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CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Abstract

The Birth of a Nation (1915) was the first feature-length film to focus on the topic of interracial marriage. Its strong anti-miscegenation message and racial stereotypes set the stage for Hollywood depictions of race relations for decades. This anti-miscegenation theme was challenged in 1967 with the release of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. The purpose of this research is to analyze these two landmark films through the lens of sociological theory using the comparative case study method. Drawing primarily from the theoretical insights of paternalistic and competitive race relations theory allows us to interpret the films in their socio-historical contexts. The findings of this sociological reading alert us to the difficulties of the film industry in transcending its problematic lens on race relations.

Keywords

Paternalistic Race Relations, Competitive Race Relations, Film, Controlling Images

1. Introduction

This paper revisits Hollywood's classic attempts to address interracial marriage between African American men and white women as a social issue through two groundbreaking films—D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). *The Birth of a Nation* has been described as the first blockbuster film and marks the seminal attempt to address interracial marriage in a feature-length production in American cinema. Praised for its technical innovation the film was listed as one of the "America's 100 Greatest Movies" by the American Film Institute (Filmsite). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was nominated for ten Academy Awards, winning two, and as with *The Birth of a Nation*, it was listed as one of the "America's 100 Greatest Movies" (Filmsite).

The Birth of a Nation set the stage for recurring racial stereotypes in Hollywood filmmaking that continue in some form to the present day. It unequivocally promoted anti-miscegenation, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy. For the next half-century, the anti-miscegenation norm went largely unchallenged in mainstream cinema, buoyed by the guidelines set by the Motion Picture Production Code (Production Code, 2009). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, released just a few years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, may be viewed as mainstream cinema's attempt to challenge its longstanding complicity in supporting anti-miscegenation representations in film. Here, the film is intended to embrace love as the prime rationale for marriage over racial differences. However, analyzing *The Birth of a Nation* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* through the lens of sociological theory reveals the difficulty in transcending the racial hierarchy historically established in American cinema.

This paper draws primarily from the theoretical work of Pierre van den Berghe (1967) on race relations, as detailed in the next section. The paper places the films into a racial framework that takes into account the institutional and economic influences on race relations. Both the acceptability of interracial marriage and the types of stereotypes prevalent in a society are addressed in van den Berghe's theoretical approach. In addition, two other theoretical perspectives are also useful in this analysis. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (2008) draws attention to the continuing damaging and stereotypical portrayals of African Americans that originated in the era of plantation slavery. In particular, her work reveals how the economic interests of the dominant group created powerful controlling images of African American

women. The work of Herbert Blumer (1958) is insightful as it conceptualizes racial prejudice as a status reinforced by societal normative arrangements. Drawing from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Blumer offers a useful examination of white privilege.

2. Sociological Theories of Race Relations

From the time of plantation slavery through the mid-1960s marked by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967, the United States exhibited two major eras of race relations. These eras are reflected in paternalistic and competitive race relations theory, formulated by van den Berghe (1967), and expanded upon by Wilson (2012) and Farley (2012). Here, the pre-Civil War period and the early industrial period following the war display the powerful influence of economic forces on race relations. In the pre-Civil War period, the paternalistic race relations system of the Southern economy was dominated by the interests of plantation agriculture elites who imposed a racial caste system. Mobility was extremely limited, and the division of labor reflected a “horizontal color bar” legally restricting slavery to people of color, relying almost entirely on people of African descent by the nineteenth century. Being born into slavery meant one’s children would endure the same fate, with the rule of hypodescent ensuring that racially mixed children born on plantations would be identified as lower caste Blacks and subjected to enslavement as well. Stereotypes emerged to defend the system. African Americans were viewed as immature, impulsive, but loveable children, and inferior to whites. The white plantation owner presented himself as a benevolent authoritarian, much as the loving and wise father watching over his children and acting in their best interests. The exploitation of the laboring class denied equal rights was re-imagined by the dominant group as a nurturing family setting. Interracial marriage (or miscegenation) between lower-caste men and upper-caste women was condemned, but sexual relations between white males and African American women were condoned by the dominant group. The latter relationships were acknowledged in many plantation areas of the Americas but were generally hidden from public view in the white settler areas of the southern United States.

