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# Racism in the Cinema: Proposal for a Methodological Investigation

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The following methodological model for dealing with questions of racism and colonialism grew out of the discussions of a study group on racism attended by interested graduate students from the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. Our goal was to understand the processes of racism as they operate not only within individual film texts, but also within the institutions that generate and distribute these texts as well as the audience which receives them. Our model, intended as suggestive rather than definitive, proposes a series of questions that might be addressed to specific films and to their processes of production. We have arranged these questions under specific rubrics - the industry, the processes of production, distribution, reception - but we recognize that these categories are not discrete but inter-articulated, mutually reflecting and inflecting one another. While recognizing the importance of textual questions (a subject that merits a separate essay), we have chosen here to emphasize the contextual, the social institutions and production practices which construct the filmic image of oppression, of injustice, and at times, of liberation.

Any serious discussion of racism in the cinema calls for a prior definition of the term. What exactly is racism? One of the clearest and most comprehensive definitions was proposed by Albert Memmi. Racism, according to Memmi, is the "generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and at his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privilege or aggression."<sup>1</sup> Memmi's definition avoids the twin traps of psychologism and sociologism common to what might be called the 'Harris Poll' approach to racism: the assumption that racism has exclusively to do with the internal harbouring of negative opinions or hostile feelings toward another group. Rather than fetishize the individual and subjective, Memmi's definition calls attention to the power situation of which racism is a part, that it is not a mere mental attitude but rather a rationale for concrete oppression. Although we have focused on anti-black racism in this essay, the model hopefully applies to analogous oppressions - including classism, sexism, colonialism and anti-semitism.

The first set of questions to be addressed concerns the structural mechanisms of the film industry itself. Here we are dealing with the questions of access, control and market that have been asked by minority, oppositional, and Third World film workers over and over again. In South Africa, Harriet Gavshon points out, films intended for black audiences are financed, scripted, shot and censored by whites. In Brazil, blacks have had a minimal role in the scripting, directing and producing of films that, as often as not, concern them. In the United States, despite the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People's 1942 compact with the Hollywood studios to integrate blacks into the ranks of studio technicians, very few have become directors, scriptwriters or cinematographers. It was recently estimated that minority directors (i.e. all racial minorities) constituted less than 3% of the membership of the almost 4 000-member Directors' Guild of America.<sup>2</sup> And among them, only two black directors, Sidney Poitier and Michael Schultz, were finding regular work. (Significantly, a number of black directors, such as Robert Gardner [*Clarence and Angel*] and Woodie King [*The Torture of Mothers*], have chosen to work outside of the commercial film industry.) An agreement between several film unions and the U.S. Justice Department in 1970 required that ethnic minorities be integrated into the industry's general labour pools, but the agreement's good intentions were undercut by growing unemployment throughout the industry and by white defence of a seniority system which favoured older (and therefore white) members.

If blacks and minorities have difficulty entering technical and professional unions, they have even greater difficulty gaining access to crucial positions of control. In a system of Gulf and Western-style horizontal monopoly and production packaging, it is often difficult to discover exactly who controls a given phase of film production. Much racial discrimination takes place at the pre-production phase, the process by which subjects and lead players and literary properties are chosen. It has recently been reported that racist and sexist criteria have been used in the planning of made-for-TV films. A white Anglo-Saxon male, according to the formula, is the preferred hero because the networks believe that people could more easily relate to such an ideal.<sup>3</sup>

A system which favours big-budget blockbusters, similarly, is often racist in effect, if not in explicit intention, in that it favours groups with economic power and discriminates against those without it. The Third World, in this sense, is doubly cursed by cinematic neo-colonialism. First World films, usually from Hollywood, with easy access to Third World distribution circuits, emphasize production values which are difficult for Third World industries to imitate and are often inappropriate to Third World concerns. At the same time, economic neo-colonialism and technological dependency raise film making costs in the Third World itself, where imported film, cameras and accessories often cost two or three times as much as in the First World. (It is no accident that Brazilian parodies of American films, as João Vieira points out, tend to focus on super-productions such as *King Kong* or *Jaws*, as a pretext for the directors to simultaneously mock the American films as well as the Brazilian inability to imitate their glossy and high-tech production values.)<sup>4</sup> Even revolutionary film makers, in such a context, remain dependant on multi-national companies for their equipment and film stock. And the film stocks themselves, may be said to discriminate against darker-complected

peoples in that they are sensitive to particular skin tones and must be stopped down or specially lit for others. The celluloid itself, in this sense, is racially inscribed by an implicitly ethnocentric industry.

