The Prison of Popular Culture: Rethinking the Seventy-Fourth Annual Academy Awards

by Donna Murch

“It is not a movie that everybody is going to accept because it’s the truth. It’s a hard reality.”

– Director Antoine Fuqua on Training Day

In both private and public conversation, a loud silence reigned after this year’s Oscars ceremony. Friends and family greeted the unprecedented wins by Halle Berry and Denzel Washington with indifference. While their awards for roles in Monster’s Ball and Training Day received press coverage, it, too, was decidedly muted. Some critics remained tight-lipped, many strained to express enthusiasm, while others were openly skeptical. In the mainstream press, this awkwardness reflected, at least in part, an uncertainty about how to mix a sober discussion of race with the usual light banter about dresses, money, and insider intrigue. What should have been an historic victory rang hollow. To make matters worse, the most biting coverage of all came from members of the black press. So why did Halle Berry’s emphatic “SEVENTY FOUR YEARS” fall largely on deaf ears?

Erin Kaplan summed up the general disappointment of many when she remarked wryly for the LA Weekly, “It was Negro Night at the Oscars. The academy made history in giving the big awards to Black actors who between them portrayed a gangster and a ho. What’s it all mean?” Her critique calls attention to how larger issues of representation frame the seventy-fourth annual Academy awards. Given the myriad performances by black actors that the Academy has ignored over the years, their choice of Monster’s Ball and Training Day as vehicles is striking.

Both films exhibit an almost defiant attitude toward African Americans’ lived experience of race in the US. Let’s just consider their premises, one rural and one urban. Deep in the heart of Dixie, a black woman, Halle Berry, seeks release in the arms of a cracker prison guard after he supervises the murder of her husband. While in Training Day, in South Central Los Angeles, a young white cop risks his life to protect communities of color from arbitrary violence. The premises purposely distort and even invert relations of power and responsibility in the most contested arena of racial politics today: police and prisons. In both Monster’s Ball and Training Day white law enforcement is absolved, forgiven, and humanized at the expense of fully realized black characters. One film offers the promise of black sex as redemption, the other revels in images of destructive black masculinity. Taken together, these two films serve as an ideological valorization of white male power and authority that utilizes racial difference as foil.

The struggle for representation remains one of the most profound aspects of the African American search for freedom. In terms of popular culture, the fight for representation has a dual aspect. The first focuses on hiring and casting. This includes structural parity—integrating film unions as well as sets to increase African Americans’ representation at all levels of the industry. The sec-
ond aspect is the more difficult one. It is as a contestation over symbolic representations, of ideology and control over one’s image. Issues of stereotype and racial myth reside in this domain. This year’s awards ceremony brought these dual goals of representation into conflict with one another. The Academy rewarded individual actors at the expense of larger goals of symbolic representation. This is why there has been such a half-hearted response to these wins.3

While the artistic significance of Monster’s Ball and Training Day is questionable, they do reflect enduring themes of contemporary racial politics. These films hearken back to archetypes of black images that represent black masculinity and femininity as extremes, as overdetermined, and one could even argue, as monstrous. Erin Kaplan invites viewers to:

Look a bit beyond the dazzling significance of the awards themselves—and in these victory-starved times, that can be tough—and you have the dull residue of two performances that, for all the thespian elaborations by Washington and Berry, are at their core ironclad black stereotypes that have been with films and pop culture so long, we don’t question their viability as real characters anymore (if we ever did). The roles were not so much created as occupied by the latest people willing to spend two or three months to shoot them.1

Although Kaplan clearly identifies the “eternal return” of stereotypes, it is important to recognize the uniqueness of the current moment. While racial myth is frustrating in how it stops time and retells the same old stories, it also changes, adapting to the needs of the present moment. Ideologically Monster’s Ball and Training Day bridge an older history of stereotypical images with a new investment in the penal system—the primary arena of racial contestation today. Just as blackface minstrelsy served as the cultural counterpart to Jim Crow, dramatizations of crime, prisons, and policing thrive in the post-industrial era. As the black population fights to maintain its economic relevance, popular culture has become obsessed with thug life and its disciplinary antidote—incarceration and penalization.

