

Racial Kitsch and Black Performance

If kitsch is failed seriousness, as the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg has proposed, then the racist kitsch that we still occasionally encounter in flea markets, on trips abroad, and in galleries and museums of contemporary art might be defined as failed humor (see Figures 1 and 2). Kitsch, according to Greenberg, attempts to say something profound, but can utter only clichés. Its abject failure is an embarrassment. The sub-genre of racist kitsch, which was largely ignored by the modernists, attempts by contrast to say something banal. In its failed effort to move unobtrusively among the objects of our everyday encounter, racist kitsch unwittingly reveals itself to be profoundly laden with meaning. Attempting to remain ephemera at the periphery of our vision, racist kitsch in fact holds our gaze, stops our conversations, and in its demand for attention in spite of itself, is an equal embarrassment.¹

Racist kitsch is pretty disgusting. To well-meaning people today, and especially to those of us racialized as “others,” the only pleasurable response to it is the pleasure of mastering the urge to laugh with the joke. Through disgust, we reassert our dignity and attain distance from the pleasure that the stereotype urges upon us. This oppositional distance places the racist object in a new frame, one in which the object is re-signified. From a token of mundane racist enjoyment, it becomes a totem of our racial survival.²

Our disgust tells us that we are not the audience solicited by the object, that we are not the people who would find the object harmless fun. Disgust reasserts the boundaries of the body when it comes in potential contact with literal or metaphorical excrement.³ The pleasure of disgust comes when we recover bodily integrity in the face of the dis-equilibrium presented by somebody else's shit. In the particular case of racist kitsch, disgust apprehends the object as a kind of body that we are not, or, at least, one that we are no longer. It draws a boundary, not only against the object's complicit audiences, but also against the object itself.

Strong disgust demands an immediate tactic or gesture to reassert dignity. The original response intended by the creators of racist kitsch, and now sedimented firmly into the unmemorialized pasts of white



Figure 1: Courtesy Aisha Bastiaans, copyright 1999.

supremacy, is simply to laugh at the object. A more contemporary and oppositional tactic might be to destroy the object physically and thus end the intolerable question of its significance. In this vein, some recent critics have objected strongly to the curating or creating of racist kitsch, even with an oppositional gaze or intent. In different ways, two recent critics of “black memorabilia” reject the possibility that such an oppositional curating or creative practice could succeed. Racist kitsch is simply “visual terrorism,” Robin Chandler observes, and Michael Harris, agreeing, suggests that because such kitsch “is linked to, and a product of, white imagination,” the “attempt to invert and reconstruct another’s dreams inevitably keeps one tied to and preoccupied with that other rather than the self.”⁴

Such criticism amounts to a theoretical destruction of the kitsch object: it attempts to imagine or invent a discursive and cultural space in



Figure 2: Courtesy Aisha Bastiaans, copyright 1999,

which the object of racist kitsch might no longer *matter*. The space produced through this imagined violence is occupied by an undifferentiated and collective black self, one that need never enter into relation with another. Such an approach solves the problem of history, and of racism, simply by wishing them away.

Another contemporary reaction, only superficially opposite, would be to curate the object, or to own it, and in these acts of curating and/or ownership, to modify the object in such a way as to render legible upon its surface the practices of our disgust. What happens



Figure 3: Film still from *Bamboozled*, copyright 2000.

when we attempt to collect or curate racist kitsch (see Figure 3), to take ownership of it by modifying it so that it does not produce disgusting pleasure but a pleasurable disgust, or even an aesthetic experience on the order of the beautiful or the sublime?

What would be the consequence if an examination of such strategies of oppositional curating and ownership unexpectedly revealed that one key characteristic of the racist figure was its ability to retain, even under the powerfully revisionary gaze of disgust, the capacity to act as a scapegoat or effigy?⁵ Could it be the case that our oppositional gaze and attendant practices depend upon the effigy's characteristic talent for absorbing blame, and thus, that they perpetuate our dependence upon scapegoating and its attendant cruelties?

