

Foreword

“You’ve been hoodwinked. You’ve been had. You’ve been took. You’ve been led astray, run amok. You’ve been bamboozled.”—Malcolm X

This quotation from the late Malcolm X at the beginning of Bamboozled can be traced back to a scene in Spike Lee’s previous film, “X.” This short, simple utterance of Malcolm X, played by Denzel Washington, obviously gave Bamboozled its title and also encapsulates the film’s theme: African Americans have been bamboozled in various ways (by Whites but even by other Blacks). In particular we have been confused or hoodwinked by the mass media, and thus we may even be, on another level—this is clearly part of Lee’s point—as audience members tricked, fooled or bamboozled in certain respects by this movie.

The main way in which black people in the United States are bamboozled, as Lee makes clear in both of these films, is in terms of their identity: they are confused (made to be confused) by others (Whites and other Blacks) about who they truly are. One of the prime sources of this confusion is, again, the media, which presents various stereotypes of today’s African-Americans, including the stereotypical gang member or criminal, stereotypical successful athlete, stereotypical “cool” rap singer. But of course most ordinary American blacks cannot easily fit any of these stereotypes, and this is one of the significant ways in which they have been “bamboozled” by the media, more specifically by movies and TV: the latter medium, which gives us many pictures of blacks in its films, music and sports programs and on the evening news, is specifically targeted for ridicule in the film Bamboozled.

Here the more general problem is that no one knows how much of what one sees in movies or on TV is really “true”; even the news on reliable (U.S.-based) news channels like CNN may be to a certain, fairly subtle degree U.S.-government-oriented propaganda or “ideology.” A more specific case of this, then, is that of African American viewers of TV

and movies, and readers of print media, who may also not be able to fully judge which of the “images” of blacks they encounter here—images which are themselves generated by a certain American socio-cultural “ideology”—are more realistic and which are not. In a sense, these black viewers (and readers) do not know what to “believe about themselves” since essentially they still do not know “who they are”—an old problem dating back to the days of slavery in the American South. Though the segregation of black and white people in the United States gave way to Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and although the goal of black-white equality in the U.S.A. may seem to have been largely achieved by the 1990s (the decade when Lee made X and Bamboozled), no one seriously doubts that, at least to a substantial degree, white supremacy still dominates in the mainstream American society in terms of education, job-status and (at least until Obama came along) political power.

If we speak of “popular” American culture then the issue becomes more complex. Obviously traditional “highbrow” U.S. culture was largely grounded in British and European, all-White culture, yet if we speak of “pop culture” then, beginning from some point in the late 20th century, Blacks began to have, arguably, the upper hand. Now even young Whites may tend to prefer rap and hip-hop to Mozart or even (if they are liberal, big-city Whites) to White country music, just as liberal-minded young Whites will greatly admire successful Black athletes and movie stars (and presidential candidates). But this White admiration of Blacks, especially in certain fields—which did not until recently include politics and still may not include corporate business, except in pop-culture-related fields like the music business—is part of that largely media-driven White (and Black) stereotyping of Blacks which also exaggerates and distorts, that stereotyping which—as Lee reminds us in the film—confuses contemporary American Blacks regarding their own socio-cultural-racial identities, “hoodwinks” and “bamboozles” them. One of the key ways in which it does this is by making them think they are in fact White (since other Whites now admire them so much), or

rather “too White” (since they are really black . . . or are they?); this is an ironic contrast with the older problem, one going back to Slavery times but still obviously persisting to a degree, of being “too black.”

In Taiwan, if we don't count the aboriginal tribes and foreigners, two groups which together still form a rather small minority within the total population, everyone is “Chinese” of one sort or another. And yet there still remains some of the old tension between Mainlanders and native Taiwanese, between those who were “here first” and the latecomers. We see this, for example, in the DPP / KMT split, exacerbated by those politicians and commentators on TV who make us feel that two people do not share the same political stand can hardly coexist. Also, there is still some prejudice against Hakkas, as well as against aboriginals and some foreigners—against Japanese (for historical and political reasons), Africans (and African Americans) and Middle Easterners more than against Whites. Thus, even though the Taiwanese people have considerably less racial complexity than the United States, conflicts between ethnic groups still exist on this small island, which is reinforced as in every country by the mass media.

Therefore it is rather difficult for Taiwanese to imagine the complexity of an extremely multicultural society like the U.S.A. The variety of different races and ethnic groups means different sets of values and cultural backgrounds that must inevitably clash against each other, while everyone must still adhere to certain common “American” values and beliefs. In spite of widespread discrimination—with the Whites traditionally on top, i.e. in a position of power from which they may feel free to discriminate against everyone else—and negative stereotypes of the “others” on the part of each group, everyone must more or less co-exist, live together (as in Taiwan) in a relative degree of harmony.

The presence of ethnic and racial prejudice everywhere in the world is an important reason why I have chosen the film Bamboozled as the text of my dissertation. I have long

been interested in African American culture (including hip hop music) in general, and this film deals with the complexity and “problem” of this particular minority culture with great subtlety, depth, and compassion. Yet ethnic and racial prejudice is a universal human problem, and it is only through acquiring a full understanding of this problem that we could ever hope to really overcome it. Spike Lee’s Bamboozled is a very serious film, once which leaves viewers with a heavy heart. It forces us to contemplate the problem of racism in America, more specifically the problem of Black Americans’ identity confusion and the role of the U.S. mass media in creating or at least substantially contributing to this confusion. By extension it also forces us to contemplate the potential power of the media in our own country, in Taiwan, to spread a particular form of ideology, to sway us toward particular (stereotypical) ways of thinking—in politics as in commercial advertising—and perhaps to paralyze our minds.



Chapter One: Introduction

I. Media Literacy

In order to prevent the media (in whatever country, society, culture) from controlling us as passive and receptive “audience members,” it is necessary that we have a basic understanding of how the media operate. The film Bamboozled also helps us to think about and perhaps understand the ideological functioning, the stereotyping or even propagandizing role of the mass media. However, the better we understand the power of the media in the first place then the more we can appreciate Bamboozled.

According to W. James Potter in the first chapter (“Why Increase Media Literacy?”) of his book Media Literacy, the mass media are everywhere in our daily lives, constantly trying to attract our attention, and our culture contains a huge amount of information, of messages coming directly from the media. Thus in order to “survive” we must constantly decide which incoming messages to ignore, that is, which information to eliminate before it even enters our minds because we know (or think) it will be useless:

To keep ourselves in the information-saturated culture, we program our minds to filter out almost all messages automatically. Psychologists refer to this automatic processing of information as *automaticity*. Automaticity is a state where our minds operate without any conscious effort from us. Thus, we can perform even complicated tasks routinely without even thinking about them. . . . Although automaticity is a very efficient state for filtering *out* almost all media messages, there are times when we want to filter *in* a message; that is, we want to pay attention to it rather than ignore it. So the state of automaticity has “triggers” programmed into it so that when a particular kind of message is in the environment, our attention is triggered. (5-6)

Thus we tend to automatically filter out what we think we don't want while letting in what we think we do (or will) want: advertisements for a particular car or movie that we are interested in, for instance, or news about a particular political figure or movie star—one whom we may either like or dislike but in whom we are very “interested.” This automaticity suggests that we are in total control of which signals—to use the information-theory term—or which messages get into our heads and which do not, but of course in fact this is not completely true: we inevitably “pick up” information that we did not necessarily need or desire to have. This is roughly the same principle at work in individual advertisements with their “subliminal” messages: I may happen to be watching, for some reason, an ad for a product that I am not (or never thought I was) particularly interested in, yet some virtually “hidden” message within the advertisement catches my interest on the unconscious level, perhaps even enough to make me ultimately buy that product one day in a store in a seemingly random act or choice.

In something like this way, we inevitably pick up ideas, feelings or other kinds of impulses from the constant barrage of media messages we are forcibly exposed to every day. For even if most of the time we are not actually trying to listen to the car radio while driving to work, or to the TV in an adjoining room or office, to give but two examples, we inevitably pick up certain “subliminal” messages, pick up certain ideas or feelings on a subliminal or unconscious level. In this insidious way the mass media are also constantly reprogramming our own “triggers,” programming our tendency to want to pay attention to certain kinds of signals, messages, information. Thus we inevitably become the virtual slaves of today's omnipresent media to some degree. As Potter puts it, “we lose the opportunity to construct meaning for ourselves and achieve goals that are truly our own.” (7)

In other words, even though the state of automaticity allows us to avoid being “overloaded,” this state also has hidden traps, because to the “triggers” that we ourselves

initially wanted—since after all everyone is interested in receiving certain kinds of information—will inevitably be added triggers that we had not (at least consciously) desired to have. Automaticity may be dangerous in another way as well, inasmuch as it means we will be mindlessly ignoring, that is, rejecting more than a few items of information that in fact we might have really needed to know—even if we didn't think we “wanted” to know them and thus had developed no “triggers” for them.

Potter illustrated four types of traps built into the state of automaticity. The first trap is that of “Information Fatigue” (7), which means that when one is dealing with an overload of messages from the media, his or her mental state will easily “switch” into the automaticity mode. As a result, one will be trapped within the same limited cycle of information since the rest of the possible messages are already eliminated automatically: thus one can simply miss some potentially important messages, and it is crucial that one get “out of” this trap in order to “receive” potentially important and helpful messages which are easily neglected.

The second trap, according to Potter, is that of the “False Feeling of Being Informed” (8). Most of the time, people believe that they are being informed when in fact they are not. This is because in automaticity-mode the variety and type of information we do receive is limited within a very constricted range. Thus with mass media the information we actually get is seldom enough for us to truly understand an issue, to understand its full background and implications. Yet one may have the false sense he or she has become aware of what is really happening in the world from merely watching the news or reading a newspaper for a short period of time, while in fact the kind of information we get from both of these media—which largely overlap—is very superficial and limited.

The third trap in the state of automaticity is a “False Sense of Control” (8). With the continual advance of technology, new media such as the cinema, television and the internet provide many more choices for people to select from in comparison to the old days when we

were limited to the print media—books, magazines and newspapers. This great increase in the number of choices or possibilities gives people the false sense that they have the power to decide between many alternatives. However, beyond the fact that we still dwell in the automaticity mode with regard to all of these forms of media, the non-print media limit us in many ways: for example, by means of the commercial breaks in radio and TV broadcasting and the random pop-up advertisements on internet web pages. True, we are also restricted in some respects by ads in magazines and newspapers, but with radio, TV, and the internet the intensity of these interruptions has increased along with our illusion of now having enhanced power or control. People who are in the state of automaticity are numbed, insensitive to these interruptions or restrictions, and their false sense of control reinforces the media's strategy of keeping us in this state.

The fourth automaticity-state trap which Potter mentions is that of “Faulty Beliefs” (10). People are constantly living in a condition of automatic exposure to the mass media in our society, and unconsciously they may often accept faulty or incorrect beliefs, facts, ideas provided by these media. Even if one is able to form his or her own attitudes and beliefs, it is still difficult to escape from the influence of the wide range of information with which one is daily bombarded, much of which is only partly true—if only because there is no depth of analysis or explanation behind it—and some of which is completely false. As a result, people may adopt the false beliefs or unclear ideas given them by the media, or construct their own false beliefs based on a too-limited amount of data (or on too-superficial ideas). Yet they will still believe that their beliefs and ideas must be right, and these become deeply-rooted in their minds and cannot easily be changed.

To gain media literacy, really means to become aware of these traps so that we can try to escape or overcome them. Only in this way can we develop our own critical perspective on the information we receive from the mass media, develop an ability to analyze this

information—separating out what is likely to be true and important and useful from what is not—in order to avoid being dominated by the media. For that the media are not so “innocent” as we may have been led to believe. They are not merely a neutral “collective” disseminating messages to everyone; rather, they subliminally influence us and control us through the strategies and traps described above. We must really learn to become the masters rather than the slaves of mass media which, especially in their more recent electronic form, will otherwise all too easily make us their slaves.

From this perspective it is interesting to note that, in order to have a written version of the film Bamboozled so that I could more easily discuss it in my thesis, I used not a traditional printed text of the screen play or book, but rather an electronic form of the screenplay which I got from the internet. (This was of course much more readily available than a printed screenplay, which was not so easy to find.) Thus again we see the power of the electronic media today, and more specifically the “power of the internet.” But the more significant point is that Lee’s movie itself concerns the day-to-day operations of a TV network in the U.S.A., and the film contains, not a “film within the film” but a “live TV show within the film.” While one might approach this theme in terms of postmodernist fiction and film techniques, more precisely the technique of *mise-en-abyme* (“putting into the abyss,” the “tale within the tale”), in this thesis I will approach it from a more socio-political and ideological perspective, one which focuses on the “ideological” role of mass media in general, and more specifically on the power of mass media to form or confuse the sense of self-identity of an individual or racial or ethnic group—in this case African Americans.

Clearly the media reinforce racial stereotypes, and this is a central theme of Lee’s Bamboozled. Through a kind of satirical technique, Spike Lee tried to show that both racism and “reverse racism”—giving too *much* respect or cultural capital (Bourdieu) to Blacks—persist in our society, and that due to this situation African Americans are confused

about their own self-*image* or self-identity. The goal of my thesis is to analyze Lee's characters and how they interact in the film, focusing on how their identities shift, flow, and maintain themselves through the various events. Though fictional, the movie is a reflection of how Lee feels about the present state of Black-White relations in American society. All of the conversations leave traces of the clashes between and among different perspectives, and show in one way or another how the characters (both Black and White) perceive the "image" of both blackness and whiteness. In the end some of the main characters are "destroyed," again in different ways, by the power of the media.

II. Hip Hop Culture

The phenomenon of hip hop culture shows us that blackness is an issue, a medium, a form of cultural capital for African Americans but for all races and ethnicities in the world, since this originally (mainly) African and Latino-American music has become global and multicultural. Hip hop was born in the Bronx in New York City in the early 1970s, more or less invented by the Blacks and Latinos. As this subculture started to grow beyond the boundaries of the inner city, it spread out through its unique music and dance and caught the media's attention. With the help of the mass media, this energetic form of musical expression of a specifically American subculture became multicultural beginning from the 1980s, spreading through many urban subcultures throughout the world. With the growth of hip hop, the four elements which are considered as its main components—emceeing, deejaying, b-boying and graffiti writing—spread everywhere along with a strong image of American blacks that was created by the media.

From the perspective of the cultural mainstream, hip hop is considered a genre of popular music which combines rap with heavy rhythms, but the various cultures which have adopted it have also adapted these techniques in certain ways into their own musical

traditions. For beyond its heavy beats and rhyming words hip hop became a cultural trend that included not just the music and the dance moves but also the associated fashions. As a vehicle conveying the American Black hyper-masculine “street thug” image to the world, hip hop lyrics often refer to drugs, sex, guns and violence. But in this way it also became the vehicle for an image of youthful (especially) teenage rebelliousness; it allowed the world’s youth to express their own rebellious self-image.

On the other hand, the rebellious message with its new sense of youthful purpose and identity is becoming increasingly replaced by a message of mindless, never-ending dance parties, a glorifying of the luxurious lifestyle of “bling” (flashy expensive jewelry worn conspicuously) and other high-priced material objects. And given the commercial success of the dance-party hip-hop, which itself builds on the hyper-masculine “cool” image of the earlier violent-black-youth image, the major record labels keep repeating this formula to create the next best-selling artist. This has become a vicious circle that keeps going round and round like an old LP record, yet even already self-ironizing, self-parodying, self-deflating (and in this sense “postmodern”) syndrome is readily accepted and “bought into” by the mostly youthful masses. Thus the current state of hip-hop, at least in its home country (the U.S.A.), has become a disappointment to the many early supporters of the genre, and even to its originators.

Hip-hop music is then a musical and storytelling form—with African folklore and storytelling traditions behind it as well as Caribbean musical influences—is also a form of contemporary popular entertainment which places African Americans in the spotlight and thus, especially in the USA, “involves” current African American culture and the African-American self-image in various complex and confusing ways. But the same could be said of U.S. TV shows which feature Blacks—whether in the way of the old *Cosby Show* (upper middle class suburban Black family that could as well be White) or in the way of the various

police shows and movies featuring Blacks as police detectives and/or criminals. And the same *might* have once been said of the old 19th-century Minstrel Shows in the U.S., a form of satirical, to a degree self-parodying, comic theater featuring Whites onstage performing in blackface the roles of Black slaves. Lee's film Bamboozled features a new Black-centered TV show, created by a Black TV writer and his boss, a show which will in fact be (and/or parody) an old-time Minstrel Show whose two main actors will now be African-Americans, themselves in blackface.

This last touch suggests the complexity of Lee's "play" with the problem of self-image here, the image of oneself as Other or Other as oneself. The conceit of an all-Black Minstrel Show as prime-time American TV show suggests the degree of U.S. Blacks' cultural centrality and "popularity" and also the confusions of identity and self-image that this relatively recent "role" brings with it. It also shows the degree to which today's multi-racial American society is still haunted by the ghosts of its (Southern slavery) past. In this thesis I will attempt to show how the American Black (self-)identity and (self-)image, with all of its complexities and confusions, is presupposed and also "played"—exploited, revised, rewritten and in certain respects "destroyed"—by the film Bamboozled.

III. Spike Lee's Perspective

The producer, writer, and director of the film, Spike Lee, is one of the most outstanding of contemporary African-American filmmakers. His films are known to reflect the problems black people are facing in the United States. Though at times controversial, his unique approach to these delicate issues always catches people's attention and generates debate—which means that those who see his films tend to either greatly admire or strongly dislike them, to agree or disagree with the themes and ideas presented in them.