While the surveillance and incarceration of black people has remained continuous throughout the history of Africans in America, the United States is currently verging on record levels of imprisonment. The U.S.’s current prison population exceeds two million, and over half of those incarcerated are African American. Political scientist Manning Marable argues that, “A new leviathan of racial inequality has been constructed across our country.”5 A dense web of prisons, integrated through state and federal cooperation, houses a snowballing percentage of North America’s populations of color. One in three young black men is “under criminal justice supervision on any given day.”6 The numbers involved are so immense that this ever-expanding penal system has surpassed de facto segregation as the greatest obstacle to racial equity.

Historically, the drive towards incarceration has been fueled by stereotypical perceptions linking race and crime. Mass media has played a crucial role in the maintenance and perpetuation of racial myth. At times it can be difficult to disentangle the conventions of mass culture from specific political agendas, because the two often mutually reinforce one another. In the 1980s, during the “backlash” period of the Reagan and Bush presidencies, vigilante movies like the Death Wish and Dirty Harry sequels exploded in popularity. Similarly, one need only point to Willie Horton to demonstrate the electoral utility of media myth. Just as The Birth of Nation recast American history to make lynching appear as an inevitable response to black lawlessness in an earlier era, contemporary crime drama and “ghettotainment” normalize violent police incursions into communities of color today.

In the present moment, racial narratives have become even more deeply embedded not only in fictions of crime, but also of punishment. Halle Berry’s cry of “seventy-four years” referred to the time elapsed since Hattie McDaniel’s win for her portrayal of Mammy in Gone With the Wind. The character of Mammy encoded white Southerners’ memory of slavery with the recognition that the majority of black women in the Jim Crow
era worked as domestics. Of her win, Hattie McDaniels later said, “I would rather play a maid than be one.” The character resonated culturally because it drew on both a recognizable stereotype and on a visible reality of the 1930s. One could argue that this award served as a kind of ideological snapshot of race relations frozen in time. A similar argument could be made about the Denzel Washington and Halle Berry wins in 2002. Both films mix identifiable archetypes—a gangster and a ho—with the contemporary realities of mass incarceration, police brutality, and a racially skewed death penalty. The ideological power of these films stems from their ability to merge racial fictions with material fact. However, this is done in a manner that reinforces rather than challenges the status quo.

“Sleeping with the Enemy”

Minhola Dargis notes that, “In its exploitation of human misery, Monster’s Ball doesn’t just invite cynicism; it provokes hostility...with all the dead bodies that crowd the story, and the deaths of characters...seem disturbingly mechanistic.” The absence of emotional logic in the film tempts one to read the story in ideological terms. Monster’s Ball is named for a macabre ritual practiced on the eve of the execution in which the guards throw a party for the man they plan to execute as a kind of prisoner’s last rites. Minhola Dargis summed up the film’s mood as a “southern gothic” romance composed of “the sort of movie hell from which only death or deliverance can be expected.” The first half of the film is devoted almost documentary style to the detailed preparations for character Lawrence Musgrove’s execution, while the second half considers the aftermath. The atmosphere is poisonous and lonely, a depressing monotony punctuated by fleeting respite of dinner stops and indifferent sex for pay. Three generations of the Growtowski men have worked in the prison, and racism is passed from father to son like a pocket watch. White women are largely absent, perhaps unable to survive the toxic environment of bigoted Southern masculinity.

Life, or more accurately, death for the black characters in this fallen Southern town is much worse. Leticia Musgrove and her son Tyrell have been visiting death row for eleven years. Leticia has collapsed into an alcoholic stupor, while her son has grown hideously fat. Apart from Hank’s neighbor played by Mos’ Def, the family subsists in total isolation from the rest of the local black community. A series of tragedies ensues on both sides of the color line, leaving Leticia manless, homeless and childless. After she seduces Hank during a drunken binge, he falls in love with her and undergoes a complete transformation. In the close of the film, Leticia discovers that Hank is the man who has helped to kill her husband. Curiously, she decides not to confront him, and the film ends with a perverse silence.

