability to realize when public opinions grow in strength or weaken; (2). the reactions to this realization; and (3). The fear of isolation that makes most people willing to heed the opinions of others” (62). The main idea of the book is that over time the groups who talk the loudest win over the public. The question then becomes how to create a group, which responds openly. “The concept of the spiral of silence reserves the possibility of changing society to those who either know no fear or have overcome it” (17).

The main way in which people accomplish this end is to form groups. If the context of his own group he is right, he does not need to fear the rest of the people. One of the Noelle-Neumann’s other findings is that people’s desire to avoid isolation is particularly focused on not isolating oneself from those who are members of one’s own group (33).

The group a person belongs to influences him or her often more than the prevailing attitudes because those are the people that he or she identifies with (Branscombe et al 44). Thus, the strong identification with a minority group can help members resist the spiral of silence effect. Chomsky acknowledges the power of people acting together saying that in order to be controlled and manipulated, “People have to be atomized and segregated and alone. They are not supposed to organize, because then they might be something beyond spectators of the action. They might actually be participants

if many people with limited resources could get together and enter the political arena" (23).

The second step to understanding the processes that groups go through to achieve more prominent and positive portrayal in film and theater is that of describing the resources they use. "Power" is the advantages or resources that enable groups to take social action. Power is not easy to define. In *Power In Societies,* Marvin E. Olson defined power with the following disclaimer attached:

> There is no commonly accepted sociological definition of social power, although the essential idea stressed by most writers is that *power is the ability to affect social activities.* Power is not a "thing" possessed by social actors, but rather a dynamic process that occurs in all areas of social life (3).

Thus, the concept of power is a non-tangible idea that involves many resources and forms. The most commonly acknowledged resource is money. It is the resource that the theory of Marxism acknowledges at the expense of all others:

> [I]t can also be argued that Marx's concern with ownership of the means of economic production as the major resource base for social power is too limited to fit contemporary developed societies. While not denying the importance of this source of power, we must also consider such resources bases as access to political decision-making, information flows through the mass media, scientific research and applied engineering, and police and military organizations. (Olsen 75).

This view of power may be successful in describing how power works in societies where the government or one small group of people controls all of the resources, thus promoting the spiral of silence. However, what about the social system where people like Du Bois organize groups to ensure that the spiral does not complete itself? This kind of society needs another theory to describe how power flows and is controlled. This type of multi-directional power flow is called "pluralism:"

> Societies with liberal-democratic constitutions are often called 'pluralist' as opposed to 'totalitarian societies. If guarantees exist for freedom of political communication, social groups may organize, mobilize, and conflict with one another as interest groups seeking to influence public opinion (Bader 434).

Since the definition of power is rather vague, there is a great variety of thought on the subject of power's source. Noted post-Marxist sociologist Max Weber began a school of post-Marxist thought involving a power base that was heavily influenced by class, but not only by class:

> Sociologist Max Weber, who was active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was influenced by Marx but believed that economic determinism could not entirely explain how groups and individuals achieved their social statuses. Groups, especially elite groups, distinguish themselves from others through a variety of non-economic credentials, including family origin, military prowess, and cultural achievement. (Cookson and Donly 236).

Another sociologist to follow Weber was Brian Turner. Turner agreed with Weber about some things, but he went further away from the class structure way of organizing power:

> Other researchers suggest abandoning the use of class terminology altogether. The contemporary sociologist Brian Turner, for instance, suggests that conflict now exists among several single-issue status blocs, ranging from consumer advocates to gay rights activists to welfare recipients. These groups more often are consumed with consumption or lifestyle issues than with traditional class issues, such as working conditions or employment. (Rempel 304).

Many other theorists have tried to propose explanations that more adequately address modern pluralist societies. Some theorists, like Weber tried to modify Marxism to fit the new patterns he was observing; others like Turner wanted to find a new way to describe social functions that did not rely on the class system. Both branches of scholarship recognize the role of values oriented groups. These theories serve as ways to help people think about power structures. Tuner's and Weber's descriptions of how power flows inform the modern theorists and help to analyze our own present day society in the United States of America which is filled with groups made up of people who identify with one another based on common ideas, identities, or values. Racial groups are values groups because race is not just a skin color. It is the perceptions and meanings people have attached to skin color. "Race is a theoretical construct," says author Oscar H. Gandy. "It is a product of the realm of ideas, thought, reflection, and perhaps even imagination" (35). Groups based on race reflect the value that the society, both minority

and majority group members, have placed on race. Majority groups may dishonor certain racial groups, which will cause the members to draw closer together. (Fuhse 236-237).

The important point to remember about power flows is that "we need not limit our analysis of actual power patterns to 'downward exertion from a single source. A highly organized society might in fact contain a diverse variety of power patterns with influence and control flowing in all directions" (Olsen 75).

A good example of how a group can use a resource other than money can be seen in the creation of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movement. Both movements used as their primary resource the large amount of available committed people that the African- American community had to offer to obtain success in spite of the fact that the group members were not wealthy. Spirited leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr. pulled together a large amount of people otherwise lacking in resources and challenged them to act to change stereotypes and negative frames of reference. Alfred Mc Clung Lee calls these leaders who spontaneously arise 'naturals' as opposed to someone who has been specifically trained to have expertise. He says "The 'natural' is the spontaneous spokesman who emerges in a rise popular movement…He does intuitively…many of the things that a skilled technician has to do consciously and rationally" (84).

Because of limited resources Du Bois encouraged African Americans to produce "community based productions and sought to have African-American plays presented in African-American churches, libraries, lodges, and community centers" (Gray 55). This tactic used what the community had, e.g. many people ready to participate. Dubois also

used contacts with elites, white and black. Du Bois was aware that the group needed strong goals and he was also aware that they needed resources.

Another resource to be used in inter-group power struggles is the approval of the elite cultural leaders. Though "elite" often signifies people with money, and money is often part of the criteria for entry into elite circles, the word means more than just rich, or well to do. It is made complex by the variety of ways that humans can have and maintain power. Eliteness is a state of being above the rest of the culture by having advantages that allow you to lead that culture. This advantage can be attained by having money, having education, or by possessing special knowledge or memberships to a group with access to a resource for attainment of any of the above. *The Dictionary of Sociology* defines elite as follows:

> Elite: a small group at the top of an area of social life. It is often used to refer to the *power elite*, but elites can exist in any walk of life. For example, an important elite in postmodern society would be the entertainment elite, who have the capacity to generate total devotion among fans. There are also elites within elites, so that the Hollywood star elite would be seen as the apex of movie elites (Lawson and Garrod 79).

Elites sometimes also function as "primary definers," a term which means "those individuals whose powerful position in society allows them better access to the media than those in other groups, and whose views, therefore, are more likely to be propagated by the media" (Lawson and Garrod 192). These primary definers hold a lot of power. Cookson and Donly say that elites are "successful in this agenda-setting behavior because, through the media, publishing, education, and other cultural institutions, they are

able to shape pubic perception and construct consensus around those issues of most interest to them" (235). Minority groups must somehow work with this power, from either within the system or from the outside. The concept of a special group of people who have more power than other groups cannot be ignored. "When the policy elite speaks, the media listens and thus the influence of the elite is magnified" (Cookson and Donly 238). A minority group's social standing is augmented by ties with elite groups.

*The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* provides an extended definition and history of this concept, which is too long to be fully explained here. It reads in part:

> Elites denote small minorities of individuals designated to act for a collectivity – a society, an institution, an occupation – at the apex of which they stand. Societies look to elites for the realization of major social goals and the maintenance of key social values…Elites mirror the societies they crown…Tightly interwoven structures tend to feature hereditary assignment of elite status whereas in the looser structures, individual achievement plays a greater role (Harrington, Marshall, and Muller 160).

When the author speaks of elites "mirroring" the societies which they are embedded in he means that the qualifications for being part of an elite group are determined by the type of economic and social structure as well as the cultural values of any given society. In America, heredity does not play the major role it played in the societies of earlier times, and that it still plays in many places in the world. As noted in the quote above, individual achievement is valued. However, there are still resources that enable a person to identify as part of an elite group.

The concept of a pluralist society does not mean a society without elites. There will always be in any society some people who have more power resources than other people do. No society is completely fair, but the advantage of separating money and other forms of power as happens in a pluralist capitalist society is that then groups can use whatever resources they have. Alfred Mc Clung Lee states the risk and the benefits of the system:

> Democracy challenges us all to make our own decisions about common problems. It keeps on inviting free –even though dangerous – choices among alternatives presented to us. Out of such realistic individual decisions, when participated in by enough citizens, it is contended that in the long run and even in the short run the wisest social policies will result. No more dependable method has ever been found." (Lee 40).

The power of a pluralist society is that groups can then compete for access to resources including access to elite circles. Du Bois also worked with white elites to form the NAACP. V. J. Jerome states, "Under the leadership of W.E. B. Du Bois… there sprang into being in 1905 a new militant Niagara movement. Its birth was a Declaration of Independence challenging the Booker T. Washington ideology of accommodation and acquiescence to the white ruling class…" (Jerome 15). If it was a declaration of independence, the independence did not include separatism because later Jerome adds:

> The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People appeared in 1910 and reflected its origins both in militancy and patronage. The former shown in the fact that nearly the entire membership of the Niagara movement merged with the NAACP: The later in the fact that the

> new organization's entire official leadership, with the lone exception of Dr. Du Bois, was composed of whites. (Jerome 16).

This example shows how the intelligent leader can use any sympathies extended his way to help gain powerful allies to bring about social change. Du Bois disagreed with Booker T. Washington's accommodation of white people's attempts to keep black people forever waiting for freedom and "blasted Washington for acquiescing to white racism" (Croce Du Bois encyc.) He also disagreed with Marcus Garvey, a black separatist who believed that "blackness… was a sign of superiority, not inferiority" (Krasner 169). The middle line that Du Bois tried to carve out for his people to follow included working with other black elites when possible and working with the majority culture whenever possible without sacrificing the goals that had been set forth. This whole process of groups competing for power is very well described by Lee:

> In any given social struggle, therefore, it is useful to think of the community or society as a battlefield or chessboard. On each of the two or more sides are a strategist and the in-group he represents. Between them are the materials of society-organizations, propaganda mediums, publics, and people. Each strategist attempts to use as much of this paraphernalia and personnel as he can. The strategist and their organization members are the combatants. Those on the chessboard are either supporters or 'confused.' Strategists can use them or at least a measure of their power through manipulation of their organizations. (McClung Lee 153).

This simile is an apt, if simple description of how power is used in society. This power struggle leads people to divide the world into two basic groups. "An *in group* is a

collectivity with which an individual identifies. An out group is a collectivity with which an individual does not identify" (Rogers and Steinfatt 49). *Social Schemata* is a term used to describe constructs that "guide perceptions and expectations of persons based on their category" *(*Dovidio et al 240). One type of social schemata is the stereotype. (240).

Lippman describes the function the human brain goes through to form stereotypes saying, "We do not first see and then define, we define first and then see" (81). This short statement explains the root of stereotyping. Lippman says that stereotypes are both a defense that provides comfort (95) and shortcut that provides an easier way to see the world (88). Groups are instrumental in helping to shape stereotypes "with a positive light thrown on group members and a negative evaluation made of non-members" (Fuhse 237).

One huge difference between the chess metaphor and power struggles in society is that most people belong to more than one group, resulting in complex arrangements of loyalties. This blend of identities creates "a complex individual whose cultural group identities function in concert with one another" (Orbe and Harris 113).

*The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* describes the construction of groups like this, "At the core of the role structure are those exerting leadership and power over the group with a high level of commitment to the group identity and group activities. At the edge, influences from various groups cross-cut and make for lower levels of engagement" (Fuhse 237). The concept of groups having low and high identifiers is key to understanding power structure within the group. The members who see themselves as marginally identified with the group will react differently to threats by out-group members than members who see the group identity as extremely important.

However, each person has group identities that are more important to him than others are. For instance, if Jack is a member of a group consisting of schoolteachers he may also be a member of groups allied by race, sexual orientation or religion.

> In most cases, however, more than one measure of 'groupedness'[sic] is necessary for understanding a given phenomenon. This fact corresponds intuitively to the kind of *multiple* or *overlapping group memberships* that most of us experience if we live in complex urban centers. Thus in some sense, a 'professor' can be thought of as someone who belongs, simultaneously to (a) a professional group (e.g. sociologists, economists, or architects, (b) a university bureaucracy (the faculty at the University of Southern North Carolina at Boodle)…and (c) a class ('middle class professionals' or, more self-servingly, 'the Intelligentsia"). At the same time, of course, he or she could be a member of a range of other entities as well: ethnic groups, political groups or parties, religious groups, alumni bodies, or whatever" (Berkowitz 13).

Jack will have some facets of his identity that are more important than others to him. Whether or not Jack identifies strongly with being a part of that group will change his behaviors toward in-group and out-group members.

The search for possible reasons why Jack would hold one group as more important to his identity than another leads to exploring the role that the rejection of the dominant culture plays in conditioning minorities to form strong movements. In *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* the entry for "group" sheds light on why a group or subculture becomes so important to participants saying, "sub-cultural forms evolve in the

interaction within a group…equally important was the labeling of the group as deviant by the surrounding society, and vice versa, leading to the construction of symbolic boundaries…The conflict with out-groups makes for strong integration in the in-group" (Fuhse 236-237).

In other words, intense pressure from the majority group who perceive Jack as different from themselves would actually compel Jack to identify himself in terms of being different. The boundaries that Fuse talks about are not physical but mental barriers. The pressure from the majority group is why African Americans may identify themselves as part of a group, while white Americans have "little conscious awareness of the racial/ethnic identity" (Orbe and Harris 58).

If a minority group gains the total confidence of its members, can the group as a whole aspire to climb the social ladder? According to *Social Identity* experiments reveal that under certain circumstances it can.

> Participants were assigned either to a low or high status group, and were told that it was either possible or impossible that the status hierarchy would change during the experiment. For members of the low status group, an unstable status hierarchy resulted in higher group commitment than a stable status structure. In addition, group members were less competitive to their fellow group members in an unstable status structure than in a stable one. Both studies lend support to the notion that, for members of low status groups, unstable relations result more easily in group-level responses (such as higher identification and more inter group

> competition) than a stable structure. (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 93 "Commitment and Intergroup Behavior").

