



The Socio-Political Spike Lee; An Essay On Political Prejudice, Historical Crossroads And The Concept Of National Cinema In The United States

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the most important aspect of the development in Hollywood. The stories usually stem from racial impact and the course of history is an aid to the narrative development. The critical studies in Hollywood cannot deny the efforts of the African American community. The structural narrative in Hollywood mainly focuses on Aristotle's arc most of the times. However, spike lee has been one of the directors in the history of united states that has established ground rules for social development and maturity of national cinema. United States is one of the few countries that has not been affected by colonialization but has seen authoritative dictatorship in building collective memories. From textbooks, to literature to movies there has been a great shift in the understanding of the land for different races living in the same land. The coherent shape of the cultural idea and the social discourse found in the United States cinema, namely Hollywood has been heavily influenced by diasporic minds. From African Americans to Mexican immigrants everyone has had their share of cinematic representation. The impact of the lives led by the marginalized communities if often measure by what a character feels in the movie as well. Hence, Hollywood, known to be leader of cinematic movement in the modern world, has a lot of brewing stories to tell with its parallel cinema.

Keywords: Narrative, Aristotle's Arc, Collective memories, Social Discourse, Parallel cinema

I think that every minority in the United States of America knows everything about the dominant culture. From the time you can think, you are bombarded with images from TV, film, magazines, newspapers.

Spike Lee (2012)

Spike Lee is one of the few directors who has been censured over the years for his extremely sensitive topics. The historical context, often criticized is one of the few rightly voiced tales. The history often mixed with other forceful ideas is indeed one of the biggest problem cinemas faces today, around the world. Spike Lee is one of the few people who has often been criticized for his blunt and honest take on the African American lives in the United States. Allyson Hobbs in her book *A Chosen Exile* narrates how parades were not politicized, part of activist movements and not even received with hope or valor but were only judged on color of the people (Hobbs, 2014). The slaves, the low caste and the down trodden were the ones driving the workforce and yet they were the ones that were considered the criminals and the root cause of all problems in achieving the American political dream. In this day and age, the American political scenario has opened doors to people from all races, but its historically correct that the American president offered to build the glorious wall between the border of United States and Mexico. The believability concept is often a misfire and any step forward to reconcile is met with the shadows of the past.

The debate however, many decades later remains the same. Is there a chance of the history being erased with present and future reconciliations? Is it possible for the American blacks to be accepted for their hard work in raising the country to the universally known standards and more importantly is the cinema representing black people historically correct and can be considered a thorough representation of the American political chauvinism?

America, known as the country of endless possibilities has seen possible boundaries in terms of political scenarios. None of them just or politically correct. Pre conceived notions and stereotypes flourish as they are fed in the name of false nationalism to the people unaware and ungrateful. Extremely diverse, every splat of red is not happiness. People from the United States have seen a bloody past, and when revisited its never met with tolerance. The level of intolerance rose when the popular culture started incorporating people from all races. The facts that cannot be denied, still, are the birth of blues music by the black people, the rhythm and blues culture that has seen its lyrical acclaim all over the world and last but not the least the people considered lower class who are often the labors that have helped the economy in ways that people could not have imagined. Historically, soon after the proclamation of emancipation, signed by the great Abraham Lincoln, he was shot dead in a theatre. The crime, solved yet left its mark on the history of the United States. Abraham Lincoln is regarded as one of the few people who stood up for the right of the African Americans on

such an elaborate platform. talking about color activism, its often criticized that some races residing on the American soil resort to a life of crime and vigilance. Little is told about the history of these people and why they stooped to this level, if they actually did. Rightly so crimes and bad behavior has been recorded throughout history from both sides. The people have been fed with nationalism with rightly accounted tales of extremism but what role is the visual media playing for the people to understand their history in a correct, unaltered and unbiased perspective.

I think it is very important that films make people look at what they've forgotten.