The character development goes little beyond clichés, of which several of the most enduring are chosen. The first is almost too obvious to mention: black woman as dynamo defined purely in sexual terms. The myth of the “Sapphire,” which is as old as plantations, serves a powerful ideological function. The construction of black women as hypersexual and outside the bounds of feminine restraint serves to justify sexual violence and exploitation. The seduction scene, which is supposed to represent the erotic christening of true love, looks instead like scaled-down hardcore porn. With its distant cinematic gaze and huge dose of gratuitous nudity, the scene reeks of blaxploitation. Shots of the lovers are intercut with images of a bird ascending its cage, a perverse reference to I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. At one point Berry lifts up her tank top to expose her breast to the viewer uttering breathlessly, “Make me feel good.” With her exaggerated imitation of black southern dialect and expressions of desperation, this scene took on an almost comedic quality.

Another misrepresentation is more subtle and extends beyond the treatment of individual black characters. It arises from the desire to understand race and racism as an epiphenomenon—a toxic, if fleeting, byproduct of family dysfunction. Both
screenwriters Will Rokos and Milo Addica grew up in abusive households and wrote the story as an allegorical reflection on their own personal histories. The director, Marc Forster, described the script as a study in "how to break the cycle of violence." Through the lens of these men, racism, like domestic violence, represents a psychopathology that is passed from generation to generation.

However, in Monster's Ball, racism is relatively ephemeral, and can be easily purged. After the death of his son and a single night of transgressive passion with the beautiful Leticia, Hank is a completely changed man. In less than a week, he goes from working on death row and using the "n———" word to publicly announcing his romance with a black woman. This plot twist is not only bad writing, but also politically and intellectually misguided. Hank's instantaneous personal transformation trivializes the enduring power of racism while reinforcing sexual myths about black women. It reflects the larger weakness of a film that sees itself as a progressive story about moral redemption and love across the color divide. The film is so focused on Hank that it reduces its black characters to mere spectacle.

Through its somber mood and hyperrealism, the first section of the film appears initially as if it is intended as critique of the death penalty. But as the film progresses, Leticia's husband becomes an object of pity whose death appears inevitable, and even necessary, for her union with Hank. The repeated use of long shots and the failure to develop the interior lives of the characters prevents viewers from identifying with Lawrence's or Leticia's plight. Instead the audience is treated to a spectacle of sex and violence that precludes any real emotional attachments.

An equally troubling aspect of the film is its rendering of forgiveness as metaphor for racial reconciliation. When Leticia discovers Hank has helped to execute her husband, she chooses to remain silent, and does not speak another word until the close of the film. She makes this choice, if you can call it that, after being evicted and losing both her job and her son. Forester explains, "And because she is the one who chooses, she is liberated from her dependency on him for money and shelter. If she had chosen a path of confrontation she would still be in a place of dependence..." Monster's Ball is a vision of union based on complete subjugation and dependence—a rather strange way of breaking a cycle of violence—family, racial or otherwise. Critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw has shown how women of color suffer from interlocking systems of oppression based on race and gender. These two poles of power inequality overlap and mutually reinforce one another at a structural, political and representational level. Crenshaw explains:

A final variant on the intersection theme is representational intersectionality, referring to the way that race and gender images, readily available in our culture, converge to create unique and specific narratives deemed appropriate for women of color. Not surprisingly, the clearest convergences are those involving sexuality, perhaps because it is through sexuality that images of minorities and women are most sharply focused.12

