

LEGACIES OF BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MEDIA: THE POLITICAL CRITIQUE OF SPIKE Lee's *Bamboozled*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extraordinary ways in which the America mainstream visual media have propagated and circulated racist myths which subvert the cultural identity of the black race. Using Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, the paper exposes the negative social stereotypes espoused by American entertainment media about blacks, and argues that Spike Lee's film not only unravels that subversive Euro-American rhetoric, but also doubles as an intense social critique of that warped cultural dynamic.

KEYWORDS: Blackface Minstrelsy, Racist Stereotypes and American Media.

INTRODUCTION Because slavery is the founding historical relationship between black and white in America... many will argue, lingers in subterranean form to this day (Guerrero 1993: 03).

Film and the African-American Image

As a form of social expression, the film medium embodies significantly staggering amounts of social truths. This very character of the film art derives from its peculiar ability to draw upon social realities for its narratology. From its outset in the later parts of the nineteenth-century, cinema art began by recording the daily life of common people hence it became a keen recorder of prevailing times in Europe and North America. It is this power of cinema to capture the tensions and pleasures of everyday life that Arthur Schlesinger (1979) refers to when he talks about the medium's ability to offer us important insights into "the tastes, apprehensions, myths, and inner vibrations of an age" (xii).

And once cinema technology took shape as an established narrative art, it blossomed in the hands of the Americans. Not only did the Americans perfect the technology of cinema, the medium became for them a poignant instrument for writing their national history in the global public domain. Schlesinger (1979) offers an

illuminating insight on this aspect of cinema in the United States when he declares that "the fact that film has been the most potent vehicle of American imagination suggests all the more strongly that movies have something to tell us about the mysteries of American life" (xii). American films then have a deep historical link with its social environment, providing us the profoundest social transcripts about American society than historians, economists and other professionals of any period could ever offer.

As Siegfried Kracauer has eloquently argued, "what films reflect... are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimensions of consciousness" (Qtd in Schlesinger xiii). In other words, the recurrent themes, motifs, metaphors, and images that any art form embodies are important, for they show the prevailing worries and tensions of the people of such an age. For example, the most insightful revelation of post-revolutionary struggle in Russia, the desolation and solitude of post-war Germany, or even the detailed workings of imperialism in non-European colonies such as Africa, Asia and South America are best glimpsed through the films of such periods. Similarly, so do movies disclose to us the inner and outer workings of American life and hence racism will become an important narrative

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trope in that creative revelation. The inauguration of the race trope as early as the last quarter of the 19th century in American film was in keeping with the broader social and political context of the time and the peculiar tastes of the audiences for which film was meant hence Jack Shadonian thesis that “all films are ultimately about something that interests and/or bothers the culture they grew out of” (15). As soon as film yielded its narrative potentials with the trial of Edwin Porter’s fifteen minutes feature (*The Great Train Robbery*), it was to the contending issue of difference between whites and freed black slaves that it turned its attention to.

The first ever comprehensive feature to be made in the United States for example was *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith in 1915. This three-hour epic with superb montage technique was an amazing chronicle of the history of the United States beginning from reconstruction. The first feature to be shown in the white house, President Wilson Woodrow described it as “history written in lightening.” It opened on February 8th, 1915 in Los Angeles and on March 3rd, at the Liberty theatre in New York City. And although *Birth* was produced and directed by Griffith, it was actually a synthesis of the work of three southerners at the time living in the north. Griffith adapted the film script from Thomas Nixon’s anti-black novels, *The Leopard’s Spots* and *the Clansman*. It also employed the ideas of Woodrow Wilson in his book *Histories of the American People*. And according to Ed Guerrero, “Wilson took the view that emancipated blacks were ‘Idlers’ who could become ‘insolent and dangerous [and thus] wrote of reconstruction as a policy that ‘puts the white south under the heel of the black south’” (11). It was precisely this philosophy that *The Birth* espoused. The film implied that the African-American, especially in the heydays of reconstruction, when emancipated, was villainous, lustful for white women and political power, and above all, ignorant. These were stereotypical southern conceptions of the average African-American. To be sure, *The Birth* did not invent these stereotypes, but it popularized them and these motifs were to be deployed by other Euro-American directors and producers of American films and television programs for many years.

