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***Manderlay* (2005): Lars von Trier's narrative of passing**

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Abstract

Von Trier, the maverick Danish director, has over the course of his career earned a reputation for being difficult; he has a tendency to create films that are not only challenging but demand an active level of participation from his audience. The film Manderlay (2005) continues this tradition of provoking intellectual debate. Whereas numerous scholars and critics have recognised that the film can be read as a metaphorical reference to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, this article interprets Manderlay as an allegory for the way African Americans have been represented by the US film industry.

Keywords

Lars von Trier
African American
stereotyping
racial passing

National guilt

Manderlay (Von Trier 2005) is the second and most recent instalment of the director's proposed 'America: Land of Opportunity' trilogy. While its predecessor, *Dogville* (2003), dealt with small mindedness in Middle America, this film turns its attention to race relations in the rural Deep South. Its release has been considered timely and relevant in today's post-9/11 climate of cultural suspicion and media-fuelled fear of 'otherness' – many critics have read the film's narrative as an allusion to the invasion of Iraq and Von Trier openly discusses the parallels between Grace Margaret Mulligan, the film's female protagonist, and George W. Bush on the official *Manderlay* website. The fact that the tagline to the film reads 'liberation, whether they want it or not' justifies such an anti-Bush reading. Bradshaw and Ebert correctly identify that in particular *Manderlay* can be read as a filmic exploration and condemnation of white American liberalism (Bradshaw 2006; Ebert 2006). In spite of Grace's attempts to educate the slaves, her intervention and naïvety have dire effects on the black community. Josh Kun writing for the *LA Times*, along with numerous other critics, also points out that Grace's whipping of the deceitful Timothy at the end of the film bears a striking resemblance to the incidents at the Abu Ghraib prison where Iraqi prisoners were tortured by US reserve troops (Kun 2005).

However, in focusing purely on the contemporary political climate in the Middle East, critics have failed to look at the domestic implications of national guilt. The film may clearly also be understood on a more literal level as a brutally candid exploration of race relations in the United States of America; one which is politically controversial, confrontational and at

- 1 Examples include *House of Sand and Fog* (Perelman 2003), *Everything Is Illuminated* (Schreiber 2005), and more recently *Inside Man* (Lee 2006).

times verges on the explicitly racist. Akin to *Caché/Hidden* (Haneke 2005), the storyline deals with the oppression of the ethnic other and the deep history of national guilt, a recurrent subject in contemporary cinema.¹ The subject of national guilt offers contemporary directors a wealth of narrative opportunity which typically results in the personification of the political – rather than directly dealing with historical issues, they opt to transfer political embarrassment onto the individual. Singing from the postcolonial hymn sheet, these films are often unforgiving and encourage an exploration of oppression from the perspective of both the coloniser and the colonised, with children often being used to illustrate the impact of national guilt on succeeding generations. Furthermore, in extreme cases, films depicting national guilt have a tendency to implicate the audience – as we watch, we become embroiled in historical shame.

The film *Manderlay* is a continuation of the story of Grace Margaret Mulligan, last seen fleeing the town of Dogville with her gangster father in the first instalment of the trilogy. Whilst travelling through the Deep South, they happen to come across an estate where, in spite of slavery's having been abolished seventy years earlier, a small community of African Americans are still being held in servitude. Grace takes it upon herself to free the slaves after confronting the old matriarch on her death bed. Grace then remains on the cotton plantation with a handful of her father's gangsters for protection in an attempt to teach the black community about democracy, justice and anger therapy. However, her good intentions have disastrous results.

But in addition to the literal references to slavery in the United States of America, and, the suggested parallels between Grace's attempts to free the slaves and the military presence in Iraq, the film can also be read as an allegory for the way African Americans have been treated by the film industry. It is Von Trier's appropriation of black cultural tropes and generic forms, along with his ability to subvert African American cultural practices that not only highlight the problematic history of black representation in film but reveal Von Trier's desire to expose that which Hollywood has traditionally hidden. In *Manderlay*, Von Trier attacks white liberalism, he attacks the film industry's misrepresentation of black identity, and most interestingly he attacks the African American participation in perpetuating this misrepresentation.

The story of slavery

In terms of the film's literal subject matter, Von Trier is clearly highly knowledgeable regarding the subject of slavery in the United States of America, both historical and contemporary. His fascination with the subject dates back 25 years to the time when, as a film student, he read the preface to the controversial erotic novel *The Story of O* by Pauline Reage (1954). Written by Jean Paulhan, the preface entitled 'A slave's revolt', tells of two hundred slaves in Barbados in the year 1838:

Some two hundred Blacks, women as well as men and all of them promoted to freedom by the decrees promulgated in March of that year, one morning presented themselves at the door of their former master, a certain Glenelg, and

besought him to take them back into bondage. In the name of the group, an Anabaptist minister had drawn up a list of grievances; they were read out to Glenelg and then the discussion began. But whether because of distrust, or scruples, or simple fear of the law, the former slaveowner refused to be convinced: whereupon he was, first of all, mildly pushed about, then, together with his family, massacred by the Blacks who that same evening went back to their cabins, their palaverings, their labours and all their accustomed activities.

