

New York Times film critics watch “while white”

Against racialism in film and art

David Walsh
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It would be very nearly possible at present to post a daily column devoted to the fixation of the American media and Hollywood filmmaking (or the “entertainment business” in general) with race.

There is, for example, the ongoing “controversy” as to whether Casey Affleck (*Manchester by the Sea*) and Nate Parker (*Birth of a Nation*) are receiving equal treatment when it comes to their consideration for awards; the worries in some quarters about whether *Fences*, *Moonlight* and other African American-themed films will be sufficiently honored this year; the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a white actor, Joseph Fiennes, playing black performer Michael Jackson, and so on. By this time next week, there will likely be a new list.

The concerns pressing forward these issues, for the most part, are not remotely democratic or politically progressive. They do not reflect the desire to see artistic depictions of the conditions of black or Latino or immigrant workers and poor, or more accurate pictures of life in general, but rather the strivings of already prosperous layers of the upper middle class for more wealth and privilege. Large amounts of money, the success of careers and entire studios and more are at stake.

The *New York Times*, including its cultural pages, continues to play a leading role in presenting every important social phenomenon in racial terms. A recent remarkable conversation between film critics A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, “Watching While White: How Movies Tackled Race and Class in 2016,” published January 7, underscores this.

Of course, the issues are not so cut-and-dried when it comes to the motives and efforts of individual artists, who may only grasp social realities poorly or confusedly, given the present political and ideological climate. Films like Denzel Washington’s *Fences*, Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* and even Theodore Melfi’s *Hidden Figures* take place in social settings and bring to the screen personalities not commonly seen or voices heard from by movie audiences. That fact, in my view, provides them with a good portion of their interest and impetus, despite the obeisance they pay in varying degrees to racial and gender politics.

Significantly, the more intriguing and intimate pictures of life, *Fences* and *Moonlight*, are at their weakest when it comes to presenting their characters as the product of broader social and historical processes, aside from the history of racial discrimination. These works tend to treat black working class life in particular as though it had a separate, independent evolution and could be made sense of apart from the general problems of American society and the great questions facing the entire working class at each stage of development. The result is something one-sided and insular.

Whether or not a poor black youth growing up in Liberty City in northern Miami in the late 1980s and early 1990s (as in *Moonlight*) was aware of it, various “external” social processes were affecting his life and the lives of those around him, including the steep decline of American industry, the sharp turn to the right by the Democratic Party and erstwhile “civil rights leadership,” the putrefaction of the trade unions, the collapse of the Soviet Union and accompanying triumphalist bleating about the

wonders of the “free market,” and the first US-led neo-colonial assault on Iraq. One of the problems with relatively passive, quasi-photographic realism is that it does not easily permit matters outside the immediate ken and experience of the protagonists to enter into the drama.

It is probably not accidental that *Loving* (Jeff Nichols) and *Free State of Jones* (Gary Ross), both of which portray episodes in American history where a “multi-racial” stand was taken against the prevailing reactionary authorities, refer quite specifically and concretely to the wider sphere of politics and history. An honest, objective examination of historical development, which will always tend to gravitate toward the centrality of the conflict between social classes, is fatal to nationalist or racialist conceptions.

Much of the history of Hollywood filmmaking in relation to African Americans is deplorable. Blacks were limited, for most of the 20th century, to roles as servants, housekeepers, porters and so on. As one historian notes, “Hollywood casting policies restricted black actors and actresses to a limited number of roles—some forty percent of which were maids and butlers. When not playing domestic servants, black performers were offered roles as dull-witted comics or pagan tribesmen.” (*Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture*, William L. Van Deburg)

In their inimitable fashion, throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, American film studio executives kowtowed to the most reactionary elements in the country (as they did overseas to the Nazi regime, for example), including Southern racists. Very few honest depictions of slavery or Jim Crow racism could be filmed in Hollywood until the mass civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s dealt a sharp blow to the official dishonesty and silence.