The conditions of the surrounding world can create a group atmosphere that is more unified which often leads to greater co-operation in artistic fields. The hope of improving conditions cements the group together as members make the group one of their most important social commitments

Within any group, there are some people who identify with the group more than others. The group members to whom the group is extremely important are "high identifiers" while those who put less value on group membership are "low identifiers." (Branscombe et al 36). The minority group is more likely than a majority group to make members identify strongly with that group because being part of a minority group is more distinct. (Branscombe et al 36). The high and low identifiers in a minority group differ in their response to threats by majority groups.

There are three basic types of threats that majority groups often make against minority groups: "1. Categorization threat (being categorized against one's will). 2. Distinctiveness threat (group distinctiveness is prevented or undermined). 3. Threats of the value of social identity (the group's value is undermined)" (36). There is also a threat that the minority group uses on unruly members, which is threatening the members' position in the group. (36) High identifiers react to threats from majority groups, which challenge group distinctiveness while low identifiers react to being categorized. Both high and low identifiers react to having their value (competence and morality) challenged, but they react differently. Under threats of competence, high identifiers increase self-stereotyping and perceive in-group members as more similar than they are

while low identifiers do the opposite and see themselves as more individual. If the group's morality is questioned, high identifiers suddenly perceive the differences among the in-group while low identifiers try to undo the behavior, which the majority group perceives as immoral (37). "Alternative strategies may be more likely to be employed by high identifiers, such as defining themselves in terms of the group (self stereo typing) when group distinctiveness is threatened" (45).

Gandy says that people "evaluate other groups in terms of the extent to which we believe they share important beliefs, especially those beliefs that engage moral and ethical principles" (84). The stereotypes that majority groups put in place for minority groups often peg minority group members with undesirable values. Gandy points out that people tend to stereotype young black men as angry and aggressive. If a man possessing these traits is described, often white listeners will imagine he is black. (84). However, Gandy also sees the value of stereotypes in a positive light. "Stereotypes are both a limitation and a resource…stereotypes are developed and used because of the ways in which they serve the 'intra psychic needs of the perceiver'" (Hamilton and Trolier qtd in Gandy 83). They are a resource because as Lippman noted, they are a shortcut, a way for the brain to abbreviate. Minority groups and their sympathizers can use this process and often do.

Wilson and Gutierrez propose a description of what happens as images of a minority group slowly permeate mass media. They say that the treatment of the minority group goes through five phases as follows:

1. *An exclusionary* phase, in which people of color are invisible or absent from mainstream media.

2. A phase in which people of color are identified as a threat to the existing social order.

3. This phase is followed by one in which fear and apprehension escalates [sic] into open confrontation. After the confrontation subsides, movement of the nation into a post-conflict status is required.

4. A stereotypical selection phase, which is seen to be necessary as a means of neutralizing White anxiety…these representations reinforce historical stereotypes.

5. The final phase is identified as an ideal multiracial coverage. (Wilson and Gutierrez qtd in Gandy166)

Another corresponding idea that Gandy presents is that society goes through a polarization phase where images of minorities are both very moral and upstanding or totally degenerate. This theory proposed by Cedric Clark has stages that somewhat correspond to Wilson and Gutierrezz purposed.

> For Clark the first stage was one of non-recognition, or invisibility, which is soon followed by a stage in which visibility occasions ridicule. A later stage features minority groups in regulatory roles upholding the virtues and standards of a mainstream society…If minority members also appear as criminals in this phase, the struggle…tends to be resolved in ways that help build the 'respect' that minority characters require before they can finally achieve a more…representative portrayal. (Gandy 166)

Both of these proposals are reflected in my hypothesis, but with several major changes. For simplicity's sake, phase one and two are compressed into my phase 1. I did

not see significant evidence within film and theater of open conflict until after the stereotypical selection phase. The world and thus the news were filled with conflict, but I did not see within the art world the same kind of wildly fearful clash. It is almost as if, during huge movements like civil rights, the treatment of potentially explosive topics was avoided in film and theater. Rather than allowing a full picture of conflict into art, the conflict was repressed and replaced with happy images. The typical selection phase is very much reflected in the work of Sydney Poitier, only rather than being very traditionally stereotypical, he was often given roles that seemed almost white. The last phase is not really described in detail by their theory. Clark's description is the closest media model I can find to match my hypothesis. I have tried to use the principles I found in both models, but add to them a more detailed description of what goes on in relation to stereotyping, minority group desires for their image, and the response or non-response of elite groups and the majority audience to those desires.

The final step to understanding how special interest groups influence film and theater is to examine the agenda setting process. Dearing and Rogers explain that agenda setting is "an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of the media professionals, the public, and policy elites" (2). When an issues proponent succeeds in getting that issue on the agenda of the media, it will later show up on the public's agenda (68). This process is usually studied as a news process, but the ideas are applicable to entertainment media because they also are a source of information to millions of people. This relationship between the media elites and the public, where the elites have the power to set the agenda, is one that shows why it is so important for special interest groups to win over key media players. In addition to deciding what goes

on the agenda, the way it is presented is important to special interest groups. The process of creating a contextual field in the mind of the viewer is called framing. “Scheufele described frame building as the organizational factors imposed on or resulting from the media institution and the perceptions of the journalists contributing to the frame. Therefore, the source of frames can be the individual journalist, the organization, or special interest groups” (Curnalia 250). This project explores the role of special interest groups in both getting issues noticed and framing those issues in a favorable way. Though stereotypes are often used in a negative way, it is important to remember that stereotypes are a way of organizing and abbreviating which can be used by any group for positive or negative purposes.

## African American Film and the Stereotype Cycle

### Reaching for Visibility

The two stereotypes of the fearful bearer of evil and the ridiculously stupid idiot who would do anything for a white laugh would become the defining stereotypes of black people in the early 20th century. However, within those stereotypes performers sought to give themselves meaning and dignity. One such man was Bert Williams, the very successful creator of the Williams and Walker company (Krasner 268). Williams and George Walker brought to life drama *In Dahomey*. The musical, a mix of various types of comic and vaudeville styles allowed Williams and Walker to attain fame (Hatch 1847-today 65). Though Williams usually performed in blackface, he himself was a man of great dignity and education. He analyzed the condition of his race musing, “I have never

been able to discover that there was anything disgraceful about being a colored man. But I have often found it inconvenient – in America" (Williams qtd in 268).

Author Mark Reid separates the practice of minstrel performing into three subgroups, which reflect the current analysis that minstrel shows performed by black people do not have the same meaning as minstrel shows performed by whites. Reid states, "American Race Humor comprises three forms of minstrelsy – blackface minstrelsy performed by whites and blacks, and hybrid and satiric minstrelsy performed exclusively by blacks" (Reid 26). The form of using black performers in minstrel-like roles but without blackface would be popular during the 30s and 40s. In the teens, it was still widely accepted to use white actors to portray black roles, their faces ridiculously painted a greasy black. The film that black leaders would loath probably more than any other single film in the decades to follow, *Birth of a Nation,* used this form shamelessly. "Bobby Heron, for instance, might play my brother in the morning, and in the afternoon put on blackface and play a negro,'" recalls white actress Lillian Gish. (Gish qtd in Bogle 11). The absurdity of doing this is revealed in one scene where two white men in the film must put on black face to spy on some black people without their knowing it. Besides the totally unbelievable look, the caption had to tell the viewer that the two men were whites in blackface, so that the audience would not mistakenly think them to be black characters played by white actors.

The supreme ridiculousness of these techniques reveals how adamant the southern whites were in their insistence that African Americans have no presence on the silver screen. A prime example of this racism was that MGM cast African American actress Lena Horne in several films as a dancer, but was careful to only put her in scenes

which they planned to cut out during southern showings of the films. Horne was under contract with MGM when the studio made the film *Show Boat* in 1951, but the studio passed her up for a white actress who sang so badly that they could not use her voice. The studio dubbed some one else's vocals over her performance (Bogle 221). The practice of casting white actors in biracial roles continued all the way until civil rights. The 1959 drama *Imitation of Life* has a white actor in the biracial role that was performed in the original version by Freddie Washington.

In light of this very popular practice, the decisions of black actors to appear in less than stellar films seem more sympathetic. Just appearing onstage or screen was a very significant act and one that required much work to achieve. The actors of that era had to fight to make white people acknowledge a fact that their contemporary counterparts can now take for granted. White people of that time period did not want to see black actors at all, for doing so would be an acknowledgment of their existence.

*Birth of a Nation* presented the stereotype of the evil black, which was added to the already widely accepted stereotype of the funny black that was the staple of minstrel shows. In one of the movie's famous scenes, a young white girl is chased through the woods by a black man wanting presumably to rape her. Finally in desperation, trying to escape from this evil man, she throws herself off a cliff.

The years following *Birth of a Nation* were years of struggle to be seen. Even in the late twenties opportunities for visibility were few. Actors like Madame Sul-Te-Wan and Noble Johnson were some of the only black actors to find work. Madame found her first job working with D.W. Griffith. She appeared in one scene in *Birth of a Nation*

where she provokes a white woman by greeting her on the street. The scene did not survive Hollywood censorship, but the job was a paycheck for Madame (Bogle 12). The film was widely denounced by the black community.

Even though the film was a negative depiction of black people, it yielded an important result:

> Even at this early time in motion-picture history, African Americans saw the power of film as propaganda and also the frightening way in which African American experiences could be distorted and caricatured…The outcries against the film helped galvanize the political forces within L.A.'s black community as well as in the rest of the nation. ( Bogle 13)

Something was stirred by this film; something was awakened. They saw the power and they wanted to have a place at the table. More importantly, a common enemy had been created. Black people were united in their outrage against *Birth of a Nation.*

From the fire *Birth of a Nation* ignited came several attempts to reply. The first was a proposed film *Birth of a Race (Lincoln's Dream).* WEB DuBois was one of the initial enthusiasts to endorse the vision, which made for a strange pairing of interests. Du Bois was fundamentally opposed to Washington's stand that black people should be more patient about civil rights and "blasted Washington for acquiescing to white racism" (Croce 1 ) Du Bois' willingness to work with whoever he could find shows that when threatened, people suddenly unify in astounding ways. Booker T. Washington and the NACCP (of which Du Bois was a founding member) had at first banded together to try to gain financing, but a series of failures lead to financing the film at the cost of losing control of the message and artistry of the film. (Berry 16-17). Berry laments that if

African Americans, particularly the writer, had retained control of the artistry of the film perhaps "*Birth of a Race"* would have become a 'healing balm' instead of a 'box office bomb'" (Berry 17). Rhines ponders over the fact that Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois' interest in film was a sudden acquisition after *Birth of a Nation* had agitated them. He states, "Their intention on this filmmaking venture appears to have been strictly motivated by political interests" (Rhines 19). The ideas, at that point, were more important than the art; desire for message trumped aesthetics.

The second indirect result of greater unity was that in 1916 a group of black artists including Noble Johnson started Lincoln Motion Picture Company. One other company, Foster Photoplay Company, was producing black films, but they were comedies where social issues were not discussed (Reid 9). However, Lincoln agreed with Foster that 'blacks should make movies with black performers for black audiences…that there was a market waiting for such films'" (Reid 9). The first film the new company produced dove into issues involving discrimination against a black man who desires a job as an oil worker. (Reid 9). Lincoln Motion Picture never made films that struck it big with a mainstream audience, but "at the colored theaters in Los Angeles and other cities, Lincoln's films fared well enough" (Bogle22). However, by the early twenties the company had lost Noble Johnson as a star and was broke. Lincoln Motion Picture had to disband (Bogle 23). The work that they did produced propaganda for their inside group to unify them. Later elite critics would view these early films.

One other great entrepreneur, Oscar Micheaux, produced films about black life in the teens and twenties. Micheaux's films were more bold and independent in flavor than Lincoln's had been, and his subject matter more daring. His film, *The Home Steader,*

discusses interracial love and infatuation between a black man and a white woman, a grossly taboo subject at that time. He also tackled lynching in *Within our Gates* (Reid 12). “Micheaux’s reading of the African-American moviegoer anticipated by fifty years the commercial black –oriented films of the early 1970s. Moreover the ‘colored man with bricks’ who defeats the Klan is a superhero, an ancestor of such heroes of the 1970s as Sweetback…” (Reid 14). Despite these achievements, he was not without criticism. As in the later blaxploitation period, some black people did not agree with the portrayals in some of his films of black people gambling and abusing women. (Reid 15). Micheaux eventually agreed to have his films financed by whites. Reid says that “Micheaux’s 1929 move to black commercial film, as opposed to black independent film, signaled a pause in African-American independent film production – that pause would last nearly forty years” (Reid 17).

The twenties were not a particularly good time for black film actors. In the late twenties “Only two black musical features, *Hallelujah!*(1929) And *Hearts in Dixie*(1929), each of them rooted in the most old-fashioned notions of the rural black south, reached the screen – each of them earning a round of black applause for their *presence* if not the timeliness of their material” (Cripps 8)

Timing is everything. Movies that will later be thought of as racist were embraced because the securing of visibility was so precious. This trend of rallying around any film portraying black life was characteristic of the early black film movement until the late 40s.

At the same time Charles Gilpin, a stage actor, was playing in the 1921-1922 touring run of *The Emperor Jones* and receiving rave reviews from *the Boston Globe*

(Krasner 190). This portrayal of a strong but greedy black man, who escapes to an island where he takes control of the people there who think he is a god, would later become a film in the thirties.

> Despite Gilpin's effort to present a well-reasoned defense of the play and the lead role, feelings among African American intellectuals were generally disapproving of *The Emperor Jones*. For many African Americans, the play's protagonist was, as literary historian John Cooley points out, "More Clown than hero, ultimately a laughable pretender to be pitied and dismissed" (Krasner 195).

W.E.B. DuBoise came down in favor of the play because of the strong black character. DuBoise was one of the founders of the NAACP and stated clearly his goals for black theater. "The plays of a real negro theater must be, 1. About us…2.By us…3. For Us…4. Near us" (Giles). These were ambitious goals, and DuBoise was willing to accept any valid work by white or black authors.