The transition to the post-Civil War era of early industrialization came with a shift from enslaved labor to wage labor. This competitive race relations period still imposed many caste restrictions, for example, the legal segregation laws imposed by the Jim Crow South, but there were opportunities for African Americans to move from a strictly farm labor or domestic worker

situation to other wage labor work or even to some segregated white-collar positions. In the Northern and Western states, factory jobs and other employment opportunities were made available during times of labor shortages, such as during World War II (Rothstein, 2017). This division of labor can be represented as a "tilted color bar." Most of the higher status jobs still went to whites, and some whites fell to the lowest occupational positions. The movement up the status scale for African Americans was limited by a combination of caste and class. With more competition (or perceived competition) between white and African American workers, dominant group members became more likely to view African Americans as a threat, stereotyping them as uppity, threatening, criminal, and aggressive, but still inferior. Hostile aggression against the subordinate group in the form of mob violence or lynching marked this era (Epperly et al., 2020). Intermarriage between racial group members was often condemned, either informally or by law. This taboo was enforced in the film industry through the Hollywood Production Code from the 1930s to 1956 (Production Code, 2009).

Blumer's (1958) normative theory on prejudice offers additional insights into race relations of the twentieth century. Much of human socialization and interaction involves learning and playing social roles in society. Different social roles are assigned various social positions or statuses. We can think of examples such as positions in an occupational hierarchy (the captain has a higher rank than the private) or even a traditional institution like the family where the parent's status allows them to set rules for the child. For Blumer, the concept of race in the United States became a marker of one's "status" in society, which created a "sense of group position." Rather than viewing prejudice as a psychological abnormality, Blumer viewed feelings of racial superiority as reflected in the normative arrangements of society. For example, it was not only a matter of personal preference that whites in the Jim Crow South did not allow their children to swim in public pools with African American children; it was the law (Waller and Bemiller, 2018). This system of segregation was institutionalized. Places of worship were segregated, cemeteries were segregated, schools were segregated, and interracial marriage was illegal. Being raised in this society, dominant group members viewed their superior status as "normal." Criticism about the injustice of caste segregation resulted in dominant group members becoming defensive about protecting their position. Hence, Blumer argues that the dominant group learns to view itself as superior, see the subordinate group as "intrinsically alien," develop

a proprietary sense of privilege, and fear the encroachment by the subordinate group on those privileges.

Related is the theoretical work of Patricia Hill Collins (2008). She recognizes that the racial stereotypes developed back during the plantation slavery period resulted in powerful “controlling images” that degraded and oppressed African American women. Two of the most damaging stereotypes popularized in the plantation period were the Jezebel and the Mammy. In reality, white male plantation owners sexually forced themselves onto African American women (Nelson-Butler, 2015). As property, these women had no rights of protection through the courts. To explain the mixed-race children born on plantations, the dominant group created the stereotype of the seductive and manipulative Jezebel who entices the white male into a relationship. Hence, the enslaved victim is re-imagined as the perpetrator, and the white owner is absolved of wrongdoing.

The Mammy stereotype is quite the opposite (Collins, 2008). Often portrayed as a heavy, dark-skinned, older woman, the Mammy is completely loyal and protective of her white “family.” She is in charge of taking care of the white owner’s children. Rather than being recognized as an enslaved, unpaid servant who lived her entire life in bondage, the dominant group portrayed the Mammy as a loving family member (Gooding et al., 2020). In reality, enslaved women who raised the white children on the plantations were often young women exploited as “wet nurses” whose main attention was given to white children rather than their own children (Cowling et al., 2017; West and Knight, 2017). Through the eyes of the owners, the Mammy served as the role model for African Americans to stay loyal to the racial hierarchy, as opposed to African Americans who stood up for equal rights.