The production processes of individual films, their means of production and relations of production, bring up many questions concerning the film making apparatus and the participation of blacks (as well as other non-whites and women) within that apparatus. It seems noteworthy, for example, that in multi-ethnic but white-dominated societies such as South Africa, Brazil and the United States, blacks have tended to participate in the film making process mainly as actors and actresses rather than as producers, directors and script-writers. In South Africa, whites finance, script, direct and produce films with all-black casts. In the late twenties in the United States, all-white film making crews shot all-black musicals like *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929). And in Brazil, virtually all black and mulatto films like *Black Orpheus* (1959) or *Rio Zona Norte* (1957) are shot by virtually all-white crews. Blacks then, like women, appear as images in spectacles whose social thrust is largely determined by others: black souls as white man's artifact.

Since commercial films are designed to make profits, we must ask to whom these profits go. Black South Africans do not profit from the films made 'for them'. The thousands of black Brazilians who played at an out-of-season carnival, with virtually no pay, for the benefit of Marcel Camus' cameras, never saw the millions of dollars that *Black Orpheus* made around the world. It was not blacks, similarly, who profited from the American blaxploitation films of the early seventies. Whites financed, produced, and packaged these films and they received the lion's share of the profits.

A film inevitably mirrors, to some extent, its own processes of production. The processes by which Andrew McLaglen's *The Wild Geese* (1978) was produced, for example, reflect a racism identical to that promoted by the film itself.<sup>5</sup> The film, a glorification of white mercenaries and their black African allies, was financed by South African investors and British banks. Its crew, according to *Variety*, consisted of 140 white South Africans,<sup>6</sup> 82 British and Americans, and "an additional 200 African blacks as workers." Euan Lloyd, the film's producer, emphasized the advantages of using cheap black labour, claiming that British productions using what he called "ethnic labour" (as if all labour were not ethnic) were the cheapest by today's standards. The film's production, in sum, 'used' blacks much as the film itself used token blacks to 'integrate' what was essentially a white racist mercenary force.

The choice of players for films also raises obvious questions of racial bias. In early films, political considerations in racial casting were quite overt. In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) hat-in-hand Negroes were played by blacks and aggressive blacks were played by whites in blackface. But today, how many aggressive blacks are cast in positions of power and responsibility? Black actor Hal Williams, the Sergeant Ross of the TV series *Private Benjamin*, claimed on a recent programme of *Tony Brown's Journal* (14 November 1982) that he was being pressured to underplay his strength in the performance of his role as military man. Why is it necessary, furthermore, that a role be designated "black" for a black actor to be cast? (Brazilian practice, in this sense, is somewhat more open and less

race conscious. See *Blacks In Brazilian Cinema : An essay in Comparative Methodology* in this issue.) Does the role of astronaut, or judge, or politician, automatically imply non-black?

