

Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*: The illogic of racialism

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American filmmaker Spike Lee's new film, *BlacKkKlansman*, takes as its point of departure the infiltration in the late 1970s of the racist Ku Klux Klan by a black police officer, Ron Stallworth, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The film is based on Stallworth's memoir.

Typical of Lee's efforts, the film views the world through the prism of race. Such a diametrically false and backward view is a miserable basis for art, or anything else. The result is a largely tedious and poorly constructed work, which has been praised in glowing terms by the critics, including, in particular, A. O. Scott of the *New York Times*.

In *BlacKkKlansman*, Stallworth (John David Washington, son of Denzel Washington) is the first black detective hired by the Colorado Springs force. Initially assigned to a menial position in the records room, he is subject to abuse by a fellow, bigoted cop.

Shifted to undercover work, Stallworth attends a rally (which occurred in 1977) addressed by black nationalist Kwame Ture (Corey Hawkins), the former Stokely Carmichael. Ture tells his rapt audience that "black is beautiful" and preaches race war. Following the meeting, Stallworth is assigned to the intelligence division.

Coming across a recruiting advertisement placed in a local newspaper by the Ku Klux Klan, Stallworth phones the organization and pretends to be a white man who hates blacks and Jews. Foolishly, however, he provides his real name. He then sends his colleague, a white, Jewish officer, Flip Zimmerman (Adam Driver), in his place to meet the Klansmen. Zimmerman, claiming to be Stallworth, is eventually enrolled in the organization. One of its members speaks obliquely about an upcoming bombing attack.

When his KKK membership application stalls at the national level, the real Stallworth phones David Duke (Topher Grace), the outfit's national director, in Louisiana. Duke is impressed with Stallworth and promises to send him a membership card immediately. Meanwhile, one of the more fanatical local Klansmen, Felix (Finnish actor Jasper Pääkkönen), grows suspicious of Zimmerman.

Stallworth establishes a relationship with the president of the Black Student Union at Colorado College, Patrice Dumas (Laura Harrier), but conceals from her at first that he's an undercover cop. The local Klan chapter plots to silence Patrice by planting an explosive at a civil rights rally or outside her house. When Duke comes to Colorado Springs to speak, Stallworth, the black policeman, is put on his security detail. Events come to a head.

The facts of Stallworth's exploits hold a certain interest. His ability to fool Klan members and Duke over the telephone speaks to the essential stupidity and impotence of this fascist filth. Such reactionary political movements never gain ground as the result of the inherent strength or coherence of their arguments. They develop a following due to widespread and festering social misery, on the one hand, and the paralyzing worthlessness, on the other, of the organizations that claim to oppose them and speak for "social progress"—in the US, the Democratic Party, the trade unions, the "civil rights" organizations, the affluent

pseudo-left.

Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *He Got Game*, *Summer of Sam*, *Chi-Raq*) long situated at the epicenter of identity politics in the US, has no grasp of this political reality nor any interest in it. He has never appeared to have much time for concrete social realities in general.

As a nationalist, devoted to the politics of race and blood, Lee is obliged to present a version of events largely existing outside *actual* history. Instead, we are offered history as the record of the beauty or emanation of the race.

The scene of Ture/Carmichael's address, for example, is unintentionally parodic. The speaker tells his engrossed listeners that they have swallowed the oppressor's conceptions of ugliness and inferiority, and that, in fact, "black is beautiful." But the audience resembles a Black Panther party rally circa 1969, with every woman in the hall (including, of course, Patrice, a slighter, more delicate Angela Davis) brandishing an Afro and every attendee, male and female, dressed in all the appropriate "militant" gear. These elegantly attired and self-confident people, whose rapt faces individually float before our eyes, clearly do not need such banal, "elementary" remarks. But Lee can't help himself.

