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RETURNING TO ZAMUNDA TO FIND PARADISE: EDDIE MURPHY'S
COMING TO AMERICA AND THE POLITICS OF PARODY IN FILM.

CLÁUDIA RAMOS NEVES

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*On a gray evening
Of a gray century,
I ate an apple
While no one was looking.*

*A small, sour apple
The color of woodfire
Which I first wiped
On my sleeve.*

*Then I stretched my legs
As far as they'd go,
Said to myself
Why not close my eyes now*

*Before the late
World News and Weather.*

Charles Simic-*History*

*In North America time stumbles on
without moving, only releasing
a certain North American pain.*

Julia de Burgos wrote:

*That my grandfather was a slave
is my grief; had he been a master
that would have been my shame.*

Adrienne Rich – from *North American Time*

*I dedicate this work to my mother, Léa,
for showing me
what is to be a Woman*

and to

*my children, Bruno and Amanda,
for being the reason why I have become one.*

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ABSTRACT

RETURNING TO ZAMUNDA TO FIND PARADISE: EDDIE MURPHY'S *COMING TO AMERICA* AND THE POLITICS OF PARODY IN FILM

CLÁUDIA RAMOS NEVES

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Supervising Professor: Dr. José Gatti

The objective of this thesis is to offer an interdisciplinary study, overlapping Film Studies and Cultural Studies within bordering territories such as Feminist Criticism, Reader-Response, and Psychoanalytic criticism, among other correlated critical approaches. The corpus for analysis are the filmic representations conveyed by the mainstream American film *Coming to America*, written and performed by Eddie Murphy. By taking into consideration the specificity of cinema as a genre, such as mise-en-scene, lighting, decor, and the structuring of the narrative time and space, the analysis focuses on the parodic aspect of the film concerning the Hollywood classical style and its supposed attempt to subvert stereotyped representations. The formal structuring of plot, besides the functions of specific *dramatic personae* are also considered. Excerpts of various sequences in the film are investigated in terms of the discursive intention behind images and dialogues regarding their commitment to Eurocentric prerogatives. Theoretical perspectives on style, according to David Bordwell, the political implications of the

parodic genre, by Linda Hutcheon, questions on stereotype, by Ella Shohat, and concepts on Black cultural identities in cinematic representation by Stuart Hall and Clyde Taylor are used to carry out the investigation. Moreover, the results show that form and content are important features in the construction of meaning (according to Seymour Chatman, Robert Burgoyne and Mikhail Bakhtin), and that the search for “positive” portrayals for Black people may not suffice to guarantee a less Eurocentered orientation.

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RESUMO

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Professor Orientador: Dr. José Gatti

O objetivo desta dissertação é oferecer um estudo inter-disciplinar, sobrepondo Estudos de Cinema e Estudos Culturais dentre territórios afins como Crítica Feminista e Psicoanalítica, entre outras abordagens correlacionadas. O corpo para análise são as representações comunicadas pelo filme americano *Um Príncipe em Nova Iorque* (*Coming to America*), escrito e interpretado por Eddie Murphy. Levando-se em consideração a especificidade do cinema como gênero, tal como *mise-en-scene* (iluminação, cenário, e figurino) e a estruturação de tempo e espaço da narrativa, a análise tem como objetivo o aspecto paródico do filme com relação ao estilo clássico de Hollywood já que *Um Príncipe em Nova Iorque* sugere uma tentativa de subverter representações estereotipadas. A estruturação formal da trama, além das funções específicas de cada personagem também são consideradas. Trechos de várias cenas do filme são investigados em termos da intenção discursiva por detrás das imagens e diálogos, no que diz respeito a seus comprometimentos com prerrogativas eurocêntricas. Perspectivas teóricas de estilo fílmico, de acordo com

David Bordwell, as implicações políticas do gênero paródico, por Linda Hutcheon, questões sobre estereótipo, por Ella Shohat, e conceitos sobre o negro e as identidades culturais dentro da representação cinematográfica, por Stuart Hall e Clyde Taylor, são usadas para se conduzir a investigação. Além disso, os resultados mostram que forma e conteúdo são traços importantes na construção do sentido (de acordo com Seymour Chatman, Robert Burgoyne e Mikhail Bakhtin) e que a procura por retratos “positivos” para os negros pode não ser suficiente para garantir uma orientação menos euro-centrada.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers a social semiotic view of the film *Coming to America*, under the light of cultural/feminist approaches, besides dealing with concepts which embrace the semantic vicissitudes attached to specific genres, that is, the discourse behind the images (and voices). In the case of the Hollywood style, it presupposes ideological interactions for the dynamics of the apparatus obeys certain conventions which reinforce its institutional nature, hence conspiring to the emerging of institutionalized discourses.

The prefix *para* in Greek, according to Linda Hutcheon, has two meanings: one which intends to make it ludicrous, and other which suggests intimacy and accordance, instead of (critical) contrasting.¹ Therefore, there is a certain degree of ambiguity in the very conception of the name *parody*, which could convey a paradoxical message: a parody of Hollywood could suggest more its intimate relation with the genre than the opposition to it.

For Ella Shohat, Hollywood classics perform a decisive role in the perpetuating of Eurocentric and patriarchal ideologies² for it places non-Western cultures under the gaze of the colonizer, instead of offering a multiplicity of images and discourses, whose effect would rely on the formation of a unilateral audience, thus contributing to hegemonic relations of power encompassing class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so forth. Nevertheless, Shohat points out to the necessity to go beyond the analysis of “good” or

¹ *A Theory of Parody* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) 32.

² “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema”, in *Film and Theory: an Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden:Blackwell,2000).

“bad” portrayals in cinema for what is at stake are the discourses which permeate the images/dialogue on the screen.

The identities of the peoples of the Black diaspora, proposed by Stuart Hall³, should be understood as being subjected to three main presences in the constitution of the self: *Africaine*, the great “aporia”, for all blacks trace their origin back in old Africa; *Européene*, for the colonizer came from Europe to impose their culture over the others; *Americaine*, for the American continent is the final destination, the conjuncture point where the many ethnicities converged. The formation of a third identity, then, would arise, once the dialogue with Africa and the West is complex since there is no return to the former, and it is already fused, syncretized with cultural elements from the latter.

Nonetheless, the search for a new “positive” image/representation of the black over the old “bad” stereotyped clichés does not guarantee portrayals less centered in European molds. On the contrary, they may go along with pre-established conventions culminating in “the aestheticization of history”, via the Western canon, as argued by Clyde Taylor⁴, thus coinciding with the institutions of domination, which contemplate unitary discourses.

I have chosen the film *Coming to America* for my corpus as I consider it to be a representative of the mainstream cinema produced nowadays in the U.S., and widespread mainstream American representation form among other cultures, such as in Brazil’s. Its main actors are among the most renowned African-American stars and the protagonist, Eddie Murphy, a polyvalent figure featuring in the various levels of the American show-biz . He is a reputable comedian, the writer of the film⁵, besides playing several roles in it

³ “ Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”. *Framework* 36 (1989).

⁴ “Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era”, in *Questions of Third Cinema*. Pines, Jim and Paul Willeman (London: BFI, 1984).

⁵ Murphy was ordered to pay 19% of earnings for not giving Art Buchwald the credits as co-writer (www.imdb.com).

– a trade mark in his films. In addition, the film is directed by John Landis, who has imprinted his own unique trademark when he makes use of allusions to other famous films, including the ones with Murphy. As parody has become a post-modern *habitué*, the film seems to fit well the purpose of my study.

My intention is to investigate whether the film's representations pose as a shift in pre-conceived Eurocentric and patriarchal gaze or remains attached to Hollywoodian conventions, taking into account form and content. My hypothesis is that the narrative constitutes a tentative critical evaluation of stereotyped Hollywoodian formulae, however finding itself trapped into a “modernist” venture whose aim is constrained in the search for “correct” images for blacks.

1.1. The Criteria for Choice of Scenes

I have chosen to select the scenes which had to have the protagonist depicted under some stereotyped prism, either focusing on “positive” or “negative” characterization, and the implications this would have with the Eurocentric discourse. I also endeavored to isolate contrasts among peoples or places, indicating a binary or Manichean relation of opposition clearly presented to the audience. The point of identification with the Western gaze, suggesting a colonialist or patriarchal treatment of the characters, such as Africans, African-Americans, and woman, in general, is to be traced according to the protagonist's point-of-view, once this is a classical prerogative in Hollywood productions. Therefore, I picked examples of how the protagonist would relate to those different characters.

My choice of scenes had to have meaningful connection to the points I intend to demonstrate so to confirm my hypothesis, that is to say, that even though being a parody of Hollywood ignorance towards other cultures apart from the European, the film may not guarantee a shift in perspective. A subsequent criteria should encompass the role of form

determining the content, and vice-versa, for there is a two-way route leading to “the orchestration of discourses” in the act of narrating.

1.2. Objectives and Research Question

I intend to demonstrate how the film could be read as a parody of Hollywood classics for its correlated treatment of elements in the mise-en-scene, exposing the genres stereotypical treatment of “exotic” lands concerning colonialism closely intertwined with male chauvinism. I also propose that the film aggregates formal and ideological features which denote the conventionality of the Hollywoodian genre, however sometimes presupposing a critical distancing as it is common in parodies in the post-modern context. Being the casting made of almost exclusively African-American actors who invert the original practice in Hollywood – in the beginning of cinema when black characters used to be played by black-faced Euro-Americans – and depicting the white explorer as a black African prince, the narrative suggests its aim at African-American audiences.

In order to get to know what is being produced by African-Americans who have access to the American industry of film, I wish to investigate:

1.2.1. How is the film attached to the Hollywood classic style?

1.2.2. What kind of parody the film presents?

1.2.3. To what extent does the parody allow critical distancing?

1.2.4. To what extent does the parody expose the conflicting identities which form the peoples of the black diaspora by means of displaying the polyphony of voices involved in the discourse (verbal and pictorial)?

1.2.5. Does the narrative offer an alternative gaze in terms of mainstream

Eurocentric representations or does it reinforce hegemony, capitalism, sexism, thereby in accordance with pre-conceived esthetical/ideological (form/content) premises

favoring the establishment thereby limiting the narrative to a pseudo-polyphonic discourse?

1.3. Methodology

I carry on this research by analyzing the film into two separate parts. The first part refers to the depiction of Zamunda, a fictitious country in the African continent, and its people, under the light of concepts which deal with the conventions of a specific system such as the Hollywood's, the study of stereotypes propagated in mass media means, and the structuring of the narrative according to a parodic mockery which aims at ridiculing.

The second part deals with the arrival of an African prince in New York, in which I also analyze the elements of the mise-en-scene and the construction of characters to find out whether they have been stereotyped or not.

I go further in my analysis in order to surpass the focus on stereotypes and propose a deeper interrogation concerning the mediations and discourses at play, being them formal – in terms of plot – and semantically structured because of the very existence of the specificities of the cinematic medium. Those parts will be dealt with observing its elements of the mise-en-scene, according to David Bordwell's notions about the classical Hollywood style.⁶

The study covers an investigation on the role of institutions of knowledge such as the Arts movement named as "Modernism" and its importance within a historical context, besides its concrete influence over the representing of ethnical minorities such as the African-Americans or black peoples of the diaspora; the relationship with the various components in the assemblage of identity referring to the peoples of the black diaspora in the Americas.

⁶ Please refer to 2.1.

The final procedure aims at arriving at a conclusion whether the film *Coming to America* subverts the gaze of the West or partly advocates towards an alternative representation in film productions.

1.4. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into three main parts:

- (a) A theoretical background related to Film Studies, involving cultural, feminist, and literary criticism, with their discursive interrelation.
- (b) A description of scenes in the first part of the narrative, including elements of the mise-en-scene, point-of-view (gaze), characters, and the language used in some dialogues.
- (c) A description of scenes in the second part of the narrative, including elements of the mise-en-scene, the contrasting of scenes which characterize some binary oppositions, the analysis of the structuring of the story (plot), characters, and the language used in some scenes (including the sound track).

Following a top-down sequence, in Chapter II, I start defining what would be understood as the Hollywood style, by David Bordwell. I continue with a definition of parody as a genre, and include its doubly-coded messages, besides its paradoxical nature, according to Linda Hutcheon. The study of stereotypes in mainstream productions, their relevance and limitations are elaborated based upon Ella Shohat's theories on Eurocentric and colonial depictions and discourses, cultural identity in cinema, by Stuart Hall, and notions on the role played by aesthetics in representing blacks within a historical context, by Clyde Taylor. I, too, include some of Mikhail Bakhtin's considerations about the character concerning his/her role in "rejoining" discourses.

Chapter III focuses on the first part of the film when the setting is, supposedly, Africa. An analyses of elements aim at defining whether it is a parody of Hollywood films concerning formal and ideological paradigms which include the portraiture of stereotyped characters. Moreover, the language used in the film is submitted to scrutiny for it is an important aspect in power relations.

Chapter IV continues to follow a similar analysis taking into account the previously mentioned elements interacting in the construction of meaning. However, the analysis of the plot and an extension in the item language are made necessary in order to improve my investigation.

Chapter V is the concluding chapter and presents the final considerations of the study, relating what I found out and the conclusions drawn from my observations, its ultimate section imparts the limitations of this thesis and offers suggestions for future research.

In the appendices I have included, firstly, the credits on the film, and, secondly, the filmography for Eddie Murphy, and for John Landis, not limiting it only to the period until the making of *Coming to America*, but until the present date.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1. The Hollywood Style

According to David Bordwell, the classical style developed by film productions originating from Hollywood is to be seen as a unique product which can be identified for its own set of characteristics. Although “we are not used to calling products of American mass culture ‘classical’ in any sense”, he says, the term “classical” seems to fit its purpose when we keep in mind that the formation of canons has always been based upon notions of decorum, respect for tradition, control of the perceiver’s response, among other concepts which include aesthetic norms capable of raising one work of art to the level of a dogmatic asset so as to take part of any medium called “classical”.¹

The putting together of specific norms, paradigms, and standards² is described as culminating in a homogenized final product of craftsmanship belonging to Hollywood and perpetuated by its faithful “followers” cast within a vast legion of filmmakers who apply the “unified system”. Such “unified system” includes not only practical/technical norms, but also ethico-socio-political ones. Therefore, the congregation of pre-established conventions, based upon technological, esthetical, or social/political premises, characterize Hollywood as “classical” for it is an institutional hallmark which has been obeyed and canonized. Bordwell states that “it was probably André Bazin who gave the adjective the

¹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 3-4.

² *Ibid.*, 3-11. For more, see Bordwell discussing the levels of generality of Hollywood, including practical aspects such as camera movement, lighting, continuity editing, and its psychological interaction with the viewers’ schemata, characterizing what he calls “an excessively obvious cinema”.

most currency”³ when he pointed to the genius of the system referring to Hollywood filmmaking as a “classical art” *par excellence*.

Furthermore, significant traits can be analyzed by taking a “broadly formalist” approach, as suggests Bordwell, for it dissects the film into definite parts (story causality and motivation; narration; time and space; shot and scene) which are unequivocally recurrent fixed elements in Hollywood’s style. “In Hollywood cinema, a specific sort of narrative causality operates as the dominant, making temporal and spatial systems vehicles for it”.⁴ Besides, story and plot are considered by Bordwell as two different elements of the narrative, once more akin to that of the Formalists. The former would define the *fabula*, namely, the mental (re)construction the viewer has to be able to infer from the plot, that is to say, “the film before us”.⁵

The story in Hollywood classics should be motivated by a character, the protagonist, who is usually “the prime causal agent”, delineated according to consistent qualities and traits. Those traits are often assigned along gender so as to furnish male and female characters with “appropriate” characteristics to their roles, emphasizing heterosexual love and continuing “traditions stemming from the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel, and the American melodrama”.⁶ The romantic pair in the story may even be compared to the protagonists in the folk/fairy tale and being subject of complications and conflicts, caused by other characters who would act perturbing the normal flow of the love story, before the final so eagerly wished *dénouement*.⁷

³ Ibid., 4. Bazin criticized his protégés at *Cahiers du cinéma* saying that Hollywood was “so much better than anything else” for its vitality and not only because of “the talent of this or that filmmaker”.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ For more on the specific characters and their roles as villains or heroes/heroines, the objects of pursuit, punishment, and other elements present in traditional tales, see Vladimir Propp, “The Function of the Dramatis Personae”, and “The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale”, in *Theory and History of Folktale* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

Time and space in the classical narrative are predictable and, as we have mentioned, motivated by characters. The story evolves in a chronological interaction “1-2-3”, as Bordwell points out, which means that one event leads to another, implying a psychological “temporal integration”. Psychological causality “permits classical viewers to integrate the present with the past” in order to make “clear-cut” hypothesis about the future. If the narrative, by any chance, shows events out of a chronological sequence, it is usually motivated by the characters, who guide the spectator into their flash-back/forward memory. In terms of space, “the human body is made the center of narrative” by means of closer shots, panning, tilting, and so forth. Frame-cutting is also extraordinarily common in Hollywood as the confirmation of the importance of the center zone of the screen, either for characters or objects. In addition, if classical narration aims at orientation, so does the space constructed by the soundtrack, which is “no less artificial than that of the image”⁸, and may be intra or extra-diegetic, as well. Bordwell says:

Certainly Hollywood’s own description of its work emphasizes the camera as an invisible witness, just as the soundtrack constitutes an ideal hearing of the scene. This aesthetic of effaced present is anthropocentric (camera and sound as eye and ear) and idealist (the witness is immaterial, an omniscient subject), hence also ideological.⁹

Moreover, narration in classical Hollywood films starts even before the action begins when the credits are displayed; “even these forty to ninety seconds cannot be wasted”¹⁰ for they may indicate the main character or the locale of the action, including the hierarchy of the actors – who comes first in terms of importance of role – plus the non-diegetic music, which usually reappears at the end of the film¹¹. Remembering what Bordwell says concerning the ideological implications of the classical Hollywood narrative, one may

⁸ Ibid., 42-54.

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

conclude we are facing a meticulously planned medium which takes advantage of each and every bit of footage in order to convey its message.

Alongside with all the techniques used in Hollywood, what I suppose would be of the most usefulness to highlight for the effect of the study proposed here, concerns the socio-political implications through the conventions so strongly signaled by the medium. First, I would pinpoint the importance of specific traits which qualify the characters as “homogeneous identities”, whose “character consistency” and reinforced “individuality” are crucial for the star system.¹² Second, the “narration’s insistence upon closure” and the search for meaning¹³; completion; the unfolding of cause and effect that “makes the time span we experience seem a complete unit.”¹⁴ Third, Hollywood as a spectacle and virtuosity appreciated by the public because of its artificiality for it is used as a means of artistic motivation, including the venerable practice of parody in Hollywood (about Hollywood), remembering that it has never aimed at diminishing its artistic value, nor “had” to be comic all the time; it has just been used to emphasize the artificiality of other art works in the name of artistic motivation.¹⁵

2.2. Parody

But what is a parody? Is it possible to decode *Coming to America* so as it fits the parodic genre? How does it refer to institutionalized visual codes contemplating embedded ideological premises?

For Linda Hutcheon, the very assumption that a text is a parody consecrates it as so for the conveyance of the message is in the eyes of the beholder. The readers’ perception – in our case the audiences’ – plays a decisive role concerning the nature of the narrative.

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

Thus, one may conclude, the moment the reader understands the narrative as a parody, it becomes characterized as such, for written texts, without the (implied) reader, “remain collections of black marks on the page”.¹⁶ The impact an image/utterance causes upon the spectator(s) characterizes the (un)conciliatory point of meeting between coder and decoder. Both ought to understand the codes being used in order to grasp the reality to which the text/image alludes to, quotes, ironizes, parodies, metaphorphizes, plagiarizes, or the myriad of distinct names different theoreticians might call it.¹⁷ What is really at stake here, is the fact that one must be able to decode the target of joke/representation, being it esthetical, discursive or ideological. “In other words, parody involves not just a structural *énoncé* but the entire *énonciation* of discourse....We may know that addresser and its intention only in the form of inferences that we, as receivers, make from the text, but such inferences are not to be ignored”.¹⁸

Notwithstanding its intimate relationship with the reader/viewer, parody does not stand as a solemn compact homogeneous set of codes. For one reason because the post-modern reader/viewer is far from being a culturally stable one, and, on the other hand, because ambiguity underlies the very nature of parody. Hutcheon points out to the double-coded politics inherent to the genre, therefore fitting quite suitably as the perfect approach to my object of analysis. She writes:

As form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies. This kind of authorized transgression is what makes it a ready vehicle for the political contradictions of postmodernism at large. Parody can be used as a self-reflective technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past. Its ironic reprise also offers an internalized sign of a certain

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody* (London: Methuen & Co., 1985) 23.

