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ROBERT STAM AND LOUISE SPENCE

COLONIALISM, RACISM, AND REPRESENTATION: AN INTRODUCTION

Racism and colonialism in the cinema have been the subject of many books and essays. The stereotyping of black Americans has been explored by Thomas Cripps in *Slow Fade to Black*,¹ by Daniel Leab in *From Sambo to Superspade*,² and by Donald Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*.³ The pernicious distortion of African history and culture has been denounced by Richard Maynard in *African on Film: Myth and Reality*.⁴ Ralph Friar and Natasha Friar's *The Only Good Indian*⁵ chronicles the imagistic mistreatment dealt out to the Native American. Lester Friedman's *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*⁶ documents the process by which most screen Jews have had to sacrifice all ethnic specificity in order to conform to a WASP-dominated assimilationist creed. Allen Woll's *The Latin Image in American Film*⁷ focuses on the stereotypical 'bandidos' and 'greasers' common in Hollywood films about Latin America, while Pierre Boulanger's *Le Cinéma colonial*⁸ exposes the caricatural vision of North Africa and the Near East displayed in such films as *Pépé le Moko* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. And Tom Engelhardt's essay 'Ambush at Kamakazi Pass'⁹ places screen anti-Asiatic racism within the context of the war in Vietnam.

We would like to express our appreciation to the members of the study group in racism, all graduate students in the Cinema Studies Program at New York University, for their suggestions and insights: Pat Keeton, Charles Musser, Richard Porton, Susan Ryan, Ella Shochat, and Ed Simunons.

¹Oxford, 1977.

²Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

³Bantam, 1974.

⁴Hayden, 1974.

⁵Drama, 1972.

⁶Ungar, 1982.

⁷UCLA Publications, 1980.

⁸Seghers, 1974.

⁹*Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 3 no. 1, Winter-Spring 1971.

Our purpose here is not to review the research or criticise the conclusions of the aforementioned texts. Rather, we would like to sketch out the background of the questions raised in them, offer some preliminary definitions of key terms, and propose the outlines of a methodology in the form of a series of concerns addressable to specific texts and their representations. We would like both to build on and go beyond the methodologies implicit in existing studies. These studies of filmic colonialism and racism tend to focus on certain dimensions of film—social portrayal, plot, and character. While such studies have made an invaluable contribution by alerting us to the hostile distortion and affectionate condescension with which the colonised have been treated in the cinema, they have often been marred by a certain methodological naïveté. While posing legitimate questions concerning narrative plausibility and mimetic accuracy, negative stereotypes and positive images, the emphasis on realism has often betrayed an exaggerated faith in the possibilities of verisimilitude in art in general and the cinema in particular, avoiding the fact that films are inevitably constructs, fabrications, representations. The privileging of social portrayal, plot and character meanwhile, has led to the slighting of the specifically cinematic dimensions of the film; the analyses might easily have been of novels or plays rather than films. The insistence on 'positive images', finally, obscures the fact that 'nice' images might at times be as pernicious as overtly degrading ones, providing a bourgeois facade for paternalism, a more pervasive racism.

Although we are quite aware of the crucial importance of the *contextual*, that is, of those questions bearing on the cinematic industry, its processes of production, distribution and exhibition, those social institutions and production practices which construct colonialism and racism in the cinema, our emphasis here will be *textual* and *intertextual*.¹⁰ An anti-colonialist analysis, in our view, must make the same kind of methodological leap effected by feminist criticism when journals like *Screen* and *Camera Obscura* critically transcended the usefully angry but methodologically flawed 'image' analysis of such critics as Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen in order to pose questions concerning the apparatus, the position of the spectator, and the specifically cinematic codes.¹¹ Our discussion draws from, and hopefully applies by extension to, the analysis of other oppressions, such as sexism, class subordination and anti-Semitism, to all situations, that is, in which difference is transformed into 'other'-ness and exploited or penalised by and for power.

SOME DEFINITIONS

We should begin, however, with some preliminary definitions. What do we mean by 'colonialism', 'the Third World' and 'racism'? By colonialism, we refer to the process by which the European powers (including the United States) reached a position of economic, military, political and cultural domination in much of Asia, Africa

and Latin America. This process, which can be traced at least as far back as the 'voyages of discovery' and which had as its corollary the institution of the slave trade, reached its apogee between 1900 and the end of World War I (at which point Europe had colonised roughly 85 percent of the earth) and began to be reversed only with the disintegration of the European colonial empires after World War II.