In describing the intent of the producers of *The Birth*, Ed Guerrero remarks that “As frank racial propaganda, *The Birth of a Nation* is an elaborate construction of black stereotypes, ranging from the loyal slave, the mammy, and the dancing bucks in the slave quarters of pre-civil

war days to the insolent, criminal and free ‘brut Negro’ of reconstruction” (15). The entire black population including the small body of interests groups such as the NAACP and the press condemned Griffith’s work. African-Americans and other minority peoples became aware of how negative and prejudicial the art of film narrativized them. Instinctively, a new awakening amongst the African-American population emerged to reconfigure the black image in the American media. This awareness emerged mostly due to the fact that most colored characters in American movies were depicted as “black buffoon[s] who appeared not to have the slightest intelligence. When the Negro was not made an object of ridicule, he was portrayed as the devoted slave who knew his place” (Mapp 16).

So independent black moviemakers began to emerge to counteract and reconstruct such old southern stereotypes. According to Thomas Cripps (1977), “...by the end of the great depression, popular taste had become more sophisticated and no longer was willing to accept so readily the old southern stereotypes that Hollywood was offering. Black protests against these stereotypes were having their effects too” (05). The old Hollywood films, produced to suit prevailing white American values and tastes were becoming unpopular. This was crucial for the industry because a substantial segment of the industry’s patrons were African-Americans. So by the late 1920s independent studios with the sole aim of producing all black films emerged. Chief amongst these movement were the Lincoln Company, Oscar Micheaux, the colored players, Reol, Ralph Cooper, and many others. Finances and technical know-how hampered these companies, but a vigorous match toward reconstructing the battered image of the black American (usually played by whites in blackface) had begun.

In spite of these efforts, a lingering racial tension still remains in the United States. Among many other areas, the American entertainment industry (Radio, TV, film) still reverberates with racial stereotypes of blacks only that the media have now “substituted new subtle stereotypes for old blatant ones” (Mapp 08). American mainstream media, especially TV networks, still circulate ridiculous images of the African race. Most common is the black man as exhibitor of grotesque comic stunts. It is this perpetuation of the old comic motifs where blackness becomes a source of popular spectacle in the entertainment industry that Spike Lee takes on in his 2000

release of *Bamboozled*.

The Politics and Aesthetics of an African-American Film Producer/Director: Spike Lee

Shelton Jackson Lee, popularly known as Spike Lee, was born on the 20th of March 1957 in Atlanta and later raised in Forte Green section of Brooklyn. Lee had an early grounding in the performing arts, as his father, Bill Lee, was a jazz musician (perhaps this accounts for why Delacroix's own dad in *Bamboozled* is also a black performer). He attended Atlanta's prestigious More House College and later earned a degree in mass communication. He also enrolled in the New York's University Tisch School of the Arts, earning a Master's degree in film production. After this was a fulltime career in filmmaking both in the feature and documentary formats. According to an anonymous biographer, while there have been streams of African-American filmmakers since the late 1920s, "none has had the same cultural or artistic impact as Spike Lee." Combining the multiple roles of writer, director, producer, and entrepreneur, Lee "has revolutionized the role of black talent in Hollywood, tearing apart decades of stereotypes and marginalized portrayals to establish an arena for Afro- American voices to be heard...his movies are a series of outspoken provocative socio-political critiques informed by an unwavering commitment to challenging cultural assumptions not only about race but also about class and gender." He has directed a number of commercials and has evolved a pre-retail outfit "Spike Joint" where apparels relating to his films are sold. But more than anything else, he acquired a 40 acre and mull film institute on the campus of Brooklyn Long Island Jason Ankey to support young African-American filmmakers.

