



The Use of Spike Lee's Bamboozled to Promote Difficult Dialogues on Race

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Abstract: This paper will explore pedagogical strategies for using Spike Lee's cinematic coup *Bamboozled* to stimulate thoughtful discourse about race in the college classroom. The combined use of film excerpts, writing exercises and classroom discussion can help students to deconstruct racial stereotyping in the media. The students are asked initially not to converse about their emotional reactions to excerpts from the film, but to write about these responses for a brief ten to fifteen minute period. Having loosened up the flow of ideas through *freewriting*, the students are now ready to engage in a classroom discussion of the film clip. This oral discourse is followed by another, more reflective bout of writing, affording the students an opportunity to consolidate their ideas. Since *Bamboozled* portrays black performers in blackface in a "New Millennium Minstrel Show," it displays virtually every imaginable stereotype about African-Americans. The film *denaturalizes* the racial stereotypes it depicts by making them the focus of our explicit attention and by showing us their historical origins. Like Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the film's narrative is built through interweaving the discontinuities among multiple perspectives. So the viewer must become an active participant in the effort to untangle the film's meaning as well as a catalyst for understanding and deconstructing the racial stereotypes. *Bamboozled* is an ideal candidate for Paulo Freire's strategy of *conscientization*, since it can be used as a codification that facilitates students in actively coming to grips with contemporary American racism.

This paper, which is the outgrowth of a presentation at UMass Boston's Center for the Improvement of Teaching (CIT) Annual

Conference on Teaching for Transformation held in 2008, will explore pedagogical strategies for using feature films to stimulate

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thoughtful discourse about race in the college classroom. We have selected Spike Lee's cinematic coup *Bamboozled* as the focus of this paper because of its frontal assault on the use of racial stereotypes in the communications media.¹

Experience has shown us that a teacher's attempts to kindle discussion about difficult sociopolitical issues often result in students going into "silent mode." Alternatively, a bedlam can erupt in which everyone's talking and no one's listening. The combined use of film excerpts, writing exercises and classroom discussion can help students to thoughtfully develop and express their responses to complex issues about race in American society.

Feature films that deal with racial issues tend to make use of racial stereotyping in two basic ways: (1) the deconstruction of racial stereotypes and (2) the exploitation of racial stereotypes for their entertainment value. Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* is an intricate blend of both. The film has a clever story line. An African-American television writer, Pierre Delacroix (referred to as "De La"), pilots a minstrel show for the new millennium, replete with such "three dimensional" blackface characters as *Man Tan*, *Sleep 'n' Eat*, and *Aunt Jemima*. De La's initial intention was to excite popular outrage so that he could get himself fired from the station and thus be rid of a job he is tired of. To De La's surprise, however, the show becomes a huge success and the popular outcry against it is largely ignored. De La and the African-American entertainers he's recruited from the street, Manray and Womack, thus become twenty-first century promulgators of the crassest form of racial stereotyping of American blacks as lazy, ignorant, self-effacing buffoons. The film

ends violently with explosions of rage directed towards De La and his key performer, the talented tap dancer dubbed *Man Tan*.

Cynthia Lucia's analysis of the film poses two probing questions: "To what degree do viewers participate in the very processes they are positioned by the film to criticize? And to what degree does the film, itself, participate in the very processes it seeks to expose?"² On the one hand, the film *educates* the viewer about the very explicit derogatory stereotypes of African-Americans initiated during the era of the minstrel shows (mid-19th and to early 20th century) and sustained, as Spike Lee pointed out at a recent talk at Northeastern University, until the present day.³ The story line requires that the newly recruited street performers be made to *understand* the motifs of the minstrel era, and so De La and his sleek assistant Sloane instruct them while simultaneously deepening their own understanding of the genre. We see documentary footage of tap dancers from the Deep South, vintage footage of *Amos 'n' Andy*, and animated cartoons, as well as numerous dolls and figurines that display the shiny black faces, wide eyes and red lips of the comical stereotype of the African-American. Likewise, Lee shows us the complex emotional responses of the performers who must "black up" before going on stage. On the other hand, Lee creates a highly *entertaining* pageant of traditional minstrel show entertainment. So the students viewing excerpts from the film must sort out a maze of apparently contradictory signals about racial stereotyping.