¹⁷ According to Hutcheon, parody is “related to burlesque, travesty, pastiche, plagiarism, quotation, and allusion, but remains distinct from them...Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgements, but satire usually uses that distancing to make a negative statement about that which is satirized”. As for modern parody itself, it does not necessarily harms the prestige of the background material because “any real attack would be self-destructive.” *A Theory of Parody*, 43-44.

self-consciousness about our culture's means of ideological legitimization. ...the doubleness of the politics of authorized transgression remains intact: there is no dialectics resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction in narrative fiction, painting, photography, or film.¹⁹

Nevertheless, I would like to make clear that the admitting of unsolvable contradictory issues which characterize all the post-whatever productions, should not come down to an infinite nihilistic derision. This is to say that two major prerogatives must remain as contemporary inquiries concerning representation in all art forms. First “that films are only representations does not prevent them from having real effects in the world”²⁰ and second, that the study of representation should keep in mind that “narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past”.²¹ Henceforth we as audiences are constituted by the summing up of a myriad of (a)historical (mis)representations – at least the ones we have been told – suffering the religious, esthetic, sexual, political, semiotic (and others) “burden”, as Ella Shohat puts it.²²

In conclusion, defining a parody seems to remain a quite controversial business once there are as many definitions for the term as there have been theoreticians occupied with the task.²³ Albeit irreconcilable those definitions due to their ideological divergences, I understand that two common features are to be agreed upon: Irony as the main rhetorical mechanism²⁴, and opposition or contrast between two texts²⁵, this is to say, there is always

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹ Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 101; 107. My emphasis.

²⁰ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 –3rd edition) 101.

²¹ Hutcheon, *The Politics*, 7.

²² Shohat, *Un. Eurocentrism*, 182.

²³ Linda Hutcheon discusses and compares the different points-of view concerning the parodic genre in *A Theory of Parody* and in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Important names such as Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gérard Genette, Terry Eagleton, Northrop Frye, among others, who may disagree in some aspects concerning the revolutionary or reactionary nature of parody. She also refers to the various forms of parody, i.e. in the visual arts, music, and in Literature.

²⁴ Hutcheon, *Theory*, 31.

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

a previous work in the background to be looked into. However, there are other aspects attributed to parody, according to Linda Hutcheon, which I judge fundamental for the purpose of my analysis in the present study: 1) its double codedness; 2) its paradoxical nature; and 3) being a matter of an authorized transgression which “remains authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert”.²⁶

2.3. Stereotype

The use of stereotypes in mainstream medium has generated discussions concerning the effects those preconceived images would cause in real world. Ella Shohat points out to the interchangeability of colonialist discourses and patriarchal practices, in “Gender and Culture of Empire”, in regards to the stereotypes used for native peoples, men and women, which derogatorily associated them with primitivism, irrationality, besides the so frequent erotic connotations that addressed the “Third-World” colonized as sexual beasts.²⁷ Besides, she discusses questions of realism, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, when she argued on the inescapability of representation when dealing with the fictional world in cinematography for there is no use in aiming at verisimilitude: we have no access to the real, at all. However, she urges for the necessity to investigate such stereotypes in a historical perspective which would lead us to a path where mainstream representations – more specifically Hollywood productions – can be seen side by side with historical social struggles the minorities have been facing in a “nothing-fictitious” basis. This is to say that the suffering and humiliating routines which the “real” person belonging to some stigmatized groups has faced are far from pertaining to the realm of fiction; could not be

²⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory*, 75.

²⁷ Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema”, in *Film and Theory: an Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden:Blackwell, 2000).

regarded as the product of one's fertile imagination, thus the importance to draw critical attention to the "complacent ignorance of Hollywood"²⁸ because

Filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships.²⁹

The study of stereotypes in mainstream Hollywood production has been of vital importance to critically denounce denigrating representations of, for example, Native Americans, Blacks, Latin Americans, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners – these days with a more exclusive emphasis on the Muslims not rarely addressed as "terrorists" by the American media – reinforcing conflicting relations in the social battleground. For Shohat, Hollywood does "write" race and prejudice, besides allegedly making the apology of the Anglo prototype to the detriment of any type of "hybrid" performer.³⁰ The segregationist policy in operation in Hollywood, according to Shohat, is not restricted to the choosing of actors or roles, but its extensive to the structural mechanisms involved in the making of films, from its manufacture until its distribution.³¹

Would it not be enough to have an industry responsible for producing and reproducing derogatory or even racist stereotypes, it acts towards the normalization of some aesthetic/ideological concepts by means of white "washing cycles"³², the preaching of idealized "racial harmony, affluence, and individual mobility"³³, and "cultural mediations"³⁴, all framed within Eurocentric prerogatives. It is, by all means, of great significance to recognize the implications of negative images portrayed by mainstream

²⁸ Shohat, Un. Eurocentrism, 179.

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Ibid., 197.

³¹ Ibid., 184.

³² Shohat borrows the term referring to Shu Lea Cheang's film which explores the ambiguities of the "melting pot" metaphor, *ibid.*, 197.

³³ The Cosby Show and other sitcoms portraying a "simulacral meliorism" of color adjustments which are incompatible with the real situation of Black people in the U.S.A., *ibid.*, 198.

³⁴ Eurocentric discourses in film can be present not only in characters, but also in the plot, the lighting, framing, *mise-en-scène*, and music, *ibid.*, 208.

media, thus becoming fundamental the study of stereotypes in popular culture, as argued by Shohat, because they “reveal oppressive patterns of prejudice”, “highlight the psychic devastation”, and make clear their use as “a form of social control”³⁵; besides, for they are used to “justify daily violence or structural oppression” against certain communities³⁶. Nevertheless, the study of stereotypes is found limited by more complex issues regarding the actual delegation of voices, that is, the discourses at play, and also because it is necessary to go beyond the study of stereotypes if one wishes to abandon the Manichean project based on the capitalist/modernist contrasting of “good” versus “bad” stereotypes.³⁷

2.3.1. The Limits of Stereotype

The study of stereotypes in mainstream media propagators has been of irrefutable value towards the comprehension of how representation plays a decisive role amongst human beings power relations. However, “the stereotype approach entails a number of political pitfalls”³⁸, according to Ella Shohat, for it can lead to an ahistorical essentialism/individualism focused on the moralistic search for “good” images for the one once derogatorily pictured.

To think in terms of non-prejudiced portrayals is not the same as to think in “positive” images conveyed according to Eurocentric humanism, although one may suppose in order to avoid prejudice one should “simply insert Black heroes into actantial slot formerly filled by White ones”³⁹, permitting the replacement of actors to pose ambiguous questions concerning its up-scaled role in films, sitcoms, TV commercials and so forth vis-à-vis their “actual” role in society. It seems as if White dominated apparatuses would be kind enough

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁶ Shohat explains that although some groups such as the Polish-Americans and Italian-Americans have been regrettably stereotyped as well, their stereotypes “have not been shaped within the racial and imperial foundation of the US”, thus not making them the target of same level social injustices suffered by the colonized, the colored, or the “mestizos”. *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 183.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

so as to allow non-White actors the pleasure of “joining the club of elite”⁴⁰, as Shohat puts it, without any further considerations on the nature of the elite to which the now “accepted” member is partaking. Besides, the binary “good stereotype” versus “bad stereotype” pair evokes a Manichean relationship, thus driving us to inquire into the very concept of “good” and “bad”. Departing from the principle that a “good” role should be one which levels Black-Americans to the “good” White-Americans, as if all the Black community wants is to be treated as bourgeois “equals”, offers “an easy pride in African-American culture”⁴¹ and celebrates “the virtues of middle class existence in order to obscure structural injustice and racial discrimination”⁴².

Moreover, the preoccupation with specific characters slides into an individualistic three-dimensional approach, therefore focusing on individuals who are considered either “all good” or “all bad”. The power of social structures and institutions would be left aside, hence reinforcing humanistic essentialism or/and aligning the spectator with certain characters who incorporate the figure of “do-gooders”⁴³, in this case, possible because of mainstream maneuvers concerning perspective, address, and focalization.

2.4. Mediations and Discourses

For Shohat, other aspects of the cinematic genre have to be taken into consideration besides the characters who appear on the screen, whether Black, White, stereotyped, ridiculed or not. She calls for the need to observe the narrative structure, genre conventions, and cinematic style exposed through lighting, framing, mise-en-scene, and even music. Those features might wind up revealing Eurocentric discourses behind previously thought politically correct characters and plots. As important as point-of-view,

³⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 206.

⁴¹ Ibid., 204.

⁴² Ibid., 204.

for her, would be the “point-of-hearing”⁴⁴, because “music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, is crucial for spectatorial identification”⁴⁵.

Another aspect to be carefully analyzed if one wishes to trace back the narratives whose whereabouts are in the West – however sometimes undercover “Western emotional hearts” are set in Africa⁴⁶ -- has to do with genre. The search for positive images are not the only means to question the establishment, even grotesque and caricatured stereotypes may achieve its goal and “convey a deep critique of societal structures”⁴⁷ Films designed as comedy or parody can destabilize and criticize by means of mockery and satire, although they may, as well, conform to Eurocentric stereotypes, thus reinforcing old prejudiced practices without actually introducing different perspectives. One ought to be aware of the ambiguity permeating caricatures and also the liberal too leaning “generic defense against accusations of racism – ‘It’s only a comedy!’ ‘Whites are equally lampooned!’”⁴⁸, and also the real nature of discourses at play despite first impressions caused upon the less experienced viewer.

In order to be able to spot Eurocentric tendencies in mainstream productions, one should seek not only scrutinizing stereotypes and visual indicators, but also discursive practices underneath thick entrenched layers disguising the real subject, that is, the social being who is not unitary but constituted by “socially generated contradictions, like the media, as the site of conflicting discourses and competing voices”⁴⁹.

⁴³ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 209. Shohat mentions films such as *Out of Africa* (1985) and *Ashanti* (1979).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 215.

2.5. Identity and Diaspora in the Cinematic Representation

When bringing up the issue of how people identify with one another, taking as common some familiar features such as color, place of origin, language, among other similar traits which make us feel “part” of certain community⁵⁰, it does not take too long until one realizes to be a matter of how we “see” ourselves, namely, more subjectively as spiritual beings but also as “physical” bodies. Our “identity” is formed based on how we understand both body and soul, as well as by how we are seen by the others. If we can only have a notion of being part of the world around us after taking notice of our own image reflected in a mirror, thus comprehending the world is a bigger space than our restricted private self, it is easy to figure how our sense of identity is intimately connected to the “reflecting” of this identity. Once the reflecting of an image depends on the mirror itself, and images cannot be reflected if not in the presence of a physical body which is reflected despite its soul, we assume that a distorted mirror will affect its reflection, showing a crippled image no matter its perfect “soul”, or vice versa. Besides, a convex or concave mirror presents us as shorter or taller beings; a broken mirror, crippled images. Therefore, taking the screen as the mirror, and representation as the reflection and not the actual reproducing of the object it aims at portraying, it is possible to say that it depends on the “cinematic mirror” the nature of images it reflects, and consequently, the idea one makes upon oneself, thus placing identity as subordinated phenomena intimately delineated by the constant mirroring of images, as Stuart Hall puts:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact,...we should think of identity as a ‘production’, which is

⁵⁰ For more, see Benedict Anderson on the act of ‘imagining’ or ‘creating’ a horizontal comradeship capable of linking a vast number of individuals who would never even know the majority of their “fellow-members” but would believe in their communion nonetheless. He also says that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983) 6.

never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.⁵¹

For Hall, it is also important to note the point from which one speaks for it is always “positioned” within a context.⁵² Whoever speaks, speaks from a certain position that cannot accommodate Blacks, Whites, or mixed peoples according only to their tone of skin, or their place of origin. The point of *enunciation* has to do with, at least, two prerogatives which should include 1) the similarities among different peoples of the black “diaspora” originated in Africa, of course, for no one is to deny the common scope of the “black experience” regarding slavery and exploitation but 2) what we have “become” after the diaspora, resulting in “difference”⁵³ more than in similarities amongst Black peoples. Therefore, as Halls argues, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”.⁵⁴

In order to comprehend what we have become it is fundamental to make room for the unfolding of meaning, without restraining it to stable binary formulas which freeze past/present events, hence stabilizing and continuing narratives which do not allow the infiltrating of so many other ones “left-over”⁵⁵ as if history were some sort of continuous, solid, unquestionable databank one could have prompt access to at anytime: the past “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth”.⁵⁶

Furthermore, Hall points out to three “presences” which, although departing from distinct regions of the world, will equally converge so to influence one’s “cultural

⁵¹ Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”. *Framework* 36 (1989) 120.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 110-113.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

identity”, that is to say, the peoples of the diaspora of the West, represented in film⁵⁷: the *Présence Africaine*, the *Présence Européenne*, and the *Présence Américaine*.⁵⁸

The *Présence Africaine*, is referred by Hall as the “site of the repressed”⁵⁹, peoples of same origin – geographical and historical referential – who due to their “loss of identity” attempt to restore, reconstruct, and trace back; where black, brown, mulatto, white, “must sooner or later come to terms with”⁶⁰ after their confrontation with the “fragmented and pathological cinematic and visual representation of the West.”⁶¹ The second, the *Présence Européenne*, the site of “power” dispute, the interminable role of the dominant discourses speaking for us, about us, and over us, entrenched with colonialism, “exclusion, imposition and expropriation”, and ultimately becoming constitutive part of one’s soul.⁶² The third, *Présence Américaine*, “the beginning of diaspora, of diversity”, different “New World”⁶³ which, although being the place of “continuous displacements” remains producing, transforming, mixing, blending: hybridizing.⁶⁴

2.5.1. The Nostalgia of *Présence Africaine*

It is true that Africa remains as a vivid presence in the culture of different peoples of the diaspora in various aspects of the language, music, or religious tendencies. However, as Hall reminds us, “the original Africa is no longer there”⁶⁵, then it cannot be recovered in

⁵⁷ Although Stuart Hall talks here about the Afro-Caribbean blacks, being he a Jamaican and having lived his adult life in England (“the belly of the beast”, as he names it), he refers not only to the new emerging cinema of the Caribbean but also other “Third Cinemas”. Naturally, this would not include Hollywood at all; however, he does make mention to the emerging practices of representation encompassing “The Black Triangle”, the Caribbean, the USA and the UK, whose center is in Africa, “the great aporia”. Ibid., 112.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁶¹ Ibid., 119.

⁶² Ibid., 118.

⁶³ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 117.

its wholeness, nor in its real existence, but by means of an imaginative effort which brings us the sense of collectiveness, the search for “ ‘one true self’, hiding inside many others”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, this imagined mother land should be approached not so much as the geographical point of departure which congregates a variety of peoples such as North/South Americans or Caribbeans, but the discursive standpoint from which they express themselves, that is to say, announce their presence, represent their image, and understand their identities. It is important to recognize the *Présence Européenne* as the major factor that distinguished the peoples of the diaspora who have become different, and difference matters, as Hall argues, if one wishes not to

collude with the West which, precisely, normalizes and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. ...These symbolic journeys are necessary for us all – and necessarily circular. This is the Africa we must return to – but ‘by another route’: what Africa has *become* in the New World, what we have made of ‘Africa’: ‘Africa’ – as we re-tell it through Politics, memory and desire.⁶⁷

Moreover, having said that representation is responsible for the construction of identity, when Hall stated that it is constituted “within” and not “outside” it, and keeping in mind that the point of one’s enunciation may coincide with a point of ambivalence where one “looks from the place of the Other”⁶⁸. When submitted to the “splitting and doubling”⁶⁹, the one who speaks must realize the importance of the *Présence Américaine* in the emerging of a third identity constructed by means of ‘new’ representations, “and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists”⁷⁰ framed by mainstreamed Hollywoodian diaspora aesthetics that equalizes and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 118.

homogenizes. The *Présence Américaine* should be the point of arrival for the *Présence Africaine* plus the *Présence Européenne*, **as well as** the point of departure of new identities; transforming and creating, resisting to old Western ideological paradigms and esthetical values, however recognizing “a necessary heterogeneity and diversity”⁷¹ in order to “discover places from which to speak”.⁷²

2.6. Post-Modern Black Cinema?

The question of beauty and what one might name as beautiful has more to do with by whom such concept is established and also with what intent it has been promoted. According to Clyde Taylor, “beauty” itself is irrelevant “beside the power to choose and name beauty”.⁷³ He urges for the need to abandon considerations about cinema and black people which deals with issues of either accuracy or positive/negative portrayals without considering the very cinematic apparatus, as well as the institutions behind apparatus and the bourgeois gaze, as a mechanism of domination.⁷⁴ This approach would inevitably lead to the acceptance of the social system which has provided it, classify the world in two hemisphere, using his term, of “haves and have-nots”⁷⁵, thus remaining exclusive to “those individuals who have lifted themselves above the imperatives of necessity and survival.”⁷⁶

He says:

Romanticism, symbolism, modernism, post-modernism: as aesthetic movements or bodies of theory and criticism, in none of them is there a role for the non-Western Other except as occasional exotic object.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁷¹ Ibid., 120.

⁷² Ibid., 120.

⁷³ Clyde Taylor, “Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era”, in *Questions of Third Cinema*. Pines, Jim and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1986) 90.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 90-92.

All the institutions which created parameters of accepted esthetical values have never included any other value if not according to its rules, therefore it is useless to base our assumptions regarding the representation of Black peoples upon normative oppositions and structural codes of Same/Different, Order/Chaos⁷⁸, and/or beautiful/ugly, for one would be running straight to – perhaps where one has never left – “the confluence of Western aesthetics and European racism”.⁷⁹

The maintenance of current “classical” aesthetic notions, even though when invertedly used to dress up the colonized with the same attributes the Western elite would praise, culminates into what Taylor calls “the aestheticisation of history and the historicisation of aesthetics”⁸⁰ – which is practically exemplified by Hollywood’s cinematic telling of “history”. Despite the appearance of subsequent movements – later incorporated by the Western canon in which Modernism stands out for it is “commensurate with its general historical era”⁸¹, modern history for the colonized characterizes only the **assimilation** of “modernization”, not the production of it. This means that the modern times, for the colonized, assume a different and paradoxical connotation⁸², thus the necessity to think of Modernism as having distinct effects regarding the centers of intellectual production, and the periphery subjected to the mere consume of Eurocentric theories.⁸³

In addition, according to Taylor, in order to arrive at a post-modern era, it is essential for Black cinema to “break with Euro-modernism power/knowledge simultaneously”⁸⁴, to question the validity of esthetical values conceived under Western constraints if to be used

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁸¹ Modernism is pointed out by Taylor as being commensurate with its general historical era because of its disproportionately ambition, leveling itself to the disproportional ambitions of science, technology, economics, and politics of the time, and posing as the “solution” for an old alienated Europe. This supposed “prototype of global experience, as Taylor recommends, should be rejected and rewritten. Ibid., 101.