Nevertheless, Lee's point of view has provided the White Americans a lens through

which to view the way a black man really sees the world around him. The theme, plot element or technique of the “Minstrel Show,” that multi-leveled “show within the show”—a Blacks-in-blackface-playing-Blacks live Minstrel Show within a (pre-recorded and White-produced) TV show within a (Black-directed) movie—in Bamboozled, turns out to be a highly original and effective lens. Lee speaks about his goal in making this film in an interview published in Spike Lee Interviews by the interviewer, Allison Samuels:

ALLISON SAMUELS: *Why did you make Bamboozled?*

SPIKE LEE: I wanted to do something about the black people for a long time, and the NAACP’s push last year¹ [to have more blacks represented on TV] just happened to occur at the same time. I think a lot of the white people in Hollywood are convinced that they know black people better than anyone. That’s why I have a white character say in the film to a black writer, “I know niggers better than you.”

AS: *The center of the film is a minstrel show. The characters on the ads for the film are of very degrading images of black people. Why go to such extremes?*

SL: I don’t think these things should be swept under a rug just because they are offensive. The New York Times shouldn’t not run them because they’re offensive. They’re real. And this is what the film is all about. A minstrel show could happen again. The networks will do just about anything to get ratings.

AS: *But Bamboozled isn’t just harsh on the white media. It’s tough on blacks as well.*

SL: My people have to wake up and realize what’s going on and our responsibility in it. I mean, back in the day we didn’t have a choice. Hattie

¹ The NAACP is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the year is 1999.

McDaniel and Bojangles² didn't have a choice. Nowadays we don't have to do this stuff. So anything you do is on you. (187-88)

Lee goes on to elaborate on the point that while he made the film for black people, more than a few white people in Hollywood believe that they know black people better than black people know themselves. Thus he had a white character in Bamboozled (Dunwitty, the TV executive) say to Delacroix, the black scriptwriter and creator of the new show, "I know niggers better than you." Of course, Lee really meant that this was an absurd misconception on the part of American Whites, who (even in Tinseltown) did not understand Blacks as well as they thought they did: their ignorance allowed them to overlook the fact of their own incorrigible, indelible Whiteness. Lee's observation is based on his own experience as a prominent African American movie producer and writer, who while based in New York obviously knows something about Hollywood. Lee is never shy about reflecting his own life experiences, and those of other African Americans, directly in his films: this is perhaps their best-known, most unique, most powerful quality.

And Lee believes it is not impossible that "A minstrel show could happen again. The networks will do just about anything to get ratings." This could mean that it's not inconceivable for the U.S. to return, at some point in the future, to a racist a society in which blacks as mocked and degraded by whites in blackface, as they were in the days of slavery; the thought that white-run TV networks might show this kind of "show" to get ratings is indeed shocking. But we more likely think Lee means that, to get ratings—i.e. to attract viewers and with them the money of advertisers—a white-run TV network might really produce just such a self-satirizing, self-parodying Minstrel Show performed by blacks in blackface as we see in Bamboozled. The point is that this latter kind of "show," whose actual appearance on nationwide (or even worldwide) TV might perhaps be the sign of a

² Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952) was the first black performer to win an Oscar; she won the award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Mammy in Gone with the Wind. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1878-1949) was a famous African-American tap dancing pioneer.

post-postmodernist, extremely corrupt and decadent society in decline, itself somehow “includes” the idea or possibility of the former, the historically very real minstrel show(s).

Therefore Lee stood firm when asked why he foregrounded in his film a Minstrel Show that blatantly displayed “degrading images of black people.” He said he believed that despite (or because of) their offensiveness, these degrading minstrel shows were an authentic and crucial part of the history of the United States. Therefore, he thought today’s Americans of all races need to be reminded of the original performances, of their offensiveness. On the other hand he also said: “I do feel gangsta rap has evolved to a modern day minstrel show” (195). In other words, this is a complex and two-sided (or multi-sided) issue for him. For we also cannot afford to neglect the powerful role of our contemporary mass media, which distort and exaggerate the truth, numb the minds of average American viewers, and will do anything to entertain them in order to make money. In the interview Lee said he was quite pessimistic about the role of the media and their lack of what might be called a moral conscience.

When the interviewer mentioned that Bamboozled is harsh on both the white media and black people, Lee agreed with his interpretation. Moreover, he mentioned that it is important for his people—the Black people—to become conscious of the reality and start being responsible for themselves, instead of dodging and blaming all of their problems on racism. Then Lee brought up Hattie McDaniel and Bojangles as examples, stating that in the past African American entertainers did not have the authority to decide whether they wanted to play a particular role. Hattie McDaniel established herself in the entertainment business by playing the maid and the servant in films, even though she played the role repeatedly in different films and was being criticized in the black community. Answering the criticisms from groups such as the NAACP against her, McDaniel responded by stating that she would rather play a maid and make 700 dollars a week than be one for 7 dollars.

The short and simple reply undoubtedly narrated the hardship of the black actresses and actors in her time. It was obvious that the only roles that African American entertainers could earn in the movies or TV episodes were stereotypical; however, it was either fit into the stereotypes or no chance of performing at all, which could lead to less salary, and with the lack of economical autonomy, the African-American people with disadvantage livings would never be able to break through the barrier of race.

IV. Theoretical Framework

The film Bamboozled shocked many (especially black) viewers in 2000 when it was first released. This was due primarily to the Lee's "black minstrel show," black actors in blackface parodying the old white actors in blackface, who themselves had satirized, mocked and degraded black American slaves or former slaves or their direct descendents. Thus the critical approaches used in this thesis all relate to this complex "scene"—and the issues that arise from it—in one way or another.

In Chapter 2 I will present a brief history of (white-against-black) racism in the U.S.A., with the focus on the way in which racist ideology functions. To do this I will analyze some passages from Stuart Hall and Leslie G. Carr, which have to do with: (1) the social-cultural construction of subjectivity, or more precisely the formation of the self by a particular ideology, an idea coming originally from thinkers like Foucault, Althusser and behind them Marx; (2) the ideological construction of stereotypes, especially racial ones (racial prejudices); and (3) close related to the above, the danger of that "universalizing" or "idealizing" thinking, associated especially with the Christian, Anglo-American philosophical tradition, according to which we have Jeffersonian universal ideals like "All men are created equal" which in fact only blur or obscure the real "differences" between classes and ethnic or racial groups, and which can thus ironically serve to justify the domination of a particular group or "minority"

by a hegemonic, colonizing power.

Because at the core of Bamboozled lies the blacks-in-blackface New Millennium Minstrel Show, in the last half of Chapter 2 a brief history of the American minstrel show is presented. The issues raised by the traditional show—which had whites in blackface satirizing, mocking and to a degree degrading black slaves and their descendants, and then pursued in considerably greater depth in Chapter 3 in the context of (contemporary) African-Americans’ self-image. The key problem here is that of American blacks’ identity confusion—what W.E.B. Du Bois, introduced at the opening of the more historical Chapter 2, calls the problem of “double-consciousness,” the need for the (originally enslaved) blacks to see themselves not only from their own perspective but also from (what they think is) that of their white “masters.” In Chapter 3, after a look at Guerrero’s discussion of the classic American film in 1915, The Birth of a Nation and its power to inflame the racist tendencies of white filmgoers, I again turn to Stuart Hall, this time to his analyses of the ideological power of the mass media, some of which also appeared earlier in this Introduction.

I then go into an extended exploration of Lee’s blacks-in-blackface minstrel show in *Bamboozled*, in terms of media- and high-tech-embedded postmodernist theories of self-parody and the *mise-en-abyme* (play-within-the-play) with reference to Derrida and Baudrillard, before tying the problem of true-and-false (self-)images that arises from this “postmodern” reading to the same problem (true/false self-images) as we get it from cultural and postcolonial theorists like Du Bois and Hall. The central argument of the thesis is really an interpretive one: I am interpreting the central theme of Lee’s film to be a very philosophical one: the filmmaker is inviting us to reflect on the uncertainty of our own self (or self-image) as well as the indeterminacy of our images of others; on the other hand, extremely clear, unquestioned, dogmatic images may become those universalizing stereotypes discussed in Chapter 2, which may be racial stereotypes as well as

idealist-universalizing ones (“All men are created equal”) and which, by blurring differences, tend to justify not just racism but the hegemony of powerful nations. Thus Chapter 2 brings together current theories of (postmodern) mass media, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of image and truth (going back to Nietzsche, who points out the ultimate indeterminacy of true-and- false images), and cultural and postcolonial theories of thinkers like Hall, who also discusses the “ideological” side of contemporary mass media.

Chapter Four is based more on a close “reading of the text.” Here, after pointing out that Bamboozled may be seen as an allegory, in which case the issue of (self-) image also arises in the more traditional literary context of “image,” “metaphor” and “symbol”—I look at the symbolic meanings of key characters’ names in the film. In fact such an interpretation of “images” also fits the postmodernist reading of the blacks-in-blackface- self-parodying play-within-the-play in Chapter 3. Thus the main theories I resort to here are those of Hall, Du Bois and Carr with regard to ideology, racism and the media, as well as those of Baudrillard and Derrida with regard to the postmodern indeterminacy of “truth” or essential “self” and more generally the “superficiality” of (Baudrillard) the “postmodern society.” The theoretical framework is as described above.

V. Plot Summary

The plot of the film Bamboozled focuses on the entertainment business and media, illustrating how racism and stereotypes against African Americans take place in the modern society. The main character, Pierre Delacroix works for a boorish White man, Thomas Dunwitty, who believes that he is authorized to say the word “nigger.” Delacroix cannot accept his ignorance and stupidity but is under pressure of creating a TV show with high rating. Therefore, he brings up an absurd proposal of making a “new millennium minstrel show,” which consists of all black actors in blackfaces, in order to be dismissed by the

company and to pursue his career elsewhere. With the help of his assistant Sloan, Delacroix managed to hire two homeless African-American street performers Manray and Cheeba to star as Mantan and Sleep n' Eat, as the stars of the show. However, this absurd show which was predicted to fail turned out to be embraced by Dunwitty and received great rating and brought success for the television station as well as the producer Delacroix. The success starts to confuse Delacroix. In quest for answer, he goes to visit his father who is stand-up comedian. By seeing his father, Delacroix seems to be more certain of pursuing fame and fortune over dignity.

While Delacroix starts to adjust his attitude toward the racist minstrel show he created by defending its purpose for being satirical, Sloan noticed and was afraid the situation might slowly become out of control. Sloan's younger brother who calls himself "Big Blak Afrika" is a leader of a pseudo-revolutionary underground rap group named the Mau Maus, the group seem to reflect afro-centricism and black power, yet they are self-contradicting for they are buying into the products which support stereotypical black images. The group despises the minstrel show Delacroix put together, and decided to destroy it by kidnapping Manray and execute him while broadcasting it on the internet.

In the meanwhile, Manray and Cheeba became popular stars as they participated in Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel show, and as Manray's ego grows, Cheeba confronts Manray about his wish to leave the show in an argument while he convinces Manray to join him, but Manray refuses. Consequently, Cheeba's position in the show was quickly replaced by another African-American performer. The upset Manray and Sloan grew closer and Delacroix became upset. Therefore, Delacroix hints Manray that Sloan is hired as his assistant for sleeping with her. Delacroix's plan to break up Manray and Sloan worked in the opposite way and brought them closer. In the meanwhile, Sloan also convinces Manray to quit from the minstrel show for that he is being exploited. After contemplation, Manray

confronts Delacroix that he will no longer wear blackface or the costume and appears in his regular outfit without makeup while recording the show, and his performance is forced to stop while he keeps on dancing. Manray is immediately fired by the executives and thrown out of the building.

Just while Manray starts to dance for freedom, the Mau Maus show up with bad intention in a vehicle. Manray was kidnapped, and being shockingly informed by the Mau Maus that he will be executed while being broadcasted live on the internet. The crazy plan of the Mau Maus had caused mass hysteria and hit the headlines. The time is ticking, the police could not find where they are before the execution starts, Manray's is being aimed at gunpoint by the Mau Maus as they start shooting Manray's feet and force him to dance, Manray is shot at both feet but keeps on dancing and the Mau Maus finally shot him in the chest and Manray dies. In result to that, Delacroix mentally breaks down and starts to see illusions of his black collectibles moving, he becomes in angry, screaming in tears, making a mess in his office. As the Mau Maus exit the hideout, the police attack and shoot them with rapid-fire, which kills all but one member of the Mau Maus.

In the end, Sloan walks in Delecroix's office with a gun, forcing him to watch the video tape which he refused to see earlier. Sloan blames Manray and her brother's deaths upon Delacroix while pointing a gun against him, in reaction, and finally forced him to watch the videotape. Delacroix cannot watch the disturbing visuals, he apologizes for his fault and as Delacroix reaches for the gun, Sloan shot him, and he asked for the gun again. Sloan hands him the firearm and flees out of the office. Wounded Delacroix drops to the floor, and wipes off her fingerprints in order to pretend that he shot himself. As Delacroix lies on the floor bleeding, he contemplates on his life, and finally dies while the video tape is still playing.

Chapter 2: American Racist Ideology and the Minstrel Show—A Brief History

In the The Souls of Black Folk (1903) by W.E.B. Du Bois, he wrote:

It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (11)

The passage quoted above catches the essence of Du Bois' sense of "double-consciousness." His point is that the mind of an African American is constantly fighting to distinguish his or her identity in the society, also, struggling to make the two identities—an American and a Negro—coexist in harmony while they conflict against each other. The idea of Black identity in a country where they are the minority, and perhaps especially in the USA with its history of black slavery, is based upon a perceived inequality, which leads to a social and psychological distance and moreover to many insecurities for the Black people. For this reason, a black man or woman with this "double-consciousness" is always dealing with the frustration of looking for recognition to gain emotional security, and striving to find

his or her position in the confusion while dealing with the White stereotypes on Blacks, and discriminations against them for being black Americans from the mainstream culture. In short, the term “double-consciousness” is the sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of the others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

What this double-consciousness really means is then that the black person sees him/herself as the Other, the white person sees him/her and also as he/she sees him/herself. And this is a universal experience of blacks when they encounter whites. As Du Bois said in The Souls of Black Folk:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately . . . instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? (9)

This ambiguous, uncomfortable feeling on the part of blacks when they are faced with whites is interracial and intercultural, thus to a degree universal. When the black man or woman is being measured by the standard or value of another culture, through the eyes of the others, it is expected that the black man or woman will have the displaced and inappropriate feeling, which consequently makes him or her feels like she is “a problem” in the society. It is obvious that the concept of black identity is based on sensible inequality. In result to that, it produces remoteness from one’s self to the others socially and psychologically.

I. A Brief History of American Slavery and Racist Ideology

The African-Americans had been long oppressed since the beginning of their enslavement by mainly southern whites in the U.S.A. From the mid-17th century until 1865,

the African- American people were inhumanely enslaved by mostly Whites in the United States, especially in the Southern U.S.; the disagreement between Northern and Southern states on the issue of slavery—the North opposed it on moral grounds—was the main cause of the American Civil War (1860-65). Even though the North won and Abraham Lincoln technically freed the slaves with his Emancipation Proclamation in 1864, the American blacks’ spiritual and cultural enslavement never ended. They had to continue to fight for their equal rights as human beings, as had been promised by Jefferson to all Americans in 1776, in his famous line in the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”³. Until roughly the middle of the 20th century American blacks were in effect treated as sub- human beings, and their opportunities were limited in numerous ways.

The slave trade which began in roughly the early 16th century was in effect an extension of the new Northern and Western European trans-oceanic trade that began in the time of the Renaissance—that is, an extension of European mercantilism, commercialism, colonialism. Innocent Africans were kidnapped from their villages by manly European white “salve-traders” and shipped as virtual prisoners to North, Central and South America. In the American southeast as also in parts of northern and western South America, they were sold mainly to the owners of large plantations; especially in the U.S. where they satisfied the pressing economic needs of the new lands and blooming cotton industry.

To understand the history of black slavery in America from the Whites’ point of view, we need to see that the Whites justified or rationalized this practice with the support of both the U.S. Constitution and the Christian (Protestant) religion. Of course we will wonder how

³ Martin Luther King refers back to this promise at the opening of his own “I had a dream today speech,” in the summer of 1963 in Washington D.C. Jefferson here really means that all human beings are in the abstract sense “equal” inasmuch as they are human beings. Of course, on the more empirical level some are born into rich families and some into poor, some as members of a minority group and some as members of a favored majority, and Jefferson himself had black slaves; yet in the more abstract sense Jefferson’s ideal can hardly be denied or even questioned.

religion, which initially should have only good intentions, could possibly be used to justify a racist ideology. Carr explains this contradiction in his chapter entitled “Christianity, the Constitution, and Slavery”:

In the colonial period, racist ideology was primarily religious in form. It was said that African people were the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. In Genesis, it is said that Noah cursed Ham because he looked on his father’s nakedness. The curse was that he would become a servant for life. But there is nothing at all that suggests that Ham was black. . . . Nevertheless, Christians found that the Bible sanctioned the system of slavery that they were creating.

This theological racism can be understood along the lines suggested by both Durkheim and Marx. Religion mystifies the real, material, social world. “God” is the real force of society in mystified form. In this case, African people were said by Whites to be cursed by God, made into slaves by God, blackened by God and they existed outside the Kingdom of God, which is White. Demystified, this simply means that the African was cursed by Whites, enslaved by Whites, and could never be a recognized part of the White nation. They could never be a recognized part of the White nation because they were an indispensable part, the heritable slave part, of the system of labor existing at that time. These were the facts of their actual condition. The planters explained the real world by employing a racist theology. God created the African American slave and free White people, they preached. This inverts what happened, enslaving White elites created, themselves, the African American slave, the White worker, and a racist God. Thus, Christianity, as ideology, was used to explain the material world as being constructed by a supernatural force instead of the planter class. (19-20)

Obviously this does not mean that the essence of Christianity is evil, or even that the

Bible encouraged (though it seems to have condoned) slavery. Rather, some people interpreted the ideas the found in the Bible in such a way as to feel that they were absolutely superior, as “God’s children,” to other races or ethnic groups or even to the lower social classes. Religion is a type of ideology and thus, like all ideologies, can be used for the purposes of social, political and economic oppression. In the US there was also the Constitution, created by the founding fathers in the late 18th century and espousing, like Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence of 1776, lofty ideals of freedom and equality. However, this also became another form of ideology that could be forced upon people. Initially, a “slave” was considered to be only three-fifths human, and the usage of the word “slave” was avoided in the constitution. While some supposed this was because of the Whites’ sense of guilt, Carr believes it was rather because of ideology.