In raising the issue of scapegoating, I am also seeking to provide a critique of the oppositional gaze from the standpoint of recent theoretical inquiry into shame.⁶ The transformational powers of performance are available, this vein of criticism suggests, through resisting the pleasures of disgust and the temptation to reassert our bodies' imagined borders. Instead, queer criticism suggests, power might ac-



Figure 4: Reproduced with permission from the collections of the John Hay Library, Brown University.

crue from a confrontation with bordering work, from a dismantling of the protections of disgust, and from an embracing of shame and abjection as a point of departure.⁷ It is through this suggestive new approach that I will attempt to reread the political and visual dynamics of racist kitsch, beginning in the nineteenth century, continuing with the film and television phenomenon, the *Little Rascals*, and culminating with a consideration of the recent film *Bamboozled* (2000), directed by Spike Lee.

Toward a Genealogy of Performing Black Children

Discussions of racist kitsch tend to notice especially the figures of Mammy and Uncle Tom.⁸ Equally important to me is another invention of the nineteenth century: Topsy, the performing black child (see Figure 4). In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Topsy is introduced as an example of the degraded condition into which children fall under the system of chattel slavery. When she is

discovered by the kind-hearted plantation owner Augustine St. Clare she is dirty, parentless, abused, and without instruction in the gospel. St. Clare hears her screams as she is being beaten, and buys her away from a cruel master to salve his conscience. Yet, unable to admit his sentimentality, St. Clare pretends to members of his family that he bought Topsy simply because she was “rather a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line.”⁹ Hearing a child being beaten, St. Clare replaces this with what psychoanalysis calls a ‘screen memory’ of a child performing.¹⁰

Topsy enters the St. Clare household as surplus. The St. Clare residence is already teeming with numberless black children who are perpetually underfoot their betters. St. Clare’s abstemious visiting cousin from the North, Ophelia, is horrified at the extravagance of Topsy’s purchase, especially given St. Clare’s claim that it was a whim. She is even more distraught to be assigned the task of educating and Christianizing the irrepressible Topsy, who famously boasts of her natal alienation: “Never was born . . . never had no father nor mother, nor nothin’ . . . I spects I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me.”¹¹

In the novel Topsy is eventually civilized, not by the harsh discipline of the compassionless woman she sarcastically calls “Feely,” but instead by the sentimental power of Evangeline, the daughter of Marie and Augustine St. Clare. It is Little Eva’s feeling for Topsy that precipitates the morally transformed character, who by novel’s end is cleaned up, free, and off on a Christian mission to Africa.

Stage versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the indispensable play of the late nineteenth-century American theater and para-theater, sometimes capitalized on Topsy’s transformation from wild child to demure Christian. But more commonly they misread Stowe’s novel and took St. Clare at his word when he claimed to have bought Topsy as entertainment, and left her laughably reprobate. On stage, she performed St. Clare’s screen memory. As an entertainer, Topsy quickly became one of the most popular characters in the play, as necessary as Uncle Tom. Actors playing Topsy sometimes received top billing in mid-nineteenth century productions, and Topsy’s song was a hot seller in sheet music. Rival productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were soon advertising two Topsies—double the fun and fidelity to Stowe’s novel be damned.¹²

Topsy’s conquest of the landscape of United States popular culture makes her an inaugural figure in the genealogy of performing black children. She appears at a historical moment where a white supremacist and slaveholding nation was actively debating “the character and destiny” of black folk. Within this debate were anxieties over the potential demographic explosion of a freed people of color, anxieties that manifested in the form of soberly scientific explanations about why the Negro would naturally die out if not under the pastoral care of slavery. This fantasy, also manifest in the counterfactual but common



Figure 5: Film still from *Bamboozled*, copyright 2000.

sense belief that “hybrid” progeny between the races would be infertile (hence the echo of “mule” in the popular usage of “mulatto”), was belied by demographic reality. The Malthusian spectacle of a slavish class reproducing uncontrollably animated the popular consciousness that found in Topsy a scapegoat figure capable of resolving these tensions.¹³

In sharp contrast to the beloved Little Eva, whose angelic presence evoked tender memories for many bereaved white mothers and fathers (including Stowe herself, who had lost an infant son), Topsy is parentless and, in lacking Eva’s qualities of feminine Christian sentiment, peculiarly genderless. Eva is not just well behaved, she is perfectly innocent, so perfect that her death of consumption was depicted on stage as a saint’s apotheosis. She is literally too good for this world. Topsy, who is subjected to continuous physical abuse by Aunt Ophelia and the house slaves, is so hardy she is almost insensate. She is fun to kick; even she finds it fun. Eva is one of a precious few. Topsy is part of a disturbing and disgusting surplus. The violence done upon her is the performance of waste.¹⁴

