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The Last King of Scotland or the Last N-----r on Earth? The Ethics of Race on Film

Paul C. Taylor

Temple University, ptaylor@temple.edu

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Abstract

This paper undertakes four tasks. It examines a tradition of cinematic and narrative representation that we might call "*the narrative of moral gentrification*." It insists on the importance of excavating the racialist and often racist images, motifs, and myths that constitute this tradition. It recommends a form of philosophical aesthetics, located at the intersection of aesthetics, ethical perfectionism, and critical race theory, as a resource for doing this work. And it insists on the importance of subjecting problematic or qualitatively inferior expressive objects to critical scrutiny for the sake of developing proper iconographies and archives of white supremacist expressive culture.

Key Words

aesthetics, critical race theory, criticism, film, moral education, racism, stereotype

1. Introduction: Mooney's Blues

From time to time, the late, lamented "Dave Chappelle Show" on the Comedy Central cable television network found ways to feature comedian and comic writer Paul Mooney. Each of these features, from "Ask a Black Dude" to "Negrodamus" and "Mooney on Movies," operated from the same slender premise: provide Mooney with an opportunity to offer unscripted comic observations. Set pieces like this can succeed only if the featured performer has a fertile comic mind and nimble tongue. But in the right hands they can go beyond mere success to transcend the merely comedic and achieve tragicomic depth.

The great writer and critic Ralph Ellison developed these ideas of depth and transcendence in ways that have had lasting significance for American and African-American letters. Focusing on the expressive practice that many now take as the Ur-text of Afro-U.S. culture, he once described the blues not as a musical form, though he was a skilled and well-trained musician, and not (just) as a lyric form, though he was a writer of unsurpassed skill. "The blues," he said, "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolations of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."^[1]

Mooney has approached Ellison's transcendence many times during his days as a writer for Richard Pryor and for shows like "Good Times," as well as in his own stand-up comedy. But he never came closer to achieving it during his association with Chappelle than during a segment entitled "Mooney on Movies." Here the comedian appears as a movie critic, seated, in the fashion of Siskel and Ebert, in an otherwise empty theatre, oddly sandwiched between two young white women. (Both women are blonde, with one dressed like a news anchor and the other dressed, as my wife put it, like an off-duty Playboy

bunny. These facts bear examination, but cannot receive it in the space available to me here.) Each of the several films the trio discusses receives the same treatment: the women introduce the film and share their thoughts on it, while the camera occasionally cuts away from their conversation to catch Mooney in various states of irritation and annoyance. Then, finally, Mooney offers his take, invariably to dismiss the film on broadly racial grounds with his characteristic brand of world-weary exasperation.

When the discussion turns to Tom Cruise's nineteenth century historical epic, "The Last Samurai,"^[2] Mooney offers his judgment:

Hollywood is crazy. "The Last Samurai," starring Tom Cruise. He's the last samurai? Give me a break. That movie was offensive... First they had "The Mexican" with Brad Pitt, now they have "The Last Samurai" with Tom Cruise. Well I've written a film. Maybe Hollywood will produce it. "The Last Nigger on Earth," starring Tom Hanks.^[3]

With this diatribe, Mooney offers two lessons that I mean to take seriously and develop in this paper. First, he points to an important and still-vital tradition of cinematic and narrative representation. Call it, for reasons I'll come to, the *narrative of moral gentrification*. This tradition borrows from, refines, and reveals patterns of meaning that continue to shape social life wherever the modern concept of race has had an impact.^[4] Because of the lingering impact of this tradition, it is important to excavate the images, motifs, and myths that constitute it to promote greater understanding of the world we inhabit. That excavation can and should be part of the work of philosophical aesthetics.

Mooney also shows that the blues impulse can be extended to the work of criticism. The burden of criticism is in part to explain what the art object is, to offer an account of just what the auditor will see, hear, or experience, by reading the object against some relevant, perhaps generic, norms for production and evaluation. So just as Stuart Klawans tells us that "Knocked Up" is another update on Stanley Cavell's comedy of remarriage, Mooney tells us that "The Last Samurai" belongs to and develops its own tradition.^[5] But this is an insight, a way of seeing that comes to Mooney by reading the film in the light of Ellison's "aching consciousness" of racial exclusion and marginalization. What I might (but will mostly decline to) call a blues criticism will finger the jagged grain of problematic expressive objects for the sake of developing proper iconographies and archives of white supremacist expressive culture. Criticism like this should be a vital part of critical race theory and can make interesting contributions to the literature on the relations between ethics and art.

2. History and the Africanist Presence

The moral gentrification narrative is my name for a certain kind of historical fiction film. History-based fiction films are well known for taking liberties with their subjects, especially when the films in question are Hollywood features. But we can still take these films seriously as history by using historian Robert Rosenstone's distinction between "true inventions" of

historical subjects on film and "false inventions." Both inventions "engage...the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history...." But true inventions are not "capricious:" they do not "exist in a state of historical innocence" or "ignore the findings and assertions and arguments of what we already know from other sources." For Rosenstone, fiction films work as history when they "make meaning out of people and events in the past" without doing violence to what we already know. [6]

To make meaning in this way is not just to communicate facts, although finding and insisting on widely accepted facts is useful. It is also to recommend a way of looking at the world, or to recommend the picture, in something like Wittgenstein's sense, that results from this way of looking. This way of looking at history – this "historiophoty" [7] – will subordinate some causal factors to others; it will find heroes where another way of looking finds bystanders, opportunists, or just more effects of deeper causes; and it will raise questions where other perspectives posit axioms. Insofar as the historian's burden is to tell us "what to think about 'the facts,'" fiction films, and other pieces of narrative art, can assume at least some of this ineliminably normative burden. [8]

