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The effects of censorship and criticism on the film adaptations of Richard Wright's "Native Son"

Burks, Ruth Elizabeth, Ph.D.

University of California, Los Angeles, 1993

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Effects of Censorship and Criticism on the Film Adaptations of Richard Wright's Native Son

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Ruth Elizabeth Burks

1993

The dissertation of Ruth Elizabeth Burks is approved.

Teshome Gabriel

Valerie Smith

Richard Yarborough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

1993

For Gyasi

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VITA

1971	B.A., Creative Writing Department of English University of California, Berkeley
1971	Honors Program Completed in the Major University of California, Berkeley
1971	The Eisner Award for Creative Achievement of the Highest Order in English (Fiction) University of California, Berkeley
1971	First Prize in the Institute of Race and Community Relations Essay Contest University of California, Berkeley
1971-1977	Teaching Assistant Departments of Black Studies and English University of California, Berkeley
1972	Phi Beta Kappa University of California, Berkeley
1974	M.A., English University of California, Berkeley
1975	The Eisner Award for Creative Achievement of the Highest Order in English (Fiction) University of California, Berkeley
1976-1977	Contributing Editor San Francisco Review of Books San Francisco, California
1976-1977	Assistant Editor Y'Bird Magazine Berkeley, California
1977-1978	Screenwriting Fellow American Film Institute Beverly Hills, California
1981-1983	Assistant Editor Center for Afro-American Studies University of California, Los Angeles

1982-1983	Symposium Coordinator Center for Afro-American Studies University of California, Los Angeles
1983-1990	Research Associate Department of English University of California, Los Angeles
1984-1991	Teaching Fellow and Associate Department of English University of California, Los Angeles
1988	Candidate in Philosophy Department of English University of California, Los Angeles
1988-1989	Predoctoral Fellowship Center for Afro-American Studies Institute of American Cultures University of California, Los Angeles
1988-1989	Visiting Research Scholar Centre d'Etudes Afro-americaines et des nouvelles litteratures en anglais University of Paris III Paris, France
1989-1990	Dissertation Fellowship Ford Foundation Washington D.C.
1989-1990	Dissertation Fellowship Graduate Affirmative Affairs University of California, Los Angeles
1989-1990	Graduate Woman of the Year Association of Academic Women University of California, Los Angeles
1991-1992	Lecturer Writing Programs University of California, Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Effects of Censorship and Criticism
on the Film Adaptations of
Richard Wright's Native Son

by

Ruth Elizabeth Burks
Doctor of Philosophy in English
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Professor Richard Yarborough, Chair

Richard Wright's Native Son was made into a feature film twice, so it is an excellent text with which to work to answer questions regarding Hollywood's depiction of African Americans. Additional aspects of Native Son make it uniquely suitable for an investigation of the problems filmmakers confront when it comes to the portrayal of blacks on the silver screen: Native Son was an immediate bestseller; both film versions were adapted by black writers, and Native Son was almost written for the screen, for Wright conceived of his novel in cinematic terms. It would appear that a film adaptation of Native Son could not

fail, yet both attempts were critical and box office disasters. Through an analysis of three key scenes missing from the two cinematic translations, this work explores the censorial and discursive practices that proved two different sets of filmmakers--who each believed that such a widely acclaimed literary classic as Native Son would produce an equally applauded film--wrong. Using a methodological approach informed by such multiple theoretical perspectives as Marxism, poststructuralism, and tropological revision, I survey film's ability both to create and to reflect reality in relation to past and present African American representation, examine how Hollywood's desire for financial profit led to a censorial apparatus that had deleterious effects on both films adaptations of Native Son, analyze the immediate critical response to Wright's novel to illustrate how criticism was used to circumvent its unprecedented threat to white America, present some of the obstacles that Wright encountered in attempting to bring an unexpurgated film version of his novel to the public, explicate the reasons for the significant absences in both cinematic translations of Native Son, and conclude that when it comes to the representation of African Americans in commercial Hollywood films, ideological considerations take precedence over economic concerns.

PREFACE

This project began as an analysis of Richard Wright's novel Native Son and its film adaptations. My intention was to examine the adaptations' deviations from the original text with the express purpose of determining whether the crucial absences in both screen versions were necessitated by cinematic or extra-cinematic constraints. In short, I wanted to unravel the codes that seemed to delimit a multifarious representation of African Americans in Hollywood cinema. My study quickly evolved into a broader examination of the critical and censorial practices used by dominant white society to defuse the revolutionary power of Wright's vision in the films as well as the novel.

More than fifty years after Wright first published Native Son, the Library of America reissued the novel in an unexpurgated edition and included those scenes that the Book-of-the-Month Club required Wright to delete for Native Son to become one of their alternate selections. Most of those changes involved attenuating Bigger's sexual response to Mary Dalton--a response which would also account for many of the two film adaptations' deviations from the novel. In describing some of the considerations that went into the decision to reissue the texts the way that Wright had wished them to be appear--before the manuscripts had

been mutilated by the original publishers--Arnold Rampersad, the editor of the Library of America's two-volume collection of Wright's prose, notes:

> Most of the major areas of textual controversy in Wright's work can be traced to the inevitable conflict that pitted an extraordinarily forceful and brilliant black writer, one who was bent on speaking the unspeakable, against white agents, editors and publishers, who, often with what they construed to be Wright's best interests in mind, had very determining ideas of what whites were willing to accept from such a source. (3)

As my study attempts to illustrate, Rampersad's observations are equally applicable to the whites who had final control over the two film adaptations of Wright's Native Son.

Chapter 1 explores the paradoxical nature of commercial Hollywood cinema--its ability both to create and to reflect reality--in relation to past and present African American representation. Chapter 2 examines how the film industry's desire for financial profit led to censorial practices that ultimately had deleterious effects on both film adaptations of Native Son. Chapter 3 analyzes the critical response to Wright's novel, Native Son, to illustrate how criticism was used to circumvent its

unprecedented threat to white America. Chapter 4 presents some of the obstacles that Wright encountered in attempting to bring an honest screen version of his novel to the public--difficulties that were augmented by the existing censorial and critical apparatus; in this final chapter, I also explicate the reasons for the significant gaps in both film adaptations of Native Son and conclude that when it comes to the representation of African Americans in commercial Hollywood films, ideological considerations take precedence over financial concerns.

For the purpose of this study, I am borrowing the following working definition of African American film from James P. Murray's introduction to To Find an Image: Black Films From Uncle Tom to Superfly:

> Any cinema in which blacks exert significant influence, either by direct input (such as writing the screenplay, starring in, producing, or directing the film) or by indirect participation (such as accepting roles in which no creative involvement is permitted, but in which a black theme has a decided effect). (xiv)

Under the first category, I would include John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood (1991) and Spike Lee's School Daze (1988) and Do the Right Thing (1989); under the second, I would include Edward Zwick's Glory (1989) and Steven Spielberg's

The Color Purple (1985). I am excluding from the boundaries of African American cinema films such as Bruce Beresford's Driving Miss Daisy (1989) or Richard Donner's Lethal Weapon II (1989), for even though black actors are featured in prominent roles and the narratives skirt issues that have a decided effect on the black population as a whole, the focus of films such as Driving Miss Daisy and Lethal Weapon II is, ultimately, on non-black characters and non-black themes.

I am also excluding from the scope of this study those films created, marketed, and distributed by black independent filmmakers whose works are not bound by the commercial constraints that Hollywood imposes. Even though black independent filmmaking can and does serve as a corrective to commercial Hollywood film, by presenting other ways of seeing, other images of blacks, its impact is too often muted by low budgets and the absence of readily available distribution outlets. As a result, black independent cinema rarely reaches a large audience and, subsequently, exerts little influence on those who write, direct, and produce the African American for the mainstream moviegoing American public.

This project reaffirmed my belief that by unraveling the codes that continue to proscribe black representation in commercial Hollywood cinema, we, as African Americans,

can exert more control over the depiction of our lives. I also discovered that criticism, which is neither innocent nor unbiased, can be just as effective a device as censorship.

INTRODUCTION

Criticism, even the type of criticism informed by Saussure's theory of modern linguistics, is less a science than a discipline within which designated scholars as well as certain privileged others sanctioned by the current hegemony are given final say over what is said by whom. As critic-historian-philosopher Michel Foucault remarks in "The Discourse on Language" in his appendix to The Archaeology of Knowledge, "not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything" (216). Furthermore, as Marxist critic Terry Eagleton notes in Literary Theory, "literary theorists, critics and teachers [are] not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of discourse" (201). That is, rather than serving as objective judges of a text's aesthetic worth--an impossible feat given the premise that no criticism is neutral or unbiased--literary critics "preserve discourse, extend and elaborate it as necessary, defend it from other forms of discourse, initiate newcomers into it and determine whether or not they have successfully mastered it" (Eagleton 201). In other words, critics function as the dominant society's cultural police force.