The shiny, hard, and brittle surfaces of racist ceramic figurines reflect back upon the psychology of scapegoating black children. If the classical Hollywood techniques of film lighting seem peculiarly appropriate to the production of whiteness, as Richard Dyer has suggested, then the material form of the ceramic figurine seems, contrariwise, particularly apt for specifying blackness as a hardened form of subjectivity.¹⁵ In this racial simile, a black skin is as hard as stone; not skin at all, but a mask, with perhaps nothing behind it. This invulnerability provides an alibi for racist violence (see Figure 5), salving the guilt that accompanies the wish to punish the black child purposelessly.¹⁶ This enjoyment completes the ideological ruse by finding



Figure 6: Little Black Sambo and Tiger. Reproduced with permission from the collections of the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.

within itself the occasion for a feeling of benevolence towards the scapegoat. Even moments of jarring violence are remembered as a charming encounter with a pickaninny. A bodily metaphor that people turn to in describing this pleasurable and guilty violence is eating. The performing black child is either hungry or eating or being eaten, or, ideally, all three.

The Story of Little Black Sambo, an odd and almost impossibly naïve text, illustrates the edibility of the performing black child.¹⁷ In the story, Sambo is set off for a walk in a set of colorful new clothes and accessories, which he is forced to give up, one by one, to a series of rapacious tigers (see Figure 6). Having avoided being eaten through the performance of this strip tease, Sambo then witnesses the tigers fight ferociously until they melt into a pool of clarified butter, which



Figure 7: The Sambo family eating Tigers. Reproduced with permission from the collections of the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.

is collected and used to fry up a delicious meal for Sambo and his parents (see Figure 7). The story defers and ultimately disavows its desire to eat Sambo, making a visual meal of the threatening tigers instead. This popular story was made into at least one play for the children's theater, and is still in print today.¹⁸

If the cute black child is good enough to eat, she is also tough as nails. This toughness is suggested not so much in actual children, who are neither hard nor brittle nor invulnerable to pain, but rather in the materiality of the ceramic figurine. The racialized function of the figurine within consumer culture dates back to the dissemination in the late 1780s of the Jasperware Wedgwood medallion that famously portrayed a kneeling slave declaring "Am I not a man and a brother?"¹⁹ The historical and ideological links between this sort of abolitionist collectible and the commodification, beginning with the popular appropriation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, of the racist kitsch figurine, have yet to be fully traced. I want to suggest that the material dynamics of the figurine, which invite the enjoyable practices of abuse, and which also anticipate and accept the abuse that our revisionary and oppositional practices enact upon them, form the concrete obstacle to any utopian regime of non-racist visual enjoyment.²⁰



Figure 8: Scene from *Our Gang*. Film still from *Bamboozled*, copyright 2000.

Our Gang/Little Rascals

The difficulties intrinsic to any wished-for escape from the shame of America's racial past are evident in the shifting fortunes of the film and television phenomenon *Our Gang*, also known as the *Little Rascals* (see Figure 8). In remarking upon this fixture of American childhood from my grandmother's day up to my own, I focus especially on the "peculiar" rascals: Ernie ("Booker T. Bacon," "Sorghum," "Sunshine Sammy") Morrison, Allen ("Farina," "Maple") Hoskins, Eugene ("Pineapple") Jackson, Jannie ("Mango") Hoskins, Matthew ("Stymie") Beard, Bobbie ("Cotton") Beard, and the three children named "Buckwheat": Carlena Beard, Willie Mae Taylor, and most famously, Billie Thomas.

What links these rascals, besides the fact that they are nearly all named after breakfast foods or exotic fruits, is their location in a racialized entertainment industry as performing black children. Although the culture industry they worked in undoubtedly participated in the establishment and maintenance of racial inequality, what is interesting about the black rascals is less their fit within then current racial policies of segregation and subordination, but the lack of fit between the racial formation of the time, ideologically considered, and the general economy of innocent pleasures to which *Our Gang* caters. *Our Gang*—which ran from 1922 through 1944 in theaters and then, be-

ginning in the 1950s, on television—played no specific ideological role within white supremacist politics. The cultural work it seems to do is less a bolstering of claims to white supremacy, and more a production of the appropriate ambience for the insinuation of racially-unmarked innocence, an innocence predicated upon a forgetfulness of the past that is one of the greatest privileges of whiteness.²¹

Something like the Blakean dialectic of innocence and experience is clearly at work in any contemporary encounter with *Our Gang*. The most exhaustive work of film scholarship on the series is also the product of a critic's love affair with the series.²² In this exhaustive catalogue of every silent and sound-era episode of the series, the critical vocabulary of film reviewing—discussions of technique, production anecdotes, and the crucial thumbs up or down summary judgment—provide the alibi for the critic to wish away the racial scapegoating that is nearly omnipresent.