In Monster's Ball, sexual imagery merges with representations of race and abject poverty to create a thoroughly depressing vision of black female disempowerment. It is no wonder that Monster's Ball generated so much discussion in Internet chat rooms. This so-called nouveau "inter-racial bridge builder" taps some of the most pernicious conventions of genocide narrative: the erasure and murder of black men and the forced amalgamation/collusion of black women.13

I have long been interested in how liberal ideology attempts to further racial progress through invoking a lesser racial evil for the accomplishment of a greater good. The examples abound from both politics and culture. In an earlier era, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal reinforced the image of the Negro as hapless victim, in order to highlight the essential contradiction of an American society that promised equality, but practiced segregation. Later, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan invoked the boogey of matriarchy to justify race conscious policies.14 On the cultural front, the film Imitation of Life, implied that the lure of whiteness and the
benefits it brings trumps all ties that bind the black community, even the most intimate tie between mother and daughter. A common link among all of these different examples of faulty ideology, is an appeal crafted largely to white audiences, in which racial sympathy can be best elicited when it reinforces rather than challenges preexisting assumptions. In this manner, liberal sentiment meets and merges with racial stereotype. It is in this tradition of racial liberalism that Monster's Ball attempts to tell its all-too-human tale of interracial redemption.

The connections between Monster’s Ball and institutions of Southern style racism are more than metaphoric. Although the script was originally set in Georgia, the film was shot in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Prior to the Civil War Angola was a slave plantation. After black people obtained their freedom it was converted into a penal institution. Four fifths of the inmate population is African American and over eighty five percent are serving life sentences. With its five thousand-plus inmates, Angola is America’s largest maximum security prison. Sentences of seventy-five years for armed robbery are not uncommon. White guards on horses wear prison fatigues, while nearly all black work gangs perform hard labor. Prisoners are paid between $.04 and $.20 an hour for their toil.16

Production of Monster’s Ball took place not only with the consent of Angola’s administration but also with their avid participation. Here, fictions of incarceration merge with fact, as prison labor was actually used in the making of the film. The warden Burt Cain allowed the production crew in and helped contract inmates out as extras. Wages were not paid to inmates directly, but instead were channeled into a general fund for prison improvements. Scriptwriters Rokos and Addica actually made cameo appearances as prison officials. In the director’s commentary on the DVD there are some downright surreal moments. Forester recounts that when the death sequence was shot the warden was overcome with the realistic nature of the filming, Cain exclaimed, “Oh my God this is so real, I feel like I am at work.”

The choice of setting and the participation of prison officials reinforces what is already manifest on screen—the profound identification of white male power with pleasure. Black suffering and ecstasy serve as lubricant for the true focus of the plot—the evolution and fulfillment of prison guard Hank Grotowski. This use of black characters as emotional mis-en-scène is nothing new, however, the mixture of racial stereotype and faux social critique make Monster’s Ball a thoroughly unsatisfying, if not unfortunate, vehicle for righting past wrongs.

The Devil in Denzel

While Monster’s Ball exploits black female sexuality and trivializes the power of racism, Training Day draws on a long tradition of racial demonology that casts black men as monstrous and destructive of the social order. The film draws on stereotypes of destructive black masculinity as the foil against which whiteness is asserted and the forces of law and order redeemed. Although the director denies any immediate connection, the plot strongly evokes elements of recent police scandals, especially that of the Oakland Riders, which pitted a decorated veteran against a rookie whistle-blower.

However, in contrast to the Riders scandal that centered on the beating, harassment, and entrapment of African American men by white and Latino officers, Training Day inverts this scenario. A single evil black police captain, Alonzo Harris, terrorizes his fellow white officer and Los Angeles’s poorest ‘hoods.