In capitalism, the new state, like Christianity, ideologically expressed the universal existence of individuals but in a secular way. The American constitution was written to describe a society, Eden, that did not exist and to not describe the society that did exist. Contradictions between classes, European invaders and Native American nations, and slave owners and slaves were all denied by denying the very existence of the categories. In achieving ideological purity, the founding fathers left matters to civil society and to the states to, more or less, do as they wished with regard to the people in these categories. Thus, it could be declared that the country was founded on great ideals, lofty principles, not on the material reality of genocide and slavery. That is why the word slave did not appear in the constitution. (24)

The key problem here is that those who espouse a universal such as the “equality of all human beings” need not really “notice the differences” between different races, ethnic groups and social classes; thus the universal ideals can ironically be used to “justify” (or perhaps blur,

render invisible) the actual social and political inequalities and injustices. Hence postcolonial theorists and other thinkers generally in the field of anti-elitist “cultural studies” tend to be skeptical of any apparently “universalist” position. Indeed universalism is often associated with classical Greek philosophy (Plato and his “philosopher kings) and European thinking that goes back to the Greeks, especially Northern European Protestantism since the Renaissance.

In the particular historical case of black slavery in America, on the surface it seemed that there was no problem because the slaves were being limited by both religion (morally) and the constitution (legally), and the state of the Whites were stably superior. However, the problems started to appear as time passed by. The importing of slaves started to make White Americans realize that if it continued; the population of African American would grow throughout the southern states and they would become the majority. If it did happen, the rebellion of the slaves could happen, and it was the last thing the Whites would want to see. Also, if the slaves were to become free, the White Americans did not know what to do with them, meaning that they were not willing to accept them as equals in the society, however, needed them for the labor.

Therefore, it was the wish of many that the African Americans would just flee the country once they were finished with their labor. Many locations were being considered by the intellectuals; however, there was no perfect solution. On the other hand, the federal law of forbidding Americans to import slaves was enacted in 1794. Though the slave traders of other countries still engage in slave trade, and illegal slave trade was still active for the next few years, the importing of slaves was finally prohibited all at once in 1808. As I trace back to the origin, the reason of importing slaves was due to the demand of cheap labor in the South, where needed the workers for the cotton plantation. In contrast to the South, the North did not rely on slaves; it was because the North focused on wage labors. The South

was more agricultural while the North was more modernized and industrialized, the two parts of United States engaged in different industries and therefore, the conflicts started to show.

There was the conflict between the North and the South, in other words, the conflict between free labor and slaves. It is also a conflict of ideologies and of interests. One country cannot operate under two different types of capitalism willing to expand. Therefore, for the supporters of both sides, it was one way or the other. And in result to that, it finally led to the Civil War. While speaking of Civil War, there is usually a misconception that Abraham Lincoln or the Northerners intended to free the slaves. In fact, the Republicans as well as Lincoln from the North were merely trying to prevent the expansion of slavery, while the South argued that it was never written in the constitution that which states were not allowed for slavery. It is evidently recorded by Du Bois in Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880:

And so the war came. War is murder, force, anarchy and debt. Its end is evil, despite all incidental good. Neither North nor South had before 1861 the slightest intention of going to war. The thought was in many respects ridiculous. They were not prepared for war. The national army was small, poorly equipped and without experience. There was no file from which someone might draw plans of subjugation.

When Northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation. It was the last thing they planned to be. The North did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man's war to preserve the Union, and the Union must be preserved.

Nothing that concerned the amelioration of the Negro touched the heart of the mass of Americans nor could the common run of men realize the political and economic cost of a Negro slavery. When, therefore, the Southern radicals, backed

by political oligarchy and economic dictatorship in the most extreme form in which the world had seen it for five hundred years, precipitated secession, that part of the North that opposed the plan had to hunt for a rally slogan to unite the majority in the North and in the West, and if possible, bring the Border States into an opposing phalanx. (55)

After the perspectives of both North and South had been demonstrated, it was always the White Americans that were in charge regardless of their class. On the contrary, the African Americans were passive, and incapable of making decisions or changes of what they wanted. Du Bois also gave a clear description in Black Reconstruction⁴ of the condition of the Negroes during the Civil War:

Both sections ignored the Negro. To the Northern masses the Negro was a curiosity, a sub-human minstrel, willingly and naturally a slave, and treated as well as he deserved to be. He had not sense enough to revolt and help Northern armies, even if Northern armies were trying to emancipate him, which they were not. The North shrank at the very thought of encouraging servile insurrection against the whites. Above all it did not propose to interfere with property. Negroes on the whole were considered cowards and inferior beings whose very presence in America was unfortunate. . . . (56)

During the chaotic time of the war, the slaves and the Negroes in general waited and observed for their best interest. Since they were mostly illiterate, it was difficult for them to digest information from books or newspapers; they relied on words of mouth to pass by, orally and traditionally. As the war continued on, the North started to realize that the Negroes could be a great advantage for their laborers, moreover, they could be very helpful to the armies. The Negro laborers were invited to Northern armies and started work for the

⁴ In short of Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880

military as food supply, or even as spies on the plantation. Therefore, before the North had realized it themselves, they had already been liberating the slaves even though they never intended to. The Negroes which rebelled against the slavery were called the participant of the general strike, and the strike had massively influenced the war. Some slaves that had escaped from plantations started to work and receive wages, even the authority to buy lands and purchasing their own property. The taste of freedom was only gave them a glimpse of their path to equality. The situation became clearer as the war went on, that the war against South was the war against slavery. And the pursuit of freedom was to join the North, along with the Abolitionists and the free Negroes.

As a result, the Negroes, helped the North to fight the war. There was no comparison while one side was fighting for interest, while the other fought for freedom—the outcome was destined. Lincoln won the war, but the cause of winning was the consequence he had to face, I would like to quote from Black Reconstruction by Du Bois again as he stated:

In August⁵, Lincoln faced the truth, front forward; and that truth was not simply that Negroes ought to be free; it was that thousands of them were already free, and that either the power which slaves put into the hands of the South was to be taken from it, or the North could not win the war. Either the Negro was to be allowed to fight, or the draft itself would not bring enough white men into the army to keep up the war.

More than that, unless the North faced the world with the moral strength of declaring openly that they were fighting for the emancipation of slaves, they would probably find that the world would recognize the South as a separate nation; that ports would be opened; that trade would begin, and that despite all the military advantage of the North, the war would be lost. (82)

⁵ August of 1862.

But while President Lincoln officially freed the slaves in 1864 with his Emancipation Proclamation, and while the situation of American blacks became significant better especially beginning from the 1950s and 1960s, racism continues to exist in many forms in the U.S.A. The “double-consciousness” that Du Bois speaks of is no doubt still experienced by many American blacks, who sees themselves as the whites see them but also as they see themselves, even if in recent decades some whites may actually have a *too-positive* image or stereotypical view of blacks—especially of successful athletes and entertainers. This comes close to the central message of Lee’s film and also to the “meaning” of the traditional minstrel show, which—though in a modified and self-parodying way—forms the core of the film.

II. A Brief History of the American Minstrel Show

To really understand Lee’s film we had to know something about the history, purpose, nature and technique of the American minstrel show. The minstrel show was one of the most important theater prototype originated in America in the 1840s. Kevin D. Roberts generally spoke of the minstrel show in his book African American Issues:

By far, the most crucial spread of black stereotypes happened on the stage.

Starting in the 1840s and lasting well into the twentieth century, minstrel shows popularized the stereotypical images of African Americans. Minstrel troupes first appeared as a formatted style of blackface entertainment in the 1840s. White actors blackened their faces with burnt cork to portray blacks as buffoonish, ignorant characters. . . .it was the blackface actors, dancers, musicians, and comedians who captured the fancy of a white America being torn apart by the issue of slavery. Characters such as Jim Crow and Zip Coon built upon the widespread characterizations of Buck, Tom, and Sambo. These minstrels, who marketed themselves as depicting the true culture of African Americans, created debilitating

characterizations that remain over a century later. Most of the minstrel show originators, however, were northerners who knew little about African Americans. When in the late 1800s and early 1900s black minstrel troupes became popular, the format and characters were so set it was nearly impossible for black entertainers to break the mold. These black minstrel shows were advertised as presenting “real coons.” Yet, ironically, even African Americans had to don burnt cork to represent themselves. (136)

There are many allusions of early African American culture in the film Bamboozled, such as the names of the characters that inherited from the original minstrel show of the early days which appeared in the New Millennium Minstrel Show in the film, and the most important feature of the minstrelsy is the blackface. In the film Bamboozled, while Mantan and Sleep’ N Eat were putting on their makeup for the first time, Sloan gave a clear description of how the blackface makeup was done in the old days:

SLOAN. We should blacken up like they did it back in the days. Keep the ritual the same.

Mantan puts some cork in the dish.

SLOAN. Put some alcohol on the corks, then light it.

INT. SLEEP N’ EAT’S DRESSING ROOM

Sleep N’ Eat strikes a match to his corks in a dish.

SLOAN. Let them burn to a crisp, and when burnt out, mash them to a powder.

INT. MANTAN’S DRESSING ROOM

Mantan is mashing the corks.

SLOAN. Add water, mix to a thick paste.

INT. SLEEP N’ EAT’S DRESSING ROOM

Sleep N’ Eat is mixing them all together.

SLOAN. And voila! You have your blackface.

INT. STAGE—NIGHT

The audience, which has become restless, starts a rhythmic clap.

SLOAN. Please put cocoa butter on your face and hands. . .

INT. MANTAN'S DRESSING ROOM

ON MANTAN'S HANDS

SLOAN. To protect your skin.

He⁶ applies cocoa butter to his hands.

INT. SLEEP N' EAT'S DRESSING ROOM

ON SLEEP N' EAT'S FACE

He rubs cocoa butter all over his face.

INT. STAGE—NIGHT

Audience hands are clapping faster.

ON FEET

They're stomping.

INT. MANTAN'S DRESSING ROOM

ON MIRROR

Mantan blacks up his face.

WE HEAR THE STOMPING OF FEET AND THE HANDS CLAPPING.

INT. SLEEP N' EAT'S DRESSING ROOM

ON MIRROR

Sleep N' Eat blacks up also.

SLOAN. The final detail. . .

INT. MANTAN'S DRESSING ROOM

⁶ Mantan

ON LIPS

SLOAN. . . . are the lips.

Mantan is applying lipstick.

INT. SLEEP N' EAT'S DRESSING ROOM

ON LIPS

Sleep N' Eat is puckering his lips as he too puts on the lipstick.

SLOAN. The redder the lipstick the better. I suggest firetruck red.

ON MIRROR

For the first time WE SEE SLEEP N' EAT in FULL BLACK FACE.

SLEEP N' EAT. Show. . .

INT. MANTAN'S DRESSING ROOM

ON MIRROR

Mantan in FULL BLACK FACE.

MANTAN. . . . TIME!!! (60-62)

From the paragraphs quoted above, Sloan spoke as a voice-over while Mantan and Sleep N' Eat put on their black faces step by step. The scene went on and illustrated very delicate details of the makeup. But why did Sloan wanted to keep the ritual of the blackface minstrel show, what was the significance of doing the makeup in the traditional way? Moreover, what was the meaning behind the blackface makeup? William J. Mahar narrated the clear depiction in addition to the importance of the blackface in the introduction of his book Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture, he stated:

The primary convention that identified the minstrel show as entertainment was burnt cork makeup. The combination of burned, pulverized champagne corks and water (sometimes petroleum jelly or a similar substance) served as a *racial marker*

announcing that a single actor or an ensemble offered what were selected aspects of (arguably) African American culture to audiences interested in how racial differences and enslavement reinforced distinctions between black and white Americans.

The makeup was also a *disguise* for white performers who chose parody and burlesque as techniques to satirize majority values while still reinforcing widely held and fairly conservative beliefs. Minstrel performers made blackface a *vehicle* for the creation of an “American” style of commercialized popular culture in what was essentially a postcolonialist entertainment environment. Finally, burnt cork was a *masking device* allowing professional and amateur entertainers to shield themselves from any direct personal and psychological identification with the material they were performing. (1)

From the paragraph, the functions of the blackface are explained. And from the previous quoted scene while Sloan said that Mantan and Sleep N’ Eat should be blacken up like back in the days and keeping the ritual the same was satirical because by doing so, it symbolically meant that through the years of fighting for equality and human rights, the African Americans were still chained by the stereotypes of the White, “just like back in the days.” They would still need to fit into the stereotypical perceptions of what the White thought of the Black people and play along. Satirically, as it seemed, the predominant white supremacy still reign over the black, and the blacks still do not get to represent themselves unless it is represented within the range which the white permitted, and the blackening of faces is the prime example.

The disguise of blackface had multiple purposes; however, it was only the basic understanding of the minstrel show. The blackface minstrel show was extremely influential to contemporary theatre, music, and moreover, entertainment in general. For it was the first

original theatrical entertainment invented in the United States.

Mahar's perspective on the minstrel show was neither negative nor cynical, instead, the minstrel shows in his eyes were, in fact, constructive and positive in many ways for that it was an innovative entertainment in the antebellum era for the poor, and the audience was given the opportunity to enjoy live stage performance which were affordable, since the operas mainly excluded the lower class and the entrance fee was extremely expensive for the ordinary American citizen. As Mahar stated in Behind the Burnt Cork Mask⁷:

The entertaining aspect of blackface interest in the class of newly wealthy Americans is found in minstrelsy's relationship to opera, a decidedly non-American commodity in the eyes of minstrel comedians, because opera attendance cost four to eight times as much as did attendance at the typical minstrel show and provided an opportunity for conspicuous display of class differences. (5)

With the subjects and structure borrowed from the European and English operas, the themes and contents of the minstrel shows were not only translated from the operas from Europe and England, but included the African traditional singing and dancing, creating a hybrid which contains traits inherited from African American culture, as well as the structures and routines borrowed from the traditional European operas, combining with the themes relative to common civilians. The content would be comprehensible for the mass instead of being too caviar to the general people, therefore, with all these advantages combining as one creating a unique, one of the kind cross-cultural product, which carried so many characteristics from different locations and ethnical groups. Mahar claimed, it was evidently that the creation of the minstrel show was a multi-cultural combination, he claimed in Behind the Burnt Cork Mask:

Nonetheless, the minstrel show was the first point of intersection between an

⁷ In short of William J Mahar's book Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture

African American culture with a rich musical heritage that included African retentions and a largely derivative English and Italian stylistic tradition mixed occasionally with Anglo-American folk materials. There is plenty of evidence that white and black Americans shared a good deal more music, humor, social rituals, and beliefs than has been acknowledged in most studies of minstrelsy. (4)

However, Adam Lively held a different opinion according to his work Mask: Blackness, Race and the Imagination, the minstrel was nothing positive, as he stated:

The hybridity of black and white American cultures was not a comfortable coexistence, as can be seen in the case of minstrel shows, the most popular form of theatre in nineteenth-century America. The vast majority of minstrels were white, but their source material was black. . . . Whites appropriated black artistic material. Not only that, but they watered down its emotional content and put the songs into the context of an openly insulting farce, with the white performers aping and exaggerating the supposed speech and mannerisms of blacks. Minstrel shows sustained white prejudice. The new segregation laws introduced in the South in 1890s were popularly named after the minstrel show's stock plantation slave character: Jim Crow. (218)

Though people hold different opinions about the minstrel shows, the minstrelsy were able to survive and exist for a long period of time, moreover, spreading across the nation and had a lasting popularity, and strongly influence the pop culture of the United States of America with its art form. Moreover, at the end of Behind the Burnt Cork Mask, Mahar concludes his analysis of the functions of the old minstrel shows with these insights:

Minstrelsy may well have been the “national art of its moment,” but its impact on the future of American popular music now appears to have been quite significant. Minstrelsy appropriated elements of black culture with varying degrees of accuracy

and with an overall purpose of creating a commercially popular product. It provided an early demonstration that Americans were committed to topical entertainment, were sentimental in their perceptions of much deeper emotional issues, misogynistic in their views of gender equality, and resistant to the portrayal of complex social problems in an environment devoted to play and diversion. In the end the minstrel show was a form of popular culture that, in its own imperfect and ambivalent ways, addressed (1) the unfairness of privilege and the growing exclusivity of class, whether based on accomplishment or the randomness of sudden wealth in a capitalist economy; (2) insecurity about emerging cultural forms borrowed from foreign countries; (3) the distrust of differences among groups other than one's own in a society where the ethnic mix changed rapidly in the 1840s; (4) questions about widely held convictions about family and courtship expressed in satirical fashion in sketches and other forms of spoken comedy; (5) the threats to male dominance of the economy and political power inherent in the extension of full and equal rights to American women; (6) fears of a power inversion if allegedly submissive slaves were emancipated and concerns over the potential loss of access to work or political power; (7) the sustenance of American-born performers in an environment where English and Europeans were able to command high salaries and public praise for often marginal musical skills; and finally (8) the ways in which the means of cultural production as well as the subjects explored in public theater could be controlled by the market forces and audience demands. Blackface minstrelsy was one of the primary paradigms for the whole enterprise recognized you now as the popular culture industry.