The narrative of moral gentrification traffics in false inventions because it interprets the facts of history by appeal to a misleading "collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies" about non-white people. [9] In gentrification narratives about black people, which this essay will take as its principal subject, the collection of images in question is the mythology to which Toni Morrison has given the name "Africanism." She defines Africanism, less helpfully than she might have, as "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people." [10] Morrison's idea is that black people in Western culture become occasions for working out white problems, and that in the U.S. this process is intimately bound up with the creation of the identities and literatures on which the relevant authorities are willing to confer the title "American." Western literature, she says, has always relied on an "Africanist presence," using invented Africans to clarify the stakes, parameters, and challenges of modernity, whiteness, and national identity. And it has usually done this while ignoring both the centrality of black peoples to modern history and the complexity of black personalities and cultures. [11]

Extending Morrison's argument beyond literature to popular film and public discourse, Aimee Rowe explains what the deployment of Africanism means for the craft of narrative construction. White characters, she says, evolve "against a variably mute and frightening blackness," while "black characters, dark things, primitive impulses... sometimes benevolent, other times exotic, erotic, and terrifying – provide the necessary backdrop for white characters to struggle in their complexity and to grow...." [12]

Having recognized the Africanist presence in American literature, and having complained about criticism that ignores this presence in canonical writers like Poe, Henry James, and

Hemingway, Morrison calls for alternative forms of criticism. She calls for, among other things, critics who will "explicate the ways in which specific themes, fears, forms of consciousness, and class relationships are embedded in the...Africanist idiom," and for "studies that analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters."^[13] In one answer to this call, Rowe finds that tropes like counter-whiteness and multiculturalism shape the depiction of interracial love on film, and she suggests that they routinely frame the deployment of Africanism in contemporary film. The narrative of moral gentrification invites us to extend the Africanist analysis to the history feature, and affirms Rowe's reading of blackness in contemporary film.

3. Saving Whiteness and Claiming Diversity

"Counter-whiteness" is the name that Robin Weigman gives to the aspiration to an alternative, post-supremacist conception of white identity. In speaking of "white identity" here, as well as of "whiteness" and "white supremacy," as I will soon, I mean to signify subject positions and institutional structures as well as the ideological stances and habitual modes of perception and conception that those positions and structures routinely call forth. These terms name aspects of historical processes in which individual white people have played various roles. To use these terms is not to say that all white people are racist. It is simply to gesture at the manifest historical fact that Western civilization has been built upon, among many other things, the systematic and, for most of its history, explicitly racialized exploitation and oppression of non-white peoples by whites. Many whites have fought against white supremacy, and those who have benefitted from it have done so unevenly, thanks to the intersection of race with ethnicity, class, gender, sexual identity, and other axes of social differentiation. But the overall pattern of benefit is fairly uncontroversial, as is the fact that this pattern still shapes contemporary distributions of social goods, both with and without the assistance of explicit racism.

The need to exchange old forms of whiteness for newer ones emerges with the decline of classical racialism, the end of *de jure* white supremacy, and the emergence of a post-racist sense of public ethics and etiquette. As Weigman puts it vis-à-vis the US context,

Integration, no matter how failed in its utopian projections of a nation beyond race division, nonetheless powerfully suspended the acceptability of the public display of white supremacy, so much so that the hegemonic formation of white identity today must be understood as taking shape in the rhetorical, if not always political, register of disaffiliation from white supremacist practices and discourses.^[14]

As Linda Alcoff points out, disaffiliation is important: white people after white supremacy *do* need some morally acceptable way of understanding their relationship to the unavoidably racist histories of their communities and states.^[15] Simply disavowing whiteness altogether seems promising to some but obscures the continuing relations of

power, perception, and privilege that the vocabulary of whiteness renders perspicuous. Alcoff suggests that the best way to withdraw allegiance from white supremacy without denying its persistence and effects is to posit a kind of white double-consciousness. This "second sight" would recognize the reality and persistence of white privilege while also celebrating the history of traitors to white supremacy, like William Lloyd Garrison and freedom rider Jim Peck. Despite the promise of white double-consciousness, though, and as Rowe, Weigman, and Alcoff all point out, the more common forms of disaffiliation are evasive: they simply sidestep history and politics altogether.

If disaffiliation is central to the pursuit of counter-whiteness, then evasive disaffiliation is central to what we might call "multicultural counter-whiteness." In the sense of the term I have in mind, multiculturalism is an ideology that recognizes the cleavages in multi-ethnic societies with sedimented forms of socio-economic stratification, but understands these cleavages principally in terms of liberal ideas about cultural diversity. This approach has at least three important consequences. It suggests that inequality emerges from nothing more than disparities in the luck, effort, and endowments of distinct individuals and cultures. It displaces racial conflict and tension onto what Rowe calls "the realm of interpersonal contact," where one seeks not social justice but "individualistic forms of racial healing."^[16] And it replaces the categories of social-theoretic investigation – oppression, exploitation, hegemony, and so on – with the thematics of therapeutic engagement – empathy, friendship, redemption, and the like.

Hollywood film narratives yoke Africanist tropes to multicultural counter-whiteness in several familiar ways. In each case, the quest for *counter*-whiteness rules out openly racist depictions of blacks. But traditionally Africanist themes, relying on Western racist and racist mythologies, continue to pervade the fiction-worlds in question. And the traditional Africanist positioning of the characters, with the blacks peripheral to and supporting the whites in their character development, largely remains in place. A few examples may be useful.