His works, mostly concerned with racial minorities, are considered as radical and contrapuntal cultural texts amidst Euro-American hegemony. His cinematic corpuses reveal him as a politically radical and progressive filmmaker. In an interview with Salim Muwakhil, he framed the political slant of his movies by saying "someone has to force America to come to grips with the problems of racism" (Qtd in Lubiano 101). Though Wahneema Lubiano, African-American feminist is critical of the uncritical celebration of Spike Lee by the American press and academics, she nonetheless acknowledges the issues which he takes on in his films. She agrees that "what has not changed in the history of race in the United States is its centrality within culture, the importance of it to our socialization as produced

and reinforced by schools, organizations, family, our sexual lives, churches, institutions—all of which produce racially structured society" (101). She then goes on to say that Spike Lee and his "...work represent a problematic through which the political difficulties that inhere in African-American cultural production in this moment can be usefully discussed" (98). This statement highlights the great contribution that Spike and his works provoke within the American cultural sector. For any one particularly interested in African-American cinema tradition between the later parts of the 20th century to the present, his works provide a mine of discourses. He is one of the leading African-American film directors who have held their own with "thematically challenging work" (George 84).

***Bamboozled*: Critiquing Racist Mythologies in American Mainstream Media**

Ed Guerrero has observed that "opening scenes are often used to express an ideological frame or orientation through which the spectator consumes the narrative..." (32). In other words, the very position a film takes is outstandingly evident from the very beginning and this is indeed the case with Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. Dunwitty's meeting with the senior executives of CNS where he exhorts a radical overhaul in the programming for the network is important. The scene illuminates the power of proprietorship (financing) and its enormous impact on the content of the media. His vehemence about the needed radical change in programming in CNS is not entirely his own. In his own words, the top hierarchy of the network are "breathing down his back" to come up with something new and funny for its viewers. This scene indeed tells us something about the history of media financing/production and content implications in the United States.

Top financiers of American mainstream networks come from a long pedigree of Euro-American supremacist class who shared and believed in the age-old mythic lores about innate Negro capacities. It is these cultural archetypes, which usually circulate among middle-class American media audiences that network owners with an eye for profit permanently explore and deploy in their productions. Thomas Cripps for instance has noted this influence of capital in culture production in the United States, tracing it as far back as the late nineteenth-century. According to Cripps, "unfortunately for the Negroes, whites slowly acquired technical and financial control over the motion picture industry and combined the many tiny studios into a nationwide system. Blacks all soon but

disappeared from the screen” (08). When they did appear, they followed the old southern stereotypes. As a form of social protest then *Bamboozled* is concerned with “what it means to be a black entertainer in a white society...where almost all avenues of distribution are controlled by white conglomerate whose idea of what’s black are profoundly different from those of black artistes” (Park 01).

The tradition of ownership influence has continued to the present when the combined forces of network owners, unchallenged by black finances, still influence the appropriation, re-spurning and delivery of old stereotypes of black images in the mainstream media. Television and film maybe too distinct media but they share the same quality of being able to capture both image (sight) and (voice) sound. The prevailing dominance and perpetuation of prejudicial images of blacks on the small screen (TV) is thus only a muted form of the age-old influence of sponsors on the content of film. Current Hollywood films still carry the old black stereotypes—the Patriot, the Family Man, The Legend of Baggar Venice and more.

As social text then, *Bamboozled* provides deep insights into the sociology of the American society. An anonymous reviewer of the film argued that the point the film makes is “that attitudes haven’t changed, they’re merely disguised by political correctness” (01). James Berardinelli puts it blankly; “American TV viewers are fundamentally racist and that the entertainment industry collaborates by providing entertainments that emasculates blacks” (02). This stinking indictment comes out quite clearly in Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*. When the black protagonist, Delacroix, under the pressure of his boss, drums up the Mantan New Millennium Show, tailored after the old southern minstrel blackface shows, his hope is that his bosses will consider it offensive and then fire him. But when his boss, Dunwitty, swallows his bait and the CNS moguls are all for the concept, he imagines that public outcry will stymie the continuation of the show by the network. But alas he is mistaken as its first airing receives gleeful public approval and great acclaim from the press. Before long, the shooting location for the show is a beehive of fans all adorned in black cork—the outstanding marker of the “Mantans.”