Each of these theories can shed light on the films under review and help explain the persistence of racialized imagery which intentionally or unintentionally informs the audience about racial inequality in the United States.

3. The Birth of a Nation: Defending White Supremacy

D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* was based on the 1905 Thomas Dixon novel *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, creating a story which depicted race relations in both eras outlined by paternalistic and competitive race relations theory. The pre-Civil War era period completely ignores the brutality and injustice of the plantation slavery

system. In reality, the legal codes of that era meant that enslaved men and women could be beaten, maimed, whipped, or even killed for “transgressions” as simple as being outside a plantation with no escort or refusing to show a stranger their pass. D. W. Griffith’s mythical plantation was a happy place where workers took daily leisurely breaks in a picnic-like atmosphere, and they happily danced until it was time to return to the fields. This depiction was consistent with the revisionist “Lost Cause” interpretation of that era by post-war southern historians, novelists, and erectors of monuments (Graham, 2020). One example is the Confederate Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, which includes a tearful mammy figure, holding a white baby, while the white soldier is preparing to leave for the war. This presumed loyalty of the enslaved to their white owners belies the reality of the thousands of people who escaped plantation slavery or the estimated 200,000 former enslaved African Americans who served in the Union Army (Williams, 2014).

However, Griffith’s main focus is on the postwar period. African American men are portrayed as arrogant and disrespectful, incapable of governing responsibly, refusing to wear shoes in the legislature, then passing laws so that they can marry white women. The threat of the rape of white women by African American men can be seen from the power-hungry political leader Lynch to the lowly soldier Gus. From Griffith’s perspective, uppity African Americans in the South no longer know their place and they must be brought under control through extra-legal violence. Here Griffith’s fantasy is a reflection of the race relations described by van den Berghe in the competitive race relations era. In reality, African Americans were disenfranchised during this period, first through violence, then through the Jim Crow era voting laws. Over 4,000 African Americans were lynched during the Jim Crow era (Equal Justice Initiative 2015). *The Birth of a Nation* was produced to defend the unjust treatment of African Americans during the Jim Crow Era.

Through the characters of the film, Griffith established damaging stereotypes of African Americans which were used repeatedly in American films. Syllas Lynch was played by the white actor George Siegmann (in blackface). Lynch is identified as a mulatto protégé of Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis), the leader of the House of Representatives. Stoneman supports political racial equality. Stoneman relocates to the South for health reasons, accompanied by Lynch who will become the leader of newly freed African Americans from the South. Lynch’s mixed racial heritage is portrayed as a mythical combination of European influenced ambition

and African uncivilized savage drives. Here, the stereotype of the cinematic “Black beast” is born. Lynch’s threat is twofold. First, he is a leader who can unify African Americans as a dangerous political challenge to white Christian civilization. Second, he represents African American male lust toward innocent white women. Unbeknownst to Austin Stonemen, his daughter Elsie (Lillian Gish) is the target of Lynch’s lust. When Elsie rebuffs Lynch’s proposal for marriage, Lynch attempts to achieve his goal by force. Austin Stoneman is horrified that his commitment to egalitarianism has come at the cost of unleashing the violent and animalistic nature of the African American male. Griffith’s solution is to portray the Ku Klux Klan as white saviors, not only for Elsie, but for all the white citizens of the South.

Similarly, the character Gus (Walter Long in blackface), an African American Union Army soldier stationed in the reconstruction era South, also longs to marry a white woman. Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh), affectionately called Pet Sister, is portrayed as very young, innocent, even childlike. She is so terrified when Gus pursues her in a forest and proposes marriage, that she leaps to her death from a cliff. Gus is hunted down by the hooded and robed Ku Klux Klan mob, captured, and lynched. Hence, the portrayal of African American men as a rape threat to white women becomes a rationalization for redefining white supremacist domestic terrorists as heroes and establishes the Black Beast stereotype as a Hollywood fixture for decades to come.