Equally importantly, critical discourse operates on a number of levels:

> It is the power of `policing' language--of determining that certain statements must be excluded because they do not conform to what is acceptably sayable. It is the power of policing writing itself, classifying it into the `literary' and `non-literary', the enduringly great and the ephemerally popular. It is the power of authority vis a vis others--the power-relations between those who define and preserve the discourse, and those who are selectively admitted to it. It is the power of certificating or non-certificating those who have been judged to speak the discourse better or worse. Finally, it is a question of the power-relations between the literary-academic institution, where all of this occurs, and the ruling power-interests of society at large, whose ideological needs will be served and whose personnel will be reproduced by the preservation and controlled extension of the discourse in question. (Eagleton 203)

In short, critical discourse has the ability to influence, for better or worse, the way in which we live our lives by controlling the dissemination of the information that we, as constituents of a particular society, receive--which accords critical discourse a tremendous amount of power.

Critical discourse, however, is not omnipotent; its sphere of influence is limited by its elitism in primarily confining itself to the academic. Since institutions of higher learning pretend that "if [discourse] should happen to have a certain power, then it is we, and we alone, who give it that power" (Foucault 216), non-scholarly discursive texts can circulate much more freely among the public at large--under the pretext that they have no power. Film, however, represents a form of discourse whose power is not contingent on the approval or sanction of designated theorists or scholars. That film is discourse is a point that Christian Metz in Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier makes apparent:

> I'm at the cinema. The images of a Hollywood film unfold in front of me. It doesn't even have to be Hollywood: the images of any film based on narration and representation--of any `film', in fact, in the sense in which the word is most often used today--the kind of film which it is the film industry's business to produce. . . . [T]hey presuppose, that the audience will come and buy their tickets and therefore that they will want to do so. The institution of cinema reaches far beyond the sector (or the aspect)

> which is usually thought of as directly commercial.
>
> Is it, then, a question of `ideology'? . . . Of course. But it is also a question of desire, and hence of symbolic positioning. In Emile Beneviste's terms, the traditional film is presented as story, and not as discourse. And yet it is discourse, if we refer it back to the filmmaker's intentions, the influence he wields over the general public, etc.; but the basic characteristic of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as discourse, is precisely that it obliterates all traces of enunciation, and masquerades as story. (91)

In the above quotation, Metz touches on a number of elements that distinguish film from more traditional literary discourse as he emphasizes film's obliquely discursive nature. Interestingly enough, Metz and other film scholars, who obviously recognize the cinema's power to impart ideological messages, nevertheless, tend to focus on theoretical aspects of film criticism rather than on practical explications of particular texts themselves--a response engendered perhaps by the singular nature of cinematic art.

As the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin notes in a

seminal article called "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," no other art form can quite duplicate the unique relationship between audience and critic that the film medium creates:

> Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film. The moment these responses become manifest they

control each other. (688)

In other words, Benjamin is saying that the primacy of the filmgoer's experience, brought about by the technological innovations used to create films and by the fact that films are actually produced for the masses--rather than for a select few--allows each filmgoer to become a self-proclaimed connoisseur, an expert who is not dependent on an outside authority to affirm or approve her or his critical reaction.

Indeed, it seems to me that an important factor distinguishing film from other types of representational discourse is its commercial aspect. I use the word "commercial" as Christian Metz does to mean that the film industry, particularly the Hollywood film industry, operates as a big business in which individual films "represent the millions that have to be invested, made to show a profit, recovered along with the profit, and then reinvested" (91). I also use the word "commercial" to signify the infinitely mechanically reproducible nature of film, a unique aspect of the cinema that reverses traditional notions that works of art must be original, self-referential, and aesthetically independent of economic, social and political considerations.

Previously, "the uniqueness of a work of art [was] inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of

tradition" (Benjamin, 680), a tradition historically based upon or associated with religious or secular ritual. However, the advent of the mechanical reproduction of art brought with it a concomitant change in the relationship between art and tradition. As Benjamin notes:

> The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. (678-9)

The fact that film meets the observer on her or his own ground effectively usurps the critic's usual function of

policing cultural discourse for the dominant society. Moreover, as Benjamin makes perfectly clear, once critical discourse loses its power to exercise control over the dissemination of discursive texts that conflict with the ideological position of the existing hegemony, revolution is imminent--unless, of course, the dominant society has another way to preserve its privileged status.

That other way is censorship, a nefarious practice dating back to the ancient Roman Empire from whence it derives its name, which has always shown itself to be an effective, even if unpalatable, means of prohibiting undesirable discourse. The imposition of censorship by the existing hegemony to retain control of the masses is not unique to film; nevertheless, the unique nature of film, which disrupts the normal relationship between criticism and art, and, by extension, the critic's power to maintain authority over ideologically unacceptable discourse, renders censorship expedient--particularly when the dominant society's position of power is threatened by someone like Richard Wright who explodes the cultural myths upon which that power rests. Moreover, even if it is only evoked when more acceptable means of manipulating the populace cannot be found, the power of censorship is tremendous, as its application to the film adaptations of Native Son demonstrates.

Native Son made its first public appearance as a work of literature, so the radical impulse behind the novel--the idea that whites would suffer as a direct consequence of their relentless oppression of blacks--could easily be diminished by subjecting it to critical practices previously established by whites to circumvent the revolutionary potential of the occasional rogue text. In fact, historically, when the earliest critics included African American works in their analyses, they did so for two primary purposes. The first was to answer the most basic question regarding the African and her or his ancestors throughout the Diaspora: Are blacks the missing link between mankind and the orang-outang, or are blacks equal to Europeans on the Great Chain of Being? The second major inducement for a later Eurocentric critic to include black art within the parameters of Western philosophical discourse was simply because he or she was unable to preclude African American discourse and still retain the cloak of objectivity.

Critics of the first ilk--those who wished to judge the humanity of the black race on individual members' ability to write history, or philosophy, or poetry--were quick to use African American letters to prove their argument that people of African ancestry were inferior to those of European descent or, conversely, that blacks were

equal to whites. Needless to say, the supporters of either position were not ideologically innocent, particularly given the fact that both diametrically opposed sides used the same examples to sustain their economically and politically motivated stances.

For instance, when antislavery crusaders used Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. Wheatley of Boston to validate their contention that the African was the mental equal of the European, Thomas Jefferson, who opposed that belief, countered with the following statement:

> Never yet could I find a Black that had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. . . Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whately [sic] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (Figures in Black 5-6)

Jefferson's refusal to dignify Wheatley's verse by offering specific critical commentary stemmed from his belief that people of African descent were not by nature equal to Caucasians. Perhaps Jefferson's own words best summarize his opinion of his darker brothers: "The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their

mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life" (Figures in Black 6). In addition to documenting the inferiority he perceived in the African, could Jefferson be suggesting, in the above quotation, that the coerced miscegenation between white masters and their slave concubines was of more benefit to the black race than it was to the white male? As a slave owner and a founding father of a newly independent nation whose battle cry had been "liberty and justice for all," Jefferson must have felt compelled to rationalize to himself, to the country, and, indeed, to the rest of the world why the privileges guaranteed under the Constitution did not apply to non-whites.

Unfortunately, Jefferson's censure of African American literary competency would exert, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes, "a prescriptive influence over the criticism of the writing of blacks for the next 150 years"(Figures in Black 5). His stature as a man of letters and literary critic--enhanced by his achievements as framer of the Declaration of Independence, minister to France, President of the United States, and enlightened and republican humanitarian--carried undue weight and obfuscated Jefferson's Southern aristocratic bias. Not only could such European philosophers as Hegel and Kant use

Jefferson's conjectures to back up their own unsubstantiated hypotheses that blacks were an inferior race, but also Jefferson's opinions helped reinforce the distinctly European notion that the more literate the civilization, the more evolved its citizens from the ape.

Consequently, African American writing was circumscribed in form and content. For only through the questionable art of mimesis, only through the facile imitation of a European literary motif and style, could African Americans writers hope to prove that they were equal to their white counterparts. In effect, even though the antislavery crusaders finally won the war against slavery, they ultimately lost their most important battle: the fight to establish once and for all the innate humanity of the descendants of Africa.

