The Shadow and the Act

A critic comments on four films about Negroes — 'Lost Boundaries,' 'Pinky,' 'Home of the Brave,' and, best of all, 'Intruder in the Dust'

Faulkner has given us a metaphor. When, in the film Intruder in the Dust, the young Mississippian Chick Mallison falls into an ice-coated creek on a Negro's farm, he finds that he has plunged into the depth of a reality which constantly reveals itself as the reverse of what it had appeared before his plunge. Here the ice—white, brittle, and eggshell thin—symbolizes Chick's inherited views of the world, especially his Southern conception of Negroes. Emerging more shocked by the air than by the water, he finds himself locked in a moral struggle with the owner of the land, Lucas Beauchamp, the son of a slave, who, while aiding the boy, angers him by refusing to act toward him as Southern Negroes are expected to act.

To Lucas, Chick is not only a child but his guest. Thus he not only dries the boy's clothes; he insists that he eat the only food in the house, Lucas's own dinner. When Chick (whose white standards won't allow him to accept the hospitality of a Negro) attempts to repay his debt and to see Lucas for once “act like a nigger.” The opportunity has come, he thinks, when Lucas is charged with shooting a white man in the back. But instead of humbling himself, Lucas (from his cell) tells, almost orders, Chick to prove him innocent by violating the white man's grave.

In the end we see Chick recognizing Lucas as the representative of those virtues of courage, pride, independence, and patience that are usually attributed only to white men—and, in his uncle's words, accepting the Negro as "the keeper of our [the whites'] consciences." This bit of dialogue, coming after the real murderer is revealed as the slain man's own brother, is, when viewed historically, about the most remarkable concerning a Negro ever to come out of Hollywood.

With this conversation, the falling into creeks, the digging up of corpses, and the confronting of lynch mobs that mark the plot, all take on a new significance: Not only have we been watching the consciousness of a young Southerner grow through the stages of a superb mystery drama, we have participated in a process by which the role of Negroes in American life has been given what, for the movies, is a startling new definition.

To appreciate fully the significance of Intruder in the Dust in the history of Hollywood we must go back to the film that is regarded as the archetype of the modern American motion picture, The Birth of a Nation.

Originally entitled The Clansman, the film was inspired by another Southern novel, the Reverend Thomas Dixon's work of that title, which also inspired Joseph Simmons to found the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. (What a role these malignant clergymen have played in our lives!) Re-entitled The Birth of a Nation as an afterthought, it was this film that forged the twin screen image of the Negro as bestial rapist and grinning, eye-rolling clown—stereotypes that are still with us today. Released during 1915, it resulted in controversy, riots, heavy profits, and the growth of the Klan. Of it Terry Ramsaye, a historian of the American motion-picture industry, writes: "The picture . . . and the K.K.K. secret society, which was the afterbirth of a nation, were sprouted from the same root. In subsequent years they reacted upon each other to the large profit of both. The film presented predigested dramatic experience and thrills. The society made the customers all actors in costume."

Usually, The Birth of a Nation is discussed in terms of its contributions to cinema technique, but, as with every other technical advance since the oceanic sailing ship, it became a further instrument in the dehumanization of the Negro. And while few films have gone so far in projecting Negroes in a malignant light, few before the 1940's
showed any concern with depicting their humanity. Just the opposite. In the struggle against Negro freedom, motion pictures have been one of the strongest instruments for justifying some white Americans' anti-Negro attitudes and practices. Thus the South, through D. W. Griffith's genius, captured the enormous myth-making potential of the film form almost from the beginning. While the Negro stereotypes by no means made all white men Klanmen, the cinema did, to the extent that audiences accepted its image of Negroes, make them participants in the South's racial ritual of keeping the Negro "in his place."

After Reconstruction the political question of what was to be done with Negroes, "solved" by the Hayes-Tilden deal of 1876, came down to the psychological question: "How can the Negro's humanity be evaded?") The problem, arising in a democracy that holds all men as created equal, was a highly moral one; democratic ideals had to be squared with anti-Negro practices. One answer was to deny the Negro's humanity—a pattern set long before 1915. But with the release of The Birth of a Nation the propagation of sub-human images of Negroes became financially and dramatically profitable. The Negro as scapegoat could be sold as entertainment, could even be exported. If the film became the main manipulator of the American dream, for Negroes that dream contained a strong dose of such stuff as nightmares are made of.