Poet Langston Hughes also was an influence on black theater in the thirties. He set up a small theater targeting a mostly black audience that performed in a space owned by the International Worker's Order. The Harlem Suitcase Theater performed shows like *Don't You Want To Be Free*, which was written by Hughes (Hatch 262). The show goes through the history of slavery in chants and songs, and then goes on to extol the labor movement as a way to freedom for both black and white workers. Near the end of the show one black worker tries to convince a "member of the audience" to organize with white workers.

> Youngman: "That's what I mean! We're all in the same boat! This is America, isn't it? It's not all colored. Not all white. It's both."
>
> Audience Member: "You mean organize with that white waiter who won't serve you?"
>
> Young Man: Yes, I mean with that waiter, too. His problem's the same as ours – if he only knew it." (Hughes 276).

In appealing to American ideals, Hughes asks the black community to take advantage of American pluralism to advance communism and an end to racism. Hughes' work often includes appeals for his audience to join labor movements. He also wrote *De Organizer*, a play devoted to gaining black support for labor movements. His bold assertion that whites and blacks can work together was very ahead of the 1937 date of performance for *Don't You Want to Be Free.* While any visibility in films was a miracle for black actors, Hughes was already advocating equality in his plays. Of course, his theater did not reach the vast popular audience but rather black people or elites interested in theater.

Theater provided fertile soil for attempts to promote racial equality, but film remained firmly attached to stereotypes, the same worn out images drawn from the theater of minstrel shows. In the thirties perhaps the most visible black performer in mainstream culture was Bojangles, who played in Shirley Temple films doing short dance routines and portraying a smiling servant. "For Black America, Robinson, however, had a reputation of being too eager to please whites" (Bogle 162). He was notoriously denounced by singer, actress Lena Horne who thought him an awful traitor (Bogle 162).

The stereotypes were so ingrained in Hollywood that in 1944 when a man named Lawrence Reddick produced a list of stereotypes in film all of the classic offenders were still on the list. Author Edward Mapp, writing in 1971, explores the list compiled by Reddick. The list includes 19 types as follows:

> 1. The savage African, 2. The happy slave, 3.The devoted servant, 4. The corrupt politician, 5. The irresponsible citizen, 6. The petty thief, 7. The social delinquent, 8. The vicious criminal, 9. The sexual superman, 10. The superior athlete, 11. The unhappy non-white, 12. The natural born cook, 13. The natural born musician, 14. The perfect entertainer, 15 The superstitious churchgoer, 16. The chicken and watermelon eater, 17. The razor and knife 'toter', the uninhibited expressionist, 19. The mental inferior. (Mapp 30-31)

This long list includes a variety of stereotypes some of which were preferred over others in certain eras. The unhappy non-white was a recurring character in the forties and fifties, while the sexual superman was in favor during the blaxploitation era. It should also be noted that some of the stereotypes are not in and of themselves bad things. A naturally musical character does not have the inherent offensiveness of the mental inferior. In fact, the former can be seen as a celebration of the longstanding tradition the African American community has of passing on a musical heritage. Nevertheless, the stereotypes used in the thirties and forties were mostly negative and servile.

The presentation of the entire race as ridiculous dancing comics must have been a source of aggravation to many young African Americans. In his study *Movies and Conduct*, first published in 1933, Herbert Blumer asked colleges and high schools to

recruit students who would “write in narrative form their motion-picture experiences” (Blumer 3). This study is a fascinating look inside the influence of films on the experiences of young people. One of the topics he covered was stereotyping and how films influenced the perceptions of young people. One 17-year-old African American high school senior wrote in her motion picture autobiography:

> It seems to me that every picture picturing a negro is just to ridicule the race. When a negro man or woman is featured in a movie, they are obliged to speak flat southern words, be superstitious, and afraid of ghosts and white men. They have to make themselves as ugly and dark as possible. The bad things are emphasized and the good characteristics left out. This is very unfair to the race. All negroes are not alike; there are different types as in other races. Why must they be portrayed as ignorant, superstitious animals instead of decent people that are just as capable of doing great things as any other race; all they need is the chance…It is very unjust of the white race to make every other nation appear inferior compared to them. (Blumer 146)

This young lady’s analysis of how propaganda has been used against people like herself reveals a liberty of thought that signifies that while films and other media are a part of how people see life experiences; they are not the only determinant. This fact has been established in the research of Neumann,  Just, and Crigler. Dearing and Rogers summarize their research saying, “People ‘co-construct’ what they see, read, and hear from the media with information drawn from their own lives” (Dearing and Rogers 5). This young girl uses her life experiences as many African Americans did to critique the

media products she had received. In so doing, she resisted propaganda. In her book *Spiral of Silence,* Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann explains that people do not necessarily care what the majority of people in general think about a given issue, but they care more what the majority of people in their group think is correct (33). Thus, the opinion of the social strata or group to which an individual belongs is often a stronger pull than society in general.

Two important films in the thirties were *Emperor Jones* and *Imitation of Life*. *Emperor Jones* differs from most portrayals of the day in that the title character is a strong, dominate person, unwilling to allow others rule over him. However, this can be seen as a negative trait, which eventually causes his downfall. This character, in contrast to Delilah, in *Imitation of Life* reveals the paradox that Clark talked about in his analysis of the phases that minorities go through to achieve representative portrayal. The polarized extremes of very good and very bad are exemplified in these two characters.

Delilah, the maid in *Imitation of Life,* is a warm, fuzzy traditional "mammy" in many respects. Her life revolves around helping the white woman she chooses to work for become successful. Tragically, her fair-skinned daughter, Peola, rejects her as part of a quest to become white. This original version does not really show any of the racism Peola experienced in life, which would have made her want to shed her associations with her mother. Since Peola's life looks very happy, the viewer wonders why she would do this to her own mother. This is one major difference between the original and later version. The 1959 remake shows the biracial girl, renamed Sarah Jane, being slapped by her white boyfriend when he finds out that she has been hiding who her mother is. It also shows that after her mother comes into her place of employment she is fired. Both films

are a big step up from the singing dancing roles most black actors were getting, but stereotypes made their appearance very much felt in both films.

In the forties, the stereotypes of natural born musician and perfect entertainer were used heavily combined with the mental inferior. In the forties, films such as *Cabin in The Sky* gave black actors a chance to show how well they could sing, but little else was accomplished in the way of complex characters. *Cabin in the* Sky is about a man called Little Joe who has a collection of evil habits including gambling and womanizing. When he gets sick and dies, his loving wife Petunia prays fervently for him to be revived. The angels and the devil fight over his soul, and he is given a little more time to try to become a better man. The catch is that upon coming back to life he will not remember having died or that he is on probation. The devil tries all manner of things to bring him down to hell, but in the end, Little Joe just barely makes it. The film has a cast that includes such notables as Lena Horne and Ethel Waters, but other than sing and clown, they are not given much of a substantial story line. These films make no mention at all of racial injustice, but rather they gloss over any problems black people might have in the world. Most of the actors were thrilled to have a chance to show their talent at all.

The forties also provided plenty of the devoted servant and happy slave type. Portraying servants gave some black actors their only roles. In the case of Hattie McDaniel, it also provided an Oscar in *Gone with the Wind.* Black leaders knew that *Gone with the Wind* could possibly be a very bad film for the reputation of African Americans. “The negro press as well as black leaders kept an eye on the production” (Bogle 179). The director, Selznick, made some concessions under the pressure such as cutting clan scenes and promising that “the film would be free of ‘anti negro propaganda’

and that the primary black characters would be presented as 'loveable, faithful, high minded people'" (Bogle 180).

"Once Oscar buzz for McDaniel started, black newspapers… were in full support" (Bogle 181). Though it might not have been perfect, most of the black press agreed that the opportunity to achieve this honor was important enough to put other concerns aside.

**The Beginning of the Push for Equality**

In the late forties, the films *Pinky* and *Home of the Brave* edged closer to positive portrayal of African Americans. Author James Murray says, "While these images did not improve significantly for another thirty years, during the period of 1946-1949 social consciousness…reappeared. Suddenly 'problem pictures' with race prejudice themes were being made" (Murray 20).

*Pinky* is the story of a young light-skinned black woman who has been passing for white at her school far away from home. Upon her arrival home, her grandmother (Ethel Waters) tells her that she knows what is going on. Her grandmother is upset, but it is difficult to tell if she is upset because being black should be a positive cultural heritage or because Pinky has overstepped her bounds by stepping into the white world. Eventually Pinky decides not to pass any more and ends up inheriting the estate she grew up on from the crusty old mistress when she nurses her in her final days. After a battle over the will with the old woman's family, Pinky is free to own the land and do good. The question of whether or not *Pinky* was a good film for African Americans in 1959 is a complex one. Author V.J. Jerome felt that the story only updated old stereotypes. He calls Pinky, "a nice, well mannered, trim negro woman who 'knows her place'…Here is the 'modern,'

streamlined version of the ‘Mammy’ cliché. Hollywood reverses the old stereotype to create the new stereotype” (Jerome 28).

In his booklet, which was expanded from a lecture sponsored by a Marxist magazine, Jerome made a strong commentary on the state of African Americans in the world of film. Though he frequently denounces “propaganda”, the booklet itself is a counter-propaganda, which aims to announce that black people will no longer tolerate the types of roles that Hollywood has chosen to give them. In this way it becomes a sort of manifesto declaring the entry of the at least the educated, elite African Americans into a new era. Their primary concern was no longer just to be seen, but to be treated as equal. Jerome does not mince word but points a finger saying it was not accidental “but with the special, racist design to keep the Negro people on the bottom rung of the ladder- that has been the studied policy of the rulers of this land. In this service they have methodically used the film medium” (Jerome 12). He points out the specific problems namely, “Not only was the negro life ignored…but such characterizations of Negroes as were given were the vilest caricatures, the most hideous stereotypes, designed to portray the Negro as moronic, clownish, menial, and subhuman” (Jerome 12). This analysis sums up the preferred stereotypes that the majority had bestowed upon African Americans whenever possible up to that point.

However, Jerome applauds the efforts of African Americans to bring about such films as *Home of the Brave,* though he finds the film incorrect in many respects. He does not agree with the answer that *Home of the Brave* gives the equality question, but he likes the question. He says *Home of the Brave* “pierces the circumference of ‘white superiority.’ *Home of the Brave* is the first Hollywood film to attempt a full length

treatment of the thesis of anti Jim-Crow… a fact that is noteworthy quite apart from the question of its treatment of that central idea" (43). Thus, the film is a success at that moment because the issue it brings up is the correct issue for that moment – the issue of equality. Jerome gives the credit for this achievement to the African American organizations that have put pressure in the right places to make this possible. He scoffs at the idea that black people are the same as white people, a notion that many white liberals through the civil rights period tried to put into films. Most of all he resents that proper notice has not been given to this budding movement.

> The answer did not indicate sufficient attention to what is new in the fact that the pressure of the Negro people's movement for equality is forcing its way upon the Hollywood screen. They (reviewers)… tended to overlook the significance of the fact that a Hollywood film had been compelled to raise, however, inadequately, the question of negro equality. (44-45)

The question that black leaders wanted to discuss had become the question of how to get equality. The next decades would bring that question front and center as a subject for numerous films. Jerome's praise for the pressure that brought about *Home of the Brave* did not extend to the film itself. He grouped it together with *Pinky* as presenting only "the guise of dignity" (49).

Other factors made the fifties a prime time for the change in racial content that had begun to work its way into Hollywood. Financial backers in the white community had decided to take the plunge to finance race films for the first time. In his book *Black Film/White Money* Jesse Algeron Rhines states that the break up of total monopolies by

the big studios made this possible. The evolution of the black film followed civil rights from that time until the blaxploitation period (Rhines 40).

The fifties were an awkward time for films concerning racial issues. The air was tense with the political pressure of factions warring about civil rights. The main achievement of the 50s was that for the first time racial injustice would be discussed in popular films. Rhines states the developments this way:

> In the first few years after World War II, while blacks were humanized on screen in white produced films, there was little change in the makeup of film crews. In addition, the subject of films such as *Intruder in the Dust* and *No Way Out* was the deplorable way that whites treated blacks much more than the life lived by African Americans. These films took advantage of the new postwar liberalism and pointed white audiences toward acknowledgement and respect for African American rights. (Rhines 40)

These films are often criticized as not giving the African American community the complex treatment they are due. However, if these films did not do much to enhance the black community's view of themselves, they did do something to enhance the white community's changing view of black people. The challenges presented to the elite by race movies in the 50s preceded the changes in popular film in the sixties when a new generation of white people was forming their opinions of civil rights.

The 1947 film *Crossfire*, which dealt with anti-Semitism, gave the money elite reasons to think that films with messages could make money. Ironically enough the story was taken from a novel which told the story of a homosexual who was murdered, but those producing it felt this subject matter was too risky and reinvented this character as a

Jewish man. (Cripps 217). “Moreover, polls revealed that audiences displayed ‘a significantly more favorable attitude toward Jews’ an angle that must have prodded black advocates of the message movies. Everyone loved it, and found it ‘a credit to the screen’” (Cripps 218).

The white producers had decided that making race movies was a business. As long as the main characters were victims, they were not threatening to a mainstream audience, and thus, they were profitable. This body of films was part of a general change, but was not part of a specific pre-charted course of action.

> Although we shall take them up as they appeared, the message movies were in no way part of a timed or planned pattern. Quite the opposite; their releases were coincidental …They had in common only a hero who was unobtrusive, unthreatening, much like the lone westerner or *film noir* private eye who is *in* society if not always *of* it, who alters society by compelling its facing up to a character-defining incident, and who leaves them better for it. (Cripps 220)

The light skinned black woman in *Island in the Sun* (1957) is one of the few actually played by a black actress, Dorothy Dandridge. The film itself is concerned with racial issues on an island in the West Indies, which serves as a representation for the situation in the U.S.A. The islanders have a great friend in a young black politician named David Boyeur (Harry Belefonte) whose parents worked on the Fleury plantation. The intelligent and promising young man is contrasted to the racist Fleury family who enjoy prestige among whites on the island. Maxwell Fleury decides to run against Boyeur in the upcoming election because he does not want the island to be lead by black people.

