

Behind the racist backlash against *Green Book*

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Sunday's decision by the Motion Picture Academy to award an Oscar for best picture to *Green Book* has been met with a furious backlash from large sections of the political establishment, academia and official cultural circles.

The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, ABC and NBC all declared with one voice that the Academy had made an unpardonable mistake in selecting the film for the highest honor because of its "retrograde" views on race and the racial identity of the people involved in its production.

The film's central crime, the critics declare, is the view that racial prejudice is a social problem that can be solved through education, reason and empathy, and that racial hatred is not an essential component of the human condition.

The backlash against *Green Book* is racist and right-wing in character. It comes from sections of the middle class that see the promotion of racial narratives and racial animosity as being vital to their social interests, and from a Democratic Party that sees working class unity as an existential political threat.

In *Green Book*, acclaimed classical and jazz pianist Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali) hires a working class Italian-American man, Tony Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen), to serve as his driver and bodyguard in a musical tour through the South. Shirley, a classically trained pianist, sees the tour as a blow to segregation. He endures countless insults, slights and police harassment, finally canceling the last show of his tour because he is not allowed to dine in the same restaurant as his listeners.

During the tour, Vallelonga acquires not only immense respect for Shirley ("He's like a genius"), but develops a close friendship with the musician. The "doc" introduces the bigoted former garbage truck

driver to classical music and jazz. Shirley teaches Vallelonga to express himself in letters that melt his wife's heart. After Vallelonga punches a police officer who calls him a "n****r w*p," Shirley explains to Vallelonga the need for dignity and composure in the struggle against oppression.

Shirley, however, is profoundly lonely and depressed, feeling like he doesn't fit in anywhere. "I'm not accepted by my own people... I'm not black enough, I'm not white enough, I'm not man enough!" Through his friendship with Vallelonga, Shirley breaks through many of the personal barriers he has built up around himself, coming to appreciate not only the "working class" experience, but, ironically, the "black experience."

"The whole story is about love," said director Peter Farrelly. "It's about loving each other despite our differences and finding the truth about who we are. We're the same people."

Green Book succeeds precisely because it draws its characters as individuals, not as racial stereotypes. Shirley is a highly cultured artistic genius who was invited to study at the Leningrad Conservatory at the age of nine. Vallelonga is not a "white man," but a man—one who is as warm-hearted as he is uneducated.

It is, in fact, a remarkable film, with a heartfelt, elevated comedy reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin. It is a "popular" movie in the best sense, addressing lofty social and political ideals without pretension, in a way that is approachable and appealing to a mass audience.

The press, however, treats its warm reception as nearly criminal.

The *Los Angeles Times* declares the film to be "insultingly glib and hucksterish, a self-satisfied crock masquerading as an olive branch." The newspaper's critic denounces the film, amazingly, for peddling "a

shopworn ideal of racial reconciliation.”

He goes on to state: “It reduces the long, barbaric and ongoing history of American racism to a problem, a formula, a dramatic equation that can be balanced and solved.” In other words, racism is an insoluble problem which can never be overcome.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Brooks Barnes calls the film “woefully retrograde and borderline bigoted.”

In contrast to the *Green Book*, Barnes extols *Black Panther*, a blockbuster superhero movie glorifying a fictional African ethno-state called Wakanda.

Like everything Marvel Studios touches, *Black Panther* is trash, regardless of the ethnicity of its cast and crew. But it also has definite fascistic overtones, with the *Washington Post* observing, “White nationalists have embraced ‘Black Panther,’ Marvel Comics’ blockbuster, to push their argument online that nation-states should be organized by ethnic groups.”

Green Book has also been contrasted to Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman*, a cop drama operating on typecast racial stereotypes. Like *Black Panther*, Lee’s views essentially mirror those of far-right racists, with former Klu Klux Klan leader David Duke declaring, according to *BlacKkKlansman* star John David Washington, “I’ve always respected Spike Lee.”

It would be premature to attempt to explain the social forces at work in the Academy’s decision to reject the racist campaign against *Green Book*, which has been ongoing, albeit at a simmer, for months. But a series of interviews with voters conducted by the *Times* gives a hint. “One voter, a studio executive in his 50s, admitted that his support for ‘Green Book’ was rooted in rage [by ‘rage’ the *Times* means disagreement with its views]. He said he was tired of being told what movies to like and not like.”

Referencing *Black Panther*, another “vinegary older voter compared superhero films to ‘the stuff that oozes out of dumpsters behind fast-food restaurants.’”

But, according to the *Times*, such views—that films should not be selected on racial grounds—are evidence that the academy is in need of reeducation. Or, as one “cinema and media studies professor... who focuses on popular culture and race” told the newspaper, “We can see some signs of changes, but there has not been a full transformation.”

What is the “transformation” of the academy that the *Times* wants to see?

It is, first of all, to make racial essentialism, and the stereotypes, political reaction and artistic garbage that flow from it, a precondition for films receiving awards. Films depicting humane relations between people of different races are henceforth to be banned.

This “transformation” would introduce a race test for films, with awards being given out not on the basis of the quality of the work being evaluated, but of the skin color of the people who produced it.

Where does this lead? Why not establish two different academies and sets of awards—one for best “black” film, and one for best “white” film? And why stop at film? Why not have separate schools and colleges? Why not separate drinking fountains?

The sickness of racism is gripping substantial sections of the upper-middle class and dominant sections of the political establishment, academia and official cultural commentary. The top 10 percent of society, immensely jealous of the vast wealth piled up by the financial oligarchy yet fearful of the masses, sees in racial and identity politics a way of pursuing its social interests not only against those above, but, more importantly, against those below.

This racist view of politics has been invested with tremendous political significance and has become the central electoral strategy of the Democratic Party, which fears above all any effort to unite workers of different nationalities in a common struggle.



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