

Reçu le: 07/09 / 2023 Accepté le: 20/01 / 2024 Publié le: 21/01 / 2024



## A Critical Gaze on Racial Reflections in Spike Lee's Cinematic Works

✍ Ghezzal Sihem

[sihem.ghezzal@univ.tlemcen.dz](mailto:sihem.ghezzal@univ.tlemcen.dz)

Tlemcen University / Algeria

نظرة نقدية على الانعكاسات العنصرية في أعمال سبايك لي السينمائية

✍ غزال سهام

[Sihem.ghezzal@univ.tlemcen.dz](mailto:Sihem.ghezzal@univ.tlemcen.dz)

جامعة تلمسان / الجزائر

**ABSTRACT:**

Black American filmmakers have played a significant role in shaping both independent and mainstream cinema within the United States. One of the key figures in 20th-century Black Cinema who has made a substantial impact with socially challenging, radical, and politically contentious films is the enigmatic Spike Lee. This study delves into various perspectives of film theory, examining the critical and controversial nature of Hollywood's portrayal of the Black community. It also addresses the prevalent racist stereotypes and biases they encountered while shedding light on how African American directors responded to these misguided trends. Consequently, this research delves deeply into Spike Lee's masterpieces, exploring different contexts and highlighting pivotal moments in selected films that critically addressed the racially biased Hollywood industry. Ultimately, it aims to provide insights into the repercussions of racism against African Americans and the evolving landscape over time.

Keywords: Hollywood, Racism, Representation, African American cinema, Spike Lee

## ملخص البحث

لعب صانعو الأفلام الأمريكيون السود دورًا مهمًا في تشكيل السينما المستقلة والسائدة داخل الولايات المتحدة. أحد الشخصيات الرئيسية في السينما السوداء في القرن العشرين والذي أحدث تأثيرًا كبيرًا في الأفلام الصعبة اجتماعيًا والراديكالية والمثيرة للجدل سياسيًا هو سبايك لي الغامض. تتعمق هذه الدراسة في وجهات نظر مختلفة لنظرية الفيلم، وتدرس الطبيعة النقدية والمثيرة للجدل لتصوير هوليوود لمجتمع السود. كما أنه يتناول الصور التمثيلية والتحيزات العنصرية السائدة التي واجهوها مع تسليط الضوء على كيفية استجابة المخرجين الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي لهذه الاتجاهات المضللة. وبالتالي يتعمق هذا البحث في روائع سبايك لي، ويستكشف سياقات مختلفة ويسلط الضوء على لحظات محورية في أفلام مختارة تناولت بشكل نقدي صناعة هوليوود المتحيزة عنصريًا. في نهاية المطاف يهدف إلى تقديم نظرة ثاقبة لتداعيات العنصرية ضد الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي والمشهد المتطور مع مرور الوقت.

كلمات مفتاحية: هوليوود، العنصرية، التمثيل، السينما الأمريكية الإفريقية، سبايك لي

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Black American cinema from the pioneering work of Oscar Micheaux to the Hollywood success of Spike Lee, has played a significant role in shaping American film, both in the realms of independent and mainstream production. The portrayal of the Black community within this cinematic genre has been a focal point, driven by the unique aesthetics of Black cinema. This study aims to illuminate this category within the broader history of the film industry, focusing on the perspectives and approaches of the renowned African American director, Spike Lee.

Spike Lee's substantial contributions over time have greatly contributed to a fresh understanding of African American cinema. His work has effectively shed light on the pervasive issue of racism in American society, providing a platform for Black films and their creators. Notably, African American representation in major motion pictures has sparked controversy within the film industry. Spike Lee, as one of America's most provocative filmmakers, has spearheaded a renaissance in this field. His advocacy for African-American culture is evident in his remarkable body of work, including films such as "*Do the Right Thing*," "*Malcolm X*," "*Bamboozled*," and "*BlacKkKlansman*," among others. These films have critically examined the deeply ingrained racism within the predominantly white Hollywood industry, which had previously co-opted Blaxploitation movies. Through challenging and unconventional films, Spike Lee has defied expectations, highlighting how depictions of Black people have evolved in response to the historical, social, and political landscape of the times. This evolution reflects the prevailing ideological concepts within the dominant film industry.