The definition of the 'Third World' flows logically out of this prior definition of colonialism, for the 'Third World' refers to the historical victims of this process—to the colonised, neo-colonised or de-colonised nations of the world whose economic and political structures have been shaped and deformed within the colonial process. The colonial relation has to do with *structural* domination rather than with crude economic ('the poor'), racial ('the non-white'), cultural ('the backward') or geographical categories.¹²

Racism, finally, although not limited to the colonial situation (anti-Semitism being a case in point), has historically been both an ally and a product of the colonisation process. It is hardly accidental that the most obvious victims of racism are those whose identity was forged within the colonial process: blacks in the United States, Asians and West Indians in Great Britain, Arab workers in France, all of whom share an oppressive situation and the status of second-class citizens. We will define racism, borrowing from Albert Memmi, as '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'.¹³ Memmi's definition has the advantage of calling attention to the *uses* to which racism is put. Just as the logic of sexism leads to rape, so the logic of racism leads to violence and exploitation. Racism, for Memmi, is almost always a rationale for an already existing or contemplated oppression. Without ignoring the accumulated prejudices and cultural attitudes which prepared the way for racism, there is a sense in which it can be argued that racism comes 'in the wake' of concrete oppressions. Amerindians were called 'beasts' and 'cannibals' because white Europeans were slaughtering them and expropriating their land; blacks were slandered as 'lazy' because they were being exploited as slaves; Mexicans were caricatured as 'greasers' and 'bandidos' because the United States had seized half of their territory; and the colonised were ridiculed as lacking in culture and history because colonialism, in the name of profit, was destroying the basis of that culture and the memory of that history.

The same Renaissance humanism which gave birth to the code of perspective—subsequently incorporated, as Baudry points out, into the camera itself—also gave birth to the 'rights of man'. Europe constructed its self-image on the backs of its equally constructed Other—the 'savage', the 'cannibal'—much as phallocentrism sees its self-flattering image in the mirror of woman defined as lack. And just as the camera might therefore be said to inscribe certain features of bourgeois humanism, so the cinematic and televisual apparatuses, taken in their most inclusive sense, might

¹⁰For a discussion of the contextual dimension of racism in cinema, see "Racism in the Cinema: Proposal for a Methodological Model of Investigation," by Louise Spence and Robert Stam, with the collaboration of Pat Keeton, Charles Musser, Richard Porton, Susan Ryan, Ella Shochat, and Ed Simmons, to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies*.

¹¹See, for example, Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) and Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon, 1974).

¹²These notions of the Third World are imprecise because the Third World nations are not necessarily poor in resources (Mexico, Venezuela and Kuwait are rich in petroleum), nor culturally backward (as witnessed by the brilliance of contemporary Latin American literature), nor non-industrialised (Brazil is highly industrialised) nor non-white (Argentina is predominantly white).

¹³Albert Memmi, *Dominated Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 186.

be said to inscribe certain features of European colonialism. The magic carpet provided by these apparatuses flies us around the globe and makes us, by virtue of our subject position, its audiovisual masters. It produces us as subjects, transforming us into armchair conquistadores, affirming our sense of power while making the inhabitants of the Third World objects of spectacle for the First World's voyeuristic gaze.

Colonialist representation did not begin with the cinema: it is rooted in a vast colonial intertext, a widely disseminated set of discursive practices. Long before the first racist images appeared on the film screens of Europe and North America, the process of colonialist image-making, and resistance to that process, resonated through Western literature. Colonialist historians, speaking for the 'winners' of history, exalted the colonial enterprise, at bottom little more than a gigantic act of pillage whereby whole continents were bled of their human and material resources, as a philanthropic 'civilising mission' motivated by a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny. Daniel Defoe glorified colonialism in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a novel whose 'hero becomes wealthy through the slave trade and through Brazilian sugar mills, and whose first thought, upon seeing human footprints after years of solitude, is to 'get (him) a servant'.¹⁴

Other European writers responded in more complex and ambiguous ways. The French philosopher Montaigne, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, suggested in 'Des Cannibales' that the Amerindian cannibalising of dead enemy warriors paled in horror when compared to the internecine warfare and torture practiced by European Christians in the name of a religion of love. Shakespeare has Caliban in *The Tempest*, whose name forms an anagram of 'cannibal', curse the European Prospero for having robbed him of his island: 'for I am all the subjects that you have/which first was mine own king'. (Aimé Césaire had to alter Shakespeare's character but slightly, in his 1969 version, to turn him into the anti-colonialist militant Caliban X.¹⁵) And Jonathan Swift, a century later in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), portrays colonialism in satirical images that in some ways anticipate Herzog's *Aguirre*:

A crew of pyrates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Topmast; they go on shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the king, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two or three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more by force for a sample, return home and get their Pardon. . . . And this execrable crew of butchers employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony sent to convert and civilise an idolatrous and barbarous people.¹⁶

The struggle over images continues, within literature, into the period of the beginnings of the cinema. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), published but a few years

after the first Lumière screenings, describes colonialism in Africa as 'just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale' and emphasises its racist underpinnings. 'The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves,' Conrad has his narrator say, 'is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.'¹⁷ 'The settler,' Fanon writes, 'makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey,' while against him 'torpic creatures, wasted by fevers, obsessed by ancestral customs, form an almost inorganic background for the innovating dynamism of colonial mercantilism.'¹⁸ Since the beginnings of the cinema coincided with the height of European imperialism, it is hardly surprising that European cinema portrayed the colonised in an unflattering light. Indeed, many of the misconceptions concerning Third World people derive from the long parade of lazy Mexicans, shifty Arabs, savage Africans and exotic Asiatics that have disgraced our movie screens. Africa was portrayed as a land inhabited by cannibals in the Lubin comedy *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), Mexicans were reduced to 'greasers' in films like *Tony the Greaser* (1911) and *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914), and slavery was idealised, and the slaves degraded, in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Hundreds of Hollywood westerns turned history on its head by making the Native Americans appear to be intruders on what was originally their land, and provided a paradigmatic perspective through which to view the whole of the non-white world.