⁸² Taylor explains that the colonized while imposed the European expansionist project, started to resist its subordination. Ibid., 102

as a model for non-European mediums of representation such as the cinematic, besides recognizing them as authorized agencies of dominant discourse which include the esthetical compromise with the West, as he explains:

Afro-modernist cultural discourse **refuses** the confinement to detailed study within the Established, Eurocentric narrative of human culture and **inaugurates** the reconstruction of its **own**. ... It **quarantines** black cultural productions misdirected by the attraction of Western ‘great traditions’. ... While blacks and whites in the overdeveloped countries may jointly be confronting the consumerism of late capitalism, their relation to these social contradictions express **different historical cruxes** in which one group meets these conditions as subject-inheritors and the other as object-victims. From the recognition of the two antagonistic modernisms, it is plain that modernism for blacks is hardly over, has in fact hardly begun. Blacks can only dubiously be post-modernists since they were never permitted to be ‘modernists’ in the first place.⁸⁵

2.7. The Poetics of Film as a Discourse

What is the difference between the story told in a novel from the one told in a film? If both are constructed around characters who are part of a plot, are there any distinctions? When attempting to answer these questions one should firstly establish the real function of characters and images, how they relate to the story in each genre; something that goes even beyond the text, *per se*: the discourse. The essentials of one genre when transposed to the other – from literature to film – may undergo not only the obvious transformations for their distinction as two mediums, but also alterations which advance, to use Ella Shohat’s term, “beyond the epidermic surface of the text”.⁸⁶ Movements operating in the deepest structures of meaning construction, that is to say, on the **semantic** level, may affect the text in such an indelible manner that it will make it impossible to refer to literature and film as

⁸³ Names such as Frantz Fanon, Ousmane Sembene, among others are cited by Taylor and regarded as the precursors of Afro-modernist movements. *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 103. My emphasis.

if they have been equally conceived. To paraphrase Seymour Chatman, the key word is “assert”⁸⁷ – for an assertion is in fact a **statement**. In other words, films would not always “state” something. They would generally name it. Chatman even feels the need to define the term due to its force in ordinary rhetoric, and exemplifies:

An “assertion” is a statement, usually an independent sentence or clause, that something **is** in fact the case, that it **is** a certain sort of thing, that it **does** in fact have some properties or enter into certain relations, namely, those listed. When I say, “The cart was tiny; it came onto the bridge,” I am asserting that certain property of the cart of being small in size and that certain relation of arriving at the bridge. However, when I say “The green cart came onto the bridge,” the greenness of the cart is not asserted but slipped in without syntactic fuss. It is only named. Opposed to asserting there is the mere “naming.”⁸⁸

Accordingly, whenever one “names” something – despite not much room is left whether we desire to infer from the sentence, utterance, or scene – the responsibility of such inference would rely more on the one who infers from what has been named. A film does not “assert”, says Chatman, but “shows” what is to be asserted by the viewer: “A film doesn’t say, ‘This *is* the state of affairs,’ it merely **shows** you that state of affairs”.⁸⁹

Whereas, in novels, the images constructed inside each of the readers’ mind – although pertaining to a similar “realm” once different readers take part in the same world – derive from a myriad of “personal” (cultural/social/historical) abstractions originating from words. According to Chatman, those “abstract symbols”⁹⁰ differ from the very words

⁸⁶ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 214.

⁸⁷ “What Novels Can do that Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)”, in *Film, Theory, Criticism: Introductory Readings*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 407.

⁸⁸ Chatman makes use of basic concepts to infer that films show much more than they say, and in case there is any doubt still haunting the audience, this would rely more on the visual message than on the verbal one; we do not trust our senses in the same proportion. Besides, some of the common terms used in the field would prove the importance of “its essential visual mode”, such as “camera eye style”, evoking the neutrality of the medium, which literary critics characterize as “non-narrated Hemingwayesque style”. *Ibid.*, 407.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 407. My emphasis.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 410.

that generated them “in kind”.⁹¹ Conversely, the sequence of events/actions which constitutes the plot/story passing before our eyes in the film deserves no further distinctions from the ones captured by our mind insofar as “the movements on the screen are so iconic, so like the real life movements they imitate, that the illusion of time passage simply cannot be divorced from them.”⁹²

Albeit, through the trajectory in which the “neutral” images on the screen and the viewer’s abstractions commute there may be found a “mediator”⁹³, as Robert Burgoyne argues, who would play a decisive role. The character in film, he states, “acts as a mediating agent not only for the narrative transformations in the fictional world – the level of plot, events, conflicts, and resolutions – but also for the **discourse** of the film”.⁹⁴ Besides, the specificity of the medium renders to the character a unique possibility, thereby intervening between the text (i.e. the film) and the construction of meaning. In addition, content and form may become so intertwined to the extent that “the formal patterning in the film text produces events which are usually understood as occurring at the deep structural level of the *fabula*”⁹⁵: instead of having the content (*fabula*) as “an irreducible core”⁹⁶ from which to depart, a reversed phenomenon may occur putting it “as a product of the formal patterning”,⁹⁷ such as (point-of-view, editing, eyeline matches, etc.).

At this point now, we arrived at an important confluence of concepts which comprise form, content, and discourse, having Mikhail Bakhtin as a central figure in the tying of the three. According to him:

⁹¹ Ibid., 410.

⁹² Ibid., 410.

⁹³ “The Interaction of Text and Semantic Deep Structure in the Production of Filmic Characters”, in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U. S. History*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 72.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72. My emphasis.

⁹⁵ For more, see Burgoyne, “The Interaction of Text”, on the Formalist dyad used by Jonathan Culler who draws his chief examples from Freud in his “Fabula and Sjuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative”. Ibid., 72.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁹⁷ A clarifying example is given by Burgoyne regarding the character’s function (Villainy) made possible by the formal patterning, in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Ibid., 73.

Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the **sound image** to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning. ... The great historical destinies of genres are overshadowed by the petty vicissitudes of stylistic modifications, which in their turn are linked with individual artists and artistic movements. ... The internal politics of style (how the elements are put together) is determined by its external politics (its relationship to alien discourse). The word lives, as it were, on the **boundary** between its own context and another, alien, context.⁹⁸

Having agreed on the importance of a “formal/ideological approach”⁹⁹ which does not ignore “basic social tones”¹⁰⁰, we go on so as to encounter the one who Burgoyne called “mediator”, in his “showing” what Chatman calls “the state of affairs”. As for Bakhtin, the mediator is a double-lived “rejoinder”¹⁰¹ who, in a sense, embodies the speaker and the receiver within his/her own self “as an organic part of the heteroglot unit”¹⁰² which cannot be “excised”.¹⁰³ What is of importance for the present study, is how the rejoinder will actually **rejoin** the voices departing from the many inner/outer directions, thus mediating discourse. Would he/she “speak of the ‘already qualified world’”¹⁰⁴; visibly “meddling” with the “heteroglot intentions that stratify that world”¹⁰⁵, or will he/she do it as if the “scaffolding is cleared away once construction is finished”?¹⁰⁶ Therefore, by removing the “cabal evidences” during the production of language, the art of representing may reduce dialogues and voices to a “unitary speech”¹⁰⁷ inasmuch as the

⁹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, eds. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 283;284.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰² Ibid., 284.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰⁴ “Discourse in the Novel”, 330.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 330.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 331.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 331.

film's homogeneous voices may speak of a unitary world "as if it were a speech about an 'Edenic' world".¹⁰⁸

Conversely, when displaying those evidences, film(s) can be defined, instead, as a multi-faceted portraiture, evoking

a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical **becoming** and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still fraught with **hostile** intentions and **accents**.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 331.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 331.

CHAPTER III

HOLLYWOOD IS IN AFRICA – AFRICA IS IN HOLLYWOOD

A parody, a parody with a kind of miraculous gift to make it absurder than it was.

Ben Jonson

This chapter aims at analyzing the first part of the narrative in which Africa is depicted in a rather traditional manner, and compares it to pre-established aesthetic notions practiced in mainstream productions. This means that the Africa we are about to meet throughout the filmic devices inscribed into the mise-en-scene may wind up being based upon the old representations conceived into Hollywood's institutionalized molding belly. Worn out depictions of Africa and "exotic" lands well acquainted to world-wide audiences populate the screen in the forms of stereotyped figures and behaviors so familiar to the Western public.

However, the whole scenario is of extreme exaggeration, even hilarious hyper-enhanced traits which may suggest an intentional mockery behind each and every costume, gesture, setting decor, and many other aspects, suggesting that what we are actually about to witness is not just another Hollywood classic, but an ironic parody which emphasizes the artificiality of it.

3. Elements of the Mise-en-scene

3.1. The Setting

The story takes place in a remote country named Zamunda. Once there are no records concerning an African country with that name, it is to be regarded as a fictitious country. Yet, because there are no references suggesting more precisely its localization, the

audience is left to suppose to be a matter of *any* country located in Africa, assuming that African countries could be all the same.

The camera guides us above a rainforest – during the first minutes of the film when the credits are being presented – we fly over dense vegetation, throughout the mist of clouds, in a dreamlike combination of photograph and cartoon which bears a striking resemblance to Walt Disney’s productions.

The voyage takes us to an “unexplored” territory where a palace stands; one is immediately able to recall the films discussed by Ella Shohat – which she referred to as “colonial” films – narrating the conquest of primitive hidden lands, inscribed within deserts, jungles, and mountains. In those films, according to her, lays the claim to initiate the Western spectator into the unknown when “the spectator is subliminally invited on an ethnographic tour of a celluloid-‘preserved’ culture”¹, hence reproducing the imperial discourse of domination. In *Coming to America*, what we see is a magnificent monument isolated in the middle of the wilderness, and surrounded by the forest. Undecipherable in its architecture for it shows the blending of several styles, domes, and towers, the building resembles distinct temples or palaces, namely, a Muslim mosque (i.e. the Great Mosque in Nigeria); the Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican; with a touch of the Russian Kremlin, or perhaps the Taj Mahal in India.

The portrayal of an African country based upon restricted focalization characterizes a reduced point-of-view in regards to what the whole African continent *de facto* is. Consequently, Classical Hollywood “topographical reductionism” poses a limited scope which constrains and reinforces the stereotyped underdevelopment of some regions,

¹ Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema”, in *Film and Theory: an anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden: Blackwell, 2000) 676.

therefore reflecting “a culturally overdetermined geographical-symbolic polarity” which enhances the “East/West axis”.²

By showing that Zamunda-Africa belongs somewhere too far distant from wherever the spectator might be, and repeating mainstream traditional formulae, the film: 1) homogenizes, reduces, and conditions the spectator, so that the audience has the impression it “comes to master, in a remarkably telescoped period of time, the codes of a foreign culture shown”³; 2) separates the audience – supposedly Americans – from the “other” being depicted.. Alongside with both reductionism and separation, lies a totalitarian hegemonic ideology, which splits the world in two halves: one Western that looks into, studies, and judges, and one Eastern, to be looked at, estranged, and analyzed .

In its interior, the palace is richly decorated; the setting of exaggerated shades is painted pink, blue, golden, green, among other bright colors. Huge glass windows make possible the sight of wild animals passing outside.

Three-point lighting, the most common in Hollywood classical films⁴, is used so as to avoid shadows and enhance as many objects as possible in the frame. The aseptically clean setting, immaculately arranged, added to the glittering floor, resembles what it could be a scene cut out from the *The King and I* (1956).

Akim, the prince, first appears asleep in his enormous bedroom on a king-sized bed with satin bedspread. Two huge pictures show a volcano in eruption, and aquatic tropical plants similar to the Vitória-Régia, from the Amazonian jungles of South America - Brazil. There is an adjoining room, whose doors are opened so the prince enters for his morning bathing session. There, gorgeous semi-naked female bathers await him inside a big round bathtub.

² Ibid., 677.

³ Ibid., 677.

⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 189.

The second scene in which the prince is having breakfast with his parents, the king and the queen, they are sat at an extremely long dinner table. It appears to be closely similar to the one used in official receptions at The Buckingham Palace when the Queen offers remarkable dinners, illustrated in traditional British well known books for the teaching of English⁵ to symbolize wealth and power. Such is its length, that an old fashioned wooden intercom is necessary when the prince – sitting at one extreme end of the table – needs to communicate with his parents. Crystals and silverware are presented over a richly decorated breakfast table. Covering the walls whose colors vary from shades of pink, blue, and green, colorful paintings of what could be tropical plants, palm trees, and gigantic bananas.

Latter on, prince and king are having the typical “father and son” conversation about the prince’s step into the responsibility of a married life. They stroll around the magnificent green grassed royal garden with tropical vegetation, where they talk and naturally deviate from some wild animals crossing rapidly the scene. They are elephants, zebras, and two giraffes who seem to be observing the two from behind a bush-tree.

Mise-en-scene in the film, so far, composes a gigantic pastiche which sends us back in time direct to the classical Hollywood studios. Overwhelmingly colorful, unmistakably fake, but spectacularly impressive, thus revealing its parodic nature.

Such an obvious resemblance could not be just coincidental. One may assume it is a deliberate reproduction of the Hollywoodean decor. If so, it characterizes a parody on mainstream representations about Africa; a critique towards its superficiality and geographical ignorance. On the other hand, preventing the Western audience from any contact possible with alternative aesthetics beyond the predictable pre-established

⁵ As in the *Headway* series of course books, elementary level, printed in the U.K. by the Oxford University Press.

mainstream gaze, it reproduces ridiculously stereotyped images which conform the ignorant eyes to the on going perpetuating of Eurocentric discourses.

3.2. The Costumes

A variety of glamorous outfits calls the audience's attention. People of Zamunda are good-looking, well-groomed and attractive. The "rose bearers" – the women who answer to the clapping of hands – throw rose petals on the floor clearing the passage for the prince and the king whenever they pass. They are particularly gorgeous in their brocade sarongs and wear turbans.

Taking into consideration the mixture in styles and colors, it is difficult to identify the country of origin in which the characters' costumes have been inspired. They may suggest a range of possible nationalities, including pieces such as turbans, Egyptian head adornments and necklaces, a safari hat, as well as European morning-suits, and military/imperial decorations around their necks mixed up with miniature tribal masks.

In addition, Zamunda's inhabitants can be distinguished by the way they dress. Servants (or slaves?) would have the less of coverings, while the royal family members exhibit absurdly glittering fabrics, gigantic golden jewelry, animal skins, furs, "and reveal European suits beneath their African garb".⁶ Lower rank members have almost no clothes. Female servants have a two-piece outfit (sometimes topless). The costumes' colorfulness and exaggeration, juxtaposed to bird feathers, g-strings, and pantyhoses seem to have been inspired by the pageants of the Brazilian Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, with a touch of the American ice-skating spectacle *Holiday On Ice*, due to their stylized allusion to tribal clothing (Indian, African, and so forth) without losing in sophistication. Both Western events are designed to impress the audiences, and not intended to convey a realistic

⁶ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 -3rd ed.) 196.

depiction of costumes used by the ethnical groups being alluded to. Therefore, the grandiosity of the spectacle show is mostly achieved specially for the excesses in color, the use of plumage (most of the time artificial), glittering fabrics, golden beads and sequins, denoting little concern towards their originals. None of the spectators would ever suppose they copy with exactness the costumes in which they have been inspired, nor would the Western audiences demand for verisimilitude even for the actual inspiring piece of garment or adornment might reveal itself as far less appealing and glamorous.

3.3. The Western Gaze

3.3.1. Erotized Africa

Concomitantly with the colonial discourse which created the hyper sexualized Negro, portraying them as a threat to every white woman, it is possible to juxtapose the Western fantasy that women are more voluptuous, and therefore more sexually available, in “exotic” places such as Africa. The concept of the harem, as presented by Ella Shohat, discusses the images portrayed in mainstream films which are equally Eurocentric, colonialist, and patriarchal. By presenting the East “as the locus of irrational primitivism and uncontrollable instincts”⁷, the film’s exposure of the female servants’ flesh suggests their availability for sexual practices, contrarily to the well-covered bodies of the nobility. Thus, the servants’ nudity establish a relationship of subservience denouncing the gaze of the colonizer.

The fantasy of the harem alongside with metaphors such as “the dark” continent, are phallogentric and colonialist; intrinsically intertwined for they both aim at justifying domination and subjugation. Whilst the colonizer ought to “bring light” and “knowledge” to the remote lands where primitivism and ignorance rule, women should be “saved from

⁷ Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire”, 677.

her enviro/mental disorder”⁸ hence being behavior and mentally domesticated, thus “civilized”. Both land and women are justifiably to be penetrated, exploited, dominated, and revealed.

Shohat calls our attention towards the overlapping nature of colonialist discourses and male centered aesthetics, recalling Freud’s psychoanalytical allusions in regards to women’s psychosis. She says:

It is the process of exposing the female Other, of literally denuding her, which comes to allegorize the Western masculinist power of possession, that she, as a metaphor of her land, becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge. This intersection of the epistemological and the sexual in colonial discourse echoes Freud’s metaphor of the “dark continent.” Freud speaks of female sexuality in metaphors of darkness and obscurity often drawn from the realms of archeology and exploration ...Freud is perhaps unaware of the political overtones of his optical metaphor... The notion of the necessary unveiling of the unconscious requires an obscure object in order to sustain the very desire to explore, penetrate, and master.⁹

Although the film shows that the prince has both male and female servants who wear diminutive outfits, his own private harem is made up of gorgeous semi-naked women who are there to help him with his most intimate moments. When a huge bathtub appears from behind the bathroom doors, placing the prince surrounded by sexy – whereas passive – topless women, the audience is presented with a voyeuristic entrance to a forbidden area of the palace, hence, the scene’s similarity with a harem. While one of the servants washes the prince’s back, another one suddenly emerges from the bottom of the bathtub: – Your royal penis is clean, your highness! – she announces. The camera cuts to the prince to find his face overwhelmed with satisfaction. He sighs.

⁸ Ibid., 678.

⁹ Ibid., 678.

Thus, by “authorizing a voyeuristic entrance into an inaccessible private space, the Harem dream reflects a masculinist utopia of sexual omnipotence”¹⁰. In addition, the scene reinforces the “active/passive heterosexual division of labor”¹¹ placing women under the gaze of the male protagonist, and, consequently, heterosexual audiences which identify with him. This characterizes what Laura Mulvey defines as the scopophilic nature of cinema. For her, the male gaze is supposed to guide the narrative, actively making things happen, while women remain as mere objects of “to-be-looked-at-ness”, displayed, and gazed upon. In an unique manner, “mainstream films neatly combined spectacle and narrative”, albeit creating a surface of friction for the flow of the narrative is interrupted by the sexualized female figure, namely, the woman spectacle *steals* the scene becoming an “alien presence” which must be “integrated into cohesion with the narrative”.¹²

How to equate the two problems and assure heterosexual scopophilia however maintaining the female figure under control? If, on one hand, the film should not take the risk of posing visual threats to “straight” male audiences, which may not bear the sight of gorgeous naked male servants sharing the same bathtub with the prince, and, on the other hand, it is important not to overwhelm the same audience and allow the female figure to work against the development of the story line and eventually take over “in moments of erotic contemplation”¹³, how should the diegesis proceed? In *Coming to America* this seems to have been solved by placing a powerful icon by means of a strong male protagonist who will guide the narrative.

¹⁰ Ibid., 684.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 488.

¹² Ibid., 487.

3.3.2. The Western Gaze Camouflaged

Early cinema endeavored to represent Third World “primitive” lands through wild or exotic images which justified the White colonizers’ penetration. The “dark continent”, for instance, once to be explored, is now the locus of too obvious “enlightened” Hollywoodian images, which call our attention in order to question the author’s intention to mockery and criticism. Whereas, this artifice might cause pernicious side effects.

In this case, the indecipherability of the costumes could stand for the indecipherability of ethnical groups represented in the narrative. Despite intended to be a parody aiming at laughable Hollywoodian “know-nothing portrayals”¹⁴, on one level, it “projects colonized people as “all the same”; besides, it “favors big-budget blockbusters” – classist and Eurocentric establishment of economic power – hence indulging the “spoiled child of the apparatus”, that is to say, pleasing the liberal American audience.¹⁵

Shohat, referring to films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923,1956), and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), wrote:

Any possibility of dialogical interaction and of a dialectical representation of the East/West relation is excluded from the outset. The films thus reproduce the colonialist mechanism by which the Orient, rendered as devoid of any historical or narrative role, becomes the object of study and spectacle.¹⁶

Unfortunately, *Coming to America* continues to offer neither aesthetic nor ideological alternatives but the ones perpetuated by Hollywood productions, which coincide with Western notions of hegemony. The inverted positioning of Africans as nobles instead of savages, does little to question the validity of imperialistic practices over colonized

¹³ Ibid., 488.

