

In April, 2006, Spike Lee appeared on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition Saturday to promote his new film, *Inside Man*, the heist thriller starring Denzel Washington. Early in the interview, Scott Simon, Weekend Edition's host, did something I thought was strange and that I still remember fourteen years later. He switched the conversation away from *Inside Man* to ask Spike Lee about his fellow film director, Ang Lee, because they have the same last name.

A month before, Ang Lee had won the Best Director Oscar for *Brokeback Mountain*, his film about a secret love affair between two cowboys. The film was a critical and box office success, and proved groundbreaking and controversial. Spike Lee explained that he and Ang Lee had gone to college together, and that Ang had worked on an early short of his. He said he was happy his colleague had won an Oscar. Simon then pointed out that Ang Lee had "done well for himself since he worked for you." "Yes, he has," Spike agreed, adding that he and Ang were "the two Lees."

Here Simon, who is white, became jocular. "Oh my gosh, you guys aren't related, are you?" he asked. Lee audibly side-eyed the conversation: "He's Chinese. I'm African-American." Simon didn't take the hint. "Well, in some other ways, though, you know, a blended family, I think is what we, is what we call it these days," the radio host continued, awkwardly.

Simon didn't ask a lot about *Inside Man*, beyond pointing out that it was made with a bigger budget than Lee's first feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, from 1986. He seems to have brought up *She's Gotta Have It* to ask Lee about its rape scene, a part of the film that Lee had, over the years, expressed remorse for including. Lee mentions he thinks the scene was a mistake, but that filmmakers shouldn't excise material they later regret. He brings up Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney's appearances in blackface in *Babes on Broadway*, and Rooney in yellowface in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as Mr. Yunioshi. These scenes are now historical facts, Lee is indicating. Trying to cover-up the past is a form of lying.

What did NPR listeners get from this interview? They learned there was a new movie out with a big star in it. They learned that Spike Lee, a Black man who once made a movie with a rape scene, now gets to work with more money. And they learned he shares a last name with one of his contemporaries, a Chinese director who started out working for him but who had recently surpassed him. Listeners, therefore, from what was only supposed to be a puff piece, got a miniature history of race relations in America. One group is pitted against another; an Asian man is held up to a Black man as a model of achievement that betters his own, based on a pretext that was odd to mention at all.

What neither Spike Lee nor Scott Simon brought up in that interview was Lee's movie *Bamboozled*, his scathing satire of blackface minstrelsy in American entertainment, which came out in 2000. Blackface did come up in their conversation, but Simon sees it as an opportunity for a quip: Mickey Rooney's got a lot to answer for. *Bamboozled* was left unmentioned then, but now the film is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. So is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Ang Lee's epic tale of love and swordplay in 18th century China. Twenty years later, let's look at the two films together.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* briefly made wuxia mainstream in the U.S., dazzling audiences with its beauty. The film was so exceptional that American audiences

didn't complain about its subtitles. Spike Lee's movie had a different effect. Bamboozled confounded audiences. Its intent was to wake them from a racist stupor that had allowed the continued degradation of Black people in American media. It was received as an ugly polemic the America of Bill Clinton had outgrown, some kind of foreign object the country didn't need.

Bamboozled did not do well with critics or at the box office, which is no doubt why Lee did not want to call attention to it on NPR. Today it is understood to be a milestone in the cinematic analysis of racism in American culture, and has gained a cult following and a deluxe Criterion Collection release. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, on the other hand, was a massive worldwide hit and the highest-grossing foreign-language film ever released in the U.S. Nominated for ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture, it won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and prizes in three other categories.

Perhaps its initial success has prevented Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon from attaining the status it deserves. While it is no doubt still making money, it has not gotten a fancy treatment on DVD or Blu-Ray. Streaming in high-def, it looks a little punched-up, in a cursory way, as if Sony Pictures doesn't consider it a classic. The termite audacity of Bamboozled now speaks directly to a society marked by continuing racial injustice and the efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement to change that. Ang Lee's feminist legend, however, has sunk into the stream of entertainment at the same time as the Hong Kong film industry has declined under mainland Chinese rule.