The white rascals are not given edible names (Alfalfa a possible exception). Gender distinction between them is essential to the parodies of adult heterosexual courtship and male bonding that delivered frequent laughs. By contrast, black children are edible and androgynous.²³ Farina was referred to with both male and female pronouns, even within a single episode. As Maltin explains,

the studio had been deluged with mail inquiring whether Farina was a boy or a girl—a puzzled movie-going audience really didn't know, and for some reason wanted to find out. So Hal Roach seized upon this widespread curiosity as a publicity gimmick, resulting in news releases that failed to disclose the lad's real name, Allen Clayton Hoskins, and avoided the matter of sex, instead describing Farina with incredible appellations such as 'that chocolate-coated fun drop of Hal Roach's Rascals.'²⁴

White little rascals, although homeless orphans, are not subjected to consistently imaginative punishments that frequently culminate in an implied off-screen death. This is the fate reserved for the younger of the two black rascals (there are typically two black rascals at any point in time, represented in the film as the siblings they in fact often were). Episode 6, "Saturday Morning," (3 Dec 1922) ends with Farina accidentally submerged in a river by her brother. The same gag is repeated in episode 107, "Fly My Kite," (30 May 1931). In episode 15, "Lodge Night" (29 Jul 1923) the gang forms the "Cluck Cluck Klams," which Sunshine Sammy and Farina haplessly join, wear white sheets, and elect an "Xsalted Ruler." As an intertitle explains, Farina "[d]oesn't know what the lodge is about—but is in favor of anything."²⁵ In episode 20, "No Noise," (23 Sep 1923) Farina eats "nails, needles, and bits of tin and wire," which leads to the other rascals threatening to operate upon her.²⁶ She is drugged with chloroform and then shocked back awake with electricity. In episode 23, "Big Business," Mango chews on a razor. Episode 32, "Every Man for Himself," (19 Oct 1924) ends with Farina covered with cactus needles from head to foot, which the gang

“helpfully” removes. In episode 59, “Love my Dog” (17 Apr 1927) Farina lets a white kid punch him in the face for two bits each time, in order to raise five dollars to get his dog out of the pound.

Fans of the Little Rascals, or for that matter, the Three Stooges or the Marx Brothers, may remember this level of pleasurable punishment being inflicted on many white characters, not simply black ones.²⁷ But except for those who remember the Nickelodeon era, the Rascals we watched was already sanitized of its most brutal bits, which were inflicted with racial specificity on Farina, Buckwheat, and their functional equivalents.

Fredric Jameson has noted the prominence of pastiche in postmodern culture.²⁸ I want to build upon this insight in calling attention to the forms in which *Our Gang* has been re-staged in American culture. Maltin’s filmography provides an account of how, in the television series drawn almost entirely from the talkie era, the most objectionable episodes were silently taken out of circulation. In the form in which I first encountered the Rascals, as videocassette compilations of their funniest moments, very few residues of racial scapegoating remain. Video pastiche is therefore in this case not random or eclectic fragmentation, but is deeply patterned by a strategy of revising the Rascals continuously so as to rescue their innocent pleasures from the contagion of racist kitsch.²⁹ This is pastiche with a politics, a cultural logic in which racist enjoyment goes bad at a certain point in the stream of time, is suddenly revealed to be in poor taste. Like mold on a piece of cheese, offensive bits are trimmed and discarded while retaining as much of the originally wholesome commodity as we can stomach. By redefining racism as “not funny,” value is preserved. Racism simply becomes bad business and is therefore shelved (in store perhaps for the day when it becomes good business once more?).