The film traces the first day on the job of a rookie officer named Jake. He meets up with his squadron leader, who has the power to determine whether or not Jake will receive a coveted place on his team of undercover officers. As the day’s events unfold, it becomes clear that Alonzo is thoroughly corrupt, and is testing Jake to see whether or not he can be turned. Despite Alonzo’s machinations, Jake remains determined to do the right thing. When it becomes apparent that Jake’s integrity cannot be broached, Alonzo arranges to have him killed by some Chicano thugs under his control. However,
the Chicano thugs spare Jake’s life, when it is confirmed that he rescued one of the thugs’ nieces from some rapists earlier in the day (earning Alonzo’s disapproval). Thus spared, Jake can proceed to avenge Alonzo’s many victims.

Ultimately, the rookie beats Alonzo before a crowd of people in Los Angeles’s notorious ‘hood, “the Jungle.” Significantly, the onlookers side with Jake, “the liberator” rather than Alonzo, “the oppressor” who is thoroughly humiliated before suffering a brutal execution by Russian mobsters who have targeted him since he robbed and killed one of their leaders in Las Vegas, before the action of the film begins.

Alonzo Harris is Mephistopheles to Jake’s Faust: a character of pure evil who tempts the protagonist by appealing to his ambition. In the original German legend, Mephistopheles name means “not loving light,” or the “one who loves the dark.” Although the exact origin of the myth is unknown, it contains elements of both Christian tradition and the pagan Germanic tradition of the kobold. In contrast to the figure of Lucifer, who is a fallen angel, Mephistopheles’ spirit personifies destruction, he is pure fiend, a destroyer and a liar.

In the film, this moral dimension is represented through racially associated characteristics, such as the costume, speech, and attitudes of the characters. Clad in black skullcap and thick chains (hung with an enormous, symbolically misleading cross pendant), Alonzo looks more like a standard issue drug dealer than a police captain. Corruption, collusion in gang violence, extortion, greed, and murder mark Alonzo’s insatiable taste for malice. His character takes on such exaggerated, even “Hollywood Shuffle” proportions, that at one point he utters, “King Kong ain’t got nothing on me.” This sharply contrasts with his fellow officer Jake, whom we first glimpse in tender scenes with his family. In a twist of Manichean racial logic, Jake is Alonzo’s perfect opposite. One is compassionate, ethical, and a family man, whereas the other is brutal, unprincipled, and hypersexual. Jake’s victory represents the triumph of law and order, good over evil, and of the true spirit of just policing.

Training Day draws on several different genres. It merges the blood-and-guts gangster movie with “ghettotainment,” but with an important difference. Traditional gangster movies celebrate a vision of masculine stoicism that thoroughly marginalizes women. The archetypal example is Michael Corleone, in The Godfather, who, despite his cruelty, invites viewers to identify with his fantasy of all-consuming power and success. His ambition is born of family history and of deprivation. By contrast, Washington’s Alonzo is strangely vacant. Alonzo exists out of context—though we see him with his family, an El Salvadoran woman and their son—the nature of their relations is never clear. He seems to visit them rather than live with them.

Alonzo serves not so much as an anti-hero, but more precisely as a male grotesque. Alonzo wears his authority uncomfortably and constantly seeks to assert masculine power through a barrage of bizarrely explicit sexual remarks. When Jake attempts to impress Alonzo with his on the job performance, Alonzo’s only thought is whether he “tapped [the] ass” of his fellow female officer. Upon hearing that his new partner is married, Alonzo comments desparately that he probably still “fucks [his wife] face-to-face.” As in Monster’s Ball, sexuality remains the primary mode of racial differentiation.

Alonzo’s degraded quality has an especially cruel irony, given that Denzel Washington has staked his entire career on the projection of dignity. He alluded to this in his acceptance speech, when he expressed his life-long admiration for Sidney Poitier. With her usual incisive wit, critic Erin Kaplan explains that Denzel’s win, far from participating in Poitier’s legacy, is a significant departure from it:

Tempting as it is to link Poitier’s success with Washington’s and Berry’s, to see it all as a lovely continuum of progress, the discomfiting truth is that Poitier set a pattern that never took hold in Hollywood. When Washington said he had been chasing Poitier for over 40 years, he wasn’t kidding...Poitier wouldn’t be caught dead in Training Day, nor Dandridge in Monster’s Ball...
Conclusion