Chapter 3: The Media, Blacks' Self-Image and Identity Confusion

It has been evident since the old days of newspapers, but even clearer since the dawn of cinema at the turn of the 20th century, that explicit (or even tacit) racism could have an immeasurable influence on readers or viewers of a film. In the specific case of the history of American racism, mass media could easily become a tool of promoting violence and other forms of abuse against black people. Sadly, the first successful full-length film in the United States was built upon such a harmful ideology. Ed Guerrero points out just how much damage a movie can do in Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film:

The film was immensely popular, influential, and very dangerous. Helping to launch the age of mass media communications and narrative cinema as a popular commodity, *Birth*⁸, in its first eleven months in New York City had 6,266 showings and was seen by an estimated 3 million people. One of the film's most obvious dangers arose from the timing of its release; it appeared in the middle of a period, from 1890 to 1920, when Jim Crow segregation was on the rise; lynching was at its height; and in general mob violence, murder, and oppression against African Americans was rampant and intense throughout the land. This bloodthirsty climate, in combination with *Birth*'s romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924. (13)

I. Racist Ideology and the Media

From the quoted passage above, it is obvious that the racism of a few individuals, through the mass media, can cause terrible tragedies by enlarging the hatred against certain

⁸ The Birth of the Nation (1915) was the first full-length movie which told the story of the Civil War, however, it was largely criticized for its racist stereotypes with regard to black Americans.

racial groups. In “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” Stuart Hall briefly defines the triangular relationship between race, media, and ideology:

“Racism and the media” touches directly on the problem of *ideology*, since the media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies. An intervention in the media’s construction of race is an intervention in the *ideological* terrain of struggle. . . . I am using the term⁹ to refer to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and “make sense” of some aspect of social existence. (18)

Furthermore, he goes deeper by stating that there are three important things about ideology by theorizing it and drawing boundaries:

First, ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings. . . .
 Second, ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions *within ideology*. . . .
 Third, ideologies ‘work’ by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to “utter” ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors.
 (18-19)

According to the text above, assuming the ideology here is “racist,” there would be a chain of concepts of majority Whites against the minority Black, Asian, Hispanics, Jews and so on. The concepts possibly include the idea of white supremacy, to have stereotypical ideas of nonwhites, or discrimination against any one of the people mentioned above. Moreover, people who are living under such ideology would make statements which fit the

⁹ “the term” here means ideology.

racist ideology; however, the racist ideology will not be created by the statements of the individual, on the contrary, the words and deeds of the individual is shaped and formed within the racist ideology. And this discourse of racist ideology will reflect the individual and collectives' position, in order to make them speak as if they are the spokesperson of such an ideology. Continuing the argument presented above, Hall goes more deeply into the definition of "media" and their close relation to "ideology":

In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies. Ideologies are, of course, worked on in many places in society, and not only in the head. . . . But institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of *ideological* production. What they¹⁰ "produce" is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work. And, amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning that imagery of race carries, and what the "problem of race" is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race. (19-20)

What Hall is suggesting here is that, since the media's power to spread information is so great, those who own and/or control the mass media can easily decide what they want to *show* the (their) mass audience. In contrast to media with good intentions and the idea of equality between all races in all mankind, there are also racist-friendly media which exist in the society. Ironically, these "false media" can carry racist ideology without realizing that they are a part of the force that spreads racial discrimination. According to Hall, there are "overt racism" and "inferential racism" (20), the difference between the two is that overt

¹⁰ Refers to "the media."

racism is intentionally stating racist arguments or opinions, but inferential racism is to have “racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*.”

“(20) Hall stated an example of inferential racism in the text which explained how it might work through the propagation of media:

An example of *this* type of racist ideology is the sort of television programmer which deals with some “problem” in the race relations. It is probably made by a good and honest liberal broadcaster, who hopes to do some good in the world for “race relations” and who maintains a scrupulous balance and neutrality when questioning people interviewed for the programme. The programmer will end with a homily on how, if only the “extremists” on *either* side would go away, “normal black and whites” would be better able to get on with learning to live in harmony together. Yet every word and image of such programmes are impregnated with unconscious racism because they are all predicated on the unstated and unrecognized assumption that the *blacks* are the *source of the problem*. Yet virtually the whole of “social problem” television about race and immigration—often made, no doubt, by well-intentioned and liberal-minded broadcasters—is precisely predicated on racist premises of this kind. . . . (20)

From the above example we see how racist ideology is spread even by a “good” broadcaster who is unaware that he is doing this. As a result, it is obvious that inferential racism can be not only much more widespread but more insidious than overt racism, for it can enter into a given sphere of knowledge or information even when both the “sender” and (especially) the “receiver” are unaware of what this “message” actually is or means.

II. Postmodern Media and the Confused Self-Image of Contemporary Blacks

This chapter began with a discussion of the tremendous impact—mainly negative in the

sense that it tended to stimulate their latent racist feelings, their potential hatred of blacks—on American film audiences of the 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, followed by a general discussion of the ideological power of the mass media, especially via Hall's analyses. However, Lee's 2000 film Bamboozled touches on the subject of racism, and more specifically on the issues of black self-image and self-identity confusion, in the form in which we find these *circa* the dawn of the 21st century in the USA.

The African-Americans historically had confusions about their own image and identity due to a very justified inferiority complex: they or their ancestors had been the slaves of whites for hundreds of years. However, beginning especially from the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s—sparked by Rosa Parks' bus boycott in Birmingham, Alabama in the middle of the decade—and passing through the tumultuous 1960s—Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the Washington Monument in the summer of 1963, followed by his assassination in May 1968, and the Black Power movement beginning from the late 1960s (Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X et al)—the status of black Americans has risen markedly in recent decades, and thus their self-image has also gone through a sea-change.

Indeed, in the year 2000, when Lee's film appeared, some of the most famous, most successful and (perhaps also) richest Americans were African-American musicians, athletes and film stars, all of them greatly admired and even idolized by (especially younger) white men and women. While "sports" and "entertainment" had been in earlier decades fields that the blacks felt they were restricted to on account of race—they could be athletes and musicians (and even movie stars) but not doctors, lawyers, professors, high-level business managers and politicians—such restrictions are becoming less and less "strict" (Obama is becoming the president) and at the same time the athletes and rappers are increasingly content to have the great fame and fortune that many whites could only dream of.

This whole situation is also closely tied up with the mass media and their relentless

money-driven drive toward self-promotion through the promotion of whoever is already “hot”—African-American entertainers, for example. The “superficiality” of contemporary, media-driven popular culture—as of 2008, and it has not advanced significantly beyond where it was in 2000—in the USA and the world’s other most highly-developed countries has been discussed by various cultural critics and theorists. Fredric Jameson in Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism agrees with Jean Baudrillard (in *The Simulacrum* and other books) that “post-modern society” is by definition “superficial” for depth had given way to an interest in the all-pervasive “surface” of things. This perspective is used to describe that virtual reality on which all media (most obviously movies, TV and the internet, indeed cyberspace itself) is somehow based. It is used to describe the fact that, as poststructuralist theorists like Derrida have been saying since the late 1960s, we never get back, or get down, to the *original* or *grounding* “meaning” or “text.”

Thus for example on HBO (depending on the hour of day) we may easily find advertisements for the advertisements of movies coming on later, and those “actual” advertisements will feature interviews with the hot actors whom we will see performing in the “real” movie, actors who keep telling us how great the movie is and in various ways luring us to see it when it shows on HBO in the next day or two. But what we finally have at the “origin” is then the virtual reality of a mere film, not the “real” reality, the real nature (real trees and mountains for example). Self-promotion of the mass media is an important part of the “mindless consumerism” that drives what Jameson calls late capitalism. As for consumerism as we see it in the masses of people shopping in large department stores, the “mindless desire” (Baudrillard again) many shoppers seem to have for things, for possessing things that they don’t really need at all—the mindless desire to satisfy a craving for material things that seems to be based not at all on practical necessity but on a sense of emptiness or lack (Lacan)—suggests once again this superficiality, this lack of any sense of depth, origin

or ground: of grounding *meaning* or original *meaning* in our lives.

To really come to terms with the problem of the contemporary African-American self-image in relation to the mass media (and here specifically TV), we would then need to see this in relation to our flattened-out “postmodern society” as briefly sketched above. For in the first place the whites themselves, N.Y. city lawyers, stockbrokers, managers and CEOs, entertainment brokers (like the TV producer Dunwitty in Lee’s film), book and magazine publishers and advertisers on Madison Avenue, have a self-image largely defined by a two-dimensional lust for money, fame and power (in other words “success”), whatever the consequences might be for others. Thus it is only natural that the previously (especially pre-1980s) downtrodden blacks have all the more right to think this way, to see themselves this way. In other words, we could hardly blame the blacks for “buying into” the whites’ dream of success turn-of-21st-century style, a success that inevitably depends on one’s ability to manipulate and be either behind (Dunwitty) or in the “center” (Manray) of the still primarily white-owned media. And as noted above, blacks are less likely than they were in earlier decades to feel that they are only allowed to “succeed” in the areas (or businesses) of professional sports and entertainment, since on the one hand this is no longer nearly so true as it once was, and on the other hand the successful black entertainers and athletes are increasingly getting richer and more famous than their white counterparts.

It is obvious that the new “class” of highly successful blacks will make for a shift in blacks’ self-image (even that of poor and unsuccessful African-Americans since they can still “identify” with other blacks). But this is a complex issue, for while on the one hand they will obviously have a more “positive” image of themselves than before, on the other hand they may be confused insofar as they may wonder whether (a) they really “deserve” this new success, and (b) this new “positive image” (as represented by Kobe Bryant, 50 Cent et al) may really be somehow an exaggerated, distorted or even “false” image of them created by

Whites—who in the case of Blacks are unable to see the real person (with his/her long history of slavery not wholly forgotten) behind the “image.” Hence we have the potential identity-confusion or confusion about self-image of today’s African-Americans, at least as it will be defined in this thesis.

And here point (b) is again closely tied to the power of today’s mass media: whites might just have an exaggeratedly “positive” image of blacks since this is precisely the image of them that the profit-oriented media (e.g. TV) want to create: more positive image means more money for the media industry. And as has already been noted, especially when we take professional sports (often shown on TV) as also being a media-intensive business, it is particularly in media-intensive fields that blacks have in recent decades most obviously succeeded.

Any sort of theatrical show or drama becomes a kind of medium, and in ancient Greek drama (as well as some forms of modern and contemporary drama) masks were commonly worn. An “image” in the above sense of the term is also a kind of mask—and we inevitably assume that a “mask” is to a certain degree a “false image.” This brings us back to the “black minstrel show” that forms in effect the core of Lee’s *Bamboozled*, and which we briefly mentioned in Chapter 1 above. We will now have a closer look at Lee’s blacks-in-blackface minstrel show in *Bamboozled*, in relation to this image of contemporary American blacks’ identity-confusion. In the previous chapter we looked briefly at the historical minstrel show in the USA, which via the use of white actors in blackface mainly mocked and degraded black slaves, and their direct descendants, by exaggerating certain stereotypical black “features” according to the whites’ perception (Du Bois) of blacks. But Lee’s blacks-in-blackface show gives Du Bois’ double-consciousness (or split image, double-image) a postmodernist further twist or spin.

Postmodernism as a self-parodying artistic technique—as discussed by numerous

theorists including Jameson, Baudrillard and Brian McHale (in Postmodern Fiction)—is present right at the center of Lee’s Bamboozled in the New Millennium Minstrel Show, where it is closely bound up with this complex and paradoxical issue of (especially successful) American Blacks’ self-image and/or sense of self-identity in a hyper-media-driven society. Here on the first level we have blacks performing in blackface as a form of parody of the “original” 19th-century American minstrel shows, in which whites in blackface performed the roles of American slaves. On the second level we have this live performance (in a TV studio) being watched by a largely urban white audience which is delighted by the self-mocking, self-deprecating humor, even though we sense most whites in the audience are amused in spite of themselves, far from looking down on blacks, if anything they tend to admire them too much in the current society (as discussed above); this becomes an important issue inasmuch as Blacks in the live (and especially in the TV) audience tend to think the show does *really* degrade Blacks, and not merely degrade them (as the whites seem to think and as educated, urbane, white-influenced blacks like Sloan think) in a *non-serious*, ironic, self-parodying or “postmodern” way). Then on the third level—if one wanted to distinguish this from the second level—we have many white and black Americans at home watching the live show as well as recorded versions of it on TV. Finally, on the fourth (or third) level, we have this whole “performance” occurring within Lee’s film Bamboozled.

III. Postmodern Self-Parody and the Confusion of True and False Self-Image

The artistic technique of the “play within the play”—Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* offers a classic example—is called, in particular by postmodern theorists, the *mise-en-abyme*, or “putting into the abyss.” This term derives from a Renaissance technique in painting: the artist includes in his painting the scene of himself painting the picture, the same picture which if large enough will also give us another repetition—and so on ad infinitum except that we

won't be able to "see that far." The same or a similar phenomenon is more often seen in movies in scenes with two or more facing mirrors in them, though if these are "funhouse" mirrors then the issue of bodily distortion usually takes priority over that of the indefinite repetition of the image. Thus we might imagine at the "large end" of Lee's "minstrel show" sequence in *Bamboozled* another movie, made by another director, which includes within in it the part of Lee's movie that shows this minstrel show.

However, when we look at the "small end" of this sequence things get more complicated. Here Manray and Cheeba are performing a blacks-in-blackface satirical mockery and parodying of 19th-century racist whites in the U.S.A., who used to perform in blackface to satirically mock, parody and degrade African-American slaves. But at the same time Manray and Cheeba in blackface are parodying themselves as (*via* a kind of time-warp) turn-of-21st-century African-Americans who are not only "free" (no longer slaves) but likely to be (if they are not already) richer and more famous than most American whites will ever be. Or rather, perhaps they are parodying the *idea* of this satirizing, ironizing and parodying of 19th-century racist whites by contemporary American blacks who are at least "free" and "powerful" enough to be able to engage in such a performance, even if they are homeless people without any money, or almost-starving artists (who seem not so far from being homeless people) like Cheeba and Manray at the beginning of the film. Hence this is not the classical *mise-en-abyme*, for to be this the minstrel show would have to be "re-enacted" as a sort of repetition *within* the performance itself; yet in its "backward- looking" or "retroactive" focus on the contemporary black actors themselves and the community and era they represent it seems to be a kind of variation on this, as is for that matter Hamlet's play within the play—undertaken because "the play's the thing / Wherein to catch the conscience of the king."

The "original" minstrel shows, of course, were performed onstage in theaters long

before television was invented.¹¹ Mass media, more specifically television, obviously has the power to spread the New Millennium Minstrel Show's "message"—whatever we finally take it to be—to a much wider audience and thus to expand or magnify its "effect." But we may say that the message being spread and intensified here is an ideological one, is itself a "racist" (but embedded within it self-reflexively also an anti-racist) ideology. In the early days, it was mostly the Caucasian performers who put on blackface to imitate black people, displaying the stereotypical behaviors and traits of the black slaves in a mocking and disrespectful manner, emphasizing a *false image* of blacks as inferior and unintelligent.¹² No doubt for the white performers and white audiences these old shows were entertaining and funny, as they were not really taken seriously by the whites; but any black audience members would likely have taken them more seriously and might well have been (secretly perhaps) offended.

Today, however, if such an old-time minstrel show were performed, it is not so clear what would be the reaction of either blacks or whites in the audience. To what degree would audience members of both race—and this might well be a function of the level of education and cultural "sophistication"—take such a show seriously and feel offended or not take it seriously and laugh? Here already the further question arises: given this scenario (traditional whites-in-blackface show performed today), what would be the possible relations between an audience member's taking or not taking the show seriously, on the one hand, and on the other hand perceiving a "true" or "false image" of the blacks being represented (via blackface) by the white actors? Whereas no one would dispute that issues of racism and ideology are

¹¹ The old 19th-century minstrel shows consisted of comic skits, variety acts, music and dance; as for the actors who participate in the shows, they put charcoal on their faces to blacken them, and wore fire-truck red lipstick to exaggerate the facial features of the blacks. Most of these were Caucasians; however, after the Civil War some blacks did in fact start performing in minstrel shows in blackfaces—thus Lee's "conceit" here is not as original as many filmgoers might have thought, but rather he is digging back into the past and also gesturing toward the future. Condemned by many the old shows, no matter what the race of the actors, slowly disappeared as African-Americans gradually gained greater rights and freedoms.

¹² See the previous note.

deadly serious, ever since Nietzsche and the post-structuralist philosophers (among them Derrida and Baudrillard) who followed him, there has been a tendency to (1) doubt that there is any fixed, essential “self” or “self-identity” beneath the various roles “played” by “us,” and (2) see the uncertainty of truth and falsity in relation to the problem of irony, that is, of taking or not taking things seriously.

Spike Lee had no doubt thought about all of this before making Bamboozled, and then decided to take things—take the complexity of this issue (these issues)—one step further with Delecroix’s “new millennium” minstrel show with its blacks-in-blackface performing the roles of “black slaves.” It is possible to see these black actors—in effect playing whites in blackface, and “adding a second layer of black paint” (charcoal) or perhaps taking the black off to reveal the black beneath it—as disrespecting their own race. While this may seem to be a too-simplistic or too-superficial level, especially in the early 21st century, it is nonetheless one to which many black viewers, as Lee presents them in the film, were apparently “limited.” It is also possible to see the black performers in blackface as mocking, criticizing and indeed perhaps degrading the whites who used to play this “role” of degrading blacks. On a third level we might implicitly that both forms of degradation are included here and choose to take either one or the other more seriously, or (more likely) to not take either seriously and see the whole thing as outrageously funny, a brilliant (and postmodern) comic performance.

