Bellamy, Jason Bamboozled; February 25, 2012

Ed Howard: Towards the end of Spike Lee's viciously funny media parody Bamboozled, there's a shootout between the police and a militant rap group in which all the black members of the group are quickly killed, leaving behind the one white guy (played by MC Serch of real-life hip-hop fame). As the cops put him in cuffs, this one survivor repeatedly cries out to them, "Why didn't you shoot me?" It's such a poignant moment because he seems to be pleading with them, begging them to treat him the way they'd treated the black members of the group, demanding that he not be spared because of the color of his skin. He's so upset, not only because his friends are all dead, but because he's realized an essential truth that Lee is getting at in this movie: no matter how well he'd fit in with his black peers, no matter how fully he'd been accepted by them and participated in their work, he was still separated from them, cut off from their experience of the world at a very basic level over which he could have no control.

Throughout the film, Lee has multiple characters try to take on the attributes of a race other than the one indicated by the color of their skin: black people trying to sound white, white people trying to sound black, and of course many people of various races donning blackface as a TV-inspired fad. For the most part, Lee has nothing but contempt for these characters; MC Serch's character is the one arguable exception, and in the end he can no more escape the color of his skin and what it means than anyone else in the film; this sequence is so suggestive of the film's themes, and also because we should probably admit up front that we're two white guys about to discuss a film that has a very provocative and challenging view of race and racism. It's a film that's at least in part about how it's all but impossible for one race to understand the experience of another—especially whites thinking they understand what it means to be black.

Bamboozled follows the black TV executive Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) as he develops a blackface minstrel show that he thinks will expose the racist attitudes of the media but only winds up feeding into and inflaming that racism. I didn't entirely know what to make of this movie when it came out in 2000, but I've come to believe that it's one of Lee's best, right up there with Do the Right Thing. A bold satire that doesn't pull any punches, Bamboozled is a deeply discomfiting film that's purposefully exaggerated and outlandish and yet is packed with real-world references that ground its satire—even that shootout with the white survivor is based on real events. Lee is exploring the history of racist entertainment in the US, and as the closing montage makes clear, he's suggesting that the same forces that made the vaudeville caricatures of comics like Mantan Moreland so popular are still very much present, in a more covert way, in the modern American entertainment industry. As a result, Bamboozled does what great satire always does: it takes a scenario that should seem ridiculous—it's hard to imagine an actual blackface variety show being aired on American TV today—and uses it to explore the submerged but very real racial attitudes that underpin all sorts of entertainment that only seems less racist than Delacroix's Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show.

If Bamboozled does pull any punches, it's due to the blatancy of its hypothetical design. It's a challenging film, sure, and it never implies that there are easy answers, but because the film is literally announced as a satire in its opening seconds, and because the thought of a modern blackface minstrel show is so outlandish, and because the thought of an audience in blackface is even more outlandish than that, it's easier to keep Bamboozled at arm's length, because we instantly recognize it as an intentionally exaggerated editorial cartoon. Compare that to Do the Right Thing, which despite its own flourishes of caricature was packed with enough realism that some critics feared it wasn't just an accurate depiction of real-world racial tension but a fuse for it, too.

Lee might have less contempt for MC Serch's character than others, because one of the things that I most admire about Bamboozled is the way it makes almost every character a clown, a culprit and a victim all at once. Lee's contempt, in my opinion, isn't for the characters. It's for the whole fucking system, by which I mean not just the entertainment industry but the societal structure, too, which of course is borne of America's shameful past. Lee seems to recognize that some of the things people do in an attempt to correct the record only end up creating new problems. A great example would be the character played by Mos Def, who insists that even his sister, Jada Pinkett Smith's Sloan, calls him by his chosen name, Big Blak Afrika, and not by his "slave name" of Julius (given to him by his parents). In his attempt to reject the expectations and/or demands of a mostly white society, Big Blak Afrika manages to reject his parents, without even fully realizing it, and then he rejects his sister, inadvertently calling her a "house nigger" because she has aspirations within that mostly white world. From Big Blak Afrika's perspective, he's keeping it real. From his sister's perspective, he's clowning (she calls him "ignorant," "retarded" and "embarrassing"). Lee never suggests that only one of them is right, because the point he's trying to make is about perception, and what's clear is that one black person's black pride is another's pathetic acceptance of buffoonery.