A belated Netflix sequel, produced by Harvey Weinstein in 2016, didn't help. Although Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny was directed by the original film's renowned stunt coordinator, Yuen Woo-ping, the sequel relied on computer effects to remedy bad scripting. Michelle Yeoh's return as fighting legend Yu Shu Lien didn't much help. Without Ang Lee's depth or acuity, it felt more like Weinstein's dreary Marco Polo Netflix series, which over twenty episodes never employed an Asian director.

Considered together, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Bamboozled point to a brief time in mainstream cinema when Black filmmakers and performers were on the rise and American audiences were open to Asian stars and genres. After the debacle of the Bush-Gore election and the subsequent War on Terror post-9/11, that began to change. Retrenchment set in. American film audiences marched into cineplexes dominated by superheroes, transatlantic children's movies, and TV remakes. In the first decade of the new century, eight Harry Potter movies, three Lord of the Rings movies, and two Batmans made about a billion dollars each. As the global market grew between 2001 and 2011—especially in China—Hollywood produced movies for export that were loudly, almost parodistically white. By mid-decade, a big-screen version of the 70s good ol' boy TV show The Dukes of Hazzard was the number one movie in America.

Bamboozled's protagonist, Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans, in a performance of great originality and daring) is the lone Black writer at a broadcast-television network. Sick of his white boss (Michael Rapaport) telling him he's not Black enough, he creates and airs a purposefully racist primetime variety revue, called Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show, so that he will be fired without losing his bonus

package. The show stars two tap-dancing street performers, Manray and Womack (Savion Glover and Tommy Davidson). Hungry for success, they agree to Delacroix's plan for the show: filmed on stage before a live audience, Black performers in blackface will shuck and jive in a watermelon patch to the music of the Alabama Porch Monkeys, a band dressed in prison stripes (played by the Roots). Lee's joke—or more accurately, his contention—is that this old-timey hootenanny will be an immediate ratings success. Returned to its Hee Haw baseline, the vast audience of American TV viewers won't be able to get enough of Delacroix's blatant, racist extravaganza.

Put at ease by Manray and Womack's talent, the predominantly white live audience's initial apprehension turns quickly into admiration, then to joy. Soon they are at ease in this setting, laughing along with the retrograde comedy routines, fully embracing a form of entertainment that Lee insists has not been consigned to history. Glover and Davidson's virtuosity in bringing this once-popular material back to life is uncanny and disturbing—a séance as agit-prop.

Lee did not tell the studio audience what they were in for when they signed up to be extras. As the show gets more and more popular, he has the entire audience appear in blackface and white gloves, a sea of mini-Jolsons. A white man in the audience (Al Palagonia) shows up ready to rap: "No matter what color/No matter what race/You know you're cold chillin'/When you're in blackface." The effect is shocking. It exposes something ever-present in American culture that we are encouraged to ignore: white people like to clown as Black. Not only do they want Black people to tell them that's okay, they want them to re-enact these stereotypes as outlandishly as possible, and to confirm them as real and true.

The film programmer Ashley Clark, who has written a book on *Bamboozled*, observes in an essay on the film that "while the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward spiritual abjection and comprehensive mental collapse." In twisting Martin Luther King Jr.'s words that way, Clark points to something that our culture was only beginning to understand in the 60s, before King was assassinated: that by the end of the 20th century all perceptions of race would be created in the media and maintained there. That is the subject of *Bamboozled*: there is only this mediation. When it breaks away from TV into real life, it has moral and spiritual consequences that can turn deadly.

The video of the murder of George Floyd by a cop in Minneapolis is the latest example of the way Black deaths are disseminated and televised, something Lee predicted in *Bamboozled*. When Manray quits the show on the air, he is kidnapped and later executed live on the internet by a radical rap act called the Mau Mau's, who are in turn gunned down by the police, live on the news (except for their sole white member, who complains he was spared).

