



HAL
open science

Mainstreaming the marginal: Selma not Chicago, Hollywood's obscuring of racism in the North

Sébastien Lefait

► **To cite this version:**

Sébastien Lefait. Mainstreaming the marginal: Selma not Chicago, Hollywood's obscuring of racism in the North. Colloque de la SERCIA "MARGINS", 2023, PARIS, France. hal-04426549

HAL Id: hal-04426549

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-04426549>

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.

Mainstreaming the marginal: Selma not Chicago, Hollywood's obscuring of racism
in the North'

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

Olivier Esteves, CERAPPS, Université Lille 3.

Introduction.

As a very marginal question in the history of Hollywood production, racism (as defined along the lines of the 'American dilemma' researched by Gunnar Myrdal) has always confronted filmmakers with the challenge of exposing issues repugnant to any liberal democracy whilst having to reassure producers, political, media elites as well as the mainstream public about the exceptional nature of racism in the United States. In a book project entitled *Selma not Chicago, Hollywood's obscuring of racism in the North*, we seek to expose the mechanisms and decision-making processes that took the issue of racism from the margins into the mainstream, to such an extent as to turn it into a crowd-puller. We show that the process has included what we call *a triple remove*: first it relegates racism in the (deep) South; second, it depicts it as literally 'a thing of the past'; third, it places the burden of racism on the shoulders of dysfunctional, White-trash type individuals, thereby silencing all structural forms of racism. Consequently, it may be asserted that Hollywood mainstreams American racism in ways that relegate it to the geographical, historical, or social margins of the country.

In this paper as well as in the book project, we wish to study the genesis of these three biases, in an approach that resonates with more or less recent historiography on the study of U.S. racism (by Thomas Sugrue, Jeanne Theoharis, Matthew Delmont, Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter) and draws from extant scholarship on the representation of the South in Hollywood (Edward Campbell, Karen Cox, Allison Graham in the US; Claire Dutriaux and Taïna Tukhunen in France) . We thus show that Hollywood's strategy partakes of an institutional effort at depicting racism as a

regional anomaly, not a national question. Refer to the subjectivity of geographical boundaries, mobilise the quote by Malcolm X (PPT).

Our focus is both quantitative and qualitative, looking into specific scenes from films like *Green Book*, *The Butler*, *Mississippi Burning*, *The Help*, etc. which taken together weave a narrative of silencing racism outside the South, thereby reinforcing what W.E.B. Du Bois or more recently Jeanne Theoharis have referred to as an 'epistemology of ignorance' among the mainstream (white) public about the pervasive, systemic, nationwide nature of racism in the U.S. We include a comparison with Sundance films (*Shadows*, *Dear White People*, *Fruitvale Station*), which offer a more comprehensive treatment of racism as a national and systemic issue, thereby refusing to relegate the issue to the margins of US society. We conclude that Hollywood offers a normative treatment of racism as a problem of the South, of the poor, and of the past, exposing this representation strategy (whether deliberate or not) as a consequence of Hollywood's normative production system. We also identify recent symptoms suggesting that Hollywood films have started progressively mainstreaming the so far marginal treatment of racism exemplified in independent productions.

1. Hollywood productions

The corpus under study consists mainly of Academy-award-winning films, whose impact on narratives of racialization is potentially magnified by the fact they are widely watched and discussed, so that the stories, characters, and themes presented in those mainstream movies can be said to shape public perceptions and attitudes towards race and racial identities.

As such then, in the project we are not so much interested in the cinematic quality of films rather than in the collective, cross-generational weaving of a narrative of obfuscation, placing racism firmly in Alabama or Mississippi. The potential or real

impact on perceptions is what matters to us : and by perceptions we mean not only 'American perceptions' of racism in America but global (particularly European) perceptions, in cold war times as well as today, where the stress on racism as a Southern anomaly is a key element in the U.S.'s self-projection as a benevolent democracy, to boost America's soft-power. As French scholars we also believe it is important to de-Americanise this debate. Also, ultimately, perceptions are bound to have an effect on policies, or to quote the classic W. I. Thomas theorem of 1928 : 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.

Statistical analysis of our corpus of around 120 films evinces a representation strategy that relies on a **triple remove**, which appears to be even more obvious when the corpus is restricted to Academy award winners exclusively.

Of this narrowed-down corpus of 32 films released between 1915 and 2021, 62.5% are set in the South (50% for the larger corpus), 31% in the North and 7% in the West. 62% of films have a White trash character (the percentage is similar for the extended corpus). 82% of films place racism at least 20 years in the past, for an average of 60 years before the film's release date (compared to little more than half the extended corpus).