In twentieth-century America, where it is no longer socially acceptable for a critic to express the kind of racially charged remarks that Jefferson did, Eurocentric critics, both the theoreticians and the popular reviewers, generally take the safest avenue: they exclude African American artistic achievements from their purview. The exception, of course, is when an African American cultural text such as Richard Wright's Native Son comes along and announces its presence with such a cry that its screams cannot be stifled--even by those critics who would like to

pretend that the howl one hears is merely the inchoate babbling of an infantile, hostile Other. In that case, when the work demands a critically responsive voice--either because of the money it amasses or because of the number of people it enthralls--the voice accedes, but the critical perspective is usually lost in the contemplation of what is erroneously perceived to constitute the work's most salient feature: its blackness. As Gates in Figures in Black suggests:

> When members of one sort of critical school or another did indeed turn to black literature or culture, often their results were discouraging. As often, explicating the `black difference' led to judgments inconsistent with the principles of the aesthetic system with which each critic was closely identified. (24)

The fact that Eurocentric critics use different criteria to review the African American works that they do consider reinforces the poststructuralist notion that criticism is neither neutral nor unbiased.

The reception accorded Native Son in 1940 was, for the most part, in keeping with conventional critical practice. In fact, the reviewers' first reactions to the novel contributed to its immediate commercial success and its subsequent neglect by American critics and readers for

nearly three decades following its initial publication--a neglect that was both "tragic and pathetic," as African American scholar Charles T. Davis notes in his introduction to Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives:

> Few writers have suffered as much as Wright has from reductive literary criticism. . . . What obsesses most Americans is a pattern of events that is automatically attached to the name of "Wright." It goes something like this. Richard was a sensitive black boy who survived, largely by luck, the dehumanizing oppression of the American South. He experienced a conversion to Communism in Chicago and disaffection with Communism in New York. In any event, a consequence of either or both was a period of expatriation in Paris, during which Wright became a serious writer. . . . The underlying assumption here is that Wright's strength as a writer depended wholly upon the intense nearness of American experience and that the experience of expatriation deprived him, then, of his legitimate materials and signaled his end as an artist. That assumption is wrong, and the tale itself is not an uncommon instance of American provincialism posing as critical truth. (2)

Davis is absolutely right, of course; in fact, one could easily substitute the word "classism," "racism," or "sexism" for his use of the word "provincialism" in the above excerpt to describe how frequently, masquerading as truth, American critical discourse generally succeeds in subverting any literary text that seeks to correct the imbalance of power by proffering a nightmarish vision of the possible consequences for both blacks and whites if a more equitable society is not realized. The important point here, however, is that so much of the original commentary that Native Son received focused on what Wright as a black man living in America had to say about the essence of black life that little notice was taken of Native Son as a literary artifact.

Not all of Native Son's commentators were guilty of such deviations from critical norms. Samuel Sillen, one of Native Son's original reviewers, even compiled more than two hundred clippings of contemporary reviews and identified what he believed to be the two major flaws in both the negative and positive commentary that Native Son received:

> The first is a tendency to consider events and character apart from their context and development. The second is a failure to analyze the organic relation between the esthetic and

social effects of the book. (New Masses 30 April)

Sillen's denunciation of the critical weaknesses mentioned above springs from his Marxist conception of the critic's function, a concept worth quoting in full because it predates a number of similar principles that Barthes and other poststructuralists would put forth more than two decades later.

> Criticism must overcome the error of thinking in compartments before it can hope to register sound judgments of artistic work. For the creative process is a dialectical process. It is characterized, in other words, by a sense of organic change and development; it does not differentiate mechanically between content and form; it sets up a reciprocal influence between the parts and the whole; it strives toward the resolution of conflict on progressively higher levels of consciousness. If we are properly to understand and evaluate the product of such a process, we must ourselves think dynamically. (New Masses 30 April)

A crucial difference between Sillen's approach to literature and that adopted by later critics such as Barthes, who apply the Saussurean notion of language to

their study of literary art, is that Sillen's position is premised upon a Marxist interpretation of the world. By revealing the economic, class, and ideological factors that determine the way an author writes, the Marxist critic attempts to analyze a literary work in relation to the social reality of its time and place. As Sillen so clearly demonstrates in his articles on Native Son, a Marxist critic may entertain the notion of a work of art's autonomy or of a work of art's ability to create a new reality; ultimately, however, a Marxist critic subordinates all other critical interpretations to the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

On the other hand, a critic like Barthes, whose move from structuralist to poststructuralist reflected a shift from "work" to "text,"

> [changed from] seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning. (Eagleton 138)

Hence Barthes insists on the importance of the ecrivain, the writer who writes only for the purpose of writing itself. Unfortunately, for Barthes and a number of other

poststructuralists, "all theory, ideology, determinant meaning, social commitment have become, it appears, inherently terroristic, and "writing" is the answer to them all" (Eagleton 141).

It is ironic that the structuralist concept that literature is not free of cultural, economic, or political bias, which helped pave the way for the acceptance of African American letters within white critical discourse, should eventually lead to the following poststructuralist position:

> Writing, or reading-as-writing, is the last uncolonized enclave in which the intellectual can play, savouring the sumptuousness of the signifier in heady disregard of whatever might be going on in the Elysee palace or the Renault factories. In writing the tyranny of structural meaning could be momentarily ruptured and dislocated by a free play of language; and the writing/reading subject could be released from the straitjacket of a single identity into an ecstatically diffused self. (Eagleton 141)

The above stance, of course, allows the critical theorist to exclude African American contributions from her or his purview since even the black difference is deferred to the "endless play of signifiers which can never be finally

nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning."

In fact, as Stuart Hall notes in an article entitled "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," the "infinite postponement of meaning," as put forth by Jacques Derrida (the originator of deconstruction and one of the foremost proponents of the poststructuralist position), "has permitted his profound theoretical insights to be re-apportioned into a celebration of formal `playfulness,' which evacuates it of its political meaning" (Framework, 36, 1989). In other words, even though deconstruction for Derrida is "an ultimately political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force," its advocates often use it to "ensure `an institutional closure' which serves the dominant political and economic interests of American society" (Eagleton 148). That is, the concepts of deconstruction and poststructuralism, with their concomitant principles of the indeterminacy of "truth," "reality," "knowledge," or "certainty" through language, deprive African American texts of their particular signification and permit the poststructuralist critic the luxury of endlessly deconstructing already canonical, "closed critical texts" (Eagleton 147).

I am not suggesting here that a Marxist interpretation

of society is the only bastion left for white critics who wish to analyze African American texts. Wright, himself, recognized that the Marxist vision of the world, with its emphasis on the economic and political conditions that foster and perpetuate a particular dominant ideology, actually ignores a crucial element in the explication of African American texts--its blackness. By blackness, I do not mean the idea of blackness that so overwhelms the white critic that he or she abandons her or his usual practical or theoretical apparatus in an attempt to exert authority over its presence. Rather, I am referring to the difference that being a black man or a black woman in white America means. As Wright has Max assert in Native Son, the existence of the African American is generally bleak:

> Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped and held captive within this nation, devoid of political social, economic, and property rights. (Native Son 364)

At the same time, African American life is imbued with a rich cultural heritage that predates the history of the United States. As W. E. B. Du Bois remarks in The Souls of Black Folks noting the double-consciousness inherent in all African Americans:

> The shadow of a mighty Negro flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single black men [and black women] flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. (46)

Still, how can the critic of African American literature and culture sustain the black difference and still retain her or his ability to appeal to a large enough audience to significantly change the lives of African Americans? The answer is of necessity double-voiced.

Perhaps Jean Paul Sartre's response to his own question, "to whom does Richard Wright address himself?" supplies part of the answer.

> Each of Wright's works contain what Baudelaire would have called "a double simultaneous postulation"; each word refers to two contexts; two forces are applied simultaneously to each phrase and determine the incomparable tension of the tale. Had he spoken to whites alone, he might have turned more prolix, more didactic, and more abusive; to the negroes alone, still more elliptical, more of a confederate and more elegiac. In the first case, his work might have come close to satire; in the second, to prophetic

> lamentations. Jeremiah spoke only to the Jews. But Wright, a writer for a split public, has been able to maintain and go beyond this split. He has made it the pretext for a work of art. (57-53)

The other part of the answer may be provided by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who suggests that the challenge facing the critic of black literature and culture is "to allow contemporary theoretical developments to inform his or her readings of discrete black texts but also to generate his or her own theories from the black idiom itself" (Figures in Black 53). In essence, the critic of African American discourse must draw from all applicable theoretical sources while maintaining the black difference; he or she can take on this double-edged task by remembering that, even before Saussure developed the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign, "signifyin(g) [was] a uniquely black rhetorical concept" (Figures in Black 49).