In an early scene Boyeur and Fleury discuss traditions. Boyeur says the island is "shackled with tradition" which prompts the following conversation:

> Fleury: What would Mr. Boyeur have us do, forget them?
>
> Boyeur: Mr. Fleury speaks as if traditions belong only to him. We have ours too.
>
> Fleury: I'd be the last to deny him his traditions.
>
> Boyeur: Which ones, Mr. Fleury? The ones we got on the slave ships or in the cane fields working like beasts, or the ones we have now, the ones we're making every day despite the slave ships and the cane fields? No, Mr. Bradshaw, we don't intend to live the way our fathers did.
>
> Fleury: Your father if I remember correctly worked on my father's plantation.
>
> Boyeur: Till the day he died.
>
> Fleury: He was well taken care of whether he was sick or not, weather he worked or not.
>
> Boyeur: That was charity Mr. Fleury. What we want is equality.

The theme of equality first began to show up in 50s films. Even the mention of the problems going on between races was a new thing. Prejudice and racial discrimination were not present in the films of the thirties and forties except in films like *Pinky*. The ambitious good-looking character of Boyeur was a big step forward in replacing older negative images with more positive ones.

In 1959, the second version of *Imitation of Life* hit the big screen. Like the first version, it was fairly successful financially (Berry 41). Unlike the original version it

included scenes of the biracial girl (now renamed Sarah Jane) being mistreated by white people when they find that she has a black mother. Sarah Jane is fired by her boss and hit by her boyfriend for being black when they thought that she was white. The addition of these scenes makes it easier to understand why she would disown her mother, and it brings the film's story closer to being realistic about current social reality. Sarah Jane does not want to be white because it is innately better, but because white people have made her existence as a light skinned black person a living hell.

*Imitation of Life,* like *Pinky,* and even *Island in the Sun,* reveals the fascination of the times with the subject of passing. Perhaps seeing a black person who looked white experience discrimination made more of an emotional impact on audiences. The actresses chosen to play in *Pinky* and *Imitation of Life* were white. This choice says volumes about the movie industry's attitude toward black people even in a time when they were producing movies addressing the race issue.

In the fifties, a good start was made toward establishing race films as a genre. However, by the end of the decade various factors had driven these types of films back. In the sixties, the flattened stereotype was the model that fit the needs of a nervous public. This stereotype contained few connections to black culture and assured whites that black people were really more like them than they thought. Since a majority audience could not accept minorities as heroes, but it was now old fashioned to make them all seem just funny, the victim was the perfect stereotype. During the sixties, agitation was already at fever pitch amongst white people. Since this was before the advent of the first black studio director or producer, black people needed white money, so they were sometimes involved in projects that used this stereotype.

The black elite had spent the decades preceding civil rights urging the black public to believe that they deserved civil rights. Those trying to lead in the arts tried to convince them of the need for better portrayals. Now, finally, the black public was deciding to cast their vote. The show that became the scapegoat for their displeasure was the 1959 film *Porgy and Bess*. The old minstrel-style musical featured black characters of questionable reputation, not unlike Carmen Jones (Mapp 42). However, this time the black community would not allow this to be perpetuated without a fight. Bogle notes that while the music to *Porgy and Bess* was high quality, the community was offended by the use of the same old stereotypes and the fact that the main characters were socially disreputable. (356). The community saw this show about a beggar and a whore as dangerous to their reputation as upstanding citizens. These concerns led Harry Belafonte, the casting director's first pick, to disown the film. (356). He read the black public correctly when he decided that this was not the time for another Carmen Jones. His choice was not without consequence; he would not garner nearly as many roles a Poitier who accepted, but not without hesitation. Either Poitier was not a good reader of public opinion or else he was in tune with the wrong public. The white public loved him, and he would be the only black actor to receive a multiplicity of roles during the following decade. However, this and other similar decisions to seek visibility at the cost of pursuing a favorable image cost him his credibility with the African American community. He himself stated, "I hated doing *Porgy and Bess*, but the pressure was brought to bear from a number of quarters and there was the threat of my career stopping dead still. I toyed with the idea of being steadfast, but I weakened…I have not yet completely forgiven

myself" (Mapp 42). This decision and more like it would ensure his success with the majority audience and tarnish his reputation with the African American community.

However, Poitier and his fellow actors were insistent that the characters speak "correct" English instead of in a style reminiscent of plantation slaves. This request was granted to them. (Mapp 42). Later some African Americans would find it more desirable to hear black characters speak in Ebonics, but standard English was the flavor of the century in keeping with the style of stereotype that was in fashion.

In his book, *Making Movies Black,* author Thomas Cripps contrasts Poitier and Belefonte saying:

> As we see, only the crisis of war and the dislocations that followed it shook the social equilibrium enough to take even the minimal risk that war movies and message movies had represented. This built-in thermador that in the absence of crisis guided Hollywood may be followed in the careers of two fine actors, Sidney Poitier and Harry Bellefonte, the former circumspect, over controlled, the later the product of Bohemian cellars where folksongs were sung to leftist audiences, as we shall see, Hollywood chose Poitier and elected to exclude Belefonte, to repeat itself rather than break new ground…In brief, Poitier's character worked the centers of the American ethos; Belefonte's played the rimland. (Cripps 251)

The 60s were the decade of Sidney Poitier. His willingness to play some roles that were not favorably regarded amongst the black community made him highly visible. *Take a Giant Step* (1961) looked deeper into racial issues, but lacking star power and

proper publicity it quickly faded (Reid 52). Poitier had established himself, even if it was by tactics some considered questionable, and the decade would belong to him. Analysis of his work makes up the lion's share of images representing African Americans in the early and mid sixties. Indeed, Reid states, "African Americans were apparently limited to Sydney Poitier" (52).

In 1963, Poitier starred in *Lilies of the Field*. The main thrust of the film has nothing to do with his race. The film is set in a rural area where Homer Smith (Poitier) is roaming the countryside looking for work fixing things when he ends up helping some immigrant nuns who do not speak English. The nuns desire a chapel but have no way to pay for building it. The film is a family, feel-good affair ending when Homer builds a chapel for the nuns assisted by the largely Hispanic community, and everyone experiences love and togetherness. The film made Poitier the first black man to win an Oscar, and was not highly controversial. Edward Mapp remarked about the film: "At some point in time, Negroes may oppose the motion picture portrayal of a black man in the occupation of handy man but this was not the scene in 1963. As Homer Smith, an iterant handy man…Sydney Poitier earned international acclaim as a motion picture actor" (Mapp 78). Mapp mentions that, "Homer entertains the nuns by singing a spiritual. The catchy song is repeated throughout the film" (79). Mapp mentions that one persistent stereotype of black people has long been that of "natural born musician." However, I see no reason why Homer should not sing spirituals, which would have been a part of his heritage. When Homer is urged by the Nuns to play and sing he first picks another song beginning with the word, "Frankie and Jonnie were lovers…" but seeing the looks on their faces of confusion and realizing that if they do understand him they are probably

appalled Homer quickly selects “Amen” as a song more suited to singing with nuns. The song is very simple, not because Homer does not know any more complicated songs, but rather because “amen” is the only English word the nuns can manage, and Homer accommodates them.

One of the films Poitier starred in that black elites really did not like was *A Patch of Blue*(1964) in which he befriends and helps a blind white girl. Critic Clifford Mason says of the film, “why does he go to the park day after day and sit with her and string her beads and buy her lunch? Because he is running his private branch of the ASPCA, the Black Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Blind White Girls, the BSPCBWG?” (Mason qtd in Mapp 116). The main complaint was that Poitier’s character waits until the end to tell the girl that he is black, and acts ashamed of his racial identity all through the film.

In 1967, Poitier played Dr. John Wade Prentice in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, a film about interracial relationships. Poitier and his white fiancé come home happily engaged but needing to break the news to their two sets of parents. His fiancé Joey relies on the fact that her parents are nice liberal people who did not raise her to be racist. However, both sets of parents have questions and doubts, but eventually the couple is allowed to marry. The character for Poitier provides no new updates except that “he was promoted from the intern in *No Way Out* to internationally famous physician to the United Nations” (Cripps 289). The film was hailed as a landmark film and suffered the inherent flatness that often accompanies such attempts at pairing film and social justice. According to *The 50 Most Influential Black Films* “The *Motion Picture Guide* calls it a lame melodrama in which the script is ‘unimaginative and hortatory’… But somehow

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is beyond that sort of serious cinematic criticism, for it's an honest attempt to help, to further the cause of integration…." (Berry 104). This indicates that the value of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is not as an art, but as propaganda. It is to this type of value that Poitier himself appealed in his autobiography *The Measure of a Man* saying, "I think it's all too easy for anyone not a participant in the cultural clashes of that era to unfairly dismiss films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, forgetting just how revolutionary they were in the context of their time." (Poitier 119).

The flaw of landmark films is that their power rests not in the art of the film, but in the culture of that time. Thus they may come to the box office with a boom, but twenty years later be bereft of any power. People will remember their advent, especially scholars and historians, but their significance will be in the annuls of history instead of the present dynamic. We will remember them as movies that had a powerful message, not movies that have a powerful message. They are dated; their power is only in helping us to remember one specific attitude or event in an era. There is no nagging question that lasts for always. The central question has become rhetorical and rote; society could answer it in its sleep. They are benchmarks of where we were; they can only be viewed facing backwards. This is what happened to most of Poitier's work ; it became the work of yesterday. However, they can be useful social tools to exert maximum social pressure at one certain time.

In the late sixties, Poitier played Detective Tibbs in *In the Heat of the Night*, a film which later had a sequel *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs.* Tibbs is a northern police officer who is arrested as a murder suspect because he is a black man at a train depot in the

wrong town at the wrong time. Upon learning that he is actually a homicide expert, they release him and his boss tells him over the phone to look into the murder. Throughout the film, he is deplorably treated by all sorts of ignorant people and the chief of police waffles back and forth between wanting his help and insulting him. For some reason, perhaps an appeal to his pride by the police chief, Poitier stays to finish the job. Curiously enough, though he is chased, attacked, and threatened by racist people, Tibbs always insists on walking alone in the dark and never seems to have a gun. In the final scene, he is at gunpoint, but he manages to turn the two people with guns against each other and somehow come out in one piece. Reid described the character of Tibbs and other characters like him as missing something, not complete. "Even though white screenwriters of the sixties introduced stronger black characters, they often deprived their heroes of some qualities associated with urban blacks" (Reid 78). Tibbs is always wearing a suit, he speaks standard English, and most of all, he is non-violent even though he is a member of the police force. These characteristics made him an acceptable black hero to white audiences, a fact which many African Americans have noted with displeasure.

In fact, Poitier was viewed with increasing displeasure. Thomas Cripps states,

> His black (and white) critics grew in numbers, in the blunt cruelty of their attacks, and in their eagerness to erase the memory of his having attained professional heights never before reached by an African American performer. His era had begun with Hollywood's preference for his work over that of Belefonte…It ended in a slough of racial self-recrimination

> brought on by African American critics too young to remember Hollywood before Poitier had helped to change it. (Cripps 290)

Films concerning treatment of black people but written by and for white people were the standard fare of the sixties. Most of Poitier's films are a part of this movement, which attracted mostly white audiences. These films played a role in convincing majority audiences of the goodwill and acceptability of African Americans. In the turbulent sixties, this was a desirable outcome for all parties.

Other films made in attempt to address the inequality problem such as the film version of *Black Like Me* were lacking in technical and artistic skill and were not well received by elite white groups or African Americans.

> Critics were not kind to *Black Like Me*…James Harrison of *Christian Century* suggested that the movie's major flaws were rooted in the book: first, that it was impossible for 'Horton' to really know how African Americas feel because he could go back to being white anytime he chose. Second, that without the experience of growing up and being nurtured in black culture, Horton did not have the emotional defenses or the determination of a black person. Harrison added that the film fell short of helping its audience to feel what goes on in the heart of a Negro, who lives in a society that does not fully accept him. (Berry 96).

In watching *Black Like Me,* I could not help but notice the inferior technical quality of makeup, lighting, etc. However, I think that dismissing the book and the movie altogether is a mistake. The mistake is one of not understanding to whom the message of this film is addressed and why. *Black Like Me* was never intended to be for a black audience. If it

had been, it would have been pompous for a white man to tell black individuals how they should feel about racism in the south. *Black Like Me* was a desperate wake up call to the stubborn, racist, and potentially violent population of the south. It is a film that uses the stereotype of victim, but interestingly enough the victim is a white man passing as black. The sympathy, however, is directed at the same target. Through the eyes of a white man, we see the problems of black people. This is what disturbed many black people about the film, but it may have been the best way to draw white viewers. As previously discussed, people tend to be drawn to other people in the group that contains the self; thus the film appealed to that desire.

Among the films I have viewed, this is probably one of the closest examples of pure propaganda. Indeed art and quality have both been sacrificed in favor of a clear, strong message. *Black Like Me* is part of a collection of films made in the 60s that were created by white people for white people about how white people should and should not treat other races. These films do not explore the experience of being black or the richness of black culture. They were never intended to. Films such as *Black Like Me* and *Finian's Rainbow* along with many of the films made with Sydney Poitier as lead actor, were produced to shame the white community into considering the claims of other races to being treated like human beings. *Black Like Me* has nothing to do with expressing what black people feel or even what black culture is like. These films were tools used to hit the white community over the head in the hopes of waking the apathetic people and shaming the racist people. *Black Like Me* does this through appealing to the fact of injustice. *Finian's Rainbow* uses humor to display the despicable characteristics of racism.

This tactic used by an elite group of whites was a classic and well-used technique. In their book *Age of Propaganda: The Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, Anthony R Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson state, "Guilt whether real or imagined, often leads to compliance" (177). They also give three possible explanations for why guilt sells. "(1) *sympathy*, or feeling sorry for the victim; (2) *restitution*, or feeling the need to compensate for the wrong doing: and (3) *generalized guilt*, or the desire to repair a self-image tarnished by transgression" (177). This movement by white people for white audiences was motivated by generalized guilt on both sides. Creating the film made the producers feel better, watching the films and agreeing with them made the white people who watched them feel better. Not only did it ease their guilt, but also for some who socialized with a more "tolerant" set of friends, it probably made them feel that they belonged in their group of nice white people. "Unlike the elite, most people don't expect offices or power from a win. We are dealing with something more modest, a desire to avoid isolating ourselves…" (Noelle-Neumann 6) Thus, going to the movie provided an opportunity for showing off tolerance.