The scenes of Patrice and her friends, of Patrice and Stallworth, are the weakest in *BlacKkKlansman*, worthy of the dreadful *Dear White People* television series. This is the ambitious and socially indifferent African-American petty-bourgeoisie announcing its importance and its aspirations. It is probably not accidental that the real Stallworth had no such activist girlfriend.

Nor did the actual Colorado Springs policeman have a Jewish undercover partner. That invention becomes another means by which the filmmakers make the case that racial or ethnic identity is everything. Zimmerman reveals that he never thought of himself as Jewish until his undercover duty placed him among anti-Semites and racists. His "Jewishness" comes flooding back to him, as it were. This is presumably intended to be a positive development.

This feature of the film has been praised to the skies. The *Times*' Scott claims Lee's "fearless embrace of contradiction gives *BlacKkKlansman* its velocity and heft." He asserts, referring to both Stallworth and Zimmerman, that "*BlacKkKlansman* is about the boundaries of group identity, and how a person can or can't cross them."

However, Stallworth's "tricky position" (Scott's phrase)—as an African-American infatuated with aspects of black nationalism, an opponent of the Klan and an undercover cop—is not a genuine contradiction: the black policeman was doing what the powers-that-be at the time required. The counter-offensive against the working class was conducted in the late 1970s through the Democratic and Republican parties, with the invaluable assistance of the AFL-CIO trade unions. The summoning up of fascist forces today reflects a new and far more aggravated phase in the crisis and degeneration of American capitalism.

The actors in *BlacKkKlansman*, for the most part, do their best. Washington is effective in those scenes when he is simply an individual

on the make, desiring to make his way within the system, which Stallworth apparently was (he ended up working as an investigator for the Utah state police for 20 years). Driver is less self-conscious than usual, which is all to the good. Harrier as the flawless Patrice has a thankless task, as does Frederick Weller as a snarling, racist cop. Pääkkönen and Ryan Eggold as two of the Klansmen are more or less convincing. Grace is all too foolish and insubstantial as Duke, a sinister and persistent figure, with deep connections to the major political parties, the international far-right and elements within the US military and the state.

Lee's essential lack of interest in such matters manifests itself in the unseriousness with which he portrays one of the more significant of Stallworth's discoveries—that several active members of the US military, including NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense Command] personnel, individuals with their fingers on the nuclear button, are members of the Klan chapter. We see Stallworth having a brief meeting with an FBI agent about the matter, and that's that.

NORAD headquarters is near Colorado Springs, as is the US Air Force Academy. The city was becoming a center for the religious and fascistic right in the period *BlacKkKlansman* treats. The filmmakers do not trouble themselves about that.

Lee's outlook is conformist and conventional. He's a racist, an avowed supporter of the Democratic Party and a wealthy, privileged defender of the profit system. He told CNN recently he hoped *BlacKkKlansman* would inspire "Americans not to vote President Donald Trump into office for a second term. 'I hope that [viewers would] be motivated to register to vote. The midterms are coming up, then this guy in the White House is going to run again, and what we're going through is demonstrated, I think... is full evidence [of] what happens when you don't vote, when you don't take part in the process.'"

In the same interview, Lee commented, "The rise of [racism] right here in the United States, specifically, is a direct reaction to eight years of President Barack Obama... It's two steps forward, one step back."

This is someone very distant from the working class, black, white and immigrant, its harsh conditions of life and its increasing alienation from both major parties.

In light of the current political crisis racking Washington, the film's essentially respectful treatment of the police and the FBI has a certain significance. That the *Hill* reported Lee "wore a shirt reading 'God Protect Robert Mueller' during an interview with CNN" comes as absolutely no surprise. Former FBI Director Mueller is investigating alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and whether Trump colluded with such interference. Lee is publicly identifying himself with the reactionary drive to censor the Internet, slander WikiLeaks and Julian Assange and pressure the Trump administration into an even more bellicose foreign policy against Russia.