Consequently, Barthes' ideal critic--the one who assumes her or his aesthetically appropriate place as a creative reader and a creative writer in an infinitely various, ever-changing universe--is as crucial to an unveiling of the codes that structure the way we live and manipulate the way we interpret the world as is Sillen's dialectical critic. I incorporate them both in a

methodological approach that is informed by multiple theoretical perspectives. Needless to say, whether he or she is passing judgment on a literary masterpiece or distillating the codes that circumscribe the depiction of the African American in commercial, mainstream cinema, the critic's role is pivotal since he or she stands midway between the producers of culture and the consumers of it.

CHAPTER 1

THE BREACH OF A NATION

> *It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.* (W. E. B. Du Bois 45)

From its inception, the American cinema has presented critics with an apparently insoluble riddle: does film create and shape our world, or does it merely reflect a pre-existing reality? For African Americans, the enigma film poses is further complicated by commercial Hollywood movies that simultaneously entertain and idealize dominant white society. As entertainment, the movies provide African Americans with a temporary respite from the bleakness of their lives by allowing them to vicariously participate in the cultural myths and fantasies that constitute the American dream. As ideological tools used to promote white supremacy, the movies prevent African Americans from seeing themselves, or being seen by others, as an essential and positive part of that dream. More often than not, African Americans are simply excluded from Hollywood productions. When they are included, African Americans are frequently portrayed as Other--as anomalies

whose darker skin only emphasizes their innate difference from the white heroines and heros usually showcased on the silver screen. In fact, films that deliberately or inadvertently call into question stereotypic images of blacks are often pointedly ignored by members of the film industry when they decide which films will receive their most prestigious awards.

The metonymy called Hollywood came into being with the release of The Birth of a Nation (1915), D. W. Griffith's epic cinematic rendition of Thomas Dixon's The Clansman--a novel which denigrates African Americans and applauds the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in a conscious attempt to construct an American cultural myth that advances the notion of the innate superiority of the white race and the inherent bestiality of the black one. Griffith's achievement in The Birth of a Nation not only established the place where American films would be made but also shaped the direction of American feature films for decades to come. On one hand, the critical success of The Birth of a Nation metamorphosed film: Griffith's positioning of the camera, his editorial technique--the cutting and arranging of images--and his use of night and soft-focus photography and moving camera shots made film an art. On the other hand, the commercial success of The Birth of a Nation delimited the content of the feature film, particularly

when it came to the representation of blacks:

> It served the ugliest purposes of pseudo-art--giving people a reflection of their own prejudices, sentimental at best, vicious at worst, and a restatement of their easy explanations of their history as Americans. It demonstrated how easily and how successfully the art could pander to the sentimentality of the public, how effectively and profitably it could transfer melodrama from the stage and false values from the novel. The enormous commercial success of the film . . . cannot have but fixed the melodramatic, the cheap and obviously emotional, as the index to the potential economic success of a film. (Carter 17)

Since 1915, when D. W. Griffith used subtitles to convince his audience that what they were watching was a "historical facsimile" of events immediately preceding and following the Civil War, such innovations as sound, color, and special effects, as well as the ability to endlessly reproduce images, have significantly enhanced the affect and effect of Hollywood feature films. Unfortunately, Griffith's ideological use of film as racist propaganda, as a way to promulgate Dixon's belief that the pre-Civil War South was ruled by an "aristocracy founded on brains,

culture, and blood . . . which but for the Black curse . . . could be today the garden of the world," did not keep pace with technological advancements in the cinematic arts (Carter 12). Consequently, D. W. Griffith's legacy to American film was antipodal: he revolutionized the form and circumscribed the content. That many of the derogatory, one-dimensional, oversimplified images of blacks on the contemporary silver screen appear real--even though they are merely the ghosts of those images of African Americans first created by D. W. Griffith in The Birth of a Nation--is but one example of the paradoxical nature of the inheritance that Griffith bequeathed to the American film audience.

Some cultural historians would disagree, for they believe that American films reflect Americans' current social, intellectual, political, and cultural values and feel that, even if the visual medium has an enormous influence on the way Americans perceive themselves and others, Hollywood does not create the images it so vividly portrays. In the introduction to The Kaleidoscope Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups, historian Randall M. Miller presents the following as the predominant viewpoint shared by the collections' eleven contributors:

> Movies serve as handbooks of social behavior. They introduce many people to people and places

> that they would otherwise never meet or know, and so establish the basic identity of those people and places. . . . Of themselves, movies have changed few people's minds about the American social structure and ethnic life. Moviemakers did not, and, do not, often run far ahead of public opinion and beliefs. . . . And that is just the point. Mass entertainment cannot depart too far from the tastes and beliefs of the masses. However much it might lead society to new values, its very survival depends on following society's fundamental values. (12-4)

In other words, according to Miller, Hollywood does not make films to direct thought as much as to mirror it; for in its attempt to make the greatest profit, Hollywood targets the mass market and uses its lens to capture images that promise to entertain and reassure, rather than provoke, its audience.

Other cultural historians, however, insist that Hollywood films are particularly instrumental in determining the values that Americans at any period in history embrace. In Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, Robert Sklar directly contradicts Miller's conclusions:

> It is important to begin with a recognition that

> movies have historically been and still remain vital components in the network of cultural communication, and the nature of their content and control helps to shape the character and direction of American culture as a whole. (vi)

In other words, as Sklar suggests, the very fabric of American life--the clothes one wears, the values one holds, and the consequences one fears--are determined in part by the images one sees on the screen.

Sklar's position that American films configure American attitudes is supported by the relationship of The China Syndrome (James Bridges 1979) to actual historical events. The China Syndrome, a film about a near-disastrous incident at a nuclear power plant and its subsequent cover-up by high-ranking officials, intensified the public's fear when an actual nuclear accident occurred at Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, only a few weeks after the movie's premiere.[1] Conversely, Miller's conception that American films merely simulate American beliefs is substantiated by JFK (Oliver Stone 1991): a film that could not be profitably released until trust in the integrity of U. S. government officials had eroded to the point where the public was willing to entertain the notion that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy could have been the result of a conspiracy.[2] One result of the

endless disagreement among cultural historians about the role American film plays in American life is that some scholars, acknowledging that support can be garnered for both sides, refuse to become embroiled in such a debate and concede that "we cannot even answer the most basic question about the American Cinema's audience: does industrialized, commercial popular culture reflect the tastes of its audience or impose them?" (Ray 364). At the same time, other film scholars--such as James Monaco in How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media--remain ambivalent. Monaco concurs in the belief that "in America between 1920 and 1950, for example, the movies provided the main cultural format for the discovery and description of our national identity (television gradually replaced movies after 1950)." However, he concludes:

> [Even though] historians argue whether the movies simply reflected the national culture that already existed or whether they produced a fantasy of their own that eventually came to be accepted as real. . . . the point is moot. (218)

Monaco defends his equivocal stance and contends:

> Two paradoxes control the politics of film: on the one hand, the form of film is revolutionary; on the other, the content is most often

> conservative of traditional values. Second, the politics of film and the politics of "real life" are so closely intertwined that it is generally impossible to discover which is the cause and which is the effect. (219)

Although he acknowledges that "film has changed the way we perceive the world and therefore, to a lesser extent, how we operate in it" (218), Monaco believes:

> The central truism of film history is that the development of the art/industry is best seen as a product of the dialectic between film realism and film expressionism: between film's power to mimic reality and its power to change it. (219)

The power of film--a power that goes unchallenged by both cultural historians and film scholars--may, in actuality, come closest to explaining the political, socio-economic, and cultural factors that prescribe and proscribe the images of blacks in commercial Hollywood cinema. Indeed, I argue that the distorted portrayal of African Americans on the silver screen is a Hollywood creation--which draws upon Griffith's legacy for its inspiration--designed to depict the most negative stereotypes of blacks to deflect the potential inflammatory consequences that a humane, multifarious visual representation of African Americans could produce.