German exile Fritz Lang intended his powerful *Fury* (1936), about mob violence, as a response to a wave of black lynchings (as well as the lynching of two young white men in San Jose, California in November 1933), but direct treatment of that subject was taboo at MGM. The victim instead became Spencer Tracy (who gave an excellent performance). Even Lang’s plan to place black characters throughout the film to remind the audience of its intended subject matter was blocked by studio head Louis B. Mayer, who, according to the director’s later comments, “allegedly had said, ‘Colored people can only be used as shoeshine people or as porters in a railroad car.’”

Even merely respectful, dignified treatment of African Americans (along with Jews and Mexican immigrants) in Hollywood films in the 1940s and early 1950s was often the work or the result of the influence of left-wing writers and directors, many of whom were members or supporters of the Communist Party. For example, Abraham Polonsky, Robert Rossen and John Garfield, all close to the CP at the time, collaborated on the boxing film *Body and Soul* (1947), with Canada Lee, a left-wing black actor, in a significant and moving role. Likewise, *Crossfire*, also released in 1947, about anti-Semitism, was directed by Edward Dmytryk and produced by Adrian Scott, Communist Party members or supporters.

One could point to other filmmakers, of a generally left-wing outlook, including John Huston (in *In This Our Life*, 1942), Orson Welles (in *Lady from Shanghai*, 1947, and *Touch of Evil*, 1958, along with his theater work), Max Ophuls (in *The Reckless Moment*, 1949), Michael Curtiz (in *The Breaking Point*, 1950), Joseph Losey (in *The Big Night*, 1951) and others, who made efforts along these lines, often in the face of studio objections.

Left-wing film artists also came under attack from politicians like the racist, anti-Semitic and fascistic Democratic Congressman from Mississippi, John Rankin, of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), who claimed in 1947 that all of the “racial disturbances you have seen in the South have been inspired by the tentacles of this great octopus, communism, which is out to destroy everything.” Rankin also declared in 1947 he had information that “one of the most dangerous plots ever instigated for the overthrow of this government has its headquarters in Hollywood.” HUAC launched its serious witch-hunting of the film industry the same year.

The contemporary approach to race and gender in middle class intellectual circles has almost nothing in common with the democratic strivings and struggles of that earlier period.

The brouhaha about Parker and Affleck is perhaps typical. In “The Glare Varies for Two Actors on Hollywood’s Awards Trail” (January 4), Brooks Barnes of the *Times* takes a dishonest tack, repeatedly making insinuations and then backing away from them.

Barnes first notes that film industry “insiders have been grappling with whether there is a double standard at play—involving race, power or both—in the treatment” of Parker, “a relatively unknown artist who has been sidelined as an Academy Award candidate, and Casey Affleck, the brother of moviedom royalty who is being feted as the leading contender for best actor.”

Both Parker and Affleck have been accused in the past of sexual wrongdoings. Parker was accused and acquitted of rape while in college nearly two decades ago. Two women filed sexual harassment lawsuits against Affleck in 2010; the suits were settled out of court, although Affleck denied the claims and termed the legal action “an extortion tactic.”

In his disingenuous piece, Barnes writes, “Why do the two men find themselves in much different circumstances? Perhaps people think Mr. Affleck’s performance, and the movie in which he stars, is better. Maybe it’s because, as an Oscar nominee and the brother of the box-office star Ben Affleck, Mr. Affleck has attained a privileged status in Hollywood ... Or maybe, say those mindful of Hollywood’s checkered racial history, it is because Mr. Affleck is white and Mr. Parker is black.”

The entire premise of the article is false. Neither individual, in fact, deserves to lose out on an award because of unproven or unsubstantiated charges. Parker was acquitted by a jury. Affleck reached an out of court settlement. Jeannie Suk Gersen, a Harvard law professor interviewed by Barnes, observes that as a lawyer, she doesn’t “take a settlement to mean much of anything. ... Sometimes it means guilt. But sometimes people who are innocent—especially celebrities—settle cases after doing a cost-benefit analysis: How much do I want to pay for this to be over?”

In any event, after observing that Parker was charged with the more serious crime, Barnes goes on, “Even so, there are people in Hollywood ... who believe that Mr. Affleck is insulated because he is a white man. Their feeling is that the entertainment-industry awards groups, still largely dominated by white men, are judging him differently than they judged Mr. Parker.” Barnes leaves the reader with this final poisonous suggestion without the slightest evidence to back it up.