The colonialist inheritance helps account for what might be called the tendentiously flawed mimesis of many films dealing with the Third World. The innumerable ethnographic, linguistic and even topographical blunders in Hollywood films are illuminating in this regard. Countless safari films present Africa as the land of 'lions in the jungle' when in fact only a tiny proportion of the African land mass could be called 'jungle' and when lions do not live in jungle but in grasslands. Hollywood films, in any case, show disproportionate interest in the animal, as opposed to the human life of Africa. And as regards human beings, the Western world has been oddly fascinated by Idi Amin, in many ways an atypical leader in the continent of Nyerere, Mugabe and Machel.

At times the 'flaw' in the mimesis derives not from the *presence* of distorting stereotypes but from the *absence* of representations of an oppressed group. *King of Jazz* (1930), for example, paid tribute to the origins of jazz by pouring (through superimposition) a series of musical ensembles, representing diverse European ethnic groups, into a gigantic melting pot, completely bypassing both Africa and Afro-Americans. Black Brazilians, similarly, formed a structuring absence within Brazilian cinema during the first few decades of this century, as film-makers exalted the already annihilated and mythically connoted 'Indian warrior' in preference to the more problematically present black, victim of a slavery abolished just ten years before the founding of Brazilian cinema. Many American films in the fifties gave the impression that there were no black people in America. The documentary-like *The Wrong Man* (Hitchcock, 1957), for example, shows the subways and even the prisons of New York City as totally devoid of blacks.

¹⁴Buñuel's film version of the novel mocks Defoe's protagonist by haunting him with surrealist dreams, turning him into a transvestite, and making it singularly difficult for him to make rational sense out of the tenets of Christianity to an inquisitive Friday. The film *Man Friday*, which we have not seen, reportedly tells the story from Friday's point of view. And in a recent Brazilian adaptation of the novel, black actor Grande Otelo subverts Defoe's classic by playing a Friday who refuses the coloniser's power to name, repeatedly telling the Englishman: 'Me Crusoe, You Friday!'

¹⁵See Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête* (Paris; Seuil, 1969).

¹⁶Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 241.

¹⁷Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 69.

¹⁸Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 51.

At other times the structuring absence has to do not with the people themselves but with a dimension of that people's history or institutions. A whole realm of Afro-American history, the slave revolts, is rarely depicted in film or is represented (as in the television series *Roots*) as a man, already dead, in a ditch. The revolutionary dimension of the black church, similarly, is ignored in favour of a portrayal which favours charismatic leaders and ecstatic songs and dancers.¹⁹ The exclusion of whites from a film, we might add paradoxically, can also be the result of white racism. The all-black Hollywood musicals of the twenties and thirties, like present-day South African films made by whites for black audiences, tend to exclude whites because their mere presence would destroy the elaborate fabric of fantasy constructed by such films.

The absence of the language of the colonised is also symptomatic of colonialist attitudes. The languages spoken by Third World peoples are often reduced to an incomprehensible jumble of background murmurs, while major 'native' characters are consistently obliged to meet the coloniser on the coloniser's linguistic turn (here westerns, with their Indian-pidgin English, again provide the paradigm). Anna, in *The King and I*, teaches the Siamese natives 'civilised' manners along with English. Even *Cuba* (directed by Richard Lester, 1980), a generally sympathetic portrait of the Cuban revolution, perpetuates a kind of linguistic colonialism by having the Cubans speak English in a variety of accents (many of which have nothing Hispanic about them beyond an occasional rolled *r*) not only to English-speaking characters, but also to one another. In other films, major nations are mistakenly attributed the wrong language. In *Latin Lovers* (directed by Mervyn Leroy, 1953), for example, Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, when they are not speaking English, are made to speak Spanish.²⁰

In response to such distortions, the Third World has attempted to write its own history, take control of its own cinematic image, speak in its own voice. The colonialist wrote the colonised *out* of history, teaching Vietnamese and Senegalese children, for example, that their 'ancestors' were the Gauls. A central impulse animating many Third World films is precisely the effort to reclaim the past. Thus *Ganga Zumba* (directed by Carlos Diegues, 1963) memorialises the proud history of black rebellion in Brazil by focusing on the seventeenth-century fugitive slave republic called Palmares. *Emitai* (directed by Ousmane Sembene, 1972) deals with French colonialism and Senegalese resistance during the period of the Second World War. *Chronicle of the Years of Embers* (directed by Lakdar Hamina, 1975) recounts the Algerian revolution and *The Promised Land* (directed by Miguel Littin, 1973) renders homage to the short-lived 'socialist republic' of Marmaduke Grove as a way to examine both the contradictions and the revolutionary potential of the Chile of the Allende period.

