

Blacks devalued by manipulation of images

by Yvonne Vera-Jose

There is nothing as comforting as the photographic space, or as ideologically charged.

Film, the continuous photograph, has transformed our consciousness of images. By presenting images as overconstructed, already defined, film beguiles us into intellectual acquiescence. The manipulation of the filmic space is crucial in relation to Africans: a generation has derived its image of Africa from watching Tarzan. Although today's films do not present a picture as absurd as that, they are misleading in a way that may be more pernicious because it is less obvious.

Melting faces

In Michael Jackson's new video, *Black or White*, Macaulay Culkin blows his father into space with an amplified guitar. He lands in Africa, still sitting on his sofa. "Africa" is signaled by lion after lion after lion... Five "Africans" approach with raised shields and spears.

Is this, by any chance, a traditional lion hunt?

The "hunt" turns into a dance with Jackson, dressed in billowing white shirt, appearing amid the "Africans," singing, "It don't matter if you're Black or White." Ironically, when two babies (White and Black) sit on top of the planet later in the video, it is the White child who holds the "world" in the palm of his hands.

It appears that all "other" groups are represented through dance (or some other form of "primitivity"), while America is represented through technology, from the opening sequence to a highway scene to the melting faces. In the highway scene, an Indian woman enacts a traditional dance, along with Jackson, while standing on the centre line of a busy road.

The "melting faces" foreground their constructed status to the point that all pretense is finally given up, and we are returned to the studio where the manipulations of the images we have just witnessed occurs. The harmony of the faces is shown to be only a technological feat, irrevocably undercutting the song's message.

In the sequence of faces, none is of very dark skin. Jackson, whose fame partly rests on a series of facial and skin transformations, lacks credibility in advocating the idea that colour is of no consequence. *Black or White* is a video which contradicts and denies the truth it pretends to affirm.

Cannibalism

Silence of the Lambs was one of the most talked-about films last year. The cannibalistic character of Dr. Hannibal Lecter fascinated audiences with its portrait of an intellectual, civilized European mind gradually overtaken by its dark underside. The theme is familiar from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The ending of *Silence of the Lambs* indicates its racist construct. Lecter escapes his cage... chews off a policeman's tongue... borrows his skin... and escapes to the Caribbean!

ANALYSIS

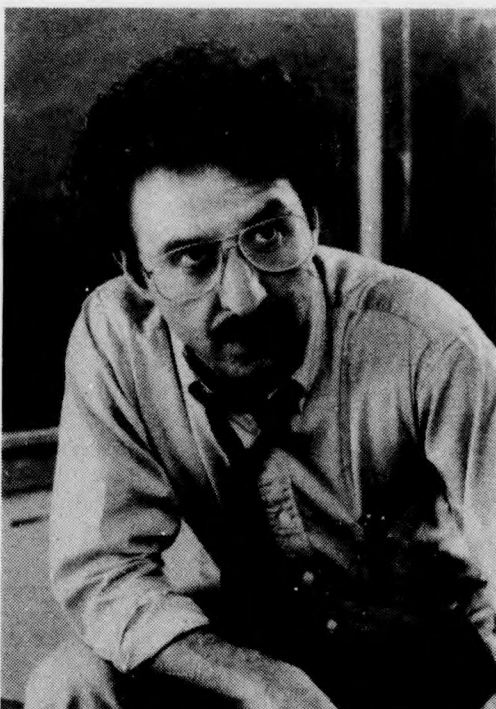
The portrayal of Black people in films not specifically about Blacks has an insidious way of promoting negative, stereotypical images

In the Caribbean, now clad in a loose, creamy matching outfit, Lecter puts the phone down, pulls a hat over his eyes, slips his hands into his pockets and slides away into perfect anonymity. Walking with a new freedom, an aura of long-delayed homecoming, he blends with the mass of black faces that suddenly overwhelm the screen.

