



**HAL**  
open science

# White trash characters as the voice of racism in Hollywood films

Sébastien Lefait

► **To cite this version:**

Sébastien Lefait. White trash characters as the voice of racism in Hollywood films. Congrès de l'AFEFA, 2023, DIJON, France. hal-04426466

**HAL Id: hal-04426466**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-04426466>**

Submitted on 30 Jan 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## White trash characters as the voice of racism in Hollywood films.

Sébastien Lefait, Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence,  
France

### 1. Introduction

This paper forms part of a book project (with Olivier Esteves), part of which I want to put to the test and would greatly appreciate getting feedback on here. In this book, we seek to interrogate how Hollywood, as a powerful cultural industry has actively entrenched, rather than actually created, a triple bias. **First**, by relegating racism to some distant, backward South, Hollywood films have conveyed the impression that the North is, at least by comparison, a model of progressivism. This representation strategy, which we call the Dixie focus, may be the easiest to observe, yet it is but one facet of the film industry's obfuscation of racism in the North of the United States. Indeed, the overwhelming bulk of films tackling the 'American dilemma', to quote Gunnar Myrdal's phrase for the "Negro Problem",<sup>1</sup> rest on at least two other removes.

The **second one**, after the geographical remove mentioned earlier, is historical. Indeed, most films on racism depict events that unfolded at least twenty years prior to release, validating the claim that 'race' or the worst forms of racism firmly belong in the past. To give some fairly recent examples, *Green Book* is a 2018 film about 1962 events, *Selma* a 2014 film about 1965, *Detroit* a 2017 film about 1967, and *The Butler*

---

<sup>1</sup> *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Volume 1* (New York : Routledge, 1995 [1944]).

This article is solely concerned with the Black-White binary of American racism, hence the reference to the 'American dilemma'. This is why, to give an obvious example, *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins, 1961) is outside the remit of this contribution.

was released in 2013 and its story spans at least three decades, from the 1950s into the 1980s. To be sure, the pattern is nothing new: *Mississippi Burning* was a 1988 production about the Freedom Summer of 1964, and even the iconic *To Kill a Mockingbird* was released in 1962, but depicts a quaint Alabama town in the early 1930s.

What all of this shows is that Obama-time glorifications of some ‘post-racial America’ had themselves been sustained by decades of cinematic production.<sup>2</sup> It is also noteworthy that two recent films on past forms of racism do clearly connect, be it explicitly or implicitly, this past racism to the Trump-time discussion on race and the Black Lives Matter movement. These are *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *BlacKkKlansman*, both released in 2018. And it is probably no coincidence that both films were directed by African-American men (Barry Jenkins and Spike Lee).

**Thirdly**, many films have been informed by an institutional and social class remove, whereby racism is almost always portrayed as stemming from dysfunctional individuals, and not from a system (police forces, education system, real estate market, federal and state-level policies). These individuals, as is shown in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) with the animal-like Bob Ewell, firmly belong to the White Trash category of characters,<sup>3</sup> thereby buffering all deserving working-class and middle-class movie-goers from any accusation of racism. More on this film in a moment.

As you have probably gathered by now, this paper focuses on this third remove, studying as it does the instrumentalization of white trash

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *Not Even Past : Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Isenberg has some interesting comments to make on the film and Bob Ewell in *White Trash : The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York : Penguin, 2016), xxv-xxvi, 254-5.

characters in Hollywood's representation of racism in the US. I also attempt, in keeping with this panel's topic, to assess the impact of this culturally hegemonic representational mode on audiences from various classes.

## **2. White trash racist characters in Hollywood films that address racism.**

As is the case for the book project, I adopt here a mixed method approach, first by providing a quantitative assessment concerning the number of films in our corpus that introduce white trash characters, presenting them as racist. As our corpus so far counts around 120 films, this part is still a work in progress, but I do want to use the quantitative method as a way of surveying the progress of the white trash racist stereotype through cinematic representations.