This brief overview enables us to draw some conclusions about the way Hollywood presents the racialization paradigm that has operated in the United States.

The reading grid that the American cultural industry tends to impose is based on a highly unbalanced North-South distribution. In the narrative of the constitution of a racialized American society, the South, and in particular the Deep South, seems to have played a predominant role. Conversely, in this unequal distribution, the North seems either free from problems of racism, or the victim of a racialization that comes from elsewhere. 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”,¹ rest on at least two other removes.

The second one is 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,² thereby buffering all deserving working-class and middle-class movie-goers from any accusation of racism. As character types, they are usually paired with another type of character, the white savior (Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*). On this topic, studies by French scholar Claire Dutriaux³ have suggested that the redneck character serves to alleviate the burden of racism borne by southern elites, but no study so far has presented this focus as a strategy aimed at presenting the North and the West Coast as racially progressive by comparison. Admittedly of course, fictional narratives -and especially films- are overwhelmingly character-based, lending themselves nicely to the portrayal of characters, rather than institutions, that embody ‘racist evil’, often through a moral, not a political, lens.

Finally, Hollywood's generalized narrative of the establishment of a racial society in the United States borrows the generic traits of the historical film. Racism is thus presented as a problem of the past, which makes it either a legacy from which we still suffer the stigma, or a problem that has long since disappeared or is in the process of disappearing. To give some fairly recent examples, *Green Book* is a 2018 film about

¹ *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.

² 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.

³ Claire Dutriaux, “Le redneck au cinéma : blanchité masculine et classe sociale dans le cinéma hollywoodien à l’ère du mouvement pour les droits civiques”, *Miranda* [Online], 24 | 2022, Online since 25 February 2022, connection on 10 June 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/43587>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.43587>

1962 events, *Selma* a 2014 film about 1965, and *Loving* by Jeff Nicholls is a 2016 film about events taking place in 1967. 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.

The North as a present absence : in many respects films that expose Southern racism are often implicit or explicit praises of Northern racial benevolence, through a kind of geographical grammar of racial dichotomy. Examples abound but the epoch-making, award-winning *In The Heat of the Night* (1967) offers a remarkable case in point. The plot to *In the Heat of the Night* revolves around one Virgil Tibbs, a Black man living in Philadelphia who finds himself at the wrong time (in the night, just after a murder has taken place) in the wrong place, in Sparta (Mississippi), a small town consumed with White-trash type racism. Tibbs is well-dressed, well-spoken and arouses suspicion, as a Black stranger to the town. After being arrested, it turns out that he is a respected, well-paid homicide officer in Philly and, ultimately, it is Tibbs who will solve the murder case, being much more experienced and smarter than all of the local police. The Oscar-winning film remains a landmark in films about racism, owing to the power of Poitier's performance, and also because of a few iconic scenes, particularly the one when Tibbs is being slapped in the face by Endicott, a powerful plantation owner, and Tibbs slaps Endicott back.

All of this is well-known, for *In The Heat of the Night* is an all-time classic. What matters for the purpose of this article is that the fact that Poitier should a well-paid, respected, homicide and Black officer in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s was expected to raise very few eyebrows when the film was released as well as today, all of this in a city whose police forces have been notoriously riddled with issues of systemic racism, particularly during the Frank Rizzo period culminating in Rizzo's access to the mayorship in 1979.⁴ A few years before the film *In The Heat* was released, the NAACP

⁴ Timothy J. Lombardo, *Blue-Collar Conservatism: Frank Rizzo's Philadelphia and Populist Politics* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

raised an alarm against Rizzo's 'storm-trooper tactics against Negroes' in the city. And, in Philadelphia as in other northern cities, police officers who happened to be Black were very few, and if anything were hardly expected to raise above rank-and-file positions.⁵

It is an amazing thing that this obvious fact should have been so little exposed. The effect on collective mental constructions of the racist South vs liberal North binary must have been quite substantial, in the U.S. as well as beyond. To give an example, in a university course on the topic of this article, spanning the 2020-2023 period, some 200 students at University of Lille, 50 students at Sciences-Po Lille and 20 students during a summer school held at Université de Montréal (2022) have been asked to analyze *In The Heat* in the perspective of the North-South bias studied here, and not any student has ever *explicitly* raised doubts about the believability of Tibbs' position in the Philly police hierarchy.