Maltin does not concur with this view. Race and racism are for him categories of experience, and, as such, are to be excluded from the enchanted worlds of innocent pleasure. The racial reader of *Our Gang*, in Maltin’s view, simply cannot abandon her baggage of racial neuroses. This reader invents or produces race in an innocent text that is doing its best to get beyond, or outside, or before race. For episode 25, “Seein’ Things,” (6 Apr 1924) it is worth quoting Maltin’s synopsis at length:

Every time Farina eats meat, he has strange nightmares. After being chased away from the gang’s ‘barbercooe,’ he comes upon a toppled picnic basket in the street with enough food to fill an army. Farina downs it all, from fried chicken to ice cream, and that night he has a dream to end all dreams, being chased by giant-size versions of the gang kids through city streets, diving underwater, then returning to shore where a dynamite blast sends him flying through the air, landing on the ledge of a tall building, which he climbs to the top as the gang pursues him, following this with a shimmy up a roof-top flagpole, and after that’s been chopped down, toppling precariously on a

plank many stories above the pavement. Finally the gang manages to saw off the board, and Farina plummets to the ground—or rather, his bed, for at this point he awakens from his dream and vows, ‘Ah eat mush from now on!’³⁰

Incredibly, this is for Maltin simply another example of “the non-malicious innocence with which *Our Gang* always treated the black-white situation.”³¹ Race, when it is considered at all, can only be understood as a “situation” that unhappily intrudes upon the world of the Little Rascals, one to which they are obliged occasionally to gesture. Lost in such an analysis is any awareness of the way visual culture actively produces racial consciousness, in addition to reflecting it. When, in episode 81, “Election Day” (12 Jan 1929) Farina’s parents, played by Louise Beavers and Clarence Muse, are driven out of town by a mob of angry whites, Maltin only comments on the “startling illusion” created by the “visual gag” of the dust cloud they raise.³² When forced to admit that an episode is a little vulgar (the “Cluck Cluck Klams” for instance) he simply dismisses those films as inferior or in poor taste.

In so explaining away the distasteful elements of *Our Gang*, Maltin consigns the iconography of racist kitsch to “the great hole of history,” to use Suzan-Lori Parks’s emotive phrase.³³ It is hard not to imagine this process as akin to disposing of the evidence of a crime. This manufactured innocence is hard to bear for those who would still wish to act against racism in the contemporary world, which explains the somewhat paradoxical interest, among black and anti-racist artists, in reviving and refiguring the iconography of racist kitsch. The other option, it seems, is to let it all be consigned to the great hole of history.

From Racist Kitsch to Racial Kitsch

I find evidence for these claims in the reappearance of racist kitsch at the very moment where one would have supposed social and political transformations would have made it irrelevant. Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* (2000) (see Figure 9) indexes and extends a long-standing practice of African-American curating of the racist kitsch figure. But in moving this practice from the less-accessible spaces of the private home or the art gallery to the much broader stage of contemporary cinema, Lee’s film becomes a crucial site for the close analysis of this practice of oppositional curating. The film is trapped in the unhappy dynamic of disseminating an iconography that it cannot stop destroying, and which it therefore cannot stop producing. The alternative to the evacuated, innocent past proposed by Maltin is one populated only by racism, a Pandora’s box of innumerate little black Sambos who, like vengeful spirits, arise to destroy all who unwisely invoke their name.



Figure 9: Movie poster for *Bamboozled*, copyright 2000.

The film concerns black television executive Pierre Delacroix (see Figure 3), played by Damon Wayans, who proposes a neo-minstrel show to his white boss Thomas Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) to protest the latter's patronizing attitude towards black culture. To Delacroix's seeming distress, Dunwitty takes the bait, and the show, shorn of Delacroix's intended irony, is an overnight success. *Bamboozled* ruthlessly satirizes in every direction. Neither condescending white media stars, nor ambitious black urban professionals, nor even race-conscious black nationalists escape the film's corrosive wit. Less moralistic than didactic, the script builds into the film the very dialogue about racism, authenticity, and entertainment that it wants to generate amongst its viewers. Ultimately, however, the film cannot escape its narrative destiny, which is to impose a judgment upon the intolerable web of ambiguities and inauthenticities it conjures. It does so through an extraordinarily melodramatic series of murders: first of Manray/Mantan (Savion Glover), the star of Delacroix's minstrel

show, then of the black hip-hop collective who stage his televised execution, and finally, of Delacroix himself, shot by his remorseful assistant Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett-Smith), the character whose moral authority is undercut the least in the film.