Spike Lee (2015)

National cinema is a concept that has devoured and changed course in terms of its meanings in the last few decades. With the increase in intolerance around the world and the rise of stereotypical viewing of things the term has seen some significant changes. Theoretically national cinema is the cinema that represents a country and the races living in it in its truest and most authentic form (Higson, 1989). national cinema would not only be a representation of the people but also the national narrative that has a sound background and also a rich historical context. Every country has a national cinema. some people resort to talks of comedies to tell their stories and some countries like Iran have taken the high road of telling sad, serious and mind-boggling stories in their truest form. Films like *a separation* and *the salesman* by Asghar Farhadi are some of the finest examples that we see today. However, in the American context we have a lot of examples that are considered to be the national cinema or at least the accounts that relate directly to the nationalistic values of the American people. The western spaghetti became famous because of its geographical context and the stories that came with it. The truest American form was represented and the cowboy became the representation of all-American men. The Marlboro men considered to be truly American was also a result of the *western spaghetti*. Rough, tough and handsome is what an American male was considered to be at that time. We see the old spice commercials in America and realize how important the imagery is. Men without shirts, having perfect bodies became the true representation of American people. However, it cannot be denied that until recently black men ere also made part of the extremely masculine series of old Spice advertisements. America, in short, has a long history of changing nationalistic approach and has seen its up and down in all visual media.

Leonard Freed in his pictorial book titled *Black in White America* takes us on a visual journey that is nothing short of remarkable. The changes that you see in the picture are extremely important. The economic conditions however remain the same. The black population In America is seen doing the toughest of jobs and producing goods at a significant rate, recorded in history, but they were the most criticized people. the black and white pictures, capture the true essence that lies in the texture of poverty. People confronted with the toughest menial labor are met with even more brutal force of

nationalistic stereotypes after their hard days work. blues music is considered to be one of the biggest contributions of the black people for the people of American and all over the world. While all the hard work, and tough labor was kept for this marginalized people, the whites had the privilege of securing jobs that paid more and required less physical labor. (Culture, 2004)The white children were raised in a society where they had to accept the pre conceived nationalistic values and the concept of white supremacy even before they developed a sense of understand to deduce a logical reasoning for the things happening around them. Black intellectualism has been misunderstood by the American public and by scholars for generations. Historically maligned by their peers and by the lay public as inauthentic or illegitimate, black intellectuals have found their work misused, ignored, or discarded. Black intellectuals have also been reductively placed into one or two main categories: they are usually deemed liberal or, less frequently, as conservative.

To completely understand American cinema and the mindset of the people working there it's very important to analyze the films that are made. Films have been created not only to amuse and entertain the audience but give subtle messages that can now be seen, instilled, in the American generation. The African American issues that rose in America, although settled through official recognition are still an issue. People talk about it, raise their voices and in some cases take their case to the court (United States v. Booker 2005). The media has taken great note of this and film makers are working on both sides to promote their ideas. White directors are found to be thematically inclined towards white superiority in the American nation. The African American directors have known to reenact moments from American history that have had a prejudice against their kind. There are a few films that are made to highlight just that

1. Crooklyn (1994) dir. Spike lee
2. Malcolm X (1992) dir. Spike Lee
3. BlacKkKlansman (2018) dir. Spike Lee
4. Chi- Raq dir. Spike Lee

All these films have been made on African American history. The factual representation of these people is very scary and heartfelt. The court has several decisions, according to a study which says that black men or women are given more jail time for the same crime as compared to their white counterpart. (Mia Bay, 2000) The rap / hip-hop generation was born due to social injustice and it is clearly evident in their themes.

Every other day now. There are news and social media videos coming up where white people chant racist comments and get away with it. Sometimes they see their due fate and get arrested and even trailed if the offense is serious. “*Black lives matter*” (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/updates/>) is a campaign that originated from the United States but has gone to Europe and any other country with African origin residents. This gave birth to the issue of heroism in America. The Ku Klux Klan was also part of the history which thought the whites were religiously, socially and economically superior to the black people. But the fact is that heroism rose from both sides at the same time. The white film directors were influential and they made films on the black people sometimes in their favors, sometimes not. Sometimes even the factual representation of history was considered offensive. Same is the case with news. The news reporters were seen having a bias while reporting and the public got to know the message that they wanted to deliver rather than the truth (Nunnally, 2012).

