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THE LIBERAL MESSAGE FILMS OF THE LATE 1940s AND THE POSITION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS

In 1949 a group of liberal message films appeared on American screens. The films *Home of the Brave* (d. Mark Robson and p. Stanley Kramer), *Lost Boundaries* (Alfred L. Werker), *No Way Out* (Joseph Mankiewicz), *Intruder in the Dust* (Clarence Brown) and *Pinky* (d. Elia Kazan, p. Darryl Zanuck) addressed the issue of racial prejudice in the United States. These politically groundbreaking features functioned as confessionals: liberal America was trying to come to terms with its bad conscience due to its long record of discrimination and abuse of the African American minority. The fact that the group of features appeared at approximately the same time suggests that the public – or at least its liberal part – was ready for such an unpleasant confrontation. In this article I will briefly comment on the economic, social, political, and cultural context of the day and relate it to two important features of the group, *Intruder in the Dust* and *Pinky*. The latter film will be taken as representative for the whole cycle. Its analysis will reveal the achievements – as well as limitations – of the liberal message film formula.

I

Post war economic development had a profound impact on the life of both mainstream and minority Americans. The turn of the forties and fifties was a period of increasing mechanization and bureaucratization. For the first time in history the number of American white-collar staff outnumbered blue-collar workers. The farming population was decreasing dramatically while the number of people employed in part-time jobs in services was on the rise. As the United States experienced another wave of black migration to the city, it was particularly the service sector that was absorbing the influx of former agricultural laborers. The GI Bill represented an unprecedented opportunity for many returned African American soldiers: access to university education and federal housing programs meant a rare chance to break away from the vicious circle of poverty and lacking qualification.

American liberals were to a great deal sympathetic to African American aspirations. They were well aware of the fact that the wealth generated by the post war economic boom was not quite evenly shared; they knew that the American landscape was dotted with what the terminology of the day called “pockets of

poverty". The solution to the problems these places represented, it was believed, rested in a variety of government programs and interventions: at a time when the gross national product grew steadily year after year it was possible to hope that with careful planning one could substantially improve the life of the traditionally underprivileged groups. Yet, while thousands of African-Americans and other minorities were moving to the city, the white middle-class was leaving them for the newly developing suburban areas. Many "pockets of poverty" started to be identical with the urban centers. Their inhabitants would most typically be people of color.

Parallel to these economic and demographic developments came some notable decisions of the Truman administration. In a true liberal fashion Truman began the desegregation of the armed forces and he ordered the abolishment of discriminatory practices in hiring government employees. Also, "he allowed the Justice Department to become actively involved in court battles against discriminatory statutes" (Brinkley 766). Such attitudes and acts were also prompted by the altered international situation after the war. In 1948 the popular liberal politician Hubert Humphrey, echoing the original Puritan notion of America as the global role model and leader, proudly proclaimed: "Our land is now, more than ever before, the last best hope on Earth." He went on to say, however, that "the American demands for democratic practice in other lands [would] be no more effective than the guarantee of those practices in [their] own country" (Gitlin 62). Just as the global rivalry with communism helped in introducing the basic elements of the welfare state, the post-war collapse of the colonial systems had an impact on the perception and legislative approaches to the domestic racial situation: American support in liberating colonies was hardly compatible with institutional repression of minorities at home.

The post-war political elites were less successful in solving the problem of the low economic standing of African Americans and other minorities, than in the area of desegregation legislation. The landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* that was passed in 1954 can be seen as the result of a combination of three forces: efforts on the part of the *NAACP* and other reform activists, the international political situation after the war, and the liberal composition of the Supreme Court.

II

The necessity of tackling the domestic racial situation became, thanks to the impact of both domestic and international developments, an integral part of the post-war consensus of the dominant political forces. The problem was also recognized by the filmmakers of the day. Hollywood, always quick to react to shifts in the social and political climate and the changing demands of the viewing public, responded by offering the so-called "message movie" (Cripps). These films, usually centering on a lone minority protagonist, reminded the viewers of a social problem – in this particular instance American racism – and also suggested a solution, typically of a highly individual nature. (Other favorite post-war problems were for

instance anti-Semitism, corruption, poverty and alcoholism. At the same time the dark side of the American reality was probed by various films noirs.)