Bamboozled, as with all work by Spike Lee, provides much critical fodder.³⁴ Ironically, one of Lee's most interesting and astute critics, Manthia Diawara, has identified Lee's aesthetic as itself a form of kitsch. In a cryptic but essential essay, "Afro-kitsch," Diawara critiques the "kitsch of blackness" which he defines as the "imitation of a discourse of liberation" in the service of "mass identification."³⁵ Returning to the definition of kitsch as failed seriousness, he considers the difficulty of Lee's films to lie in their frustrated desire to achieve the impossible, to become a surrogate for a radical politics within the landscape of a demobilized and demoralized media culture. Nowhere is this dilemma more acute than in *Bamboozled*.

That a new reflexivity has been introduced into Lee's vision is evident in the intensely skeptical focus that *Bamboozled* brings to bear upon the black nationalist collective Mau Mau, led by Sloan Hopkins's brother Julius Hopkins, a.k.a. Big Blak Afrika (Mos Def). Sincere but somewhat hapless (as evidenced in their obviously white member, played by M.C. Serch of 3rd Bass), they react with holy anger against the neo-minstrel show, but are totally oblivious to the man behind the curtain, and therefore select Manray himself as the target of their vengeance. In a scene that visually parallels the opening of the film, in which Manray is dancing on a pallet, they set him dancing again to the rhythm of their gunfire.

A major point of *Bamboozled* seems to be to call attention to the immense skill trapped within minstrelized iconography—to the double injustice done to audience and *performer* by the demeaning legacies of slavery and racism. Thus, the film invests itself in producing as plausible a neo-minstrel show as possible, with as talented a cast of dancers and comedians as possible, led by Glover. This structural contradiction in the film, which Lee purposefully elicits in fusing Glover's culturally proud choreography with blackface's cultural profanity, is formally resolved by the unusual level of bloodletting at the film's end. In blacking up, Manray/Mantan becomes waste, and his violent death is literally a performance: it is broadcast on prime-time television.

A moment which prefigures the violence visited upon Manray/Mantan is a scene between him and Lil' Nigger Jim in which, frustrated by the child's inability to learn choreography quickly enough, Manray verbally abuses him (See Figure 10). This moment is understood as a watershed in Manray's dehumanization: he has begun to internalize Jim's status not as a human child but as a mechanized, senseless, performing doll, as a Topsy. We, on the other hand, protectively and humanely recognize Jim as an abused child. This scene of a child be-



Figure 10: Film still from *Bamboozled*, copyright 2000.

ing beaten is doubly phobic: of Manray/Mantan's unmanly sadism *and* of Jim's helpless and childish non-masculinity. He alerts our protective instincts, but protection is not the same as, perhaps is even the opposite of, identification. Between Jim and the Mau Mau going out in a blaze of glory, there is no contest about where identification lies. To identify, contrapuntally, with the abashed and wounded child, rather than with our protective feelings for him, is to locate the abjection on screen and within ourselves that *Bamboozled* elicits but cannot tolerate.

The film seems to deliver a very pointed warning against black-on-black violence. But this critique of black-on-black violence does not extend to violence itself; rather, it is the focus, not the nature, of Mau Mau's wrath that is most questioned (i.e., the focus on Manray, not the white executive who shows his racist true colors in the moments be-

fore Manray is kidnapped by the Mau Mau). This seems to be because, while authenticity is subject to a great deal of skepticism in *Bamboozled*, the shamefulness of *inauthenticity* is never questioned. The film's phobia for Pierre Delacroix is total. He has abandoned his name, his language, his family, his race, even his manhood (as is shown in his treatment of women). Depicted with over-the-top glee by comic actor Damon Wayans, who uses the effeminate mannerisms he perfected in parodying a gay film reviewer on the television series *In Living Color*, Delacroix is the film's internal scapegoat, one upon whom we can credibly lay blame, and, therefore, additional violence. The odd, excessive repetition of carnage, in which Delacroix's death avenges the death of the Mau Mau (which is society's vengeance for their murder of Manray), shows that the film cannot find a way to exit the circuit of 'an eye for an eye.'

Conclusion: Becoming Modern, Becoming Innocent

The curating or ownership of racist kitsch is confounding to those who would rather forget it ever occurred. Thus, a film like *Bamboozled* is seen by some as "heavy-handed satire," an "endless polemic" that is only barely "endurable." For Leonard Maltin, the author of these judgments, to remember the racism within innocent pleasures is already to be polemical.³⁶ To pollute the American popular film—a form centered, as Richard Dyer argues, upon the romantic utopia of a white heterosexual couple in three-point lighting—with blackface is simple resentment. Twentieth-century postmodernity in the United States racial imagination is structured by a wish to move beyond and forget the scapegoating of blacks. Becoming modern involves the seemingly impossible task of becoming innocent, a project that in its more academic formulations announces itself as "post-race."