2. Comparative analysis.

A sample of independent movies corroborates our interpretation of Hollywood's treatment of racism as the result of a deliberate obfuscation strategy. Although the corpus of Sundance films we have worked on is far from being as large as our main corpus of Hollywood films (but this part of our project is also still a work in progress, so that other examples will be added along the way), it evinces certain features that largely differ from, and indirectly expose, the triple remove that characterises most mainstream productions. As we shall see promptly, indie films deal with racism in a variety of ways, addressing the issue with nuance and subtlety, so that the comparison with Hollywood productions speaks volumes about how codified their representation of racism actually is.

⁵ W. Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1996), 20-23.

This leads us to one of the main arguments we expand upon in our book. — the Hollywood anti-racist film should be considered a genre or sub-genre of its own. To make this point, we abide by Rick Altman’s defining criteria of film genres: they are defined by the film industry and recognized by the mass audience; they have clear, stable identities and borders ; they are transhistorical ; they undergo predictable development ; finally and more importantly, they are located in a particular topic, structure and corpus, they share certain fundamental characteristics ; and they have either a ritual or an ideological function.

Those defining features largely overlap with some of the main arguments we make in our book. Besides, where sharing certain fundamental characteristics is concerned, the triple remove we have identified is almost sufficient for the antiracism films to form a genre defined by its main topic, its geographical location, its main character types, and its location on the historical timeline. Incidentally given the nature of one of the examples discussed below, it should be noted that Justin Simien, the director of *Dear White People*, seems to perceive such films as generically similar himself when he writes, in the book he released as a follow-up to his film: “I’ve noticed that people typically want to discuss race in America only if it comes in the form of **irony or controversy, or a civil rights/slavery-era film released during awards season.**” Simien’s statement also suggests, as we also do in our book (see above), that such films wear their anti-racist agenda on their sleeve to improve the odds of receiving a major award. It also makes a point that is similar to our book’s argument that the historical remove present in most of the items in our corpus exposes the role of the Hollywood industry in constructing a discourse of post-racial America. Indeed, what quantitative analysis reveals is that Obama-time glorifications of some ‘post-racial America’ had themselves been sustained by decades of cinematic production.⁶

⁶ Thomas Sugrue, *Not Even Past : Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2010).

For today's presentation, we have selected three non-mainstream films: *Shadows* by John Cassavetes, the aforementioned *Dear White People*, and Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*.

Shadows directed by John Cassavetes, unfolds against the backdrop of 1950s New York City's vibrant jazz scene, focusing on three mixed-race siblings—Ben, Hugh, and the vivacious Lelia, whose love interest Tony adds a layer of complexity. As their distinct personalities intermingle with personal struggles, the film subtly explores the issue of racism, highlighting the intricate challenges faced by individuals of diverse backgrounds in a prejudiced society that is never presented as openly racist.

Indeed, in a 1967 article, Thomas Cripps states that the film offers “the most sensitive view of Negroes and American life”. He goes on: “Using unknown actors, Ben Maddow's script attempted to show the world of Negroes as closed and esoteric by juxtaposing it with the world of whites through the medium of the anxieties of a young girl who has been passing.” This “world of whites” does not seem to have found its way onto Hollywood screens, at least until recently, as it is represented by a group of wealthy, urban, and trendy New Yorkers, who are dramatically different from the southern redneck stereotype systematically used in civil rights era films, as Alison Schoen has explained (working on a small corpus of films and TV productions) in her book *Framing the South – Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (2003), and as Claire Dutriaux and Taina Tukhunen have also shown in various book chapters and articles.

In the film's climactic scene, Tony reacts offensively when he finds out that Leila's brother is Black and that she therefore has been passing for White. His reaction, though, is more discreet and subdued than the unabashedly racist behaviour of the white trash characters found in the films of our Hollywood corpus. Besides, Tony's response is later qualified as he comes back to Leila and apologises, which suggests that he, like many white people even in New York, had internalised a mode of racism

that is culturally entrenched, which he later decides to fight off and correct upon realising that he, of all people and to his great dismay, had it in him to indulge in racist demeanour.

Fruitvale Station, directed by Ryan Coogler, is set in Oakland, California, and delves into Oscar Grant's last day, depicting his relationships and struggles, while highlighting the issues of racial profiling and police brutality. It is a fictional version of real-life events, as Oscar Grant died at the hands of a white police officer on January 1, 2009. The film, however, does not read as an in-your-face exposure of police brutality against African-American men. As Robin M. Boylorn writes “Oscar dies because of overpolicing, profiling, and racism,” at the end of a film whose focus “shifts from how to construct black masculinity to how to deconstruct the systemic racism and paranoia about black men that created an environment in which a good (imperfect) black man can die in a subway station with hundreds of witnesses watching—and his murderer only serve half of a two-year sentence”.