The emergence of the Black Beast coincides with the onset of the Competitive Race Relations era. The transition from enslaved people on plantations to free African Americans who openly demanded equal rights resulted in a shock to the normative structure previously enforced by Slave Codes and unfettered white supremacy in the U.S. South. This shift in legal rights was not welcomed as “liberty for all” by the dominant group. Rather, it seems Blumer’s theory is relevant here. African Americans were viewed as encroaching on the proprietary advantages established by white supremacists prior to the war.

African American women are subjected to demeaning portrayals in *The Birth of a Nation* as well. Both contemporary stereotypes as outlined by Collins (2012) above, are present in this film. Lydia (Mary Alden in blackface) is identified as the mulatto housekeeper of Congressman Stoneman. As with Lynch, Lydia’s sexuality and lust are implied to be derived from her African heritage and her ambition from her white ancestry. This combination allows her to manipulate Stoneman to support her desire for equal treatment by whites. This manipulation results in the

film's interpretation that the moral white Christian supremacy governing the nation is threatened. The "Jezebel" character was re-enacted time and time again in cinematic portrayals of African American women. In some films, the Jezebel was presented as a "tragic mulatto" character, who because of her mixed ancestry is a misfit longing to be loved by whites who will not accept her (Pineda-Volk, 2007).

The Birth of a Nation also popularizes the Mammy character in the public imagination. Mammy (Jennie Lee in blackface) is the film's role model for African American behavior. Setting the standard for many cinematic Mammies to come, Mammy is heavy-set, dark-skinned, and has no apparent romantic interest or family of her own. She has been a life-long faithful servant whose purpose in life is to protect her white "family." Even after being freed from slavery, Mammy remains loyal to her former owners. Rather than welcoming a new society in which she may enjoy the same freedoms as white citizens, she is distrustful and disrespectful of the African American males who have come from the Northern states. She physically confronts African American Union Army soldiers whom she views as a threat to the Southern racial hierarchy. *The Birth of a Nation* establishes the Mammy stereotype in American cinema. This stereotype would dominate the few roles offered to African American women for decades. The Mammy character was integral to promoting the imagery of the plantation as a kind and paternalistic system.

The Birth of a Nation reinforces the image of white male morality both before and after the Civil War through the hero character of the Little Colonel, Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall). Interestingly, in real life, the director D. W. Griffith's father was a colonel in the Confederate Army. As a returning Confederate soldier, Cameron is distressed to be viewed as an equal to African Americans during the reconstruction period. His humiliation and anger peak when his little sister leaps to her death to escape the advances of Gus, and when his romantic love interest (Elsie) is threatened by Syllas Lynch. His solution to return the South to its glory is to form the Ku Klux Klan, and to impose vigilante rule. The film's climax has Cameron and the Klan saving Elsie from Lynch. The film's conclusion places the racial hierarchy back to its pre-war norm of rule by white supremacy cloaked in Christian morality. Here, competitive race relations results in whites resorting to violence to confront their perceived threat of African American insolence.

4. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: The Challenge Falls Short

A half a century after *The Birth of a Nation* promoted fear over interracial marriage and established racist stereotypes about African Americans in cinema, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* attempted to challenge that divisive imagery. Set in San Francisco, Joey Drayton (Katherine Houghton) surprises her white liberal parents with her new fiancé, Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier) an African American medical doctor and professor. Shot in 1967, the same year the *Loving v. Virginia* case was determining whether bans on interracial marriage were constitutional, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* grapples with the prejudice against interracial marriage in the United States. While Joey believes there will be absolutely no problem with her parents accepting John into the family, her mother Christina (Katherine Hepburn) is initially in shock, and her father Matt (Spencer Tracy) is firmly opposed to the marriage. John tells Matt and Christine that if they do not support the marriage, there will be no marriage. Matt believes both Joey and John are not realistic about how much hurt they will be facing. John's mother (Beah Richards) is supportive, but John's father (Roy Glenn), like Matt Drayton, believes his son is making the biggest mistake of his life.