African Americans have been creating films to reflect black life and to correct the negative screen images presented by white filmmakers since technology made cinematography possible. Nevertheless, with the exception of two or three seminal works, primarily produced by cultural historians attempting to use cinematic representation to document the social progress of blacks in this nation, few, if any, book-length, theoretical studies exist which examine African American film from a critical perspective.[3] Ironically, most contemporary film scholarship, which utilizes critical theory and recognizes that the dominant culture marginalizes other cultures, still lacks extended analyses of Hollywood films that involve African American characters or themes. Perhaps the intentional exploitation of anachronistic, negative, and stereotypic portrayals of African Americans is one of the reasons that a discussion of black-centered, commercial Hollywood movies is so conspicuously absent from critical cinematic debate that attempts to delineate whether film creates or mirrors real life. One could, indeed, postulate that the debate over whether film mimics or shapes reality might cease if Hollywood's deliberately skewed, cinematic portrayals of African Americans were included.

In fact, I argue that by denying the full range of human emotions to its fictitious black creations,

Hollywood's presentation of African Americans in commercial feature films exerts a consistently negative, increasingly significant influence on society's perception and reception of African Americans. The distorted, stereotypic images of blacks that Hollywood continues to create may be traced back to those facsimiles first capitalized upon by D. W. Griffith, but Hollywood has extended Griffith's legacy and made his images of "toms," "coons," "mulattos," "mammies," and "bucks" as much a part of the American psyche as apple pie and baseball (Bogle 1973). Moreover, Hollywood's appropriation of antiquated, white racist stereotypes to imbue its contemporary visualizations of African Americans is insidiously intensified by its reticence in portraying African Americans in a polytypical manner: the absence of diverse, multidimensional images of African Americans in Hollywood feature films dissociates blacks from their white counterparts. By failing to provide black characters with the physical, psychological, and social dimensions with which it enhances the representation of its white protagonists, Hollywood effectively undermines black humanity and relegates African Americans to "a level of human experience that the dominant society denies" (Hogue 23). In other words, Hollywood projects blacks as Other and reinforces white supremacy by frequently presenting the African American as deviant, irrelevant, or both.

A typical example of Hollywood's treatment of African Americans is found in the comedy Short Time (Gregg Champion 1990): A white police officer on the verge of retiring is diagnosed with an extremely rare and fatal blood disease because a black bus driver, who had smoked marijuana and needed to pass a mandatory drug test, switched urine samples in the physician's office. The police lieutenant uses the short time he has left trying to get killed in action so that he can leave his ex-wife and son financially secure when he dies. After a series of comic, misfired encounters with a number of diehard criminals, the lieutenant learns that a mistake had been made in his diagnosis. The film closes with the police officer at the funeral of the bus driver exulting in his own good fortune, for his life will be even better. Not only will he continue to live but also, as a direct result of his recent death-defying pursuits, the lieutenant's reputation on the force has skyrocketed; and, he has become reconciled with his wife. Unfortunately, fate is not as kind to the black bus driver, who was unable to get his affairs in order before his death, because his anti-social behavior prevented him from learning in advance that he had only a short time to live.

That Short Time is billed as a romantic comedy, even though it depicts a young African American male struck down

in his prime, is an indication that Hollywood is "unable to imagine the Other" and responds to the Other like Roland Barthes' description of the "petit-bourgeois" in Mythologies: "[it] blinds [itself], ignores and denies [the Other], or else transforms [the Other] into [it]self" (151). Short Time, which characterizes the African American's death as incidental to the comedy as a whole, is but one of many Hollywood films that blinds itself to the existence of the Other. A number of motion pictures exist that clearly illustrate how Hollywood filmmakers actualize Barthes' predication of the way in which the Other is depicted.

Lawrence Kasdan's The Accidental Tourist (1988), for example, is not unique in the way in which the film completely ignores and denies the presence of blacks in the racially diverse city of Paris, France. Even the taxicab driver, who picks the central characters up from their hotel, is white, although it is impossible to find a taxicab driver in the entire city of Paris who is not a person of color.[4] The Accidental Tourist typifies blind spots found in white-directed, Hollywood films set in urban locations. In direct contrast, exiled Hollywood director Roman Polanski's Frantic (1988), which takes place within the same time and space as Kasdan's film, is liberally peppered with blacks and suggests that their absence in The

Accidental Tourist is (in typical Hollywood fashion) no accident.

Finally, a number of films exist in which Hollywood simplistically transforms the Other into clones who resemble its more identifiable white male protagonists by giving African American men roles in which their race has little or no bearing on the part they play. Without analyzing particular films in detail, it is worth mentioning that all three of the African American men who have won Academy Awards for their performances as best actor or best supporting actor--Sidney Poiter in Lilies of the Field (Ralph Nelson 1963), Louis Gossett, Jr., in An Officer and a Gentlemen (Taylor Hackford 1982), and Denzel Washington in Glory (Edward Zwick 1989)--did so portraying characters whose sexuality is not apparent and whose race is less important than their gender.

Behind Hollywood's continually muted and skewed portrayal of African Americans in feature films is the fear, as Barthes points out, that "the Other is a scandal that threatens [white Americans'] existence" (151). Given the history of this nation's black/white relations--specifically the injustices perpetrated upon African Americans by white Americans during slavery and afterwards--it is not surprising that white Americans would wish to deny their complicity in the systematic degradation of a

large segment of humanity by using Hollywood films to pretend that African Americans are, if not obviously inferior, at least quite distinct from the rest of mankind. After all, film is the perfect medium in which to play out one's fantasies.

But the population of the United States is comprised of at least twelve million African Americans all of whom cannot be rendered invisible, denied, or whitewashed, in which case Hollywood has another effective way of dealing with the Other. As Barthes also notes, when "the Other is revealed as irreducible: not because of a sudden scruple but because common sense rebels: a man does not have a white skin, but a black one," Barthes' middle class man turns the Other into a "pure object, a spectacle, a clown" (152). And, as one would expect, periodically, Hollywood will perfunctorily produce a major motion picture that features a predominately all-black cast.

In films such as Cabin in the Sky (Vincente Minnelli 1943) and Porgy and Bess (Otto Preminger 1959), Hollywood concedes the presence of blacks by producing carnivalesque movies in which African Americans are paraded as Other. Most of these extravaganzas, which cast blacks in large numbers, belong to the genre of film known as the musical. Unfortunately, the blues, jazz, or spiritual rhythms predictably accompanying Hollywood's dramatization of black

lives help further the plantation myth that African Americans do not suffer; they sing. Hollywood offers these concessions of African American presence to the moviegoing public as spectacles through which the dominant society as absent subject can gaze on the African American as unadulterated object. The spectacle, in which Hollywood intersperses music with dramatic footage of stereotypic depictions of the trials and tribulations of black life, reminds those whites who may have come to see African Americans as being much like themselves that blacks are indeed Other.

Although not specifically designated a musical, Spielberg's adaptation of The Color Purple provides an illustrative example of the way in which commercial Hollywood films signify African Americans as Other. Celie, the protagonist of The Color Purple, is perfect as an Other heroine. Whether she is bearing healthy children for her stepfather within her mother's house, or being abused by Mr. _____ as she struggles to make a decent home for his children within her husband's house, or sewing pants and freely loving her husband's lover within her own house, Celie manages to survive, and often thrive, within each of her dysfunctional families: extended families whose deviations from the traditional, nuclear family are brought about by the black man's view of the black woman as "de

mule uh de world" (Hurston 29)--at least, that is what Spielberg's version of The Color Purple would lead its viewers to believe.

Since The Color Purple was adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name written by black womanist author Alice Walker, who also had a voice in the cinematic production, it is too facile to credit Spielberg with all of the responsibility for creating a historical epic that trivializes the reality of black/white relations in the early-twentieth century South as it epitomizes the most negative stereotypes of African American men. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder what motivated Spielberg to choose Walker's novel for his first dramatic feature, when most of his earlier films centered around humans struggling with non-human foes: ET. The Extra-Terrestrial (1983), Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), Jaws (1975) and the made-for-television movie Duel (1971), in which an innocent white man is relentlessly and senselessly pursued by a Mack truck's invisible driver. Perhaps Spielberg felt that the praise he had received for his earlier productions, in which he captivated audiences by capitalizing on their fascination with and fear of the unknown, prepared him to undertake a screen adaptation of The Color Purple.

Still, Spielberg is known for directing "box-office

smashes" and his adaptation of The Color Purple was no exception. Numerous black actresses and actors--such as Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, Akosua Busia, Rae Dawn Chong, Margaret Avery, and Oprah Winfrey, to name but a few--gave sterling performances and were brought to the attention of a large mainstream audience; moreover, the film was nominated for eleven Academy Awards.