(Paulhan 1954: 267–268)

Von Trier was further motivated to revisit the topic of slavery after he witnessed the work of the photo journalist Jacob Holdt. Holdt's project, entitled *American Pictures* (1997), was the culmination of years travelling around the Deep South exposing modern-day slave camps. Carrie Kahn, a news broadcaster for National Public Radio confirms Holdt's allegations that slave camps can be located in the South even today, stating that:

For the most part, the workers are U.S. citizens, and many are homeless African-American men recruited from shelters and soup kitchens. Lured by the promise of work, they hop into vans, only to find themselves in fenced farm camps, forced into debt by their bosses and sometimes paid with drugs instead of money.

(Kahn 2005)

Von Trier invited Jacob Holdt to address the cast of *Manderlay* in order to prepare them for the project and to inform them of the film's contemporary political significance in the United States. Nevertheless, the film not only responds to Von Trier's knowledge of – and desire to reflect on – both historical and contemporary US race relations. It also stems from his knowledge – and subsequent subversion – of certain key traits associated with the representation of African American culture and experience in literature and, in particular, film.

The narrative of passing

Conventionally, Hollywood has romanticized the Antebellum period through numerous plantation narratives which depict the mythic South as a harmonious society. Films such as *Song of the South* (Foster & Jackson 1946), *The Green Pastures* (Connelly & Keighley 1936) and *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming 1939) are classic examples. But rather than treating the black culture of the South with the customary Hollywood nostalgia, Von Trier interrogates the archetypal plantation myth on a far deeper level. This is notably shown through his appropriation of the narrative of passing.² Harper states that racial passing is when 'a light-skinned person legally designated as black, passes as white' (1998: 382). The narrative of passing is a generic form common to African American culture. Racial passing, in both film and literature, tells of the tragic mulatto figure, torn between black and white society who struggles to find acceptance due to his/her conflicting ancestry.

As a recurring black American motif, narratives of passing are typically gender specific. Pilgrim states that 'Most tragic mulattoes were women (. . .).

- 2 The term 'passing' was popularized by the African American author Nella Larsen. In 1929 Larsen published a novel, entitled *Passing*, exploring the lives of two fictional light-skinned women confronting the opportunities and limitations offered to mulattos who attempt to 'pass' themselves off as white in white society (Pilgrim 2000).

The troubled mulatto is portrayed as a selfish woman who will give up all, including her Black family, in order to live as a White person' (Pilgrim 2000). Famous mulatto heroines include Julie from *Showboat* (Whale 1936; Sidney 1951), Sara-Jane or Peola from the two versions of *Imitation of Life* (Stahl 1934; Sirk 1959), or the poignantly named *Pinky* (Kazan 1946). However, these films by Euro-American directors clearly borrow form the narrative construction found in the early work of the pioneering black director Oscar Micheaux. Being light-skinned himself, Micheaux was fascinated with the trope of racial passing and explored it many of his films including *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) and *All God's Stepchildren* (1938).

As a genre, narratives of passing are heart-rending and melodramatic stories which expose the cruelty of American racial inequality. However, passing was, and is, a reality for many light-skinned African Americans. Writing in 1963, Conyers and Kennedy undertook a survey examining the motivation for passing as white. The answers to the questionnaire included the following reasons:

1. Lack of identification with other Negroes.
2. Fallen in love or married into the white race.
3. To secure economic advantages.
4. To hide one's past life.
5. To secure equal social, cultural, and recreational advantages.
6. To have something to feel important about among other Negroes.
7. To obtain some psychic thrill in fooling the white man.

(Conyers and Kennedy 1963: 217)

The above 'list of statements highlights the benefits and justification for passing as white and it is the final category of 'fooling the white man' which acts as the foundation for the film *Manderlay*. Although narratives of passing as a genre have dwindled in popularity since the 1960s, Von Trier reinvents this outdated mode of storytelling through his inclusion of the character Timothy.

Manderlay reworks the traditional formula of racial passing in a number of ways. First the passing figure is male rather than female, and more interestingly the character is looking to darken his cultural roots rather than bleach his genealogy. In an ironic twist, the character of Timothy on the Manderlay plantation is passing himself off as an African warrior. Rather than being apologetic for his black familial roots, Timothy is looking to accentuate his African inheritance. Unlike the archetypal tragic mulatto, Timothy is proud of his black identity. Nevertheless, in the same vein as the historical heroine, he ventures to deceive white society about his racial makeup. He ironically disassociates himself from his white American heritage in favour of his African roots.