Many oppressed groups have used 'progressive realism' to unmask and combat hegemonic images. Women and Third World film-makers have attempted to counterpose the objectifying discourse of patriarchy and colonialism with a vision of them-

selves and their reality as seen 'from within'. But this laudable intention is not always unproblematic. 'Reality' is not self-evidently given and 'truth' cannot be immediately captured by the camera. We must distinguish, furthermore, between realism as a goal—Brecht's 'laying bare the causal network'—and realism as a style or constellation of strategies aimed at producing an illusionistic 'reality effect'. Realism as a goal is quite compatible with a style which is reflexive and deconstructive, as is eloquently demonstrated by *El Otro Francisco* (directed by Sergio Giral, 1974), a Cuban film which deconstructs a romantic abolitionist novel by highlighting the historical realities (economic motivations on the part of the whites, armed resistance on the part of the blacks) elided by it, while at the same time underlining its own processes of construction as a filmic text.

POSITIVE IMAGES?

Much of the work on racism in the cinema, like early work on the representation of women, has stressed the issue of the 'positive image'. This reductionism, though not wrong, is inadequate and fraught with methodological dangers. The exact nature of 'positive', first of all, is somewhat relative: black incarnations of patience and gradualism, for example, have always been more pleasing to whites than to blacks. A cinema dominated by positive images, characterised by a bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection. ('Just because you're black don't make you right,' one black brother tells another in *Ashes and Embers*, directed by Haile Gerima.) A cinema in which all black actors resembled Sidney Poitier might be as serious a cause for alarm as one in which they all resembled Stepin Fetchit.

We should be equally suspicious of a naive integrationism which simply inserts new heroes and heroines, this time drawn from the ranks of the oppressed, into the old functional roles that were themselves oppressive, much as colonialism invited a few assimilated 'natives' to join the club of the 'elite'. A film like *Shaft* (1971) simply substitutes black heroes into the actantial slot normally filled by white ones, in order to flatter the fantasies of a certain (largely male) sector of the black audience. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (directed by Stanley Kramer, 1967), as its title suggests, invites an elite black into the club of the truly human, but always on white terms. Other films, such as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Pressure Point* (1962), or the television series *Mod Squad*, place black characters in the role of law-enforcers. The ideological function of such images is not dissimilar to that pointed out in Barthes's famous analysis of the *Paris Match* cover which shows a black soldier in French uniform, eyes upraised, saluting what we presume to be the French flag. All citizens, regardless of their colour, can serve law and order, and the black soldier's zeal in serving the established law is the best answer to critics, black and white, of that society. The television series *Roots*, finally, exploited positive images in what was ultimately a cooptive version of Afro-American history. The series's subtitle, 'the saga of an American family', reflects an emphasis on the European-style nuclear family (retrospectively projected onto Kunta's life in Africa) in a film which casts blacks as just another immigrant group making its way toward freedom and prosperity in democratic America.

¹⁹A recent example of this tendency is the ecstatic song led by James Brown in *The Blues Brothers* (directed by John Landis, 1980).

²⁰For a discussion of Hollywood's view of Brazil, see Sergio Augusto, 'Hollywood Looks at Brazil: From Carmen Miranda to Moonraker', in Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, 1982).

The complementary preoccupation to the search for positive images, the exposure of negative images or stereotypes, entails similar methodological problems. The positing and recognition of these stereotypes has been immensely useful, enabling us to detect structural patterns of prejudice in what had formerly seemed random phenomena. The exclusive preoccupation with images, however, whether positive or negative, can lead both to the privileging of characterological concerns (to the detriment of other important considerations) and also to a kind of essentialism, as the critic reduces a complex diversity of portrayals to a limited set of reified stereotypes. Behind every black child performer, from Farina to Gary Coleman, the critic discerns a 'pickaninny', behind every sexually attractive black actor a 'buck' and behind every attractive black actress a 'whore'. Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racism they were initially designed to combat.

The analysis of stereotypes must also take cultural specificity into account. Many North American black stereotypes are not entirely congruent with those of Brazil, also a multi-ethnic New World society with a large black population. While there are analogies in the stereotypical images thrown up by the two cultures—the 'mammy' is certainly a close relation to the '*mae preta*' (black Mother), there are disparities as well. Brazilian historian Emilia Viotti da Costa argues, for instance, that the 'sambo' figure never existed, as reality or stereotype, in Brazilian colonial society.²¹ The themes of the 'tragic mulatto' and 'passing for white', similarly, find little echo in the Brazilian context. Since the Brazilian racial spectrum is not binary (black or white) but nuances its shades across a wide variety of racial descriptive terms, and since Brazil, while in many ways oppressive to blacks, has never been a rigidly segregated society, no figure exactly corresponds to the North American 'tragic mulatto', schizophrenically torn between two radically separate social worlds.

An ethnocentric vision rooted in North American cultural patterns can lead, similarly, to the 'racialising', or the introjection of racial themes into, filmic situations which Brazilians themselves would not perceive as racially connoted. *Deus e Diabo na Terra do Sol* (God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun, directed by Glauber Rocha, 1964) was mistranslated into English as *Black God, White Devil*, suggesting a racial dichotomy not emphasized either in the original title or in the film itself. The humour of *Macunaíma* (1969), similarly, depends on an awareness of Brazilian cultural codes. Two sequences in which the title character turns from black to white, for example, occasionally misread as racist by North Americans, are in fact sardonic comments on Brazil's putative 'racial democracy'.