Perhaps the most familiar and least interesting cases are the films – crime procedurals or police thrillers, most often, like "Dirty Harry" or "Colors" – in which individual blacks surface only occasionally, and then as representatives of a generalized social threat or pathology. Here blacks collectively provide a backdrop against which the white characters develop and demonstrate their heroism. Equally familiar but more interesting are the films like "Monster's Ball" and, in its way, the far superior "Far From Heaven" that promise redemption through miscegenation. In these films, interracial love with more sensuous, emotional, or noble blacks offers white heroes deliverance from emotional paralysis and from the legacy of white supremacy.^[17] Somewhat less familiar but perhaps even more interesting are the films that, like "Ghost" and "Casablanca," feature what Robert Gooding-Williams calls "black cupids." These films evade racist depictions of lascivious blacks but recode the trope of black sensuality to make blacks the vehicles for awakening white characters to their

desires.[18]

There are also the interracial male buddy films, like "48 Hours" and "Men in Black," which do the work of racial ideology on (at least) two levels. First, in the manner of literary narratives like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which Leslie Fiedler calls "the sacred marriage of males," the nurturing black buddy enables the white lead to evade adult heteronormative sexuality, and his friendship absolves the white character of the crimes of anti-black racial injustice. Then, in a post-civil rights update of Fiedler's tradition, there is a kind of quid pro quo exchange: the white buddy confers his refinement, professionalism, skill, or institutional legitimacy on the black buddy in an allegorical resolution of the stereotyped threat that black male "savages" pose to "civilized" society. Meanwhile, the black buddy confers his greater sensuality, style, and spontaneity on his white friend, thereby reacquainting the white character with his feelings and, sometimes, with his woman.[19]

A final kind of narrative employs what we might call the "dark mentor" trope in which central white characters accept instruction from marginal non-white characters. This education is both a symbolic penance for the sins of white supremacy as well as a way out of the psychocultural "iron cage" of white reserve and repression via a "transtextual" infusion of cultural style.[20] Quentin Tarantino relies on this trope, from Tim Roth's education in "Reservoir Dogs" to Ving Rhames' lecture to Bruce Willis in "Pulp Fiction." [21] (The *Kill Bill* films provide an especially interesting case, as the Orientalist set piece – the apprenticeship with Gordon Liu's Pei Mei that Uma Thurman and others undergo – is mediated by the black racial coding of Kung Fu films in the U.S.)

There are many more narrative themes to explore in this spirit and much more worth saying about the few that I've mentioned. There is rather a lot to say, for example, about exceptions, real and apparent, to the broad principles I've described here about the way these themes play out in films involving indigenous peoples and others, and about the degree to which the need to recuperate whiteness is really a need to recuperate white *masculinity*. But I've introduced these themes here only to situate my claims about the narrative of moral gentrification in a broader ideological context.

The broader context I have in mind is defined by two facts: first, that contemporary fiction features continue to recuperate Africanist themes and techniques; and second, that they do so to advance a counter-white, post-racist racial project. The white protagonist remains central in these films, just as in *Huck Finn* the protagonist's goals and growth provide the framework within which the story unfolds. But the imperative of counter-whiteness requires that these goals involve finding a morally respectable place for white people in a post-civil rights, post-colonial world. The black characters, meanwhile, remain in the background where they serve as a resource for the development of the whites. Blacks can serve as resources in this way because they enter their fiction worlds endowed with the typical traits of blacks in Western racial mythology. Sometimes they are an undifferentiated mass, devoid of culture, history, and individuality: in this form, they are the

threat or the problem against which white heroism defines itself. At other times, when black characters emerge as distinct individuals, they are sensual, emotional, physical, indifferent to convention and decorum, and cool. In both cases, they are, above all, uncomplicated, requiring little in the way of character development. (Does Reggie Hammond *grow* in "48 Hours"? In what was once Hollywood's most telling way of answering questions like this, he doesn't get the girl. He gets a girl, but she appears nearly at random, unlike Nick Nolte's love interest, played by Annette O'Toole, whose ambivalence about Nolte's character sets one of the narrative's goals: Nolte must become worthy of her.)

4. Gentrification: Spatial and Moral

The aim so far has been to advance two suggestions. The first is that the aspiration to counter-whiteness and the embrace of multiculturalism are the preoccupations that shape many contemporary deployments of Africanism on film. The second is that the convergence of these post-racist preoccupations with Africanist techniques yields certain specific outcomes. We might summarize these outcomes with a series of oppositions: where white characters are round, blacks are flat (with their specific mode of flatness fixed by racial mythologies); where white experiences and actions are normative and central, black experiences and actions are deviant, pathological, and marginal.^[22] The burden now is to ask how the post-racist preoccupations and their attendant outcomes shape history films. My sense, so far registered only in the vocabulary I have suggested, is that one way to fix ideas in response to this question is to consider certain dynamics of the post-industrial city.

Sociologist Ruth Glass first used the term "gentrification" in 1964 to name the process that transforms poor, low-status urban neighborhoods with distressed housing stock into middle and upper class neighborhoods with revitalized housing stock. This process usually displaces the low-status residents, often disrupting viable and long-standing communities; and it often does this at the behest and with the encouragement of political elites, who hope to solve the problems of the post-industrial city by encouraging contemporary "homesteaders." In the U.S. in particular, which will be my focus from this point on, this process is racially charged: the poor neighborhoods in question tend to be filled with black and brown people and the middle class adventurers tend to be white. (Sexual identity plays a role here as well, though in ways we haven't space to consider. Suffice it to say that in the early literature on gentrification, at least, the pioneers seemed to be middle class people who were marginal on grounds apart from class, like gays and lesbians.)^[23]

More to the point, gentrification is a racially charged subject because plausible and familiar stories about the post-industrial city (stories that it is not the burden of this paper to defend) hold that our familiar urban problems, and our familiar conceptions of how to solve them, result in part from racial asymmetries and biases in public policy. To take just four examples: many areas of concentrated poverty in U.S. cities emerged in the wake of urban "renewal" projects that decimated viable black and brown neighborhoods.