Here again we come back to the closely-related issue of truth and falsity, true and false roles, true and false images. Let us assume that the old minstrel shows clearly presented a *false image* of blacks insofar as they exaggerated certain stereotypes and showed them as being flat, two-dimensional characters, “nothing but slaves,” rather than whole human beings—and that anyone disagreeing with this could surely be called a racist, whether in 1840 or 2009. (Some might dispute this assumption by saying, again, that this is just a

comedy show, not to be taken seriously). For the sake of simplicity let us also limit the discussion here to black audience members. Then those audience members (e.g. Big Blak and the Mau Maus in the film) who were offended by Manray and Cheeba, by the idea of blacks-in-blackface performing black slaves, were in effect equating these blacks actors with the white actors in blackface in the old-time shoes—and arguably not “seeing” their true blackness. On this same reading, black audience members who saw the blacks-in-blackface as mocking/degrading the white actors who used to mock/degrade would see the actors as being “truly black” and thus presumably like these actors, and enjoy this show; but they too would be taking this show and the “identity “ of the actors very seriously.

Even with these two cases, where we stay within the domain of seriousness, the question of true and false (self-)image arises and in various ways. For example, do black audience members in the second group, who see the blacks-in-blackface as being truly black because they are mocking/degrading whites, see or have a “truer” image of the black actors than do those black audience members in the first group? Or might these second-group viewers still see a “false” image inasmuch as their sense of “true blackness” was based purely on the idea that these blacks hate, mock, degrade whites (*because* the whites hate, mock, degrade blacks)? And so on: there are various possibilities or permutations, which is one reason why audience members in the third group, who don’t take the whole show seriously at all—perhaps in part as they intuitively realize that the complexity goes “too far” to be taken seriously—but rather find it extremely funny and entertaining, might seem to be closer to the “truth.” Members of this group include the sophisticated, cosmopolitan Sloan and (later on, after he goes through a change) the “creator” of the show, Delacroix. But there we must always keep in mind that Lee is likely thinking here of some connection between our (actually) true and false images of ourselves and of other people, and on the other hand true and false images or roles as we see them performed in dramas, in movies—and in real life.

One final issue that could be raised here is that of the potential connection of the problem of “universals” to that of true/false (self-) images and the problem of identity-confusion. In Chapter 2 we noted passages from both Hall and Carr which critique the “universalizing” tendency of Western thinking, from ancient Greek philosophy through the Renaissance (e.g. Descartes) to modern Anglo-American (from the Northern European Protestant tradition) thinking. This universalizing tendency is also a transcendentalizing (Emerson comes to mind) and idealizing one. In Chapter 2 the context for Carr was the American Constitution and Jeffersonian ideals such as “All men are created equal.” As the cultural-studies and postcolonial critics invariably point out, this idealizing-universalizing mode obscures the real differences between different classes (e.g. rich/poor), ethnic groups (English/Irish) and races (Black/White/East Asian). Racism, as emphasized in Chapter 2, is after all based on stereotypes that are by definition “universal.” And stereotypes are a kind of fixed image.

Hence it is important to think about the relation (or interplay) of/between true and false images, and too the difficulty of pinning down one image (of oneself or of others) as being either true or false, precisely because it is the absolutism of racism (of racial stereotypes), and of other sorts of prejudices, which necessarily clings doggedly to a single image. And whether that image was initially thought of as being true or being false, the mere fact that someone (or some group) clings to it stubbornly makes it in the larger sense “false.” In the view of Hall, Carr *et al* it is by virtue of these universalizing images or points of view—Christianity and Capitalism for example, or in the context of places like the Middle East, even Democracy—that the colonizer justify their domination of the colonized, which is perhaps the most lucid and powerful way of demonstrating that these universal images are “false”—or simply wrong, or some might even say evil.

The content of the new minstrel show in the film is not much different from the one in

reality; however, due to the reason that the slapstick musical skits and all the other performances are played by blacks, the meaning can be interpreted differently. When people of one race are mocking or making fun of people of another race, it is called racism; however, when one is making fun of his own race, can it be seen as merely humor, or can it be justified merely because the creator is black? Or moreover, can it be accepted by the mass? The idea of the new minstrel show in the film is created by an African-American, but the whole idea took place only because the producer's original ideas were rejected by his boss, his ideal shows were not "black" enough. This plot leads the audience to contemplate on the black subjectivity, that if a black person necessarily needs a white person to judge his "blackness." And moreover, questioning if black people still have not obtained the power, position, or social class to decide what they want in the media in the "white men's world." On the surface, excluding the race factor, the producer is simply following what his boss tells him to do, but there is much more to it, and the complexity of the relationship between the two in the text is worthy of analyzing.

Therefore, it is expected that the new millennium minstrel show becomes more than just a comedy show, but a theme of debate, a way of spreading racist ideology. Secondly, the constitutive difference between the old and the new minstrel show is the actors.

IV. Dunwitty vs. the Blacks, the Interplay of Class and Race

In Bamboozled, like many talented, ambitious and "upwardly-mobile" people of whatever race, Delacroix wanted to have a successful career, as well as the affirmation of his white boss and of the multi-racial TV audience. Thus he wanted to produce a hit show to prove his ability as a television program producer. However, he could not really satisfy his boss Dunwitty until he created the new millennium minstrel show.

DUNWITTY. The material you've been creating is too white bread. White

people with black faces. The Huxtables's, Cosby, revolutionary. But that's dead. We can't go down that road again.

DELACROIX. I don't agree. The Negro middle class does exist, and it's rich material for a dramatic series or sitcom.

DUNWITTY. I'm telling you it's not.

He goes to his desk, picks up Delacroix's scripts and starts throwing them one by one against the window.

DUNWITTY. The middle class black family moves into a white suburban enclave.

The middle class black family moves into a small Southern town that is run by the KKK. The middle class single black father raises his teenage daughter.

The middle class single black mother raises her teenage son. And so on and so forth. It's too clean, too antiseptic...

DELACROIX. ... to¹³ white? I still feel all of my scripts would make good shows. (10.6-33)

While Delacroix tried to explain and persuade his boss of using his scripts and ideas, they are being objected for being "too white." It is another irony as Dunwitty stated in B: "I'm blacker than you. I'm keepin' it real and you're frontin', trying to be white." (11.10-12). The way he purposely spoke Ebonics and slang was to emphasize his "blackness," which made it seemed like they have switched the color of their skin of each other on the surface, since Dunwitty is "keepin' it real" and on the contrary, Delacroix was "trying to be white." Dunwitty explained that he was authorized to use the derogatory term "nigger" because he is married to a black woman and they have interracial children together; it all the more displayed his stupidity and ignorance, for that no one is given the right to use such a racist term. From this aspect, Dunwitty's characteristic as a television executive is

¹³ I assume this is misspelled accidentally in the movie script, it is supposed to be "too."

shown, from his comments on Delacroix's ideas being "too clean, too antiseptic," it is easy to tell that he wanted a show that is vulgar and dirty, meaning a show of somewhat controversial themes, since controversy generates attention.

Moreover, Dunwitty describes that most of the audience as "deaf, dumb, and blind" (11.25-26) and "these idiots"(11.30), meaning the mass audience in his eyes, do not have the basic intellect to choose what kind of television program they want to watch, instead, they can be manipulated, controlled, and fed with anything that is on television without complain as long as one is applying the right method—the method of creating controversy—in order to make the show a headline-subject of the media, and then gaining attention of the audiences, and finally, winning the rating of the show, and the huge money from advertisers and sponsors. Another important message by Dunwitty is that he wanted a show that is black-oriented, because "the 'niggers' set the trend, set the styles"(11.28), meaning that as long as the show is contained of the "blackness" in his perception, that is, displaying the stereotypes of the black people, it will not only please him but also, the audience. As powerful as Dunwitty was, he appeared to be captious, rude, and self-centered; I believe Spike Lee wrote this character to satirize the media executives in reality that are willing to sacrifice anything to be on the top of the rating chart. As pathetic and ignorant Dunwitty seems in B, from the perspectives of marketing and business he is very successful, perhaps it is his scandalous attitude that pushed him to his position of television executive, and it is only right that he believes his instincts and past experiences of producing.

The interesting question is "why Delacroix"? As Dunwitty stated in the film: "I got some corny white boys and girls writing for me." (9.10-11), if that is the case, why does he need Delacroix to come up with ideas? Why could Dunwitty not just come up with some racist material himself and make the "white" writers on his payroll to incarnate his ideas? My theory is that if Dunwitty really felt as justified to use the word "nigger" as he said in the

dialogues between him and Delacroix, he could have made anyone to write. And since Delacroix's ideas and scripts were being thrown out of the window, what makes him any different from the "corny white boys and girls" writing for Dunwitty? The answer is the color of his skin. With all the "corny white boys and girls" writing for him, Dunwitty still needed a black man to write it, because even though close as he said he was to being black, he still was not, and no one is able to change the color of neither their skin nor their bloodline. Therefore, while he was trying to explain to Delacroix how he is able to use the word "nigger," that he is blacker than Delacroix, he is actually looking for identification. In other words, Dunwitty was not exactly as sure of himself as it seemed in the text. In fact, though the whole explanation in B about him using the N-word appeared to be aim at Delacroix, but in fact it was closer to a self-convincing monologue:

DUNWITTY. I understand Black culture. I grew up around black people all my life. If truth be told I probably know "niggers" better than you, Monsieur Delacroix. Please don't get offended by my use of the quote-unquote N word. I got a black wife and three bi-racial children, so I feel I have a right to use that word. I don't give a damn what Spike says, Tarantion is right. Nigger is just a word. If Ol' Dirty Bastard¹⁴ can use it every other word so can I.

(9.15-28)

The attitude he expressed toward Delacroix is not only ethnical, but also psychological. By the way he speaks, it appeared that it makes him superior than other whites to "know 'niggers'," or even superior to Delacroix, who was in his eyes, a white-washed black person. And Delacroix's reply on Dunwitty's opinion on him displayed the absurdity of reality he was facing in the text:

DELACROIX. I am an oreo, a sell out? Because I don't aspire to do

¹⁴ An African American rap artist who is known to speak and behave recklessly.

HOMBOYS FROM OUT OF SPACE, SECRET DIARY OF DESMOND

PEEIFFER, A PJ's or some as you put it, some "nigger" show? I'm a Tom?

I'm whiter than white and you're blacker than black? Is that what you think?

(11.13-20)

It is obvious that Delacroix did not intend to follow the stereotypical method of the famous black-oriented television episodes, and this is where his ideology clashes with that of Dunwitty. What Dunwitty thought was truly portraying the image of blacks were actually the stereotypes, and while Delacroix thought about breaking through and doing a black-oriented television show of new topics, he is accused of being a Tom. In "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois explained it the best with an example:

Suppose you were to write a story and put in it the kind of people you know and like and imagine. You might get it published and you might not. And the "might not" is still far bigger than the "might." The white publishers catering to white folk would say, 'It is not interesting'—to white folks, naturally not. They want Uncle Toms, Topsyies, good 'darkies' and clowns. (985)

It is amazing to see that the piece was written in 1926, but after so many years, the condition against blacks still exist nowadays. It will not be "black" enough of an idea, for that the show is produced or written by a white person. And this is the main reason Delacroix is chosen; that is to say, the character Delacroix can be viewed as a scapegoat, who eventually sacrifices by the end of the movie. Since Delacroix is black, it makes sense for Dunwitty to use Delacroix's skin color as an advantage to gain the authenticity he needs, while facing questions about the motives and contents of the show, a black person can defend the show much better than a person of any other race. In other words, Delacroix is not only the poster boy of the show, but also the one to take the blame, while Dunwitty sits behind the curtain and controls the situation, after all, Dunwitty is still the boss of Delacroix.

The characters in Bamboozled all had made some decisions and had to suffer the consequences by the end of the film, and their perspectives toward what they do change as the story goes on. It is similar to a journey of finding who they are, in other words, constructing their identities, and ultimately, understand there is only a blurry line between right and wrong. As Delacroix came up with the script of the new millennium minstrel show, he and Sloan both thought about recruiting the same cast, the street performers Manray and Cheeba who often showcased their talent near the building where Delacroix and Sloan worked.

These two did not have high academic degrees like Delacroix, but they have the enthusiasm for art, which they believe was the only way out for them to climb up to earn a better living in the society. They did not have a staple income, and they stayed at a condemned tenement building as squatters. Just when they got evacuated by the police, Manray left his tap shoes in the building, but could not return to get it for the police might arrest him. The next day while Sloan and Delacroix were outside of the building looking for them, they were also looking for Sloan and Delacroix inside of the building, being blocked by the security guards. When they finally met and Delacroix briefly explained that content of his job, stating that they will be paid for dancing and singing, Manray accepted the offer desperately and immediately. But Cheeba wanted more details, such as the accurate amount of money, and the style of the show, however, Delacroix ambiguously stated that it would be “different.”

From the dialogues, it showed how the two cooperate with each other as a team, and we could trace the initial personal traits of the two from their dialogues. Manray was the true artist; he was naturally gifted and loves what he does, his mind was basically focused on performing and making a living of it, but careless about details and lacked of the ability to analyze the pros and cons of his decision. But Cheeba was more sophisticated; in the text,

he described himself to be the “brain behind this outfit” (13.7-8) while Manray was “the feet” (13.9). This metaphorical description meant that Cheeba did the thinking and analyzing, while Manray solely concentrated on dancing. Therefore, it explained why Cheeba was the one to negotiate the remuneration with Delacroix, also, to realize that they needed to quit the show.

The rise of Manray and Cheeba made sense because they were truly talented and unique individuals, however, they represented the stereotypical black image until they decided to quit. Though they were gifted, they were also poor economically and uneducated, often being considered as the lower class by the mass, which naturally became a gift and a curse for them in the film, for that they did not have many choices of occupations, therefore, when it came to the opportunity for work, they were desperate for it. While they were still homeless, living in the abandoned apartment, they both dreamed of the luxuries of life, being able to buy an apartment and pay the bills. While one is under a critical living condition, it is difficult enough just to get by day to day; therefore, it is also hard to blame them for accepting the jobs, for that they were simply trying to improve their living condition. And as they faced the exploitation of the TV network for enlisting them as a part of the degrading minstrel show program, Manray and Cheeba achieved superstar status and things started to become different.

First, they were no longer economically dependent, for that their talents were recognized and they became national TV stars. In result to that; they were making huge amounts of money from the success of the show given by the profit generated from the commercial sponsors, who decided to invest money for advertisements. Therefore, Manray was able to live up to his dream and buy a house, their clothing and food were both taken cared of from the beginning as a part of the bargain to seduce them to join the show. The improvement of living condition gave them a chance to live more comfortably, moreover, to contemplate on

more delicate moral issues and responsibilities as artists which they never had to deal with before when they were poor.

Second, their attitudes toward performances started to change. In the very beginning, even though no dialogue could prove that if they loved performing or were it merely an approach to survive, through the frustration of not making enough money; they did not argue nor question the content of their performances prior to the new millennium minstrel show. It was obvious that they were in charge of the content of their street performances. However, after they started to participate in the minstrel show on TV, they were being talked into putting on the blackface, displaying stereotypical images and overall, being manipulated by the network. While Manray started to become short-tempered of the rest of the casts, and Cheeba decided to quit. The content of their performance was no longer the same, and even though they were financially successful, their consciences haunted them, and Cheeba was the first who could no longer tolerate himself for degrading his entire race. This crucial difference first led to the split of the two partners and the quitting of Cheeba, and then the breakdown and quitting of Manray, and eventually, the tragic death caused by the hatred of the Mau Maus—the pseudo-revolutionaries who did not have a clue of what to fight against and whatnot, also, using the wrong and extreme approach of violence.

The decisions of quitting their jobs showed the autonomy of Manray and Cheeba, it was a trait they did not obtain. By doing so, they resisted the manipulating of the white supremacy and subtracted themselves from creating misinterpretation of the African Americans—including themselves. On the other hand, to look at it from Dunwitty's perspective, Manray and Cheeba were hired not only because they were talented, but they were controllable. Therefore, once Manray decided to go against the system but refusing to put on the blackface, he was immediately abandoned, because that he was no longer a puppet for him. And from another perspective, Manray's position would soon to be taken by one of

the cast members Honeycutt, as Dunwitty stated, there were many just like him, therefore, what Manray did was nothing irreplaceable.

To Dunwitty, or any of the TV executive, Manray only stood as a very small part of the entire machine, and without Manray playing Mantan, the show could nevertheless go on by promoting someone else to replace Manray and still be successful, since all of the black Americans are alike according to their opinion. The talent of Mantan was no longer valuable when he was not obedient anymore. And this exposed how the words of Dunwitty contradicted with his previous statement about how much he knew black people, for that obviously he did not know anything about them. The contradiction totally displayed the ignorance of the white Americans in general.

The plot constructed by Spike Lee for Manray and Cheeba I believe was meant to show that, the black men in the United States are commonly represented in an inferior social class; therefore, they started off poor economically, and were neglected while performing with minimum audience supporting them on the streets. As they became employees of the TV network, the content of their show enforced the ideas on the mass that blacks were less like real human beings, for that the jokes of the minstrel shows were degrading and insulting to the dignity of black people, and it was unacceptable to permit the whites to call the blacks “niggers” by simply stating that the show was satirical. In “The contours of racialization” by Stephen Small, he clearly narrated the problems of misrepresentation of the blacks by giving examples:

. . . . The fact is that these individuals represent a tiny and unrepresentative section of the black community. And it is no joke the one finds so many of the television shows about black people to be situation comedies, many of them involving professional comedians and/or rap artists. “The Fresh Prince of Bel

Air,” “Family Affairs,” “Martin,” “Roc¹⁵,” and others. Collectively this contributes to the impression that black people are not to be taken seriously.

