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April 1997

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People of Color as Teachers and Mentors in American Film

Jim Knippling

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“All too often, U.S. Filmmakers depict people of color in roles that are degrading and show a certain one-dimensional saintliness.”

The images of people of color shaped by the mass media, absorbed by all of us almost daily, pertain centrally to the question of people of color in predominantly white institutions because those images shape so many of the conceptions of cultural difference which pervade such institutions. The relation of many of the undergraduates—not to mention faculty and staff—to cultural differences at many universities, for instance, is often inflected by media images in rather evident ways. This paper will consider trends and tendencies within the U.S. film industry's portrayal of African American characters in the role of teachers or mentors within predominantly European American cultural settings. The paper would contribute to one of the sample topics listed in the call for papers: (Mis) Representations in the Media and the Arts.

A teacher occupies a uniquely ambiguous position within the elaborate hierarchies of Western culture: a teacher is at once an authority figure and a servant. The role of the teacher, as represented in U.S. film, may prove a particularly signal cultural category which can help historicize the complex question of the popular media's historical and current depictions of people of color. Over the last three or four decades, cultural productions have sometimes been given credit for progressive intent when they've been perceived as countering degrading images of people of color in the popular imagination. This countering is often understood in terms of positive versus negative images. Cultural critics have pointed out, however, the limitations of assessing the political impact of mass media representations in binary terms. For instance, Michele Wallace has illuminated the sense in which a conceptual framework of polar opposition—simply positive versus simply negative—can perpetuate the logic of racism. She has argued that "since racism or the widespread conviction that Blacks are morally and/ or intellectually inferior defines the 'commonsense' perception of Blacks, a positive/negative image cultural formula means that the goal of cultural production becomes simply to reverse these already existing assumptions."

The upshot of such a reversal in Hollywood ~ can be that African characters are portrayed with a certain one-dimensional saintliness which would be unintelligible if removed from a crudely racist body of representation. Critics of the 1960s films of Sidney Poitier have often observed that his characters were not always scripted so as to give shape to a complex, fully realized, and rounded character. But also notable in Poitier films are the professions of his characters and the ways in which those professions are figured. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Poitier plays a doctor (although he is never shown doctoring on screen), while in *To Sir With Love*, he plays a teacher—and he is indeed shown teaching. In fact, the almost complete absence of Black doctors shown doctoring or Black lawyers shown lawyering in U.S. films arguably lasted longer than did

resistance to depicting Black teachers teaching. I would argue that in America there arises an overdetermined investment in representing teachers of color.

I will examine the portrayal of African American teachers or mentors in such films as *To Sir With Love*, *Higher Learning*, *Searching for Bobby Fisher*, *Crossroads*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Malcolm X* in order to develop three main ideas. First, I argue that so-called colorblindness is not necessarily the most desirable ideal toward which progressive White Americans should aspire in their institutional lives, because colorblindness is complicit with the nefarious tendency for our culture to repress any memory of slavery and brutally dominative racism which is still pertinent to understanding contemporary reality. The media tend to isolate African American characters from other Blacks or from any reference to the Black world (e.g., *Beverly Hills Cop*). This trend unfortunately naturalizes the state of isolation, portraying it as normal and unproblematic. Such a dominant tendency in our mass culture encourages us to live in denial of racial tension and even to claim mystification should racial dynamics become manifest in institutional life. Rather than colorblindness, students of all colors should be encouraged to develop a historical awareness of color and respect of color.

Secondly, Hollywood has, with a few exceptions, seemed compulsively bent on begrudging people of color any acknowledgment of the knowledge, power, and insight which informs the teaching of people of color on a daily basis. The plots of many films can be shown to go through elaborate contortions to avoid a recognition of or engagement with that power. This twisted approach to Black teachers is symptomatic of what more generally can be considered public society's relation to Black teaching: American culture's structural dependence upon African American epistemology and expression.

Thirdly, in audaciously unspoken ways, Hollywood films tend to recuperate or contain the teachings of people of color within an economy of service. The films often fail to account for the motivations and the desires of African American characters who function as teachers, gurus, and character witnesses, seemingly assuming that their contributions to the growth and success of Whites is available and there for the taking.

These issues will be considered in relation to college teaching and the difficulty involved in getting students to think critically about their own popular culture, which often functions for them as a comfort zone, "just entertainment," and not something to be analyzed too hard.

PRESENTER

Jim Knippling is an associate editor in distance learning at the University of Nebraska. He received his Ph.D. in cultural studies and English in 1990 at the University of Pittsburgh, where his dissertation—a study of cultural-biographical methodology and of African American novelist Chester Himes (1909-1984) - was supervised by Professors Colin MacCabe, Dana Polan, Ursula Davis, and James Snead. Knippling has taught many American literature courses at the University of Delaware and at the University of Nebraska, where he has served in a visiting capacity.