Spike lee rose against this very culture. His films have been criticized to the core and never been understood. But the irony is that only a handful of people argue on the historical context of these films. The films are however historically correct but because they deal with issues not widely accepted by the majority of people living in the understates, they are considered to be less factual and more dramatized. Douglas S. Massey, Nancy A. Denton in their book *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* discuss exactly what happened that lead to the concept of segregation in the united states. The concept of *Us and Them* (Henri Tajfel, 1970) has been there for quite a few years. People have relied on their identity comparing themselves with the others. It often leads to the feeling of supremacy as the only comparison being made is in terms of nationalism (Rad, 2010). In America the white Americans consider themselves to be the Us and the rest of the world is “them”. Hence at the end of the day every other race living in the united states is either not accepted or is subjected to a very strict and harsh segregation. (Douglas S. Massey, 2003). The concept of segregation created a psychological boundary amongst people and some started considering themselves at the wrong side of history. People were thrown into slums by their economic conditions and even the education system was part of this nationalistic extremism. KKK and the people who were against the existence of black people on the “American soil” are recorded in history. Traces are still found of people that consider this a sane and a logical thing to do. Films like *Blackklansman* and *Chi-Raq* which talk about this very segregation that divide not only through geographical context but also the historical idea was blurred and presented in a peaceful and believable manner. Politically a nation cinema is not often a safe way to go. The mirror when reflects on the society gives a real, often unwanted picture. Spike lee is one of the few people who not only hold s the mirror but also reflects the most painful and unaccepted parts of history that the most civilized and privileged nations in the world deny. His signature style is

clearly seen in his film. His films are situated in the ghetto. The neighborhoods that are not so picturesque are glorified by their love of art and their struggle for intellectual and political freedom.

Spike lee is an auteur director because of his stories and the visual representation that he follows in all his films. He is a master at work who discusses topics not so easily understood and discussed. We see strong women, supporting males and everyone fighting for their right. Malcolm X is one of the films directed by Spike lee that is rated high by film critics and has a good response by the audience as well. The characters are well developed and he usually writes his own screenplays as well. The stories are closer to his heart and the emotions portrayed in the films are clearly an *ode* to that closure.

“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.... Finally, [the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings.”

— Benedict Anderson (August 26, 1936 – December 13, 2015)

National cinema in the united states brings on the horizon a better yet comprehensive narrative of the culture in the country. Diverse as it is, the director in discussion has a great impact in contributing to the national cinema and getting the message across to the people. The people might have mix feelings about how it works and if spike lee can be considered national cinema or not. But all his cinematic accounts are historically correct and have enabled and inspired so many other film makers to talk about this cultural taboo in a historically correct way. For national cinema it's not only the representation of the majority but also the pertaining issues that make way for the true representation of a social class or a group of people that co-exist in that very country. The author director however is a concept very close to what Spike Lee displays on the silver screen. His films are not only a reflection on reality but also contributing as a history lesson in a visually pleasing way. The events are correct, although dramatized at points. His films are based or inspired by true events and talk about a group of people who have been a pivotal force in driving the nation to where it is today.

Branching out from the likes of national cinema in the united states sustaining the same topic we see television series made a on a much bigger scale. Quite recently a television series called “When They See Us” (2019) also reflects on the national identity of the black people living in the united states. Although spike lee is not apart of the project but clear inspirations and historically correct presentation is visible. National cinema often talks about cultural values and its not just the people who are in the majority but the people or the race which has contributed to the books of history. National identity is frequently discussed in these films that are the true portrayal of national cinema. The socio-political understanding is developed through the concept of national cinema. Specially on an international ground the true representation of a national film is considered to be a very important and essential part of the film making. Every directory telling stories that contribute to the national cinema plays an important part in creating national identities. (Jürgen Grimm, 2016). National identity is a very strong part of every human’s life. As the world is becoming globalized, we see people seeking identities more than ever. Cinema plays a vital role in creating that. And for years to come directors with auteur signatures will be part of this revolutionary road to create and discuss national cinema on an international level.

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