Where are the images of “racialized” hostility and exclusion? Of black resilience and strength, of moral courage and stamina, against all the odds? They are there, to be sure, but sandwiched infrequently and irreverently between this larger picture of sloth, undeserved privilege and hatred. (55)

Small also quoted Guerrero in Framing Blackness while stating that the overall impact of such stereotypical images is more difficult to ascertain. Guerrero wrote that:

. . . .the representation of black people on the commercial screen has amounted to one grand, multifaceted illusion. For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society. (2)

It was stepping over the boundary of satire for that it was supposed to have a message behind the content with good intention while it actually did not. And as soon as Manray and Cheeba decided to get rid of the authority of the white supremacy, they have two options: decide whether to be excluded from the show by quitting, or by simply getting fired. One way or another, Manray and Cheeba did not have the authority to make changes other than passively refuse to become a part of the racist network. Racially, they were the minority in the network; and artistically, they had no control over their performances. They were the employees, the authority given was very limited, and it was a take-it-or-leave-it situation for them. Even though the duo both decided to quit their jobs with different approaches, they could not stop the show from airing, nor could they change the perceptions of public opinions of the show, moreover, on Black Americans in general. This is exactly what Guerrero meant

¹⁵ They are the examples of comedy TV programs, sitcoms that portray black Americans’ lifestyles

by the African Americans were being subordinated, marginalized, positioned and devalued in the racial hierarchy, that is, to place black under the white Americans in society.

In result to the irretrievable damage they had helped produce, the Mau Maus decided to take action by kidnapping Manray and perform an open execution on the internet as revenge. However, though the Mau Maus claim they were black revolutionaries, they were confused of whom their true enemies were. They were simply making up targets to fight against, and created irrational theories to cover their ignorance. And in reality, they failed to “revolutionalize” anything, except for perhaps, changing the spelling of black to “blak,” which served no contribution to the social betterment of the progressing of the black Americans. The Mau Maus fell victims to the stereotypical propaganda and TV commercials that the TV executives originated; they were consumers of the Da Bomb malt liquor and the clothing line Timmi Hillnigger, and both products represented stereotypical portraits of the black Americans, and it was self-contradictory while the Mau Maus exchanged opinions about how they felt about the false representations of African Americans in Mantan—the New Millennium Minstrel Show, for that they were also supporters of the products that applied stereotypical images as their tools in order to achieve commercial success.

Also, Big Blak had asked his sister Sloan to give his rap group a chance to participate in the tryout for the casting in the New Millennium Minstrel Show, it was ironic how he was against the ideology yet he went for the tryout in order to gain exposure for the Mau Maus. In my opinion, the Mau Maus stand for the young black Americans who want to let out of their anger by rebelling against the suppression of white supremacy. However, the Mau Maus did not have the understanding of who their true enemies were, and their lack of knowledge led to the black-on-black crime—the death of Manray and the destruction of their entire squad. It was because that they could only see what appeared to be harmful to the

black Americans superficially—such as Manray; but on the contrary, they were not aware of the man behind the curtain—such as Dunwitty, or even Delacroix. The people with power and authority to make changes in the high positions of the TV networks were overlooked by the Mau Maus for that they did not know about their existence; neither did they obtain enough knowledge of how the media operated. Consequently, the lack of intellect and their recklessness led them to self-destruction.

Other than the final conflict between Manray and the Mau Maus, they had already clashed against one another, that is, when Manray was still Mantan, and insisted that he was right. While Mantan was being interviewed on TV, the host asked for his opinion on the controversy around Mantan—The New Millennium Minstrel Show, he simply answered that his motive was money. And the way he saw it, going against the system would not change anything, and “the game” would not play him if he went with the flow. Rhetorically, Mantan was weak; he was quoting simplistic rap lyrics to answer questions of the host. Moreover, Mantan did not understand when the host said “retort,” and his motto was basically about making money, and if the audience did not like it, they could change the channel or produce their own show.

Some of Mantan’s traits were shown from the interview. First, he did not receive too much education, which was the reason why he did not understand what “retort” was. Second, he value money highly, which was the reason why he put it as his first priority and no criticism could change his opinion. Mantan emphasized it repeatedly during the interview that he was poor and it was not fun to be homeless and jobless. According to Black Americans’ views of racial inequality: The Dream Deferred by Lee Sigelman and Susan Welch: “Unemployment is a heavy anchor weighing down black economic advancement, and the achievement of racial economic parity promises to stretch over many decades, rather than, as optimists once considered possible, occurring within the foreseeable

future.” (36-37) On the surface it seemed like the fact that Mantan found a job was supposed to be a positive move economically, however, with the help of media, the false image of black American he played on the TV screen damage all of the African Americans more than the economical value he created in comparison. The problem of black unemployment could be the reason why Mantan valued his job so importantly, because with limited opportunity, he did not have choices of what to do. Therefore, it made Mantan a convict but also a victim of the environment at the same time.

As the live interview went on, Big Blak called in to speak with Mantan, and from the dialogues, one could tell that the hostility Big Blak was holding against Mantan was not only personal, but also ideological, and the animosity between the two was shown in their conversation:

BIG BLACK. Microphone check one, two. One, two. Yo Travis, I be lovin’ yo show but Mantan you is foul. Why you perpetrating? You a sellout.

MANTAN. That’s our¹⁶ opinion.

BIG BLACK. You’re a traitor to the race. A tool for the caucasoids.

MANTAN. Why? Because I am successful? Because I don’t use “caucasoids” as an excuse for not fulfilling my dream?

BIG BLACK. I ain’t hearing all that noise. You getting played and you don’t even know it.

TRAVIS SMILEY. And Big Black from Brooklyn, what do you do?

BIG BLACK. What do I do?

TRAVIS SMILEY. What do you do?

BIG BLACK. I’m a revolutionary.

MANTAN. That’s a job?

¹⁶ I assume it is mistyped for “your”

BIG BLACK. That's a full time job, especially when sellouts like you are running around, acting insane. (111.4-111.37)

Even though the three (Manray, Cheeba, and Big Blak) were all unemployed, they did not share the same values. Big Blak was the most radical of the three, because even though he did not have a staple occupation with income (not including the fact that he claimed to be a revolutionary because realistically one could earn no salary for it), he believed that it was his first priority to fight the power, the governmental system of United States, and even though he was not fully aware of who his true enemies were, he kept his faith of revolutionize the society by making music. As Big Blak had stated himself, his rap group the Mau Maus had an underground following, however, he still wished to seek commercial success through the tryout for TV show. From this perspective, it was obvious that Big Blak saw no conflict against his "revolutionary mind" to participate in the tryout, or to soak himself in marijuana or malt liquor. In result to that, I assume Big Blak was not in fact a revolutionary as he claimed to be for that he still long for commercial success of his rap group, also, he was a constant alcohol and drug abuser. From his behavior, it seemed that he chose to live the lifestyle in order to escape from the harsh reality, and blamed the faults of himself not succeeding to the white people. On one hand, while Big Blak claimed that his job was a revolutionary, Mantan did not acknowledge that as a real job; but on the other hand, the job was supposed to pay one's bill, or at least with a offer of salary for Mantan. In short, it was the conflict of values between the importance of ideology and economy. In the end, Big Blak went from a revolutionary to a terrorist and finally, was killed by the police. His struggle to come up was unsuccessful.

As for Mantan and Cheeba, they were more realistic and secular in contrast to Big Blak. Despite of their doubts toward the proposal of the TV show, they took and offer because they needed the fame and the money, and that was what they wanted, at least initially. As the

show became successful and their stardoms grew, they believed that their social statuses had changed and their class had shifted, but in fact they did not. Though their conditions were improved economically, they were still puppets to be manipulated by the white executives, but as the show went now, their original ideas of values started to change. While they were becoming wealthy, the guilt of degrading the black race was haunting them. Their consciences were struggling against their affluent lifestyles.

Finally, Cheeba could not tolerate it anymore, and this awakening was declaring that he was no longer a puppet; moreover, he decided to put his self-esteem ahead of the money and quit. This move shook his partner Mantan, who was still blinded by the fame and money, since he was not ready to accept such a change, he refused to join Cheeba and stayed in the show. At this point, Mantan did not realize why his best friend was betraying him, and he unaware that he was actually bothered by the oppositions around him. His tempers turned bad, his patience was running out, and he could not figure out what was the issue. But Cheeba realized that the money they earned did not win the respect they wanted, and he felt wrong to participate in the show, therefore he quit. Being coming from the bottom of the society, they needed the money to live so they took the job; however, they found out that money did not matter as much as they imagined, one after another. Since Mantan was the star of the show, he was taking more responsibility, and because of that, he became the scapegoat of the show.

In my opinion, these characters narrated by Lee were representations of the lower class blacks. Some were like Big Blak, angry but also ambitious of doing something to change for the better; however, due to the lack of knowledge they fall victims to the white supremacy over-powering them as well. In We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, bell hooks provided an appropriate description for young black Americans like Big Blak, who held a hip-hop/street/revolutionary image:

Today's young and hip black male who fancies himself a radical, who is ready to throw down for the cause, is not talking about neo-colonialism, about global struggle. And he is definitely not critiquing capitalism; making rap music is his way into the system. . . .Hip-hop is the place where young black males can deploy the rhetoric Julius Lester¹⁷ identified as a central aspect of power. Black male hip hop artists who receive the most acclaim are bust pimping violence; peddling the racist/sexist stereotypes of the black male as primitive predator. Even though he may include radical rhetoric now and then, he cannot guide himself or anyone else on the path to liberation. More often than not he is simply nostalgic about the past or seeking refuge in a fantasy of cultural separatism that is not functional in the work world today. But to not understand neo-colonialism is to not live fully in the present. (59-60)

The others similar to Mantan and Cheeba, they went full circle to finally understand that they had walked the wrong path to improve their economical statuses, simply because that the dignity of an entire race was not an option of trade. And the deaths of Mantan and Big Blak in the film symbolized for their prices to pay, there was no other ways to make up for the damages they had done, or the crime they had committed. (the same goes with Big Blak) But it did not seem all pessimistic for the lower class blacks, if one realized soon enough, they could avoid tragedy from happening, Cheeba was the prime example who awakened from the fantasy and survived.

¹⁷ Julius Lester (1939-) is an award-winning African American author who had written books in many fields relating to black Americans.

Chapter 4: Symbolic Meanings and Transitions of the Names of the Characters

By way of emphasizing his explicit and implicit theme of “image” and “identity” in the film, in particular the problem of African-Americans own self-image, Spike Lee, who also wrote the screenplay, gives obvious symbolic meanings to the names of several of the main characters. Thus in a sense we can read the film as a sort of allegory in which, as in all allegories, the symbolic names—or in any case symbolic meanings, which are just made more explicit by their names—of characters identify them as “images,” now taking the term in a sense closer to that of “metaphor,” or perhaps “personification.” Examples of this would be the characters of Death, Virtue and Good Works in the medieval morality play *Everyman*, or Young Goodman Brown and his wife Faith in Hawthorne’s allegorical and moral tale “Young Goodman Brown.”

The names of all the characters in Bamboozled leave traces of who they are, these names carry certain indications of their personal characteristics, or metaphorically imply their transformation through the change of their names. Under most circumstances, the names coexist, and this double-ness brings multiple dimensions to the characters’ personalities. Most importantly, the name of a person is the initial identity of him or her. From the change of names, it proves that identity is not just the traditional concept. It is not rigid and unchangeable or produced by the characters such as ethnicity or gender; instead, it is constructed through the process of “becoming.” It is not a given, nor solely a product of the environment, but the result of the combination of history and culture.

I. Delacroix

First, I will start by analyzing the main character Delacroix. The name Delacroix does not seem like a common name for a black person, moreover, an American. As the film goes

on, Delacroix's dialogue between him and his mother Orchid Dothan, his real name is revealed:

ORCHID. If at first it's not what you want, just work that much harder, Peerless.

DELACROIX. Mommy, please don't call me that.

ORCHID. Son, Peerless is your name. Now you might be one of these Hollywood types, change your name and all that but Peerless Dothan is on your birth certificate.

DELACROIX. I know what's on my birth certificate. You heard from Daddy?
(39.1-12)

In the dialogue, Delacroix's real name—Peerless Dothan—is revealed by his mother, and apparently Delacroix does not want to discuss his motive of changing his name, while his mother assumed that he changed the name as a pseudonym in order to establish a new image and identity in the entertainment business. However, the image and identity Delacroix established outside of her house was irrelevant to Orchid, because Delacroix still remains her precious son Peerless to her. But Delacroix holds a different attitude while speaking to his father.

JUNEBUG. What do you want?

DELACROIX. I want to speak with you.

JUNEBUG. Go way, unless you got my money.

DELACROIX. It's me, Peerless. (71.13-16)

This was the only time throughout the film that Delacroix introduced himself in his real name Peerless. While his mother called him by the name, he felt embarrassed, but not to his father. The attitudes of Delacroix are completely different while facing his mother and father. In the final scene, Delacroix revealed his inner thoughts toward his parents as he started to contemplate about his life, and his relationship with them:

DELACROIX. As I bled to death, as my very precious life oozed out of me all I could think of was that I never made my father proud, my mother didn't count.
(134.1-5)

And then Delacroix went on to explain why he felt that his parents had different attitudes toward him, which explains on the contrary, why he held two standards while his parents called him by his name:

DELACROIX. Everything I did, no matter how great or small, was always extraordinary to her. With Daddy it was a different ball game. (134.6-9)

From Delacroix's monologue, it was plain to see that he believed his mother never cared if he was successful, because everything that he had done was always amazing to her, and therefore, he felt it was unnecessary to satisfy her expectations of him (if she had any expectations of him), for the standard was too low and not challenging enough. It might seem strange that in the dialogues between Delacroix and his parents, there were never specific expectations coming from Orchid and Junbug, but the invisible standards that Delacroix had set up for himself were always there. There were multiple reasons why Delacroix felt that he had never made his father proud. First, he revealed his admirations for his father in the voiceover monologue while he was driving back home after he visited him at the show. Delacroix stated that his father was the reason he got into the business in the first place, which he thanked him for.

In the same monologue, Delacroix described his father as a strong man with conviction, integrity and principles. However, he was not pleased to see his father performing in an obvious lower-rate club, getting drunk and unable to become more established or make more money. The complexity of emotions of Delacroix toward his father is a contradiction of both love and hate. Throughout the film, though Delacroix never officially stated in dialogues, he desired for the approval of his father—it was evident as he stated before his

death that, he never made his father proud. According to The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, “Lacan defines desire as what is left of absolute demand when all possible satisfaction of needs has been subtracted from it. In other words, desire is what by definition remains unsatisfiable” (1282). The approval of his father was his desire—that remained unsatisfiable. However, this desire contradicted with his voiceover monologue in the car, that is, the disapproval of his father’s lifestyle. If he was telling the truth from the heart, that, his father was a failure, then why would he care for his father’s approval so much, to the point that it was his last thought? For that reason, I believe that instead of viewing the part of voiceover monologue in the car as a depreciation of his father, it could be view as his complain for his father’s achievement, for that Delacroix worshipped him for being convicted and talented. The complexity is definitely larger than an ordinary father-and-son relationship. As Delacroix stated that Junebug was the reason that he got into the business, therefore, Junebug did not only exist as a father but also a mentor of Delacroix.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, the definition of the word “peerless” is “better than all others of its kind,” (1117) all children’s names are decided by their parents and from his name we are able to tell what his parents want to be—to be better than all others of his kind, that is, to be better than the rest of the African-Americans. By the way Delacroix abandons his name Peerless, it can be interpreted as a metaphor that he has given up of being better than the people of his race. Moreover, he trades his old name for a new one, a new identity for himself while he entered the television business, which was Delacroix. According to Campbell, the origin of the name Delacroix is French, and its meaning is “of the cross. It denoted one who lived near a cross symbol, or near a crossroads,” and this symbolic meaning of the name is deeply related to the tragic fate of the character Delacroix in Bamboozled.

The cross is known as the symbol of Christianity in the world, which had long existed

before the birth of Christian religion. However, since the western world is mainly dominated by the Christian religion, the interpretation of the name Delacroix will be discussed within the range of Biblical allusions. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning which the symbol cross carries. The cross is first created as a instrument of torture for convicts, usually intended to kill; it is made of two wooden splats that layers one upon another vertically and horizontally, and the convict who is being tortured will have his/her both legs tied to the lower end, and each arm tied upon one end horizontally, while the head is fixed at the higher end. The most well-known figure who is crucified on the cross is Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament of the Bible, the cross symbolizes for the penalty of death, but in the New Testament, it also symbolizes for the redemption. From this perspective, it means that the death of Delacroix was already predicted while he decided to use this name, and his death by the end of the film was the ultimate redemption for his deeds, and to expiate for the wrong he had done.

The martyrdom of Christ symbolized for different issues in each Testament in the Bible, but both issues can be connected to the death of the character Delacroix in Bamboozled. Because in one aspect, Delacroix was shot dead by Sloan by the end of the film, which corresponded to the symbolic meaning of death penalty; and in another aspect, it also corresponded to redemption. The most important factor that indicated Delacroix's downfall originated from his naïve intention of getting fire and proving his point that, the network was only interested in producing TV programs that contained black stereotypes. His attitude toward the new millennium minstrel show is a journey of four stages: first, treating it as a tool to get out of his contract; second, worrying about the outcome of the show and the reaction of the mass, nervous, very cautious, but still thought he had the authority to control the show as it develops; third, started to accept and enjoy the success the show without considering its influence on people; and fourth, causing the tragical result of the death of Manray, Big Blak

Africa, and himself. The meaning of death penalty in the symbol of the cross does not only reflect on Delacroix, but other characters in the film as well, each executed by different people, but somehow connected to one another as if it was a chain reaction exploding by the end of the film, I will discuss this portion later on in the thesis. Delacroix tried to make up for the loss of Sloan, for that she had lost both her brother and her lover because of the creation of Delacroix, and by doing so, he took the gun and wiped off Sloan's fingerprints after she shot him, and asked her to go, in result to that, Delacroix was left watching the tape Sloan had put together to face his faults and contemplate, while he bled to death. And his death was his last redemption.