However, Von Trier scathingly highlights the fact that Timothy is performing the African exotic other for the benefit of Grace, thus introducing the primal theme of miscegenation fantasies (cf. Courtney 2005). Timothy claims to be a Munsu chief and in impersonating the noble and virile tribesman, seduces Grace in a sexually explicit mock-African ritual. Through Timothy's performance of an identity founded on concepts of

black manhood and the black man's ability to sexually satisfy women, both black and white, Von Trier is exploiting the archetypal figure of the black buck or brute, renowned throughout US cinematic history as the militantly proud African American male who lusts after white women. Yet, this is not the only derogatory stereotype evoked in *Manderlay*. On reflection, the entire film can be read as a simultaneous condemnation and perpetuation of the way African Americans have been depicted as two-dimensional caricatures by the film industry and the way in which black actors have had to fight to secure a visible presence which does not compromise their racial integrity.

Stereotyping

The slaves at Manderlay are shown negotiating their identities as an act of survival. Ever fascinated with rules and restrictions, Von Trier introduces Mam's Law as a narrative device within the film. Mam's Law is a written account of how the slaves on the Manderlay plantation should be treated, with each individual being categorised according to his/her psychological traits. As the narrator comments:

Sammy was a group five, a clownin' nigger. The formidable Victoria was, of course, a number four, a hittin' nigger (. . .) Wilma and Mark were losin' niggers. Wilem was a two, a talkin' nigger. Flora was a weepin' nigger, et cetera, et cetera. There were pleasin' niggers and crazy niggers by the dozen.

The final category, number one proudy niggers, consisted nowadays of Timothy as expected (. . .) and Elizabeth. No it said seven not one. She was a pleasin' nigger also known as a chameleon. A person of the kind who could transform herself into exactly the type the beholder wanted to see.

These psychological divisions should be instantly recognisable to the audience as they allude to the key racial stereotypes perpetuated by the film industry. The essentialist burlesque approach to African American representation has been recorded by Bogle in his seminal text *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks* (1988). Bogle identifies coons and Uncle Toms as recurring figures in commercial American film; on the Manderlay plantation such slaves are labelled as 'clownin' niggers' and 'talkin' niggers'. Likewise, Bogle provides illustrative examples of the mammy and the jezebel; according to Mam's Law the female slaves are referred to as 'hittin' niggers', 'pleasin' niggers' and 'loser niggers'.

The trickster

Interestingly, Timothy is branded as a 'proudly nigger' which, as mentioned above, is an example of Von Trier paying homage to the archetypal buck. However, at the climax of the film, we realise, like Grace, that we have been duped and that Timothy is in fact a group seven 'pleasin' nigger', rather than the group one 'proudly' category. In introducing this twist in the plot, Von Trier is subverting the nature of African American stereotypes by indicating that black Americans often adopt particular traits in order to manipulate white society. Timothy, like Elizabeth, turns out to be a category seven slave, a 'pleasin' nigger', also known as a 'chameleon',

and as a result they are able 'to transform themselves into exactly the type the beholder wanted to see'. Therefore, Timothy is not only purposefully playing the buck but is in fact a classic trickster.

The trickster, represented as the 'pleasin' nigger' in *Manderlay*, is a caricature frequently employed by Hollywood, to represent the quick thinking, cunning African American. The trickster is a rogue who consciously manipulates and undermines figures of superiority. Despite the apparent weakness of the trickster, he/she ultimately becomes empowered through his/her ability to gain leverage at the expense of the naïvety of those in power. However, in her study of 'negro expression', Hurston states that 'the trickster-hero of West Africa has been transplanted to America' (1933: 299). Therefore, unlike the traditional stereotypes of the Tom, coon, mammy and buck, which were created by white society, the trickster is a genuine African folk hero. Timothy is a trickster; like most of the slaves at Manderlay, he wittingly becomes 'exactly the type the beholder want[s] to see'. White society fails to see that Timothy and his compatriots willingly wear the stereotypical masks provided by white cultural hegemony in order to forge a sense of control. Therefore Von Trier is highlighting the complexity of imposing stereotypes on marginal people as there is a sense in which such traits are embraced and subsequently subverted for personal and societal gain. However, Von Trier's suggestion that black society readily succumbs to performing two-dimensional roles is a highly controversial and inflammatory proposition.