Furthermore, as one of the film's apparently unimportant sequences suggests, Oscar's death occurs as the final development in a story that follows the pattern of tragedy. In this sequence, Oscar is shown disobeying his mum who requires him to use a hands-free device before calling her while driving, to no dire consequence whatsoever. Ironically, the scene places him on the path to his tragic demise at Fruitvale Station. To go to San Francisco for the New Year's Day fireworks display, Oscar and his friends will follow the caring mother's recommendation this time and travel by train rather than driving under the influence. Had he chosen to disobey again and drive anyway, Oscar would not have been killed by a cop at Fruitvale Station.

Our third example, *Dear White People*, is far more complex in its structure and visual style. Directed by Justin Simien, the film is set within the racially charged environment of a prestigious Ivy League college. The story revolves around a group of

diverse characters, including outspoken radio host (and ironically named) Samantha White and activist Lionel Higgins, as they navigate identity, relationships, and cultural clashes. Tackling the issue of racism head-on, the film follows their journeys in a satirical exploration of the complexities and tensions surrounding race relations on a modern campus.

Central to the film's treatment of racism at university and beyond is Samantha White, who uses her skills as a media activist in the titular radio broadcast within the film "Dear White People". Her skills, however, seem to need polishing up if she is to graduate. In one of the film's sequences, her senior thesis film is shown in front of the class to much criticism. Asked to comment on the production by the professor, one of Sam's fellow students, Gabe, assesses the film as follows "I dig the 'silent movie' thing, but it's a little self-congratulatory, light on story, and frankly, thematically dubious." A parody of DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the essay portrays white characters in whiteface responding to Obama's election in a way that is very similar to the one in which, in the 1915 film, the KKK and more generally white supremacists reacted to the Yankee victory in the American Civil War, and also to Reconstruction. The fellow student's reaction points to what is wrong with her essay. Her denunciation of racism takes the form of antiwhite discourse, suggesting that her reaction makes her the black equivalent to Griffith, where the use of filmic representations to promote racism is concerned (in her case, a form of revenge racism against white people).

At the end of the film, she submits a comparatively far more successful video essay: a documentary on a real racist event, a blackface party thrown by a bunch of white supremacist students writing in one of the college's journals, *Pastiche*. This time, White people are not directly under attack, nor are they essentialised. Instead, White racism becomes the responsibility of a bunch of White would-be leaders, criticised for the way they express their racism, a blackface party that caricatures black people, rather than for acting the way white people supposedly do.

Obviously, this final video essay is a metamedial commentary on the way Simien's film seeks to address racism, as a set of cultural preconceptions that thrive on representation strategies (specifically descended from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy here), rather than merely as the effect of pure xenophobia or sheer desire to preserve white privilege.

Conclusion.

Dear White People offers a treatment of racism from a deliberately post-modern perspective, including as it does many different media, a parody of *The Birth of a Nation* that reads as the opposite of how *Dear White People* tries to solve racial issues, an activist radio broadcast that bears the same title as the film and finally a documentary essay that recycles moments from the blackface party shown in the film moments before. To conclude, we want to suggest that this recent film, and to a lesser extent *Fruitvale Station*, point to a paradigm shift in films that deal with racism in the US that consists of a call for the appropriation of representations of race which may be achieved directly through a form of visual sovereignty as African-American filmmakers direct movies about racism in the US. In similar vein, many other 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. *If Beale Street Could Talk* by Barry Jenkins is an evident example. Indeed, the construction of representations is always situated, and such films show that African-Americans should be in the position of directing the gaze from the inside of narratives rather than just from the outside as filmmakers, thereby decentring the white gaze and managing to appropriate Western tropes, and then in turn deconstruct dominant representations and provide new ones. This finally allows counter stories to emerge, with for instance *The Trial of the Chicago 7* by Aaron Sorkin (2020) or the 2022 movie *The Walk* by Daniel Adams, about busing policies in Boston in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, we want to suggest that Hollywood's handling of racism has been undergoing a reflexive turn roughly since 2010 and that this meta dimension present in recent films shows that acting on representations may be an obvious way of debunking stereotypes, but that it also blurs the divide between the ironic and the straightforward inclusion of racist representations in recent films. See for instance *Django Unchained* by Tarantino, 2012, or *BlacKkKlansman* by Spike Lee, 2018, to name two obvious examples). By bringing the treatment of racism previously exemplified in independent films from the margins to the mainstream, Hollywood thus provides the logical continuation of its obfuscation project.