In *The Original Kings of Comedy*, the concert tour film Lee made right before *Bamboozled*, Bernie Mac insists, as part of his standup act, that "there are no Black terrorists," because they would immediately get arrested if they tried to buy dynamite. In *Bamboozled*, there are Black terrorists, almost as if the film is responding to the comedy in the previous film. The presence in *Bamboozled* of Junebug (Paul Mooney), an embittered comic on the Chitlin Circuit, implies as much. Lee turns the comedy from his previous film inside out, bringing it to bear on the network employees who

staff Delacroix's show, a large group of white comedy writers whose knowledge of Black life in America comes from sitcoms like *The Jeffersons* and nothing else. Now, in the age of digital blackface, anyone can use a gif of a Black person to get a quick laugh. And in the twenty years since *Bamboozled* came out, old-school blackface has not gone away. Instances of blackface spiral in on each other, implicating one white TV personality or politician after another. One of the *Real Housewives of New York* goes to a party made up as Diana Ross in blackface and an afro wig, then claims that was okay because the makeup she used was just her usual bronzer. Andy Cohen rebukes her on his show not for being racist, but because in his mind Diana Ross wasn't known for having an afro. In response, conservative anchor Megan Kelly bamboozles herself out of a job by announcing on TV that costume-party blackface is fine with her.

The cluelessness of the American news media revealed itself again in October 2018, in a surprising way. Responding to Kelly's dismissal, CBS *This Morning* did a segment on blackface with host Maurice DuBois, a man who will immediately remind anyone who has seen *Bamboozled* of Pierre Delacroix. While writer and critic, Margo Jefferson, was telling DuBois that blackface is still in the culture, the show's producers put up an image of Tommy Davidson and Savion Glover from *Bamboozled* to illustrate Jefferson's point, blindly implicating Spike Lee's film in the racist tradition it was made to oppose. FEED THE IDIOT BOX, as the sign reads over Delacroix's TV in his luxury condo.

Similarly, in Lee's film, a white media consultant (Dina Pearlman) instructs Delacroix and his bosses on how the network should counter the inevitable accusations of racism their minstrel show will face. If things get bad, "wear kente cloth," she tells the network execs. Wearing kente cloth is exactly what Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and other members of the U.S. Senate did last June while taking a knee to show solidarity with African-Americans after the murder of George Floyd. As Doreen St. Felix pointed out in *The New Yorker*, by staging this photo op for the media, these members of Congress "only made themselves models of obtuseness." Chuck Schumer lives in Brooklyn just a short walk from the offices of 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, but that doesn't mean he saw *Bamboozled*.

Tommy Davidson explained *Bamboozled*'s invocation of blackface comedy by saying that "laughter is the reflex of pain." Michelle Yeoh, in explaining *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s approach to both its genre and its women characters, noted that "fighting is the exhilaration of repression." The swift grace of Ang Lee's film exists in images of conflict. Women representing three different generations seek to master the same fighting skills as Chow Yun-fat's Master Li Mu Bai, an adept of the Wudang Mountain school (from which the Wu-Tang Clan takes its name). Li is also the star-crossed love of Yu Shu Lien, the swordswoman played by Yeoh.

Set during the Qing Dynasty, the film has a fragile yet resilient quality befitting a period in which women were assigned specific roles and not expected to question them. A teacup nudged off a table by Shu, and silently caught by Jen (Zhang Ziyi), a rich heiress, before it can break, is a key image from early in the film. Jen trains in secret as a ninja with Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-pei), the discarded concubine of the master of the Wudang, who trained Li. Both Jen and Jade harbor a hatred of the

Wudang. Jen calls it a whorehouse when rejecting Li's offer to make her his disciple. Li and Jen's fight in the bamboo forest is justly remembered as the film's high point: an unexpected scene of lyrical, floating beauty, so impossible-seeming that it had to have convinced wuxia purists skeptical of an American co-production. In fact, while it may be the coincidence of the word bamboo that unites *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Bamboozled*, what is apparent is how "the two Lees" understand an important secret of the cinema: dance scenes should be shot in full frame, so that actors are visible head-to-toe.

Ang Lee's film is a ballet of movement the same way the tap-dancing in *Bamboozled* splashes primary colors into the drabness of the rest of the film's handycam-video look. Both films rely on the fluidity of motion and music to lift their characters above the repression they face. Both films are spectacles and both are fantasies. *Bamboozled* satirizes the destructive fantasy of white oppression, which turns Black people into servile, smiling caricatures. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s fantasy is a positive one, kept aloft by Tan Dun's percussive score.