## 2. Black American Cinema

Black cinema, also known as African American cinema, emerged in the early 1900s, predominantly showcasing black actors in leading roles and giving rise to various film genres, including 'Blaxploitation' (Sims, 2020, para. 1). In recent times, the prominence of numerous black celebrities has highlighted the significant contribution of Black Americans to American film, revealing the complex trajectory this contribution has followed. Throughout history, popular culture and the entertainment industry have frequently portrayed African Americans negatively, perpetuating stereotypes and harmful tropes.

From the inception of motion pictures and television, African Americans have often been depicted as deviant, violent, unintelligent, or reduced to comic relief. For instance, the film "*Gone with the Wind*" (1939) prominently featured infamous stereotypes of Black men such as the Tom, the Sambo, the coon, the brute, the pickaninny, the minstrel, the sexualized Jezebel, and the mammy figure for Black women (Bogle, 2001). Even in the mid-twentieth century and into the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary portrayals in movies and mini-series continued to reinforce negative perceptions of African Americans through voyeuristic depictions, as seen in "*Boyz n the Hood*" (1991).

Consequently, African American films have been created with African American casts, primarily targeting African American audiences to combat these derogatory stereotypes and worn-out tropes that have plagued Black American cinema from its inception in moving pictures to the modern landscape of streaming content, film, television, and mass media. The dominant industries and audiences alike have often ridiculed such cinema, perpetuating a hegemonic, patriarchal manipulation of meaning. The representation of African Americans in American cinema has been profoundly influenced by the prevailing political climate, serving specific functions for the film industry. It

became a dream factory that allowed African Americans to perceive the entertainment industry as a means to enhance their economic and social standing. Unfortunately, due to Hollywood productions and the world's perceptions, coupled with prejudiced portrayals and political influences, unfavorable perceptions persisted. Notably, "*The Birth of a Nation*" (1915), a silent film directed by D.W. Griffith, glorified the Ku Klux Klan and reinforced the notion of blacks as inferior humans, marking one of the most disturbing portrayals of African Americans in cinematic history.

Subsequently, African American filmmakers from independent studios like the Lincoln Motion Pictures Company initiated a wave of films presenting blacks in genuine, multifaceted roles. The black/white racial binary not only characterized the history of racial discourse in the United States but also permeated the realm of cinema. In response to outdated perspectives, African American cinema vividly brought the stories of Black people to life, while the black independent film movement paved the way for black film production and filmmakers to carve out their own space in the industry.

### **2.1 Blaxploitation Films**

Interestingly, these types of films received praise for depicting Black individuals as heroes and central figures in their own narratives, despite persistently featuring stereotypical characterizations. Initially intended for an urban African-American audience, Blaxploitation movies quickly transcended racial and ethnic boundaries, gaining widespread appeal (Anderson, 2018, para. 8). Hollywood, as the world's largest film industry, recognized the potential advantages of expanding the Blaxploitation audience across diverse racial demographics. These biases are closely intertwined with the ongoing racism and discrimination faced by African Americans in the United States.

The rise of Blaxploitation in the 1970s marked a significant turning point in the history of cinema. This genre challenged existing film stereotypes by portraying confident Black men in control of their own destinies, but it also had a detrimental impact on the aesthetic representation of Black culture, depicting them as a source of trouble, a thorn in the side of America (Aftab, 2005). This trend was accompanied by a range of perspectives on race-related films in general, such as : the creation of 'Racial Stigma' is actively fostered by Hollywood executives and insiders who perpetuate the false belief that Black films are less likely to succeed than white films, especially in international markets. They place an undue emphasis on the global box office performance, downplaying the achievements of films featuring Black actors and directors that excel domestically but intentionally limiting their exposure worldwide. Furthermore, these films often serve as catalysts for conversations about injustice.

Throughout the history of cinema, racist stereotypes have been deeply embedded in media. Identifying and acknowledging these racial stereotypes is one strategy to combat them. In this context, Black artists bear responsibility for their role in reshaping Black America through their contributions. However, in the early twenty-first century, the genre continued to generate controversy due to the strong and self-reliant nature of its main characters, reinforcing negative stereotypes (Sims, 2020). Interestingly, Spike Lee, a newcomer in the African American filmmaking scene, deviated from the traditional path set by Oscar Micheaux, the prolific African American director who aimed to offer alternative perspectives in a more appropriate fashion.