Hollywood's turning to the somewhat less photogenic realms of reality had a variety of other causes. The rise of this type of film can be attributed to a number of other demographic, industrial, legislative and technological developments. The studios reacted, among other things, to the success of European films, such as *The Bicycle Thieves* or *Rome, open city*, whose sense of authenticity was much more in tune with the bleak post-war atmosphere when much of global civilization lay in ruins. The world after the Holocaust and Hiroshima (including the victorious United States) seemed to have changed radically and it was hardly possible to capture its nature by means of the established formulas of the traditional Hollywood genres. The more thoughtful segment of the cinema-going public thus regarded the conventions of a musical or a western as somewhat dated, if not downright irrelevant (Cook 400). Another important factor was the abolishing of the vertical integration of industrial production that gradually led to a better marketing, distribution and exhibition of foreign and independent productions. These films were frequently more socially relevant, tough and provocative. It was this competition that prompted a response on the part of the big Hollywood studio players. Perhaps the most important cause of all, however, was the massive spread of television. The presence of a TV set in every household had a dramatic impact on the cinema-going practices that had lasted for more than a generation. The cinema-going public was shrinking and the audience as a whole was growing younger. Such trends had to be resisted by offering the viewers experiences which the family-oriented, lowest common denominator; small-screen, black and white medium of TV was unable to provide. Thus Hollywood reacted either by offering its audiences various extraordinary spectacles, such as large-screen epics shot in color – and even some attempts at three-dimensional projections – or by addressing more provocative themes – that television in its effort not to antagonize anybody – avoided. The attempt on the part of the film industry to please the dwindling number of viewers, combined with the demographic trends of the day (such as the middle class move to the suburbs) also led to the fragmentation of the previously homogeneous cinema market: some films were successful in suburbia, others in the cities, etc. Paradoxically, the shrinking pool of viewers was offered a significantly wider array of genres, styles and themes. It was in the context of this fragmented terrain that the liberal message movie found its place (Cook).

III

The scene was no longer a submarine, a platoon or a lifeboat – as in the preceding cycle of war movies about units or crews with a token black character – but a small town, hospital or another kind of relatively closed community. The plots were often centered on exemplary black heroes (or heroines) whose qualities were undeniable and therefore the only reason for his/her plight was his/her ra-

cial identity. The adversary was typically a white racist (or a group of racists) and the main issue (in addition to unsettling representations of race injustice) rested in the moral dilemma such injustice posed for the common representatives of the mainstream population.

In the film adaptation of William Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust*, for instance, the sole black protagonist Lucas Beauchamp faces the anger of an ignorant white lynch mob that nearly burns him alive. This larger than life figure of a farmer is charged with the murder of a white man, a typical situation for the "poor white trash" to reach for their guns, ropes, gasoline and matches. However, Beauchamp gains the sympathy of several other white people who are capable of resisting the deeply ingrained and cruel Southern racism and saving his life. Initially it is only an adolescent and an old lady, i.e. both outsiders in the white mainstream, who believe in his innocence but gradually they can persuade personalities that matter more: the boy's uncle, who is a lawyer, and the local sheriff. The script focuses less on the suffering of the falsely accused prisoner, than on an analysis of the ideological mechanisms that prevented the thoroughly rational and just uncle from understanding the truth about Beauchamp's innocence. At one point the uncle describes himself as a "man of facts". The film demonstrates rather well that some "facts" can be extremely misleading.