The reality is that, yes, Affleck’s *Manchester by the Sea* (directed by Kenneth Lonergan), about a working class man who suffers from terrible guilt over a personal tragedy, is a more deeply felt and generally better film than *Birth of a Nation* (which Parker both directed and starred in), on

the subject of the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion. The latter work treats far weightier subject matter, but Parker’s film is poorly and unconvincingly done for the most part. But the issue of artistic quality hardly merits a mention in the shallow and muddy media coverage.

The uproar over the decision to cast Joseph Fiennes, a white actor, as the late pop singer Michael Jackson in the British comedy sketch show, “Urban Myths,” is thoroughly wrongheaded. The only pertinent question, frankly, is whether Fiennes does an effective job as the troubled performer.

This is not a contemporary version of Warner Oland or Sidney Toler appearing as pseudo-Chinese detective Charlie Chan in the 1930s and 40s, or Peter Lorre as Japanese detective Mr. Moto in another demeaning Hollywood series in the late 1930s. The *Times* reports that “Ben Palmer, the program’s director, defended the selection of Mr. Fiennes to portray Mr. Jackson. ‘We were really looking for the performance that could unlock the spirit, and we really think Joe Fiennes has done that,’ he told the *Guardian* this week as anger grew. ‘He’s given a really sweet, nuanced, characterful performance.’”

It does not appear to have occurred to any of the outraged critics of Fiennes as Jackson that the logic of their arguments would help re-establish ethnic and racial barriers that have fallen in various media in recent decades. Many classical theater companies worldwide have appropriately adopted “color-blind” casting, enabling black, Asian and actors of other backgrounds, if they should so choose, to perform in Shakespeare, Molière and Corneille, Greek tragedy and other older works. Opera companies have obviously operated like that for many years. Should those policies be reversed? Are they ill-considered?

And this brings us to the January 7 conversation between A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, film critics of the *Times*, “Watching While White.” Dargis initiates the “meatier” part of the dialogue by commenting that their various considerations about filmmaking in 2016 “have made me think that we need to start talking about something we rarely do, which is how to think about whiteness—our own and the movies.” One is tempted to ask: do the *Times* film critics (and reporting staff in general) ever do much of anything besides “think about whiteness”?

Not that their thinking ever leads them anywhere useful. Because its starting point is foul and mistaken. What is “whiteness”? For that matter, what is “blackness”? These are essentially meaningless terms when applied to human beings in class society. At one point, later in the discussion, Scott refers to “the maintenance of whiteness as a zone of economic privilege and existential entitlement.” Are we seriously meant to believe that a Detroit auto worker, a coal miner from Kentucky, a nurse in California, or a former college student burdened with debt and working in retail or fast food for miserable wages, all of whom happen to have white skin, co-exist with banker Lloyd Blankfein, multi-billionaire Bill Gates and president-elect Donald Trump in “a zone of economic privilege and existential entitlement”? The unreality here is akin to madness.

In any case, Dargis stakes out the more reprehensible position. She crudely and aggressively argues for the inevitability and permanence of race. Clint Eastwood’s *Sully*, about the remarkable airline pilot who successfully landed an Airbus A320-214, with 150 passengers on board, in the Hudson River, “is about professionalism and expertise, specifically those of a white hero ... Kenneth Lonergan’s *Manchester by the Sea* is about a working-class white man’s tragedy, and his whiteness is as crucial to his identity as class. Damien Chazelle’s *La La Land* has several black characters, but it also, exasperatingly, positions a white pianist as the savior of jazz and a black musician as its corrupter. Whatever their genres and stories, these movies are all also about race, because race defines our world.”

The view that “race defines our world” is historically identified with the ultra-right, with those in the extreme nationalist or fascist camp. Political and ideological positions have a logic of their own.

French aristocrat Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (1816-1882), one of the founders of modern racism and chauvinism, and an inspirer of the Nazis, was also of the opinion that “race defines our world.” As he explained, in his 1,400-page *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, “I was gradually penetrated by the conviction that the racial question overshadows all other problems of history, that it holds the key to them all ... Everyone must have had some inkling of this colossal truth, for everyone must have seen how certain agglomerations of men have descended on some country, and utterly transformed its way of life.”