This inadvertent popularity of the “Mantans” unearths something profoundly inherent in the American media audience. According to O’Connor and Jackson, films usually “tell us what made people of other decades laugh or cry, what

made them forget their troubles, and what they believed about their past” (xxi). In other words, the popularity of film and television programs privilege insights into “the subtleties of mass prejudices”; they tell about the state of mind of people at a certain epoch. The Mantans’ popularity in *Bamboozled* thus signifies an enduring longing for black buffoonery by the American media audience, and indeed illuminates the *raison d’être* for why the US media keeps recycling those images almost a century and half after slavery. Lee’s own statement about the motivation for the film corroborates this point: “Being a black man in this country, and seeing how we’ve been depicted on television and film, this film has been inside of me since I started watching television and going to the movies” (Anonymous Review). Till date, prime time TVs still proliferate stock images of blacks and such programs are popular with the audiences especially white middle-class Americans. This lingering taste is an echo of the surviving passion of white American for black spectacle that dates back as far as even the lynching theatres of the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth-century America.

As creative cultural products, African-American films are therefore metaphors for the larger socio-political experiences of the colored people in the United States. *Bamboozled* particularly narrativizes the recurrent ways in which black culture is repeatedly appropriated and subverted to negative ends because of racist inclinations in the United States. This is what Ed Guerrero hints at when he declares that black culture is usually “relentlessly co-opted, emptied of its social meaning and sold by the entertainment industry as the latest fashion or fad” (07). This is quite evident in *Bamboozled*. Although it is Delacroix who initiates the Mantan concept, his boss (Dunwitty), complemented by the efforts of a Finish director/cameraman, completely distorts his concept by exaggerating it. Delacroix’s tantrums about the inappropriateness of the show’s content are unheeded because Dunwitty knows the audience for whom he’s designing his TV show—an audience with a prolonged longing for archetypal black entertainment. This managerial maneuver indicates the widely held view that film and TV moguls in the United States have “increasingly tried to reflect conservative middle class values and strict racial codes of the time to guarantee profit from there as well as offset the cost increased capitalization and consolidation” (Guerrero 17). Both at the level of production and

consumption, there exist a recurrent cycle of entertainment tastes in America—the one suitable to white America at the expense of the African-Americans.

In teasing out the dangerous social critiques embedded in *Bamboozled*, it is crucial to trace the genealogy of blackface minstrel in the United States because that history helps illuminate the peculiar mimicry slant that Spike Lee deploys in the film, especially as a counter-cultural discourse. As the main activity of slaves was labor, they spent a large amount of their time in plantation farms tending cotton, coffee, sugar and other crops. And though extricated thousands of miles away from their original homeland, they were not completely uprooted from their culture. In their spare moments they found time to recreate and amuse themselves within the plantations. Inevitably, they turned to their cultural memories for fun, which came in the form of dance and songs. As plantations were one of the rare areas for inter-racial interaction, these cultural expressions provided amazing exotica to Euro-American slave owners at the time. Instinctively, some white slave owners began to relish and even patronize these cultural forms exhibited by blacks within the plantations. Eric Lott has noted these kinds of early inter racial contacts that fertilized the growth of minstrel imitation amongst Anglo-American theatre troupes. He reports from the New York clipper a certain Billy Whitlock, a banjo player with the Dan Emmett's Virginia minstrels who used to "quietly steal off to some Negro hut to hear the darkeys sing and see them dance" (50). So also was Ben Cotton, a performer in Mississippi, who used to sit and perform with blacks in front of their cabins.

And plantations were not the only inter-racial contact zones from where black performance culture sifted into white culture. Apart from black festivals, churches and theatres (where people like Ira Aldridge, the renowned black Shakespeare artist), there was what Lhamon Jr. calls the "Catherine Market street culture." We mention this market and the performances that were contemporaneous with it because the performances we see in *Bamboozled* are prototypes of the Catherine Market tradition. The Catherine market, located in the seventh street of the seventh ward of New York, was not a slave market. Rather, it was a market for the exchange of goods and services. Here, slaves, mostly from Long Island, who took leave from their masters for a number of days came with wares such as roots, berries, herbs,

fish, and oysters and so forth to sell as a way of earning extra to earn money.

Drawing from the reports of Thomas De Voe, Lhamon explicates on how black slaves hired by butchers, performed dances and songs for a fee (7); something they'll naturally do for mere entertainment in the plantations anyway. Usually in twos or threes, the performers danced on top of boards called shingles (a kind of improvised make-shift stage), sang comical tunes, and accepted offerings from the public. When there was no money they accepted eels (fish) in lieu of money. They generated sounds from tapping and clapping their feet and playing instruments made locally from plantations called banjos. The Catherine market was thus a unique social space where "Citizens and slaves mingled to gather, perform, and learn the stylistic gestures that sorted out their problems. It was an urban edge and a nexus, a determinative cultural valve sorting our nutrients and waste" (Lhamon 8). Both white and blacks loved the black performances and they showed their support, love and enchantment through the tokens they threw on the players.