It is perhaps the height of irony that The Color Purple, with eleven nominations, was not the recipient of even one of Hollywood's most coveted awards, for it appears that Spielberg went out of his way to adhere to Hollywood's unwritten codes controlling the representation of African Americans on the silver screen. In fact, Spielberg's deviations from the novel, which opened the film up to charges of racism and sexism, did little more than impose dominant white society's hackneyed images of African Americans on an otherwise black female conception. As author Ishmael Reed points out in his essay "Steven Spielberg Plays Howard Beach":

> In the film The Color Purple, directed and produced by white males, all of the myths that have been directed at black men since the Europeans entered Africa are joined. In this film, black men commit heinous crimes against women and children, and though defenders of

> Walker's book, upon which the movie was based, argue that these creations were merely one woman's story, critics in the media have used both the book and the movie as excuses to indict all black men. This is not Ms. Walker's fault. (145-146)

Reed's comments center upon the far-reaching and negative consequences that Spielberg's depiction of African American men in The Color Purple wielded in real life. In a similar fashion, critic and scholar bell hooks remarks upon the way in which Spielberg's screen version of The Color Purple sparked "more discussion among black folks of feminist issues (sexism, freedom of sexual expression, male violence against women, etc.) than any theoretical and/or polemical work by feminist scholars" (135). Although hooks welcomes a feminist response to Spielberg's The Color Purple, she notes:

> Often these discussions exposed grave ignorance about feminist political movement, revealing the extent to which shallow notions of feminist struggle disseminated by non-feminists in popular culture shape and influence the way many black people perceive feminism. That all feminists are man-hating, sexually depraved, castrating, power-hungry, etc. are prevailing stereotypes. (135)

In other words, Spielberg's screen adaptation of Walker's novel The Color Purple only furthered existing racist and sexist notions.

The first variation from the novel occurs at the very beginning of the film when Celie's father asks her "ain't she done yet," as she is giving birth to his baby. The father's words, which are not taken from the novel, reinforce the plantation stereotype that African American females are mere breeding machines and that African American males care little or nothing about their women or offspring. A second embellishment upon the novel is Spielberg's intercutting of tribal African initiation rites with Celie's thoughts as she contemplates cutting M _____'s throat with a razor while she shaves his beard. Spielberg's message is clear: Black on black violence does not stem from white oppression but from some savage, inherited, instinctual African need to draw blood. A third departure from the text of The Color Purple is Shug's reconciliation with her Baptist minister father during a Sunday church service replete with the frenetic singing and testifying that exemplifies Hollywood's portrayal of African Americans worshiping God. Spielberg's creation of this scene not only provides the setting for the requisite Gospel singing--stock footage for Hollywood films about African Americans--but also promotes the reassuring, though

false, stereotypic notion that blacks always forgive.

If Spielberg's inclusion of a number of Hollywood formulas regulating the presentation of blacks was intended to make his adaptation of The Color Purple more palatable to the award-giving Hollywood community, it failed to do so. Perhaps the combined talents of Walker, and the predominately all-black cast of The Color Purple, militated against the film being viewed as sheer spectacle and, inadvertently, transgressed the code that blacks are not to be at the center of any Hollywood film that ultimately portrays them as more human than Other.

At its annual awards presentation in 1986, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences overlooked The Color Purple in favor of Out of Africa (1985): Sydney Pollack's screen adaptation of Danish expatriate Isak Dinesen's autobiographical account of her adventures in darkest Africa. Many film industry critics felt that The Color Purple should have received the Oscars instead; most concurred with the sentiments expressed by one movie reviewer who concluded his brief synopsis of Out of Africa with the following remarks: The film goes for sundrenched romanticism at every opportunity, there's hardly enough story to fill the time" (Scheuer 787). Consequently, one could hypothesize that members of the Hollywood film community bestowed their accolades on Out of Africa because

it so closely observed those unwritten codes circumscribed by Griffith in The Birth of a Nation almost seventy years earlier.[5] Certainly, Out of Africa, which starred Meryl Streep as the Baroness Karen Blixen-Finicke, Robert Redford as a great white hunter, Klaus Maria Brandauer as a lusty plantation owner, and hundreds of unknown black males--cast as loyal, subservient African bushmen--did more to sustain the ideology of white supremacy than the performance of either Whoopi Goldberg or Danny Glover in The Color Purple.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIG PICTURE

> *We have three types of prohibition, covering objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject; these prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web continually subject to modification. I will note simply that the areas where this web is most tightly woven today, where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality.* (Foucault 216)

Two exigencies of commercial American cinema make it virtually impossible for even a veteran filmmaker like Steven Spielberg to accurately predict which films the Hollywood community will applaud and which it will dismiss. The first is the imperative to make money; the second is the desire to avoid political and public reprisal. In keeping with these dual, often conflicting aims, early Hollywood producers devised a system of internal regulation that allowed them to appeal to the largest possible audience and still retain autonomy from outside censorship: As long as movies ultimately championed the traditional values of dominant white society, Hollywood filmmakers could continue to attract viewers by titillating them with scenes of sex and violence. Unfortunately, as Richard Wright discovered when he tried to use film to convey a

message that did not idealize dominant white society, Hollywood's censorial apparatus precluded other points of view from reaching a large segment of the American public.

As early as 1915, in deciding whether or not films were protected under the First Amendment from state censorship prior to public release, Supreme Court Justice Joseph McKenna declared:

> We immediately feel that the argument is wrong or strained which extends the guaranties of free opinion and speech to the multitudinous shows which are advertised on the billboards of our cities and towns. . . . It cannot be put out of view that the exhibition of moving pictures is a business pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit, like other spectacles, not to be regarded, nor intended to be regarded . . we think, as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion. (Sklar 127-8)

Even though the Supreme Court upheld the states' constitutional right to censor any movies they found visually offensive--before those films could be viewed by the public--in recognizing that movies were commercial enterprises produced purely for monetary gain, the Supreme Court absolved filmmakers of any civic responsibility. As a result, even if the states were granted the power to ban

any film that they felt was not suitable viewing for their citizens, movie producers retained the right to determine the kinds of films that they would make.

On one hand, therefore, filmmakers could legally go as far as they wished in luring their public to the theaters with graphic portrayals of sex and crime or visions of the American dream. On the other hand, filmmakers could actually go only as far as the censors would permit, so filmmakers quickly learned that the easiest way to appease the states' censors was to stress that their films were merely mythical fantasies that had no direct correlation to real life. Consequently, in the mid-1930s, when "talkies" had virtually replaced silent pictures, and films could legally be protected from prior censorship under the First Amendment, a precedent had already been set: films were flights of fancy, and theaters, which by the mid-1920s had evolved into elaborate movie palaces with live performers, full orchestras, and gold-plated bathrooms, were dream machines--places where one could enter for a small fee and have her or his wildest fantasy fleshed out.

Indeed, by the late 1930s, almost every segment of the American population--even if they might not agree on whether movies were omens of evil or tokens of beneficence--was well aware that Hollywood films exerted a tremendous influence on those who watched them, and that, Hollywood

filmmakers, consequently, exercised a great deal of power.

> Clergymen in backwater towns could still raise a crowd by railing against sin on the silver screen, and judges and reformers here and there continued to maintain that movies led impressionable youth to crime. Among academics and in literary circles, however, and in the principal newspapers and magazines, the moviemakers were regarded with considerably more respect, awe and even envy, as the possessors of the power to create the nation's myths and dreams. (Sklar 195)

As soon as scholars recognized that movies possessed the power to convey ideological messages, film's effect on individuals and on American culture-at-large became a burgeoning field of sociological inquiry--particularly among those intellectuals who wished to prove that movies required careful monitoring by educated people like themselves to circumvent film's potential to wreak havoc on the nation. Although the bulk of these studies lacked definitive scholarly evidence, their overall conclusion--that movies were corrupting America's youth--was succinctly summarized by journalist Henry James Forman in a popular 1933 volume entitled Our Movie Made Children:

> What the screen becomes . . . is a gigantic

> educational system with an instruction possibly more successful than the present text-book variety. Therefore, it is of no less importance to citizens than the schools their taxes pay for, and the milk and water their children drink. The vast haphazard, promiscuous, so frequently ill-chosen, output of pictures to which we expose our children's minds for influence and imprint, is not this at least of equal importance? For, as we cannot but conclude, if unwatched, it is extremely likely to create a haphazard, promiscuous and undesirable national consciousness. (Sklar 137)

However, other than generating a plethora of additional studies on the possible negative consequences of leaving the movie industry unchecked, which, in turn, alarmed Hollywood filmmakers because they feared increased censorship, Our Movie Made Children had little adverse effect on public consumption. Even if the producers and scholars were among the last to recognize movies as powerful ideological tools, the general American public had always realized that films wielded enormous influence over their lives. In fact, no sooner had nickelodeons begun churning out moving pictures, then social reformers began trying to establish control over the content of those

images. And, as one would expect, the more that social crusaders looked to films and their makers as potential corrupters of American youth, the more vehemently movie producers denied their complicity in doing any more than merely turning out harmless entertainment for America's downtrodden and poor.