Homeownership in these areas, and among black and brown people generally, is less common than among whites, thanks in part to explicit racial biases in the policies that the federal government used to cultivate the U.S. middle class beginning in the early twentieth century. The values of the homes in these areas and the ability of the residents to access capital to maintain and improve their homes have long been negatively impacted by redlining and other discriminatory practices in the real estate and lending industries. And conscious and unconscious prejudices combine with sedimented barriers to mobility to lock residents of these neighborhoods out of employment networks and other pathways to success.[\[24\]](#)

Having moved quite swiftly over several contentious issues, I want to be clear about what I am not saying. First, I do not mean to suggest that the problems of the post-industrial city result from racism and nothing more. Racism, more properly, white supremacy, is one part of the complex swirl of economic, cultural, and social forces that makes issues like immigration, AIDS, and poverty so difficult to address. It is, however, a real factor and one that has had a discernible impact.

If something like the foregoing account of gentrification is correct, then it closely tracks the line of thought developed above in connection with the uses of Africanism. Urban policy has, at crucial moments, been either driven or hobbled by flat images of pathological, cultureless, inherently problematic black people. Where people like these are concerned, it can hardly matter that new highways or sport facilities or downtown revitalization programs will decimate standing neighborhoods: the residents of these neighborhoods are an undifferentiated mass with no social ties, no networks worth preserving. It can hardly matter that concentrated poverty and widespread gun violence have complex causes: the *real* cause is the pathological cluelessness of a problem people. And it can hardly matter that these problem people have been and remain at the margins of the processes of democratic deliberation and of wealth acquisition: because they are supposed to be marginal, we won't even notice. What does matter is that the inner cities get revitalized, as it happens, by young white people on a redemptive errand into the urban jungles.

What the idea of gentrification adds to the earlier discussion of the post-racist uses of Africanism is an explicit engagement with the historical terrain of white supremacy and an overt movement to replace problem people with people of promise. One of the favored solutions for urban problems now involves shipping out the problem *people* and inviting in more promising types, mostly white people whose stores of financial, human, and social capital have, in broad terms, been enhanced by social practices and state policies that have historically been racist in intent, effect, or both (redlining, whites-only government mortgage programs, and so on). These promising people, we hope, will take over blighted spaces and turn them into thriving communities largely by the magic of their example and initiative and the infusion of their resources. Never mind that the blight, the magic, and the resources are, in many ways, different aspects of the same sociogenic processes, and that separating them delimits the

policy space by ruling out approaches that eschew magic in favor of, say, thoroughgoing economic restructuring, while also doing violence to the historical record.^[25]

Similarly, in narratives of *moral* gentrification, the problems of modern racial history appear in these films as real problems for people of all colors. But the narratives suppress the evident historical connections between these problems and the practices of white supremacy. Instead, they import innocent whites, whose presence magically solves the problems, at least insofar as the problems exist for non-problematic people. The problem people recede into the background as befits an undifferentiated mass. The souls, the fortunes, and the fates of white folks come to define terrain that once belonged to other people, and the terrain itself is cleansed not just of its former inhabitants but also of its history. Some examples will help to clarify these ideas.

5. How Mississippi Burning During a Dry White Season Made the Last King of Scotland Cry "Freedom" (on His Way Out of Africa)

5a. There are many examples of the moral gentrification narrative. I'll start with just two. In "Mississippi Burning"^[26] two white FBI agents somehow become the heroes of the U.S. civil rights struggle, despite the historical fact that the Federal Government was notoriously unhelpful for most of the movement, especially in the domain that the film works hardest to vindicate as an occasion of white heroism in protecting ordinary black folks from the systemic, terroristic, deadly violence of southern white supremacists. It is a Hollywood film, so there is shooting and blood, and there are explosions and fires. And while the white heroes routinely throw themselves into the fray to save the helpless blacks in their charge, the black characters, such as they are, recede into the background, and become part of the backdrop against which the heroic whites work out the nation's moral problems and complex fates.

A second example focuses not on the U.S. freedom struggle but on its South African counterpart. "Cry Freedom"^[27] is the story of white journalist Donald Woods' experience of and awakening to the evils of apartheid. The great activist Steven Biko appears in the film and plays a prominent role. But his life and death matter on the screen principally as elements in Woods' life and radicalization. The film ends not with Biko's brutal killing but with Woods and his family escaping South Africa on a plane. Here the black backdrop to white growth is a man, not the masses (or not just the masses), but he is a backdrop all the same.

There is much more to say about these films, as there would be about any film that had received only a paragraph's worth of commentary. There are, for example, questions like these, questions that go to the heart of my argument here: *What, one might wonder, is the big deal? Of course these films focus on white people. They were made by white people for white people. The problem has to do with the political economy of the moving picture industry in and around the U.S. and with the fact that non-whites still have uneven access to the means of cultural production. (Or, more harshly, the problem has to do with the failure of blacks and other non-whites to make and*

patronize films that favorably depict and prominently feature people who look like them.)

These are reasonable questions, and they help me to be clear about my point here. Donald Woods has every right to tell his story, especially since it is a genuinely compelling story that seems not to invent history "falsely," unlike "Mississippi Burning." And the makers of "Mississippi Burning" are no more bound to respect history than the people behind Demi Moore's bodice-ripping version of "The Scarlet Letter"[\[28\]](#) are required to respect their literary source. My concern is that these films rely on and reinforce patterns of meaning and habits of perception and interpretation that play important and destructive roles in life outside the theatre. It is a problem when people think, and cultivate the habit of thinking, that only the experiences of white people count and that the marginalization of non-whites is acceptable and routine. It is a problem when we ignore, and cultivate the habit of ignoring, the historical roles of the real people, of every color who fought for civil rights, and when we replace those real people with (falsely) invented, historically innocent, wish-fulfillment mechanisms. In the face of these problems, appealing to the racially skewed political economy of the film industry doesn't help: the industry routinely advances or presupposes ill-conceived, misleading, and tendentious arguments about the history and ethics of what we once called race relations. These arguments can pass unnoticed and the asymmetric relations to the means of production can seem harmless unless we prevent these false inventions from masquerading as common sense or harmless cinematic "license." That is, these films may be *by* white people but that's part of the problem; and they are not really just *for* white people, are never presented as such, and cannot justifiably function in that way if film industry resources are unjustly distributed.