BlacKkKlansman doesn't hold water intellectually or aesthetically. There is an illogic to racial politics that cannot be overcome in art. Demagoguery is possible at a political rally or in an article, even an entire campaign. But art relies on utter sincerity. The inauthentic word or gesture is fatal.

Much of the film is awkward, clumsy padding. There is no dramatic reason for many of the scenes. They simply go on until they end. We receive the message early on about the ferocious racism and anti-Semitism of the Klan. The harping on their poison becomes an evasion of the political and ideological problems in the US. These forces represent an infinitesimal percentage of the American population, but the White House was won by someone in the same general political orbit. How is this possible? There's no insight here into the historical or social process. It's superficial and lazy, it challenges no one.

In Lee's film, everything is race, except when it's not, every white American is a racist, except when he or she is not. To his credit, the director concludes his film with documentary footage of the August 12,

2017 attack on peaceful protestors opposing the fascist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Neo-Nazi and white supremacist James Fields Jr., 20, drove his automobile at top speed into the crowd, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Lee dedicates his film to her.

What the filmmaker gives with one hand, however, he more than takes away with another. It's his parochialism and narrowness that is so debilitating, and fatal. He told an interviewer: "If you look at the civil rights movement, white people died in Mississippi, Alabama, Kent State during the Vietnam protests. White people have died for justice... Right is right and Heather Heyer is a martyr. She gave her life for justice." But he goes on: "We can't just do it ourselves. We have to have a bigger heart to embrace people who are righteous and wanna help us."

This is magnanimous of Lee. As though world history revolved around "helping" him, whatever that might mean.

Scott's ecstatic review of *BlacKkKlansman* in the *Times* is deplorable, albeit predictable. Scott claims in his headline that Lee's film is a journey "Into White America's Heart of Darkness."

Once again, the *Times* critic should perhaps speak for himself. He proceeds to praise Lee's work as "a furious, funny, blunt and brilliant confrontation with the truth. It's an alarm clock ringing in the midst of a historical nightmare, and also a symphony, the rare piece of political popular art that works in all three dimensions."

It's embarrassing to read such obvious pandering to racial politics and second- or third-rate artistry. Scott applauds Lee's "fearless embrace of contradiction [that] gives *BlacKkKlansman* its velocity and heft. It is worth pausing to admire its sheer, dazzling craft, the deftness of its tonal shifts—from polemical to playful, from humorous to horrific, from blaxploitation to Classical Hollywood and back again—and the quality of its portraiture." The *Times* review concludes, "Maybe not everyone who is white is a racist, but racism is what makes us white." Pernicious, foul stuff.

In one of the most unintentionally revealing scenes in *BlacKkKlansman*, an elderly black man (played by Harry Belafonte) recounts for the Black Student Union the horrifying details of a lynching of a black youth that took place in Waco, Texas in 1916 (a lynching, in fact, only made possible because it had political value for county officials running for office). At the same time, Duke and the Colorado Springs Klansmen are holding their reactionary gathering, complete with a screening of D. W. Griffith's racist *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Belafonte's character concludes his account with the assertion that such horrors as the Waco lynching prove "Black Power" is needed. The black students begin chanting "Black Power!" Meanwhile the racist conclave, for its part, starts shouting, "White Power!"

It never occurs to Lee or anyone else involved that, notwithstanding the racist outrages described by Belafonte, there is a political and ideological *symmetry* at work here. Both camps are advocating racial separatism, the fracturing of the working class and the oppressed along ethnic or national lines—all of which benefit only the ruling elite.

In a recent interview with Stallworth and Lee conducted by NBC's Lester Holt, the latter questioned Stallworth about a telephone conversation he had with David Duke. Duke was apparently concerned, according to Stallworth, "about how he is going to be portrayed in this film. He's only seen the trailer and the trailer makes him out to be a buffoonish, cartoonish idiot." But, Stallworth then added, the Klan leader "complimented Spike. He said, 'I've always respected Spike Lee.' Which surprised the heck out of me."

It doesn't surprise us, however, one bit.





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