Our strategy is to begin the classroom exercise by showing the archival footage at the film's conclusion, an excerpt of about three and a half minutes. As De La lies ex-

¹ The presentation also discussed Warren Beatty's film *Bulworth* (1998), but space limitations make it necessary to focus only on *Bamboozled*. Those interested in using *Bulworth* may contact the lead author at sslaner@necc.mass.edu for helpful suggestions.

² Cynthia Lucia, "Race, Media and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*," *Cineaste*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2, p. 11.

³ March 21, 2008, Blackman Auditorium, Northeastern University, Boston.

sanguinating on the floor of his luxury condo, the audience is treated to the pastiche of traditional racial stereotypes he has been viewing on his VCR: movie cartoons from the first half of the twentieth century, excerpts of racist feature films like *Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer*; documentary footage of soft shoe and tap from the era of the advent of film, newsreels of watermelon-eating contests, and the like. The stereotypical content includes visual exaggerations of facial and bodily characteristics: shiny black faces, huge, "liver" lips, bulging white eyes, rotund women with skinny, diminutive men, and of course, *blackface* makeup for both blacks and whites. Personality characterizations include vacant stares, slow, slurred speech, exaggerated deference to whites, fearful trembling, spasmodic gesturing, cannibalism, and gustatory excitements occasioned by chicken houses and "nigger apples."

The students' first reactions to the film clip might range from bewilderment to outraged indignation to outright amusement. The students are asked initially not to discuss these responses, but to write about them for a brief ten to fifteen minute period. This strategy, suggested at the CIT conference by Dr. Vivian Zamel of UMass Boston, would allow the students to develop and express their emotional and conceptual responses to the onslaught of raw, crass racial stereotyping. Having loosened up the flow of ideas through *freewriting*, the students are now ready to engage in a classroom discussion of the film clip. The writing exercise will have served to modulate the students' tendency to "clam up" into a self-conscious silence or, alternatively, to gush forth with a stream of careless remarks. The classroom discussion is followed by another, more reflective bout of writing, affording the students an opportunity to consolidate their ideas. The structure of this writing exercise reflects Peter Elbow's observation:

Writing calls on two skills that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: creating and criticizing.... Most of the time it helps to separate the creating and criticizing processes so they don't interfere with each other: first write freely and uncritically so that you can generate as many words and ideas as possible without worrying whether they are good; then turn around and adopt a critical frame of mind and thoroughly revise what you have written—taking what's good and discarding what isn't and shaping what's left into something strong. [Elbow (1981), p. 7.]

This two-step process of unfettered *freewriting* followed by thoughtful revision is here utilized to promote the difficult dialogue about racial stereotyping in the media.

In the next phase of discourse about the film, the students are asked a *scaffolding* question: To what extent do racial stereotypes in the media influence our self-concepts and behavior? After posing the question, the teacher shows a brief clip from the film that displays the conflicted emotional responses of the black performers when they "black up" before going on stage. Spike Lee contrasts their reactions by showing more resentment, anger, and humiliation on the part of Sleep'n'Eat and more resignation on the part of Mantan, and also by using softer colors (brown and red) for Sleep'n'Eat and harsher colors (green and black) for Mantan. Their ambivalence is shown by rear shots of each character along with *two separate reflections* in the mirror, as if embodying W. E. B. Du Bois' famous concept of "two souls," one reflecting the way black folks see themselves and the other the way they are seen by whites. The minstrel show, of course, expresses the white half of the split. Indeed, Spike Lee's commentary on the DVD points out that Tommy Davidson, the actor who

plays Sleep'n'Eat, has a moment of insight as he applies the finishing touches to his black-face and cries "real tears." It is interesting to note that despite his facial expression of disgust and humiliation backstage, Sleep'n'Eat assumes the stereotypical role of the dumb Negro on stage, while Man Tan, who seemed less conflicted to begin with, is positively gleeful and very much into the part. In this rapidly edited scene, Spike Lee conveys a range of emotional dynamics that makes the viewer viscerally aware of the devastating psychological impact of accepting the demeaning role assigned to black entertainers by their white bosses.

