Critic-at-large Wesley Morris on the Academy Awards

Why does the New York Times keep pushing pernicious racialism?

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The *New York Times* critic-at-large Wesley Morris published an article January 23 headlined "Why Do the Oscars Keep Falling for Racial Reconciliation Fantasies?"

The article does not precisely argue that "reconciliation" between blacks and whites is itself a "fantasy," but that is unquestionably Morris's implication. He suggests that there is simply too much "bad blood" inherited from America's past for blacks and whites ever to get along.

Morris, who began writing for the *Times* in 2015 after a stint with the *Boston Globe*, belongs to the group of film and arts commentators at the newspaper, including A. O. Scott, Manohla Dargis and others, who view the world almost entirely through the prism of race or gender, or both. Their work, whatever their conscious intentions may be, amounts to a relentless cover-up of economic inequality in America, as well as an argument for already affluent black and other minority layers to advance themselves farther.

These journalists, unsurprisingly in light of their considerable income and privileged social position, have no interest in examining the great economic and class divide in the US. In the present degraded cultural climate, their type of self-serving and self-justifying material is treated as legitimate social commentary. No one bats an eye in these circles about the reactionary logic of the politics of "race and blood."

Much of Morris's January article is devoted to criticizing a number of films that offend him, including *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989), which collected four Academy Awards in 1990 (including Best Picture and Best Actress), and, in more recent times, *The Upside* (Neil Burger) and *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly), whose nomination in five Academy Awards categories was announced last week. All three films deal with relations between individual black and white characters—the first two, between a white employer and a black employee. In the *Green Book*, an African American musician hires an Italian American to chauffeur him through the Jim Crow South in the early 1960s.

To those movies, Morris counterposes in particular the work of African American director Spike Lee, including the latter's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), which lost out at the 1990 Academy Awards in two categories, and *BlacKkKlansman*, nominated this year for Best Picture and five other awards. He defines Lee's artistic efforts as a "cold shower" of realism about race relations in the US.

Morris adorns his criticism with certain "left" phrases. He complains, for instance, that *The Upside* and *Green Book* "symbolize a style of American storytelling in which the wheels of interracial friendship are greased by employment, in which prolonged exposure to the black half of the duo enhances the humanity of his white, frequently racist counterpart." Adding *Driving Miss Daisy* to the mix, he asserts that "the bond" in all three films "is conditionally transactional, possible only if it's mediated by money."

Speaking of the money involved in the various film relationships, Morris writes that it "seems to paper over all that's potentially fraught about race." He continues: "The relationship is entirely conscripted as service and bound by capitalism and the fantastically presumptive leap is, *The money doesn't matter because I* like *working for you*. And if you're the racist in the relationship: *I can't be horrible because we're friends now*. That's why the hug Sandra Bullock gives Yomi Perry, the actor playing her maid, Maria, at the end of *Crash*, remains the single most disturbing gesture of its kind. It's not friendship. Friendship is mutual. That hug is cannibalism."

This is simply throwing dust in the readers' eyes, intended to persuade the susceptible (and there are many such among the *New York Times* readership) that there is an oppositional or "progressive" side to Morris's racialism.

Throughout his piece, Morris seeks to take advantage, so to speak, of Hollywood's fumbling, inadequate liberalism and its rather large ideological contradictions for his own purposes. The phenomenon he identifies speaks to the "do-gooder" limitations of many of the film industry's treatments not only of race, but a host of other social issues. The garden variety liberal writer, director or producer views such matters from "on high," regards him or herself as open-minded and tolerant and often organizes the dramatic material so that a given "backward" character is put in circumstances where he or she grows more "enlightened."

Such films can be clumsily or more artfully done, and they tend to ignore the fact that great social advances in thinking are the product of *mass* experiences in which people change themselves, sometimes overnight, in the process of changing their social conditions. However, it remains a fact that individuals are also altered by their interactions with other individuals that *can* have an improving effect. (The increasing recourse to the employer-employee motif is more a sign of the growing wealth of Hollywood's upper echelons than anything else. It is the relationship to which such people are most accustomed these days.)