A comprehensive methodology must pay attention to the mediations which intervene between 'reality' and representation. Its emphasis should be on narrative structure, genre conventions, and cinematic style rather than on perfect correctness of representation or fidelity to an original 'real' model or prototype. We must beware of mistakes in which the criteria appropriate to one genre are applied to another. A search for positive images in *Macunaíma*, for example, would be fundamentally misguided, for that film belongs to a carnivalesque genre favouring what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'grotesque realism'. Virtually all the film's characters are two-dimensional grotesques

²¹See Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Slave Images and Realities", in *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1977).

rather than rounded three-dimensional characters, and the grotesquerie is democratically distributed among all the races, while the most archly grotesque characters are the white industrialist cannibal and his ghoulish spouse. Satirical or parodic films, in the same way, may be less concerned with constructing positive images than with challenging the stereotypical expectations an audience may bring to a film. *Blazing Saddles* lampoons a whole range of ethnic prejudices, mocking audience expectations by having the whites sing 'Ole Man River' while the blacks sing 'I Get No Kick from Champagne'.

POLITICAL POSITIONING

One mediation specific to cinema is spectator positioning. The paradigmatic filmic encounters of whites and Indians in the western, as Tom Engelhardt points out, typically involve images of encirclement. The attitude toward the Indian is premised on exteriority. The besieged wagon train or fort is the focus of our attention and sympathy, and from this centre our familiars sally out against unknown attackers characterised by inexplicable customs and irrational hostility: 'In essence, the viewer is forced behind the barrel of a repeating rifle and it is from that position, through its gun sights, that he [sic] receives a picture history of western colonialism and imperialism.'²² The possibility of sympathetic identifications with the Indians is simply ruled out by the point-of-view conventions. The spectator is unwittingly sutured into a colonialist perspective.

A film like *The Wild Geese* (directed by Andrew McLaglen, 1978) inherits the conventions of anti-Indian westerns and extends them to Africa. This glorification of the role of white mercenaries in Africa makes the mercenaries, played by popular heroic actors Richard Burton, Richard Harris and Roger Moore, the central focus of our sympathy. Even the gamblers and opportunists among them, recruited from the flotsam and jetsam of British society, are rendered as sympathetic, lively and humorous. Killing Africans *en masse*, the film implies, fosters camaraderie and somehow brings out their latent humanity. White Europe's right to determine Africa's political destiny, like the white American right to Indian land in the western, is simply assumed throughout the film.²³

In *The Wild Geese*, the imagery of encirclement is used against black Africans, as the spectator, positioned behind the sight of mercenary machine guns, sees them fall in their hundreds. One of the crucial innovations of *Battle of Algiers* (directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) was to invert this imagery of encirclement and exploit the

²²Engelhardt, *op. cit.*

²³In the racist hierarchies of *The Wild Geese*, white males stand at the apex, while women are treated as comically dispensable and blacks are relegated to the bottom. The film camouflages its racism, however, by two plot devices involving positive images: first, by including a token black (a positive image?) as a member of the mercenary force (genocide rendered palatable by 'integrating' its perpetrators) and second, by having the entire operation be undertaken on behalf of a black leader characterised as 'the best there is'. The African 'best', however, is embodied by a sick, helpless, dying 'good Negro' who must be literally carried on the backs of whites. In this white rescue fantasy, the black leader of the 70s speaks the Sidney Poitier dialogue of the 50s; he pleads for racial understanding. The blacks, he says, must forgive the white past, and whites must forgive the black present. Thus centuries of colonialism are cancelled out in the misleading symmetry of an aphorism.

identificatory mechanisms of cinema on behalf of the colonised rather than the coloniser. Algerians, traditionally represented in cinema as shadowy figures, picturesquely backward at best and hostile and menacing at worst, are here treated with respect, dignified by close-ups, shown as speaking subjects rather than as manipulable objects. While never caricaturing the French, the film exposes the oppressive logic of colonialism and consistently fosters our complicity with the Algerians. It is through Algerian eyes, for example, that we witness a condemned Algerian's walk to his execution. It is from *within* the casbah that we see and hear the French troops and helicopters. This time it is the colonised who are encircled and menaced and with whom we identify.

One sequence, in which three Algerian women dress in European style in order to pass the French checkpoints and plant bombs in the European sector, is particularly effective in controverting traditional patterns of identification. Many critics, impressed with the film-makers' honesty in showing that the FLN committed terrorist acts against civilians, lauded this sequence for its 'objectivity'. (Objectivity, as Fanon pointed out, almost always works against the colonised.) But that *Battle of Algiers* shows such acts is ultimately less important than *how* it shows them; the signified of the diegesis (terrorist actions) is less important than the mode of address and the positioning of the spectator. The film makes us want the women to complete their task, not necessarily out of political sympathy but through the mechanisms of cinematic identification: scale (close shots individualise the three women); off-screen sound (we hear the sexist comments as if from the women's aural perspective); and especially point-of-view editing. By the time the women plant the bombs, our identification is so complete that we are not terribly disturbed by a series of close shots of the bombs' potential victims. Close-ups of one of the women alternate with close-ups of French people in a cafe, the eyeline matches suggesting that she is contemplating the suffering her bomb will cause. But while we might think her cruel for taking innocent life, we are placed within her perspective and admire her for having the courage to perform what has been presented as a dangerous and noble mission.