At this point, we will turn our attention to a critical analysis of *Bamboozled* that will further clarify our rationale for selecting this film as a stimulus for classroom discussion about race and racial stereotypes. We can view *Bamboozled* through the lens of another film, Cuban director T.G. Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976). Here a 19th-century slave revolt is portrayed as the outcome of the glaring contradiction between the masters' rhetoric of equality before God and the slaves' condition of gross inequality and subordination. In the course of an Easter dinner, one of the slaves relates the following parable from his own culture:

When Olofi made the world, he made it complete: he made the day, he made the night; he made good things, he made bad things; he also made lovely things and ... ugly things.... He made Truth and also he made the Lie. The Truth appeared nice to him. The Lie did not seem good to him: it was ugly and skinny ... as if it were sick. Olofi thinks it pitiful and gives it a sharp machete to defend itself. Time passed and people always wanted to go with the Truth, but no one, no one wanted to go with the Lie. One day Truth and the Lie met each other in the road and as they

are enemies they fight. Truth is stronger than the Lie, but the Lie has the sharp machete which Olofi gave him. When Truth was careless and dropped his guard, the Lie—zip!—cut off Truth's head. Truth no longer has eyes and begins to look for his head with his hands. Looking and looking he suddenly blunders into the head of the Lie and—whup!—pulls off the Lie's head and puts it where his own had been. *And from then on he goes about the world, deceiving all the people, the body of Truth with the head of the Lie.* [Cited in Downing (1987), pp. 292-293; emphasis added.]

This parable is an ingenious answer to the New Testament stories recounted by the plantation owner, whose message of love and equality is belied by the obvious fact that the Africans have no rights, are not treated as human beings, and are anything but equal in Cuban society. The Truth in Jesus' message, of course, is that the slaves *should* be treated as free and equal human beings, but then they would not be slaves: Truth with the head of the Lie.

Next we shall examine how *Bamboozled* deconstructs historical images of African-Americans in a very different way from *The Last Supper*; but still with the idea of unmasking Truth with the head of the Lie. We will close with some observations by renowned education theorist Paulo Freire about the use of *codification* as a means of stimulating critical reflection.

Bamboozled builds on Melvin Van Peebles' *Classified X* (1998) in exposing the way in which African-Americans have historically been portrayed in American cinema.⁴ The montage of actual images at the end of *Bamboozled* that we discussed earlier serves as a documentary counterpoint to the fierce satire we have seen up to that point. Before analyzing the film, we would like to situate it in terms of the images of Africa that pre-

cede the emergence of cinema by centuries.

In his authoritative work *White on Black* (1992), Jan Pieterse amply demonstrates that race is a social construction, since the stereotypes of blacks in European and American culture clearly reflect the perceptions of whites—in turn related to their position of domination with respect to Africa—rather than the realities at the time. This stereotyping did not cease with the end of slavery; in fact, according to Pieterse (1992, pp. 57, 63),

The period of abolitionism coincided with the rise of racism. The humanization of the image of blacks in abolitionist propaganda went hand in hand with the hardening of that image through the application of the category "race." ... Race established new social boundaries at the very time the old ones were annulled.

A new imperialism emerged that replaced the image of the "noble savage," itself a European distortion, with that of the "ignoble savage." Now the Europeans would take up "the White Man's burden," in Kipling's famous phrase, to tame the "savages" they encountered. Then, as noted by Pieterse (1992, pp. 88-89),

A new mythology of Africa took shape which met the needs of established colonialism. Savages had to be turned into political subjects. ... Colonial paternalism engendered as its counterpart the infantilism of the colonized.

⁴ Spike Lee acknowledges his debt to this documentary in Crowdus and Georgakas (2001, p. 4): "I was amazed by the imagery, so I contacted the film's researcher ... since she'd done a lot of the work already, and she was able to get us a lot of this material.... None of us had seen this material. For example, I had never seen Bugs Bunny in blackface!"