### **Show the spreadsheet.**

Because of the emphasis placed on the cultural vehicles of this deflection strategy, the corpus is mainly comprised of Hollywood films that are studied for their ability to globally propagate, through fiction, a distribution of racism in the US that mainly exempts the northern white elite to vilify southern rednecks.

This quantitative approach so far validates our working hypothesis:

About **XX %** of the films are set in the South, among which **YY%** also blame white trash characters for being racists in at least one sequence.

The next step will be to try and validate our secondary hypothesis: that the stereotype under study – the “racist cracker” – is usually paired with an educated “white saviour” character, often from the North of the country, with whom viewers are prompted to identify.

I will now add, as in our book, a qualitative perspective expanding throughout a few case studies. First, I will focus on the white trash/white saviour dyad through a seminal example (the Bob Ewell / Atticus Finch pair in *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Robert Mulligan, 1962) leading up to a more recent production (*Mississippi Burning* – Alan Parker, 1988) finish with a film that introduces a variation on the trope (*BlacKkKlansman* – Spike Lee, 2018).

Since the topic for this conference is **Voices, Sounds, Noises, Silences**, I have chosen, to make the above point, sequences that rely on the opposition between a strong southern accent and a neutral accent as a way of overemphasizing the dichotomy between educated people and inferior citizens, the burden of racism being brought to bear on the latter, while the former seem to be impervious to racist attitudes, protected as they are by their superior milieu.

### **3. Blaming white trash characters for racism in the US.**

In the preface to her 2016 book *White Trash : The 400-year Untold History of Class in America*, Nancy Isenberg uses as her first example “one of the most memorable films of all time”, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, described as “a classic portrait of the legacy of slavery and racial segregation in the South”. She then describes how the central plotline focuses on Atticus Finch, “who refuses to perpetuate the racial double standard” as “he agrees to defend an African-American, Tom Robinson, on the charge of raping a poor white girl, Mayella Ewell”, to pit against one another Robinson, “an honourable, hard-working family man” and the “degraded Ewells, his accusers”. The Ewells, she then states, “are unmistakably what southerners (and a lot of other people) called white trash” (xxvi).

This is nowhere clearer than in the film's climactic trial scene. **Show clip.**

To ensure he will get the support of the all-white jury, members of which are dressed almost exactly like him, Bob Ewell physically provokes Atticus, turning the trial into a racial tug of war against Atticus, who is singled out as very different from the inhabitants of Maycomb. Yet Atticus soon reverses the situation.

**Clip.**

As can be seen here, Atticus' demonstration is twofold.

First, he aims to show that Bob is left-handed, which she suggests he is guilty while Tom Robinson is innocent (indeed, Tom's left arm is disabled due to a farming accident years ago, the supposed rapist would have had to mostly assault Mayella with his left hand before raping her.

Second, the mode of the demonstration also uses a preconception against white trash as illiterate, which causes whispers against the audience, and sends a red herring across Ewell's path. Indeed, Atticus is less trying to prove that Ewell cannot write, which he can, with some difficulty it seems, but that he is left-handed. The link is thus built between his ingrained racism, his lack of education, his farm worker's clothing, and his strong accent. Conversely, Gregory Peck embodies education, style, class, and some level of cunning that translates as his ability to use stereotypes for a specific purpose.

The result of this binary treatment is that racism seems to be the consequence of a lack of education may only be found among the very lower classes on American society, and consequently only in rural

America, and also consequently mainly in the south of the United States.

Second example: *Mississippi Burning*.

Two scenes are noteworthy.

The first one takes place at the barbershop, and Anderson, one of the two FBI agents in charge of investigating the disappearance of three civil rights workers in fictional Jessup County, Mississippi, is confronted by the town's mayor, Tilman, with an explanatory statement about the American South and in particular Mississippi. **Clip.**

In this dialogue the North's perspective is presented as stereotypical and condescending. The North sees the South as a group of uncultured, racist rednecks. This binary geography is contrasted with another binarism, between the white south and the south of people of color. This is a direct attack against Anderson's FBI partner, Ward, a bespectacled by-the-book agent from the North, a typical white saviour, but also against Anderson who, as a former Mississippi sheriff, is exposed as a traitor to his area of origin.