Joey's friends and others of the younger generation are presented as color blind in the film, leaving the audience to believe the problems of prejudice will be resolved by the younger generation. John tells his father his generation is the problem, for Mr. Prentice thinks of himself as "a colored man" whereas John thinks of himself "as a man." Joey is in complete denial that John's race is of any importance to her parents. Joey's friends see no issue and insist that Joey leaves for Geneva with John immediately. In another scene a young white delivery boy and a young African American female worker for the Drayton family blissfully dance their way out of the Drayton home into the delivery boy's van, signaling the new generation's break with past racial norms. The film's theme is that love makes race irrelevant. In the end, Joey's parents have no objections to the marriage, and Hollywood has signaled that its opposition to interracial marriage is over.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner makes a point of briefly introducing a classic racist into the mix. Hilary (Virginia Christine), the manager of Christina Drayton's art gallery, appears to be obsessed with status. She describes Joey's decision to marry John as "appallingly stupid." Hilary's opposition, based on crass racial prejudice, serves the purpose of making Matt Drayton and Mr. Prentice's opposition to the marriage seem less problematic to the viewing audience.

Here, Hilary is of the age that her views on race relations were formed during the era of Jim Crow in the South, and government-supported *de facto* segregation in the North. Her status consciousness reinforces her belief in white superiority. As such, her normative context is consistent with Blumer's (1958) observation that dominant group members may perceive that their privileges are threatened by the encroachment of people they view as intrinsically alien. Dr. John Prentice represents a threat to her status as a member of a privileged white community which excludes African Americans as equals. In line with competitive race relations, Hilary, much like the Little Colonel in *Birth of a Nation*, perceives an African American male romantically interested in a white woman as a threat. However, unlike *The Birth of a Nation* where the white racist is the hero, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* portrays Hilary as the villain who is cast out from the Drayton's friendship circle. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* attempts to make a moral distinction between Hilary who opposes the marriage for selfish and racist reasons, and Matt and Mr. Prentice who initially opposes the marriage out of concern for their children.

Also, unlike in *The Birth of a Nation* where African American men who desire relationships with white women are portrayed as Black Beasts, John in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is portrayed as thoughtful, deferential, hard-working, and intelligent. Not only is he on a mission to save less fortunate people of the world from serious health problems, he is unwilling to have sex with Joey until they are married out of concern that she might get hurt. Indeed, we may consider John's character as a saint. His pure moral character leaves the other members of the cast no option to oppose the marriage outside of his race.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner allows Monsignor Ryan (Cecil Kelloway) to have a central seat at the table in the marriage discussion. The Monsignor, symbolizing Christian morality, is wholeheartedly supportive of Joey and John's marriage. Indeed, he chides his good friend Matt for being a phony liberal for his reluctance to approve of the marriage. Here, unlike *The Birth of a Nation* where Christianity is portrayed as supportive of segregation, white supremacy, and domestic terrorism, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* presents Christian values as endorsing integration.

For the reasons outlined above, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* can be viewed as a direct challenge to *The Birth of a Nation*. The film was written to make the case for interracial marriage and to support racial equality in the era of civil rights. But a deeper look at *Guess*

Who's Coming to Dinner from the perspective of sociological theory shows that the film's commitment to racial equality falls short.

While the content and intent of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* make the case for equality, the form in which the solution is framed falls back to a previous era. As if guided by paternalistic race relations, the solution to the film resides solely with the white male father figure. The film is centered on Matt Drayton's struggle to accept his white daughter's preference for an African American husband. Matt initially views John's proposal of marriage to Joey as irresponsible. In the final scene of the film, Matt announces to the assembled group that he has something to say. Matt stands to deliver his verdict, while all the others sit and listen. He says that his wife Christina could not be trusted to make a responsible decision because she is in a "romantic haze" and is not able to act rationally. His daughter Joey attempts to speak but is told by Matt to "sit down and shut up". Matt indicates that this may be his last chance to tell her what to do, indicating that responsibility is about to be shifted to John. John's opinion at this point is not equally valued either. He attempts to confront Matt before his talk, but Matt cuts him off. In the end, Matt approves of the marriage, even over the objection of John's father. Matt tells John that he has no reason to worry about his father's objection, saying that he, Christina, and Mrs. Prentice will deal with Mr. Prentice. In effect, each of the adults in the room is relegated to a childlike status in Matt's presence. He has fulfilled the role of the wise white father figure whose authority goes unchallenged by either the white women or the African American adults present.