### **2.2 Race theory**

Race is a term with deep historical roots, shaped by culture and established within a larger dominating framework. Despite race theory revealing its constructed nature, racial biases and

prejudices persist as a pervasive aspect of daily life, considered both culturally and visually as the norm. Examining the history of American cinema inevitably entails exploring the history of race and the portrayal of African Americans. This was and continues to be a remarkable milestone in film history, incorporating innovative techniques far ahead of their time and captivating audiences nationwide, even during an era when white performers in blackface were a prevalent form of entertainment. Nonetheless, a common stereotype portrayed black individuals as collaborating with white dominance, while also caricaturing the "tragic mulatto," a mixed-race character consistently depicted as doomed and used for comic relief.

Regrettably and sadly, the entertainment industry in Hollywood has produced numerous demeaning portrayals for individuals from minority backgrounds. This involves perpetuating and reinforcing racist ideas within mainstream culture by resurrecting harmful stereotypes, including but not limited to depictions of minorities as members of the mafia, drug dealers, savages, criminals, or terrorists, thus unfairly associating these negative narratives with all minority communities in the United States.

In the early 1950s and 1970s, so-called "race films" shared a common spirit of promoting "racial uplift" and offering educational "counter-programming." However, by the 1980s, filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton had developed nuanced portrayals of Black life from multiple perspectives, using engaging scenarios and contentious scripts. Other cinematic works adopted this approach as a sociological framework, introducing the concept of race theory as a novel way to analyze how characters and themes in movies reflect different racial groups, stereotypes, behavioral patterns, and more. "Representation can mean many things in many different settings," as one critic put it, "but for the purposes of Race Theory and cinematography, representation generally describes how a single image of an ethnic character can manipulate the way we form stereotypes and how we consider that ethnic group as a whole" (Coleman, 2014). Any misrepresentation can inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes about the entire race.

### **3. African Americans' Representations in Cinema**

The persuasive elements found in Hollywood storytelling and visual spectacle not only challenge certain spectatorship theories but also influence the aesthetics of independent Afro-American cinema. It's essential to keep in mind that African American cinema is often considered a part of the broader American cinematic landscape. Consequently, just as Hollywood incorporated early Black cinema, it similarly absorbed and influenced the blaxploitation genre, perpetuating certain perspectives that persist to this day. This is why actors like Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and the recent Oscar winner Will Smith have faced growing criticism of the Academy Awards and its ongoing failure to recognize and honor African American performers with nominations and awards.

Despite achieving Academy Awards across various categories such as acting, screenwriting, and music production, individuals within the visual entertainment industry still face persistent challenges in securing meaningful roles on both television and cinema screens. Consequently, many Black American directors have endeavored to demonstrate that African Americans can transcend the predefined stereotypes, while amplifying diverse voices and narratives, thus offering a crucial counterpoint to the prevailing mainstream storytelling. In fact, contemporary Hollywood productions now depict African Americans as potential saviors, both for America and the global audience, reflecting an evolution in the portrayal of Black characters by addressing intricate societal issues. While there have been commendable efforts to present more nuanced and sophisticated aspects of

Black culture in recent works, some directors and actors argue that, even in the twenty-first century, television and film continue to perpetuate outdated caricatures of African Americans. Notable examples of more recent films featuring significant roles for African American actors include "*The Great Debaters*" (2007), "*The Help*" (2011), "*Django Unchained*" (2012), "*Twelve Years A Slave*" (2013), and "*Selma*" (2013).

Although recent films and TV shows leaning on long-established stereotypes, there is optimism that the entertainment industry will gradually move away from relying excessively on clichéd portrayals of African Americans, in order to create blockbuster movies and popular television series. In contrast, films such as "*The Black Panther*" (2018) and "*Us*" (2019) signal a fresh era for Black cinema. These debut films offered a compelling departure from the typical Hollywood stereotypes, serving as a source of inspiration for many Black filmmakers, producers, critics, and others who sought to challenge narrow character archetypes and offensive depictions (Staples, 2012). However, it was Spike Lee, in particular, who pioneered the path for other African American filmmakers, encouraging them to enter the world of filmmaking with the aim of rectifying negative portrayals and shedding light on the contradictions and ideologies underlying them in diverse ways. While some may still observe a distinction between Hollywood's "new" and "old" perspectives on race, there is a growing belief that the industry has made strides in the right direction, with numerous productions showcasing a reduction in racial tensions within Hollywood.