¹⁴ Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 182.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183-187.

¹⁶ Ibid., 187.

peoples. It does not critically evaluate the hazards provoked by despotic institutions such as the Monarchy – let alone their brutal interference over the African peoples.

3.4. The Casting

All actors in *Zamunda* are Black – which could signal its aim at Black American audiences. Nevertheless, argues Ella Shohat, it does not assure that the “correct” casting will free the narrative from the mark of colonialist paradigms which caricature and ridicule colonized peoples nor does “an epidermically correct face guarantee community self-representation”.¹⁷ Still, one question immediately comes to our mind regarding the possible shifting of aesthetic notions in mainstream film productions: would we be about to eyewitness a non-Eurocentric story about Africa, even though told by a Hollywoodian production? Would the film be free from the “the mark of caricature on their own bodies; burnt cork literalized, as it were, the trope of Blackness”¹⁸?

Right in the beginning of the film we notice that the casting presents the names of famous Black-American actors. There are no African names. Eddie Murphy is responsible for the story, and the production. He plays the prince and more cameo roles. Arsenio Hall plays the prince’s closest companion, and also cameo roles. James Earl Jones is the king; John Amos plays Mr. McDowell; Madge Sinclair is the Queen, and many other prominent African-Americans take part in the narrative. They play both noble and ordinary Africans, as well as the Americans themselves. The African family is represented by the nobility *à la* British royal family. According to Ella Shohat, a “chromatically literal self-representation does not guarantee non-Eurocentric representations” when it “embodies the neocolonized

¹⁷ Ibid., 190.

¹⁸ Ibid., 188.

attitudes of the African elite”¹⁹, thus remaining the site for depictions which perpetuate hegemonic ideologies.

Moreover, the Black-American casting which replaces the Africans, is not too different from the ethnical “salad” common to Hollywood. Shohat points out that “Dominant cinema is fond of turning ‘dark’ or Third World peoples into substitutable others, interchangeable units who can ‘stand in’ for one another”.²⁰ Euro-Americans have always played other ethnical groups; not only blacks, but Native American roles (e.g. Rock Hudson; Elvis Presley; Tom Mix), and Latino characters (Charlton Heston; Marlon Brando; Natalie Wood).²¹ Consequently, it is possible to make a parallel between former Hollywood practices and the all-American casting in *Coming to America*. Their similarity lies in substituting Africans by Americans, as if it were possible to assume they are just the same due to their tone of skin. The American casting (*these* blacks) in replacing Africans (*those* blacks), besides conforming to Eurocentric politics of exclusion, is extremely simplistic for it “leads to a one-dimensional portrayal of the colonized, seen as shadowy figures devoid of cultural definition.”²² Black peoples, here, seem to be taken as all the same, once they are dark-complexed, no matter if emptied of inner essential historical/cultural/social distinct traits, thus being equaled in body and soul.

Furthermore, Shohat advocates that casting should be dealt with in a broader sense regarding its discursive implications, and not only in terms of color of skin. She argues that non-literal casting can also be used to combat mainstream discourses:

Casting, we would argue, has to be seen in contingent terms, in relation to the role, the political and esthetic intention, and to the historical moment. We cannot equate a gigantic charade whereby a whole foreign country is represented by players not from their country and is

¹⁹ Ibid., 190-92.

²⁰ Ibid., 189.

²¹ Ibid., 189.

imagined as speaking a language not its own (a frequent Hollywood practice), with cases where non-literal casting forms part of an alternative esthetic.²³

3.5. The Language

The question of how we, Anglophone spectators, identify people in Zamunda if they speak only English, could lead us through a marshy terrain. Although the author's message might have been intended to one of an anti-colonialist core, he seems to have fallen into his own internalized "stereotype trap" for he presents the Africans according to Eurocentric paradigms. The audience would probably regard them as "equals" for they are very well articulated speakers, owners of an irrepressible vocabulary and great fluency, besides having a very distinct British accent, thus fitting into the category of the well-read-educated-civilized human beings. For Benedict Anderson, languages (of power) – print-languages fixed by print-capitalism – have laid "the bases for national consciousness"²⁴ being "consciously exploited in a Machiavellian spirit"²⁵ and "helping to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of nation".²⁶

However, because mainstream Western productions about Third-World or colonized peoples were not always this generous, mostly representing colonized peoples as either silent figures, or the responsible for pathetic utterances²⁷, one may assume *Coming to America* subverts the gaze of the West: for example, as cited by Shohat, the pidgin English spoken by the "Indians" of classic Hollywood westerns who were "denuded" of their own idiom showing inability to "master" the good language; Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) where we hear "English spoken in a motley of accents" instead of Arabic; or in

²² Ibid., 188.

²³ Ibid., 191.

²⁴ *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983) 44.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁷ Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 192.

Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1991), set in North Africa, which privileges the English without bothering to translate Arabic dialogues. The colonized have been “denied speech”, not only when he/she was not literally allowed to speak but also when he/she was not recognized as being able to speak correctly. In addition, Hollywood has always profited from this “Linguistics of Domination” policy in the sense that it promoted the dissemination of the English language around the world, which indirectly contributed “to the subtle erosion of the linguistic autonomy of other cultures, as presented in the Senegalese film *Le Symbole* (1994), which portrays children who are punished for speaking their native language.²⁸

Because Zamunda's inhabitants are far from being depicted as incomprehensible mumbling creatures, one might assume the author's intention to present them as “superior”. This fact, despite suggesting that Africans can be “as civilized as” the “civilized” in general, brothers in the big Anglophonic family, soon fails to signify a portraiture of resistance; instead, it may lead to a twofold reading, one more obviously committed to Eurocentric paradigms “since for the colonizer to be human was to speak the colonizing language”²⁹, and another less conspicuous, however equally segregationist, which it may arise if one takes notice of the kind of English spoken among them; there is something strange about their utterances. In spite of the fluency, the African citizens seem oddly old-fashioned in their choice of words besides making use of quite unusual expressions:

Semmi : I was just remarking my mother the other day what a lovely skin the queen has.

Queen: Semmi, do you not have somewhere you should go?

Semmi to Akeem: Now, see if you can defend yourself, you sweat from a
baboon's balls...Hippopotamus shit!

²⁸ Ibid., 192.

Even though they make use of accurate, coherent, and very elaborated standard of English, it sounds as if it were anOTHER language. What Shohat describes as the “tying of tongues”³⁰ in Hollywood films, could be understood as equally discriminatory when produced backwards. By inverting the order of portraiture, the narrative could denote an equally nefarious gaze. One may conclude that, because people in Zamunda do not speak “the same” English, they are not to be regarded as “the same”, thus putting them into the realm of categories, the one which labels, (dis)classifies, and selects human beings under sub-genres. Moreover, being people of Zamunda so different in their language – which symbolize a different identity – it is easy for the spectator (European or American) to remain apart. They are well articulated; they are nice, but they are not “US”: they are the other – do not share the same identity.

Having that in mind, and recalling Shohat arguing on the role of the English language as the Anglo-American projection of power, the narrative may work so as to delimit up to which point one people is likened to the “other”. She argues that “languages are the foci of deep loyalties existing at the razor’s edge of national and cultural difference”³¹: People in Zamunda are nobles, belong to the African elite, and are not depicted as savages, hence their similitude to the British royalty. On the other hand, British and Africans are not the same: by “ventriloquizing” Africa in such a peculiar way, the film not only makes clear that language is “operating within hierarchies of power”³² but also sets parameters of difference and anomaly regarding the Africans.

In this case, it seems that the film readdresses Western audiences conveying the inability of certain people to speak “good” English. Once, the “tying of tongues” has

²⁹ Ibid., 192.

³⁰ Ibid., 192.

³¹ Ibid., 192.

³² Ibid., 192.

provoked protest against countless films for they discriminated, and distorted social portraiture³³. This time, the strategy to position Black third-world peoples under the stigma of underdevelopment may rely on depicting humans who are not “completely human”; they are not capable of speaking a contemporary form of English, that is, a language wherein people of more “updated reasoning” are to express more “intellectually elaborated social relations”. Less updated – or else, surreal – kinds of English could refer directly to less developed, more primitive, and respectively, inferior underdeveloped human beings who have not gone “all its length” the long road of “knowledge”. Provided that we keep track with Eurocentric logic, in order to be **as human as** the colonizer their English ought to be equivalent both in form and content.

3.6. Contaminated Africa

It is a “big day” in Zamunda. The entire kingdom is gathered to attend a very special ceremony when the prince will be introduced to his bride-to-be. Outside the palace fireworks greet the people who arrive to attend the royal festivity where, by the main entrance, there is a street vendor who shouts “Come and get your engagement T-shirt!”. The T-shirts show the prince’s photograph in front, which could signal to the “globalization” of the capitalistic world, its influence, and/or the dissemination of marketing strategies on non-Western countries in an allusion to the typical market of souvenirs, T-shirts, and caps there is outside any football stadium or rock concert in the United States. On the other hand, it may refer to the use of a kind of cloth in Africa, as explains José Gatti, which “carries a black-and-white photographic imprint of a government leader”.³⁴

³³ Ibid., 192.

³⁴ José Gatti, “Der Glauder Have Sept Cabeças”. *Cinemais* 12-July/August 1998.

In its interior, the palace is crowded with well dressed guests, who appear to belong to the Zamundean elite, when loud screams echo to forestall the frenetic dancers who come running into the scene to present a tribal dance synchronically choreographed to the beating of the drums.³⁵ They wear identical stylized African costumes, meticulously adorned with feathers, animal skin patterned costumes, and ... pantyhoses. According to Ella Shohat, the drum sound may be presented as “libidinous”³⁶, which suggests that native peoples (and their musical and cultural expressions) reinforce an “immoral” conduct. In addition, the narrative’s tendency towards a colonialist approach could be assumed since, as Shohat points out:

Colonial films associate the colonized with hysterical screams, non-articulate cries, the yelping of animal-like creatures; the sounds themselves place beasts and native on the same level, not just neighbors but species-equals.³⁷

As soon as the dance finishes, one of the king’s servants proceeds with a gospel song intended to announce the future princess; however, he is hilariously out of key.

Moreover, the lyrics in the song talk about a woman who was born and raised to grant the monarch with safe satisfaction, once she is “free from infection”. The song seems to make a point on making clear the woman is disease free, which depicts a widespread concern towards the epidemic of AIDS. Despite its complexity, the epidemic has been addressed by mainstream current Aids-control efforts as having its epidemic “other”, which “helps to stabilize a Euro-America adrift in a postmodern condition of metanarratives and occluded origins”.³⁸

³⁵ The coreography is a high-tempo rendition of the dance from Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video, also directed by John Landis. www.imdb.com

³⁶ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 209.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁸ See Cindy Patton “From Nation to Family: Containing ‘African Aids’ ”, in *Nationalism & Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker et al (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 218-234.

Publications in respectable news propagators such as *The New York Times* – besides publishing imprecise mapping, and over generalized figures concerning different countries in Africa – uses the term “African Aids” to refer to the epidemic as if it were another kind of disease affecting only peoples of that continent. It is misleadingly biased, and it places the Western world in a “protected” area of the globe. “The very labeling of **African Aids** as a heterosexual disease quiets the Western fear”³⁹:

If the proximity (homosexual) AIDS allows such men to ignore their local complicity
 In “dangerous” practices that lead to the infection of (“their”) women, then a distant
 “African AIDS,” by correlating heterosexual danger with Otherness/thereness,
 performs the final expiatory act for a Western heterosexual masculinity that refuses all
 containment.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, the reference to AIDS here comes in the guise of comedy. Its inscription within the narrative in the forms of parodic mockery entails specific complications once the subject requires – by all means – a serious approach. The epidemic has long abandoned the realm of the stigmatized “risk-group-constraint” – such as “promiscuous” homosexuals and drug-addicts – this time reaching indiscriminately eclectic worldwide targets constituted by female/male “straights”, the newborn “blamelessness”, the elderly, besides “respectful” middle-class monogamous housewives. This signals to the virus’ disrespect towards any social/economical or sexual parameter, ignoring whatever geographical frontier or nationality grid when it strikes merciless to decimate.

3.7. Stereotypes

3.7.1. The Prince

³⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 219.

Introducing the spectator to a powerful male protagonist may proportionate a point of identification for Akeem, the prince, functions as a potent character to whom the audience may identify with, thus being conducted by *a posteriori* throughout the narrative.⁴¹ In other words, the presence of a male protagonist who embodies specific virtues could: 1) guarantee sufficient visual pleasure to heterosexual (black) male audiences; 2) prevent the female characters from becoming central.

Well built in his features, the prince is strong and masculine without losing his *sense and sensibility*; two attributes which, when combined, would turn him into a perfect role model. A distinguished fighter, the prince is skillful and athletic. He can high jump, long jump, and perform somersaults – forwards and backwards! Nevertheless, what can really make him exceptionally outstanding, is the fact that he is original in his ideas as well. Other men in Zamunda, such as the king and his friend Semmi, are portrayed as chauvinistic insensitive womanizers. On the contrary, the prince clearly differs from the ordinary sexist men of Zamunda.

What might be considered normal for the “uncivilized” barbarian man of primitive Third World countries, according to mainstream Eurocentric depictions, is rejected by Akeem. He does not fit into cliché stereotypes such as the polygamous Arab, the libidinous Black buck, nor the macho Latino, neither links his image to the stereotypical loud rudimentary Third-World monarch commonly showed by Hollywood. On the contrary, the prince is posed as the antithesis of his brutish insensitive father. Akeem’s father is portrayed in a very traditional way regarding mainstream Western cinematic productions, showing a close resemblance with the one played by Yull Bryner, in *The King and I* (1956). The king’s attitudes towards his son and wife, as well as regarding women in general, are permeated by a sexist authoritarian aura which levels him to a caricature of the

⁴¹ See Laura Mulvey “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 489.

Hollywoodian classical movie star. His comments are so absurdly chauvinistic, his tone of voice so rude, that we can almost hear him saying “et cetera...et cetera...et cetera”, like the king of Siam used to. When questioned by the king about his dissatisfaction for being forced to marry a woman he does not even know, he answers:

But father, I want a woman who marries me *for* who I am, and not *because of* who I am. ... I want a woman who can arouse my intellect, as well as my loins!

His companion Semmi, too, does not understand why the prince is so upset:

Semmi: You can have a woman who'll obey your command, but you'd rather have a woman who has an opinion?

Akeem: Only dogs are to obey. If you truly love your wife you'll value her opinion.

Semmi: Your wife only needs to have a pretty face, a firm backside, and big breasts the size of a Casaba melon.

Akeem: You'd share your bed and your fortune with a fool?

Semmi: That's the way it's always been with men in power; it's tradition!

Akeem: It is also tradition that times must – and do always – change!

In conclusion, the prince is depicted standing above the others of his kind. Owner of distinguished athletic abilities, and unique in his revolutionary opinions concerning women, Akeem's superiority vis-à-vis his fellow countrymen liken him more closely to a liberal American male representative, than to a primitive authoritarian “cannibal” despot.

However, the problem of having the African prince as the embodiment of Western liberal attributes relies on the fact that it isolates him from his community. He is depicted as being “the” not-so African one. It individualizes “good” traits in a man's personality, while it generalizes the “bad” essence of Africans as a whole.⁴² Therefore, the message conveyed by hegemonic discourses blowing from the West, would hit Euro-American

⁴² *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 183.

audiences quicker than the speed of Hollywood lights: you people who are Westerners, thus civilized, do not fool yourselves: the almost Democrat Akeem is exceptionally good, intelligent, swell, and nice.

3.7.2. The Stupid Native – Bimbos and Dummies.

In order to depict Africa as a primitive society, nothing more convincing than portraying its peoples as unqualified to perform a Western art. Right at the beginning of the narrative, the prince is about to be awakened by a small orchestra of violins made of untalented musicians who are unable to produce “higher” art. They enter the scene, take their seats with their instruments at hand, when the camera cuts to the stereo being switched on. After all, refined erudite sounds could not be produced by hands only accustomed with the pre-historical drums.

Besides the ungifted musicians, there are the submissive domesticated African female. This is the reason why the prince is not able to find one single woman in the entire kingdom who could fulfill his needs. Although beautiful, they seem brainless, showing no evidence of reasoning whatsoever.

Women in Zamunda are more objectively represented by the prince’s mother, the Queen, and by the bride-to-be, because the other women in Zamunda are simply dumb. The female servants, the dancers, and one beautiful woman who is always by the king’s side, are silent figures who never say a word. Only one bather speaks to the prince once. His mother, on her part, plays the conciliatory between father and son, however being careful enough not to contradict the king. She listens to the king’s sexist comments kindly suggesting to her son of the unimportance of love when getting married, and also admits that she herself was not in love by the time of their wedding. The queen seems to be not

only conformed with her position as submissive to the king, but also reinforces patriarchal values when advising her son:

The queen: When I first met your father, I was terrified. But over the years, I've grown to love your father very much.... I was so nervous, I became nauseous.

The king: You see, my son, there's a very fine line between love and nausea.

Later on, the prince is presented to Imanni (which is pronounced as "your money"), his bride-to-be. She comes glamorously dressed in a long gown covered in gold sequins. Nevertheless, the prince is not convinced she is the right woman for she shows no trace of intelligence, seeming brainless. She would answer the prince's questions according to what she had been trained to do during all her life:

Imanni: Am I not all you dreamed I would be?... Ever since I was born I've been trained to serve you.

Akeem: ... but I would like to know about you. What do you like to do?

Imanni: Whatever you like.

Akeem: What kind of music do you like?

Imanni: Whatever kind of music you like.

Akeem: ... Do you have a favorite food?

Imanni: Whatever food you like.

Akeem: Anything I say you'll do?

Imanni: Yes, your highness!

Then, the prince tells her to bark like a dog, hop in one leg, and make a noise like an orangutan, what she follows immediately without hesitating. The prince realizes she is not the woman he is looking for.

In conclusion, by depicting African women as stupid and submissive, tamed like an animal to obey their masters, it not only reproduces a-historical Eurocentric discourses

which distorts the actual role of Middle Eastern women, but also elides the coercive tactics – physical and psychological – inflicted upon “First-World” women by their “civilized” partners. By keeping the focus on the “other” women of “underdeveloped” societies, the narrative leaves “unquestioned the sexual oppression of the West”.⁴³ According to Ella Shohat, “the middle-Eastern system of communal seclusion, then, must also be compared to the Western system of domestic ‘solitary confinement’ for upper-middle class women”⁴⁴, therefore dismissing the Western men of any repressive practice, yet conveniently distracting female Euro/American audiences who may feel “privileged” if compared to their “Third-Worldist” counterparts.

3.8. The Voyage Backwards

Akeem decides to search for a suitable wife in other lands. He is discontent with the old costume of arranged marriages common in his country, besides feeling not attracted to such subservient women. He wants more from a relationship and asks his father to part. Although the king ignores Akeem’s real intentions about the trip, he agrees with it for he assumes the prince wants to have a kind of “bachelor’s farewell”. He finds it strange, once they both have regular sex with their bathers – he says – but allows his son to go “sow his royal oats” and encourages him to “fulfill every erotic desire” before the grand day.

The prince meets Semmi to share the news, who becomes very excited with the possibility of “forty days of fornication”. Nevertheless, his friend is skeptical when Akeem tells him that what he is really going to do is to find a “woman able to arise his intellect as well as his loins”.

Semmi: But where in the world will you find such a woman?

Akeem: In America!