The Nazis developed such theories and put them into ghastly practice. According to their outlook, the Jews and other “inferior races” defiled Aryan culture. Racial theory, the worship of “blood” and nation, was discredited in the postwar period by the crimes of the Hitler regime. It is now coming back, at times in the guise of “radical” or even “left” politics. There is nothing remotely progressive about this sort of conception.

Dargis continues: “The *New York Times* stylebook [for its journalists], for instance, states that ‘race should be cited only when it is pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader.’ The idea is not to identify everyone by race; yet when is race *not* pertinent?”

“At the same time, I have no interest in merely tabulating, say, Asian actors in a movie or noting again (and again) how many women don’t have speaking roles. I notice, but I don’t want to watch or write using a checklist.”

We should be grateful she doesn’t propose legally requiring that every character be registered by race or gender. But why not? In any case, if Dargis doesn’t suggest it, someone else most likely will.

It never occurs to those obsessed with race that this fixation can work both ways. One can safely predict that certain of those presently appalled by their “whiteness” will come to treasure it above all things. “Whiteness” will then appear not as the root of all evil, but as the source of everything good and beautiful.

Scott offers a slightly more nuanced, shamefaced version of the same racialized outlook: “I found myself thinking about my own angle of vision, about the identities I bring to the screening with me and sometimes slough off in the darkness. Race isn’t the only one, but it has been an especially heavy and messy one this year. In politics, whiteness has reasserted itself with an insistence that has surprised many observers.”

Bizarrely, defensively, Scott later says, “A lot of postelection commentary has slipped into the bad habits of treating race and class as opposites and using ‘working class’ as a synonym for ‘white.’ The reality is much more complicated, as will be evident to anyone who has seen *Fences*, a movie about an African-American family that is also a working-class family.” As though anyone is likely to forget that many African American families are working class.

We might suggest that instead of spending time contemplating or “sloughing off” his “whiteness,” it would be more productive if Scott devoted even a few hours to considering his political-intellectual history and how he arrived at his present miserable views.

Scott’s maternal grandfather was Sam Wallach, a public school teacher in New York City, who joined the Communist Party in the 1930s and became the leader of the CP-influenced Teachers Union. Wallach (the older brother of actor Eli Wallach) was among the first New York teachers fired in the McCarthy-era witch-hunt, in 1951. Sam Wallach was no doubt a courageous individual, but he was politically and intellectually formed by Stalinism, with its reactionary nationalist-opportunist outlook and, in the US, its dedication to subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party.

Scott’s mother is Joan Wallach Scott, a prominent feminist historian and postmodernist thinker, currently at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. An outspoken admirer of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Scott has developed over the course of the past several decades—along with many members of her generation, male and

female—into a more and more open opponent of Marxism. She personally has progressed from the writing of “history from below,” inspired by works like E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), to conceiving of gender as the defining category in the social and historical process. As she wrote in her introduction to *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), “I want to insist that questions about gender will illuminate not only the history of relations between the sexes but also all or most of history whatever its specific topic.”

An admirer writes, “A prolific and dynamic scholar, she [Scott] has gone from studying social history to studying the history of women and then, in the 1980s, to studying the history of gender, becoming one of the first theorists in the field.” The same writer notes that “from her seminal article ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,’ published in 1986, to the recent publication in France of her book *De l’utilité du genre* in 2012, Scott has continued to highlight the political, social, and even imaginary issues that can only be understood through the conceptualization of sexual difference.”

A former collaborator criticized Scott for “ultimately eschewing class relations in order to attribute everything to gender relations alone.” Another commentator wrote that Scott’s “eagerness to appropriate the vocabulary of poststructuralists like Derrida and Foucault means that she does not always question their assumptions. For instance, is it true that ‘there is no social reality outside or prior to language?’”

This is the witches’ brew of American radicalism and left-liberalism in decline and subjectivist idealist philosophy out of which the *Times*’ Scott and his film criticism emerge.

What does racial (and gender) theory mean for art?