Jen's callow actions earlier in the film lead to Li's death, robbing Shu of the possibility of happiness. Ang Lee has referred to this wealthy, spoiled girl from the ruling class as being "in some ways the villain of the movie." She's an ambivalent character, too self-centered to understand the fragility of the relationships between the people around her, and how quickly they can come apart.

Jen finally frees herself of her resentments, and breaks the boundaries of her arranged marriage in favor of true love with Lo (Chang Chen), a desert bandit from Xinjiang, yet she ends the film fantasizing about flying away, alone, into the foggy void around Wudang Mountain, the way Master Li disappeared years before.

The romance between Jen and Lo transpires as a captivity narrative, barely more modern than *The Sheik*, with Rudolph Valentino, from 1921. A high-born, feisty girl in pants fends off a desert chieftain but submits to his love. Lo implores Jen to "come with me to the desert," as if he is speaking to her in silent-movie intertitles. In the context of a Chinese-American co-production from the year 2000, one that brought together star actors from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the People's Republic, the film now seems like a wishful moment of Chinese unity, a dream of harmony possible only in the cinema.

Lo, like Valentino, is presumably a Muslim. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is partially set in Xinjiang, where the current Chinese government is actively oppressing the Muslim Uyghur population, rounding-up hundreds of thousands of people in concentration camps. The Uyghurs have a tradition of separatism dating back to Mao, and Xinjiang, an autonomous region of some 640,000 square miles, wasn't part of China until the second half of the 18th century, the years in the Qing Dynasty during which the film takes place. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was shot all over the mainland with a Hong Kong crew, at a time when the Hong Kong film industry was still its own kind of autonomous entity. Now it is being squelched and subsumed, like Hong Kong itself, into an oppressive system run from Beijing.

Ang Lee, as a Taiwanese and as an American film director, understands the evils of national division. The film he made before *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 1999's *Ride with the Devil*, told the story of Bushwhackers in Missouri, Confederate irregulars fighting the Union Army on the Kansas border in the 1860s during the Civil

War. One of them is a freed slave (Jeffrey Wright) committed, as the film begins, to the wrong side of history. The film failed at the box office as big as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* succeeded, too tragic and unheroic for the kind of massive popular audience *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* attracted.

The power of Ang Lee's cinema comes from the way each scene is potentially heartbreaking, filled with subtle emotion, but combustible just the same. He achieved that in film after film, almost imperceptibly, for twenty years. Now Lee devotes himself to a more esoteric challenge: combining mise-en-scene with very expensive technological innovation. Both Billy Lynn's *Long Halftime Walk*, a war drama from 2016, and 2019's *Gemini Man*, a sci-fi thriller with Will Smith, were shot in 3D at a super-high frame rate few theaters could show. No one, I don't think, fully understands why Lee, the director of *The Ice Storm*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Lust, Caution* is devoting himself to this kind of specialized work. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s achievement was that it was made with no digital effects. Or only one: Lee digitally erased the wires that allowed the actors to move so freely, climbing walls, darting across rooftops, and balancing on tree branches.

At the beginning of this century, recut Jackie Chan films were still coming out in American cineplexes. The combo of Asian and African-American stars was good for business. Chan's pairing with Chris Tucker reached its box office height in *Rush Hour 2*. Jet Li, who had supposedly turned down Chow Yun-fat's role in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, got together with Aaliyah in *Romeo Must Die*, her film debut, which topped the box office in the months before she died in a plane crash. By 2002 these crossover films had disappeared. Spike Lee's new film, *Da 5 Bloods*, set in Vietnam, provides a link. Veronica Ngo—a screen star in Vietnam who appears in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*—plays a fighter in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* and has the plum role of Hanoi Hannah in *Da 5 Bloods*, where she implores American soldiers to give up and go home. “Black G.I., your soul sisters and soul brothers are enraged in over 122 cities,” she announces over the radio while describing the riots in the US after the assassination of Martin Luther King. “They kill them while you fight against us.”

**Postscript:** After this piece went to press but before it went online, I saw in the news that Thomas Jefferson Byrd, who plays Honeycutt in *Bamboozled*, had died in Atlanta, age 70. He was shot several times in the back, at 1:45am on October 3rd. The police investigating his murder say they don't have any suspects.