⁴³ “Gender and Culture”, 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

The two are shown in the palaces library. There are many books, a globe, and a map which is open on the desk. This scene recalls the colonial narratives, which “legitimized the embarking upon treasure hunts by lending a scientific aura, encapsulated especially by images of maps and globes”, as Ella Shohat reminds us.⁴⁵ According to her, “Western cinema has relied on map imagery for plotting the Empire” because it functions as an alibi so as to connect cinema with science, this way granting the apparatus the credibility of areas such as Archeology and Geography. Yet, the spinning of the globe entitles the scientist to possess the world when it allegorizes the relationship between creator and creation. Shohat cites films such as *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956), where the explorer is represented by upper-class British men, and more recently, in films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Indiana Jones* .⁴⁶

However, what *Coming to America* presents is an inversion of expansionist routes, as well as of characters in the figure of the explorer. If those films aimed at establishing the relationship West/East, and colonizer/colonized , the narrative now puts the colonized – a Black-African prince – going to the contemporary “center of the world” to “conquer” not a primitive land, but one “civilized” wife. Therefore, Eddie Murphy’s “inverted” telling of the (his)story, when replacing the colonizer by the colonized, and the metropolis by the colony, reads as a parody of mainstream Hollywood representations thus posing a critique in its subversion to Euro/American values towards imperialistic white/dominated practices. One must agree it is an undeniable progress if compared to traditional Hollywood narratives; whereas, the prince is going to America because he was not able to find an African bride up to fulfill his “democratic” needs. Here lies a contradictory nature of the

⁴⁵ “Gender and Culture”, 675.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 675.

author's intentions for, at the same time it subvert old Eurocentric reasoning, it also confirms the superiority of American women vis-à-vis African ones.

CHAPTER IV

MAPPING *TERRA INCOGNITA*

This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

F. Scott Fitzgerald – The Great Gatsby

This chapter will focus on the second part of the narrative when the prince and his servant arrive in the United States of America aboard a British Airways Concorde. Although they are not shown landing on American soil, this is clearly suggested when the country's flag appears and takes up the whole screen. While walking in the airport – through the people who nudge at one another staring at the two Africans – Akeem warns Semmi that they should remain unnoticed, which would obviously be impossible due to their unusual outfits and the expensive, large set of Louis Vuitton luggage. From now on, the two Africans are about to get in contact with what a real “First World” country has to offer, including its decaying landscape and hostile inhabitants.

I borrow the term which names this chapter from Ella Shohat, in order to allude to the “remote” lands where the Europeans explorers once set forth with intentions to “get to know” and colonize¹, and referring to the “New World”, according to Stuart Hall, as “the beginning of diaspora”.² Whereas, the former definition should be inversely read for the prince's journey takes a contrary route, that is, an African from the periphery who heads to

¹ “Gender and Culture of Empire”, 674.

the metropolis; notwithstanding that he similarly experiences with the estrangement caused by being inside an outlandish incomprehensible culture.

In addition, this chapter aims at pinpointing the contrastive nature of the narrative characterized by the noticeable binary oppositions placing the United States versus Zamunda, as well as Americans versus Africans.

4. Elements of the Mise-en-scene

4.1. The Setting of “Have-nots”

Prince and servant take a Yellow Cab. Akeem tells they are just Africans students who want to go “to the most common part” of the Queens. The driver, thinking it strange, answers that “a couple of rich guys like you should go to the Waldorf or the Palace”, but Akeem refuses and both are taken to some kind of boarding house in the heart of Queens.

The neighborhood looks ugly, dirty, and cold. Streets and cars are covered by snow, involved in both the smoke from the subway, and the sound of sirens which create a chaotic and gloomy scenario. As soon as they get off the cab they look around as if they were stepping into another planet. Semmi is shocked with what he eyewitnesses, while Akeem seems excited in awe. Surrounded by dilapidated old buildings, they remain for some minutes observing the environment of burnt down Projects and homeless people trying to heat up around an improvised fireplace made up with a fuel cask placed on the sidewalk. They are beggars, and stare at the two who stand motionless across the street until they are suddenly interrupted by a load of garbage falling from above. “Fascinating”, exclaims Akeem, “imagine a country so free one can throw glass on the street”. At this moment, screams coming from the barber shop next door call their attention making the prince recognize them joyfully: “Listen: real Americans”!

² “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 119.

A black man chewing on a toothpick that hangs from one side of his mouth comes to the front door and greets the strangers with a “What the fuck do you want”. He is the landlord who, after glancing at the large amount of cash in the supposed future tenants’ hands, does not hesitate to let them in. In the meantime, their expensive luggage is being robbed outside. Once inside the building, the two newcomers are taken to their room while one drunkard rolls down the stairs and is cursed out by the landlord who demands the past due rent. They walk through the grimy corridor amidst the sound of a couple quarreling in Spanish, to the beat of a salsa. Akeem, then, asks for “meager accommodations”, which the host does not understand until the prince translates it into “poor room”. There is only one single insect infested bathroom for the entire floor and all the guests have to share it. The room they are shown faces a brick wall and has been the scene of a crime not too long before, there are still the chalk drawn silhouettes on the filthy wooden floor populated by rats, where a blind man and his dog were killed. “Damn shame what they did to that dog”, says the landlord. Akeem takes the room.

The morning after, the prince is seen at the fire staircase outside his room. After looking around the decadent landscape he calls Semmi to look at it too, and comments: “Look Semmi, real life! A life we have been denied for far too long”! Then, as it is time to get acquainted with the neighborhood, they go out for a walk when they realize everyone on the street is wearing their African robes, or some of their garments. There is even one man who approaches the two and opening his luxurious coat exhibits golden toothbrushes and a hairdryer, besides other articles that Semmi recognizes as being theirs. He screams: “Thief”! However, Akeem does not care for the stolen goods not only because he wishes to “get rid of those material things”, but also because he has other plans at this point: “We are in New York, now. So, let us dress like New Yorkers!”.

4.1.2. **Présence Americaine**

America is the “point of juncture”³, the territory where peoples from the most different origins meet seeking an identity. This can be illustrated by the two Africans going to a typical American store one can find downtown Manhattan, packed with a lot of motive articles, T-shirts and caps hanging from the ceiling, and also items exposed outside the shop’s premises already invading part of the sidewalk. They are, now, dressed in colorful jackets and hats covered up with buttons saying “I love N.Y.”, in different sizes and colors. When they are leaving, Akeem stops so he can watch a commercial playing on several T.Vs. next to the shop’s door. It is about a hair relaxer which can be used at home and shows two black actors caressing each other’s soft hair. The lyrics imply that, by relaxing the hair, black people would feel their “Soul Glo”, as the product’s own name suggests. Akeem touches his naturally curly hair and looks at Semmi in doubt: “Perhaps I should cut off my prince’s lock”. Semmi disagrees.

4.1.3. **The Barber Shop – When Three Presences Meet**

The two friends go to the barber shop nearby the boarding house. There they find one of the barbers engaged in an inflamed argument. Amongst “fuck yous” and other kinds of insults, the African-American barber and one white customer, who could be from a German-Jewish origin due to his accent, fight over the superiority of notorious names in the American world of boxing:

Barber 1: You must be out of your God dam mind! Joe Louis was the greatest boxer that ever lived!...

Customer: What about Rocky Marciano?

Barber1: There they go! There they go! Every time I start talking about boxing, a white man gotta pull Rocky Marciano out their ass! That’s their one! That’s their one! Rocky

³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 118.

Marciano! Rocky Marciano! Let me tell you somethin' once'n'for all, Rocky

Marciano was good, but compared to Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano ain't shit!

Customer: He beat Joe Louis's ass...

Barber 2: That's right. He did whoop Joe Louis's ass.

This scene reminds us of Al's Pizzeria, in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, owned by an Italian-American and his sons, and located in a black neighborhood. Its "hall of fame", made only of Italian-Americans, becomes one of the points of racial friction between the owners and the African-American clientele who demands the inclusion of their own African-American representatives. Similarly, in *Coming to America's* barber shop, it is possible to see many black-and-white pictures on the walls showing famous Black-Americans legends, such as Martin Luther King and other important sports figures. Here, the point of friction is established because the white customer, supposedly Jewish, is for the white Italian-American boxer Rocky Marciano, but the barber is for the African-American Joe Louis. Although what is made clear are the competing voices trying to ensure their place in the canonized "hall of fame" of boxing, the barber shop differs from the pizzeria in one aspect: the discussion does not implicate in separation. If the audience has, by any chance, supposed the scene suggests apartheid when confronting Italian-Americans versus African-Americans, such impression soon disappears for the barber brings into the conversation one relevant "neutralizer", so to speak: when the barber mentions that Frank Sinatra has been a customer in his barber shop, the narrative reintegrates Italian-Americans into the text, thus conveying some degree of "racial integration". Besides, by presenting blacks and Jews in the same barber shop, the narrative seems to take advantage of the scene in order to propose one anti-racist statement which would encompass two ethnical groups for, according to Fanon, "an Anti-Semite is

inevitably anti-Negro”.⁴ Furthermore, the issue of Cassius Clay name changing to Muhammad Ali comes into play, raising a question concerning the adoption of Muslim names by many African-Americans who identify with their African ancestors, that is to say, the recognition of a common identity which connects all the blacks of the diaspora to the same origin, or “a spiritual journey of discovery”⁵, as Stuart Hall puts it, hence characterizing **Présence Africaine**. In addition, Akeem is called “Kunta Kinte”⁶ by the people of the barber shop, which indicates the obvious reference to Africa. When the white customer interrupts the argument on Clay, saying that “this is a free country and a man has the right to change his name”, **Présence Americaine** lays its claim, as Hall explains:

It is because this New World is constituted for us as a place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning.⁷

When the quarreling is over, Akeem finally sits at the barber’s chair. The man touches his hair and, feeling it so hard, asks:

Barber: God dam, boy! What’s that? Some kind of weave or someth’n?

Akim: It is my natural hair. I have been growing it since birth.

Barber: No shit! What kind of chemical you got in there?

Akim: I have put no chemicals! Only juices and berries.

Barber: ... tell me how you want me cut this.

Akim: Just make it nice and neat.

Barber: (Takes the scissors and cuts his braid in one shot) That’ll be eight dollars.

⁴ Fanon evokes his philosophy professor, a native of Antilles, who used to warn him: “Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.” This helped him understand the relationship between these historical “brothers of misery”. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 122.

⁵ “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 116.

⁶ A slave captured in Africa, and brought to America in 1767. Alex Haley, Kinte’s descendent, is the author of a book telling the slave’s saga which gave origin to the famous TV series “Roots”, in 1977(www.us.imdb.com).

The prince is in doubt whether there is any “significant change” in his appearance because he looks at himself in the mirror inquisitively, then asks his servant: Tell me Semmi, honestly, how do I look?

On a second occasion, when Akeem returns to the barber shop, they are fighting again about other celebrities in the U.S.A. Akeem points out to a poster on the wall that advertises the “Soul Glo” and shows a black model with his relaxed lustrous hair. He asks the barber if he can make his hair look like that. The barber answers:

Barber: Oh, man! Why do you want to make your hair look like that for? I like the way you wear your hair. You wear it natural, that’s good man... I wish more of the young children today would wear their hair natural like Dr. Martin Luther King did... You ain’t never seen Dr. Martin Luther King with no mess of jeri-curved hairstyle... Dr. King ain’t come walking around like that!

The scene seems to illustrate the conflict the prince is going through for it depicts a hesitant prince who is not sure he should keep his natural hair or not. If *Présence Européenne* “belongs irrevocably to the ‘play’ of power”⁸, “exclusion, imposition, and expropriation”⁹ and having in mind that the Eurocentric discourse encompasses aesthetic prerogatives, as argued by Clyde Taylor, then the narrative highlights: the colonial discourse is still “alive and kicking” when it comes to hair style. In fact, one can assume the author’s intention was to present “Soul Glo” as an allegory for the European presence “which, in visual representation, has positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation”¹⁰. Besides, the repetitive appearance of “Soul Glo” during several scenes – in the form of T.V. commercials, posters, leaflets, and billboards – suggests that *Présence Européenne* is to be found everywhere, passing its messages

⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁸ “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 117.

⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰ Ibid., 118.

across perhaps without being consciously noticed; however, not “an extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin”¹¹ but, as Hall evokes Fanon, deeply entrenched in its roots, hence becoming a “constitutive element of our own identities”.¹²

It is clear, by now, the film’s intention to reinforce *Présence Africaine* by means of ridiculing black Americans who would eventually “betray their roots” and incorporate a “Western” look. They are depicted as having the greasiest of the hairs which leaves its sticky “prints” on whichever sofas they would rest their heads. Besides, by relating the product to Darryl – who actually uses the “Soul Glo” and is the company’s owner – the film connects it to a derogatorily stereotyped character for he is depicted as a narcissist of doubtful morals and a chauvinist. Therefore, relating the product to such a despicable character implies the film’s criticism.

However, the narrative parallel message signals to the confluence of various ethnicities in the composition of the American society. The barber shop is located in a black community and their owners are also African-Americans. They bring up to the public other names deriving from various segments (music, sports, and politics), who have become significant interlocutors for the groups they represent throughout the American history, which means that those names are not brought forward indiscriminately, but as standing out for the whole racial group they signify.

4.2.American Women and Moralism

4.2.1 Club X Church

The prince’s servant tells Akeem “it is time to find your queen”. They start their search by going to a night club so they can meet many different American women. During

¹¹ Ibid.,118.

¹² Ibid.,118.

the night, they have the chance to talk to several of them, in a total of ten of the most bizarre female representatives: the devil worshipper; a nymphomaniac; a gold-digger; one whose husband is on a death-row; the Siamese twins; one who is “in the group thing”; Joanna D’arc’s reincarnation; and other eccentric types. After a very disappointing experience, the two friends return home discouraged and frustrated, even doubting they will ever find the prince’s “queen”. Akeem comments are that “every woman in America seems to suffer from severe emotional problems.”

However, before reaching home, they find Mr. Clemens, the barber next door who is closing his shop. He grants the two some hope when he says that if they want to look for “good” women, they should go somewhere else. Advising the two that they would not find decent women in bars, but in “nice” places “such as libraries and churches”, the barber invites them to accompany him to church where they can find “good, good **clean** women”.¹³

It is “The Black Awareness” night at church, and everyone is gathered to “praise the Lord”. On the stage, gorgeous African-American contestants dressed in bikinis take part in a rally. Akeem seems filled with boredom, though. He is not excited with any of the contestants. At the very moment Semmi calls him to leave, however, the prince appears to be instantly infatuated by the woman speaking on the microphone. She is Lisa McDowell, one of the two daughters of Cleo McDowell, and the event’s organizer. Beautiful, elegantly dressed, and articulated, she talks about the importance of preserving the neighborhood’s park for the children of the community. She urges the congregation to contribute with substantial donations, so they can rebuild Lincoln Park. “The children are our future”, she says, while the ushers pass with donation baskets through the aisles. The

¹³ My emphasis.

prince immediately falls in love with her, and laying a thick bundle of dollar bills into one basket exclaims: “She is wonderful”!

4.2.2. The Lady X The Tramp

Akeem and Semmi get a job at McDowell’s restaurant as ordinary cleaners. The prince plans to be close to the girl as much as possible in order to win her love. However, she should not know he is a wealthy noble.

Since the beginning of her appearance in the narrative, Lisa is presented as a reserved and educated woman. Graceful in her gestures, and delicate in her talking to Akeem, a simple employee, she is portrayed as the perfect match. In several scenes, she is shown working in the computer, helping with the father’s business. Another time, she will be reading, while her younger sister, Patrice, dances to the sound of an insinuating song saying “I want you to blow my...mind”. It is clear the intention to posit the two sisters as opposite prototypes for women in general.

On one hand, there is Lisa, the intelligent well behaved female fit to be the prince’s elected wife. She is serious, religious, virtuous, well read, sober, and politically aware. Gifted with so many attributes, Lisa is the embodiment of all qualities a man would dream of, including her outstanding beauty, naturally. She functions as the representative for Western liberated women vis-à-vis either submissive brainless or sexual objects in the African country. Therefore, it is possible to identify here the predominant male gaze juxtaposed to the colonial one in the compositions of the character: Male for it restrains her into a common place framework for “perfect” woman; colonialist for it implies that this woman would only be possible in Western “civilized” countries.

On the other hand, a derogatorily stereotyped Western woman is clearly visible in Lisa’s sister Patrice – the “money-wise slut” – whose attitudes totally diverge from the

older sister. This becomes evident in a scene when Lisa receives a pair of ruby earrings delivered at her door. They have been anonymously sent by Akeem:

Patrice: Somebody is messing around!

Lisa: I am not!

Patrice: I don't care how much a man admires you . He's not gonna give you earrings like that unless you're giving him a little booty!

Lisa: Not everybody thinks like you Patrice.

Patrice: Yes, they do. They just don't admit it

Patrice dresses and behaves in a vulgar manner if contrasted with her reserved and elegant sister. She is not only depicted as morally doubtful, but also as having no consideration toward her sister Lisa. This would be illustrated when she goes to a basketball game with Akeem, Lisa, and Darryl. She asks Akeem to take off his jacket and, as he lays it over his lap, sneaks her hand under it so as to masturbate him – without bothering with the crowd of spectators around them nor with her sister who is sitting next to them. Later on, Patrice goes to Akeem's apartment; however, the girl ends up in bed with his servant, Semmi, when he tells her he is the real wealthy prince. Besides, she even makes a move towards Lisa's fiancé, Darryl, unzipping his pants with the excuse that he should get rid of his rainy wet clothes. Drifting from one man to another, she is portrayed in a negative prism which does not qualify her as a proper woman, suitable for any men, let alone a prince's wife. Once more, cliché metaphors are used so as to contrast virtuous women with “not so virtuous ones”, taking into account patriarchal preconceived elements used to label women, such as the moralistic Manichean “clean/dirty” pair.

4.3. McDowell's X McDonald's – Allegories of Empowerment

The burger restaurant owned by Mr. McDowell seems to be placed in the narrative with the intention to oppose the great worldwide American chain. Not only because of the obvious take on McDonald's (the two buildings look exactly the same), but also through Mr. McDowell's double coded remarks when he is showing the restaurant to Akeem and Semmi on their first day at work:

Mr. McDowell: Look, me and the McDonald's **people**, we...got this little misunderstanding. See, **they** are McDonald's. **I'm** McDowell's. They got the Golden Arches; mine is the Golden Arcs. They got the Big Mac; I got the Big Mic. We both got two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles and onions; but, they use a sesame seed bun. My **buns** have no seeds.

In this scene, it is clear the comparison between “they” and “I”. Having in mind that African-Americans, in general, refer to McDonald's and McDonald's products in their own unique way (i.e. pronouncing “Mic” instead of “Mac”) – one may safely assume that two distinct cultural territories have been delimited by means of language (discussed in 4.6.1.), “for it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other”.¹⁴ In other words, whenever one hears either “the McDonald's people” or “they”, one should infer “the white people”, who have “seeds” in their “buns” (pimples in their buttocks!).

Moreover, if one thinks of McDonald's as being “synonymous with American way of life”¹⁵, there would be more to say in regards to what Mr. McDowell “ingenuously” comments.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 17.

¹⁵ For more on the “McDonaldization” of society as a phenomenon of control and addictive predictability, see Susan Marling, where she discusses its “global grip” as well as its importance to set economic indexes in international financial markets. She mentions, for instance, how the price of a Big Mac has become a parameter to measure inflation published regularly in the respectable magazine *The Economist*. *American Affair-The Americanisation of Britain*. (London:Boxtree, 1993) 83.

The fact that an African-American owns a restaurant capable of competing with one of the most significant landmarks of capitalism¹⁶, hence of power, implies that he represents all the well succeeded African-Americans in the U.S. Therefore, besides previously depicting blacks as the American eyesore in the first part, the narrative also portrays the emergent upper-class in the figure of Cleo McDowell, whose lines may suggest: “If **they** can have it (economical power), so can **we**”.

4.4. Institutions Targeted

As the narrative continues, the viewer has the opportunity to experience more and more with intertextuality. Irony permeates the whole diegesis, inscribing its “funny”, however straightforward messages, sometimes working as an ideological critique in the form of images and words. After watching the film several times, one is able to grasp the hidden content inserted in almost every shot or dialogue which gradually unfolds the author’s acute sarcasm, thus leading the audience to uncontrollable laughter.