And there is no question either, frankly, but that people belonging to communities that have suffered greatly, such as blacks and Jews, and who have learned compassion for others as a result, frequently *have had that sort of impact* on their fellow human beings in the course of daily life. Morris is essentially heaping scorn on that kind of humanizing influence, the influence of the oppressed, which has also played a large role in American life and literature. When he argues contemptuously that most "of these black-white-friendship adventures were foretold by Mark Twain. Somebody is white Huck and somebody else is his amusingly dim black sidekick, Jim," he reveals an appalling upper-middle-class insensitivity and obtuseness.

Morris's attack on bourgeois liberalism, in other words, is a *right-wing* attack, from the standpoint of racialism, communalism and the strivings of a social layer "on the make." Whatever the failings of *Green Book*, for example, its elementary notion that people of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds can overcome their differences and find common ground is in a different intellectual league from Morris's pernicious racialism.

His defense of Spike Lee, a millionaire many times over, is telling in this regard. Lee is one of the more unpleasant figures in American filmmaking over the past three decades. In *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, *He Got Game*, *Summer of Sam* and other films, Lee has specialized in crude ethnic stereotyping and racial self-promotion. If a white director indulged in the type of degradation and humiliation of black characters that Lee has submitted his white characters to, he or she would rightly come under severe fire. Lee's works are cold, poorly constructed and generally tedious. Racialism cannot provide the basis for a realistic and rich portrait of life because it is a false outlook that points the viewer in the diametrically wrong direction.

Morris describes *Do the Right Thing* as Lee's "masterpiece about a boiled-over pot of racial animus in Brooklyn." The movie, he asserts, "dramatized a starker truth—we couldn't all just get along." In 1989, Lee "was pretty much on his own as a voice of black racial reality … He helped plant the seeds for an environment in which black artists can look askance at race." As opposed to those who "had been reared on racial-reconciliation fantasies," Lee understood, according to Morris, that "closure is impossible because the blood is too bad, too historically American."

What a foul and even sinister perspective—and one that Morris's fellow reviewers, Scott and Dargis, incidentally, fully endorse.

Morris tells his readers that "the black version of these interracial relationships tends to head in the opposite direction … [T]hey're not about money or a job but about the actual emotional, psychological work of being black among white people. Here, the proximity to whiteness is toxic, a danger, a threat." He adds that "scarcely any of the work I've seen in the last year by black artists … emphasizes the smoothness and joys of interracial friendship and certainly not through employment. The health of these connections is iffy, at best."

In so far as this is true—and it is manifestly *not* true in the case of one of the films he mentions, Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, which has a decidedly anti-racialist take on things—it is a commentary on the infection of the artistic community by political reaction.

Morris, true to social type, is clearly drawn to the successful and the wealthy in particular. His numerous sycophantic tributes to the billionaire couple Beyoncé and Jay-Z, including to their obscene flaunting of wealth in last year's "Apeshit" video shot at the Louvre museum in Paris, are especially repugnant.

This is from "Morality Wars," Morris's October 2018 *Times* essay: "An aspect of Beyoncé's cultural vitality is the moral power she wields. She performs, but she also represents—as a feminist, a black person and a black woman. She operates as a solo artist but thrives in sisterhood—as a bandleader, dancer and conjurer of histories. She has come to take herself, that power and what it can do, very seriously. There is activism in her art and a real disdain, from its consumers, for critique of it. 'Lemonade,' for instance, arrived with a demand that white people refrain from commenting until black people had had their say."

And from his "Best Performances of 2018,"—"Last April, the universe genuflected before Beyoncé after she wrapped a major music festival around her baby toe. Some of us are still on our knees."

This is the sort of toadyism that a leading newspaper would have been embarrassed to print in an earlier day. Now, anything goes.