The importance of the participation of the colonized or formerly colonized in the process of production becomes obvious when we compare Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) to his later *Burn!* (1970). The former film was an Italian-Algerian co-production which cost \$800 000. The Algerians were involved in every aspect of the production, and Franco Solanas rewrote the scenario many times in collaboration with the Algerians. In the film, Algerian non-actors represent themselves in a staged reconstruction of the Algerian War of Independence. The result of this production process is that Algerians exist as people in the film, speak in their language and express themselves in the characteristic modes and gestures of Algerian culture. *Burn!*, on the other hand, Pontecorvo's multi-million didactic portrayal of a failed anti-colonialist revolution, involved no such collaboration between Europeans and Third World people. An Italo-French co-production, the film casts Marlon Brando as a British colonizer and the non-actor Evaristo Marques, who had previously been a peasant, as the Latin American colonized. By pitting one of the First World's most charismatic actors against a completely inexperienced Third World non-actor, Pontecorvo disastrously tipped the scales in terms of spectatorial fascination in favour of the colonizer, in a film whose didactic intention was to support anti-colonial struggle. The lack of Third World participation in the production processes of the film led to a one-dimensional and inauthentic portrayal of the colonized, who become shadowy figures without clear human or cultural definition.

Censorship and self-censorship also inflect the film's representation. In South Africa, Harriet Gavshon points out, censorship of films made for black audiences has traditionally been more stringent than that of films made for whites.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, the motion picture industry's self-regulation, the 1927 "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" and the 1934 "Production Code" declared that miscegenation, spelled out as "sex relationships between the white and black races" was not in keeping with the standards of American life. And in Brazil, official sensitivity to latent racial tensions was certainly one of the factors that postponed the release of Antunes Filho's *Compasso de Espera* (*Marking Time*), a strong indictment of individual and institutional racism in Brazil, for almost three years.

The same kinds of questions that we have addressed to the cinema industry and its production processes are pertinent to distribution and exhibition as well. We must examine how a film reaches or fails to reach an audience. The existing global distribution of power makes the First World nations of the West cultural 'transmitters' while reducing most Third World countries to the status of 'receivers'. The flow of sounds and images tends to be unidirectional. While the Third World is inundated with North American cultural products in the form of Hollywood films, television series, and popular music, the First World tends to receive precious little of the vast cultural production of the Third World.

All the distribution advantages go to the First World countries. This process began, in the cinema, shortly after the First World War, when North American film distribution companies began to dominate Third World markets, and especially those of Latin America. (See Susan Ryan's article in this issue for a discussion of the

'precise mechanisms, in the case of Mexico, of this domination). The continuing economic dependency of Latin American nations makes them vulnerable to North American commercial pressure. When dependant countries take measures to strengthen their own film industries or to set up trade barriers to foreign films, for example, the American film industry, in collusion with the American government, can threaten retaliation in some other economic area such as the purchase of raw materials from the dependant country. American films also enjoy the advantage, in most cases, of having already covered their costs in the domestic market, in which case they can be profitably "dumped" on Third World markets at very low prices. Indeed, it is often more profitable for Third World exhibitors to screen American films than to screen local films, precisely because of their low prices and often because of the conditions of cultural colonialism, because of their easier marketability. American films, furthermore, often arrive in the Third World "pre-advertised" in the sense that much of the media hype revolving around prestigious big-budget productions-the rumoured hiring of stars, the projected budgets, romances and quarrels - reaches the Third World, in the form of journalistic articles and television reports, prior to the local release of the film. (The Brazilian parodies of American big-budget films, such as *King Kong*, a parody of the De Laurentis *King Kong*, and *Bacalhau*, or "Codfish", a parody of *Jaws*, parasitically profit from this hype in order to attract audiences to the local parody version of the films). The dissemination of American popular music also plays a role in the advertising of Hollywood films. *Saturday Night Fever*, for example, arrived with previous publicity in many Third World countries because multinational-dominated radio and television stations had often given over considerable air time to the music featured in the film.

If we shift our attention to the situation within particular First World countries, we must ask similar questions concerning access, control and market. How do distribution factors determine the audience or predispose spectatorial reception? The theatre or neighbourhood into which a commercially released film is booked can determine a film's audience, just as the audience can inflict booking policies. South African blacks, for example, are partly served by cinemas, church and school halls sufficing mainly in the towns and open air mobile units in the countryside. In Brazil, movie theatres tend to be located in urban middle-class areas, a location which discriminates, in a sense, against the largely black and mulatto populations of the outlying "suburbios." In the United States, the urban demography is reversed, so that blacks tend to live in the inner-city areas, precisely the areas where the proportion of movie theatres is declining. Distribution can thus ultimately affect production, in the sense that producers might argue a declining black audience as a reason for refusing films with black themes or participants.