We are recalling all this not so much as a means of indicting Hollywood as by way of placing Intruder in the Dust, and such recent films as Home of the Brave, Lost Boundaries, and Pinky in perspective. To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow, but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion. Actually, the anti-Negro images of the films were (and are) acceptable because of the existence throughout the United States of an audience obsessed with an inner psychological need to view Negroes as less than men. Thus psychologically and ethically, these negative images constitute justifications for all those acts, legal, emotional, economic, and political, which we label Jim Crow. The anti-Negro image is thus a ritual object of which Hollywood is not the creator, but the manipulator. Its role has been that of justifying the widely held myth of Negro unhumaneness and inferiority by offering entertaining rituals through which that myth could be reaffirmed.

The great significance of the definition of Lucas Beauchamp's role in Intruder in the Dust is that it makes explicit the nature of Hollywood's changed attitude toward Negroes. Form being, in the words of Kenneth Burke, "the psychology of the audience," what is taking place in the American movie patron's mind? Why these new attempts to redefine the Negro's role? What has happened to the audience's mode of thinking?

For one thing there was the war; for another there is the fact that the United States' position as a leader in world affairs is shaken by its treatment of Negroes. Thus the thinking of white Americans is undergoing a process of change, and reflecting that change, we find that each of the films mentioned above deals with some basic and usually negative assumption about Negroes: Are Negroes cowardly soldiers? (Home of the Brave); are Negroes the real polluters of the South? (Intruder in the Dust); have mulatto Negroes the right to pass as white, at the risk of having black babies, or if they have white-skinned children, of having to kill off their "white" identities by revealing them to others? (Lost Boundaries); and finally, should Negro girls marry white men or—wonderful non-sequitur—should they help their race? (Pinky).

Obviously these films are not about Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes. And if they are taken as accurate reflectors of that thinking, it becomes apparent that there is much confusion. To make use of Faulkner's metaphor again, the film makers fell upon the eggshell ice but, unlike the child, weren't heavy enough to break it. And, being unable to break it, they were unable to discover the real direction of their film narratives. In varying degree, they were unwilling to dig into the grave to expose the culprit, and thus we find them using ingenious devices for evading the full human rights of their Negroes. The result represents a defeat not only of drama, but of purpose.

In Home of the Brave, for instance, a psychiatrist tells the Negro soldier that his hysterical paralysis is like that of any other soldier who has lived when his friends have died; and we hear the soldier pronounced cured; indeed, we see him walk away prepared to open a bar and restaurant with a white veteran. But here there is an evasion (and by evasion I refer to the manipulation of the audience's attention away from reality to focus it upon false issues), because the guilt from which the Negro is supposed to suffer springs from an incident in which, immediately after his friend has called him a "yellowbelly nigger," he has wished the friend dead—only to see the wish granted by a sniper's bullet.

What happens to this racial element in the motivation of his guilt? The psychiatrist ignores it, and becomes a sleight-of-hand artist who makes it vanish by repeating again and again that the Negro is like everybody else. Nor, I believe, is this accidental, for it is here exactly that we come to the question of whether Negroes can rightfully be expected to risk their lives in an army in which they are slandered and discriminated against. Psychiatry is not, I'm afraid, the answer. The soldier suffers from concrete acts, not hallucinations.

And so with the others. In Lost Boundaries the question evaded is whether a mulatto Negro has the right to practice the old American pragmatic philosophy of capitalizing upon one's assets. For after all, whiteness has been given an economic and social value in our culture; and for the doctor upon whose life the film is based "passing" was the quickest and most certain means to success.

Yet Hollywood is uncertain about his right to do this. The film does not render the true circumstances. In real life Dr. Albert Johnson, the Negro doctor who "passed" as white, purchased the thriving practice of a...
The deceased physician in Gorham, New Hampshire, for a thousand dollars. Instead a fiction is introduced in the film wherein Dr. Carter’s initial motivation for “passing” arises after he is refused an internship by dark Negroes in an Atlanta hospital—because of his color! It just isn’t real, since there are thousands of mulattoes living as Negroes in the South, many of them Negro leaders. The only functional purpose served by this fiction is to gain sympathy for Carter by placing part of the blame for his predicament upon black Negroes. Nor should the irony be missed that part of the sentiment evoked when the Carters are welcomed back into the community is gained by painting Negro life as horrible, a fate worse than a living death. It would seem that in the eyes of Hollywood, it is only “white” Negroes who ever suffer—or is it merely the “white” corpuscles of their blood?

Pinky, for instance, is the story of another suffering mulatto, and the suffering grows out of a confusion between race and love. If we attempt to reduce the heroine’s problem to sentence form we’d get something like this: “Should white-skinned Negro girls marry white men, or should they inherit the plantations of old white aristocrats (providing they can find any old aristocrats to will them their plantations) or should they live in the South and open nursery schools for black Negroes?” It doesn’t follow, but neither does the action. After sitting through a film concerned with interracial marriage, we see it suddenly become a courtroom battle over whether Negroes have the right to inherit property.