The feature divides the majority population into two camps: on the one hand there is the mob of anonymous racists; on the other hand there are members of the "enlightened" establishment. They are capable of transcending their previous prejudice (i.e. "facts" that can be blinding) and start treating everyone equally; while so doing they are willing to take considerable risks and confront the wrath of the fanatic white majority. The existence of such characters communicates hope for a more just society in the United States in general, and in the American South in particular. They are the persons upon whose shoulders the burden rests. The saintly figure of an exemplary black hero functions as a kind of catalyst for their changing attitude. He becomes the conscience of liberal America.¹

IV

While the racial identities of the characters of *Intruder in the Dust* are presented as obvious and fixed, the first liberal A-movie about racism in America – Kazan's and Zanuck's *Pinky*, deals with the uneasy question of the "color line", the issue of passing and the responsibility of the individual not to take an easy way out. The heroine Patricia Johnson is an attractive, young African American woman with a remarkably light skin. Having graduated as a registered nurse in the North she returns to pay a visit to her granny. She returns home as someone who knows her value as a human being and as a skilled professional. (During her stay in medical school she has totally unlearned the unwritten laws of Jim Crow South and forgotten its discriminatory practices.) Upon arrival she is painfully reminded of everything that she so much resents about the South. Once her racial identity is disclosed, the attitudes of the whites toward her undergo a fun-

damental change: she is harassed by the police, attacked by vile males, discriminated against in shops and in the streets. For Pinky the message is clear: pack up and leave this inhospitable and perverse place.

Her granny complicates her seemingly easy way out. This softhearted, illiterate woman begs Pinky to stay and – being a skilled nurse – to look after Miss Em, a lonely white aristocrat on her deathbed. A lifelong bond of friendship and servitude connects granny with her. Pinky does not like this idea for she considers Miss Em a typical Southern woman who has throughout her life profited from the black people and particularly from her grandma's toil. Yet granny insists and so Pinky puts on her nurse's uniform and starts looking after the dying lady.

Initially, Pinky's assessment of Miss Em's character is confirmed. She is being treated as a servant; Miss Em is arrogant, bossy and domineering. Yet in the course of time both women start respecting each other, the viewers witness the growth of mutual understanding. Pinky abandons her previous attitudes and starts regarding her patient as a noble person with a strong character. Her domineering tendencies are transformed into decisiveness, into the capability to stand for what she regards right, to fight for the principles she believes in. Miss Em, in turn, appreciates the nurse's intelligence, taste, self-confidence and competence. When she dies, she bequeaths both her house and the surrounding property to Pinky. In her will she explicitly states that Pinky should use the property for a good purpose.

In the backward Southern community such an unorthodox act has no small explosive potential. The greedy relatives immediately contest the validity of the will and representatives of both sides try to persuade Pinky not to fight in court. The local blacks fear reprisals, even the more sympathetic whites are afraid of the resentment of the racist white majority. At that moment Pinky is joined by her fiancé Dr. Thomas Adams. Adams, who is a white Northerner, is surprised to find out about her racial identity. But throughout the trial he remains loyal to the heroine.

The moment of the trial is at the same time the moment of truth about the moral quality of several important characters. Pinky faces a slimy attorney, a group of lying, unscrupulous relatives, and a whole room of angry racists. This hostile climate is obviously quite difficult to bear and even the sole witness to the validity of the will, Miss Em's physician Dr. McGill, declines to testify. Pinky enlists the support of the retired judge Walker, a person of integrity. The fact that he is several notches above everyone else is signified by his dress: while everybody else is dressed in shirts and tries to beat the sultry heat of the Southern summer with fans, he keeps on both his jacket and his tie. The other white man who keeps his jacket on is the judge who finally declares the will valid. When the sentence is passed, Judge Walker skeptically summarizes the situation: "You have gained your property and you have gained justice. I doubt, however, that this will help anybody in the community."

Then the viewers find out more about Pinky's fiancé's plans. He asks her to sell the property and leave for Denver, where they would get married. Why Denver? Because there her racial identity could be kept secret and the couple could easily merge with the white population. The heroine realizes that by accepting this offer she would betray the meaning of Miss Em's will. The purpose

of Ms. Em's gift was for Pinky to use the property to promote general good at the place where it is needed most: in the heart of the racist, backward South. (Finally it becomes clear why during the trial the fiancé took off his jacket as well.)