Before long, white theatre performers adapted this popular entertainment into their repertory for greater appeal. As Lotts puts it "The outsider comes to teach the insider. The insiders master the gesture themselves; in time, they claim to do them better than the outsiders" (13). As the white adaptors were not black in color, they had to simulate blackness if their shows were to remain close to the originals. So to the blackening-up tradition did the performers all turn. According to William Mahar, "The primary convention that identified the minstrelsy show as entertainment was the burnt cork make-up" (01) and a number of reasons have been advanced for this blackening up but they fall beyond the purview of this paper.

As the defining relationship between blacks and whites during this period was that of slave and master, inferior versus superior, laborer versus employer, these disparities soon found their way into the blackface minstrelsy shows. According to Mahar, "the combination of burned, pulverized champagne corks and water (Sometimes petroleum jelly or a similar substance) served as a racial marker announcing that a single actor or an ensemble offered what were selected aspects of (arguably) African-American culture to audiences interested in how racial differences and enslavement reinforced distinctions between blacks and Americans" (01). So although Lotts advises that it is to the North

that we must turn to in questing for the origins of blackface minstrelsy, when it did emerge, Southern prejudices permeated it. Fredrick Douglass, denouncing the pro-Southern inclination for such minstrel groups as the "Virginia Minstrels", the "Christy Minstrels" and the "Ethiopian Serenaders," described them as "Filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." Douglass did believe that blackface entertainment "compromised the search for racial harmony and treated differences in race and status as a subject of ridicule" (Mahar 7-8). The blackface shows degenerated from their earlier benign and harmless cultural exchanges to platforms where white racial subjectivities were worked into them. And this trend was to permeate and pervade all white cultural productions from the late nineteenth-century onwards. Lotts puts it succinctly when he says that the minstrelsy template culled from the Catherine Market "survived transatlantic crossing and held sway both south and north of the Thames. It held for the traveling minstrel show in metropolitan and frontier venues. It survived, even showed the way for, silent and talking films. It was popular on TVs in the fifties and even now organizes much of MTV" (05).

It is this cultural history of the blackface minstrelsy and its subversive Euro-American adaptation and deployment that Spike mimics to score his point in *Bamboozled*. When the film opens, we find two itinerant black performers in New York called Manray and Dowark (Savion Glover and Tommy Davidson). But these two street performers adopt almost all the key elements of the "Catherine Market" paradigm. As slaves left their dingy plantation aboard to the Five-points Catherine Market square, so do Manray and Dowark leave their scruffy habitation in the Manhattan ghetto to the city center in New York; as the slaves bore their shingles for performances, so do Manray and Dowark roll their mobile stage with them; as the slaves danced and made sounds by clapping their feet, so does Manray create his own melody from tap-dancing; as whites gathered to watch the cultural exotica of the slaves, so do New Yorkers swam to watch these two street performers; as the slaves took offerings or eels from their watching audiences, so do the two black New Yorkers collect tokens from their white New Yorkers; as the Negro performers were hired by the butchers for "a penny extra" more, so will the Manrays be

hired by CNS network; and as blackface performers made their way from stage to the screen, so will the two black performers transit from the street to the tube (TV). Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* thus offers a beautiful visual catalogue of pop culture from the Jacksonian age to the mid twentieth-century.

But Spike's deployment of the blackface motif emerges from a thorough grounding in the very logic of colonial mimicry. According to Homi Bhabha "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal." In this sense "The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (126-127). It is a form of cultural politics that attempts to show that the colonial paradigm is incapable of being a cultural model. The mockery of blackface in *Bamboozled* then becomes a powerful logic of disavowal of the colonizer's imperfect and subversive mimicry of indigenous cultural forms.