Even though the films made in the sixties were made by white people, the movement was in large part a product of African American initiative. The civil rights movement headed by black leaders and sustained by the black public spurred concern amongst white intellectuals such as the author of *Black Like Me*. In this way, the products produced by sympathetic majority elites are off shoots of the efforts of minority group members to win a place in films and plays.

*Finian's Rainbow* was another movie of the sixties that held up racism as a backward practice. Its approach was extreme humor and obvious exaggeration for the

purpose of distancing the cold reality, exactly the opposite of *Black Like Me*. The black community had previously received numerous calls to unify in colorblind socialism through plays like *De Organizer* and *The Job Hunters.* In one scene Howard, an intelligent young black man, seeks a job at the home of a racist senator to get money to fund his latest scientific project. He is greeted by the senator's racist "yes man" and instructed on how to serve a julep correctly. After being subject to the white man's parody of how black person's should serve juleps complete with bowing, scraping and shuffling, a mystified Howard asks, "How do you do that again?" Put out by his question the white man replies, "I don't understand you, Jackson. I mean, you don't walk like you're supposed to. You don't talk like you're supposed to. You don't even know how to serve a julep like you're supposed to. You educated or something?" Later he leaves Howard with instructions to practice, which Howard does. When eventually he is called to serve a drink, his parody is so bombastic that it turns the stereotype on its head. In his book *Blacks in American Films Today and Yesterday*, Edward Mapp praises the scene saying that "Howard demolishes the 'devoted servant' stereotype with his buffoonery" (180). In fact, the producers strove to make sure that Howard did not embody any of the typical traits that had often been associated with negative images. He is a member of the emerging black middle class who speaks professionally and his character is without any references to black culture.

*Finian's Rainbow* is a part of the ultimate fantasy held by white liberal people that everyone can get together and experience love and community in one big, socialist family. Although most of the films of this era extolling the virtues of a colorblind community were by white people, the idea had first been extolled by prominent African

Americans at an earlier date. Leading members of the black community such as noted poet and playwright Langston Hughes had produced numerous plays expressing this hope in the 30s. Hughes went a step beyond suggestion in his play *Do You Want to Be Free* when he admonished through the mouth of a character the establishment of "Colored and white unions to life us up all together." Hughes then wrote a line of protest to be spoken from the audience. "You mean organize with the white folks, too?" The young man onstage unflinchingly replies, "That's what I mean! We're all in the same boat! This is America isn't it? It's not all colored. Not all white. It's both" (276).

Another voice in the theatrical world, that of playwright Amiri Baraka was proposing a vision bitterly opposed to the type of films being produced by the white liberal elitist community. In "The Revolutionary Theatre" (1966), Baraka advocates a theater that will create divisions between black and white. He says, "White men will cower before this theater because it hates them. The Revolutionary theater must hate them for hating" (Baraka 1320). This vision was the opposite of Hughes' inclusive vision in the thirties and of almost all the films of the sixties. Baraka points out that his main characters are victims, but they are also at the same time possible heroes. This mixing of opposite stereotypes is a forerunner to blaxploitation films like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* where the main character is both victim and hero. Most importantly, Baraka continued the tradition of recognizing the role of propaganda in theater. He says of his new revolutionary theatre, "it must be food for those who need food and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted, fat belied white guys" (Baraka 1320). Traces of this Barakan anger and hate run through films like *Sweetback* and later the films of Spike Lee.

Nineteen sixty-nine marked the first film directed and produced by an African American, *The Learning Tree*. This coming of age drama directed by Gordon Parks is more complex than the other films cranked out during the sixties and also more complex than the films that would follow it in the early seventies. *The Learning Tree* is the bridge between the pacifism of the sixties and the radical violence of the seventies. It is also a key point in the evolution of African American control over films. Gordon Parks made every effort to hire African Americans behind the scenes, an idea so radical that he could only find five people with enough experience to make the cut. (Berry 123). The story concerns the difficulties of a young intelligent black man named Newt coming of age in a racist town. The depictions of racism are clear and unflinching. Unlike the happy ending where no one is hurt, as happens quite unrealistically to detective Tibbs in the final showdown in *In The Heat of the Night*, death is a real possibility for Newt. In one scene a white police officer shoots a black man for nothing more than participating in a crap game and then running away. He dives into the water, the shot rings out, and blood fills the creek as Newt and his friends are initiated to life.

The contrast in responses to the reality of their world is one of the most interesting parts of the film. Marcus is embittered by life and becomes angry and violent while Newt struggles to walk the narrow path between being possessed by anger and accepting oppression. Although Newt's approach is portrayed as the preferable choice, the audience is brought to understand why Marcus would want to use violence to try to solve his problems. Earlier films do not even explore the possibility of violent retaliation. Detective Tibbs does not even have a gun which is odd because he is a police officer and should logically be allowed to have one at all times.

Parks did a good job presenting a script that could easily have dissolved into sap. Only one scene struck me as unbelievable. When Newt and his Uncle Rob talk about how Newt's girlfriend is pregnant by a white boy, Newt asks his Uncle Rob "Why do white people do so many bad things?" His uncle replies, "Newt, I've been blind for 30 years, I don't know what color people are anymore. If somebody do something good or bad I don't figure his color into it…" This speech could be believable, but he continues, "sometimes I have a little fun, like imagining you are green with pink ears, a blue nose, and purple hair…and I think sometimes if the people in the world were made up of colors, instead of just black and white, it would be a happier world." This speech stuck out like a pause in the otherwise undisturbed sincerity of the film. It is a misplaced propaganda speech in the middle of some otherwise fairly complex art.

*The Learning Tree* explored the possibilities of racism as well as the various responses. The ideology is still one of peaceful protest because although violent and peaceful options are explored, the character the audience comes to love, Newt, retains a non-violent approach. However, he does not grovel, but confronts those who stand in his way. After confronting his racist teacher who wants to prevent him from going to college, Newt is taken to the principle's office where he and the white principle talk. The principle tells him that he personally would like for equality to be possible, but it just is not the time yet. This scene underscores the frustration of waiting for hypocritical people like the principle to take action because they never will. Despite the disadvantages of his world, Newt grows to be a man who is independent and strong. In the last scene Newt refuses to ride on the motorcycle of the racist police officer saying, "I can make it by

myself." The police officer slurs him saying, "Ok by me, boy." Nevertheless, Newt is willing to confront prejudice, and he walks home as a man.

*The Learning Tree* is a unique film that stands in the gap between white and black control, between violence and pacifism. It is a complex film compared to other films of that era because it presents several different reactions to the same problem, one violent, and one peaceful. It also deals with multiple themes. In addition to exploring race issues it is a member of the coming of age subgenre and explores the universal topics of sex, death, and growing up.

If the sixties was a time exalting peaceful protests by African Americans to gain their rights as equal citizens, the seventies was the decade of taking it by force. Mark Reid states:

> The African-American community's growing impatience with white racial and social intransigence and black second-class citizenship produced two major results in the late 1960s: radical violence and black cultural nationalism. Earlier in the decade African Americans and white liberals had sought to dismantle racial segregation in America through non violent protest, a tactic designed to make whites recognize the immorality of racially discriminatory practices and thereby change these practices…By 1967, and as a logical result of the frustrated attempts to gain first-class citizenship for blacks, many black grassroots organizations became more aggressive in their tactics. (Reid 73)

The times had changed with the attitude change and as a result of the increasing amounts of money, which African American communities were spending, on entertainment. When

Van Peebles released *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* in 1971, it brought in 4, 100, 000 in domestic rentals. This success established African American youth, who contributed heavily to the film's success, as a viable commercial audience (Reid 79).

Interestingly enough Van Peebles was able to finance *Sweetback* with money made directing another film, *Watermelon Man* (Rhines 43). which was presented as a film discouraging racism but actually played on every stereotype hated most by the black community. The film is funny, but offensively so. Jeff Gerber (Watermelon man) starts the film white, but for no apparent reason becomes black overnight. This change sets in place a chain of mostly undesirable events. Godfry Cambridge plays both white Jeff and black Jeff by the miracle of modern makeup (Mapp 223). The technicians pull off the physical change better than the lousy job done in *Black Like Me*, but the content was not similarly advanced. Mapp calls attention to the film's racism and use of stereotypes saying, "Of course, as soon as Gerber turns black he starts wearing flashy clothing, beds down with a blonde Norwegian secretary who is attracted to black men, and drills with potential black revolutionaries (who use brooms and mops). Primarily 'the buffoon, Gerber incorporates as many other negro stereotypes as possible" (Mapp 224). Though his skin is black, Gerber is still racist. He goes to the doctor trying to become white again and behaves in all the most offensive ways that he imagines black people do. In the end, he joins other black people in a bar with a topless dancer, joins the black militia, and seems to accept the change. The depiction of African American culture as topless bars and militias without any context is disturbing to say the least.

Van Peebles used the money from directing *Watermelon Man to* finance the controversial film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which would spur on many

imitators in the early seventies. The film actually started the brief genre of blaxploitation films that lasted only about five years in the early seventies. Interestingly enough, Van Peebles's other big investor producing *Sweetback* was none other than the future icon of the middle class black stereotype, Bill Cosby. Rhines reveals that Cosby gave Van Peebles 50, 000 dollars in addition to the 50,000 that Van Peebles had made on *Watermelon Man* (43). Though earlier films and television shows portraying black people as middle class may seem to be unrelated to the sudden explosion of blaxploitation films, really the are delicately connected in a chain of events. Money that Cosby made off of his earlier comedic performances directly funded the beginning of the genre exploring black urban life. Without *Sweetback* it is doubtful that other producers would have seen potential profit in the depiction of black urban life, and the genre might not have been born.

During the same year a major studio, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, released *Shaft* - another film in the same new, black-action genre. Some parts of the African American community were not pleased with the violence, but both films made money and thus there would be more like them. An important distinction between *Shaft* and *Sweetback* is that Van Peebles did not want the film to advocate violence. Before the opening credits Van Peebles frames the violent events of the film with a quote, "Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality." He then goes on to dedicate the film with the words on screen saying, "This film is dedicated to all of the brothers and sisters who had enough of the man." *Shaft* has nothing like this in the way of dedication, and it makes no reasons for its violence because the

violence in *Shaft* was there merely to make money. For Van Peebles, however, violence made a point and was a part of telling the truth.

Reid describes the audience for *Shaft* as "a black popular, or unpoliticized audience…MGM hired UniWorld, which popularized *Shaft* by using the rhetoric of black power." (83). The profits made from *Shaft* brought MGM back to a place of financial stability when it looked like the studio was finished (Berry 120).

The blaxploitation genre, as these early seventies films became known as, was a genre that ran with blood. In one of the first scenes of *Shaft*, the title character throws another man out of a window. This type of violence is routine for Shaft, who also entertains women, both black and white, in bed very successfully. Like Shaft, Sweetback is a sexual superman and a violent man. However, unlike Shaft, his initial violent act is well motivated. Sweetback kills the police because they are perpetrators of violence on another black man. This act makes him both a victim, as he must now run from the police, and a hero because he did not grovel to them. The violence in *Shaft* is mere sensationalism, whereas the violence in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* is a form of political protest. The dedication of the piece confirms that this is its true intent. Sweetback kills because he is justly angry, Shaft kills, apparently, because that is the macho thing to do.

Films like *Shaft* reveal that white America had figured out the money part of Van Peeble's success. However, in their imitation they missed the political protest, which was the main point. *Shaft* is bereft of the anger which Van Peebles had poured into the character of Sweetback. The main plot of *Shaft* concerns the title character helping a black gangster save his innocent daughter from the Mafia. Shaft fights the Mafia and

talks to the white police only when he feels the urge. In the end, after several hours of constant blood bath, Shaft is victorious in his quest thanks to no one but himself.

The African American community is still split on how to view the character of *Shaft.* S. Torriano and Venise T. Berry write in their book, *The 50 Most Influential Black Films*, "*Shaft* portrayed a black man never seen on a movie screen before. His cool, in control demeanor and the way he maneuvered on both sides of the color line with confidence and dignity, using his connections, risking his life, and taking no crap from anybody, made him a consummate professional worthy of respect and admiration" (Berry 122). This view of *Shaft* makes it a step forward in the social evolution of race relations.

Mark Reid, the author of *Redefining Black Film*, paints a different picture of the character of *Shaft.* He claims that the studio "invested black heroes with mainstream values. In doing so, it did not create mythic black heroes. Instead, like the doll-makers who painted Barbie's face brown, MGM merely created black skinned replicas of the white hero action films" (Reid 84). Reid also notes with displeasure that although the film was directed by Gordon Parks, it was manipulated by white people unlike *Sweet Sweetback's Baddassss Song* (83).

It should be noted that both of these books were written at a date much later than the release of these films, Berry's in 2001 and Reid's in 1993. In the ever-present world of popular culture, the removal of these books from the films discussed in them is enormous. Perhaps more important than what authors think now are the opinions of the director and lead actor who were there at the time and certainly weighed the consequences and benefits that this film would bring to their community. Richard Roundtree who portrayed Shaft is quoted in the 1973 book *To Find An Image* saying, "So

many black characters in movies are extensions of the white man's imagination. This one would have been too, if it wasn't for the fact that we had a black director" (Murray 63). Roundtree felt that the piece had been redeemed by the presence of Parks, who had insisted that the character of Shaft be changed in subtle ways to make the character seem more stereotypically black. For instance, the script gave Shaft a white girlfriend. Parks decided she must be black in order to keep Shaft connected with the black community. (Murray 62). Although Shaft spends the night with a white woman in keeping with the unspoken rules of this genre which stipulate that the hero must seduce many women, his girlfriend is black. Shaft is very much a member of the sexual superman stereotype group previously mentioned by Reddick.

Parks himself sounds less enamored with the film in this quote taken from the same book as Roundtree's praise.