The final shots of the film show Pinky in a schoolmistress's uniform. She is running Miss Em's private clinic and nurses' school. In the halls of the mansion and bustling with activity, future black nurses are everywhere. On the face of the heroine there is a happy smile. She has found herself. She knows where her place is. And she is trying to change the world.

V

The African American characters in this drama can be roughly grouped into two uneven categories. On the one hand there are persons who represent loyalty to the Jim Crow status quo. They are lacking the necessary education and imagination, intellectual skills that might allow them to move beyond the deeply ingrained tradition of segregation and institutional harassment. They are unable to formulate a vision of a better and more just America, just as they are incapable of resisting the white domination. They do not strive for a more equal position for the black minority. They are characters that embody the past. For instance granny corresponds to the traditional stereotype of a black "mammy" who is ready to serve others even if it means her own self-destruction. She squirrels away every quarter to allow for her granddaughter to leave for studies, she manifests the same boundless devotion when looking after Miss Em. It is suggested that it was the combination of lacking education and willingness to self-sacrifice on the part of people like granny upon which the Southern society rested between the period of Reconstruction and the current historical moment. It is necessary to add, however, that it was not only the white majority that profited from their labor. Pinky could go North and study only thanks to her grandma's sacrifice. Thus, we are told, even the loyal generation of servants and manual laborers, who knew their place and never attempted to call it into question, contributed to the rise of the new, more self-confident and more equal African American generation.

The other black characters also correspond, by and large, to the original stereotypes. Their relative flatness, sometimes verging on traditional racial caricatures, indicates how difficult it was for the majority filmmakers – despite the best of intentions – to avoid such established clichés. Particularly the character of Jake Walters is a classic example of a lazy, irresponsible, but very smart and talkative black man. He owes granny money but is in no hurry to return it. Likewise his wife is presented as a bossy, dominant and dangerous woman: wearing a knife under her suspenders she is ready to use it when necessary (e.g. when Pinky comes to collect the money owed by Jake). Lucky the filmmakers at least created the character of the selfless Dr. Canady whose idea it is to establish the clinic. Otherwise the African American cast would be – leaving the snow-white character of Pinky aside – a truly saddening ensemble. Unfortunately Dr. Canady's role remains quite episodic.

Where the traditional accommodation to the status quo stopped, open repression stepped in. The film features a variety of daring depictions of discrimination against African Americans. The police harass them and arrest them on dubious grounds, aggressive males attack Pinky as they please, and the heroine has to put up with unequal treatment in the shops. No member of the African American community is exactly overjoyed when finding out about Pinky's court victory. They rightly sense that such triumph may backfire. The community might be further polarized and they will bear the brunt of possible white reprisals.

Should we accept the suggested rules and regard the alabaster-skinned Pinky as a true to life African American character (no easy task!); she is the sole representative of the new black generation. She is strong, competent and principled. As a person with professional skills she does not lack self-confidence (in the script her qualification as a registered nurse is stressed almost every five minutes). It was people of this kind that, in the opinion of the liberal filmmakers, represented hope for the region and for the USA as a whole. To be sure, Pinky is no revolutionary; she avoids engaging the system head on: she does not attempt to abolish segregation; neither does she aspire to lead the African American masses. Pinky works within the system (for instance she relies on the local system of justice). Instead of exulted proclamations and extreme political gestures she chooses the method of small steps to achieve her rather modest goals. She becomes a role model, an example to follow; she stands her ground and tries to change whatever is in her power. Even the utterest racists would find it hard to object to her plans to improve the local African American health care.