First, as a practical matter, one could point to the low level of the art work produced on the basis of identity politics over the past 40 years as proof of the latter’s debilitating character. I stand by what I wrote in 1994, in a review of Jane Campion’s *The Piano*: “A balance sheet could be drawn up. Movements such as feminism, black nationalism and gay rights have not helped anyone to see the world and its most fundamental social relationships more clearly; they have had precisely the opposite, narrowing effect. They have objectively damaged artistic and intellectual work.”

Art is dependent on striving for truth to the greatest degree possible. Ideas that historical experience has proven are demonstrably false, that the artist leans on out of laziness or self-interest, or the desire to be socially acceptable or have a career, are a bad basis for art.

The important artist, although he or she is inevitably a historically and socially limited creature, struggles for the greatest universality, to reflect situations and feelings with the greatest possible bearing and weight. In fact, that is the essential meaning of his or her life and work.

This idea has been expressed many times. The French writer Anatole France commented, “Great artists do not possess meager souls.” The Russian-Soviet critic L.I. Akselrod in her appreciation of Tolstoy observed that the great writer stood “firmly” on the basis of Russian conditions, but “was able to embody in his works those general traits, thoughts and feelings which in one form or another are characteristic of civilized humanity over the course of long historical periods.”

Hegel put it poetically and beautifully: “For man does not, as may be supposed, carry in himself only *one* god as his ‘pathos’; the human emotional life is great and wide; to a true man many gods belong; and he shuts up in his heart all the powers which are dispersed in the circle of the gods; the whole of Olympus is assembled in his breast.”

Shakespeare in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, more than 400 years ago, gave flesh and blood to the painful conditions of a “Moor” and a Jew living in European society. The particular tragedies still affect the reader or viewer because the impossible dilemmas and the responses to those dilemmas accord with what we know of people living in class society. Shakespeare does justice to Shylock, above all, by making him a

human being.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (the book—about a white boy who runs away in the company of a black slave—from which “all modern American literature comes,” according to Ernest Hemingway), in quite distinct ways, are imbued with radical egalitarianism and humanity.

Not in the same category as those as a literary work, but a novel written with both enormous passion and compassion, Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was the most popular American novel of the 19th century and, after the Bible, the second-best selling book of that century. More than 300,000 copies of the novel were sold in the first year after its publication.

There are specific life-experiences in American history, the Native American experience, the “pioneer” experience, the immigrant experience, the black experience. The history of slavery is tragic and traumatic. But is its truth only accessible to people who are black, or is it an especially cruel feature of the rise of American capitalism, whose reality can be comprehended by—and should motivate—all those fighting to end that system?

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), at least in part, is one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century. That its protagonist is black is not irrelevant or secondary, he represents the most oppressed and crushed portion of the population. But his hiding out and then hunting down in Chicago generalizes a terrifying, broader reality, the persecution of the weak and damaged (and even criminal) individual by the self-righteous, ruthless authorities, a reality found in one way or another in Lang's *M* (1931), as well as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and even Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1922).

Racism is a subject of immense importance in America, and not only in America. But it needs to be treated in the most profound and serious manner. Narrow particularism and self-pity are bad premises for such work. American and global society and history need to be studied and their most fundamental patterns and trends drawn out. The French novelist Balzac produced *The Human Comedy*, a series of interconnected novels that treated in great detail French society and all its social groupings during a considerable portion of the 19th century. He suggested jokingly that his novels had been authored by “Madame French History,” and that he was only her personal secretary. We have no remotely comparable figure.

A portion of the middle class, as bitter historical experiences demonstrates, is objectively drawn to racial (and gender) theory as an explanation of the social process. These layers cannot give an accurate and progressive view of history because history goes against them. No social class has ever accepted its decline and demise willingly. As Marx and Engels suggested 170 years ago about layers of the petty bourgeoisie, “They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history.”

The US is the most socially unequal developed country in the world and probably one of the most unequal such nations in history. The incoming Trump administration, with its cabinet of generals and billionaires, promises to continue and deepen the trend of transferring wealth into the hands of the oligarchy. Social inequality is the question of questions. It thoroughly “defines our world.”

Richer and more honest artistic appraisals of life and society, and more profound criticism, will only emerge in our time on the basis of a rejection of the economic and political status quo and a commitment to tell the undiluted truth about it.





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