Other narrative and cinematic strategies are deployed in this sequence to solicit support for the three women. The narrative placement of the sequence itself presents their action as the fulfilment of the FLN promise, made in the previous sequence, to respond to the French terror bombing of the casbah. Everything here contributes to the impression that the bombing will be an expression of the rage of an entire people rather than the will of a fanatical minority. It is constructed, therefore, not as an individual emotional explosion but as a considered political task undertaken with reluctance by an organised group. The sequence consequently challenges the image of anti-colonialist guerrillas as terrorist fanatics lacking respect for human life. Unlike the Western mass media, which usually restrict their definition of 'terror' to anti-establishment violence—state repression and government-sanctioned aerial bombings are not included in the definition—*Battle of Algiers* presents anti-colonialist terror as a response to colonialist violence. We are dealing here with what might be called the political dimension of syntagmatic organisation; while the First World media usually present colonial repression as a response to 'leftist subversion', *Battle of Algiers* inverts the sequencing. Indeed, examining the film as a whole, we might say that Pontecorvo 'highjacks' the techniques of mass-media reportage—

hand-held cameras, frequent zooms, long lenses—to express a political point of view rarely encountered in establishment-controlled media.

The *mise-en-scène*, too, creates a non-sexist and anti-colonialist variant on the classic cinematic *topos*: women dressing in front of a mirror. The lighting highlights the powerful dignity of the women's faces as they remove their veils, cut their hair and apply make-up so as to look European. The mirror here is not the instrument of *vanitas*, but a revolutionary tool. The women regard themselves, without coyness, as if they were putting on a new identity with which they do not feel entirely comfortable. They perform their task in a disciplined manner and without vindictive remarks about their future victims.

The film also highlights the larger social dimension of the drama in which the women are involved. The colonial world, writes Fanon, is a world cut in two: 'In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression.'²⁴ The background imagery, readable thanks to the depth of field, shows that the French have imposed their regime by what amounts to military occupation. The French are in uniform, the Algerians in civilian dress. The casbah is the Algerian's home; for the French it is an outpost on a frontier. The barbed wire and checkpoints remind us of other occupations, thus eliciting our sympathy for a struggle against a foreign occupant. The proairetic 'code of actions', meanwhile, shows the soldiers treating the Algerians with racist scorn and suspicion, while they greet the Europeans with a friendly 'bonjour'. They misperceive the three women as French and flirtatious when in fact they are Algerian and revolutionary. Their sexism, furthermore, prevents them from seeing women, generally, as potential revolutionaries. In the negative dialectic of oppression, the slave (the colonised, the black, the woman) knows the mind of the master better than the master knows the mind of the slave.

Western attitudes toward non-Western peoples are also played on here. Hassiba is first seen in traditional Arab costume, her face covered by a veil. So dressed, she is a reminder of Arab women in other films who function as a sign of the exotic. But as the sequence progresses, we become increasingly close to the three women, though paradoxically, we become close to them only as they strip themselves of their saris, their veils, and their hair. They transform themselves into Europeans, people with whom the cinema more conventionally allows the audience to identify. At the same time, we are made aware of the absurdity of a system in which people warrant respect only if they look and act like Europeans. The French colonialist myth of 'assimilation', the idea that select Algerians could be first-class French citizens, is demystified. Algerians can assimilate, it is suggested, but only at the price of shedding everything that is characteristically Algerian about them—their religion, their clothes, their language.²⁵

If *Battle of Algiers* exploits conventional identification mechanisms on behalf of a group traditionally denied them, other films critique colonialism and colonialist

²⁴Frantz Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁵For a fuller discussion of this film, see Joan Mellen, *Filmguide to the Battle of Algiers* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973), and Robert Stam, *The Battle of Algiers: Three Women, Three Bombs*, Macmillan Films Study Extract, 1975.

point-of-view conventions in a more ironic mode.²⁶ *Petit à Petit* (directed by Jean Rouch, 1969) inverts the hierarchy often assumed within the discipline of anthropology, the academic offspring of colonialism, by having the African protagonist Damouré 'do anthropology' among the strange tribe known as the Parisians, interrogating them about their folkways. Europe, usually the bearer of the anthropological gaze, is here subjected to the questioning regard of the other. *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1971), meanwhile, updates Montaigne by persuading us to sympathise with Tupinamba cannibals.²⁷ The film plays ironically on the traditional identification with European heroes by placing the camera, initially, on American shores, so that the Amerindian discovers the European rather than the reverse. By the final shot, which shows the Frenchman's Tupinamba lover dining on him while manifesting no emotion beyond ordinary culinary pleasure, our 'natural' identification with the coloniser has been so completely subverted that we are quite indifferent to his fate.

The question of point of view is crucial then, but it is also more complex than might at first appear. The granting of point-of-view shots to the oppressed does not guarantee a non-colonialist perspective, any more than Hitchcock's granting of subjective shots to the female protagonist of *Marnie* inoculates that film from what is ultimately a patriarchal and infantilising discourse. The arch-racist *The Birth of a Nation* grants Gus, the sexually aggressive black man, a number of subjective shots as he admires little Flora. The racism in such a case may be said to be displaced from the code of editing onto the code of character construction, here inflected by the projection of white sexual paranoia onto the black male, in the case of Gus, and of patriarchal chivalry (tinged perhaps with authorial desire), in the case of Flora. The Brazilian film *João Negrinho* (directed by Oswaldo Censoni, 1954) is entirely structured around the perspective of its focal character, an elderly ex-slave. The film apparently presents all events from João's point of view so as to elicit total sympathy, yet what the film elicits sympathy for is in fact a paternalistic vision in which 'good' blacks are to leave their destiny in the hands of well-intentioned whites.