This paternalism is reinforced by Tillie's role as well. Tillie (Isabel Sanford), is an older African American woman who works as the Drayton family's domestic worker. Matt Drayton introduces Tillie as "a member of this family." Matt tells the Prentices that Tillie has been making trouble that day, and as with Joey, Matt commands Tillie to "sit down." In the competitive context of the marriage issue, Tillie views John as a threat to Joey. Tillie surmises John is a Black power advocate, and she seems to believe John is going outside his proper status in marrying Joey. To emphasize the loyalty to her white family, Tillie tells John she raised Joey from "a baby in the cradle," and she attacks John by calling him the n-word and saying John is up to no good. Like the classic Mammy from *The Birth of a Nation*, Tillie is attempting to protect her white family from what she perceives to be a threatening Black male. Tillie's Mammy character is a creation of white supremacy, originating in plantation slavery. Here

Collins' (2008) theoretical insights are informative. While African American women were instrumental in the civil rights movement during the 1960s, the white-dominated motion picture industry continued to present African American women in the degrading image of the family servant. Tillie, rather than depicting a modern African American woman, was based on a long-standing Hollywood tradition of relegating African American women to Mammy roles (Gooding et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

Although we may view *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as a challenge to Hollywood's white supremacist and anti-miscegenation history tracing back to *The Birth of a Nation*, utilizing sociological theory illuminates both the racialized context for *The Birth of a Nation* and the inability of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to make a clean break with the problematic racial history of American cinema. *The Birth of a Nation* embraces the white supremacy embedded in both the paternalistic and competitive race relations of the pre- and post-Civil War eras. Its blatant use of the Black Beast, the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the white supremacist hero characters unfortunately set the stage for Hollywood representations of race relations for decades to come.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner was an important film in that it directly addressed interracial marriage between an African American man and a white female. For decades the subject was largely taboo in Hollywood. The rarity of an African American male lead romantically involved with a white female lead even in later films speaks to the significance of this portrayal in 1967. Yet, even in attempting to embrace the struggle for equality of the time period in which it was filmed, our theoretical insights into this classic work demonstrate that the film comes up short.

The Mammy-like portrayal of Tillie shows how persistent the "controlling images" of African American women as outlined by Collins (2012) can be. Likewise, the lack of agency in the portrayals of the other African American characters juxtaposed with the white paternalism is a reminder of Hollywood's struggles with race relations. For all its good intent, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* did not get past relying on the white male protagonist as the decision-maker. The formula was typical of the films of that era and was reflective of the white lens provided by the film director and the screenwriter. Thus, for the white audience, the film narrative avoided

some controversy. There was no direct challenge to white authority, only a polite request for permission from the white patriarch.

This research has taken an in-depth theoretical look at two of Hollywood's most significant attempts to address interracial marriage. The first film, *The Birth of a Nation*, attempted to justify the historical taboo against interracial marriage by embracing racist stereotypes. The second, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, challenged the historical taboo by presenting a romantic relationship between a white woman and African American man, but still struggled to escape problematic stereotypes and white paternalism. The two films are representations from the early twentieth century and the immediate post-civil rights period, respectively; hence, the study is limited both by the number of cases and the time frame of this research. This study provides a theoretical point of departure to analyze the evolution of portrayals of interracial marriage in Hollywood films. Future research building on this work will explore the films in the contemporary period. Utilizing this theoretical approach for future research will inform us to what extent Hollywood views of race relations have evolved into more diverse depictions or remain grounded in controlling images.

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