Indeed, most of the early filmmakers really believed, at first, that all they were doing was satisfying the law of supply and demand, for they saw themselves as capitalists who earned their living by giving the public what they wanted and could not already get from books, magazines, and newspapers. And, to a large extent, the early filmmakers were correct; the immense popularity of movies among the lower classes had initially caused them to be shunned by scholars, so there was no theoretical basis upon which to formulate any precepts about film. In fact, the lack of early scholarly interest in movies resulted in film censorship developing outside of any authoritive, institutionalized framework, a consequence that would have a far-reaching and ultimately negative effect not only on Wright's screen adaptation of Native Son but also on other black films for decades to come; it enabled Hollywood to become its own police force.

Since film companies had essentially begun as commercial enterprises that faltered or thrived on their

ability to sell their product to the largest number of buyers, it behooved movie producers to find a way to prevent the states from censoring their films before the public even had a chance to see them. However, given the fact that no pre-established guidelines existed to define what made a film objectionable, the states themselves had no firm criteria for deciding which films could be shown and which could not. Consequently, there was no accurate way for filmmakers to determine in advance which films were going to be banned in which states--a position that was particularly frustrating to producers. On one hand, they knew that the more they stretched the limits of decency, the more they would gross in box-office receipts; on the other hand, they recognized that if they stretched those limits too far, their product might never reach the box-office.

This equivocal situation actually came to a head in 1908, when all of the movie theaters in New York City (which was the hub of the film industry until Griffith moved his film studio to Hollywood in 1914) were closed by the police for indecency. At that time, the producers organized and decided to associate with The People's Institute, an organization based in New York City that, unlike many other reform groups, actually considered movies valuable popular entertainment. Early in 1909, the New

York Board of Motion Picture Censorship, a film review association made up of ten New York civic organizations that The People's Institute had brought together, received the producers' approval: the filmmakers agreed to "submit all films to the board prior to making final release prints, and to excise any footage the board wanted out, even to junking a film entirely" (Sklar 31). The arrangement was beneficial to both sides. In practice, the states now had a national board made up of men and women from various charitable, educational, and religious groups looking out for America's morals. In principle, the producers had succeeded in achieving self-regulation. In exchange for voluntarily submitting their films to the Board for prior review, the filmmakers were assured that if their films met with the Board's approval, they would not be censored upon theatrical release.

Everyone, of course, was not happy with the agreement drawn up between the New York Board of Motion Picture Censorship and the movie producers. Indeed, a number of social reformers throughout the country continued to insist on censorship at the local level since they felt that the idea of self-regulation equated itself with litle or no outside control. But most states were relieved to have the onus of deciding what was offensive taken out of their hands and left to the producers--particularly once

moviemakers had indicated their willingness to preserve traditional American values at their own expense. Moreover, the New York Board of Motion Picture Censorship did exercise its powers:

> Some 20 percent of the films they saw they refused to approve. Often they required cuts in the films they passed. Obscenity was their prime target, but they never defined the word, assuming that a respectable person knew obscenity when he or she saw it. Films of women in corsets and leotards, kidnapping, gruesome crimes, and films that might give instructions on how to commit a crime, were taboo. A theatrical suicide, with beating of breast and rolling of eyes, could pass; a leap from the Brooklyn Bridge could not. (Sklar 31-32)

As one can surmise, a consequence of the Board's perusal could mean that a producer might have to pull back a film or two, or leave a particularly risque scene on the editing floor; but, all in all, the New York Board of Censors, which early on changed its name to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures to reassure the producers that they really abhorred unnecessary censorship, allowed the movie industry license to determine its own subject matter.

More importantly, from the producers' standpoint, the

concept of self-regulation allowed them to increase their net profits by getting the bulk of their product to the public. Indeed, the future of Hollywood's internal censorship mechanism would be shaped by the producers' desire to maintain, by any means necessary, the substantial advantage that they knew they had won. Unfortunately, the need to hold on to self-regulation at any cost would inevitably result in more than 2500 feet of Wright's cinematic translation of Native Son winding up on the New York Board of Censors' cutting room floor. In fact, two separate political moves on Hollywood's part, in its effort to make sure that it retained self-censorship, would significantly shape the content of Hollywood films in general and of Wright's Native Son in particular. The first was the enforcement of the 1930 Production Code; the second was Hollywood's capitulation to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1947.

By the end of the 1930s, everyone accepted that movies held a great deal of power, even if no one was quite sure of just what that power constituted or what its actual effect might be. In fact, the only thing that anyone knew for certain was that movies were powerful ideological tools and that whoever controlled them had power over more than just the movies the public saw; they also had power over the American dream.

Even though they were loath to admit it, for fear that an admission would increase pressure for outside censorship, which, in turn, would decrease their substantial profits, movie producers had begun in the late 1920s to recognize film's ability to influence reality and, as a direct result, their own power. Even during the height of the Depression, moviemakers discovered that they could still entice patrons to the theaters by creating films filled with such special effects as color and sound, which transported the audience to brighter and more quixotic locales. Talking pictures, however, raised new issues regarding censorship, for now civil libertarians could reopen the argument as to whether or not movies were protected from prior censorship by the First Amendment.

On top of this fresh attack from civil liberties interest groups, who felt that "talkies" should be treated like other forms of public utterance (which would mean that film censorship would no longer remain in the hands of the producers or their designated censor associates), there were new assaults from social reform groups. Previously silenced by the agreement between the producers and the New York Board of Review of Motion Pictures, social crusaders renewed their demands for increased external censorship--once Our Movie Made Children had armed them with concrete scientific data showing that films were perverting American

youth. Since Hollywood producers knew that self-censorship was the only way to maintain absolute control over their financial empire, they fought these new imperatives for outside regulation by increasing their internal censorial apparatus.

Hollywood spokesperson and consummate political lobbyist Will Hays, who had been retained following the Fatty Arbuckle scandal in 1921 as a non-partisan mediator by the newly formed trade organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), recognized that the introduction of talking pictures necessitated more rigorous self-censorship on Hollywood's part if it were to maintain its autonomy from existing laws controlling free speech. Consequently, Hays sponsored and had the members of both the Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. (California) and the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. (New York) approve the 1930 Production Code, which was co-authored by motion-picture trade publisher Martin I. Quigley and Jesuit priest and professor Daniel A. Lord. The Quigley-Lord Code "attempted to establish once and for all a standard for moral values in a popular mass medium" (Sklar 173); nevertheless, the producers found innovative ways around it--until Hays established the Breen Office in 1934.

The appointment by Hays of his employee Joseph I.

Breen to the position of Administrator of the newly instituted Production Code Administration effectively guaranteed that "self-regulation by the movie industry was at last accepted by the censorship forces, which could not have attained more effective control over movie content in any other way" (Sklar 173). The establishment in 1934 of the Production Code Administration was the only way that Hays, who "branded censorship as nothing less than an un-American attack on the principles of democracy" (Sklar 83), had kept the movie industry from financial collapse when it had come under attack earlier that year by the Legion of Decency--a national organization dedicated to boycotting those movies that the Catholic Church declared indecent.

Prompted by the Vatican and fueled by Our Movie Made Children, the Legion of Decency was created in 1933 by a group of American bishops who were determined to find ways to purge the movies of their immorality. That they did not finally succeed had more to do with the American public's unquenchable appetite for sex and crime than with the Legion's methods:

> Beginning in 1934, the Legion distributed pledge forms throughout Catholic dioceses calling upon the signers to observe the boycott; it was claimed that within ten weeks eleven million people signed, including many Protestants and

> Jews whose organizations rallied behind the Legion effort. What could the studios do? Having lost millions of dollars in 1933, with attendance dropping to a five-year low, they found themselves in no position to ignore so massive a threat of box-office desertion. Quickly they communicated their willingness to sue for peace. (Sklar 173)

Hays, subsequently, had no choice but to appease the Legion by creating an office that would strictly enforce the existing 1930 Production Code--"which [already] went about as far as it could toward expressing the Catholic bishops' viewpoint without converting the movies from entertainment to popular theology" (Sklar 173). After that, Hays had to convince the Committee of Catholic bishops that Breen, an Irish Catholic and former newspaperman, was the right one to head up the Production Code Administration since the Administrator "would have absolute power to approve, censor or reject movies made or distributed by the Hollywood studios" (Sklar 173). Fortuitously for the Hollywood producers, the Committee of Catholic bishops' accepted Breen due, in large measure, to the testimony of influential Catholic layman Martin I. Quigley.