Nevertheless, in order to enjoy the text’s irony in its full length, one ought not simply to keep eyes and ears wide open, but to be aware of the target of the joke so we are not to miss what is being mocked and satirized – most certainly with the intention to criticize. According to Linda Hutcheon, the “creator” figure remains decisive for the production of meaning¹⁷ alongside with the audience being addressed to, in our case the American public. She says:

Parody is one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning, of the importance of signification of the circumstances surrounding any utterance. But any discursive situation, not just a parodic one, includes an

¹⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷ The creator, here, should be understood in a broader sense as the “creator’s position” as “a position of discursive authority” which will entitle him/her to comment/criticize. *A Theory of Parody*, 85.

enunciating addresser an encoder as well as a receiver of the text.¹⁸

Therefore, the pun contained in words or images reflect the viewers' ability to contextualize and understand the original source of meaning and the importance they eventually occupy in the American society (i.e. sacramental institutions, the armed forces, the relationship labor/money in the capitalist economical regime, and national architectural landmarks of wealth and power).

4.4.1. The Church

One of the most cultivated institutions in the preservation of a Black-American identity is religion. It is true that it plays an important role for it congregates the African-American community around one God, but for it does so in a very distinguished way which reinforces their uniqueness as a people. The musical atmosphere which involves its worshipers has become recognized worldwide for generating renowned black stars. This way, it continues to reinforce the African-American talent within and outside the community, but also remains as the site for a strong manifestation of Black culture, a fact which is signaled by the narrative through the "The Black Awareness Week" taking place at the local church..

However, the event seems awkwardly depicted. On the church's altar, black contestants stage their semi-nude bodies, conducted by Reverend Brown, who sounds more like a horny strip-tease show watcher than a religious pastor. Panting while he talks and looking at the girls' buttocks, the man seems to be having an orgasm every time he invokes the holy name:

Reverend : I didn't come here to preach you today, but you know, when I look at
this contestants for the Miss Blackness Awareness, I feel good! I feel

¹⁸ Ibid., 85.

good, cause I know there's a God, somewhere! There's a God,
 somewhere! Turn around ladies for me, please. You know there's a God,
 who sits on high, and looks down low. Man cannot make it like this.
 Only God can. Larry Flynt, Hugh Hefner, can take the picture, but they
 can't make it. Only God above can make it for you!

The inclusion of names which are highly connected to the world of pornography in the U.S. (Larry Flynt is a famous sex industry entrepreneur, and Hugh Hefner is the founder of *Playboy* magazine) seems to create a strange combination of two distinct sectors, one of religiosity, morals and abnegation, and the other which emphasizes the displaying of the female body as a propagator of pleasure, eroticism and sexual practices, a fact which is usually discouraged by churches as a whole.

The next attraction is Mr. Randy Watson and his band "Sexual Chocolate". It is actually a caricature (by Arsenio Hall) of the rock singer Little Richard, who is openly gay, and was a Reborn Christian. Introduced by the reverend, the singer comes to the stage and speaks to the audience, later kissing the reverend on the cheek. He says: "He has been my reverend since I was a little boy, and I love him dearly". This could assume a sexual connotation in the utterance, thus suggesting there would have been more between the supposed singer and the religious leader. Besides, the singer of pathetic gestures dresses in a baby blue suit with a frilled shirt under, and acts in an exaggerated effeminate manner. In addition, his "Soul Glo" styled hair plus his complete inability to sing one single note without being out of tune turns him into a bizarre appearance of awfully bad musical taste despite the quality of the song "The Greatest Love of All" – which leads us to note the homophobic nature of the depiction. In addition, because the singer has been disastrous in his performance, the Reverend's insistent efforts so to encourage the audience to give him "a big hand" becomes visibly disproportional. What we hear is nothing but a big silent

audience which remains motionless while the singer leaves stepping his feet and dropping the microphone squealing on the floor.

Besides the reverend's and the singer's caricatures, the congregation seems to be also exaggeratedly mocked. Their over-enthusiastically screaming, shouting, and jumping in loud "Amens" and "Joys" to the Lord portray them gathered in church as if to attend to a spectacle. Some of them bring their McDowell's cups of sodas in hand, even eating what it seems to be a chicken leg or a pork rib while the "show" – sponsored by "Soul Glo" written in banners and colorful balloons – goes on.

4.4.2. Capitalism – Labor X Money

Another aspect of the American society which seems to have been targeted is its economical capitalistic system of inequalities. Very few Americans would make unimaginable fortunes overnight, while a huge segment of the population – specially the ethnic minorities – remain not awarded, thus excluded from the financial awards granted by the capitalist system of production. In this logic, the relationship between work/income seems to bear no equivalent ratio concerning their growth: the more or longer one labors does not necessarily mean the more one will earn. Therefore, there should exist no parallels in regards to their supposed proportionality.

In McDowell's kitchen Akeem is mopping the floor while Semmi is dumping a pot of dirty water into the sink, showing disgust. Maurice, a chubby white employee, happily washes lettuce heads. In the background, a wall with a poster in which Uncle Sam points his finger as he recruits for the Army: "We want you!"

The guy: Hi! You know, I started on cleanup just like you guys. But now, see, I'm washing lettuce.

Soon, I'll be on fries, and the grill. A year or two, I make assistant manager. And that's when the big bucks start rolling in.

Akeem (Ironically) : Just two years, eh!

The scene appears to be an ironic attack on the role incarnated by less advised minds which share the common ideals preached by capitalism. This appears to be the case with Maurice who innocently endorses conventional capitalist paradigms. Unlike Semmi, who is not satisfied with being part of the cleaning crew, he seems to be unaware of the harms inflicted by the economical system in force, apparently leading his life according to the mottoes “all work is dignifying” and “hard work always pays”. He is a curious blend of faith, ignorance, and naïveté so useful to the maintenance of the establishment.

4.4.3. Monuments of Power

The use of Architecture as a means to materialize and reinforce power has been a historical practice common amongst empires so to ensure their ideological power in a more visible basis. Since the Greeks and Romans, magnificent buildings such as imposing temples and palaces— whose scale usually surmounted the human figure – have been planted on earth to impress or intimidate, thus causing the grandiose effect of superiority and absoluteness. In modern capitalistic societies, it has not been different. Megalithic monuments stand out over the cities attracting the eyes of the passerby who is always reminded of the economical and ideological power behind these buildings, also because they are most frequently connected to important names such as Chrysler, Sears, Rockefeller, and so forth.

In one scene which Lisa and Akeem are going to a restaurant in their first date, they are shown walking along the East River. On the background, the night sight of illuminated Manhattan Island with its skyscrapers where we can see majestically the Brooklyn bridge, the Empire State, and the World Trade Center Twin Towers, three symbols of capitalism, wealth, and economical power. In the foreground, on the other hand, a pile of trash is

deposited on the pavement where the romantic couple stroll. Plastic garbage bags, cardboard boxes, metal trash cans, a supermarket shopping cart, and its inhabitants: two beggars who sleep amidst loads of junk in a freezing winter night.¹⁹ Here, the picture of the metropolis, the island of lights and colossal architecture, ironically contrasts with misery and abandonment, portraying the cruelty of a system by showing the buildings as if they had their back indifferently turned to the poor side of town. The Big Apple shows its not at all attractive rotten half, nor polished juicy-red, but decaying, ugly, droughty. The absurd reality of two distinct worlds coexisting in the same frame, that is, wealth and power, on one margin, versus the deplorable sub-human conditions of life on its neglected half. In this case, a critique posed towards the ambiguity of living in a capitalistic society capable of producing phenomenal architectural monuments while leaving so many homeless, alongside with the scene showing a burger restaurant employee who aspires to wealth (see 4.4.2), attempts at a progressive anticapitalist criticism.

4.5. The Plot

I would like to refer to “plot”, here, interchangeably with “story”; this way, making no distinctions between the two. Therefore, I consider relevant the inclusion of David Bordwell’s own definition on both:

‘**Plot**’ will refer to the totality of **formal** and **stylistic** materials in the film.²⁰

Hollywood **story** construction: causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals.²¹

¹⁹ The two beggars are the “Duke Brothers”, from “Trading Places” (1983), a film also directed by Landis.

²⁰ *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 12. My emphasis.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Those concepts will serve as decisive tools in order to approach our material of study, that is, the film. When analyzing the formal and stylistic aspect of it, it is made clear that the plot follows Hollywoodian formulae for lighting, framing, decor, and so forth. (Discussed in 2.1.)

As regards to story construction, some specific elements are to be selected and analyzed so to point out to the plot's commitment to the conventionality practiced by Hollywood concerning causality and motivation, hence offering a permeable contact surface between this genre and the folktale – which I consider noteworthy despite the controversial nature of the issue.²² Robert Stam reminds us that “in Art, social life is expressed in the interior of a defined semiotic material and in the specific language of a medium”.²³

4.5.1. The Hero

“Character-centered – i.e., personal or psychological – causality is the armature of the classical story”²⁴ which “reinforces the individuality and consistency of each character”.²⁵ In *Coming to America*, the center character is Akeem, who may be understood as the hero. The hero, in the folktale, is one of the functions of the *dramatis personae*, with characteristics which coincide: “the hero is unmarried and sets out to find a bride – with this a beginning is given to the course of the action”²⁶.

Akeem is unhappy because he does not feel attracted to any women in his country. He is fraught with boredom and frustration, so he plans to leave Zamunda in order to

²² For more on the (in)validity of Propp's “structural” method for Film Studies, as well as the recurrent misconceptions concerning the English editions of his *Morphology of the Folktale*, see “Appropriations and Improperities: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative”, by David Bordwell, in *Cinema Journal* 27, No. 3. Spring 1988.

²³ See Robert Stam, “O Método Formal nos Estudos Literários”, in *Bakhtin-Da Teoria Literária à Cultura de Massa*. Trad. Eloisa Jahn, (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 2000), 22-28. My translation.

²⁴ Bordwell, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ V. Propp, “The Functions of Dramatis Personae”, 35.

search for his “soul mate”. Similarly, in the folktale plot “one member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something”.²⁷ However, his father, the king, would not consent on the trip if he were informed on the real intent of the journey. Thus, Akeem’s plan consists on hiding his true reason for leaving, by agreeing with the king who thinks he just wants to “sow his royal oats”.

Similarly, in the folktale, the hero forges his departure:

“The hero is allowed to depart from home. In this instance the initiative for departure often comes from the hero himself... . Parents bestow their blessing. The hero sometimes does not announce his real aims for leaving: he asks for permission to go out walking, etc., but in reality he is setting off for the struggle”.²⁸

4.5.2. The Genius

The noble Akeem seems to concentrate in his figure all the features required in the composition of a perfect hero “defined as a bundle of qualities, or traits,... clearly identified and consistent with one another”.²⁹ He cannot be compared to his elegant – however Chauvinist – African “kinsmen”, nor to the ignorant grotesque African-Americans. He does not bear similarities with his loyal companion Semmi, either, for he seems more adjusted to his American condition as a cleaning person in an ordinary fast-food restaurant. Because he is interested in the owner’s daughter, the character does not mind mopping the floors, wiping the windows, and even being in charge of unpleasant duties such as emptying the garbage cans. Differently of what one might expect from a pampered prince “who has never had to tight his own shoes” and accustomed with “the life of the rich and famous”, he perfectly fits into the “good guy” category, yet, reproducing Hollywood stereotypical roles such as the “Coon”, defined as “a type itself subdivided into the

²⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁸ Ibid., 37.

²⁹ Bordwell, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.

‘pickanniny’ (the harmless eye-popping clown figure) and the Uncle Remus (naïve, congenial folk philosopher)’.³⁰

In several scenes during the narrative, Akeem is portrayed in good spirits and posing no threats to the ones who insist on humiliating him. He seems not to suffer with the fact that he is living in extremely humble conditions, and shows no discomfort nor revolt for being badly treated. He is always polite and gentle towards everyone, no matter how disrespectful or aggressive their manners may be. In one occasion, when McDowell’s restaurant is being robbed by a violent robber who invades the place screaming and intimidates the customers pointing a rifle, Akeem, who is on duty, calmly unscrews the mop’s wooden stick and uses it as a weapon to fight the invader. Nevertheless, before immobilizing the man with his precise strokes, the prince approaches him in a pathetic rhetoric attempting to persuade the criminal to drop his gun:

Robber: Anybody move, I’ll blow your fucking head off!... Come on!

Akeem: It would be wise for you to put the weapon down.

Robber: Who the fuck is this asshole?

Akeem: Please, refrain from using any further obscenities in the presence of this people.

Robber: What?

Akeem: I’ve warned you. I’ll be forced to thrash you.

Robber: Fuck you!

The man is finally defeated and Akeem wins all the glories for saving the innocent customers, which wins him the title of “McDowell’s Employee of the Month”, with the honor to have his picture on the wall.

Another feature of Akeem’s personality is his flair for philosophy. His high sounding utterances suggest he is, indeed, “above anything petty” – not to mention his quoting on important names proper:

³⁰ Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 195.

Lisa: You know, you're a pretty unusual guy. I've never seen anyone take so much pride in mopping the floor.

Akeem: "He who would learn to fly one day, must first learn to stand and walk. One cannot fly into Flying". That is not mine. That is Nietzsche's.

Dialogues like this, besides lines such as "no journey is so great when one finds what he seeks" are admired by Lisa, who finds it difficult to believe the prince comes from Africa. She reacts as if she were surprised by meeting an "intelligent" African Negro, which is easily denoted when she inquires: "Does anyone in Africa talk like you"? Fascinated by such a sapient young man, the beautiful African-American girl rapidly falls in love with this "intriguing" representative of the Third-World.

However, another fact which brings the couple together would be their affinity concerning marriage. For Akeem, who has traveled a long way in order to find his emancipated bride, marriage should be a personal decision based upon love, not money – an opinion also shared by Lisa. Neither one is interested in each other's financial status or social position, nor would they have allowed their fathers choose their spouses imposingly. Even to sweet Lisa, it is unquestionable every woman's right to decide on her life. In an occasion when Lisa's father announces her engagement with her boyfriend Darryl, without her previous knowledge, serene Lisa becomes furious beyond recognition, instantly rejecting Mr. McDowell's plans. After all, a (stereo)typical American civilized female should never permit to be told what to do. At this point, Lisa seems to embody the "liberated" attitudes of the West, which confront American women with the "subjugated" African ones, in the first part of the narrative. Hence, it is established the ideological link connecting the romantic couple. From now on, the politically correct African prince and

the independent American girl will share aspirations and values, in spite of their distinct place of origin.

Moreover, among all the attributes which make Akeem irresistible, one of them certainly is particularly charming: he knows how to cook. Contrarily to the fact that he is a pampered prince who “has never wiped his own backside”, he holds the secrets of the *haute cuisine*. In a certain occasion, when inviting Lisa on a date, he offers himself to prepare her a meal, and as long as food is considered an art form, the multi-talented Akeem can be thought as an artist, as well.

However, what may really make a difference concerning the prince’s regal power, is his economical status. Although Lisa ignores the prince’s true identity (he told her he is a “goat herder” back in Africa) she feels there is something special about the African man; “almost regal”, she says. He acts like a gentleman, and sounds like an English lord. In reality, throughout the second part of the narrative, in which he is supposedly a poor immigrant, the audience is constantly reminded of Akeem’s financial relations for he is repeatedly portrayed intimately connected to capital, either to specie, or valuable things only a wealthy man could buy: 1) when donations are being collected by the ushers at church, the prince is shown laying a thick bundle of bills in one basket; 2) in order to prevent Semmi from ruining his plan to pose as poor Africans, he takes all his friend’s “pocket money”, which consists in another thick bundle of dollar bills carelessly scattered over the bedroom’s dresser; 3) the prince puts the same money inside a used McDowell’s paper bag and gives it to two the poor – white beggars on the street; 4) Akeem has his picture printed on Zamunda’s cash bills; 5) He anonymously sends Lisa a pair of ruby earrings worth 500,000 American dollars.

In conclusion, the African prince is depicted as the depository of abundant virtues among which the most evident is his impressive economical power, a significant trait in

considering the American audience. Albeit, the prince's portraiture conveys all the norms and standards which fulfill Western requirements of what is to be a "good" African, such as passiveness, Western "knowledge", and wealth. This fact may infer the opposite, that is to say, an African who goes against these parameters of "acceptable behavior", would not be qualified to join the club of the American "elite"³¹, as Ella Shohat points out:

A cinema of contrivedly positive images betrays a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually has no illusions concerning its own perfection. ...It simply inserts Black heroes into the actantial slot formerly filled by White ones to flatter the fantasies of a certain sector (largely male) of the Black audience.³²

4.5.3. The Imbecile

Paradoxically to the image of genius, philosopher, and wealthy noble, the narrative juxtaposes an idiotic depiction of the African prince. He, who has been the object of over-generous portraitures, this time is turned into a less gifted protagonist – more likened to fit the tale's role of the frog, rather than the prince's. Inexplicably, the noble raised in an elegant kingdom surrounded by culture and good taste, appears to ignore trivialities concerning the Western civilization, more specifically, the U.S.A.

The first odd attitude of the prince happens at his arrival. In order to get a taxi, the prince seems not to acknowledge the so common gesture used in this occasions. He simply stops in the middle of the street, and positioning himself in front of a Yellow Cab in movement, orders: Halt!

Latter on in the narrative, the prince and his servant easily get a job at McDowell's restaurant. This seems to be a common fact, since it is usually difficult for an immigrant to work in the U.S. in higher positions without either a Green Card, or a work permit issued

³¹ Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 204.

in special situations, as for legal students who have been studying in the country for more than one year. “Illegal Aliens”, should consider themselves happy enough to get **any** kind of “shady” occupation which pays “under the table”, usually the least attractive, mostly the ones turned down by American citizens, such as mopping the floor. Nevertheless, the two Africans do not seem to be hiding in the back of the kitchen all the time, on the contrary, they are many times seen in front of the restaurant, cleaning the windows, dumping the trash cans, and wearing their showy red plaid uniforms.

Moreover, besides the visible problems of communication between the African prince and the Americans due to the foreigner’s unusual vocabulary (discussed in 2.2.2.) the highly educated prince strangely does not recognize the most trivial objects in Western daily life, nor is informed of Western cultural practices spread out around the globe.

The first awkward fact happens when Mr. McDowell is showing the two friends their cleaning chores. Akeem and Semmi do not know what a mop and bucket are. Akeem seems confused and starts pushing them together idiotically as if he had never seen such an object in his entire life.

The second clear indication that the African prince is not quite aware of is the most popularly known sports practice in the U.S.. The scene occurs when he, trying to win Mr. McDowell’s sympathy and trust, describes a certain “peculiar” game he had recently watched on television. He is actually talking about American Football, and refers to it as being a funny game where “some men run after a pig-skin oblong ball and try to pass it through a huge ‘H’”.

In a further situation, the prince meets Lisa and Patrice in the restaurant. When asked about the purpose of his trip to America, he shows embarrassment; without knowing what to answer, the prince is clearly caught off guards:

Lisa: Akeem is from Africa.

³² Ibid., 204.

Patrice: What are you doing in New York?

Akeem: I'm a student.

Lisa: What school are you going to?

Akeem: aahh...I go to the university?

Lisa: Which one?

Akeem: (pausing for a moment) The University of the United States.

Patrice: (laughing) I never heard of that!

Akeem: Well, it's a very small university. We don't even have a basketball team.

Patrice: Really?

It seems rather strange that a man of great culture, like the prince, does not know at least the name of one university in New York, which is an indication that the "well-read" prince has obviously never read there is no university in the entire country by that name.

However, the most intriguing portrayal of Akeem in N.Y. perhaps would be his astonishing ignorance concerning the subway's operation system. When trying to enter one of its stations without paying, he unsuccessfully forces the turnstile a couple of times as if it were supposed to open. This leads us to believe that the so intelligent prince has evidently never thought of inserting a token. He, finally, jumps over it and gets into one car.

The very idea that a very educated aristocrat, an intellectualized "connoisseur" disregards simple rules or habits in the Western world seems oddly displaced once his own culture has been so closely shaped according to the British – habitual commuters in the Underground.

In conclusion, for functioning as the focus of either over qualifying depictions or for degenerating ones, one character becomes the perpetrator of Eurocentric paradigms. What the film actually presents is the combination of the two: one which artificially over-values the individual, and other which undermines his capacity to understand the Western

reasoning. According to Ella Shohat's warning, "a cinema in which all the Black characters resemble Sidney Poitier might be as much a cause of alarm as one in which they resemble Step'n Fetchit."³³ As for this narrative, we have both.