CODES AND COUNTER STRATEGIES

A more comprehensive analysis of character status as speaking subject as against spoken object would attend to cinematic and extra-cinematic codes, and to their interweaving within textual systems. In short, it must address the instances through which

²⁶Some Left critics dismissed *The Battle of Algiers* as a Hollywood Z-style exercise in political melodrama. Such critiques run the dangers of being (1) *ahistorical* (we must situate the film in the context of 1966); (2) politically *counter-productive* (the Left deprives itself of a powerful instrument of anti-colonialist persuasion); and (3) *ethnocentric* (offering an example of a kind of Left colonialism). While the Right asks all pro-Third World films to display high production values and be entertaining, a certain Left asks all pro-Third World films to be disconstructive, reflexive, and to display the precise variant of Marxism that the particular First World critic finds most sympathetic.

²⁷Montaigne's essay 'Des Cannibales', was, ironically, based on interviews with Brazilian Indians then on display in Europe. The Indians, according to Montaigne, asked him three questions, only two of which he could remember: (1) Why were some people rich and others poor? (2) Why did Europeans worship kings who were no bigger than other people? Lévi-Strauss, more than three centuries later, claims to have been asked the same questions by Brazilian Indians.

film speaks—composition, framing, scale, off- and on-screen sound, music—as well as questions of plot and character. Questions of image scale and duration, for example, are intricately related to the respect afforded a character and the potential for audience sympathy, understanding and identification. Which characters are afforded close-ups and which are relegated to the background? Does a character look and act, or merely appear, to be looked at and acted upon? With whom is the audience permitted intimacy? If there is off-screen commentary or dialogue, what is its relation to the image? *Black Girl* (directed by Ousmane Sembene, 1966) uses off-screen dialogue to foster intimacy with the title character, a Senegalese maid working in France. Shots of the maid working in the kitchen coincide with overhead slurs from her employers about her 'laziness'. Not only do the images point up the absurdity of the slurs—indeed, she is the *only* person working—but also the coincidence of the off-screen dialogue with close shots of her face makes us hear the comments as if through her ears.

An emphasis on identification, however, while appropriate to fiction films in the realist mode, fails to allow for films which might *also* show sensitivity to the point of view, in a more inconclusive sense, of the colonised or the oppressed, but in a rigorously distanced manner. A film like *Der Leone Have Sept Cabeças* (directed by Glauber Rocha, 1970), whose multi-lingual title already subverts the cultural positioning of the spectator by mingling the languages of five of Africa's colonisers, allows identification with none of its characters, because it is essentially a Brechtian 'tricontinental' fable which animates emblematic figures representing the diverse incarnations of coloniser and colonised in the Third World. 'Zumbi', named after the founder of the Brazilian fugitive slave republic Palmares, encapsulates the revolution in Africa and among the black diaspora; 'Samba' embodies the power of Afro-culture; and 'Xobu' figures in caricatural form the corruption of the black puppets of colonialism. To condemn such a film for not creating identification with the oppressed is to reduce the broad question of the articulation of narrative, cinematic and cultural codes to the single question of the presence or absence of a particular sub-code of editing.

The music track can also play a crucial role in the establishment of a political point of view and the cultural positioning of the spectator. Film music has an emotional dimension: it can regulate our sympathies, extract our tears or trigger our fears. The Ray Budd score in *The Wild Geese* consistently supports the mercenaries, waxing martial and heroic when they are on the attack, and maudlin when they emote. At one point, the Borodin air 'This Is My Beloved' musically eulogises one of the slain mercenaries. In many classical Hollywood films, African polyrhythms became aural signifiers of encircling savagery, a kind of synecdochic shorthand for the atmosphere of menace implicit in the phrase 'the natives are restless'. *Der Leone Have Sept Cabeças*, in contrast, treats African polyrhythms with respect, as music, while ironically associating the puppets of colonialism with 'La Marseillaise'. *Black and White in Color* employs music satirically by having the African colonised carry their colonial masters, while singing—in their own language—satirical songs about them ('My master is so fat, how can I carry him? . . . Yes, but mine is so ugly. . .').

In many consciously anti-colonialist films, a kind of textual uneven development makes the film politically progressive in some of its codes but regressive in others.