Whether seen as savages or children, Africans were obviously not perceived to be on the same plane as "civilized" Europeans. Similarly, even if they were no longer actually slaves, people of African descent in the New World were not accorded the same status as whites. (Indeed certain ethnic groups, most notably Jews and Irish, had to *become* white, and stereotyping of these groups was quite common through the early 20th century.⁵)

So the stereotypes continued and came to be reflected in the emerging U.S. entertainment industry—which is where *Bamboozled* comes in. As discussed above, in suggesting that his network put on a *New Millennium Minstrel Show*, in which black performers would be wearing blackface, TV writer Pierre Delacroix at first wants to devise a show so outrageous that its failure is assured⁶ and he will therefore be released from his contract. As a black writer in a white-dominated industry, he feels with some justification that his views are not taken seriously by his boss, Thomas Dunwitty. Spike Lee's camera placement reinforces this idea, since at the meeting of network writers we look *down* on De La and *up* to Dunwitty. It is quite clear who has the power in this situation. Just as in *The Last Supper*, advantaged whites are inviting blacks to the table, but the terms are prearranged and lead to destruction and violence in both cases.

To De La's surprise, Dunwitty goes for the minstrel show. Indeed, it is evident that he seems himself as someone who really understands blacks, partly because (as he

⁵ This again reinforces the point that it is a question not of skin color, since these groups "look" white, but of social construction.

⁶ This is similar to Mel Brooks' 1968 film *The Producers*, in which the protagonists put on a play, "Springtime for Hitler," in the hope that it will be a total failure so that their insurance policy will pay off. To their amazement, the play is a smash hit. (In the DVD commentary, Spike Lee acknowledges his debt to this film and to Budd Schulberg's *The Face in the Crowd*, a 1957 media exposé.)

says) he is married to a black woman. So whereas De La has a distinctively “white” accent, Dunwitty sounds “black.” Recalling the metaphor from *The Last Supper*, the Truth of De La’s whiteness and Dunwitty’s blackness comes with the head of the Lie, in at least two senses: (1) Despite De La’s affectations and desire to succeed in a white world, he is in fact black, just as Dunwitty is definitely white; and (2) De La’s blackness and Dunwitty’s whiteness are themselves social creations and therefore a kind of illusion (or collective delusion, if you will). In any event, Dunwitty adopts the minstrel show idea as his own and makes it even more degrading, if possible, than De La had intended, as the stereotypes come to embrace not only the performers but the audience as well. The underlying truth here is captured by Spike Lee (Crowdus and Georgakas, 2001, p. 5):

Culture should be appreciated by everybody, but for me there is a distinction between *appreciation* of a culture and *appropriation* of a culture. People like Dunwitty are dangerous because they appropriate black culture and put a spin on it as if they are the originators of it. There’s a big difference.

Note that this distinction is reinforced by the different ways the minstrel show and the film itself are shot. As Davis points out (2002, p. 17):

Lee and Kuras [his cinematographer] made the esthetic choice to shoot on digital cameras those scenes involving the characters interacting in their daily lives, while the scenes involving *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* were shot on the more richly detailed Super 16 camera.

To put it another way, the minstrel

show is going to be “larger than life,” just as the impact of black stereotypes throughout American media and culture has been to transform daily life itself, making it stylized in a particularly destructive way.

In this context, it is important to remember how the minstrel show originated historically:

One of the first black figures to achieve popularity in modern western culture was the Minstrel—a white imitation of black culture. Or, more accurately, in the words of Kenneth Lynn, “a white imitation of a black imitation of a contented slave.” [Pieterse, 1992, p. 132.]

So whites were imitating blacks imitating the white image of blacks.⁷

Moreover, the response to these stereotypes—deliberately shown in an over-the-top way—is itself stereotyped, in at least two ways. First, the phenomenon of *internalizing the aggressor* is shown in De La’s willingness to go along with the minstrel show despite (because of?) its cruel and destructive nature. This is graphically shown in the reactions of the two dancers in the minstrel show, Mantan and Sleep’n’Eat. A similar phenomenon was seen in concentration camps where some Jewish inmates were assigned the role of kapo to police their fellow inmates for the Nazis. Second, the resistance to black acquiescence in white domination is shown by the Mau Maus, who execute Mantan on television. In a way, this conforms to the image of blacks as violent, aggressive, even gangsters,⁸ not a group that has a clear and coherent alternative to the powers-that-be.