Put differently and more concisely, I'm happy that Donald Woods gets to tell his story. But where is Biko's Hollywood film? "Mississippi Burning" is an interesting fantasy. But if we have to have white heroes, to give white people a moral foothold in an immoral racial-national history, where are the mainstream features about the *real* white heroes, such as the abolitionists and the freedom riders like Joe Slovo or, if we need controversy and bloodshed, John Brown? There is something at work behind the films that get made, some determination to reclaim and reshape history in the name of white innocence, much the way contemporary urban "homesteaders" reclaim urban spaces. This determination is what I am trying to examine.

At this point, some more questions recommend themselves: *Can't we defend some of these films as true inventions? Given the epistemic limits of the mostly white audiences at which they are aimed, they manage to smuggle in a fair amount of real history, and they might prepare the way for a deeper engagement with the past, perhaps without the mediation of a white protagonist. That is, don't these films focus on white characters as a kind of epistemic "sweetener," to facilitate the reception of true historical inventions that take up difficult topics?* These are reasonable questions, and I mean to engage them by considering a film that seems to enact the sensibility behind them.

5b. "The Last King of Scotland"[29] has the form of a film that uses an anti-racist epistemic "sweetener." The film puts a white character at the center of a story that seems to be about a black character but does this on the way to exposing some of the tragic consequences of white supremacy. In light of this narrative structure, one might interpret the film as a slow-burning criticism of white supremacy, one that starts slowly and subtly so as not to lose its overwhelmingly white audience, but that gathers steam and conviction as its real protagonist's mistakes come to mirror the mistakes of Eurocentric geopolitics. This is an attractive reading, and probably close to the one the filmmakers meant to motivate. Unfortunately, the film is more complex, and more problematic, than this.

The film's title refers to former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, who once joked that he was the last king of Scotland. This joke revives a political designation that ceased to be meaningful in the eighteenth century, when the Stuart "pretenders" to the unified thrones of Scotland and England were defeated and when Scotland, Wales, and England were combined to form Great Britain. Reviving this designation serves several serious purposes for Amin. First, it recalls the contentious and brutal history of European politics, thereby undermining any attempt to draw a bright line between the civilized and stable West and the barbarous and unstable Rest (of the world). The claim also links Amin and Uganda to specific moments in that brutal history, thereby identifying twentieth century Uganda as in part an artifact of, component of, and participant in British politics. More to the point, rhetorically claiming the Scottish throne links Amin to the underside of British history, to the rebellious Scots who sought to throw off English domination, thereby giving Amin's assertions of post- and anti-colonial sovereignty a European pedigree.

By taking Amin's claim to the Scottish throne as its title, the film imports the historico-political rhetoric of the claim, thereby beginning to substantiate its anti-colonial credentials. It also, however, establishes the ambiguous doubling that moves Amin to the periphery of the narrative and brings the white character to the center. The spectator of the film sees Amin over the shoulder of a fictional character named Nicholas Garrigan, a Scottish doctor who manages to become Amin's personal physician and principal advisor. As the chief advisor to the dictator, and as the only semi-rational person we see in the leadership of Amin's Uganda, Garrigan is in a way the power, or the brain, behind Amin's absolutist throne. In this sense, *he*, not Amin, is Scotland's last king, the last Scotsman to wield kingly authority.

So far we have the resources for treating Garrigan as an epistemic sweetener. Manohla Dargis acknowledges as much in her *New York Times* review of the film. The doctor, she says, is an "empathic point of entry," a starting point from which the spectator can watch as the film "creates a portrait of this famous Ugandan dictator from inside the palace walls." [30] If this is right, then the film concedes but revalues and disarms some of the concerns of anti-Africanist criticism. The white protagonist will be central, but this is intentional and strategic and designed to create the conditions under which, as it might

be, empathy can spread from the white hero to the black people whose misfortunes he allows the spectator to witness. In other words, Amin's doctor serves this film as a kind of Forrest Gump for a moment in the history of British colonialism. Like the title character in "Forrest Gump,"^[31] Garrigan is a vehicle for contemplating the transformations in a particular social formation over a definite period of time. And Garrigan's emotional investment and active involvement in the Amin regime mirrors the West's ill-advised investments in and support for people like Amin (and Pinochet, and so on). Garrigan is, in Dargis's words, "a stand-in for all the white men who have unwisely and cravenly journeyed into the proverbial heart of darkness." He is the allegorical centerpiece of "a very contemporary, pointedly resonant film about blowback" from the colonial enterprise, which created the conditions for Amin's murderous reign.

If all this is right, then "Last King" represents the emergence of an historically *sensitive* form of counter-whiteness on film rather than a myopically post-racist deployment of Africanism. The white hero doesn't evade history but immerses himself and the spectator in it. And along the way he acquaints the spectator with the human victims of colonialism, neocolonialism, and the blowback from both.

5c. Unfortunately, the epistemic sweetener reading of "The Last King" strikes me as utterly implausible. The black characters are not complex enough to sustain it or to ward off the worry about Africanism. And the white hero's immersion in history is too mediated by racist stereotypes and too completely governed by realist conventions to animate an effective anti-colonial allegory.