The caution on the part of the filmmakers in the choice of Pinky's political program was well advised. At the time when the production team was agonizing over how far one could go (trapped between demands of the more radical black consultants on the one hand and fears of a hostile reaction by stock-holders and the Southern box office on the other), the Democratic Party was being pulled apart on the right. In the summer of 1948 upon Truman's nomination at the Democratic Party convention, a number of delegates from the former confederate states walked out in protest against his desegregation policies. They formed the States' Rights Party, which came to be known as the Dixiecrat Party. Even though Truman won in the 1948 election, the attack by the Dixiecrats made many a time-tested Hollywood liberal worried. Taking this anxious context into account, one can understand that any more daring political project on Pinky's part was simply too tricky to risk: one was afraid of Southern protests, censorship, as well as Ku-Klux-Klan reprisals. Perhaps the best illustration of the atmosphere of unease concerning the project is the fact that John Ford, who was originally hired to direct the film, faked illness to avoid being entangled in the project. (Rosenbaum) (Zanuck found a replacement in Elia Kazan, who had directed a similar liberal feature *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), which attacked American anti-Semitism.)

The choices of the main heroine corresponds less to what a real-life person would opt for in her situation, than to the wishful thinking of the idealistic, well-meaning, liberal filmmakers. Only a saintly figure with the devotion of a Mother Theresa would give up a handsome, competent professional and the pursuit of

private happiness in Denver in exchange for the difficult existence in the racist, backward South. (It is significant that in the final shots of the movie Pinky's character is constructed in this manner – a uniform, celibacy and a happy look toward heaven). Although the likelihood of such choices could easily be called into question (which is quite typical in the world of Hollywood make believe), the ethical message of the movie is crystal clear: one has to know and honor one's roots. African Americans should neither attempt to migrate north, nor merge unrecognized with the majority population. They should stay where they are and by means of education and gradual reform change this monstrous and sick region. The film communicates hope that achieving this difficult goal may not be impossible. The last shots of the movie bring an overall view of the successfully operating clinic. It remains, however, an all-black institution. Despite enormous progress (i.e. the victory in court; improved health care for local blacks) this happy ending pictures a world that is still segregated.

VI

The white characters indicate the scope of radical reassessment on the part of the liberal establishment in matters of race. For the first time in American cinema the whites as a group are presented in a conspicuously unflattering light. Most characters are irredeemable racists (the police, the storeowners, the prosecution attorney, and the crowd in the courtroom), others are weak egoists (Dr. McGill, who fails to testify, and, above all, Pinky's fiancé Dr. Adams). Naturally, there are also notable exceptions that represent hope for the system. The dividing line between prejudice and discrimination on the one hand and the possibility of building a more humane society on the other hand seems to be identical with the dividing line between the white classes: the higher the class standing of the character, the more likely it is that the voice of reason and law will be heeded. Miss Em is sufficiently intelligent to rise above her a priori prejudice and discover in Pinky a competent person of integrity whose activity will be beneficial for the whole African American community. Judge Walker is principled enough to overcome his pragmatic doubt that Pinky's fight for justice will cause more harm than good to the community and starts defending her. He realizes that if in the United States law were so blatantly violated, the country could never aspire to leadership of the democratic world. The presiding judge shares this opinion and expresses it by means of his verdict. The characters of Miss Em and both judges express the conviction of the filmmakers that the American system – despite intolerance of the white lower classes in the South – is working and can be further reformed. It is only the white elite, however, that has retained enough awareness and principle to be able to put aside the irrational racist attitudes and to realize the advantages of the rule of law and a truly functioning democracy. Only an alliance of both elites – the white one creating institutional conditions from above and the black one focusing on local project from below – can guarantee the future success.

VII

The films of the liberal message movie cycle are marked by a number of apparent flaws: the unrealistic exemplariness of the black heroes, the predictability of the narrative development and its formulaic character, the presentation of racism as individual rather than an institutional problem. It is possible to say, however, that despite these valid objections the films represented valuable projects. To the minority viewers they sent a signal that the social and political climate was changing; the majority viewers were reminded that not so far away from them, perhaps ten minutes by car, there lay an explosive problem to be tackled; that the genre of their reality may not be the musical or the fairy tale, as they might have assumed, but rather a drama, or perhaps even a horror.

Note

- ¹ Representing the bad conscience of liberal America does not necessarily mean being the main character, either in the script, or in reality.

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