> In answer to the question about why he made *Shaft*, Parks replied, 'I guess a black man has to prove himself and I've done this picture as an exercise to show them what I can do…and from now on, I want a chance to do the the same kind of pictures that any director does. (Murray 63)

The question of what is beneficial was an old question. Like Belefonte and Poitier struggling with the decisions over *Porgy and Bess*, Parks must have wondered if what he would give to the project justified his participation. The problem of whether or not to participate in majority-lead projects or seek only independent work has not disappeared from the black community today. In fact, in the modern era it has probably become even more heated than ever before as displayed in the more recent quotes from the two opposing authors.

Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baddassss Song*, like *Shaft* "was criticized for a variety of things including…the exploitation of black cultural stereotypes" (Berry 119). Since the use of stereotype is powerful, some minority group members like Van Peebles wanted to redeem that power to tell a story his way. Others saw the stereotypes he used as unredeemable. However, other shows involving black people, such as the later Cosby Show, use stereotypes; they are just the opposite of the stereotypes used in urban blaxploitation films. The image of the middle class African American who speaks correct English is a stereotype. The conflict was never over whether or not to use stereotypes; it is merely a question of which stereotypes are best to use and who will control the content surrounding their use.

Beyond analyzing the political content of the films themselves, one can analyze the impact that the film has financially by providing the producer and director with money to spend in favor of or against political causes. As previous mentioned Bill Cosby helped to fund *Sweetback* with money he made doing comedy. Later, after the success of the Cosby Show he also funded political candidate Jesse Jackson and gave money to an African American institution of higher learning. Author Mark Reid mentions these examples saying, "This is the socioeconomic importance of the Cosby Show" (Reid 33). Even if a certain performance or project does not fulfill minority group member's political expectations, financial profit or experience gained can be an asset to later political projects.

Now that it was popular for African Americans to be portrayed with guns and power, even Sydney Poitier showed back up in 1972s *Buck and the Preacher* with the gun he could not seem to find in the 60s. The film, which Poitier also directed, was a

fairly typical Western, including chase scenes, shootouts, and of course the obligatory Indians. The plot concerns a black wagon train trying to escape from white bounty hunters who want to take them back to work as servants. In one scene the bounty hunter rides into the wagon train camp killing people at will and roars at everyone to go back to Louisiana because "there's plenty of good work for ya back there, choppin cotton, cutting cane, good jobs for people that know you. You was born there, you was raised there…you couldn't last the winter." The courageous wagon train decides to go on and winds up succeeding with help from the Indians. The typical western format is almost campy at times, but the history covered is a unique part of the African American heritage. Before the film starts a message on the screen briefly relates the history of the period and ends saying, "This picture is dedicated to those men, women, and children who lie in graves as unmarked as their place in history." Like Parks, Poitier did not get to pick a film to direct; rather he inherited the project when the first director quit (Berry126). It was not an artistic masterpiece, but it was a tribute to the courage of those wagon trains. Rhines says that it was, "the first film to show blacks responding in kind to violent white gangs trying to end the migration…" (Rhines 150). Despite the disparity of locales and cultural contexts, *Buck and the Preacher* shares with other films of the early seventies the advent of the black hero and the use of force when necessary. In that way, it was very much in tune with the times.

*Shaft* was followed by a barrage of similar films, including the 1973 *Coffy*, which had a similar urban setting and a black action hero, but this time there would be no good guys. Shaft tolerated the police, but Pam Grier's Coffy would have to fight off all the bad guys single handedly. The only other "good guy," a police officer who Coffy dates is

incapacitated very early in the film. Coffy herself wonders about the validity of the police force who do not appear to put forth any effort to fight drugs. In fact sometimes they are the problem. When the one decent man in her life is maimed by an attack, it is up to Coffy to take up the good fight on his behalf. Coffy challanges the Mafia and a drug lord/ pimp named King George in an effort to get revenge for Carter and justice for her sister's death. Coffy sometimes sleeps with a black politician who she thinks is a good person, but eventually she finds out that Howard is actually cutting deals with the Mafia. Coffy runs through a long and complicated maze in which there are no good characters except herself and she alone must dispense justice.

In order to pay back King George for his involvement in ruining people's lives with drugs, Coffy masquerades as a prostitute in order to hand him over to a Mafia boss, Vitroni. Coffy gets hooked up with Vitroni for sex after she beats up another one of King George's girls at a party. Vitroni is pleased with the violence and requests Coffy, which plays directly into her hands. At first Vitroni is pleasant, but once they enter the bedroom he berates her saying, "Get down on the floor where you belong, you no good nigger bitch." At first Coffy plays along, pleading in a fake tone of voice, "Oh please, I know I'm not good enough for you, but let me have your precious white body just once." Vitroni continues to try to humiliate her telling her to crawl to him and spitting on her. Then Coffy pulls a gun on him saying, "You want to spit on me and make me crawl? I'm gonna piss on your grave tomorrow." Though she is wrestled to the ground my Vitroni's comrade, Coffy still has the situation partially under control. When questioned she blames King George resulting in his brutal lynching by the Mafia.

The problem of deciding the value of Pam Grier's character is much the same as the controversy surrounding *Shaft.* The character can be analyzed as advancing the glorification of powerful African American heroes, or as stereotyping black people as violent. What is undisputable is the utter commitment of Coffy to destroy those who victimize her whether they are white Mafia members or black people helping the mafia. Coffy confronts Howard at gunpoint after she accomplished revenge on Vitroni. Howard explains to her that he was seeking power for his people and that is why he had to seek questionable alliances. Coffy wavers and almost does not shoot him, but she blows his head off when she sees he has another woman in his bedroom. Her decision to kill Howard suggests that those who aid oppressors are as bad as the people they help. At the close, Coffy has accomplished all that she intended to do, and nearly all the other characters are dead.

Films like *Shaft* and *Coffy* were mostly produced by whites, and the general feeling of critics now and then was that they were not the kind of liberation films that would advance the African American cause. What the production of blaxploitation films did reveal was that the African American individuals, whom Reid called collectively, "The unpoliticized audience," had money to spend. This was an important revelation, which was why studios cranked out imitations of *Sweet Sweetback's Baddasss Song* so fast. Jesse Algeron Rhines states, "The film industry simply hoped to make money by indeed exploiting an audience need" (Rhine 45). On the positive side, the film industry now knew that films starring black people would find a black audience. However, as Reid notes, the audience was not large enough to support many films all by itself. A combination of racial groups was needed to make the films more profitable. This

realization was a key factor in the brevity of this type of film, which was essentially over by 1974 (Reid 90-91). Some films such as *Cooley High* retained the inner city setting, but are far less violent and angry.

*Cooley High* was a film covering the same demographic of character, but from a radically different perspective. The plot revolves around several young men enjoying their last year of high school. The setting is urban and even ghetto, but the main characters are not violent, or heroic. Instead they are like most humans, a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant attributes. These young men gamble, discover women, and try to plan for their adult lives. What distinguishes this film from previous films is that the characters are fully members of the African American community, and yet each young man is also a person, with his own dreams and desires, that even his friends sometimes do not understand. Preach likes to write poetry and desperately wants to become a screenwriter, an ambition that his friends think is funny. His response to them is, "You guys think it's so funny because I want to be something other than a factory worker or a football player. Well, that's just because you're a bunch of stupid niggers that don't know shit." This remark, though coupled with a racist slur, can be seen in a positive light as his declaration of uniqueness. His uniqueness is not at the price of his group identity since he is shown throughout the film as fitting in with his friends in other ways. He is a product of the black urban scene and a member of the black community, but he is not defined totally by his color or his culture. His identity is both personal to himself, and it is expanded as a member of his culture.

The violence in the film is not performed by these main characters, but rather directed at them. When Preach and his friend Cochise go for a joy ride in a car with some

other people, Stone and Robert, little do they know they are in hot water. The car is stolen, and they are caught with the guilty men. The police do not make them serve jail sentences because they realize the boys were not a party to the crime. However, the guilty parties think they have divulged information to the police and punish the boys by having Cochise beaten to death. The portrayal of a violent act within the black community is balanced by the complex and sympathetic characters of Preach and Cochise. In an interview in 1998, the writer, Eric Monte, said he took the story from his own life and was careful to emphasize positive aspects of black life instead of the negative (Berry 158). Berry calls the film "a welcome relief from the violent action packed, rock-um-sock-um blaxploitation films of the period" (152). In defending the final violent scenes, the director, Michael Shultz, points out, "It had violence, but that wasn't the substance of the piece. It made you feel this tremendous loss of potential in black youth: it never condoned violence. It made you feel so sorry that that kind of action had to take place" (153).

**After Equality- Disagreements Within**

The period between the blaxploitation films of the early seventies and the new films of the late eighties, including Spike Lee's first films, was rather devoid and empty of good roles for African Americans. Reid says that as the later films of the blaxploitation period "failed to live up to expectations at the box office…producers began to recognize that those films that maintained their popularity… had to have at least some appeal to white audiences… the studios returned to a blackface narrative form and softened…black action films by pairing a black hero(ine) and a white" (Reid 91). In his top fifty list, Berry

does not include any films between 1976 and 1985 because of the insignificance of the films made during those years. The next significant movement in black film was in the mid to late 80s with several new promising actors and the advent of Spike Lee.

*A Soldier's Story* and *The Color Purple* were produced in the mid eighties. *The Color Purple* drew on the idea of connection to Africa established by *Roots*, but it also dealt with conflict within the black community. Both of these films were directed by white men, the former by Steven Spielberg and the later by Norman Jewison, bringing criticism from African American critics. One writer for the New York Times, Vincent Canby wrote, "Another director might have transformed *The Color Purple* into a film that functioned as a tribute to the book. Mr. Spielberg's film is a tribute to Hollywood. He's over his head here, but the film is insidiously entertaining." (Berry 184).

*The Color Purple* continued in a long line of pieces that produced very polarized responses. As Berry states, "There were very few in-betweens when it came to reviewing *The Color Purple:* critics either loved it or slammed it" (Berry 184). However, both films contained an element that would later be characteristic of Spike Lee's work. They revealed struggle not just between African Americans and white abusers, but within the African American community itself. *The Color Purple* reveals struggles between black women and black men; thus the problems the movie tackles are expanded to include racism and feminism. The importance of race is overshadowed by the greater importance of the problem between men and women. Some people felt that Spielberg should not have been selected to direct a film where the main characters are black women. However, Julie Dash, the director of the 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, said of the film, "I was

not offended by the movie. I felt Spielberg did the best job that he could do. It just wasn't the book I had read" (Harris 120).

*A Soldier's Story* also examines tension between members of the African American community. The film centers around a black attorney, Captain Davenport, who works for the military investigating the death of Sergeant Waters. The investigation is complicated by the fact that neither the black troops serving under him, or the white men at the base like the Sergeant. The men under him hate him because he treats them as culturally inferior to himself. The prejudiced whites hate him for being black. The sergeant strives to fulfill himself through achieving all that the white men have and berating other black people who do not fit into his agenda. In one scene he rants, "I don't blame the white man. Why should he put white and colored together in this war?" As Davenport interviews the men, he is informed of the sergeant's poor treatment of them as man after man reveals his part of the story. Eventually Davenport locates the killers, who are two of the sergeant's men. When Davenport confronts one of the murderers, private Peterson, played by Denzel Washington, Peterson emphatically stands by his actions claiming that the sergeant disserved to die. Davenport asks him, "Who gave you the right to judge- the right to decide who is fit to be a negro and who isn't?" The question underscores the complexities of racism and identity among the black soldiers.

These films, though directed by white men foreshadow a major change in the levels of complexity and depth that would be explored starting in the 80s. The film was a great opportunity for young actors like Robert Townsend, who had been an extra in *Cooley High.* Townsend said of his experience acting in the film it was, "the best experience of my life…and my agent said, 'Robert, they only do one black movie a year

and you may never, ever do one again.'" (Townsend qtd. in Alexander 120). Not only would Townsend do another film he would direct one, *Hollywood Shuffle,* in 1987. However, at that moment he did not know if the opportunity would ever come up, so he enjoyed the filming very much. He said of the time spent with his fellow actors, "We just had the best time for ten weeks, as opposed to being the token Black in a movie. When it was over I said, 'This is how movies should be'" (Townsend qtd in Alexander 120). Other films following *A Soldier's Story* began to include diverse roles for black actors that were not merely tokenism.

The 1989 film *Glory* is the story of the first black regiment to fight in the Civil War. The film shows how different men with various personalities, backgrounds, and outlooks on black culture were brought together to fight. The conflict is heightened by the fact that three very different men have to share the same tent. Private Trip (Denzel Washington) is a young man who dislikes his tent mates John Rowlins (Morgan Freeman), an older man with a more calm less confrontational style, and Thomas Searles, a man his own age with a very different outlook on life. Since Thomas grew up free in the north with white people as companions, his way of thinking and talking is not culturally black enough to suit Trip. The three men represent different ways of thinking about race, which often are in conflict. The African American community has always many different subgroups, but only starting in the late eighties did the conflict between these factions really start to show up in film. Berry says, "*Glory* portrays the full spectrum of the African-American men who joined the struggle" (208). This spectrum would be further explored by other films. In addition to portraying conflict, *Glory* also was a portrayal of black men as heroes, something that had rarely happened in the

decades before. Blaxploitation films had rebel heroes, but characters like Sweetback and Shaft appealed only to a limited audience consisting of mostly urban blacks. *Glory* was a movie that various audiences could appreciate.

Another development of the late eighties was Spike Lee's first professional films. His way of explaining the black experience draws on the urban black experience portrayed in blaxploitation films and is very much the opposite of films like *Driving Miss Daisy*. Spike Lee did not enjoy Morgan Freeman's portrayal of Hoke, a chauffer who becomes friends with the stubborn and rather racist wealthy Jewish woman who he works for. However, the Academy of Motion Pictures and millions of white people loved this sweet happy story. Lee, whose film *Do the Right Thing* came out that same year, ranted against the film and Freeman's participation. In an interview for the educational film series *The Directors :Profiles of Today's Most Acclaimed Directors,* Lee gave this harsh statement, "I look at fucking Morgan Freeman's role…that's the one white America…that's the one the academy was comfortable with…that's when I woke up." Lee then stated that Academy Awards do not really matter.