The critical reaction to *Bamboozled* was mixed. Some commentators seemed to

⁷ This wheel-within-wheels phenomenon is used in a different way by Blake Edwards in *Victor Victoria* (1982) to show sexual stereotyping, as Julie Andrews is cast in the role of a woman imitating a man imitating a woman.

lump the film together with that which it was attacking. Noted black film critic Armond White, for example, declared that

... Lee is his own work of art, an example of social and professional ascension, exemplifying personal foible and contradiction.... By confusing issues of showbiz representation and career ethics through his inherent inconsistency and apoplexy, Lee's films hinder and exacerbate rather than clarify. [White, 2001, p. 13.]

White comes perilously close to arguing that since Spike Lee has “made it”—that is, since his films have mass-market distribution and he has celebrity cachet—the impact of the stereotypes he criticizes is not so great as to prevent the emergence of directors who challenge those very stereotypes. The argument is ingenious, and reminiscent of bygone days when it was argued that the fact that Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues with the Brooklyn Dodgers “proved” that racism in sports was either nonexistent or not as bad as people thought. Of course it proved nothing of the kind. Racism was a real problem in sports (and still is in terms of who controls the various teams), and it remains a real problem in American media and culture, notwithstanding the success of Spike Lee and other independent black filmmakers. Spike Lee is not saying that racist stereotyping is anywhere and everywhere all-powerful, but it *is* a huge force in American life whose impact we ignore at our peril.

The real point of *Bamboozled*, in fact, is to *denaturalize* those stereotypes by calling attention to them and showing how they were historically constructed. As we dis-

⁸ Spike Lee says in the DVD commentary that gangsta rap is a kind of stereotype that doesn't advance the interests of blacks. He reiterated this position at his recent talk at Northeastern.

cussed earlier, one of the most powerful scenes in the movie involves the two main characters putting on blackface. We get to see how the blackface was prepared and the psychological impact it has on those who have to wear it. Art and reality are combined in this scene, since the idea of black people wearing blackface happened only in a Spike Lee movie, but *metaphorically* many blacks have been wearing blackface insofar as they conform to the image that white people have of them. This might be seen as the Lie with the head of Truth, since the literal improbability of the image is much less significant than the deeper underlying reality that Spike Lee is getting at.

There is a larger issue here as well. In a recent paper on the work of French film theorist Gilles Deleuze, Amy Herzog (2005) raises the question of “how we might think about cinematic spectacles in relation to the notion of a historical image” (p. 2). *Bamboozled*, of course, is a spectacle that is trying to position itself in relation to actual images—some of which we see at the end—of the black experience. As Spike Lee's film is a spectacle which is in part a musical, Herzog's comments may apply to it:

In the musical, the dance is our dream, and the movement between dream-world and “reality” is, to greater or lesser degrees, open and ambiguous. The significance of the musical number rests in its rupturing of the sensory-motor situations that define the movement-image. [2005, p. 6.]

The *dream-image*, Herzog goes on to argue, is part of what Foucault calls

...a new means of perceiving and conceptualizing, a “historical sense” that counters the pillars of Platonic history (reality, identity, and truth) with parody, dissociation, and the powers of the false. [2005, p. 8.]

“Parody ... and the powers of the false” are certainly evident throughout *Bamboozled*, which is nothing if not parody. Moreover, the film is like a dream in that inanimate objects take on a life of their own (the Jolly Nigger Bank), the dead speak (De La, the narrator, has been killed by his assistant Sloan), and the minstrel show itself is nightmarish. Now consider Herzog's point about the potentialities of cinema:

[For Deleuze] the cinema is a creative process that can act to excavate, to provoke, to make the previously imperceptible perceptible. Engagement with the cinema becomes a means of generating new thought, of rethinking history. The question is how to understand the modality by which a film operates. Does the film ... build its narrative through chronological progressions or through discontinuities and chance? Is identity asserted as a unified whole, or is it dissociated, contradictory, and multiple? Does the film aspire to speak the truth, or does it wage a battle against universals through fiction and fabulation? [2005, p. 8.]