Dargis anticipates the line of thinking I'll pursue here in the title of her review. As she sees it, Amin's right-hand (Scots)man is "An Innocent Abroad – Seduced By a Madman." First, about the innocent abroad: The white hero's Gump-like journey through Amin's Uganda, which is to say through the legacy of Great Britain's Uganda, is driven by bad choices, hubris, and various less than noble motivations. But he is, essentially, innocent: great forces beyond his reckoning have made Uganda what it is. The film, to its credit, does some work to properly locate some of these forces at the level of Western geopolitics. But it renders this as a realm of shady backroom deals beyond the reach or understanding of the ordinary individuals, like Garrigan, who find themselves buffeted by the winds of empire. More importantly, the causal forces most in evidence in the film derive from the preternatural malevolence of a madman, also beyond the understanding of ordinary people. If this is the historiophobic approach the film recommends, it effectively rejects the kind of reorientation to history that we find in Alcoff's white double-consciousness, and instead enacts the same kind of evasive disaffiliation that we find in "Monster's Ball" and "Mississippi Burning." (Amin's madness will be of some import in a moment, after a few more words on the theme of Garrigan's innocence.)

While in one sense the Scotsman is too innocent to contribute to the work of true historical invention, he is in another sense not innocent enough. He is too richly developed a character to

claim the kind of innocence that reveals the workings of history instead of obscuring them. In trying to motivate the “epistemic sweetener” reading of Garrigan’s centrality to the narrative, I compared him to Forrest Gump. But Forrest Gump was a cipher, a character ostentatiously constructed to lack the kind of inner life that would compete with the events around him for the spectator’s interest. The character of Garrigan, by contrast, is governed by realist conventions: he seems a rather ordinary person, whose impulses and choices we’re meant to credit and evaluate as causal factors in what happens to him. We focus (I found myself focusing) on Garrigan himself, on his bad and often inexplicable choices, which is to say that I was not encouraged to take him as a stand-in for anyone or anything. The spotlight that the Scotsman’s journey might have shone on the sociopolitical conditions in postcolonial Uganda instead remains resolutely on *him*, a not-too-bright, improbably lucky (and unlucky) individual. And this narrowing of focus from postcolonial allegory to individual picaresque effectively dramatizes the central motif of multicultural counter-whiteness, collapsing politics and history into individual luck, private choices, and interpersonal relations.

If the African characters around Garrigan were more fully realized, the slip from allegory to picaresque journey might be less striking and might tell us less about the persistence of Africanist tropes than about simple missteps in the craft of filmmaking. But the film clearly revels in the idea of an innocent Garrigan being “seduced by a madman.” The viewer of this film is meant to accept (or the film declines to imagine that anyone would refuse to accept) that Amin was psychotic or, as the *Times* review goes on to say, a “flamboyantly lethal nut job.” But Amin reached the highest ranks of the British Empire’s African military. He built and maintained political alliances before and after he took control of Uganda, and he ran a country for almost a decade. If we take seriously any reasonable account of political power, especially after the work of Hannah Arendt,^[32] then Amin could not have been simply “a nut job.” More likely, as political theorist Mahmood Mamdani has shown, he was “a rational actor – a fascist, rather than a buffoon or a gorilla.”^[33]

The inability to credit Amin’s rationality is an instance of a broader problem, one that leads us also to think of Hitler as a monster rather than as a political actor in the grip of particular ideologies and armed with particular techniques for political domination. Discussing our reasons for extruding Hitler from the ranks of humanity would exceed the scope of this essay, but North Atlantic culture’s imperviousness to the banal humanity of evil is easy enough to explain when the evildoers are black and African. With figures like Amin, the trope of savagery comes in and, as Fanon says in a related context, reason walks out.^[34] So instead of constructing a complex portrait of Amin the fascist, of a brutal political actor driven by specific personal and political motives (some of which, yes, may have warranted some psychological intervention), the film reproduces the same irrational, inscrutable, black tyrant that Paul Robeson played in “The Emperor Jones” and that Denzel Washington played in “Training Day.”^[35]

6. Conclusion

As with much else I've said here, my reading of "The Last King of Scotland" is not and could not be dispositive. I have passed too quickly over the details of the film, of its words and images, to aspire to an authoritative interpretation. My aim has been to indicate the contours of a narrative tradition and to suggest a way of extending it in the direction of recent historical films about Africans on the continent and in the diaspora.

The tradition I have in mind is Africanist, in Morrison's sense, and uses familiar myths about black people to address white psychocultural needs. One of the more pressing needs in the current post-colonial, post-supremacist context is for an ethical and responsible way for whites to disaffiliate from white supremacy. This preoccupation has produced narratives of redemption through miscegenation and of interracial and homosocial male "marriages," and it has employed devices like the black cupid and the dark mentor. I have suggested that Africanism and the pressures of disaffiliation produce historical fiction films in which white protagonists "gentrify" historical terrain that they find morally troubling. These characters take over and occupy stories that in some sense belong to other people, in the process displacing the other inhabitants of the fiction world and obscuring the real relationships between the whiteness they mean to recuperate and the history they mean to invade.

I should close with a word about why the sort of thing I've undertaken here is important, if it is. There are some obvious points to make in this regard, points about the importance of ideology critique in societies that have replaced domination with hegemony, or about the importance of cultural literacy – or "picturacy," we might say^[36] – in a world as image-saturated and myth-driven as the world that we have made. These are important things to say, despite their obviousness, especially when it comes to ideas about human types, like race and gender. A great deal of modern history has been driven by dominant ideas about different kinds of people and about what these different human kinds deserve. And a great many of those ideas have been hashed out and turned into "common sense" in the forums of popular culture, from colonial-era exhibitions and natural history museums to films like Griffiths' "Birth of a Nation" and Frank Miller's "300." It will pay us to learn to "read" these ideas, to sensitize ourselves to the habits they inspire in their less harmful forms, so that we can be on guard against them when they try to insert themselves into public policy and public action.