That ambiguity is one of the most interesting things about the film, and it's especially apparent in any of the scenes involving Big Blak Afrika's rap group, the Mau Maus. It's hard to know what Lee thinks about them, which is curious because they're the characters who come closest to articulating Lee's own ideas, the ideas of the film. They're all about black pride and black consciousness, about making art that deals with serious issues and confronts prejudice rather than trying to fit into a racist system. To some degree, they're contrasted against Delacroix, who's increasingly absorbed by the white system, and Manray/Mantan (Savion Glover), who shrugs off whatever compunctions he might have for the chance to make some money. It's obvious that Lee sympathizes with Big Blak Afrika when he complains about a famous rapper, saying, "That motherfucker's a millionaire, grunting on record." He's lamenting the fact that black entertainment that enforces negative stereotypes—"bling" and gangstas—is so successful while more politically, racially and socially conscious art is, in Sloan's word, just thought of as "embarrassing." And yet Lee often seems to be mocking the Mau Maus as well, for having a political consciousness and then being unable to articulate their ideas except with empty posturing and, ultimately, useless violence.

In one key scene, Delacroix and Sloan are auditioning various black performers for the Mantan show. They see a parade of comics, singers and performers, mostly validating Big Blak Afrika's complaint, since Delacroix is delighted by anything crude and abrasive, while looking on with bafflement at the musician who plays the didgeridoo, because his beautiful, melancholy music doesn't fit at all with the image of blackness that Delacroix is envisioning here—anything that displays black people as capable of grace and beauty is out. And then the Mau Maus themselves come out, rapping and shouting, delivering their in-your-face aggressive style of performance, and Delacroix seems physically disgusted. Because of the rest of the sequence, one might think that Lee is once again showing Delacroix missing the point, but it's hard to tell, mainly because after all the rhetoric delivered by the Mau Maus throughout the film, their actual performance is incoherent and empty, their presumably political lyrics entirely indecipherable amidst all the shouting.

This impression is confirmed by the finale, in which the Mau Maus simply wind up conforming to—and broadcasting through the media—the black stereotype of the violent gangster that they'd claimed to oppose. Ultimately, these activists have nothing to offer but guns and senseless death. How Lee feels about them, in the end, is suggested by the scene where they're killed by the cops. They're celebrating their murder of Mantan by drinking big bottles of Da Bomb, the malt liquor that Lee had earlier lampooned in a sequence parodying advertising targeted at black people. This film, for all its humor and outrageousness, is ultimately extremely bleak, because this ending suggests just how difficult it is to escape the expectations and stereotypes of a predominantly white society. Society expects black people, and especially black men, to be either buffoons or killers, and almost everyone in this film is all too eager to feed into that system.

Blackness is often closely associated with violence and thuggishness (be it substantive or merely stylistic), which creates that "house nigger/field nigger" division exemplified by the relationship of Sloan and Big Blak Afrika, in which a black person who takes a white-collar job and speaks in grammatically correct sentences is regarded as somehow faux black while a black person who embraces baggy jeans and rap is regarded as accepting, and furthermore perpetuating, the larger society's lowered expectations. Exactly what Lee thinks about the Mau Maus is unclear: are they genuinely violent thugs all along, or does the system force them to fulfill the stereotype? What is clear is that the Mau Maus' determination to exhibit their blackness renders any deeper intentions moot, at least to the white-dominated entertainment industry, exemplified by Delacroix, who recoils in horror at their audition and then says, "It's frightening; I don't want anything to do with anything black for at least a week."

Wayans' portrayal of Delacroix is dominated by a pinched, nasally voice, a rigid stick-up-the-ass posture and frequent hand gestures. It's a performance that suggests the absurdity of white people "acting black," and beyond that the extremeness of it implies that there's a lot of room between succeeding in a predominantly white man's world (in the United States, I mean) and actually trying to become white. Wayans' Delacroix is pure caricature, a cartoon like oreo.