In terms of *Bamboozled*, the narrative is built primarily through discontinuities among multiple perspectives—as in Kurosawa's celebrated film *Rashomon*—and the viewer must be an active participant in the effort to untangle the film's meaning. Identity is definitely “dissociated, contradictory, and multiple,” as we discussed earlier with respect to De La and Dunwitty's positioning themselves on the black/white continuum. As to the last point, the film is aspiring to speak a larger truth, but it does so precisely through fiction and fabulation. Thus *Bamboozled* transcends the antinomies put forward by Herzog: it is not “either/or” but “both/and” for some of her questions. Finally, there is no question that

“generating new thought” and “rethinking history” are goals of the film, whose purpose is to shake things up and open up new avenues of discourse. We must repeat that the notion of Truth with the head of the Lie is key to the film, along with the idea that the task of all of us—film director, actor, and viewer alike—is to change the reality it so eloquently criticizes. Before we can change it, however, we must understand it, and that means confronting unpleasant realities about American media and culture. In this sense the ultimate target of *Bamboozled* is not, or not only, racial stereotypes: “The driving force of Lee's story,” Landau argues (2002, p. 12), “is contemporary, untamed capitalism in its mad race for profits or, in media jargon, ratings.” In other words, we are talking not only about *race* but also about *class*.⁹

If there are still masters—and there most certainly are—they reside in a new kind of plantation, the corporation, and its handmaidens in politics. The slaves are no longer picking cotton; in fact, they are not legally slaves. In terms of who has power in society, however, the master-slave dichotomy is still applicable. The irony is that on *this* plantation the slaves can, if they wish, rebel. It is therefore the task of the media, among other institutions, to make sure that that thought never crosses their minds.¹⁰ And here is where Spike Lee's movie really has something to teach us: just as the media are busy promoting racial stereotypes, so they replace real news with manufactured

⁹ In this connection, Pieterse (1992, p. 51) notes that “the key notion underlying [racist] discourses is not so much that of race as of *hierarchy* based on differences in religion, ethnicity, geography, nationality, culture, or a combination of these.” Class, of course, is a persistent and powerful form of hierarchy. Landau argues (2001, p. 12), and we agree, that “Lee has done in one film more to enlighten audiences on race, class, history and entertainment than Hollywood has done in a century.”

¹⁰ On this point see, among others, Chomsky and Herman (1988). For the philosophical implications, see especially Marcuse (1964).

reality in which the slaves, if slaves they are, acquiesce in their own slavery. The discomfort many critics feel at seeing *Bamboozled* is really the discomfort we all feel at living in an artificial reality that masquerades as the real thing: Truth with the head of the Lie.

CONCLUSION

Renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire initiated the use of a visual "code" or codification—which can include photographs or films—to stimulate critical thinking among students:

In my case, the codification works as a challenge, a challenge to the students and the educator.... The codification is an object to be known, and to the extent that codification represents a part of the concrete reality, in trying to understand or to describe the codification, you are again trying to understand the concrete reality in which you are. (Freire & Horton, 1990, pp. 87-89)

Mayo summarizes the opportunities made possible by this use of codification:

Codifications can ... be used not simply to facilitate processes whereby the present is viewed critically, to obtain greater awareness of the contradictions underlying it, but also as a means of engendering the dialectical process, involving the juxtaposition of and critical reflection upon past and present. This dialectical process can open up possibilities for transformation. (Mayo, 1999, p. 148)

Bamboozled can function as a codification in Freire's sense to enable students to see and understand the racial stereotypes

in our culture that too often go unseen. While it is true that the grossest traditional racial stereotypes have been superseded by more subtle ones in today's media, the stigma of racial inferiority that such stereotyping engenders is still present. The real danger is in the lack of a proper historical context for our discourse about race, a deficit that Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* strives to remediate. It is the legacy of slavery that is simultaneously portrayed and deconstructed by Spike Lee, and for that reason alone *Bamboozled* deserves serious consideration in any pedagogical strategy to expose students to the minefield that is race in America in 2008.

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