An unmistakable cultural resonance in the film that also doubles as a poignant social critique is the peculiar design of the Mantan New Millennium Minstrel Show. The setting, costume and make-up, characterization, music, dance, and spectacle of the show are reminiscent of the early blackface minstrelsy shows of antebellum America. Recorded in a proscenium theatre, the setting is a watermelon patch on an Alabama plantation. This set, according to Paula Massood, "Resembles a southern plantation very much like the idyllic setting from early vaudevilles or from the black cast musicals, such as Vincent Minelli's *Cabin in the Sky* produced in Hollywood between 1929 and 1943" (207). It is here that the Mantans, supported by other stock black entertainment characters such as *Rastus and Sambo*, and backed by a band called the Alabama porch monkeys (played by the Roots), are seen "cavorting and lazing around their water melon patch (Wright 02). The two act out long held beliefs about blacks popularized in the antebellum south, what Donald Bogle has referred to as "Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bugs" (1989).

These categories usually include chicken stealing, crap shooting, watermelon eating, slow talking, laziness, gin drinking etc. (Sampson 10 & 24). These stereotypes implied that a black slave could never resist water melon; that the plantation was a cherished place of pleasure for the slave; that the slave was complacent with serving his white master and so on. But as a form

of cultural critique, the present day setting of the *Mantans* suggests that little has changed in America. The blackface *Mantan Show* and the surprising and ironic popularity that trails it in the film set in the America of the Twenty-First Century underscores Paula Massood's view that "what might appear as innovative in urban popular culture actually has deep roots in the long and perhaps forgotten history of American cinematic, televisual, and theatrical representations" (208). It is a subtle reference to the recurrence of mythic conceptions of the African-American that continues to circulate the American socio-cultural ambience for more than two centuries and half.

As a way of engaging the contemporary political, economic, cultural, and social existence in post civil rights America, *Bamboozled* succeeds precisely in enunciating Massood's point through the visualization of archival footage of African-American images in the US media since the last quarter of the 19th Century to the present. Rob Blackwelder corroborates this point when in his review of the film he states that, "the dizzying array of historical footage edited into the film showing blacks exploited in showbiz certainly help makes his point, as does the extensive collection of racist antiques..." (03). These clips of American entertainment history and the pejorative semiotization of the Negro in it run as far back as the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the 1903s through *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and later TV comedies beginning from the 1950s up to the *Good Times* of the 1980s. This visual history articulates a repetition of years of black stigmatization in America's cultural sector.

In arguing for the apprehension of the use of historical clips in the film as an articulation of echoes, we draw copiously from memory studies and its connection to film. Paul Grainge for instance has argued that "as a technology able to picture and embody the temporality of the past, cinema has become central to the mediation of memory in modern cultural life" (01). Film becomes a cultural tool bearing popular memory as distinct from public history. Even though history and memory are intertwined in some sense as both concern the knowledge and interpretation of the past, memory is different in the sense that "it draws attention to the activation of the past as they are experienced in the present" (Grainge 01). And memory functions in cultural texts such as films in very peculiar ways. It becomes a strong factor in socio-cultural and political struggles. This is how we view the archival footage in *Bamboozled*. We see them as

cultural memories deployed to a political end. The footage function precisely in the same manner in which Grainge argues that "the negotiation of memory," especially in the cultural sector, "describes the echo and pressure as it is configured in the present-based struggles over the meaning of lived experience." In this context then memory "...is seen as a political force, a form of subjugated knowledge that can function as a site of potential opposition and resistance..." (2-3).

The sponsors of the *Mantan Show* in *Bamboozled* also provide other insights on the dimensions of racist echoes in the United States. The advert by producers of a two-liter bottle of malt liquor drink tagged *Da Bomb* drops a hint on the widely held notion of black hyper-sexuality. The ad depicts black masculine characters and bitchy black women exhorting the use of *Da Bomb* as they claim it invigorates sexual performance. The ad thus is a powerful reference to the persisting conceptualizations of black hyper-sexuality. The hyperbolization of black sexuality had begun soon after slavery. The logic behind this popular myth was that the children of the loyal slave (*Uncle Tom*), once free, became hyper-virile (men) and bitchy (women). This notorization of the African-American figure, what Wiegman calls "feminized docility" and "hyper-masculinised phallicity" (96) of the black subject became a widely circulated social myth and it accounted for most of the lynching orgies that were prevalent between the later parts of the nineteenth to the early parts of the twentieth-century. This legendary phallicism of the black male was reproduced in American cultural circuits such as theatres, films, novels, dramas and comic books.

