

---

# THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

## CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

### Week 4: Civil Rights and Hollywood

#### The Abolition of the Slave Trade

- From the 1770s in Britain, a movement developed to bring the slave trade to an end. This is known as the abolitionist movement.
- The work of politicians, ordinary workers, women and the testimonies of formerly enslaved people all contributed to the British abolitionist movement.
- In 1807, the British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. This ended the buying and selling of enslaved people within the British Empire, but it did not protect those already enslaved. Many enslavers continued to trade illegally.
- Hundreds of thousands of people remained enslaved. It took a further 30 years of campaigning before slavery was abolished in most British colonies.

#### Jim Crow' Laws

- Introduced in the Southern United States
- Mandated 'racial segregation' in all former Confederate States

#### Screen Representation

*'There can be little doubt that comic representation of African-Americans has been used as a way to aid the legitimization of racial inequalities. Early American film inherited a set of racist caricatures from forms such as Vaudeville, the minstrel show and the dominant culture at large...'*

**(Leob 1975)**

#### Early Examples of Offensive Cinema Depiction

- *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907)
- *The Pickaninnies* (1908)
- *Rastus in Zululand* (1910)
- *The Sambo Series* (1909-1911)
- *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1910)
- *Chicken Thief* (1910 or 1911)

#### *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

D.W. Griffiths

*'Birth of a Nation was appallingly racist. Black senators were shown as drunken or unclean. Demonstrations for and against the film took place after some screenings; many protested the film's depictions of African Americans, others attacked black audience members.'*

**Cousins, M (2011) p.54**

---

### ***The Birth of a Nation (1915) CONT...***

*'On Thanksgiving Night, 1915, in Stone Mountain, Atlanta...2,500 former clansmen marched down Peach Tree Avenue to celebrate the release of the film.'*

**Kevin Brownlow**

*Though the organization had been 'officially' disbanded in 1877, by the mid-1920s, KKK membership was four million.*

**Cousins, M (2011) p.54**

### ***Hollywood Representation 1930s-1950s***

#### ***King Kong (1933)***

- There are, of course always uncomfortable hints of, or even more blatant examples of racism linked to many early 30s productions, which often presented the exotic, native or darker-skinned character as dangerous, savage or animalistic.
- *King Kong*, for example, is unquestionably jingoistic in its depiction of the islanders
- Kong himself might be seen as a brazenly discriminatory cartoon, i.e. a tall dark foreigner, preying on prejudiced audience fears about people of colour stealing away 'the white man's woman'

#### **The Hays Code**

*'...the Code also held up the strong sense of racial apartheid and paranoia of the times by expressly stating that miscegenation, or mixing of the races, was to be portrayed as in no way desirable...Notably though, the taboo against miscegenation, whether explicitly articulated as in the original Hays Code or more implicitly just understood and practiced, has remained in force over the long continuum of dominant cinema's reign.'*

**Ed Guerrero (Fever in the Racial Jungle)**

#### **The Civil Rights Movements**

- Begins mid-50s and gains momentum in the 60s
- 'Jim Crow' laws in Southern States still continue
- Violent oppression of black citizens

#### **Emmet Till (1941-1955)**

- 14 years old, he was accused of 'offending' white woman, Carolyn Bryant in her family's grocery store.
- Till was abducted and killed
- 'They beat and mutilated him before shooting him in the head and sinking his body in the Tallahatchie River.'
- Despite the brutality of the murder his killers were acquitted
- He became an icon of the Civil Rights movement

#### **Rosa Parks (1913-2005)**

- Became an NACCP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) activist in 1943
- Most famous for refusing to move to the 'coloured' section of the bus

- Though she was not the first (Claudette Colvin had previously challenged bus segregation) the NACCP decided that she would be the best candidate to challenge the system
- She became a pivotal symbol in the Civil Rights movement

### Other Key Events and Law Reforms

- 1954 – Brown vs Board of Education <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/brown-v-board-of-education-of-topeka>
- 1963 – March on Washington
- Civil Rights Act. 1964, 1968
- Voting Rights Act. 1965

### *To Kill a Mockingbird* the Novel by Harper Lee

*'I never expected any sort of success with 'Mockingbird.' ... I was hoping for a quick and merciful death at the hands of the reviewers but, at the same time, I sort of hoped someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement. I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways, this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected.'*

Harper Lee

### *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

Robert Mulligan

### Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch

*"Hardly a day passes that I don't think how lucky I was to be cast in that film"*