II. Dunwitty

However, it was not only Delacroix that one is able to seek for metaphorical meanings that lies within a name, the rule could be applied in the names of other characters in Bamboozled as well, this aspect also includes the villain in the film, Dunwitty.

The personal distinguishing characteristics of Dunwitty include arrogance, self-righteousness, shamelessness, astuteness, lack of morality and so on. His name can easily be interpreted into two adjectives, 'dumb' and 'witty.' For 'dumb,' I believe it indicated his stupidity and know-it-all attitude revealed in his conversation with Delacroix while speaking of how much he knows about black people, and his given right to use the 'N' word. In result to TV rating and sponsors, he was the accomplice to Delacroix, Manray, and Big Blak Africa's deaths, however, it was clear that he did not care, because while Manray were being kidnapped by the Mau-Maus, he still shamelessly introduced his sponsors of the minstrel show on TV soon after his hypocritical speech. At first, he talked as if he really cared about Manray's safety:

DUNWITTY. Hello, my name is Thomas Dunwitty. I am the senior V.P. of

the entertainment here at CNS. I come to you with a heavy heart. . . . This abduction is cowardly, vile, sinful and dastardly act and I promise these creeps will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. This is an attack on the American way of life. . . .We here at CNS offer a \$100,000 cash award to any information that leads to the safe return home of our friend, Mantan.

(126.8-22)

Interestingly, Dunwitty called Manray by his stage name instead of his real name, from the perspective, it is obvious that he did not really care about Manray as a person, but Mantan as a product of merchandise which he had invested and produced. However, since Manray was already fired by Dunwitty, he had already become useless in the eyes of him; therefore, Dunwitty's fake concern for Manray is revealed. And it became even more obvious as Dunwitty goes on with his speech:

DUNWITTY. Help us and in addition you will get a guest-starring speaking role on the next Mantan—The New Millennium Minstrel Show, plus an added bonus: a lifetime of 125% Malt Liquor. Let's you get ya "freak on", as well as a whole wardrobe of Timmy Hillnigger Active Git Toe Wear. Mantan, may God bless you. . . . (127.1-10)

Though Dunwitty wanted to act as if he cared, but deep down his heart, he did not. It would seem very out of place to advertise for malt liquor and clothing line while one's ex-employee was being kidnapped and soon to be executed, it was simply inappropriate, cold-blooded, and business-oriented. As soon as Manray resisted blackening up, he was no longer profitable to Dunwitty, and as Dunwitty threw Manray out of the TV building, he said that he could easily find many replacements to take his place. Since the show and the character Mantan were all established, any black performer who was willing to make a fortunate could take Manray's place. Therefore, Dunwitty handled it professionally, went

on the TV to make his statements as a part of his job, but his heart really felt neither sorrow nor pain for the loss of Manray.

After theorizing Dunwitty's cold-blooded attitude to chase high rating, though it is hard to admit, it was 'witty' of him from the perspective of his bosses, the network owners. Because he was willing to do anything to earn the TV rating and commercial sponsors, his "whatever it takes" persona was what the success of the TV network company needed. It was undeniable that Dunwitty's instinct was right about the new millennium minstrel show becoming a hit, he knew what it takes to please and attract attention from the audience and to satisfy the TV executives, his bosses. Therefore, his name describes his personality perfectly; the traits of dumbness and wittiness coexist in him; a ruthless boss, but very competent of his job.

III. Manray and Cheeba

Dunwitty did not change his name in the film, meaning that his identity remained the same throughout the entire movie. On the contrary, Delacroix did change his name but the progress of how and when he did it did not show in the movie. Also, Manray and Cheeba did change their names, and they were the best examples of the shifting of identities because the process is clearly shown in the film. What makes it more fascinating is that they did not officially change their names, but used them as stage names in performances. At first, Manray and Cheeba did not realize that the change of names will influence them so much, symbolically; change what and who they stand for. However, they were required to "get used to the new names," therefore, they were to be called by the new names even when they were off stage:

DELACROIX. I want you to start using the name Mantan and not Manray if you don't mind.

MANRAY. Why?

DELACROIX. You have to start getting into your character. (36.12-17)

From the dialogue, there are some issues that can be pointed out. Delacroix's excuse for Manray to start using the name off stage cannot be merely to get into character. The name of a person is an identity, the simplest way to get to know a person, and moreover, recognize a person as. By doing this, Delacroix is intentionally forcing Manray to abandon his prior identity as Manray, the street dancer who was living homeless; into a brand new character he built, which is a reminiscence of the former comic and actor name Mantan Moreland¹⁸, who is known for taking roles of stereotypical black people who appeared to be easily frightened and exaggerating his reactions while performing. If Manray obeyed Delacroix's request, his state of mind was destined to change for that it was Delacroix's ideology that he was following, and in result to that, he would become lost of who he was. Though he did not care too much about the controversial content of the new millennium minstrel show, but this is the way Delacroix came up with to ensure that he will truly accept the show psychologically. Therefore, the meaning of "getting into your character" does not only function to let Manray play Mantan better while he is on stage performing, but also, to make Mantan's way of life and characteristics be digested by Manray, so while he gets off stage, he does not question about the materials of the show, for that he will be assimilated through the adoption of the new name. The meaning of "getting into your character" goes both ways for Manray, both on stage and off stage. In other words, Manray will have to be Mantan even in reality, his image as Mantan will be spread throughout America, and while people get to know the character he plays on television, he will act coherently in reality, losing his previous characteristics as a real person, to become a fictional character in real life.

¹⁸ Mantan Moreland was a comic and an actor most popular in 1930s and 1940s. Some of his roles are now considered to be controversial, as he often plays a superstitious, easily frightened manservant, ready to flee at the first sight of danger. However, many consider these roles to be just a minor part of Moreland's prolific career, which included many early all-black films as well as dozens of mainstream comedies, mysteries, and horror movies.

This is Delacroix's way to invade Manray's mind and to manipulate how he thinks. As harmless as this request seemed in the very beginning, it was not fair at all for Manray for that he was out of options. He wanted to work and make money so badly that his desire to earn money had blinded his thoughts, there was no room for second guessing Delacroix's intention, and therefore, he had to take the offer. On the contrary, it was very despicable of Delacroix to take advantage of his own kind, but could one really blame him? For Delacroix claimed that he thought he was in charge and the situation was under controlled until his guidance was no longer needed for the network since the hit TV program was created. In fact, he was in no position to fight against the authority from the executives, and his challenge had turned into a monster he created with bare hands.

As the persuasion continued while the duo was under negotiation with Delacroix, Cheeba wondered about who Mantan was, his curiosity made Delacroix unveil who he wanted Manray to be. Delacroix came well-prepared, since he already had the video footage of Mantan Moreland prepared in the VCR already. As he showed Cheeba and Manray the scenes of Mantan Moreland, Cheeba and Manray became hesitated, while Delacroix emphasized by saying that he was funny, Cheeba objected right away, while Manray was plain skeptical about the idea of inheriting the name Mantan, for that it was no longer pure performance of dancing nor acting. Manray failed to realize that if he inherited the name, the history of the stereotypical black actors and the degradation of African Americans would be inherited as well. On the other hand, by the way Cheeba reacted, it was obvious that he did not know anything about who Mantan Moreland was, or did he know what kind of influence it would bring to them to participate in such a self-degrading show. And during the negotiating process, Cheeba merely thought about asking for more money, for it was their first priority to achieve economical sufficiency. From this perspective, one can easily tell that they were simply desperate for wealth, and for the money, they were willing to

sacrifice anything—including who they were and what they stood for, and it appears to be that the morality of people only come after they have gain wealth, but it was not exactly the case. They were not aware of the consequence of the show, just like the director of the show Delacroix. Since they only thought about the deal from merely the economical perspective, they would accept any deal that was brought to the table in order to become rich, and to improve their living condition. Manray hesitantly said: “Mantan?” was because he still had doubts, and Delacroix answered with the same exact word: “Mantan!” to stand firm on his position, and to persuade Manray as if he knew what he doing was right. In result to that, both Manray and Cheeba were fooled, and Delacroix’s mission was completed. The transformation officially started for them, Manray was from then on Mantan, and Cheeba became Sleep’N Eat. And the history of the suffering of the African Americans was re-awakened while the duo was unaware of.

As the plot developed, the new millennium minstrel show was approved by Dunwitty and ready to air, and as soon as it was broadcasted, it became a huge success unexpectedly. The more successful the show was, the more influence it began to show on Manray and Cheeba, as well as Delacroix. While Sloan noticed that she needed to make moves to prevent the tragedy from happening, she tried to talk to Manray:

SLOAN. This is a nice place. It must have cost a pretty penny.

MANTAN. Sloan, I got it like ‘dat.

SLOAN. Oh you do, huh?

MANTAN. Just a little somethin’ somethin’.

SLOAN. I hope you save a little somethin’ somethin’.

MANTAN. Gots no intention of ending up broke.

SLOAN. Y’know, at the beginnin’ of the century, African-American had to perform in blackface. You ever heard of Bert Williams? He was a great artist.

MANTAN. No, before my time.

SLOAN. You don't read, do you?

MANTAN. Never read a book in my whole life.

SLOAN. Maybe you should start.

MANTAN. Maybe I need to do a lot of things.

SLOAN. Bert Williams and the rest, they had to black up. They had no choice.

They were considered 3/5 of a human being. Did you know that's written in the Constitution of the United States?

MANTAN. Why all of a sudden are you flippin' on me? This blackface thing was part of the deal from the git-go. Don't even try to play it like you ain't a part of all this. You down with Delacroix.

SLOAN. I just don't want you and Cheeba to get hurt.

MANTAN. We can look out for ourselves. (97.1-98.9)

One thing that was worth noticing is that the character's name Manray was changed to Mantan in the script of the film as soon as their discussion with Delacroix ended in the previous dialogue; therefore, the transformation of identity from Manray to Mantan was certified. In this dialogue between Sloan and Mantan, the setting was at Mantan's new apartment, which looked nice and pricy. Mantan said to Sloan that he "got it like dat," and the new place was just "a little somethin' somethin'" showed that he was aware that he was becoming wealthy, and the money spent on the apartment did not concern him too much. Sloan noticed it, and said she hoped he was saving money instead of spending it all. However, Mantan's attitude was perfunctory toward Sloan's concern, as Sloan continued to try to inform him the history of blackface, and the struggles African-American had gone through, Mantan slowly became impatient and finally lost his temper near the end of the conversation. He became defensive since he had noticed Sloan's intention was to arouse his

awareness by enlightening him how the blackface is heavily related to racism and the inequality of the past. Mantan fought back accusing Sloan that the whole idea of blackface minstrel show was conspiring by both Delacroix and Sloan, since she also took part of the plan, Mantan stated clearly that she had no right of being righteous toward him about the issue as if it did not involve her. The reaction of Mantan proved that he was having a guilty conscience. While Sloan simply answered that she just did not want Mantan and Cheeba to get hurt, what she really meant was “please quit now before you get hurt,” and on the other hand, Sloan really did not have the authority to call the shots nor make decisions of the directions of the show for that she was only an assistant of Delacroix. In result to that, she could only try to persuade Mantan in a soft tone and manner, because she also knew that she was in no place of judging him, but in order to make changes of the worsening situation, the least she could do was to enlighten Mantan with her knowledge. Apparently, they both know clearly at heart that blackface minstrel show is a fragile subject to handle, and the situation was slowly getting out of control, but as Mantan’s stardom grew, so did his ego. Even though he had doubts of the content of the show, he was not to let go of the success just because Sloan’s slight warnings, he was finally living the luxury lifestyle he once craved for while he was poor, and it was the dream come true for him—materialistically at least. So at this moment while Sloan confronted him that the meaning of the show was much more than a paycheck, the hard fact was difficult for Mantan to swallow.

Since Mantan was the star of the show, he was more famous, more successful, but on the contrary, more stress, in comparison to the rest of the crew. The show was receiving recognition of many awards, and in one scene during practice, Mantan was losing his patience during the rehearsal with the Pickaninnies for that they could not keep up with Mantan’s choreography. And as Cheeba showed up, Mantan called for a break and their conversation went on:

CHEEBA. I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid¹⁹.

MANTAN. What are you talkin' about?

CHEEBA. Jim Jones²⁰, y'know. I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid.

MANTAN. Meaning?

CHEEBA. I'm out.

MANTAN. Good. I've got a broken back from carrying you from all these years anyway.

CHEEBA. So that's what you've been doing?

MANTAN. Damn Skippy²¹.

CHEEBA. You're in this up 'till your neck.

MANTAN. Don't shoot me, I'm just the piano player.

CHEEBA. You can walk away. We both can.

MANTAN. Yeah, that's easy for you to do. You never had any talent.

CHEEBA. I'm so tired of you running that. I always worked hard for you.

You think I'm a leech, a kling-on, I quit.

Cheeba walks out.

MANTAN. I'm the star of Mantan, so you do that. Quit, walk away. And don't come crawling back, either. (104.1-23)

From this dialogue between Mantan and Cheeba, it was easy to tell that their partnership was falling apart since they no longer share the same values. Cheeba sensed that the content of the show was not right and wanted to quit, and while Mantan heard it, he reacted as if he did not care at all, moreover, he blamed Cheeba for being cumbersome. He was no longer

¹⁹ "The Kool-Aid" is referring to the poisonous drink that Jim Jones persuaded his followers to us, and by "I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid, it is basically saying "I am not going to kill/destroy myself." See footnote 8 for Jim Jones..

²⁰ Jim Jones (1931-1978), the founder and leader of Peoples Temple, which is notorious for one of the biggest mass suicide in human history, over 900 people were dead.

²¹ Of course.

the friendly Manray who simply wanted a chance to showcase his talents on dancing and performing, but the acrid, aggressive Mantan who was willing to point a finger on anyone for standing in his way to fame and fortune.

This was the second time someone approached Mantan trying to talk him out of the show, first time by Sloan, and second time by Cheeba. Both attempts to persuade him to quit failed, and both conversation ended as Mantan became heated and started to accuse the opposite party. It was clear that Mantan did not like, and refuse to think about if it was right of him to portrait the African-American people as the way he did. The two attempts were similar but different in some ways. The first time, while Mantan was facing Sloan, he was flirting with her since he admired her, but as Sloan kept pushing on the subject of blackface minstrel show until Mantan lost it, however, Sloan did not walk away from him. Sloan's concern did not make Mantan push her away; though he was being defensive of the subject, their bond was still strong, perhaps stronger than before. Mantan still stood up for her while Delacroix decided to fire her, it was not until he found out about Delacroix and Sloan had slept together that he decided to neglect her. The love triangle between Delacroix, Sloan, and Mantan will be further discussed in the paragraphs later.

Back on the subject of the two quarrels, Cheeba confronted Mantan that he could no longer act as if it was fine to participate in the show, therefore he wanted to quit. And Mantan reacted evenly more aggressively than when he faced Sloan, he turned his defensiveness into aggressiveness. As Cheeba revealed his unwillingness to be in the show and stated that they could both walk away from the show, Mantan started to accuse Cheeba for having no talent, and had been tired of "carrying Cheeba on his back" throughout the years. To look at this situation from Mantan's perspective, it seemed as if his best friend from the beginning had betrayed him, and he could not sympathize nor understand it. In result to that, he became angry and talked recklessly stating that he was the star, and he

wished Cheeba would not come back begging to work with him again.

The strong conflict between the success of the New Millennium Minstrel Show and the failure of Mantan's morality was clashing. On one hand, Mantan was making money, the television executives were happy, the rating was great and the show was extremely popular, the audience was crazy about the show; on the other hand, he was continuously being persuaded to quit by his intimate friends, who he thought would always stand by him since the beginning. The conflicts confused him, and as much as he wanted to be successful, he could not bear to be questioned. The transformation from Manray to Mantan is different from all the other name changes by other characters, because Mantan would become Manray again as the story went on. None of the other characters have their names changed in Bamboozled from A to B then back to A again. The meaning behind the resurrection of Mantan's former identity is that he rediscovered his true self, his consciousness awakened and he finally refused to be a buffoon for the White television executives, degrading him as well as the entire Black race to entertain the audience.

During the journey of participating in Mantan—the New Millennium Minstrel Show, Manray turned into Mantan for the fame and wealth, but through the journey, he found out about the importance of not letting people take control of his freedom for money, not to degrade himself and his own race. The key person that helped him realize this aspect was Sloan.

From the previous dialogue between Mantan and Sloan that I had quoted, it was the first time Sloan tried to make Mantan realize the importance of acquiring knowledge and understand the history behind the blackface minstrel. As the story went on, Delacroix tried interfering Sloan's relationship with Mantan for both professional and personal reasons. From the professional perspective, Delacroix thought that the straight-forward attitude Sloan carried toward the show would be a negative influence to Mantan, and that she should be

more cautious of the words she said to Mantan. In other words, she was not supposed to be too honest of what she thought about the content of the show to Mantan in order to keep Mantan controllable, from Delacroix's stand, which was also the stand of the executives of the TV station. However, it was hard to judge whether Delacroix truly believed that Sloan was derelict of her duty, or if Delacroix was merely trying to interfere with Sloan and Mantan's relationship for his personal reason—being jealous and emotional because Sloan was growing close to Mantan. There could be a possibility that Delacroix only came up with the excuse to keep her away from Mantan. However, Delacroix's strategy did not seem to work, as he accused Sloan of being too forthright toward Mantan, Sloan fought back by telling him that he should try it sometime. In the dialogue, there are several issues to be pointed out, as Sloan and Delacroix went on with their conversation:

SLOAN. That which has been hidden in darkness is now in the light. This bucket of blood.