These are important things to say, but many other people have said them and said them more effectively and eloquently than I ever could. I want to supplement these thoughts with some gestures at what it means to take this call for cultural criticism seriously, and to answer it from the vantage point of philosophy.

One philosophical response to the call for cultural criticism and ideology critique connects these practices to aesthetics and to the sciences of cognition. What I have in mind here is the fact that ideologies, discourses, and cultural myths do their work as effectively as they do because the "knowledge" they contain becomes habitual and reflexive, the subject matter of

immediate, pre-reflective experience. In this form it leads psychoanalysts to talk about the unconscious and subconscious, it leads activists of various sorts to talk about consciousness-raising, it led John Dewey to talk about aesthetic experience, and it leads cognitive scientists to study the phenomenon that popular author Malcolm Gladwell calls "rapid cognition."[\[37\]](#)

There are two simple ideas behind all of these approaches. The first is that our ideas, beliefs, capacities, and convictions can train our powers of perception in ways that enable, or condemn, us quite literally to *perceive* quite complicated, conceptually loaded, phenomena. The second is that this cognitively funded perception then recruits into its operations the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction that some thinkers have associated with the experience of formal beauty. With the right background and technical training we can see, immediately and without conscious deliberation, and often without being able to explain the grounds of our judgment, whether a hatchling is male or female, or whether a statue is a genuine antique or an elaborate forgery. Similarly, a certain cultural training prepares us to see, and to see immediately and viscerally, that black male bodies are dangerous or that scantily clad female bodies are flirting or sexually available. The second, cultural training is much easier to come by than the first, more technical form, and it is much more likely to produce erroneous judgments that nevertheless have the feel of truth.

As it happens, one of the principal training sites for this rapid cultural cognition is also a promising site for retraining. Expressive practices like painting, literature, and film can mobilize, exploit, and reinforce these loaded perceptions. This is the point behind Dewey's favorite examples – the paraphernalia of nationalism, like flags and anthems, and the objects of ritual observance, all of which work in the general run of cases by tugging directly at our emotions, without the intervention of conscious reflection on what these things mean.[\[38\]](#) But art can also highlight these funded perceptions for us and help us examine and evaluate them. By stressing the chain of associations that typically attends racialized bodies in U.S. visual culture, a work of art can lift these associations from the domain of common sense and make us interrogate our perceptions, commitments, and convictions. This is the idea behind my earlier remark that aesthetic criticism is or ought to be an essential part of critical race theory.

The idea that aesthetic experience can help retrain our rapid cultural cognitions points toward a second philosophical response to the call for cultural criticism and ideology critique. Here we turn from aesthetics to a kind of perfectionist self-criticism. The perfectionism I have in mind is a mode of ethical practice that combines the emphasis on character and habit-formation that emerges from certain forms of virtue theory with the emphasis on self-care in relation to dominant or hegemonic meanings that we find in theorists from Emerson and Nietzsche to Foucault and Bordo.[\[39\]](#) The burden of this form of ethical practice is to insist on asking *what kind of person am I becoming?* and to take responsibility for the way the process of becoming manifests the cultural meanings that flow through and around each of us. This is the ethical core of

the practice of cultural criticism and my principal motivation for taking otherwise unsatisfying films seriously.

A final philosophic response to the call for cultural criticism deepens the idea of taking bad films seriously. This response points toward the literature on art and ethics, and recommends a version of the clarificationist or cultivationist approach to narrative and moral education. On this approach, the ethical value of art lies in two places: its ability to hone certain ethical skills and powers, like discernment, empathy, and imagination; and the opportunities it gives us to refine and exercise our understanding of ethical concepts and principles by applying and developing the ethical concepts we already possess.^[40]

Films like "The Last King of Scotland" interest me principally as test cases for a kind of *therapeutic* clarificationism. This is not the therapeutic engagement mentioned much earlier, which refuses political categories and analysis in favor of psychological remedies and introspection. This is a perfectionist project in the spirit mentioned above, one that insists on the important role that expressive practices can play in the genealogical phases of cultural criticism. Where clarificationism depicts expressive objects as resources for clarifying our standing ethical commitments, specifically therapeutic clarificationism focuses on ethically problematic works, and insists that the work of clarification can go beyond the concepts and skills we already possess. Bad or flawed films can encourage us to identify and root out the *bad* habits, the damaging principles and misguided concepts, that our imperfect cultures have cultivated in us. Films like these can give us the experience not just of applying the ethical skills we wish to develop and principles we wish to understand. They can also provide occasions for the habitual, reflexive application of *unethical* skills and principles, and for the psycho-existential dissonance that attends the second order criticism of one's first-order responses. These films invite us to marginalize or fear members of some groups but not other or to dismiss one character's testimony while accepting others. They give us the cultural cues to trigger these responses: the marginal or frightening character has a certain accent or brown skin; the unreliable one is female, and feminine, or has blonde hair. But they do all this in a post-supremacist culture that explicitly and routinely encourages us, however unevenly and superficially, *not* to treat people in just these ways. And here, at the jarring intersection of our responses and our convictions, at the tense juxtaposition of aesthesis, moral judgment, and cognitively loaded perception, the work of ethical perfectionism can begin.

Paul C. Taylor, Temple University

ptaylor@temple.edu

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Endnotes

[1] From Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), p. 82.

Cited in Donald E. Pease, "Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke:

The Nonsymbolizable (Trans)Action," *boundary 2* (special issue: "Ralph Ellison: The Next Fifty Years"), Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 65-96, 82.

[2] Ed Zwick, Warner Bros. 2003.