Gregory Peck

*'When I learned that Gregory Peck would play Atticus Finch in the film production of To Kill a Mockingbird, I was of course delighted: here was a fine actor who had made great films – what more could a writer ask for? ... The years told me his secret. When he played Atticus Finch, he had played himself, and time has told all of us something more: when he played himself, he touched the world.'*

Harper Lee

### Criticism

*It expresses the liberal pieties of a more innocent time, the early 1960s, and it goes very easy on the realities of small-town Alabama in the 1930s. One of the most dramatic scenes shows a lynch mob facing Atticus, who is all by himself on the jailhouse steps the night before Tom Robinson's trial. The mob is armed and prepared to break in and hang Robinson, but Scout bursts onto the scene, recognizes a poor farmer who has been befriended by her father, and shames him (and all the other men) into leaving. Her speech is a calculated strategic exercise, masked as the innocent words of a child; one shot of her eyes shows she realizes exactly what she's doing. Could a child turn away a lynch mob at that time, in that place? Isn't it nice to think so.'*

Roger Ebert

---

## Sidney Poitier

- The first black actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actor for *Lilies of the Field* (1964)
- *To Sir with Love* (1967)
- *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)
- *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)
- The three latter films involved issues around race and race relations

### *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)

#### Plot

- When the body of wealthy industrialist Corbet is found murdered in the street, an investigation begins
- Virgil Tibbs (Poitier) an out of town detective is coincidentally passing through
- He is immediately suspected and arrested due to his 'fat wallet'

#### Production

- Jewison, Poitier, and Steiger worked together and got along well during the filming, but Jewison had problems with the Southern authorities
- Poitier had reservations about coming south of the Mason–Dixon line for filming.
- The first major Hollywood film in color that was lit with proper consideration for a Black person.

#### The Slap

*"...the first known act of physical defiance in a studio film by an African American character that did not result in punishment or death."*

*"I said, 'I'll tell you what, I'll make this movie for you if you give me your absolute guarantee when he slaps me I slap him right back and you guarantee that it will play in every version of this movie. I try not to do things that are against nature.'"*

**Sidney Poitier**

*"...almost everything in this movie is good—the sharply drawn minor characters, the careful plotting, the wonderful rightness of each scene's setting, mood and dialogue. Most admirable of all is the way everyone avoids oversimplifications."*

**Steve Ryfle**

#### The Rise of 'Blaxploitation'

- Even as recently as the 1960s Hollywood features still featured black actors for comic relief or to make some surface level point about prejudice

*Prior to the early 1970s, representation in Hollywood for black performers was limited, to say the least. The roles most often involved being maids or servants. Even in the rare cases in which characters had some semblance of agency, they were usually alone in a sea of white faces and always remained safely subservient.'*

**Tre'vell Anderson (Los Angeles Times)**

- 
- The growth of civil rights and Black Pride movements in the 60s and 70s gave low budget producers who were adept at spotting trends the impotence to create 'exploitative' titles featuring black creators and casts

***Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970)***

*'...was the first black action thriller to really hit home with audiences. With a black director (Ossie Davies) at the helm, it freewheeled along, taking one of Chester Himes's better Harlem based cops n robbers tales and transposing it to modern day New York...'*

**Ross, J. (1993), p113**

- Proved there was an audience for black heroes
- However, on some levels these were still depicting black stereotypes

***Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)***

"This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the man"

- Sweetback (Van Peebles) witnesses cops administering a brutal murder and completely unnecessary beating to a young black man
- He beats the cops to death
- The repression he has felt is broken
- He avoids capture and makes it to Mexico

*'...was perhaps the first genuinely ant-establishment picture in this field.'*

**Ross, J. (1993), p115**

*'The film's amorality and violence were echoes of Bonnie and Clyde and Roger Corman Films but what was new was how 'black' the behaviour was. It glamorized ghetto life and simplified its gender politics in a way that would later be denounced by black intellectuals but in exposing white corruption and racism and celebrating black male sexuality, it set new schemas for American filmmakers ...'*

**Cousins.M, (2011) p.342**

***Shaft (1971)***

Gordon Parks

- Adapted by Tidyman and screenwriters John D. F. Black and Joel Freeman
- Though Shaft was black in the novel, Tidyman had written the protagonist as white in the initial script drafts
- Melvin Van Peebles claimed that the success of his film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* caused Shaft to be changed from a "white movie" into a "black one"
- However, the filming of Shaft had begun months before Sweetback had been released and Richard Roundtree had already been cast

*'In many ways Shaft was too obvious a hero for the Seventies. His blackness was really the only thing that distinguished him from most other fictional detectives.'*

**Ross, J. (1993), p115**