Second example from *Mississippi Burning*. Several times in the film, there are documentary-style sequences giving the inhabitants of the city the opportunity to express themselves. **Clip.** Through such sequences, Southerners voice their suspicion of the North, supporting it with conspiracy theories. The inhabitants speak in front of the camera, as if questioned by a reporter, which anchors racism in the reality of Mississippi, and makes simple people bear responsibility for it in the way they talk and the content of their comments, all of which seem to point to their lack of education.

Third and last example. In Spike Lee's oxymoronically titled *Black Klansman*, the dichotomy between the accents is also to be found, but question of voicing one's resistance is treated differently, and quite cleverly, thanks to the predominance of notion of ventriloquism in the plot.

This is shown in the scene located at the beginning of the film where Ron Stallworth reads the newspaper and, discovering that he can call the Ku Kux Klan, immediately decides to do so.

### **Clip if time.**

He imitates a lower-class white accent, his voice contrasting with his appearance, which associates white supremacy not with a visual stereotype, but with an identifiable voice and manner of expression. Indeed, the essentializing characterization of the redneck, if it can be achieved through images, is more effectively carried out through the soundtrack, where language and accent characterize the working-class white man as one who speaks with certain words, and certain intonations. The way in which Ron, though black, manages to embody the very racism he is fighting is achieved through the imitation of a known stereotype (see how he references the black hands on white female bodies trope, which Celia Daileader has called the Othello Syndrome). This suggests that racial intolerance is detectable perhaps not to the naked eye, but at least to the ear. Conversely, it seems that one has to express oneself in this way to be truly racist. This is confirmed at the conclusion of the scene by his colleague's remark, "Good luck with your new redneck friends," which clearly identifies the impersonation as corresponding precisely to this stereotype.

This clip, as well as the film as a whole, also deconstructs the white saviour trope: the film takes place in Colorado, and Ron, an African

American, destroys the local KKK branch, with the assistance of his Jewish coworker, Flip Zimmerman, who plays his part among the KKK members. The white saviour here is black, Jewish, and he speaks with a strong accent he is able to imitate, in a film that provides less a counterexample in our list than a reflexive perspective on racist / antiracist character types.

#### **4. Exploitation.**

Through a few examples selected among many of the same ilk, I have argued that mainstream American movies dealing with racial issues have massively associated intolerance with undeserving, lower-class white characters who are almost relegated outside the bounds of humanity.

Two main consequences can be highlighted – one that has to do with the role of voices in representation strategies, the other with the role of voices in character identification / dissociation processes. Those consequences will be drawn based on a selection of critical reactions to some of the films mentioned above shortly after their release.

As Camille Chane shows in his Phd dissertation, there is a strong connection between accents and stereotypes. Although his work deals with cartoons and representations of East Asians, some of the perspectives borrowed from his work can indeed be applied to some of the accents heard in the clips I have shown.

Indeed, Rosina Lippi-Green has shown in *English with an Accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge. 2012), that good and bad types can be defined on screen through their accents (I wish to thank Camille for the reference). Her seventh chapter is dedicated to Disney movies and their handling of accented-English-speaking characters, and she shows, for instance,

that British accents often index villainy and American accents often index goodness.

A similar pattern may be found to be operating in our films, with neutral American accents being associated with liberalism, education, and tolerance, all of which are positive characteristics, while thick Southern accents connote conservatism, ill-education, to such an extent that they seem to be the tune to which racist speech is played.

Yet some of our film's reviews seem to indicate that southern dwellers feel proud to hear their accents correctly reproduced on the film's soundtracks. In his review for the *Alabama Journal*, on 5. April 1963, Arch McKay Junior writes

"It was refreshing that the Southern accents of the two children were authentic Birmingham. Too many times have I seen a movie ruined by some actor carelessly mouthing you alls in a futile attempt to duplicate the soft southern speech. Those little ones have it, and it's wonderful to hear".