#### 4. Spike Lee's Mode and his Impact on the Black American Cinema

Spike Lee, whose real name is Shelton Jackson, is a renowned filmmaker recognized for his exploration of the African-American experience, his willingness to challenge racial stereotypes, and his tackling of controversial subjects. Additionally, Lee is acknowledged for providing unprecedented opportunities for black actors and actresses within the American film industry (Aftab, 2005). What makes Lee's artistic vision particularly captivating is its profound and multifaceted complexity. Through movies such as "*School Daze*" (1988), "*Do the Right Thing*" (1989), "*Malcolm X*" (1992), "*Bamboozled*" (2000), "*BlacKkKlansman*" (2018), and "*Da 5 Bloods*" (2020), Lee has approached filmmaking as an inclusive, financially demanding, and collaborative "venture."

His work is often linked to his public persona, which presents him as a mysterious figure operating at the outskirts of both mainstream and alternative cultural productions. Upon delving deep into several of Lee's films, it becomes evident that most of them are credited with reinvigorating African American cinema by proving the commercial viability of movies centered on African American experiences, crafted by African American creators (Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, 2022). His impact on the industry also extends to introducing numerous African American talents and reinvigorating many others. However, his approach to directing and character portrayal has given rise to problematic issues, including the way race is portrayed, prevailing stereotypes, racism, oppression, and the depiction of African Americans on the silver screen all of which stand in contrast to Hollywood's established policies and norms regarding the representation of African Americans. He holds various roles, including that of a moral crusader, a champion of African-American heritage, and a controversial figure. Nevertheless, he is widely recognized as a trailblazer in the realm of African-American civil rights within the film industry. The Library of Congress has selected the majority of his works for inclusion in the National Film Registry due to their profound cultural, historical, or artistic importance (Chow, 2019).

##### 4.1 Reflections on Spike Lee's Masterpieces

Spike Lee has a lengthy history of making films that criticize racist structures in the United States. He is noted for bringing lightheartedness to serious issues such as inequality. However, it also makes allusion to present racial tensions in the United States.

In his 1989 film "*Do the Right Thing*," the director boldly confronts the cultural dynamics surrounding race, directly engaging with issues like representation, racial injustice, urban gentrification, and police brutality. Remarkably, the film's portrayal of the dominance of white culture was so precise that some analysts speculated it might even spark racial unrest, as if merely shedding light on these inequalities would lead to violence (Ugwu, 2021). This postmodern masterpiece solidified his reputation as an artist and a visionary filmmaker. To this day, it remains a complex, conflicted, and truly unique piece of art that continues to challenge and provoke audiences whenever it is screened.

Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), which emphasizes how gangsta rap, fashion, and advertising promote negative images, is another film that has come to be regarded as a classic for skewering racial prejudice. Lee conceived "*Bamboozled*" as a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of film and the 50th anniversary of television. In its portrayal of blackface and the racist imagery pervasive in American audio-visual history, the film encompasses every conceivable racial stereotype. Notably, American critic Roger Ebert criticized Lee's decision to utilize blackface, stating that it overshadowed any intended message. "Blackface is so conspicuous, painful, and emotionally charged that it obscures the underlying message of the person wearing it," (Sharman, 2020). This satirical comedy features an ensemble cast and takes a no-holds-barred approach in conveying its outrage.

From the very beginning, the creation of the film "*Malcolm X*" in 1992 ignited controversy, and it became a personal mission for Spike Lee, who had long held deep admiration for the renowned black leader. The movie chronicles *Malcolm X*'s journey, starting from his humble rural beginnings and spanning through his evolving role as an activist in his later years. While Spike Lee's "*Malcolm X*" deserves recognition for reintroducing a historically marginalized figure to popular culture, it goes beyond that. The film serves as a counter-hegemonic response to prevailing narratives, which have persistently upheld white dominance even in stories predominantly centered on African Americans, despite ostensibly good intentions. Spike Lee aspires to demonstrate that an entirely black-produced film, created by a black individual, can still possess universal appeal, as he articulated in a New York Times interview (Ugwu, 2021). This text holds significance in understanding Afrocentric principles that challenge the ideological biases of mainstream Hollywood cinema, as well as the ongoing cultural endeavor towards social equality in the United States.

"*BlacKkKlansman*" is not the only film in 2018 that managed to find a glimmer of hope amidst the sorrow while addressing the issue of racial justice in America. Spike Lee's successful summer release is centered around the true story of Ron Stallworth, an African American police officer who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado during the 1970s. However, what sets this biographical crime thriller apart is Lee's desire to once again attempt to heal America's deep-seated racial divisions. This remarkable film received six Academy Award nominations and stands as a significant and renowned piece in cinematic history for its unique portrayal of a role reversal between white and black individuals. By presenting racism as a complex interplay between the absurd and the terrifying, Lee enriches the movie by incorporating impactful monologues from anti-racist activists, references to historic instances of racism in film, and montages of contemporary material.