Manthia Diawara's provocative essay accompanying photographs of racist kitsch by David Levinthal discusses this difficulty with uncommon skill.³⁷ His comprehensive analysis of the visual and material culture of racist kitsch, and the specific resignifications that Levinthal's art photography works upon them, ends in an ambivalent anecdote regarding an interaction with his thirteen-year old son, who innocently happens upon him as he is examining the photographs. His son's indifferent response to the images, Diawara reports, "is challenging me to stop being the custodian of these stereotypes, to distance myself from them, and to begin enjoying the humor in them. Only then will I, like him, become an individual and modern."³⁸

Diawara's essay thus ends by taking the willfully ironic stance of an achieved innocence. Becoming modern means becoming innocent, a process that seems available only through the enlarging and revivifying energies of a child. Diawara's enjoyment of his son's insouciance—



Figure 11: Courtesy Aisha Bastiaans, copyright 1999.

may I call it his invulnerability?—in the face of racist kitsch, recapitulates the economy of pleasure I have been discussing, but in a way that should produce self-recognition in us rather than another round of scapegoating.

Although Diawara's wish to "begin enjoying the humor" again reminds us of Maltin's position regarding *Our Gang*, I want to suggest that it can have a different implication. I have repeatedly suggested that oppositional spectatorship to the figure of racist kitsch cannot overcome its ability to reproduce scapegoating, because these practices of opposition inevitably reinscribe the object as a target for hatred and scorn, and in doing so, draw other people into the suffering orbit of the ceramic doll (see Figure 11), other people whose punishments can

be understood not as cruelty but as fun. This is the fate of Manray and especially Delacroix in *Bamboozled*.

The transforming of shame this essay has been recommending cannot proceed programmatically. By definition, any project endorsing creativity cannot determine in advance what course such creativity might take. But it may be at least suggestive to explore a parallel here between queer theory and Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I am." At bottom, the shame of racist kitsch resides in the idea that "I am thought of as less than human." And yet, the very shame that floods through at that thought, a shame that, were we not human, we would have no capacity to feel, is our best internal evidence that the thought is wrong and vulgar: I feel (shame), therefore I am (human).

Acknowledging the permanence of our shame, and its usefulness, may mark the beginning Diawara wishes for but does not quite find in his call to "begin enjoying the humor" again. The point may not be to become individual and modern, to ever achieve a kind of prophylactic invulnerability to the object that says "Shame on you! Shame on you for being black!" We do not, at this late date, need yet newer formulations of pride to negate this shame. The point may be to locate, within the transformations of our shame, a way out of scapegoating, and thus, out of the bloodletting that accompanies with such monotonous reliability our attempts to regain our innocence.

Notes

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- 1 On kitsch as failed seriousness see Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). See also Dennis Dutton, "Kitsch" (Grove Dictionary of Art Online, 1998 [cited 15 May 2002]); available from <http://www.groveart.com>. On what I am calling "racist kitsch," see Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1994) and Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). On contemporary art that mimics and critiques racist kitsch, see Michael D. Harris, "Memories and Memorabilia, Art and Identity," *Third Text*, no. 44 (1998). Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, hosts the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, curated by Dr. David Pilgrim.
- 2 See bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 115–132. On the application of an oppositional gaze to interrupt sexist (and implicitly, racist) pleasures, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
- 3 See William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Norman O. Brown, "The Excremental Vision," in *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), 179–201.