4.5.4. The Villains

Another aspect of the plot would be *Villainy*, for some of the characters may be recognized as potential villains. Although the narrative's villains may be classified as such for various reasons, all of them perform a communal function: they play in opposition to the main protagonist, that is, the hero, thus exercising some kind of "evil" power in order to "defeat" Akeem.

The first villain to be identified in the narrative comes in the figure of the landlord who rents a room to the two Africans. His gross appearance already poses threat even before he opens his mouth in interminable insults. He is depicted as rude and loud; however, he immediately changes into a helpful host, once he realizes there is money involved. His tone is deceitful, and his lines full of repulsive prejudice:

Landlord (with a sly tone): Come on in, gentlemen...Excuse me if I was brusque, but we've got a lot of boobos here without a dollar to their names. Of course you, gentlemen, seem to have come on a different boat. There's only one bathroom. You have to share. A little insect problem (showing the roach infested room).
Nothing that two boys from Africa aren't used to.

Extremely unpleasant, the detestable landlord would certainly upset anyone's stomach whom is sitting in the audience.

The second villain in sequence is Darryl, Lisa's fiancé. He lives on his father's invention, the "Soul Glo", and "can buy her anything she wants". Showing disgusting

³³ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 204.

gooey locks, he drives around in an expensive red sportive car. He is conceited, arrogant, besides having the ridiculous habit of arranging and spraying his hair in the car's rear mirror. Among all, he is the one who more similarly approaches the description of Propp's function VI of the *dramatis personae* as the "bad guy":

THE VILLAIN ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE HIS VICTIM IN ORDER TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIM OR OF HIS BELONGINGS. (Definition: trickery)

The villain, first of all, assumes a disguise. A dragon turns into a golden goat, or a handsome youth; a witch pretends to be a "sweet old lady" and imitates a mother's voice; a priest dresses himself in a goat's hide; a thief pretends to be a beggarwoman.³⁴

In comparing Darryl with Propp's villain, one may assume their similarities because of the following coinciding traits: 1) Darryl attempts to **deceive** his victim (Lisa) when he leads her to believe it was him who "stuffed a large amount of cash" into one of the church's donation basket; 2) he does that, in order to **take possession** of her, that is, to win her love and marry the girl; 3) he assumes a **disguise** posing as a benevolent man, in the same way "a witch pretends to be a 'sweet old lady'". In addition, by pretending to be what he certainly is not, our villain "uses **persuasion**"³⁵ by means of "direct application of **magical** means"³⁶ – i.e. money – therefore fitting into the category of wrongdoer.

Besides the clear indication that Darryl is a "slick" used to dissimulating, perhaps a more serious flaw in his character would be the fact that he is a chauvinist. If we take into account the vast portion of "emancipated" female audience, nothing would be more irritating than a man who shows such a deplorable behavior in post-modern American society. After the robbery in McDowell's, in a supposedly "man to man" confidential tone to Akeem at Mr. McDowell's house party, he lets out his true "swinish" nature:

³⁴ Propp, "The Functions of Dramatis Personae", 29.

³⁵ Ibid., 29.

³⁶ Ibid., 30. My emphasis.

Darryl: You know, I can appreciate t'way you handled that dude with the gun. I would've helped you myself, except that I had a cup of coffee in my hand. You understand that, right? I bet you learned all that stuff fighting tigers and lions and shit.

Akeem: Yes. Where I am from we have to be very aggressive.

Darryl: (looking at Lisa) I'm all for that. Specially with women. You know, they may not admit it, but they all want a man to...take charge... .Tell them what to do.

While Darryl continues with his chauvinistic rhetoric, Akeem patiently listens to him but not without a ghastly look of contempt in his eyes.

4.5.5. The Pitfalls of Villainy

The problem with stereotyped portrayures of villainous characters reside in their simplifying approach to complex issues concerning power relations. The classification of Darryl as the villain may induce to a more hazardous outcome. Because he is depicted as this obnoxious being, so overtly drenched in prejudiced, one could simply dismiss him as a “real” person, and simply laugh of his absurdly gross remarks. In a scene where Akeem goes to a basketball game with Patrice, Lisa, and her fiancé, distasteful Darryl makes a point of offending the prince:

Darryl: Wearing clothes must be a new experience for you. What kind of game do you all play in Africa? Chase the monkey? (laughing)

Akeem: No, we play football. I believe you call soccer.

Darryl: Oh, yeah. Soccer. That's a real cute sport... Specially the way you all bounce that ball off your heads.

As well as in the case of the “privileging of character over narrative and social structure”³⁷, says Shohat – which indulges the hero with over-magnified attributes – the

³⁷ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 203.

denigrating depictions of a couple of isolated characters would fall into the same reductionism for they “let ‘ordinary racists’ off the hook, unable to recognize themselves in the raving maniacs on the screen”.³⁸ Therefore, evidently, none of the spectators could identify with a “pathologically vicious racist”³⁹ whom gratuitously attack the good and harmless African prince.

Furthermore, the construction of the plot based upon two oppositely fixed axes, continues to repeat old Hollywoodian Manichean formulae which confront, as Ella Shohat calls them, “the saintly Black” vis-a-vis “the demon Black”⁴⁰, having Akeem standing for the saint, while Darryl would serve as the demon.

4.5.6. The “Almost” Villain

Apart from the already discussed “plain” villains lies one whose characteristics differ considerably. In the case of Mr. McDowell, there seems to be a more condescending aura in the treatment of the character. Because he is a concerned father type of villain, stereotypical denigrating images should not be branded if one wishes not to question the dignity of the fathers of America. Therefore, his depiction is conceived and modeled around certain “neutralizing” features which help diminishing the bad qualities.

Mr. McDowell is a middle class single parent of two girls. Having been raised in an extremely poor environment he desires to give his children a better life. Thus, since the beginning it is made clear his interest in marrying his older daughter to Darryl, the wealthy king of the “Soul Glo”. After the engagement incident which has upset Lisa tremendously, Darryl tries to make up with her by sending many bouquets of flowers. Lisa seems not interested and tells her father she is seeing Akeem, the “humble” restaurant cleaner. The father immediately disproves of it:

³⁸ Ibid., 203.

³⁹ Ibid., 203.

Mr. McDowell: Boy they smell good! That Darryl must be spending a fortune on flowers!

Lisa: Stay out of this, dad.

Mr. McDowell: Where you going?

Lisa: To a museum with Akeem.

Mr. McDowell: I don't like that one bit!

Lisa: What's wrong with Akeem?

Mr. McDowell: Lisa, you told me yourself. He's a goat herder. Why don't you marry Darryl.

He dresses real nice. Treats you real good.

Lisa: You only like Darryl because he is rich.

Mr. McDowell: I just don't want you to have to struggle the way your mother and I did.

Although Mr. McDowell is portrayed as a materialistic fellow, the audience probably would not see him as a “complete” villain for his villainy is somehow ameliorated by his “caring father figure” who only wishes to spare his offspring from life's misfortunes.

Nevertheless, Mr. McDowell's behavior changes significantly during the narrative. First, because he is more emphatically depicted as a capitalist, this time even leaving his previous condition as a concerned father. When he is visited by the king of Zamunda, Akeem's father, he accepts money in exchange of information on the prince's whereabouts. Now, showing too much interest in the relationship between her daughter and the African, he tries to win the wealthy king's friendship and trust. The king tells they are staying at the Wardorf Astoria Hotel, and gives him a one hundred pounds bill “for his trouble”. Mr. McDowell agrees to keep the king informed. Overwhelmed with the vision of Akeem's picture printed on the bill, he exclaims with joy: “A prince”!

The following scenes will prove Mr. McDowell a pathetic kind of father who desperately wants to “arrange” a rich match for a daughter: 1) he starts treating Akeem in a totally different manner, being exaggeratedly nice to the once rejected African; 2) he tells

⁴⁰ Ibid., 203.

his daughter “she has done it this time” for “she hit the **jackpot**”; 3) once Darryl is no longer **the** chosen one, Mr. McDowell rudely dismisses him from his house by calling him “a greasy head”, sending the dog after him, and slamming the door on the man’s face.

Moreover, when the king of Zamunda goes to Mr. McDowell’s house searching for his son, Mr. McDowell continues to act in a bizarre way so as to convince the king that the “kids” are getting along just perfectly and shows great excitement for them being together. Portrayed as grotesquely obsequious towards Akeem and the king, Mr. McDowell seems to care little about his daughters happiness. All he is obviously interested in is how the noble’s financial position may be of benefit.

However, after Mr. McDowell has hitherto been portrayed as a prejudiced person who looks down to the African prince for judging him poor, followed by a second focalization which places him as a pathological sycophancy case, it appears to be a third unexpected shift in regards to Mr. McDowell’s behavior:

Mr. McDowell: What did you say to my daughter?

King: I told her the truth. That Akeem could not be interested in her.

Queen: How can you be so sure?

King: Come on! Our son could not consort with such a girl.

Mr. McDowell: Wait a minute!

King: (calling his servant who has a checkbook) I know you have been inconvenienced. I am prepared to compensate you. Shall we say one million American dollars?

Mr. McDowell: No way!

King: Better well, then. Two millions.

Mr. McDowell: (angrily) You haven’t gotten enough money to buy my daughter off!

King: Nonsense!

Queen: Geoffrey! Apologize to Mr. McDowell.

King: I would do no such thing! The man is beneath me, and so is his daughter.

Mr. McDowell: I don’t give a dam who you are! This is America, Jack! You say one more word about my daughter Lisa and I will break my foot off your royal ass!

Unexpectedly, Mr. McDowell has a subtle attack of dignity, thus showing that he is not, by any means, totally corruptive. His daughter's honor remains immaculate, thus suggesting that in America the family comes before all. Hence, by depicting Mr. McDowell as a man who is able to defend the family's pride against the tyranny of a Third-Worldist despot – at the same time that he stands for the country's legitimacy as a democracy – the narrative seems to reverse Mr. McDowell's negative image. He may now be considered redeemed of his sins as a cold blooded capitalist, and engage into the category of the “almost” villains. Whether he has sinned, one may assume there is no doubt; albeit, as a father he has done it for a good cause, thus implying that “the ends may justify his means”. Besides, it is possible to consider that the scene advocates in favor of an American noble “essence” vis-à-vis the African's immoral tendency, thus reintroducing a Manichean pair which denotes the narrative's “moralistic and individualistic approach”.⁴¹

4.5.7. The Complication

Akeem and Lisa are definitely in love with each other. Despite her father's contrariety to it they seem to be united against all odds. “THE VILLAIN IS DEFEATED”⁴² for Darryl has been “banished directly”⁴³ by Mr. McDowell, and mercilessly “dumped” by Lisa. Therefore, “THE INITIAL MISFORTUNE OR LACK IS LIQUIDATED”⁴⁴ when Akeem encounters the woman he was searching for. However, “this function, together with villainy, constitutes a pair”, which places Akeem and Darryl at the same level for “the object of search is seized by the use of force or cleverness”.⁴⁵ The object of search, Lisa, is equally deluded by Akeem who is a fake; he “intelligently”

⁴¹ Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 203.

⁴² *Morphology of the Folktale*, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53. My emphasis.

plays a poor “goat herder” when in reality he is a wealthy prince. For Propp, “heroes sometimes employ the same means adopted by villains for the initial seizure”.⁴⁶

All would have been solved and a happy denouement could have been reached by now without any further “complications”; except that “a tale may have another misfortune in store for the hero”⁴⁷, thus making Akeem have to endure a second battle in order to obtain Lisa:

An initial villainy is repeated, sometimes in the same forms as in the beginning , and sometimes in other forms which are new for a given tale. With this a new story commences. There are no specific forms of repeated villainies. ...From this moment on the development is different from that in the beginning of the tale. ...this phenomenon attests to the fact that many tales are composed of two *series* of functions which may be labelled “moves”(xody). A new villainous act creates a new “move,” and in this manner, sometimes a whole series of tales combine into a single tale.⁴⁸

The king goes to Lisa in order to ruin the girl’s feelings towards Akeem. He tells her the prince “could not be serious about her” once he is on the verge of getting married in Zamunda, and having come to America simply to “sow his royal oats”. Lisa is devastated; yet, furious. She leaves the house running across the streets under the pouring rainy night in a desperate attempt to calm herself down and recover sanity. She has been fooled by Akeem, therefore, she flees away. “The hero once more sets out in search of something”⁴⁹ (or someone). Hence, the prince takes a cab to go after Lisa. Nevertheless, before Akeem succeeds in finding his beloved, “a difficult task is proposed to the hero”⁵⁰: the cab gets stuck in the middle of a traffic jam. Without hesitating, he soon gets off it almost as

⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 60.

immediately, thence following Lisa who escapes from him entering a subway station. This finishes an extenuating “hide and seek”⁵¹ series.

Akeem manages to find Lisa inside one of the subway’s car. He tries to convince her of his true intentions and even renounces his throne in front of the passengers who watch them attentively – a cliché of so many a comedy of the 40’s and 50’s. Nonetheless, Lisa is firmly resolved not to make up with him. She throws the ruby earrings at the prince and parts.

4.5.8. The Denouement

The following sequence in the film may be thought as rather contradictory. Because Akeem fails to convince Lisa of his true love, the audience starts assuming this may not be a classical “happy ending” story. Whereas, a quite unexpected action is about to take place: the queen of Zamunda, Akeem’s mother – whom has so far been portrayed as a submissive “voiceless” female representative for the Third World – seems to have instantly been brought to life. First, she tells the king to “put a sock on it” when he starts with his reactionary rhetoric. Second, already inside the royal Limousine on their way to the airport, she tells the king that if he is the ruler of Zamunda, he certainly has the power to go against the tradition. Hopefully, the queen’s posture as she emerges as a “new woman” will exert influence upon the king’s own conservatism.

The next scene shows the royal family back in Zamunda. The palace is crowded in what appears to be a wedding ceremony. Akeem’s stands by the altar motionless; his inexpressive wearisome countenance reveals a dull spirit while a nuptial march accompanies the bride slowly coming through the central aisle. She is richly dressed in a long tailed Cinderella-like wedding gown. Akeem approaches the woman who is believed

⁵¹ Ibid., 61.

to be Amani, his African fiancée. He gets closer to the bride so as to remove the fine cloth which covers her face but is surprised by his American soul mate's gorgeous unveiled smile. The long awaited fortuitous *grand finale* is imminent forthwith. "THE TASK IS RESOLVED".⁵² "THE HERO IS MARRIED AND ASCENDS THE THRONE".⁵³ Accordingly, "a bride and a kingdom are awarded at once".⁵⁴

4.6. Discourse

The present topic will attempt to consider some elements throughout the narrative which may be of use so as to identify not only the "stylistic overtones", as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, but also its "basic social tone".⁵⁵ Inasmuch as "the task of the critic would be to call the attention to the cultural voices at play"⁵⁶, it would be of no use to engage in a project ignoring such premises. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam urge that one should not endeavor to "reverse existing hierarchies – to replace a demagoguery of the visual with a new demagoguery of the auditory – but to suggest that voice (and sound) and image be considered together, dialectically and diacritically."⁵⁷

4.6.1. The Language

The language spoken by Zamundeans and Americans is English. However, while on one hand there is the polite British English of the Third-Worldist, on the second part of the narrative we find the First-Worldist speaking a deformed type of English whose utterances barely resemble the original idiom. Such discrepancies become so important to the point of interfering in the actual communication between both peoples.

⁵² Ibid., 62.

⁵³ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁵ "Discourse in the Novel", in *The Dialogic Imagination*, eds. Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 259.

⁵⁶ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 214.

⁵⁷ Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 214.

Problems of communication are present since the first scenes when Akeem and Semmi land in the American territory. “You dumb fuck” happens to be the first sentence ever heard by the prince in foreign land when he is almost run over by a Yellow Cab at the airport. The white nothing elegant taxi driver speaks with a slight Italian-American nuance at the same time that he chews on a gum. On their way to the Queens, Akeem asks Semmi “what does dumb fuck mean”? By the time they are delivered, the driver asks: “This shitty is good enough for you”?

The second confusion in a dialogue takes place when they try to rent a room. The black landlord’s first greeting to them would be a “What the fuck do you want”? However, prince and servant do not seem to be offended, seeing that they get into the building and follow the man. Akeem requires “meager accommodations”, which has to be rephrased by “poor room” so the landlord understands the message. When they are heading to the room, it is possible to hear some sounds while they are passing through the filthy corridor: people are fighting in Spanish, a baby is screaming, and a Latin rhythm which sounds as salsa fills the air. All these elements combined suggest that the Queens is a Black-Hispanic poor neighborhood, albeit no Hispanic characters are ever seen during the film.

The morning after, Akeem is shown at the fire staircase outside his room. Glancing over the gloomy neighborhood for the first time he exclaims:

Prince: Look Semmi! Real life! I life we have been denied for far too long! Good morning my neighbors!

Neighbors: Fuck you!

Prince: (happily) Fuck you, too!

The scene depicts Akeem total ignorance towards the popular expression. Besides, the image we see on the screen could not be exactly regarded as a “lively” landscape.

The two Africans first “trip of recognizance” into the American territory allows them to encounter more impolite types. Still on the street, Akeem manages to hear screams coming from the barber shop next door. “Listen Semmi”, he says, “real Americans”! The two friends go inside.

In the barber shop, the predominant tone is loud and exaggeratedly vulgar. Among the black men who argue, there is one who has the sharpest tongue. Most of his utterances include some kind of cursing. There is also a white man – presumably a Jew – played by Eddie Murphy himself, who speaks “boid” instead of bird; a typical “working class” error of pronunciation. So far, two aspects seem worth mentioning. The first would be the fact that a black actor interprets a white character, and not vice-versa as it used to be a common practice in Hollywood. Together with the scene where the black African prince performs charity towards two white beggars (p.p.59;65) they might be regarded as a tentative shift in gaze. The second, I may assume, would be the narrative’s attempt to portray some of the various ethnic groups which populate New York City. For Robert Stam, many North American films set in New York trigger a type of “textual polyphony”, *per se*.⁵⁸

It is worth remembering the scene where Mr. McDowell explains to Akeem the difference between McDonald’s and McDowell’s. Big Mic and Big Mac symbolize the social battle between two ethnic groups⁵⁹: African Americans and Whites. For Bakhtin, “the word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context”.⁶⁰

However, during Akeem’s visit to the U.S., his language seems to suffer no influence from the creolized English spoken by the Americans. On the contrary, the American landlord starts “picking up” the language of the educated Africans, which is noticeable in two situations when he uses “Excuse me if I was brusque”, and “You may enter”.

⁵⁸ Robert Stam, *Bakhtin-Da Teoria Literária à Cultura de massa*, 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*,31.

American's are also depicted as "kitsch". When Akeem and Semmi are invited to McDowell's house party thinking that "he had accepted them as equals", the Africans realize they had been in fact hired as helpers. Semmi would stay outside in the snow parking the cars, while Akeem, who seems to be "less rude", would work inside as a waiter. While Mr. McDowell shows "his little castle" around – whose clashing-styled decoration is evident and noticed by Akeem – the middle class African-American representative explains how hard his life used to be in the old days. Whereas now, having gone considerably up in the "social ladder", he is able to enjoy all the American petit-bourgeois lifestyle can offer – including an electric train which serves drinks over the bar's counter. Akeem patiently listens to the African American's saga, besides condescendingly accepting Mr. McDowell's comforting words of encouragement: "In twenty or thirty years, you too may be able to have a house like this", he says. Later on, when asked whether he knows how to open a bottle of champagne, Akeem ironically replies: "I think I have seen it done once." In general, the prince's expression was one of haughty contempt. After all, what importance would that have if compared to the life of the sole heir to the throne of Zamunda?

Mr. McDowell could also be depicted as the embodiment of a generalizing American ignorance towards other peoples cultures and languages. When he receives the African royal family in his home he opens the door and greets the foreigners saying: "Welcome to *casa* de McDowell". On the other hand, some puns on names may indicate the hidden intention of some discourses. In a scene when Mr. McDowell is introduced to Akeem's mother, Aoleon, he mistakes her name calling her "Alien".

⁶⁰ "Discourse in the Novel", 284.