If Spike Lee opposes certain interpretations of black life, he is not alone. Spike Lee's decision to make his films his way did not always fit into the plans of other prominent black leaders, particularly those in charge of his alma mater, who stopped him from filming *School Daze* on their campus. It seems that the age of criticism has begun. Whereas in the forties roles for African Americans were so rare that even an Oscar for *Gone With the Wind* was universally accepted, now a film made by a black man for black people would be an open target for disagreement. There are now enough resources for various clashing viewpoints to find their way onscreen.

The concept of the division between members of the African-American subculture is a major theme that runs through the work of Spike Lee and saturates the modern depiction of the black experience. Starting with Spike Lee, the criticism of African American life from within the subculture would leap off the pages of scholarly books and reviews and into the art itself. The argument of identity had always been there in the background, but it was now marching with rapid stride into the foreground of the subculture's consciousness and would itself become the subject of new work for the African American community. His film, *School Daze,*is devoted entirely to that theme.

*School Daze* is set at a fictional but obviously representative black college called Mission College. The conflict is between the light and dark-skinned black youth there. The light-skinned Gamma Rays term the darker blacks Jigaboos, while the Jigaboos call their enemies the Wannabees. The film begins with Dap, one of the leaders of the jigaboo side, making a speech to the student body urging them to support the movement against Apartheid in South Africa. He yells "till we have completely divested we need to march, we need to protest, we need to disrupt class, we need to sit in, we need to shut the school down if need be." The lighter-skinned Wannabees are terribly busy running sorority and fraternity events and have no interest in South Africa. Their leader, Julian, serves as a nemesis for Dap. At one point the Wannabees are riding their floats in the school parade, and Dap's group is following behind chanting "A people united will never be defeated" and carrying a banner reading "Mission, divest now South Africa must be free." Julian goes out of his way to remove them from the parade on charges of not having a permit. Julian calls them Jigaboos to their faces to which Dap replies, "You call your family jigaboo?" This question highlights the callousness of Julian's way of thinking.

If the film is harsh on the light-skinned blacks, it also includes a reality check for anyone like Dap who might think he has it all together. Dap is challenged by his girlfriend Rachel, who though very dark skinned and very culturally aware, thinks she may want to join a sorority. Dap reacts badly to which Rachel's replies that she thinks he is prejudiced against lighter skinned people. Later Dap and his friends have a run-in with some inner city men at a Kentucky Fried Chicken who challenge their version of the black life, just as Dap is accustomed to challenging everyone else's. After a petty argument over table condiments, the college students start to leave, but the men follow them out to the parking lot. One of the men accuses them saying, "You come down year after year and take over. We was born here, gonna be here and gonna die here, and can't find good jobs cause of you…We may not have your education, but we ain't dirt neither." This encounter provides a reality check for Dap as he is forced to take a moment to consider how other black people view him.

Originally, Lee had planned to shoot on the grounds of several prominent black colleges including his alma matter, Morehouse College. However, due to his refusal to show them the script, Morehouse refused him the privilege (Lee 69). In a book which he wrote about the project, Lee talks about his role and puts together a collection of comments by others involved with the project. Monty Ross the co-producer stated of Morehouse, "They didn't want illicit sex or any talk about the light-skinned, dark-skinned issue" (Lee 164). Despite controversy, Lee kept shooting at the one college that let him stay. Lee uses his book as a chance to share his reasons for making the film.

> I'm all for Black colleges. I'm a third generation Morehouse man, and I hope my sons choose Morehouse. But, there are certain things wrong at

> black colleges and I address some of them in *School Daze.* To me that doesn't mean I'm putting forth a negative portrayal of these institutions. The ACU were after squeaky-clean images of Black Colleges. I refuse to be caught in the 'negative image' trap set for black artists. Yes, Black people have been dogged in the media from day one. We're extra sensitive and we have every right to be. But, we overreact when we think that every image of us has to be squeaky clean. (Lee, Spike 62.)

In support of Lee, the reverend Jesse Jackson paid a special visit to the cast and crew of *School Daze* affirming their efforts and reminding them to make the best possible film with these words "People will not come to see your opportunity to do a film, because that's not really exciting. Well, it was at one time, but it isn't any more. We've kind of gotten used to that. What they will come to see is the team who's going to win…We have to go from the opportunity to do a movie, to doing it, and doing it well" (Lee 22).

What Jackson was saying was that the black image would not draw viewers, black or white, to the film. The white audience in particular would not pay just to see race movies; the topic had become boring. It was now required of the cast to make a film worthy of being seen.

*School Daze* did well for a low budget film, especially amongst African Americans. Spike had desired a demographic breakdown including a 35 percent white audience for the first screening in Philadelphia, but it did not happen that way. "The film was scheduled at 7:30 pm. Folks began lining up at 5:30 outside the theater and many had to be turned away…only 17 people were not black" (Spike Lee 168). Most of Spike Lee's films have not reached a mass audience of white people. This may be because they do not

include a lot of gory scenes, sensational plot lines, or slapstick comedy. Often they are comedy, but of a more sedate, political tone. The white audience expected these things and when Spike Lee did not produce them, they decided to watch Eddie Murphy whom they found funnier.

His 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* features the tensions between the black community and the Italian owner of a pizzeria. Spike himself plays a young man named Mookie trying to hold down a job at the pizzeria. Mookie's life is made very difficult by a local named Buggin Out. Buggin Out frequently visits the pizza parlor and tells Sal he needs to put pictures of black Americans on his wall of fame. Sal's reply to this is "You want brothers on the wall? Get your own place, you can do what you want…but this is my pizzeria – American Italians on the wall." Sal also frequently yells at a guy named Radio Raheem for coming in to the pizzeria with his radio blasting rap songs. Buggin Out starts a campaign to start a boycott of Sal's pizzeria, which is unsuccessful because most of the neighborhood does not bear any ill will toward Sal. This all changes one night when Buggin Out and Radio Raheem come into the pizzeria and an argument escalates into a tragedy for everyone involved. In the end, it is Mookie who starts the rush to demolish Sal's place. The film is filled with tension between black and white, but also between Mookie and Buggin Out who represent the different members of the community. Mookie is just trying to make a living; Buggin Out wants a mini-revolution. "Mookie must decide whether he will maintain his job with Sal or join the ranks of Buggin' Out, the resident black militant" (Reid 102). In the end, his choice was made in a moment of anger after a black man was killed. After all of the killing, no one was better off for it. The interesting aspect of the film is its refusal to give easy answers or provide a hero.

Mookie is a sympathetic protagonist, but he certainly cannot be exalted to hero. Lee risks being misunderstood to make a complex film. Reid says of the film, “Most of the debate centered on whether the film would ameliorate or worsen America’s racial and ethnic tensions” (103).

Author Jesse Algeron Rhines devotes an entire chapter of his book *Black Film/White Money* to a critique of Spike Lee’s films. Though he does not verbally abuse Lee’s work, he does question Lee’s right to set himself up as chief definer of the urban black experience. Rhines says, “a significant function Spike Lee performs is to define the Black urban underclass and make it both more familiar and less threatening to white Americans” (115). Yet Rhines also believes that Spike Lee is ignorant of the political and social underlying issues “Art Programs may teach one how to make films, but they generally limit their film critique to aesthetic and technical issues,” Rhines says of Spike Lee’s training. (130). Rhines recognizes that Lee fills his films with quotes from famous historic black figures like Garvey and Du Bois, but argues that his knowledge of contemporary social analysis by Black social scientists is lacking. Rhines states:

> Spike Lee has taken a public position on the side of the Black disadvantaged despite the fact that he has never been one of them…Amazingly despite frequent allusion to heroic African Americans of years gone by, such as sociologist W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, Lee admits never having heard of Wilson, the contemporary African American sociologist policymakers most associate with the characters portrayed in Lee’s own films. Asked if he had read any of William Julius Wilson, Lee replied, ‘Who? No.’” (Rhines 112).

Rhines concludes that Spike Lee is "complicit with this society in furthering the very dominations he abhors" (131). Critiques like this remind the modern consumer that the African American film is a subject of controversy. Now that there are more films, people are more at liberty to critique famous black figures openly as Rhines criticized Lee.

Other notable attempts of the early nineties include Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, a non-linear feminist drama that many people coming from a western linear perspective did not understand. The ability to make such a film indicates that room has been made in the market place for more than one view of black life. Dash says of film, "A lot of people find it very disturbing. The story doesn't unfold the way a western story unfolds" (Dash qtd in Harris 106). During the process of creating *Daughters*, which took her fifteen years, Dash says that she came to realize that her writing style did not attract the American people. She says, "It took me fifteen years to realize that people want to see stories that have to do with themselves or their families, or their children, or what they fear, or what they love. When it has nothing to do with them, then they tend to disengage from the subject matter. I can't say all people, but Americans are like that" (Dash qtd in Harris 107). This illustrates the power of the market on what can and cannot be produced. Nevertheless, Dash eventually managed to arrange the script so that it was marketable and carried forth her vision.

Dash is an interesting example of a filmmaker representing a subgroup within a group. Dash represents black women, a category that Lee has often been criticized for misrepresenting. When asked by Harris, "Do you consider yourself a writer first or a filmmaker first?" Dash replied, "I consider myself a black woman first because when you walk into a room, that's what people see" (Harris 110). The work of women like Dash

displays how different black films have become in the nineties with the addition of alternative voices from the eighties, when Townsend was told to enjoy being in any film featuring black people because the next time might not come. This transition is apparent in the attitudes that new filmmakers have about their work. Rhines says that "the new black filmmakers espouse: individual choice and technical proficiency as their ultimate objective…Very few believed that they should be responsible to any group, person, or philosophy beyond their own moral and artistic selves" (Rhines 132). This new emphasis on individual interpretation is a sign of the times.

Comedians like Eddie Murphy produce films that are almost the opposite of Spike Lee's politically charged dramas. Murphy's comedies like *The Nutty Professor* do not focus much on racial or political issues. *The Nutty Professor* comes closer to being propaganda for fat acceptance than it does to saying anything specific about black culture. Rhines says of Murphy that he "is not seen and does not claim to speak on behalf of any other black people but himself, yet we find he admires Lee for speaking out" (Rhines 113). This difference may be due to the way Murphy views himself in relationship to the group of all black people. The idea of different responses for high and low identifiers fits here. Low identifiers react to categorization threat, which is being thought of in terms of the group. (Ellemers et al 37). If Murphy is a low identifier it would explain why his films do not always emphasize his blackness the way Spike Lee's always feature black urban culture so prominently. Though Lee does portray differences between black people, he always leaves at least hints as to which type of view he perceives as correct. It should be noted that low or high identification is a relative term. Murphy said of himself in comparison with Lee, "My politics are much more covert . I

am very black and I have a very strong black consciousness but I am about gradual change and dialogue that is much more civil" (Murphy qtd in Rhines 113). It is possible to identify with a group, but not have the sense of belonging to that group saturate everything one does, because although the group is important to one's identity, it is not central. Spike Lee's films are all about being black. It is almost impossible to imagine how he would construct a film that is not about being black. Eddie Murphy, on the other hand, could easily translate his slapstick style into films staring people of other races. Although his films may be informed by his experiences as a black man, the ideas in many of them are universal. The difference between high and low identifiers is not the result of either choice being more correct, but rather it is a question how of whether a person views the world specifically through his group membership, or more universally through many group memberships and experiences. Spike Lee is a purist, who has devoted his career to talking about certain things in his films. Eddie Murphy, without viewing himself as less black, uses his culture and race as part of the context from which he delivers a message, which is less specifically political and more universal.

This tension between specific and universal products will continue because of the fact that majority audiences enjoy films that remind them of themselves. As Dash said of the potential audience for *Daughters of the Dust,* Americans like to see themselves in the story line. This reality makes films about racial unity with themes that white people can relate to very profitable. Films like *Corrina, Corrina* and *Remember the Titans* benefit from this simple fact. White people like seeing themselves just as much as black people like seeing themselves. In sociological terms, "because of the centrality of the self concept in all perception, social categorization is most often reduced to the group

containing the self, the in group, and other groups…mere categorization is sufficient to increase attraction to in-group members" (Dovido et al 240). Sometimes these processes morph into racial hatred, but often they simply inform preferences that the viewer is unaware of. If seeing people of one's own race in the media was not important and did not fulfill a need, then the black community would have less incentive to participate in the world of film. But this also means that there is a great divide between films like those of Spike Lee which mostly concern black people and are watched by black people, and those created with members of the majority and minority communities which if successful bring in revenue from both.

*Amistad* (1997) portrays the trial of a boatload of Africans who tried to rebel against slave traders and go back to their homeland. The film is heavily seeped in Speilbergism with intense dramatic music playing underneath the scenes of the rebellion and subsequent capture by another white ship. Some critics loathed the fact that Speilberg had produced another black film since he himself is white. Berry says, "reviewers agreed about the fact that *Amistad* was another black story being told from the perspective of a white savior, and criticized the weak role of Morgan Freeman's abolitionist character…" (260). In spite of any shortcomings, the film was nominated for four Academy Awards and is a suspenseful and feeling drama. One of the questions that films like *Amistad* pose is what defines a black film?

In his book *Redefining Black Film* author Mark Reid states, "film books that discuss African American films use critical approaches that emphasize white-directed, -written, and –produced films about black America. For example, the black-image approach has generated almost three decades of black-oriented film books: Peter Noble's

*The Negro in Film* (1948), V.J. Jerome's *The Negro in Hollywood Films* (1950…" (Reid 1). Reid goes on to say that his book will be different because he is going to discuss films made by black people or "in which black people controlled the key aspects of creative production" (2).

This is a good and valid approach, but it is wise to remember that at the time these early books were written, aside from the work of Lincoln Motion picture and Oscar Micheaux, there were no black films of this description available to discuss. Had they defined black film in this way, they would practically have defined it out of existence as far as popular culture is concerned. Also Reid's statement that "a valid examination of black film must separate the black commercial film [controlled by whites] from the black independent film"(2) is a good way to categorize for now, but in the future it may be more difficult to distinguish between films made exclusively by black people and films made by white and black people together. It is important to remember that not only are films changing, what black people consider to be a black film is changing as well. Now that there is more to choose from, authors like Reid have such a variety that they can now classify it into more than one category, but those categories may not fit sometime in the future.