Marketing strategies often discriminate between target audiences and even between neighbourhoods. Thomas Cripps writes of a film from the early teens that was entitled *One Large Evening* when it played in the ghetto and *A Night in Countdown* when it played in white neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup> The high-cultural presentations of the American Film Theatre, similarly, were not booked in Harlem. More recently, *Ragtime* advertised itself as a black power film in the ghetto, and as an exercise in nostalgia in white neighbourhoods, with advertising copy that began: "It was the best of times ..." Such practices, whether termed demographic, deceptive or simply racist, demonstrate the powerful relationship between distribution

and exhibition policies and spectatorial expectations and vantage point.

Distribution and exhibition policies also inflect the audience reception of a given film. Viewing *The Birth of a Nation* at a Ku Klux Klan rally, in a film history class or at a commercial release does not lead to an identical experience. Seeing *Battle of Algiers* is not the same experience when it is seen in Paris with Frenchmen or in Algiers with Algerians. But apart from such questions of the nature of the audience, distribution and exhibition strategies can "aim" a film at a mass public or at a specifically targeted audience which might share a common framework of concern. The pairing of films on a double bill or their selection as part of a special series or retrospective (e.g. on such subjects as "blacks in film") can also orient a film's reception or help define its audience.

Film criticism, finally, often operates as a kind of literary appendage to the film industry, as First World critics often project their ethnocentric assumptions in criticism which is often frankly discriminatory or tendentiously ignorant. When Andrew Sarris declares in *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962* that American Cinema is "the frosting of a few great directors at the top," he is using auteurism to express an ethnocentric perspective which dismisses as irrelevant most Third World and many European cinemas. Often the critics who pass judgement on Third World films are simply not culturally equipped to even understand the films. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*, for example, regularly criticizes as "confusing" Third World films which are not at all "confusing" for Third World audiences. North American reviewers often project their own racial perspective on Latin American products, perceiving the couple in *Lucia III* as a "racially mixed couple" (when the film makes nothing of race) or seeing *Tent of Miracles* as a film about mixed marriage (which is only a minor theme in the film). Racist pejorative language creeps into the very descriptions of the action of the films. Bosley Crowther, in his *New York Times* review of the Brazilian film *The Given Word* (1962), for example, gave remarkably inaccurate and ethnocentric accounts of specific scenes, in which "swarms" of "pagan dancers" stage a "riot" and "Negroes and Indians" perform "wigggle dancing". The "wigggle dancing" is in fact simply "samba," and the bestial swarm of negroes and Indians, who are not in fact so easily distinguishable as Crowther suggests, is simply an ethnically mixed group of Brazilians enjoying themselves. In such cases, colonialism and racism inflect the very perception of the critic.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Memmi, Albert 1968: *Dominated Man*, Beacon Press, Boston, p 186
- 2 Dempsey, Michael and Gupta, Udayan April 1982: "Hollywood's Colour Problem," *American Film*.
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- <sup>5</sup> See Stam, R. 19: "Wild Geese", *Cineaste*, Vol.9 No.2 p50-51
- <sup>6</sup> The South African Film and Television Technicians Association disputes this figure, claiming that Lloyd used no more than 15 recognized South African technicians. The "hundreds" refer presumably to the black unskilled personnel such as runners, drivers, carriers, etc. who could be paid much less than overseas employed technicians doing the same tasks. See Tomaselli, K.G. 1980: "The Role and Function of SAFTTA in the South African Feature Film Industry", *The SAFTTA Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1 pp 5 - 7
- <sup>7</sup> See also Tomaselli, K.G. 1980: "Ideology and Censorship in South African Film", *Critical Arts*, Vol.1 No. 2 pp 1 - 15
- <sup>8</sup> Cripps, Thomas 1977: *Slow Fade to Black*, Oxford University Press, New York, p 42

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