Yet while the Southern press greeted the movie with a real sigh of relief, and argued that only the most bigoted Southerners would be offended by the film, this is qualified if we take into account more critical readings of how our films represent the South, in national newspapers.

About *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The New Yorker* wrote that "the moral of this can only be that while ignorant rednecks mustn't take the law into their own hands, it's alright for nice people to do so". The Times called it: "side-porch sociology", and Peck is "the Abe Lincoln of Alabama".

For *Mississippi Burning*, now: in an article published in the *Austin American-Statesman* (Austin, Texas) on Fri, Jan 13, 1989, the reviewer writes that *Mississippi Burning* "gets the audience rooting for

vengeance, and it's no wonder. Most of it is meant to incite. It's a series of beatings, burnings and lynchings. (...) You can't argue that life in racist communities isn't a hell on earth, but you can darn well say that Parker is singularly artless about his depiction of it. All events in MP are exaggerated, **all characters stereotypes or cartoons**".

The Ft's review by Nigel Andrews is even more scathing (Andrews, Nigel. "Cop Operas down South." *Financial Times*, 4 May 1989, p. 29). Andrews writes: "Just when you thought the cinema had restored the Deep South to its pre-1960s fantasy world of bayous, in-breeding and battiness (...), we get *Mississippi Burning*" He then adds, "Event the crime's solution seems provided by the Hollywood branch of Rent-a- cliché".

In the *Edmonton Journal* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) · Fri, Jan 13, 1989 · Page 19, Marc Horton considers MB "as heavy-handed as a club in the brutal fist of a Klansman and as subtle as a bomb tossed into a black Pentecostal church". He goes on: "How ugly was the face of the South? Every single one seems to glisten with a thin layer of sweat. Every mouth is filled with crooked teeth. If there are teeth at all. Eyes are crossed or squinted or mere slits in fat, white faces".

Surely, the reviewer had the fake interviews we saw in mind.

The line is this clearly drawn between the hiring of authentic Southern actors, on the one hand, and Hollywood representations, comparatively presented as lacking realism, on the other hand, especially where the depiction of lower-class whites is concerned.

## **Conclusion**

There might seem to be several steps from feeling proud to be southern to taking action to make oneself heard directly, rather than through such despicable characters as the Ewells or Mississippians

from Jessup County. Yet despite the relatively small number of examples of such reactions I have found (so far, and counting), this is a road I wish to go down, to suggest that the Hollywood productions discussed earlier (and later in our book for many others) contribute to triggering the white backlash that this panel centers on.

As in Lippi-Green's example of a good guy/bad guy dichotomy being expressed through variously accented voices, character voices may contribute to audience identification. In her case study, American audiences are likely to feel they are good people, while British audiences may take offence at being indirectly criticized through villainous characters.

If applied to our corpus of films, this identification process may similarly split the audience in two groups.

Thanks to this social class remove, educated, middle- or upper-class filmgoers, and anyone from the North of the US will thus be soothed into believing that racism only affects a minority of people portrayed as completely unlike themselves. But also, as a result of this class remove, lower class viewers may feel they are made to bear the burden of racism against African Americans in the United States, which may be one of the causes of the white backlash mentioned in the call for papers for this panel.

Therefore, presenting white trash characters as the voice of racism in the US may be a culturally entrenched prompt for the silent majority to speak up, not as a result of crass racism, but to protest against the way in which the entertainment industry has vilified and essentialized them. This response is more complex to assess, as the southern lower class is known for its loathing of "Hollywood liberals" and their work. Nevertheless, reviews of the films published shortly after their release

in southern newspapers give us an indication of response patterns that express forms of discontent with Hollywood's representation strategies, leading to the conclusion that the majority of American citizens are being silenced not in, but *by* those productions.

Scholars have deconstructed the mythical image of the South as it is portrayed in movies to show that the projection of an idyllic or, on the contrary, racist and violent vision allowed to mask racism in the rest of the country (see a few references in slide). By comparison, the historical reasons for the focus on the South and the constant sidelining of the North, by opposing the two regions, have not been fully explored. Olivier and myself do hope that our book will fill this gap.