[3] "The Chappelle Show," Season 2, episode 7; episode 21 overall (production code episode #207), First aired: 3/3/2004, Comedy Central Television.
www.tv.com/chappelleshow/show/15677/episode_guide.html?season=2&tag=season_dropdown;dropdown:1.

[4] In referring to the modern concept of race, I mean the entwined approaches to human biological diversity and social differentiation that began to develop in early modern Europe, in or around the fifteenth century, and that developed into the familiar color-coded scheme of four or five globe-spanning racial populations. This concept is distinct from earlier approaches to human difference, and from approaches developed outside the orbit of European modernity. Some of these might count as forms of race-thinking, by virtue of their determination to assign deeper meaning to superficial facts of human appearance and ancestry; but they are not recognizably *modern* race concepts. It should go without saying that I use terms like 'modern' here as placeholders for a particular social formation or cluster of social conditions, not as honorific euphemisms for 'advanced' or 'civilized.' See Paul C. Taylor, *Race : A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).

[5] Stuart Klawans, "Boys (and Girls) of Summer," *Nation* 7/30/2007, Vol. 285 Issue 4, pp. 42-44.

[6] Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen* (Cape Town, SA: Double Storey Books, 2007), citing Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (Dec., 1988), pp. 1173-1185.

[7] Historiophoty is what Hayden White calls "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse." It is a companion enterprise to historiography, which does the same work in writing. See Bickford-Smith and Mendelsohn, citing Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (Dec., 1988), pp. 1193-1199, 1193.

[8] Bickford-Smith and Mendelsohn.

[9] Edward Said, "The Scope of Orientalism," in Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, eds., *The Edward Said Reader* (1978; New York: Vintage-Random House, 2000) pp. 93-113, 93.

[10] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

[11] As Morrison puts it, the uptake and invention of New World Africans in U.S. literature "provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (p. 7). And it does this while observing the "codes and

restriction" that have for so long ruled out a sincere, serious, and explicit engagement with racial oppression (p. 6).

[12] Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "Feeling in the Dark: Empathy, Whiteness, and Miscege-nation in *Monster's Ball*," *Hypatia* vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 122-42, ref. on 126.

[13] Morrison, *Playing* pp. 52-3.

[14] Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 115-150, ref. on 119.

[15] Linda Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Border Crossings: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part 2) (Summer, 1998), 6-26.

[16] Rowe p. 124.

[17] Rowe p. 127; Katherine Sugg, "Multicultural Masculinities and the Border Romance in John Sayles's *Lone Star* and Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 1, Number 3, Winter 2001, pp. 117-154. I say that "Far From Heaven" is superior because it does its ideological work self-consciously, because it calls attention to this work with the techniques of melodrama, and because it nevertheless suggests that this kind of redemption is unavailable. The white heroine and black hero do not end up together, never consummate their mutual affection, and end the film going, literally and existentially, in different directions.

[18] Robert Gooding-Williams, "Black Cupids, White Desires," in *Look! A Negro!* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 17-34.

[19] Heather Hicks, "Suits vs. Skins: Immigration and Race in *Men in Black*," *Arizona Quarterly* Volume 63, Number 2, (Summer 2007) 109-36, 134 fn. 6, citing Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*; Victoria Elmwood, "'Just Some Bum From the Neighborhood': The Resolution of Post-Civil Rights Tension and Heavyweight Public Sphere Discourse in *Rocky*," *Film & History*, Volume 35.2 (2005), pp. 49-59, 57; Laura Doyle, "Review of American Anatomies," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.2 (1997) 457-459.

[20] On 'transtextuality' see Manthia Diawara's interview with Silvia Kolbowski, "Homeboy Cosmopolitan," *October*, Vol. 83 (Winter, 1998), pp. 51-70, 51-2. On whiteness as an iron cage, see Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[21] I am grateful to Charles Peterson for suggesting to me that this line of thought might illuminate Tarantino's films.

[22] On round and flat characters see E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985). For Forster, "[r]ound characters are capable of surprising in a convincing way, while flat characters can be summed up in a single sentence." James Phelan, "Narrative," *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* Ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz. Vol. 4. Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005. pp. 1569-1572, ref. on 1569.

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- [24] William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1997); Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- [25] On sociogenesis, see Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) pp. 38, 103.
- [26] "Mississippi Burning," Alan Parker (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1988).
- [27] "Cry Freedom," Richard Attenborough (Universal City Studios, Inc., 1987).
- [28] "The Scarlet Letter," Roland Joffé (Hollywood Pictures, 1995).
- [29] Kevin MacDonald (DNA Films, 2006).
- [30] Manohla Dargis, "An Innocent Abroad – Seduced By a Madman," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2006, movies.nytimes.com/2006/09/27/movies/27king.html accessed August 30, 2008.
- [31] "Forrest Gump" (Robert Zemeckis, Paramount Pictures, 1994).
- [32] See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970).
- [33] Michael C. Vazquez, "Hearts in Exile: A conversation with Moses Isegawa and Mahmood Mamdani," *Transition* 10.2 (2001) 126-150, 128; citing Mahmood Mamdani's *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983). I am grateful to Kathleen O'Mara for affirming the validity of this line of analysis for me.
- [34] Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1952).
- [35] "Training Day," Antoine Fuqua (Warner Bros., 2001); "The Emperor Jones," Dudley Murphy (John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran, Inc., 1933).
- [36] James Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006).
- [37] Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).
- [38] John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (1934; New York: Capricorn, 1958) ref. on p. 31.

[39] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays: First series* (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1890); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell Pearson, ed., Carol Diethe, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[40] Noel Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics*, Vol. 110, No. 2, (Jan., 2000), pp. 350-387, 367; Noel Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60:1 (Winter 2002) 3-26; Martha Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 82, No. 10, (Oct., 1985), 516-529.