The process of trying to blend minority and majority interests into one film is difficult. The issue is who will end up having control of the project. Authors like Mark Reid make clear distinctions between independent efforts headed by black people and studio films controlled by white. Under this classification system, *Remember the Titans* and *Amistad* are white films with black actors. However, in the future these categories may become blurred as the complexity of racial distribution and power changes further.

As Jesse Jackson said, the ability to make a film is not big news to the America public. In a post-equality era, black filmmakers increasingly have needed to look for new ideas to separate their work from the growing body of films to make it stand out and be profitable. This search may open the possibility of visiting places that would have once been unthinkable, various forms of minstrelsy. It is this revival that Spike Lee must have anticipated when he made *Bamboozled* in 2000.

In tackling the issue, Lee loses none of his controversial punch. *Bamboozled* is the story of a disgruntled middle class black TV writer, Pierre Delacroix, whose boss is a racist idiot. Pierre purposes a new sitcom about the black middle class and his boss reacts in the following scenario:

> Dunwitty: You know, I grew up around black people my whole life. I mean, truth be told I probably know niggers better than you. And don't go getting offended by my use of the quote unquote 'n' word. I have black wife and two biracial kids, so I feel I have a right. I don't give a goddamn what that prick Spike Lee says. Tarantino was right. 'Nigger is just a word.
>
> Delacroix: Well, I would prefer if you did not use that word in my presence.
>
> Pierre: Oh really? Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger.
>
> (Delacroix says nothing, but in his fantasy, we see him run up to Dunwitty and slap his face yelling "Whitey, whitey, whitey, whitey.")

> Dunwitty: The material you've been writing for me is too white bread. It's white people with black faces. The Huxtables, Cosby—a genius, revolutionary…but we can't go down that road again.
>
> Delacroix: I disagree. The negro middle class does exist and it's fertile ground for a dramatic series or even a sitcom.

In the words of this character, Lee validates Cosby and the Huxtibles as "real" black people. They do exist and putting their lives on television is a valid pursuit. However, Dunwitty remains unimpressed, and it is up to Delacroix to discover what will wet his racist pallet. Then Pierre is struck by an inspiration so bad that it is sure to get him fired and out of this nasty situation as well as ruining CNS; he is going to write a minstrel show. When he shares this information with his intern, a young woman named Sloan, she is skeptical at best but decides to trust him. Thus, "Mantan's new Millennium Minstrel Show" is born, but something is wrong from the first – Mantan is successful.

All of the characters in this film are representative caricatures, especially the white characters. Halfway through the film Dunwitty brings in a public relations expert named Myrna Goldfarb to help with publicity for Mantan. After she presents her six-point strategy, Delacroix and Sloan sit awkwardly until Delecroix says, "These are Negros we are talking about, not some lab mice in a cage. We are not one monolithic group of people." Goldfarb assures him she is an expert having gotten a PhD. in African American studies from Yale. He mocks her saying, "Yes, yes, continue, O great niggerologist."

Likewise, all of the black characters represent types. Delacroix begins the film as an optimist trying to make a place for quality black art, but he is sucked down into the

money and the fame. Halfway through the film Sloan gives him a present – a “nigger bank.” The little character bust feeds himself quarters with the push of a button – a metaphor for what Delacroix has become. Lee holds up Delacroix as the perfect example of a sellout and traitor to the race.

Sloan, Delacroix’s intern, belongs to the middle class black subgroup, but she has a brother who belongs to a gang, the Mau Maus. His street life is in great contrast to her posh middle class apartment. They get into an argument because Julius has decided to rename himself “Big Black Afrika” (Afrika spelled his own way on purpose) as a way of freeing himself like Malcolm X. Sloan gives her disgruntled reply that she will continue to call him Julius.

When Delacroix casts Mantan’s New Millennium Minstrel Show, his two main actors are a team he found performing on the street. Like the long line of minstrel performers before him, Manray, the young man selected to play Mantan, is only in search of food and a place to use his talent. Delecroix convinces him over many French Fries to join the show. Eventually after his friend and costar quits, he opens his eyes and decides he does not want to wear blackface anymore. He goes on stage for the taping in front of a studio audience without his blackface. He is removed by Dunwitty and tossed out the back door as if he had never existed. He becomes a symbol of the uselessness of this type of role in achieving anything for black people. Even after becoming a star, he is instantly disposable. After he leaves the studio, he is attacked by the Mau Mau’s and executed live for the world to see.

These grim scenes are made even bleaker by the final scene in which Delacroix is confronted by Sloan who threatens him with a gun her brother gave her and makes him

watch a video of minstrel shows and think about what he has "contributed to." When he tries to take her gun, she executes him Coffy style.

*Bamboozled* expresses Lee's position on minstrel shows – they should never be used. This film was timely in its appearance because interest in minstrel acts has to some extent been revived. No one has yet thought of a TV show like Mantan, but scholarly interest in Minstrel shows has been revived by people like Michael Pickering who "has argued for re-examination of shows like, *The Black White Minstrel Show* which enjoyed a successful run on the BBC between 1957 and 1973" (Gandy 89). Scholarly interest does not necessarily mean support for a return to that form, but it does signify a respect for performers that have long been buried by history.

Reid also defends the decision of former black performers to participate in minstrel shows. "Criticism directed at black minstrel performers for their participation in such films (Amos 'N' Andy) is misguided. Black actors had little power over the production…" (24). Reid also states that "the presence of black performers neutralizes that racist imagery in hybrid minstrelsy. Black presence validates the joke, veils the smut, and recycles it for a modern audience" (Reid 25). The recent resurgence of interest in such past performers as Williams and Walker as well as the actors who played Amos 'N' Andy in the TV series, makes the content of Lee's film interesting and controversial. At one point in the film, Delacroix gives the young man playing Mantan a pair of shoes, which have been worn by Bojangles Robinson. The question that those shoes represent is the question that the film tries to answer. Are the shoes of performers like Bojangles worth wearing? Lee's answer is an absolute resounding no.

One dilemma of any minority group who is trying to produce successful films in a post abuse world is that their sensitivity to stereotypes will inevitably push them away from two of mankind's all time best sellers, fear and funny. The audience at large loves to watch characters that are frightening and ridiculous. The films of Spike Lee may be well thought out and full of great political commentary, but they are not as widely viewed as the comedies of Eddie Murphy.

The larger white populace is divided into types of people who are funny, such as the dumb fat slob, the pretty but stupid girl, the macho idiot, etc. Gandy says, "Even though it is rarely the focus of critical discussion, there are readily identifiable stereotypes that apply to generic whites, or 'Anglo's' as well as ethnic whites" (Gandy 179). The majority audience for the most part enjoys seeing themselves as funny. They do not take personal offence because they do see themselves as representative of a larger group. The average white person does not see himself as primarily belonging to the category "fat people" even if he is fat; thus he will laugh at an image very like himself and not feel that he has been used. Minority groups do not have this luxury. Due to past exclusion and abuse every time they see a group member, they personalize the characteristics displayed in that character. This personalization is a normal result of previous intense prejudice.

As a result, there is then a gap between the majority audience and the minority group members attempting to create cultural products. The majority audience merely wants to be entertained, while the minority artist wants to represent his group well. It is not that majority group members hate minority groups for the most part, but two inclinations create new challanges, firstly they subconsciously prefer to see people like

themselves. Secondly, they are board with films that define the minority group's existence or uniqueness and want to see some thing that entertains not that teaches.

When minority artists do bridge that gap on purpose or by accident, it often leads to controversy. The films that make the most money are the ones that include the crowd-pleasing elements of fear and funny. One case in point is the vastly popular 2002 film *Barber Shop* staring Ice Cube. The film is a comedy about the daily happenings in a Barbershop owned by Calvin (Ice Cube) and located in a mostly black neighborhood in Chicago. The main characters are the employees, one of whom, an older man named Eddie makes the comments that started the controversy. When Calvin expresses his reverence for Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, and Rose Parks, Eddie responds with his shocking opinion. "Man, she was tired. That's what you do when you're tired. You sit your ass down. I sat on a bus and got thrown in jail and ain't hear from nobody in a whole week." Amongst the din and the noise of one guy trying to sell Calvin a laptop, Eddie continues to try to explain his view. "I'm gonna give her her just due. I'm gonna give her her just due for what she did. Her act lead to the movement and everything, but she damn sure ain't special. No, it was a whole lot of black folk sat down on buses and they got thrown in jail, and they did it way before Rosa did." This speech by Eddie spurs one of the younger employees to rebuke him and initiates a conversation about what can and cannot be said in the barbershop. An older customer finishes the argument saying, "I'll tell you one thing. You better never let Jesse Jackson hear you talking like that." Eddie stares at him for a moment and then levels the bomb. "Man, fuck Jesse Jackson!"

The content of this conversation was big news amongst the public and the figures who were the topic of the conversation. According to USA Today, the NAACP

nominated the film for an Image Award because the film deals with black history, but Rosa Parks and Jesse Jackson were both livid about the whole affair. Parks skipped the Image Awards because she felt disrespected. Jackson and the Reverend Al Sharpton criticized the film. Apparently, their criticism did not matter because the film made 75 million dollars. USA Today quotes the president of the NAACP as saying that the extreme reactions were "over blown." The article also says that, "The film's director, producer, and screenwriter apologized, saying they didn't intend to offend anyone, but defended their right to poke fun" ("Controversy Resurrected" 2).

This type of poking fun is one way to earn big money. Some people think that the controversy over the film helped to boost its appeal. Maryanne Vandervelde, who wrote a book about movie groups, says that her group thought, "that Jackson's criticisms will only help the film to be seen by more people" (166). The controversy and the humor must have done something that people like because it garnered such a huge pile of cash. Some black filmmakers feel that this is a slap in the face to those who played an important role in black history. Julie Dash says that she was asked to have a line in one of her films saying that Rosa Parks just did not get up because she was tired. Dash says,

> That was the prevailing myth at the time. Why would I do something like that when every black person on the face of the planet knows that was not true? These network executives and producers were asking me to commit cultural suicide… Months later, we did a tour of the states promoting the film, and just before each and every screening, an African American representative of the community would stand up and say, 'We no longer have to live with the myth that Mrs. Parks refused to give her seat up just

> because her feet hurt…' my point is, what if I had allowed that statement to be made in the movie?... Of course, this was before the *Barbershop* controversy. (Dash qtd in Alexander).

Controversies like this are unlikely to be solved any time soon. In this present era the representations of African Americans are simply too numerous to be discussed in one book, paper, or article. The one thing that is certainly true is that there will be a variety to choose from and most of it will be criticized. Gandy takes note of the critical spirit of the modern era saying:

> the cultural activists have also engaged in hostile criticism of minority authors show publicly constructed identity falls outside the approved range. Even autobiographical works in which the author is unquestionably the most *authentic* source of knowledge…are likely to be appropriated for use in struggles which the authors… may have entered on the wrong side. (Gandy 74)

The images of African Americans in film will continue to be a complex and multifaceted field of study. This past decade alone provides endless resources. The current media image is a combination of the many stereotypes that have been constructed over the years. Just one film can have a plethora of different positive and negative stereotypes. Last year's Academy Award winner *Crash* has as characters a young black car thief and a middle class executive. The young man, who swears he never steals from black people, falls into a hard place when he tries to steal the older man's car. As they fight for control of the wheel, the look on his face reveals his surprise in finding a black driver in this nice car. When they are pulled over by police, the older man takes his gun

and gets out. Fortunately, the police do not find the gun, and when he gets back in, he drives the younger man to a corner and gives him back the gun telling him that he is embarrassed by him. These images present a complex blend of stereotypes in direct contrast to one another. As the movie case to *Crash* says the conflict takes place, "[i]n the gray area between black and white, victim and aggressor,"

Ideas about how to portray the lives of black people will be as varied as the people who produce them and the purposes for which they produce them. One thing that has not changed is the connection between art and social goals. The black filmmakers of today are not independent of a past filled with activism; instead, they are intimately connected to it. As Rhines says in *Black Film White Money*.

> The latest period of Black feature film production continues the relationship between the goals of racial uplift and the financial success attempted in the Du Bois/Washington feature, *The Birth of a Race*, through the many films of Oscar Micheaux and Melvin Van Peebles *Sweetback.* These filmmakers consider the political at least as important as, if not more important than, the aesthetic purpose of their work. In fact, the word *artist*, as usually applied to filmmakers such as David Lean or Francis Ford Coppola, seems inappropriate for most African American filmmakers. Whether they like it or not, the fact that most of their films comment on racism, sexism, poverty, oppression, and other social ills has caused critics and everyday people to respond more to the implicit social commentary than to the artistry of their films. (Rhines 103)

Film and theater play an important part in helping people define racial issues. Stereotypes are still a part of that process. The use of stereotypes cannot really be separated from these art forms. As the portrayals become more complex, the 'proper' use of them may also be hard to define. Most likely, a variety will be required and coexist like the characters in *Crash* in an uneasy fellowship with one another.

**Conclusion**

The use of stereotypes in film and theater is much more complex than most people would imagine, and is influenced by the prevailing attitudes among members of the minority group, as well as preferences of the majority group surrounding them. Gaining enough power to control or influence stereotypes is a lengthy process because it is very difficult to change the way that people think. However, it is possible for minority groups to be successful.

Studying stereotypes and their use brings one to reconsider whether stereotypes are innately bad or can be viewed as a tool that can be helpful. Since the stereotype is part of the way that people experience the world, it may be more practical for minority groups to make sure that they have an arsenal of positive stereotypes rather than trying to eliminate the stereotype. It might be advantageous to assist people in forming several different stereotypes or frames of reference for a type of person that they previously thought of as having only one type. The possibilities of how to manipulate the cognitive framework are endless.

The importance of the group as a social phenomenon is a factor that people often forget to take into account. The power of people banding together with common concerns

can create movements that change the way media is used. Studying this process can be helpful to minority groups who desire to improve their image, but it is also helpful for any scholar who wants to understand media and power. Concluding that money is power and power is money over simplifies this process. It is vital to understand all resources and their use in power struggles.

The study of theater and film as propaganda is a field that deserves more attention from scholars and ordinary people. If nothing else, people should be aware of the power that is being exercised over them so that they can harness that power to be players in the game of chess instead of resources for elites and power brokers to squander.