Spike Lee is on a mission to use film to successfully represent the texture of African-American

life and to draw attention to the various shadings of their existence. In doing so, he transcends White one-dimensional depictions of Blacks, Blackness, and Black life. As a film director, he clearly fits into this framework: an active individual who has discovered his self-expression for resistance through his films. Exactly what Hall refers to as the struggle "against a powerful culture" (Ontiveros, 2014). Lee's characters engage directly with Black audiences, delving into aspects of the Black psyche that remain elusive to or are avoided by White viewers. Consequently, his portrayal of fresh and nuanced images of Black men and women may offer a novel perspective on their contribution to cinematic representations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, Spike Lee plays a crucial role in shaping a Black artistic and ideological framework that starkly contrasts with the prevailing culture. This contribution is significant as it marks the emergence and validation of progressive Black viewpoints on a grand scale. Black cinema has always been closely tied to societal issues within the Black community and has consistently served as a representation of Black aspirations, evolving over time. Spike Lee is dedicated to using film as a powerful tool to authentically depict African-American life and shed light on the diverse facets of their existence (Massood, 2011). Through his groundbreaking works that challenged the dominance of white cinema, Spike Lee's influence on the film industry opened doors for other ethnic filmmakers to share their own cultural narratives. Ultimately, he facilitated their engagement in broader discussions within the film industry, reaching wider audiences and contributing to the enrichment of culture.

## 6. Bibliography List :

1. "African American Cinema ." (2022). *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film*. Retrieved from: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-american-cinema> (Accessed on :13/05/2022).
2. Aftab, K. (2005). "Spike Lee Filmmaker & Screenwriter". *NYS Writers Institute*. Retrieved from: [https://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/archives/lee\\_spike.html](https://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/archives/lee_spike.html) (Accessed on:13/05/2022).
3. Anderson, T. (2018). A look back at the blaxploitation era through 2018 eyes. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from : <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-blaxploitation-superfly-20180608-story.html> (Accessed on:11/05/2022).
4. Bogle, D. (2001). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
5. Chow, A. (2019). See the 25 additions to the National Film Registry for 2019. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/5747503/national-film-registry-2019-additions/> (Accessed on: 20/05/ 2022).
6. Coleman, R. R. M. (2014). *African American viewers and the black situation comedy: Situating racial humor*. Routledge.
7. Cunningham, V., Brody, R., & Colapinto, J. (2021). Spike Lee sees the parallels. *New Yorker* .Retrieved from: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/spike-lee-sees-the-parallels> (Accessed on:20/05/ 2022).
8. Diawara, M. (1993). Black American cinema: The new realism. *Black American Cinema*, 3-25.
9. Hall, S. (1981). The whites of their eyes: Racist ideologies and the media. *Silver linings: Some strategies for the eighties*, 28-52.
10. Massood, P. (2011). *Black city cinema: African American urban experiences in film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
11. Ontiveros, R. J. (2014). *In the spirit of a new people: the cultural politics of the Chicano movement* (Vol. 6). NYU Press.

- 12.** Perkins, E. (1990). Renewing the African American cinema: The films of Spike Lee. *Cineaste*, 17(4), 4-8.
- 13.** Ugwu,R.( 2021). Spike Lee and the Battlefield of American History. *The New York Times* retrieved from:<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/movies/spike-lee-da-5-bloods.html> (Accessed on:05/05/2022).
- 14.** Race and cinema. (n.d.). *Oxford Bibliographies*.Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0127.xml> ( Accessed on:May 22, 2022).
- 15.** Sharman, R. (2020 ). African Americans in Cinema. *Uark*.Retrieved from <https://uark.pressbooks.pub/movingpictures/chapter/african-americans-in-cinema/>.(Accessed on:May 22, 2022).
- 16.** Sims, Y. (2020). “blaxploitation movies”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/blaxploitation-movie>(Accessed on:05/05/2022).
- 17.** Staples, B. (2012). Black characters in search of reality. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: [https://www.wikifox.org/en/wiki/African-American\\_representation\\_in\\_Hollywood](https://www.wikifox.org/en/wiki/African-American_representation_in_Hollywood). (Accessed on:11/05/2022).