In a piece for his Black History Mumf at Big Media Vandalism, Odie Henderson points out that Delacroix's motivations often turn on a dime. "First, Delacroix wants to do the show to get fired, then he wants to do it to prove a point, then he's happy about the show despite several scenes of him being upset by what his White writers are putting into the mouths of his characters. Then we see him laughing at some of the Mantan show. When he wins awards, he dances around like the coons on his show. Why?" Delacroix creates his minstrel show as an attempt to be the tail that wags the dog, but somewhere along the way, and without him entirely noticing it, the system reasserts its dominance. Maybe it's fame that corrupts. Maybe fortune. It doesn't really matter.

Delacroix's motivations are constantly changing because the character isn't quite sure what he wants, which makes him an easy target for assimilation by a system that can absorb and appropriate pretty much anything to its own purposes. Bamboozled shows a process that's been going on in the entertainment industry at least since the industry figured out that they could even market punk rock, a music ostensibly defined by rebellion, political engagement and non-commercialism. Delacroix's initial subversive agenda, like the Mau Maus', is very poorly defined—because the character is confused, I think, not because of a failure of the script—and Delacroix, who should understand all too well how the media works, is kidding himself that he can get any of his ideas across in his show.

Not that Delacroix has many well-defined ideas, really. Lee mocks almost everyone in this film to some extent, but he's most unsparing of Delacroix and his boss, the white Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport). That's because they're the characters who are most strenuously trying to deny their respective races and act like something they're not. That seems to be the biggest crime for Lee. Delacroix's exaggeratedly nasal elocution is the kind of voice that Lee has always used to signal a character, generally a villain, who's trying to pretend that he's white—in that respect, Wayans' Delacroix is a descendant of Giancarlo Esposito's Julian in Lee's sophomore film School Daze, though Wayans' performance is far better. Delacroix is also the counterpart to Dunwitty, a white Irish guy who speaks with what he imagines to be a black dialect, and who thinks he has the right to say "nigger" because he has a black wife and "biracial kids."

At the root of Dunwitty's attitude about race is a confidence in the progress that has been made in civil rights in the United States. As Honeycutt (Thomas Jefferson Byrd) says on the Mantan show, dressed up as a blackface Abraham Lincoln, "Four score and seven years ago, they was kicking our ass. … But this is the new millennium!" The agenda that this minstrel show eventually ends up pushing is based on the idea that racism exists only in the past, a relic of a previous era with no relation to the post-racial present. By broadcasting a minstrel show full of outdated racist imagery, they're suggesting that the only form of racism is this kind of super-obvious stereotyping, which is so blatant that it's easy to think that racism no longer exists, that there's no relation between blackface and the much more insidious and undercover racism that keeps black entertainers like Delacroix, his father and Manray ghettoized and marginalized, or the kind of racism that leads to situations like having a roomful of white writers writing for a supposedly black show and providing readymade excuses for the lack of black writers, including a dearth of qualified black people being available.

Perhaps even more significantly, Bamboozled via Mantan explores the ramifications of asserting one's strength through an attempt to reclaim and redefine words and stereotypes that were designed to be pejorative. In the early days of the Mantan show, the actors wear blackface with a certain amount of excitement. It's their show. It's their path to stardom. Thus, their adoption of blackface feels like a symbol of their independence and control—they take ownership of the blackface/minstrel identity so that the identity doesn't own them. It all makes sense on paper, but in reality it proves problematic. The second time we see Womack (Tommy Davidson), aka Sleep'n Eat, applying the mixture of burned cork to his face, he does so angrily, and Manray looks at himself in the mirror with an expression of disillusionment. The implication of this shift is that blackface is inherently and inescapably vile and demeaning: Manray and Womack can wear blackface without malice and maybe even without insensitivity, but they can never truly wear it with pride, because the negative history of blackface is too powerful to be fully neutralized.

One of the most disturbing moments in Bamboozled is the one just after we've watched Manray and Womack don blackface for the second time. As they stare into their makeup mirrors backstage, we can hear the sounds of Honeycutt exciting the studio audience, inciting them into a spirited, anticipatory chant of "Niggers! Niggers!" As with their blackface attire, the audience means no harm with their chant. In fact, much like Tarantino, they're trying to express their fondness. But the combination of that chant with those images of two men in blackface is particularly revolting, and it sets us up for what I think is the most important moment in the film, the one much later when Manray appears on stage in street clothes and stuns a raucous, standing crowd into silence. This is the moment when Manray delivers his speech, but his words are irrelevant. His statement is made simply through his refusal to perpetuate the Mantan show's myth, thereby breaking the spell of mutual and willful blindness and holding the audience accountable for their behavior. Meanwhile, Lee's statement is made through shots of the crowd's stunned yet immediately understanding reaction, which implies that underneath all the external insensitivity and self-delusion, the audience knew that a minstrel show was revolting and shameful all along.