DELACROIX. You can talk all that mumbo jumbo if you want but your hands are much²² bloody. I know where I made my big mistake. I have a general rule,
never get involved romantically with someone crazier than you. (113.4-13)

There were several objects that Sloan metaphorically spoke of in the dialogue that can be interpreted. First, the bucket of blood symbolized for the conflict, the pain, the hate, and suffering of the black people in the past, it also stood for the evil intention that initiated the New Millennium Minstrel Show, it stood for the cruel facts that Delacroix had sold out himself as well as his own people. Second, what Sloan meant by “hidden in darkness” and “in the light” was that the true meaning behind the show was hidden by Delacroix, camouflaged in the name of satire. The truth is—the whole idea of creating the show in the

²² Erratum; “much” here should be “just as.”

beginning was to make the point that Dunwitty and the TV executives would only produce shows that display African-Americans stereotypically, and the New Millennium Minstrel Show was the ultimate example of downplaying Black people by reminding them of the unjust slavery era in the past. As the show started to attract more audience and attention from the media, the protests against the show and even violent threats were made (Sloan's brother—Big Blak, also the Mau Mau clique, as well as the protestants marching on the street).

Interestingly, after Sloan fought back against Delacroix, Delacroix reacted the same way as Mantan did while Sloan talked to him at his new apartment. They both said that Sloan was held responsible for the situation of the show as much as Delacroix and the TV executives, for that she was also a part of the whole television system. Notably, this was the second time Sloan being accused of being an accomplice. Sloan's advices for others were taken offensively because both Mantan and Delacroix had guilty consciences of what they were doing, they did not fully believe in the content of their jobs. Therefore, the insecurities inside of them made them grew suspicious of the good intention of Sloan, since they could not assure that what they did were morally correct, therefore, Mantan and Delacroix were psychologically unstable.

After the heated conversation between Sloan and Delacroix, Sloan was requested not to see Mantan besides work related issues. Mantan was furious about the decision Delacroix made of firing Sloan, and as he stood up for Sloan stating that she was the hardest working person he knew, Delacroix counterattacked Mantan by alluding that Sloan only got her job because she was willing to sleep with people to reach her goal, also called her an opportunist. This incident led Mantan to confront Sloan about her relationship with Delacroix, as Sloan told the truth about her previous relationship with Delacroix; it was difficult for Mantan to accept. Mantan was blinded by rage and feeling of distrust; as he felt used and betrayed by

Sloan, but Sloan realized that Mantan was being manipulated by Delacroix, so she asked if he was a puppet for Delacroix. As simple as the question was, Mantan failed to answer it, for that he refused to face the fact that he had been manipulated by Delacroix all along, ever since he agreed to participate in the new millennium minstrel show. And Sloan's question finally woke Mantan up. In result to that, Mantan decided not to hide behind the motive for money anymore; he was fed up with the show, fed up with blacken up his face, fed up with self-degrading and being manipulated—he stood up against Delacroix and the television executives. And through rejecting the manipulation of the system, he returned to his previous identity Manray:

DELACROIX. Mantan, we got a show to tape.

MANTAN. My name is Manray, goddamnit.

DELACROIX. Kook and the Gang²³. It's Manray. Let's do the taping. You go back to your dressing room, get dressed and blacken up.

MANRAY. I'm not playin' myself no mo'.

DELACROIX. How you sound? hint

MANRAY. I won't do it anymore.

DELACROIX. Manray, I'm very sorry about ya boy Cheeba and Sloan. Believe me, it gave me no joy pulling ya coattail about her, just lookin' out for a brother. I feel you, all this stuff happenin' at once but you can't let it affect your work. You gotta be professional.

MANRAY. I'm always gonna be that. But I ain't doing no more buck dancing.

DELACROIX. No costume. No blackface.

MANRAY. No. No. (120.5-121.1)

During this conversation, Mantan officially returned back to Manray on the script as

²³ "Kook and the Gang" is referring to "Kool and the Gang," an American band that plays funk music. Delacroix misspelled the name of the band purposely to suggest that "the name" is not so important.

soon as he stated his name was Manray instead of Mantan to Delacroix. Manray was sick of being a character of the New Millennium Minstrel Show even when he was off stage, he rediscovered who he was through the quarrels and fights, clash of ideologies. The metamorphosis of going from Manray to Mantan then back to Manray did not merely mean returning back to who he was as a person, because obviously he had learned a lot of lessons through the journey. So while he became Manray again, he was no longer the naive street dancer who only wanted fortune and fame from the start, he had come to realization that a person's pride and dignity could not be bought by money, and that was why he refused to keep putting on blackface, and it was also the reason he could no longer persuade himself to hide behind the name of satire to degrade himself, as well as his entire race.

Metaphorically speaking, the character Mantan was the twisted creation of Delacroix, it was a lifeless role made out of void—which was exactly why Sloan asked if Mantan was a puppet for Dela, because only a lifeless puppet would be manipulated by other people, without having a second opinion about it. Therefore, the transformation of changing from Manray to Mantan was to change from being alive to dead. The strings attached to the puppet were the money, controlling every move Manray made. The orders were sent from Delacroix, who was also a puppet for the television executives. And Delacroix, was somewhat similar to Mantan, also being controlled by the money. Through the layers, one can easily see the distinction of class; both Mantan and Delacroix are victims, being exploited by the television corporate company. And I believe it was one of the messages Spike Lee tried to send that the Black people are being exploited—in spite of the education or how high a position the black person might hold in his career, it would be difficult for her/him to resist the manipulation of the White supremacy—either directly or indirectly.

IV. Sloan

Through the change of names, the identities of the characters in Bamboozled shifted from one to another, and the audience got to see the transformations not only of their names, but their state of minds. However, there was one main character that remained with the same name, she was Sloan. Not only was she the only main character who did not change her name in the film, she was also the main female character. Sloan was a neutral character, her name did not consist metaphorical meanings like the previous characters I had discussed. In the film, it was difficult to tell whether if she was rooting for Delacroix or wishing for the freedom of Manray while the two conflict against each other; however, she had intimate relationships with both. Sloan's position remained like her name in the film; she was always the one questioning another person if he was doing the right thing. And her questions reflected what the audience felt as they contemplated. For example, since she was Delacroix's assistant, she was entitled to discuss with Delacroix about the idea of the New Millennium Minstrel Show, she would ask if it was the right thing to do, or if Delacroix wanted to abort the plan and just quit his job. However, she was in no place to stop anything for that she had no such authority to change anything in her position, the most that she was able to do was to give advice. And Sloan did actually support the idea of Delacroix in the beginning, and lied to Manray that the material of the New Millennium Minstrel was fine. But she was stuck in an awkward position. Though she would not totally agree with every decision that Delacroix or the TV executives had made, her identity as the employee would not allow her to oppose the orders, for that she wanted to keep her job. Yet, her identity as an African-American would conflict against her identity as a TV network employee, for the material of the show consisted racist content. The more attention the show received, the more Delacroix grew arrogant, and in result to that, Sloan started to notice that Delacroix's stand was shifting—he was no longer faking that he wanted the show to be

on air—Delacroix had finally got the taste of success, and he wanted to keep it, even if it cost the dignity of African-American people. Therefore on one hand, she wanted to voice her opinions and stop the show, but on the other hand, she could not do so for that it might jeopardize her career. She never had a name change throughout the film, and even though she remained as who she was, she already had triple identities which function upon one another—her gender as a female, her race as a black person, and her occupation as the television network employee.



Conclusion

Stuart Hall talks about the problem or difficulty of experiencing oneself as one really “is” and one’s life as one actually lives it, given the omnipresent and inescapable power or politics of representation:

Moreover, we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside of representation. We have only, as it were, to express what we already know we are. Instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield ‘how life really is out there’ as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured. It will not be a mystery to you that I think that “black” is none of those things in reality

(472-473)

Yet J. M. Favor in Authentic Blackness: does want to emphasize a black person’s everyday experience of his or her racial identity, giving this just as much cultural significance and value as the “legal status” of blackness, of being black: “The legal status of blackness, however significant, is no more culturally important than people’s everyday lived experience of their own racial identity” (1)

But the lived experience of one’s own racial identity, especially if one is the member of a minority group, e.g. a black within a predominantly white American society, clearly involves the experience of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “double-consciousness,” a sense of doubleness, of being both black and white. Du Bois speaks of two identities, two warring ideals in one dark body, which might suggest that one is somehow either black *or* white but cannot really be both, at least not harmoniously. However, Stuart Hall in Critical Dialogues

in Cultural Studies stresses that blacks living in a mainly white society may potentially be both black *and* white, thus making a more harmonious sort of accommodation to their situation. Incorporating an idea of Paul Gilroy and taking the U.K. as an example of how to solve the problem of the “two warring ideals” of black people, Hall writes:

To encapsulate what Paul Gilroy has so vividly put on the political and cultural agenda of black politics in the United Kingdom: blacks in the British diaspora must, at this historical moment, refuse the binary black *or* British. They must refuse it because the ‘or’ remains the sight of *constant contestation* when the aim of the struggle must be, instead, to replace the ‘or’ with the potentiality or the possibility of an ‘and’. That is the logic of coupling rather than the logic of binary opposition. You can be black *and* British, not only because that is a necessary position to take in the 1990s, but because even those two terms, joined now by the coupler ‘and’ instead of opposed to one another, do not exhaust all of our identities. Only some of our identities are sometimes caught in that particular struggle. (472)

Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled deals with the complex problem of Black and White identities and self-images in a mass-media-driven, a mass-media obsessed U.S.A. at the turn of the 21st century. In particular it deals with the ways in which African Americans see themselves both as what they (both as an ethnic minority and as individuals) “really” are—which is puzzling, hard to know—and as whites see them (or as they think whites see them). The film takes this very serious issue of the “problem” of Black identity and self-image in the contemporary U.S.A., and portrays various sorts of inter-racial and (especially) intra-racial violence, including the violence of disagreement and anger and above all the violent killing of Manray by other blacks. But it also deals with these issues in a comic and ironic, satiric and self-parodying way, which could hardly be avoided given the central trope of a self-parodying blacks-in-blackface “New Millennium Minstrel Show,” itself

presented as a live dramatic show within a taped TV show within a movie. Hence the depth, complexity and “puzzlement” (as in “being hoodwinked and bamboozled”) of Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled.

Most of the black characters in the film seem to be unsure of who they really are, and Lee describes their various journeys, both physical and spiritual, in quest of their true identities. On the one hand, the blacks are often “bamboozled” by the surface appearance of a thing (including themselves) or situation and seem misjudge its deeper or truer meaning, thus making poor ethical judgments about how to act or what to do. For instance, Manray is an excellent dancer who perhaps becomes too concerned about his own wealth and especially his fame, his “image” as a great new black “star,” an entertainer—even if he also knows, on another level, that the New Millennium Minstrel Show is making an important statement to both black and white television viewers. But in starting to see himself mainly in terms of an image that is projected onto him by white TV producers and huge white audiences hungry for new, young black performers, Manray also starts behave not like his original “self” but as if he were someone else, a kind of white-media-created monster. On the other hand, the blacks in the film are also misunderstood by others, by whites but especially by other blacks. They may be accused of “misrepresenting” their race (by both blacks and whites) when in fact they are trying to represent it as honestly as they can; they may be accused of not “keeping it real” when in fact they thought they were.

Of course, that each race or ethnic group has stereotypes of its racial or ethnic others is an old problem, and Lee knows well that whites have their stereotypical views of blacks—as being either entertainers, athletes or criminals, etc. But in Bamboozled Lee is taking this familiar problem to another level by focusing on the ways in which blacks are either forced to fit the whites’ stereotypes (stereotypical images) of them—stereotypes largely created or at least reinforced and intensified by the mass media—or to question those stereotypes, those

self-images that have really been created by their Others, and perhaps purposely go against them, contradict them in their actual behavior. Or it would be more accurate still to say that all the black characters in the film are to some degree questioning the images and roles that have been given to them, and then to various degrees either “acting” out those images/roles or acting out different ones of their own choosing.

As for the satirical function of mocking the minstrel show tradition of whites in blackface performing the roles of black slaves, as N. K. Denzin says in Reading Race “the film speaks to a larger truth about the culture’s unwillingness to face up to its own racist past” (185)—where we could perhaps read “facing up to” as “taking seriously.” For in his film Lee is also presenting, in encapsulated form, the history of this white stereotyping of blacks. This stereotyping began in the days of slavery—an institution itself “stereotyped,” in a sense, by the old-time minstrel shows and, on another level, on the “new” minstrel show in Bamboozled. Indeed, the stereotypical images given blacks, which became their own self-images, themselves “enslaved” them in another way: this too is Lee’s point. Thus the film can also be seen as presenting a brief history of the American “media” and their power to numb audiences, to instill them with mindless stereotypes, beginning from the old minstrel shows in the era of black slavery in the southern USA—though the shows were also often performed in the North—and ending with The New Millennium Minstrel Show, presented as a live (and taped) TV show in New York City.

Of course, by presenting a variety of African American “types” as we find them at the turn of the 21st century, a much wider variety no doubt than could have been found 100 or 200 years earlier, Bamboozled also shows the limitation, the stupidity of all such (manly but not only white) stereotypes of blacks. Even if Manray and Cheeba play characters who are relatively one-dimensional, the actors themselves, the actors who play them (on stage and in the movie) are obviously somewhat more complicated, in part because they are living in the

complex, multiracial US society. Arguably, Delacroix and Sloan are more complex in certain ways than Mantan and Cheeba. Or rather, they are intentionally presented by Lee as being in a sense “more complex” as a function of their higher educational level and “social class”—in other words, Lee is subtly and ironically reminding us, as a function of their being (according to the standard stereotypes) more “white,” more fully assimilated into “upper-middle-class” white society.

But Lee also obviously knows that Delacroix could not *really* be judged on absolute terms as being “more complex” or more “multi-dimensional” than say Mantan and Cheeba—though admittedly it may be harder to see “complexity” in the character of Big Blak. And this is another complex issue of (white and/or black) stereotyping, “imaging” or perception-of-identity with which the writer-director is playing or negotiating in his film. Even Big Blak is not presented as being an *entirely* one-dimensional, simple-minded, cartoon-like creature—but then, neither are the “comic” characters or roles of Mantan and Sleep’N’Eat as performed by Manray and Cheeba in their show. After all, these are all real human beings, and real human beings are very complex. Indeed, the “identities” even of the most normal and “well-adjusted” people are in certain ways fragmented and disjointed. As Powell puts it in A Rhetoric of Symbolic Identity: An Analysis of Spike Lee’s *X* and *Bamboozled*:

To be aware of individuals’ many communicative selves is to understand the enormous collective social composition that influences who people are. As such, people must recognize that their identities are disjointed, and frailty can be disconcerting, especially when there is nothing absolute on which to ground identities. When Mantan reacts to Cheeba’s decision [to quit performing in the show], he is astonished. To Mantan, Cheeba’s identity is firmly grounded in the character Sleep ‘n Eat. Cheeba is a distant memory. Outside of the character

Sleep 'n Eat, there is no other possible identity for Cheeba. Mantan is never aware of the dynamic, frail, and disjointed nature of identity, until the latter parts of the film. (80-81)

In the film, as we have seen, when Delacroix brought his proposal for a new show to his boss Dunwitty, he assumed that Dunwitty would be shocked by such overtly racist material and fire him, thereby proving Delacroix's point that "the networks don't want black people on television unless they are buffoons." However, Dunwitty—being a kind of stereotypical white businessman in some respects but refreshingly unpredictable in others—loved the idea; more unexpectedly (and ironically) still, the New Millennium Minstrel Show's ratings quickly zoomed. And this is when Delacroix started to question what he really wanted. His intentions shifted as the movie's plot thickened—the further he went with the project, the more he felt himself being assimilated into the white, success-oriented society, felt himself becoming "white." No longer hoping to get fired for his radical "blackness," Delacroix became increasingly excited by his role as creator of the hottest new show on TV and by the fame and fortune that came with this. After all, Delacroix's black comic-performer father had never given him the recognition he craved.

Ironically, the most obvious evidence that Delacroix was "becoming white" was the fact that he started to laugh while watching his own new millennium minstrel show. In the beginning when the show was first taking off, Delacroix as the father and nurturer of this delicate baby watched it very seriously; Sloan on the other hand—perhaps already more "white"—was laughing and telling him to lighten up. Yet as time passed and the awareness of his own "success" became increasingly clear to him, Delacroix could also easily laugh at this show, which also implies that he did not feel it really degraded blacks. Was this because he was now "thinking like a white"? If so, does this again imply that all well- educated, intellectually sophisticated blacks (e.g. also Sloan) must be "thinking like whites"? Isn't this

just another (black-generated) stereotype?

It is indeed true that many viewers of the film, whites and no doubt at least some blacks, will find themselves laughing uncontrollably at the Minstrel Show scenes with their Mantan-Cheeba dialogues and antics, for these are—at least on one level—very fine comic scenes. But it is also true that Delacroix did not fully grasp the fact that he had become white, become a sort of Uncle Tom. He seems to have forgotten that he had initially designed the show to shock and anger blacks who saw it on TV, had even perhaps (unconsciously?) designed it to appeal to certain middle-class or upper-middle-class white “comic values.” Again we see the complexity of Lee’s irony. Furthermore, of course, the commercial “white” success of the show—which only fueled the blacks’ hatred of it, their anger—finally backfired on both Delacroix and Manray, leading to their deaths and to the deaths of the Mau-Maus.