Repetitions also make up the material for analysis of discourses. In the case of expressions such as “this is America” and “this is a free country”, it is observable their use in different contexts, sometimes with irony, other times with a nationalistic tone.

Absences, too, are to be regarded as important indicators. Why are the majority of voices in the film male? Why do the homeless people on the streets shown in several scenes in long angles express no verbal activity? Why did they exclude Mrs. McDowell from the narrative by killing her? Who is the beautiful African woman who always accompanies the king? Why is she always silent ?

4.6.2. The Music

According to Ella Shohat, cinema manipulates music as much as it manipulates point-of-view.⁶¹ Thus, intra and extra diegetic music in the film should be taken into account once they may instantly relate to images.

The first image of Africa – when an aerial shot shows the palace amidst the jungle and the credits are presented – is accompanied by a song which reminds us of Paul Simon’s album *Graceland* (1986), recorded in Africa, and making use of African singers. Whereas, throughout the entire narrative, there would be no “foreign sounding” songs/music apart from the ones performed by American singer/musicians.

In the case of Patrice, Lisa’s fickle sister, the lyrics of the song to which she is shown dancing is clearly double intended for “I want you to blow my...mind” offers sexual connotations. Because of it, one is able to notice how music can reinforce the moralistic construction of the character.

However, the most evident example of how music can be of supportive use in the construction of meaning is found through the use of extradiegetic music so as to announce

⁶¹ *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 209.

the king of Zamunda's arrival on the American soil. Whenever the African king and his delegation appear they are accompanied by the threatening beating of the "native" drums, as Shohat points out:

In many Hollywood films, African polyrhythms become aural signifiers of encircling savagery, acoustic shorthand for the racial paranoia implicit in the phrase "the natives are restless". What is seen within Native American, African, or Arab cultures as spiritual and musical expression becomes in the western or adventure film a stenographic index of danger, a motif for fear and loathing.⁶²

As the king is coming to America without previous warning in order to search for the prince and take him back to Africa, his presence is depicted as a serious threat.

Finally, the epilogue reveals itself indisputably in rapport with the dialogue and the music at the end of the film. In *Zamunda*, the newly wed Akeem and Lisa leave the palace in a carriage amidst a cheering crowd:

Lisa: Would you really have given up all of this just for me?

Akeem: Of course! If you like, we can give it all up now!

Lisa: Nah!(shaking her head meaning no)

Almost as immediately, the credits are re-introduced followed by a song which is unmistakably a parody on the American National Anthem:

Oh! Say can you see

I'm coming to America

America America America

I took a plane to sunny Spain

I crossed the desert in the camel train

⁶² *Ibid.*, 209.

Had to see the sights in gay Paris

Ah! But there's a land more wonderful to me

Oh! Say(2x)

I've been to Kenya

And walked in Hyde Park

I've seen Copenhagen after dark with my baby

I met the Pope at the Vatican

I've seen Ghana, Tijuana, and the sea of Japan

Oh! Say...(2x)

You can travel 'round the world

See lots of boys and girl

Meet different people on the way, yeah!

But there's nothing like the U.S.A

Oh! Say...

First stop New York City

All the girls are pretty

Next stop Miami

Everybody was jammin'

I bought a ticket to L.A.

That's the perfect way

Everyone in the world is coming to the U.S.A.

Oh! Say...(2x)

(the land of opportunity)

(hold on, I'm coming)

Oh! Say...(10x)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Certain features of language take on the specific flavor of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents characteristics of the given genre.
Mikhail Bakhtin

5.1. Final Remarks

The task of analyzing a text, in this case a film, should encompass a myriad of prerogatives in order to avoid a totalizing experience. The critic – here the researcher/student – should envisage various possibilities contained in a single work of art once this work of art is a human production, and humans, in the post-modern world are far from being the result of a homogeneous, total, undeniably singular historical fact.

However, when History is depicted, narrated, that is (re) presented, within media means of massive amplitude, there may occur a significant tendency to “equalize” historical events in the sense that some parts of it will be significantly enhanced, whilst others will be diminished, deformed, or simply elided to the extent of complete erasure from “official” existence:

The issue of representation and its epistemological claims leads directly to the problem regarding the nature and status of the ‘fact’ in both **history**-writing and **fiction**-writing. All past ‘events’ are potential historical ‘facts’, but the ones that become facts are those that are **chosen** to be narrated.¹

One has no immediate access to the historical fact if not through the mediums of representation carrying along their own specificity embedded in ideological premises which

¹ Linda Hutcheon, “Representing the Past”, in *The Politics of Post-modernism*, 75. My emphasis.

delineate the nature of the gaze. Not only the medium itself has to do with ideology, but also the genre produced by such medium entails ideological manifestations. In the case of parody, it works so well as to convey the contradictory manifestation of “gazes” departing from the post-modern subject, even for his/her very subjectivity within the system he/she belongs to and/or is represented by. This is why the morphological analysis of the term *parody* is made essential for the understanding of its double-coded magnitude even before the analysis of the work entitled as parodical.

Another important issue to be considered has its roots in the political power sustaining the production and distribution of mass media productions such as the American film industry. There are transgressions of norms in parodic works; however,

these transgressions of literary or social norms, for all their revolutionary suggestion, could be said to remain legalized by authority, just as pop music is made popular not by the youths who buy it but by the authorities that manipulate their consumption – New York publishers and marketing experts (who both pre-censor and peddle), multinational record companies, and even commercial radio stations.²

Therefore, it is possible to overcome the naive regarding of parody as part of a resistance agenda against the capitalist establishment and say that parodic works on Hollywood productions remain legalized by the authority of the American film industry which distribute and make possible their massive penetration in international markets. In addition, if Hollywood productions promote the telling and retelling of Eurocentric narratives (plots), and narrative and myth conjunct towards a formal structure (pickled) preserved³ by Eurocentric esthetical/ideological constraints (and the semantic implications to it), then, to reproduce those concepts would be to reinforce Eurocentric imperialistic practices, in the forms of stereotypes and cliché metaphors for peoples outside mainstream

² Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 81.

niches; negating considerations on human values and aesthetic notions apart from the normative ones. It is important to recognize that there are limits concerning the study of such conventions⁴, however, without letting it underestimate the impact of those in the formation of identities across worldwide audiences.

For Stuart Hall, the point of *enunciation* is connected to how we position ourselves within the mainstream discourse, how we identify with this or that culture, how we become something/someone different from the original group after the diaspora experience, and, finally, how we relate to the displacements and lacks of cultural roots, thus finding a place from where to speak; whether we do manage to encounter it or simply assume pre-established reactionary long-term existing pedestals; whether we leave our places of origin in order to reinvent ourselves in different lands or submit ourselves to imperializing conventionality and render to the prevailing institutions of knowledge – including what Clyde Taylor addresses as the historical “assimilation” of Modernism.⁵

In conclusion, genres which neglect the embattlement entrenched in the construction of meaning – therefore neglecting the antagonisms existing in the struggle for a place from where to speak – would neglect the very essence of the being who is multiculturally constructed, thus assuming the existence of an (Euro) homogeneity of the self. Once the language (verbal/visual) in a certain genre fails to provide access to polyphonic/heteroglot discourses, one will find that genre akin to unitary discourses – such as the Eurocentered ways of thinking – as Mikhail Bakhtin refers as Rhetoric “on a par with professional

³ For more see Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. (London: Cape, 1981).

⁴ For Shohat, the study of stereotypes in mainstream Hollywood productions is worth it insofar as we comprehend that what is at stake is the view point behind the stereotypes. It is insufficiently deep the scrutinizing of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ portrayals if one does not attempt to the mediations and discourses involving point-of-view/point-of-hearing. See 2.4.

⁵ In “Black Cinema in the post-aesthetic era”.

jargons”⁶ thereby characterizing Hollywood fraught with its particular rhetorical/ideological jargons.

5.2. Findings and Conclusion of the Findings

In this thesis my objective has been to blend theories so as to make possible the analysis of the film *Coming to America* via a post-modern approach. Therefore, form and content have served as the object of my research. I started with concepts defining the Hollywood style, about elements of the mise-en-scene, lighting, and plot, as well as the discursive intentions behind the film’s parodic genre. By dividing the narrative into two parts, simply in order to make my analysis easier and more objective, I realized that, by the formal splitting of the film into two parts, one important aspect of the conception of the film has been scrutinized and, thus, determining the film’s “post-modern” nature. The “splitting” of the narrative, helped in deciphering the splitting of the “selves” responsible for the film production, and denoting their own (dis)confluence of ideas; ideas aiming at a critical distancing from the Hollywoodian (political) style, whereas entrapped in its formal conventionality.

The first part of the narrative foretells a parody of the Hollywood classics about Africa, their exotic lands and peoples. The exaggerations and artificiality in the elements of the mise-en-scene makes clear the film’s ironic intention towards mockery. Besides, the inversion of characters (posing a black actor in place of the white European explorer) stated the film’s deconstructive intention to satirize Hollywood Eurocentric practices. By depicting the Africans as well educated aristocratic types, the narrative also subverts the gaze of the West which is characterized by derogatory depictions of “Third-World” peoples as a whole. In the case of *Coming to America*, the Africans are clearly compared to

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, 289.

the Americans as regards to their manners and language; Africans are shown as being the polite civilized ones, vis-a-vis the primitive rude “First-Worldist”.

However, as the story develops more and more contradictions seem to distance the film from an alternative formulae – than of the Hollywoodian – in order to depict the history of the colonized and the colonizer. First, because Africa is erotized according to Eurocentric images such as of the harem, where gorgeous women passively serve the master, and second, because the black prince, in performing the explorer who goes to America, leaves Africa to search for a bride he was not able to find in his own country – African women are too subservient for his taste. As Ella Shohat argues, the masculinist utopia of sexual omnipotence concerning “primitive” lands is intrinsically connected to the colonialist discourse.

In the second part of the film, however, when the foreigners are in New York, some isolated scenes attempt to pose as an anti-capitalist critique. Institutions such as the fast-food chain restaurant McDonald’s and the church appear as the target of the joke. Either for the former does not leave room for the enrichment of their employees, becoming a capitalist institution whose aim is in profit, not social equality, or because the latter has become more as the site of spectacles, than of propagators of spiritualized values. The setting, as well, sometimes is placed as a direct reference to the different levels of economical power attributed by the system, for some have too much and few have very little. Still, what outstands any critical attempt to distancing from already written narratives, is its repetitive commitment to capitalism and capitalistic ideas in the construction of the main character, the prince of Zamunda, who is always deeply connected to money and economical power.

Moreover, in regarding form and content as equally important in the construction of meaning, hence in the formation of identity throughout representational mediums, the

perpetuation of classical plot structures such as hero/heroine, villainy, and one dimensional depictions would lead the audience to one dimensional ideological reasoning which benefits totalitarian forms of thinking. For instance, in the case of *Coming to America*, there is one hero and some isolated villains. The hero is different from his countrymen (the prince is the only African fitting in a Western profile), and the villains are too reduced to symbolize the entire West as villainous. The plot evolves into a stable didactic denouement (formally adequate to classical Proppian fairy tales). The teaching that the “good” thrives over the “evil”, and the villains who are always punished.

I conclude that *Coming to America* exemplifies the post-modern contradictory ideologies at play, being parody its most paradoxical genre of self-reflection and a dualistic expression of the self inscribed in a multi-faceted society. As for black-aesthetics, according to Clyde Taylor, black-cinema should abandon the Eurocentric modernist path to create its own alternative route, thus creating its own referentials. Although there are no unitary answers concerning identities, and having considered what Stuart Hall poses when he says that the dialogue between the three presences is of a difficult resolution (the return to Africa is impossible and the Western imposition, a fact), thus need finding a new place of enunciation. In the film *Coming to America*, although it expresses the conflictuous constitution of the African-Americans, it makes use of a language which performs as “an obedient organ, fully adequate to the author’s intention...a discourse that cannot be doubted”⁷ on reinforcing the supremacy of Europe over the rest (and that rest includes the U.S.). The African prince leaves the African continent for good, passes through America, but sets foot in European-Africa, where he finds his (stable) place to speak. The place of continuous, , unconflictuous relations, only possible in the Edenic world of Zamunda. The deliberate inversion of roles does not signify the inversion of mainstream discourses,

⁷ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, 286.

therefore does not classify the film as a parodic genre aiming at subverting mainstream Hollywoodian depictions, on the contrary, it reinstalls black actors in the “actantial slot” of the hitherto white actors’ roles, without questioning the ideological forces which maintain them there.

5.3. Limitations of Study and Suggestions for further Research

I understand that the depth at which I have delved into the analysis of verbal discourse has been somewhat superficial. I would have liked to be more precise and include more of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on heteroglossia and polyphony. I also feel that it would be illuminating if I could have relied more on psychoanalytical notions on desire, for such would have helped my grasping regarding concepts of “otherness” and the psychological phenomena which triggers the construction of identity.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the time and the pre-determined length of this Master’s research, I judge its theory presented to be adequate so to suffice for my immediate necessities.

Moreover, I deeply regret not having been able to include more theory produced by Brazilian authors for this would demand a more extensive coverage of the topic, perhaps becoming a posterior corpus of research, namely, the presence of stereotypes and the formation of cultural identity commonly represented in the Brazilian cinema due to the Brazilian society’s direct influence from the American modes of mass media productions. In addition, it would be considerable a further study aiming at the actual effects of mainstream American films and/or TV series on the making of Brazilian films alongside with the construction of identities of the Brazilian audience and what have we all become after *Coming to America*.

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APPENDIX 1

Details of the film, cast and production team

The ensuring material about the cast and production team were obtained at

www.imdb.com

Title: Coming to America . Also, King in New York (Europe) and Um Príncipe em Nova Iorque (Brazil)

Directed by:

John Landis

Produced by:

Robert D. Wachs and George Folsey, Jr.

Story by:

Eddie Murphy

Screenplay by:

David Sheffield & Barry W. Blaustein

Music Score by Nile Rogers

Production Designer Richard MacDonald

Cast:

Eddie Murphy as Prince Akeem, Clarence, Randy Watson, Saul.

Arsenio Hall as Semmi, the last woman in the club, Morris, Reverend Brown.

James Earl Jones as King Jaffe Joffer

John Amos as Cleo McDowell

Madge Sinclair as Queen Aoleon

Shari Headley as Lisa McDowell

Allison Dean as Patrice McDowell

Eric La Salle as Darryl Jenks

Paul Bates as Oha

Vanessa Bell as Imani Izzi

Louie Anderson as the Maurice (McDowell's employee)

Sheila Johnson as the lady-in-waiting

Frankie Faison as the landlord

Jake Steinfeld as the cab driver

Calvin Lockhart as Colonel Izzi

Vondie Curtis Hall as the basketball game vendor

Elaine Kagan as the telegraph lady

Samuel L. Jackson as the hold-up man

Don Ameche as Mortimer Duke

Ralph Bellamy as Randolph Duke

Clint Smith as barber

APPENDIX 2

Eddie Murphy – Actor Filmography

1. Shrek 2 (2004)- filming – (voice) Donkey
2. The Haunted Mansion (2003)- Jim Evers
3. Shrek 4-D(2003) – (voice) Donkey
4. Daddy Day Care (2003) – Charlie Hinton
5. I Spy (2002) – Kelly Robinson
6. The Adventures of Pluto Nash (2002) – Pluto Nash
7. Showtime (2002) – Officer Trey Sellars
8. Dr. Dolittle 2 (2001) – Dr. Dolittle
9. Shrek (2001) – (voice) Donkey
10. Nutty Professor II: The Klumps (2000) – Professor Sherman Klump/Buddy Love//Cletus ‘Papa’ Klump/Young Cletus Klump/anna Pearl ‘Mama’ Jensen Klump/Ida Mae ‘Granny’ Jensen/Ernie Klump/Lance Perkins
11. “The PJs” (1999) TV Series (voice) – Thurgood Orenthal Stubbs
12. Bowfinger (1999) – Jifferson ‘Jiff’ Ramsey
13. Life (1999) – Rayford Gibson
14. Holy Man (1998) – G
15. Doctor Dolittle (1998) – Dr. Dolittle
16. Mulan (1998) – (voice) Mushu the Demoted one
17. Metro (1997) – Insp. Scott Roper

18. The Nutty Professor (1996) – Professor Sherman Klump/Buddy Love/Lance Perkins/Cletus ‘Papa’ Klump/Anna Pearl ‘Mama’ Jensen Klump/Ida Mae ‘Granny’ Jensen/Ernie Klump
19. Vampire in Brooklin (1995) – Maximillian/Preacher Pauly/Guido
20. HIStory (1994) (V) – Pharaoh (‘Remember The Time’ video)
21. Beverly Hills Cop III (1994) – Det. Axel Foley
22. Dangerous: The Short Films (1993) (V) – Pharaoh (‘Remember The Time’ video)
23. The Distinguished Gentleman (1992) – Thomas Jefferson Johnson
24. Boomerang (1992) – Marcus Graham
25. Another 48 Hrs. (1990) – Reggie Hammond
26. Harlem Nights (1989) – Quick
27. What’s Alan Watching? (1989) (TV)
28. Coming to America (1998) – Prince Akeem/Clarence/Randy Watson/Saul
29. Beverly Hills Cop II (1997) – Det. Axel Foley
30. Uptown Comedy Express (1987) (TV) – Host
31. The Golden Child (1986) – Chandler Jarrel
32. Beverly Hills Cop (1984) – Det. Axel Foley
33. Best Defense (1984) – Lieutenant T.M.Landry
34. The Best of The Big Laugh Off (1983)
35. Trading Places (1983) – Billy Ray Valentine
36. 48 Hrs. (1982) – Reggie Hammond
37. “Saturday Night Live” (1975) TV Series – Various

Producer – Filmography

1. The Incredible Shrinking Man (2005) (pre-production) (executive producer)

2. Nutty Professor II: The Klumps (2000) (executive producer)
3. “The PJs” (1999) – TV (executive producer)
4. Life (1999) (producer)
5. Vampire in Brooklyn (1995) (producer)
6. Clippers (1991) – TV (executive producer)
7. The Kid Who Loved Christmas (1990) – TV (executive producer)
8. Harlem Nights (1989) (executive producer)
9. What’s Alan Watching? (1989) – TV (executive producer)
10. Eddie Murphy Raw (1987) (executive producer)
11. The Golden Child (1986) (executive producer)

Writer – Filmography

1. “The PJs” (1999) –TV (creator)
2. Vampire in Brooklyn (1995) (story)
3. Boomerang (1992) (story)
4. Another 48 Hrs. (1990) (as Fred Braughton)
5. Harlem Nights (1989) (written by)
6. Coming to America (1988) (story)
7. Eddie Murphy Raw (1987)
8. Beverly Hills Cop II (1987) (story)
9. Eddie Murphy Delirious (1983) – TV
10. “Saturday Night Live” (1975) – TV Series (writer) (1982-1984)

Director – Filmography

1. Harlem Nights (1989)

APPENDIX 3

John Landis – Director Filmography

1. Slasher (2004) (TV) (post-production)
2. Susan's Plan (1998)
3. Blues Brothers 2000 (1998)
4. "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids: The TV Shoe" (1997)
5. The Stupids (1996)
6. HIStory (1994) – (video "Black or White" -- Michael Jackson Greatest Videos)
7. Beverly Hills Cop III (1994)
8. Innocent Blood (1992)
9. Black or White (1991) (V)
10. Oscar (1991)
11. "Dream On" (1990) TV Series
12. Coming to America (1988)
13. Amazon Women on the Moon (1987)
14. Three Amigos! (1986)
15. Spies Like Us (1985)
16. "George Burns Comedy Week" (1985) TV Series
17. Disneyland's 30th Anniversary Celebration (1985) (TV)
18. Into the Night (1985)
19. Michael Jackson: Making Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' (1983)
20. Thriller (1983) (V)
21. Twilight Zone: The Movie (1983)

22. Trading Places (1983)
23. Coming Soon (1982) (V)
24. An American Werewolf in London (1981)
25. The Blues Brothers (1980)
26. Animal House (1978)
27. The Kentucky Fried Movie (1977)
28. Schlock (1973)