Throughout the film, Clarice's world is contrasted with that of Lecter. She is free while he is caged, lawful while he is an outcast. The world of tuxedos, ceremoniousness, order, reward, duty and officiousness which forms the background as Clarice receives Lecter's final call contrasts with the Caribbean world Lecter now inhabits.

Populated by an amorphous black crowd, Lecter's world is depicted as dark and cannibalistic (he salivates self-assuredly after his next victim). Lecter is where he belongs. His subconscious coincides with a fitting external image. The translucence of all previous filmic images that dominated the last two hours is abandoned, and the film quality dwindles to a trembling haze — I mean halt. The smouldering mirage-creating Caribbean sun is an overreaching metaphor.

The shocking aspect of this message is its failure to shock. The image-maker has anticipated his audience. The final images and conclusion of *Silence of the Lambs* assume an au-



Ron Silver as lawyer Alan Dershowitz in *Reversal of Fortune*. The film starts with a plea for justice for Blacks, but the innocent Blacks facing the death penalty aren't even seen, only their fearless white lawyer.



Andy MacDowell and Gerard Depardieu create their own romantic history in the film *Green Card*. The use of Africa as a running joke in the film is a subtle and insidious method of demeaning Black experience and African, history.

dience that shares its myth about Blackness — the trait of cannibalism.

be "recreated," and that it is the opposite of whatever is whole.

Artificial Africa

The movie *Green Card* opens with a Black boy frantically beating on a drum. The drumming takes us through some crowded market scenes, then into a cafe called "Africa." Gerard Depardieu marries Andy MacDowell to get a coveted Green Card, then is explained away for much of the film as being in Africa shooting elephants.

Shooting elephants?

When Immigration starts to suspect that the "husband" is a fake, and that Africa doesn't exist, the two accomplices get together and create, through the manipulation of photographic space, an "Africa."

Dressed in Khaki safari wear and carrying all the paraphernalia of a hunter, Depardieu goes into MacDowell's greenhouse. They duck behind leaves and, with the assistance of an instant camera, produce pictures intended to convince officials that this is Africa. It's supposed to be comedy, but it doesn't work.

Depardieu eventually gets a job in the "Africa" cafe while in America. When off-screen, he inhabits an imaginary territory (because he never really goes to Africa). He also inhabits another Africa in the greenhouse, an Africa further transformed by the instant photograph into a photographic space that Immigration officials now witness in the album, and which we witness through the film camera's projected screen image...

Which space does Depardieu really inhabit?

Black or White, *Green Card* and *Silence of the Lambs*, though diverse in their subject matter, have each chosen to manipulate the image of Africans. Each reduces a complex and diverse people into a monolith of cannibalism, simplistic animal imagery or other "primitive urges." Each reinforces the idea that Africa can

Erotic space

Perhaps the most persistent image is that of Africa as erotic space. *Out of Africa* and *The Sheltering Sky* are held as achievements of sensuality; in the movie *Sahara*, actress Brooke Shields is inspired to a passion as hot as the desert itself.

The main imperative of these films is the exploration of White sexuality in a tropical, exotic landscape. Like *Out of Africa*, most of these films sidestep the harsher realities of colonialism.

Reversal of Fortune, a movie whose dominant theme has nothing to do with Black Americans, still finds it necessary to exploit the idea of Blackness. When we first meet lawyer Alan Dershowitz, he insists on his commitment to two Black clients who face the death penalty even though they are innocent.

Other than a single photocopied picture seen in the background, however, these Blacks do not appear in the film. After the first half hour, this theme is suddenly dropped. If it couldn't have been sustained, it should have been omitted.

One of the most memorable moments in *Awakenings* is that of a fat Black woman in a blue dress who is screaming hysterically and rolling her eyes; unfortunately, this is the only image of a Black person in the film, other than a medical attendant. The Black woman is used for comic effect, while the other patients are used to evoke sentiment and lead us to ponder questions of existence.

Viewers need to become more conscious of narrative and cinematic techniques which unfairly manipulate the image of "other" groups. Sometimes the least obvious films are the most exploitive.

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