As a result of his insinuation of black complicity in offensive stereotyping and the controversial nature of the subject matter, Von Trier experienced great difficulties in casting African Americans for the film. Historically, the United States of America rarely produces films that depict the institution of slavery. When such films do occur they often fail to address key issues. Danny Glover, who plays the character of Wilhelm, in an interview with Catherine Higgins, said 'it would be extraordinary for [US] film culture to unravel [slavery] but it doesn't. People are afraid to deal with it. There is no framework for people to unravel it' (Higgins 2006). Indeed, Glover was the only black American willing to be involved in the project; instead Von Trier had to look to the British stage in order to cast the rest of the black characters. This highlights the problematic decisions faced by African American actors and the weight of expectation that is put upon them from both the industry and the black viewing audience – there is a fear that if you are seen as being outspoken you may not get the opportunity to work again. Von Trier, as a director, recognises the problems facing African American actors:

The best thing you could offer a black actor is a white role. That means a role where the colour of his skin doesn't matter, and that's degrading in itself (. . .) most parts black actors will get today are heroic parts, which must be terrible. (*Manderlay: Official Website*)

In the light of this statement, it is clear that the film *Manderlay* can be read as a comment on the film industry's treatment of black identity.

The awkward history of black representation in film is further explored when Grace becomes despairing of the white overseer and his family. She

controversially forces them to wear blackface and serve food to the slave community. The scene is challenging and epitomises Von Trier's inclination to shock his audience. Furthermore, in a film concerned with the stereotyping of racial otherness, this scene has to be recognised as an allusion to the offensive black and white minstrel shows popularised in the vaudeville shows of the nineteenth century. Historically blacks were not deemed intelligent enough to perform in theatres or for the camera, so instead white actors would adorn themselves with black greasepaint and exaggerate black vernacular patterns and bodily movements. In humiliating the white characters by making them don burnt cork as a form of punishment and humiliation, Von Trier is ironically repositioning the former hierarchical practice of blackface.

- 3 In 2002, the actor and Civil Rights activist Harry Belafonte insinuated that Colin Powell was a 'house-slave' on national radio (Maxwell, 2002).

Change the joke and slip the yoke

It is the hierarchy of identity politics that the slaves are both reacting against and playing with on the *Manderlay* plantation. All the slaves are attempting to 'pass' in some form or another, and therefore they can all be seen as directly drawing on the African trickster heritage with varying degrees of success. They are all performing an identity in an attempt to survive in a racist society. In this respect the film provides an interesting critique of how black Americans have internalised derogatory caricatures in order to gain access and recognition within the film industry whilst also attempting to earn a living. Black society can be very quick to point an accusatory finger at celebrities whom it feels are selling out; these stars are often labelled as Uncle Toms as they are deemed willing to please the metaphorical white master at the expense of degrading their own race.³ However at the climax of the film it is discovered that these divisive categories that dictate the hierarchical pecking order in Mam's Law, were in fact written by the old slave Wilhelm, not the late white matriarch as previously thought.

This ironic twist can be read as both an empowering and damning reflection on black society. First, Von Trier could be seen to be demonstrating how African Americans become empowered through their ability to manipulate white society by toying with their expectations and preconceived ideas of black character traits. In buying into the propagated archetypes of the lazy, the sexually driven or the eager to please, which have been prolifically endorsed by the film industry both in the past and today, Grace is easily deceived. Yet on the other hand, Von Trier is more problematically suggesting that the African Americans are responsible for oppressing themselves. Wilhelm is knowingly accountable for creating the psychological categories which act to contain and restrict individuality, and consequently lead to subjugation. Rather than wholeheartedly seizing their new-found freedom, the slaves on the plantation re-enact the derogatory caricatures made dominant by white society. In consciously performing the archetypal caricatures of the past, the slaves on the Manderlay plantation avoid the challenges that liberation has to offer, choosing instead to retain their submissive status. Von Trier goes as far as to suggest that donning the stereotypical mask leads to a life free from responsibility and free from blame.

4 On the 30 September 2005, the *Jyllands-Posten* national Danish newspaper published a series of cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The cartoons were regarded as blasphemous by Muslim communities all over the world and a number of riots broke out.

Manderlay provides a fascinating study of the dehumanising effects of racial essentialism. The film can clearly be read as an attack on white liberalism and more specifically the Bush administration's involvement in the war in Iraq. However, the implication that racial inequality is fuelled by the inability of African Americans to rise above stereotyping is an accusation that will not make Von Trier popular, yet I doubt he will be losing any sleep over this. The Danish director is looking to antagonise by placing blame in both camps. Like the Danish cartoonist's satirical renditions of the iconic Muslim figure Mohammed, Von Trier could be accused of inappropriate appropriation.⁴ Yet, in turning the tables in the final act by revealing the real author of Mam's Law, Von Trier is, to quote the African American novelist Ralph Ellison, 'changing the joke and slipping the yoke' (1995: 45). He is laughing whilst pulling the rug from beneath both white and black American feet.

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