This year’s Oscar’s ceremony is a stark reminder that greater visibility does not always mean greater power. In a culture increasingly obsessed with reality shows, voyeurism is a constant temptation. While Monster’s Ball and Training Day share reactionary content about race, prisons, and policing, they also have an even more fundamental likeness. Both films aspire to a type of documentary realism that justifies their potentially controversial content. Although the films are highly mediated fictions that draw heavily on racial stereotypes, they present themselves as windows onto the harsh realities of people’s everyday lives. Antoine Fuqua, director of Training Day, argued that while his film contains objectionable content and language, including the incessant use of the “n———” word, in contrast to other LA gang movies like Dennis Hopper’s Colors, Training Day “is the real world.” Fuqua pointed out that he went to great lengths to shoot the film on location in Los Angeles’ most troubled “hoods. In fact— he saw the filming of Crenshaw and Watts as a public service, a chance to allow “the children to see something positive”— that black directors and actors do exist. In a similar vein, Marc Forster worked closely with Angola’s administration to capture the authenticity of death row.

While these films struggle to achieve verisimilitude through careful attention to physical detail, the true spirit of realism eludes them. In contrast to an earlier generation of social realist filmmakers, these films are profoundly lacking in empathy and social commentary. They are a more direct expression of a sex and violence saturated marketplace that seeks too often to titillate rather than to touch its viewers.16

This year’s awards ceremonies provide the occasion for reflecting on race and power at this historical juncture. In many respects we are entering an era of growing contradiction. While the narrow spectrum of state policy is increasingly dominated by the ideology of “colorblindness,” racial profiling has become an accepted tool of law enforcement. Although many gains from the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s are being rapidly dismantled for the black majority, select individuals are enjoying unprecedented power and celebrity. A superficial glance at the media would lead one to think that African Americans are indeed experiencing greater integration. Culture appears to be opening up. Hip hop has replaced rock as the cultural mainstream. Puff Daddy has his own reality show, and thanks in part to the academy, Halle Berry has become the first two-time Bond girl. The victories at the Oscar’s seem intended to prove this, a self-congratulatory gesture on the part of Hollywood to show its ultimate good will. But a glimpse behind this electronic illusion reveals a world of polar disparity in which more black men are in jail than in college. The unprecedented wins for Denzel and Halle in Monster’s Ball and Training Day are stark reminders of what James Baldwin called “the price of the ticket.” In the house that race built, the success of one is too often achieved by the abandonment of the many.

Endnotes

2. Since the Academy’s founding in 1929, only six black actors have won, representing less than three percent of the winners. Some of the most obvious contenders have included Denzel Washington’s leads in Hurricane and Malcolm X, Angela Bassett’s Tina Turner in What’s Love Got To Do With It?, and Whoopi Goldberg’s Celtic in The Color Purple. One of the most striking differences between this year’s winners and past losers is that the latter are majority black films that explore African American culture and politics. By contrast many of the winners hinge on isolated black characters stripped of social context.
3. When looked at more closely, the second is clearly related to the first. Hollywood’s failure to attract a diverse array of writers and producers is probably the largest obstacle to creating work that represents people of color in fully human terms.

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9. Ibid., 5.
10. Atkinson, Michael, “The Sorrow and the P. Diddy,” Village Voice, 26 December (2001)-1 January (2002), 2. This absurdity was not lost on audiences. When I went to see the film in downtown Oakland, California, the crowd of teenagers who surrounded us burst into laughter at the first sight of flesh. Even the youth recognize that you do not have sex like that.
15. An interesting side note is that the director of photography on Monster’s Ball was a great admirer of Imitation of Life and referenced it often when talking about the film.
18. Interestingly, both films have failed to achieve box office success, despite their historic wins. Perhaps the over reliance on racial cliche and the failure to craft nuanced characters damaged their popular appeal.

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