Burn! (directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, 1970), for example, a didactic assault on neo-colonialism, partially vitiates its message by imposing highly Europeanised choral music on its Third World setting.²⁸ *Compasso de Espera* (*Marking Time*, directed by Antunes Filho, 1973), a denunciation of Brazilian-style racism, subverts its pro-black position with a music track that mixes Erik Satie and Blood Sweat and Tears while ignoring the rich Afro-Brazilian musical heritage. On the other hand *Land in Anguish* (directed by Glauber Rocha, 1967) uses music to the opposite effect. Here, in a film dealing with Brazil's white political elite, Afro-Brazilian music serves as a constant reminder of the existence of the marginalised majority of blacks and mulattoes absent from the screen and not represented by that elite. Brazilian films in general, perhaps because of the ethnically 'poly-phonic' nature of that society, are particularly rich in the inter-codic contradiction, at times instituting a veritable battle of the codes on the music tracks. *The Given Word* (directed by Anselmo Duarte, 1962) sets in motion a cultural conflict between the Afro-Brazilian *berimbau* instrument and the bells of the Catholic Church, while *Tent of Miracles* (directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1976) counterpoints opera and samba to represent a larger conflict between Bahia's white elite and its subjugated *mestizos*.

ABERRANT READINGS

The filmic experience must inevitably be infected by the cultural awareness of the audience itself, constituted outside the text and traversed by sets of social relations such as race, class and gender. We must allow, therefore, for the possibility of aberrant readings, reading which go against the grain of the discourse. Although fiction films are persuasive machines designed to produce specific impressions and emotions, they are not all-powerful; they may be read differently by different audiences. Hollywood's ill-informed portrayals of Latin-American life were sometimes laughed off the screen within Latin America itself. The Spanish version of *Dracula*, for example, made concurrently with the 1931 Bela Lugosi film, mingles Cuban, Argentine, Chilean, Mexican and peninsular Spanish in a linguistic hodge-podge that struck Latin-American audiences as quite ludicrous.

A particular audience's knowledge or experience can also generate a counter-pressure to colonialist representations. Black Americans, presumably, never took Stepin Fetchit to be an accurate representation of their race as a whole. *One Potato Two Potatoes* (directed by Larry Peerce, 1964), a film about interracial marriage, provides a poignant narrative example, in which the experience of oppression infects a character's reading of the film-within-the-film. The black husband, enraged by a series of racially motivated slights, attends a western in a drive-in movie theatre. Projecting his anger, he screams his support for the Indians, whom he sees as his analogues in suffering, and his hatred for the whites. His reading goes against the grain of the colonialist discourse.

²⁸The film also made the mistake of pitting one of the First World's most charismatic actors (Marlon Brando), as the coloniser, against a former peasant non-actor (Evaristo Marques), as the colonised, thus disastrously tipping the scales of interest, if not sympathy, in favour of the coloniser.

The movement of an aberrant reading can also proceed in the opposite direction; an anti-racist film, when subjected to the ethnocentric prejudices of a particular critic or interpretative community, can be read in a racist fashion. A sequence in *Masculine, Feminine*, a quotation from LeRoi Jones's play *The Dutchman*, shows a blonde white woman in the metro accompanied by two black men. At the conclusion of the sequence, a shot of the woman's hand holding a revolver gives way, shortly thereafter, to the sound of gunfire and a title 'Nothing but a Woman/and a Man/And a Sea of Blood.' Andrew Sarris, in his account of the sequence, ignores the visual and written evidence that it is the woman who wields the gun: '... a Negro nationalist draws out a gun with phallic fury in the metro.'²⁹ Here, cultural expectations inform the very perceptions of the viewer, who projects his own racial and sexual expectations onto the film.³⁰

We must be aware, then, of the cultural and ideological assumptions spectators bring to the cinema. We must be conscious, too, of the institutionalised expectations, the mental machinery that serves as the subjective support to the film industry, and which leads us to consume films in a certain way. This apparatus has adapted most of us to the consumption of films which display high production values. But many Third World film-makers find such a model, if not repugnant, at least inappropriate—not only because of their critique of dominant cinema, but also because the Third World, with its scarcer capital and higher costs, simply cannot afford it. Significantly, such film-makers and critics argue for a model rooted in the actual circumstances of the Third World: a 'third cinema' (Solanas-Gettino), 'an aesthetic of hunger' (Rocha), and 'an imperfect cinema' (Espinosa). To expect to find First World production values in Third World films is to be both naive and ethnocentric. To prospect for Third World auteurs, similarly, is to apply a regressive analytical model which implicitly valorises dominant cinema and promises only to invite a few elite members of the Third World into an already established pantheon.

The objective of this study of filmic colonialism and racism, finally, is not to hurl charges of racism at individual film-makers or critics—in a systematically racist society few escape the effects of racism—but rather to learn how to decode and deconstruct racist images and sounds. Racism is not permanently inscribed in celluloid or in the human mind; it forms part of a constantly changing dialectical process within which, we must never forget, we are far from powerless.

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²⁹From Sarris's review in the *Village Voice*, September 29–October 6, 1966, included in *Masculine, Feminine* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), pp. 275–79.

³⁰In the case of Cuban films, ethnocentrism merges with anti-communism to distort the perception of First World critics. Many American critics, for example, identified very strongly with the alienated artist-intellectual protagonist of Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) and with his disabused view of the Cuban people. Seeing the film as an auteurist lament concerning the low level of cultural life in Cuba and the repressive nature of the Cuban regime, Andrew Sarris spoke for these critics (in his explanation of the award given the film by the National Society of Film Critics) when he claimed that what struck them most favourably was the film's 'personal and very courageous confrontation of the artist's doubts and ambivalences regarding the Cuban revolution'. Such critics completely missed the film's critique both of the protagonist and of pre-revolutionary Cuba.