Lee provides this reminder himself, throughout the film, by cutting in excerpts from various pieces of entertainment: Birth of a Nation, racial caricatures in cartoons, The Jeffersons and Good Times, and the old Hollywood blackface comedians who provided the principal impetus for this film, those guys like Mantan Moreland and Bert Williams who did their pop-eyed, subservient, buffoonish schtick while playing sidekicks, chauffeurs and servants for white stars. There's also plenty of iconography from the history of blackface, which Delacroix begins accumulating after receiving the rather sarcastic gift of a "jolly nigger bank" from Sloan, who seems to be giving it to him as a not-too-subtle way of calling him a sellout. Soon enough, whenever Lee shows Delacroix's office, he's surrounded with more and more blackface memorabilia, presumably displayed in a spirit of reclaiming the imagery, but again, he can't escape its negative connotations, and the more blackface junk he piles on the shelves of his office, the more all those big lips and wide eyes seem to be mocking him. It's obviously important for Lee that this film be seen in its context, as a critique of a long history of racism and marginalization of black performers in American cultural history, a critique that includes the more subtle ways in which that history extends into the present day.

Bamboozled ends with a montage retrospective of film/TV history that's quite similar to the one at the end of Martin Scorsese's 2011 Hugo, except of course in tone and intent. Whereas Scorsese's film pays nostalgic tribute to cinema history (and in particular the works of Georges Méliès), Lee's montage is mournful, featuring clips of white actors in blackface, black actors in caricature roles and cartoon characters drawn according to degrading stereotypes. The Bamboozled montage is set to a musical arrangement by Terence Blanchard that's so mellow and inviting that it could have just as easily scored the uplifting Hugo sequence, except that when paired with these shameful images it takes on a funereal tone. Lee's montage isn't angry, it's worth underlining. In fact, while it's confrontational, Bamboozled isn't a particularly angry film as a whole. Instead, the mood is melancholy, full of sadness for this country's troubled past and for the way those sins of yesterday still affect us today.

Bamboozled's climactic montage (actually the first of two montages, because the closing credits scroll over images of those antique blackface toys) concludes with clips of black actors in relatively straightforward "Yes, sir" and "Yes, ma'am" portrayals of plantation-era servants in which offensiveness isn't found in the dramatic performances themselves so much as the historic bases for those performances. In other words, those servant performances have less in common with Manray-as-Mantan's minstrel antics than with, say, Viola Davis' performance in The Help, the 2011 movie that enraged some critics and audiences by rewriting history at least as often as it reflects it. In a recent interview with Davis and her costar Octavia Spencer, PBS talk show host Tavis Smiley noted that while he was hopeful that both actresses would win Oscars for their performances he was "ambivalent" about what they would be winning for, expressing frustration that more than seven decades after Hattie McDaniel won an Academy Award for playing a servant, Davis and Spencer might be reduced to the same.

On the other hand, Lee is also critical of the kinds of Cosby-like, whitewashed shows that Delacroix was making for his network before Mantan, which in their eagerness to present very positive images of blackness also don't really say much about the black experience or the real lives of black people. In some ways, this double-barreled criticism is a little self-serving—what's the right kind of black movie? The kind Spike Lee makes, of course—but it also suggests the legitimate problems of black entertainment, which for much of American history has been saddled with stereotypes and limiting roles. I don't think Lee's suggesting that every black movie has to be Bamboozled as a result, but he is advocating for an awareness of this history, a refusal to act in ways that simply feed into the opposing stereotypes of the violent gangster and the subservient "house nigger." That's why so much of the mockery in Bamboozled isn't simply directed at the characters within the film but resonates outwards to real incidents, like Delacroix's faux-humble award acceptance speeches, which parody real speeches by Cuba Gooding Jr. made at the Oscars that Lee had criticized for buffoonery and a "yes, massa" tone towards the white-run entertainment industry.