And while we agree that *Bamboozled* is a vehement agitation against the persistent and pervasive stereotyping of the African-American, the film does not spare the black wo/man for his or her complicity in these continued echoes of stigmatization. According to Andrew O'Hehir, "Lee also suggests that blacks have become conscious and unconscious collaborators in the perpetuation of these stereotypes and must bear some responsibility for it" (01). The *Mantans* is an entertainment concept initiated by a black American (*Delacroix*) working with the white middle class; the stars of the show are two African-Americans (*Manray* and *Dowark*); the excited audiences who cheer on with cork colored faces are mostly blacks. When the advert for the show's audition is put out, it is blacks that flock the venue with different black stereotype

performances—Aldridge, the Negro pastor, horn piping reminiscent of slave “doings” in plantations, etc.

This complicity of the black American that Lee points at in the film is usually not unconnected with economic gains. Many African-Americans prostitute their talents for profit from Euro-American art sponsors and patrons and this dates back to as far as the early parts of the nineteenth-century. Eric Lotts for instance has made reference to Thomas De Voe’s reports of slaves in 1815 from Long Island who on being granted short leave by their masters “were ever ready” to perform Negro “Sayings or Doings” for extra money in public (41). These types of performances, as I have illustrated earlier, were later to be appropriated by earlier Anglo-American theatre performers into their repertory using burned cork on their faces to simulate blackness.

It is the recurrence of such black American complicity in his/her stigmatization in the twenty-first century that the film hints at. This is evident in the attitudes of Delacroix and the two Mantan performers. Dela, as he is popularly called in the film, smiles as huge cheques from the network come his way and the lives of the two entertainers changes dramatically from ghetto personalities and impecunious roving artistes to big-time New Yorkers with a luscious apartment, fame and money. These economic gains often blind most African-American entertainers to the cultural treachery they pose to their own race. This is another form of echo but one that resounds from within the precincts of the black community itself rather than from outside, what David Molden (1993) calls “Black on Black Shame.”

CONCLUSION

In her work, *Black City Cinema: American Urban Experience in Film*, Paula Massood calls attention to Mikhail Bakhtin’s argument about the powerful link between the film text and the actual world of reality. Bakhtin acknowledges that there is a difference between the world outside and the one created in the film text. But the former feeds on, and relies almost entirely on the latter for its depictions. According to Bakhtin “out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerges the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)” (Qtd in Massood 06). We find this compelling logic invaluable relevant to our discussion of the echoes of African-American stereotypes and

caricatures in contemporary cultural productions in America as suggested in *Bamboozled*. To be clear, we do not suggest that *Bamboozled* as a creative piece is itself an echo (an argument which can possibly be pulled). Rather, we argue that the scenarios it presents are mimics (a form of sign-posting) of contemporary echoes of cultural racism in the United States. The film, through its reproduction of cultural artifacts, helps us understand the current experiences of the African-American as s/he engages with the society where s/he lives. What we see in the film therefore is only refractions from the reality of daily experiences of African-Americans in the US. What *Bamboozled* does then is to invoke and play on what Yearwood Gladstone (2000) refers to as “cultural memories” through narration, to protest a dimension of racism which manifests itself in very congealed forms in American *mediascape*. The film functions as “a kind of visual testimony or evidence” (Smith Michelle 162) to the enduring structures of domination and racism that still pervade the American society. In many ways then, we argue that *Bamboozled* essentially triangulates what Cynthia Lucia refers to as “race, money and media” in contemporary America.

We end this paper with a rather long quotation which, in our opinion, captures the true essence of the production of *Bamboozled*: “What would be desirable in future cinematic inscriptions of slavery would be the production of black and other independent features that artfully historicize and politicize the issues in a way that not only reveals slavery’s past but at the same time, by allegory, allusion or otherwise, communicates its relevance to Americans today” (Guerrero 35). This statement provides a black cinematic agenda within which we can authoritatively situate Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*. The film not only historicizes but also politicizes distinctive cultural memories of Africa-American experience within the field of media production in the United States.

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