- 4 Robin M. Chandler, "Xenophobes, Visual Terrorism and the African Subject," *Third Text*, no. 35 (1996): 17; Harris, "Memories and Memorabilia, Art and Identity," 42.
- 5 The terms scapegoat and effigy are used somewhat interchangeably in this essay, although a longer account would need to restore their full complexity. An important account of the scapegoat is given in René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). See also Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) especially pages 36-41.
- 6 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James and The Art of the Novel," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 1-16. See also Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame And Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). A recent defense of politics conducted from the standpoint of abjection/shame is available in Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics And The Ethics Of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- 7 This argument is made powerfully throughout Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- 8 See for example the titles (but not the exemplary content) of Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1994), and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, And Bucks: An Interpretive History Of Blacks In American Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994).
- 9 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 237.
- 10 See "'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions (1919)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1955), 179-204. On the psychic traffic between beating and performance, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Poem is Being Written," *Representations* 17 (1987): 110-43.
- 11 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 238. On the concept of "natal alienation," see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 12 On stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit* (New York: Vanni, 1947) and Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985). In "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud notes "In my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating-phantasies; those accessible to young people, such as what was known as the "Bibliothèque rose," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, etc." (180) This fragment suggests that Topsy, as one of the children being beaten in the novel, can actually be thought to contribute to the evidence on which Freud builds his theoretical account.
- 13 See George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in The White Mind: The Debate On Afro-American Character And Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
- 14 This definition of violence derives from the work of Georges Bataille on what he terms "general economy," which for Bataille is founded not upon the problem of scarcity, but rather, the problematics of excess: excess of resources, excess of people. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1998). The exact phrasing is from Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), 41.
- 15 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 16 The etiology of this guilt is a problem within psychoanalysis. In "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud initially locates the origin of this guilt in the family romance (191). This is usually not the approach taken by theorists of oppositionality, who assume this guilt is of an *ethical* nature. While Freud later in his essay seemingly acknowledges the role of ethical or conscientious guilt, (194) it is sobering to ponder his first account of guilt, built entirely without reference to ethics. In other words, Freud finds it possible to theorize this guilt without depending upon any necessary ethical counterweight to sadism. Oppositional criticism, by contrast, is rhetorically dependent upon claiming this universal, if suppressed, hard-wired guilt.
- 17 Helen Bannerman, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (New York: Stokes, [1900]). Although set in India, the race of Sambo is destabilized not only by his name, but by those of his parents, Mumbo and Jumbo. So while he may *literally* be a lower-caste Indian, *literarily*

- speaking he is of African descent. In fact, part of the “charm” of the book is to render such geographic niceties beside the point; the black pickaninny is nothing if not portable.
- 18 Hazel Sharrard Kaufman, *Little Black Sambo, a Play in Three Scenes for Pre-School Children* (New York City: Samuel French, 1928).
 - 19 On the transformation of the Wedgewood icon from sculptural medallion to popular print, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 21–2. See also Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
 - 20 This paragraph is influenced by the arguments put forward by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 - 21 Scott Malcolmson’s recent account of the development of racial ideology in the United States is especially illuminating in drawing the connection between whiteness and innocence. See Scott L. Malcolmson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000).
 - 22 Leonard Maltin and Richard W. Bann, *Our Gang: The Life and Times of the Little Rascals* (New York: Crown, 1977). In what follows, I am primarily reading this text rather than the filmic texts it refers to, some of which are no longer commercially available.
 - 23 The non-importance of gender difference at the formative stage of the fantasy “a child is being beaten” is noted by Freud (185).
 - 24 Maltin, *Our Gang*, 42.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 33.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 38.
 - 27 Sarah E. Chinn reminds me that they are seen weekly on Comedy Central’s *South Park*.
 - 28 Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (New York: Verso, 1998).
 - 29 In “A Child Is Being Beaten,” Freud refutes the simplistic sexualized accounts of repression adopted by other psychoanalysts, and instead insists on seeing repression as an historical process. “Man’s archaic heritage forms the nucleus of the unconscious mind; and whatever part of that heritage has to be left behind in the advance to later phases of development, because it is unserviceable or incompatible with what is new and harmful to it, falls a victim to the process of repression” (203–4). See also Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).
 - 30 Maltin, *Our Gang*, 42.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, 67.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, 93.
 - 33 Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play, and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995). See also Joseph Roach, “The Great Hole of History: Liturgical Silence in Beckett, Osofisan, and Parks,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.1 (2001): 307–317.
 - 34 See the special issue of *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* devoted to the film (Fall/Winter 2001).
 - 35 Manthia Diawara, “Afro-Kitsch,” in *Black Popular Culture: A Project*, eds. Gina Dent and Michele Wallace (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) 287–89.
 - 36 Maltin’s review of *Bamboozled* can be found at <http://www.imdb.com>.
 - 37 David Levinthal and Manthia Diawara, *Blackface* (Santa Fe, NM: Arena, 1999).
 - 38 *Ibid.*, 17.