Lee’s hypothesis suggests that the system is the primary influencer and that the other dominos fall from there: Delacroix in his apartment, kneading his bald head in confusion after the pilot taping of Mantan turns out to be a rousing success. Sitting in the dark, Delacroix stares into his computer screen at a cross-section diagram of a slave ship, which serves as Lee's blatant acknowledgement that Delacroix is ever aware that his minstrel show is institutionalizing racism. Equally telling is the experience of Sloan, who is called a "house nigger" by her own brother, then is dismissed as "the help" by Delacroix and then is paradoxically called Delacroix's puppet and manipulator by Manray after he learns that Sloan had slept with Delacroix prior to their relationship, which Manray assumes was a calculated business tactic.

Naturally, Sloan is offended. "It's funny how a man always has to perceive an attractive young lady as having to fuck or suck somebody in order to get to the top," she says in her own defense. "It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that I'm intelligent maybe? Or have anything to do with the fact that I have drive?" The underlying message of that scene, when coupled with her earlier argument with her brother, is that whether a black person is perceived as an upstanding "house nigger" or a scheming "field nigger" doesn't matter. A "nigger" is a "nigger"—and not Tarantino's super-cool kind—and all the negative stereotypes attached to that identity can create prejudice between blacks and other blacks as easily as between whites and blacks.

The scene with Sloan certainly shows that Lee understands just how tricky and contradictory the situation can be, creating a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't dilemma for black entertainers and professionals, where even when they succeed, when they beat the odds and make it to the top in a game rigged in favor of white people, they're not given credit for their successes. It's worse for women like Sloan, who also have to deal with sexism and accusations of sexual manipulation, but even when that's not a consideration, there will inevitably be accusations of tokenism, a suggestion that any successful black person only got to where they are through the help of affirmative action. That implication is certainly there when Delacroix's all-white writing staff scrambles to justify the lack of any black writers in the room, suggesting that there were no qualified black people available, that the only way they could have hired someone black was by lowering their standards.

At the same time Lee is equally interested in the way that the system makes black people act towards each other. In that respect, the Lee film that Bamboozled most resembles is School Daze, which also deals with conflicting, opposing images of blackness: a black fraternity at an all-black college representing the buffoons and those who are trying to fit in and assimilate with whites, as opposed to a group of radical, politicized students who extol racial consciousness and awareness of African identity. That film is very awkward in typical Lee fashion, but it's definitely a forerunner to the ideas he's exploring in Bamboozled. Notably, School Daze opens with a montage of photographs from black American history (including the same slave ship cross-section that Delacroix looks at) and closes with a literal call to "wake up" that seems to be targeted specifically at black audiences, with Laurence Fishburne's Dap turning to the camera and demanding that the audience think about the questions of black roles and stereotypes raised by the film.

Similarly, Bamboozled is a wake-up call. There might be some hypocrisy in Lee's approach when he seems to be setting down his own rules for what it means to "keep it real," but mostly the film isn't advocating for any particular model of black behavior so much as it's asking people to simply think about these issues, to be aware of the lessons of the past. Bamboozled is designed to spark re=evaluation, and to do that it needs to shock us from complacency. It does that.

The movie may be hypocritical in spots, but that's okay because it's genuine where it counts. Unlike Clint Eastwood's Gran Torino, for example, Lee never makes the mistake of thinking he can condemn these hateful stereotypes and revel in them at the same time. Blackface should make us uncomfortable, and so Lee keeps upping the ante to make sure we never accept it. First there's the shock value of seeing Manray and Womack in the minstrel show; then there's the shock value of the Halloween costumes and a packed studio audience in blackface; then there's Dunwitty attending a Mantan taping in blackface; then there's the montage of all those blackface movie moments, including a scene from Holiday Inn with Bing Crosby; and then there's the montage of all those despicable antique toys. "Always keep 'em laughing" is Delacroix's mission statement, imparted by his father, but while Bamboozled is an often funny film, each and every laugh is chased with bile—the flavor of knowing that just beyond the joke is a bitter, ugly truth.