Pinky wins the plantation, and her lover, who has read of the fight in the Negro press, arrives and still loves her, race be hanged. But now Pinky decides that to marry him would “violate the race” and that she had better remain a Negro. Ironically, nothing is said about the fact that her racial integrity, whatever that is, was violated before she was born. Her parents are never mentioned in the film. Following the will of the white aristocrat, who, before dying, advises her to “be true to herself,” she opens a school for darker Negroes.

But in real life the choice is not between loving or denying one’s race. Many couples manage to intermarr

Trouble ahead: Chick and the ‘uppity’ Beauchamp in a country store

without violating their integrity, and indeed their marriage becomes the concrete expression of their integrity. In the film Jeanne Crain floats about like a sleepwalker, which seems to me to be exactly the way a girl so full of unreality would act. One thing is certain: No one is apt to mistake her for a Negro, not even a white one.

And yet, despite the absurdities with which these films are laden, they are all worth seeing, and if seen, capable of involving us emotionally. That they do is testimony to the deep centers of American emotion that they touch. Dealing with matters which, over the years, have been slowly charging up whether Negroes can make complete identification with their screen image. Interestingly, the factors that make this identification possible lie in its depiction not of racial, but of human, qualities.

Yet in the end, turning from art to life, we must even break with the definition of the Negro’s role given us by Faulkner. For when it comes to conscience, we know that in this world each of us, black and white alike, must become the keeper of his own. This, in the deepest sense, is what these four films, taken as a group, should help us realize.

Faulkner himself seems to realize it. In the book Intruder in the Dust, Lucas attempts not so much to be the keeper of anyone else’s conscience as to preserve his own life. Chick, in aiding Lucas, achieves that view of truth on which his own conscience depends.

—RALPH ELLISON
To Man's Measure...

Frenchman Boy

At first the crowd was all for the American. It was Cerdan's first fight here, and many people thought he was another foreigner brought in, like Jack Doyle, the Irish Thrush, because the fights were so dull. The Garden had even imported a Dutchman who had become a German, but the patriotic societies had not liked that; so all the Garden could do was to keep the Dutch-German busily training for fights that the Garden did not dare put on. After a while, the naturalized German got tired of training all by himself; so that importation was a flop, and Europe's dollar shortage remained what it was. The Garden had brought in a French butcher with the biggest hands anyone would want to see, and this one had courage enough, bled enough, but did not win very often. So the night that Marcel Cerdan fought Georgie Abrams the crowd was mostly for Abrams, because he had always fought hard and they knew him, and also because he was an American; you might prefer Jake LaMotta or somebody, but you would not just normally prefer a Frenchman unless you had never seen a fight and did not want to. It was the way Frenchmen in France used always to have something to say to an American about Lindbergh, or Charlie Chaplin. It made for a kind of friendly feeling.

Cerdan won the middleweight title from Tony Zale, the Polish-American boy from Gary, and lost it to Jake LaMotta, the Italian-American boy from the Bronx. He was coming back for a return match with LaMotta when his plane crashed in the Azores.

Forty-eight lost their lives—the young French violinist, Ginette Neveu; Boutet de Monvel, the society painter; the pilot Jean de la Noue; and the rest—all human beings, each of unique interest, and differing from one another in only one respect: Some were known to the general public and some were not. When Thornton Wilder wrote about the disaster at the Bridge of San Luis Rey, he paid equal attention to all the victims. Newspapers are not novelists nor, godlike, can they concern themselves impartially with all who live and die. There was only one name in the headlines: Cerdan's.

When the news of Cerdan's death reached New York, a nationally-circulated picture magazine, noted for its earnest, groping editorials, rushed a camera crew to the night club where Cerdan's compatriot and friend Edith Piaf has been singing. It was hoped that the cameramen might just happen to be present should the singer break down and collapse.

Jake LaMotta and his mother spent the day in church lighting candles for "our friend."

Proud Day

It is justice that matters, not the judges who administer it. Probably, it is as impudent to praise a judge as to abuse one. If the name of Judge Learned Hand appears in this note it is only because he presided on the three-judge bench of the United States Circuit Court which admitted the eleven Communists to bail. If the name of Irving S. Shapiro appears it is because he spoke in court for the Department of Justice. The clear and wonderful honesty of that short day in court showed justice at its best.

The Communist trial had lasted nine months; it was a fair trial; the government had worked hard for conviction and had obtained it. Now the convicted men were asking to be re-