Breen's main function was to make sure that the producers adhered to the Production Code that they had

already approved. Breen's job was not an especially difficult one, for when Quiqley and Lord constructed the Code, they made allowances for the fact that sex and crime were the backbone of the Hollywood film industry. Subsequently, they developed ways to insure that depictions of sex and crime remained within the limits of decency sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Quite naturally, under the provisions of the Code, the concept of poetic justice became a frequently employed formulaic device, for, as long as the guilty were punished in the end, the Code allowed producers to visually depict the sin. The Code, however, did specifically prohibit "homosexuality, which it described as `sex perversion,' interracial sex, abortion, incest, drugs, most forms of profanity, and scores of words defined as vulgar, including s-e-x itself" (Sklar 174); as one would expect, the Code had a particularly deleterious effect on Wright's film.

Since an extant copy of the unexpurgated version of the 1951 cinematic adaptation of Native Son does not exist, by using various drafts of Wright's original screenplay as an untapped resource, I was able to theorize why a strict adherence to the Code would have necessitated a number of the cuts that the New York Board of Censors appear to have made that so negatively affected the screen version of Native Son. First and foremost, the 1930 Production Code

mandated that "miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden" (Farber 125). As a result, the following scene excerpted from Wright's screenplay must have been deleted by the New York Board of Censors:

> STUDIO - Dalton's house: Mary's Chamber - NIGHT
> Bigger goes towards the bed, when suddenly he feels like kissing her. He leans over her. She does not resist and, even kisses him back . . . They kiss each other again. But suddenly a light noise is heard, coming from the passage. Bigger, tense, listens. What would happen if somebody would find him--a [N]egro--so late in the chamber of a white girl? Mary is stammering, and Bigger gets quite frightened! Nobody must know his presence here. The amplified throbs of his heart, musically transposed, fill the whole room.

The censors did, however, permit Bigger's subsequent act of smothering Mary to remain intact even though the Code specified that "the treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy" (Farber 127)--a clear indication that, in actual practice, Code enforcement by the New York Board of Censors was quite subjective.

Nevertheless, the Code's prohibition of sexual relations between blacks and whites helps to explain why

portions of the trial may have been excised by the New York censors because, as the following scene from Wright's screenplay shows, much of Buckley's cross-examination of witnesses involves his insinuation that miscegenation between Bigger and Mary either occurred or was encouraged:

LAP DISSOLVE

We open in the midst of Jan Erlone's testimony.

BUCKLEY: . . . do you believe in social equality for Negroes?

JAN: I believe in social equality for everybody.

There is an outburst of indignant ejaculation in the court and the judge is force to pound his gavel for order.

JUDGE: If this demonstrativeness occurs again, I shall be compelled to ask the marshall to clear the room. Proceed, Mr. District Attorney.

BUCKLEY: I ask the witness if he believes in social equality for Negroes?

JAN: I believe in social equality for everybody . .

BUCKLEY: Answer my questions yes or no, Mr. Witness. You are too intelligent not to know the meaning of what I'm asking. Now, tell me, do you believe in social equality for Negroes?

JAN: I believe that all races are equal . . . There is nother [sic] waves of sullen voices that rolls

over the court and the judge raps for order.

JUDGE: Silence in the court!

BUCKLEY: (Advancing toward Jan) Answer yes or no! You're not on a soap-box! Do you believe in social equality for Negroes?

JAN: (In quiet and clipped tones) Yes.

BUCKLEY: Aw . . . We're getting somewhere. Now, are you a trade unionist?

JAN: Yes, but . . .

BUCKLEY: Answer me and say not one word more or less. In what condition was Miss Dalton when you left her early that Sunday morning?

JAN: What do you mean?

BUCKLEY: I see that I'll have to spell things out for you. The little boy is playing innocent . . .

MAX: I object. He cannot characterize the witness.

JUDGE: Sustained. Mr. District Attorney, that last remark was uncalled for.

BUCKLEY: And I say, with all due respect to your Honor, that this witness's attitude is uncalled for. I'm merely trying to get him to answer simple questions . . .

JUDGE: Mr. Erlone, try to answer the District Attorney's questions and it will speed things up here a little.

BUCKLEY: Now, tell me, what was the condition of Miss Dalton when you left her?

JAN: What do you mean?

BUCKLEY: I mean this: Was she drunk?

JAN: We had a few drinks.

BUCKLEY: At what time did you leave her?

JAN: It was about two o'clock.

BUCKLEY: So, you left an unprotected white girl alone in a car with a drunk Negro?

JAN: I was not aware that Bigger was drunk and I did not consider Mary as being unprotected.

BUCKLEY: You asked that Negro to call you Jan, didn't you?

JAN: Yes.

BUCKLEY: You sat next to him in the car, didn't you?

JAN: Yes.

BUCKLEY: You sat next to him at the table in Ernie's Palace, didn't you?

JAN: Yes.

BUCKLEY: At one time you saw Miss Dalton take hold of his hand, didn't you?

[Although Mary does touch Bigger's arm at one point while they are eating in Ernie's Palace, she never holds his hand; so Wright added this incident to the film, perhaps, to heighten the sexual tension between Mary and Bigger]

JAN: Yes. But that is entirely . . .

BUCKLEY: You didn't try to restrain either of them, did you?

JAN: No. Look, here . . .

BUCKLEY: Had you, Mr. Erlone, at any time in the past left Miss Dalton alone in the company of Negroes?

MAX: Objection. This has no relation to the degree of guilt!

BUCKLEY: I'm establishing the movie [sic] for murder, sir! If you'll permit me . . .

MAX: No, you're not. You're trying to indict a race of people and you're smearing trade unions!

JUDGE: (Rapping for order) Gentlemen: You cannot use this court room for propaganda purposes. If this kind of political bickering does not end, I'll hold you both in contempt . . .

Hostile voices break out against the judge's words.

Marshal, see that order is kept back there. If there are those who cannot restrain themselves, eject them!

MARSHAL: Yes, your Honor!

BUCKLEY: Now, Mr. Erlone, after you had eaten and drunk with that Negro, didn't you give him some radical pamphlets to read?

JAN: Yes.

BUCKLEY: What was the nature of those pamphlets?

JAN: They dealt with the Negro question.

BUCKLEY: Didn't they contain material advocating complete equality of whites and blacks?

JAN: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Did you, in your drunken agitation of that black boy, tell him that is [sic] was all right for him to have sexual relations with white women?

JAN: No! The outbreak of howls is so loud that the judge raps for order again.

BUCKLEY: Did you advise Miss Dalton to have sexual relations with him?

JAN: No!

BUCKLEY: You like Negroes, don't you, Erlone?

MAX: I object! How on earth is that question related to this case?

BUCKLEY: A woman has been foully murdered! This witness brought the deceased into contact with the last person who saw her alive. I have the right to determine what this witness' attitude was toward that girl and that Negro . . .

MAX: The signed confession covers all that. Your words serve but to inflame passions . . .

JUDGE: It's true that the District Attorney is covering ground already gone over. But let him proceed, Mr. Max.

[As one can see from Wright's screenplay, not only do the

overtones of Buckley's prosecution of Erlone suggest that his witness may have arranged for Bigger to engage in sexual intercourse with Mary, but also Buckley's methods could be considered "third degree"--an unacceptable legal maneuver that, under the section entitled "Repellent Subjects," the Code also forbid.]

BUCKLEY: Thank you, Your Honor. (Turning back to Jan) Now, Erlone, have you a sister?

JAN: Why, yes.

BUCKLEY: Is she married?

JAN: No.

BUCKLEY: Would you consent for her to marry a Negro?

MAX: Objection!

JAN: I have nothing to do with whom she marries.

MAX: This is beyond the range of decency . . .

JUDGE: Yes; you had better confine yourself, Mr. District Attorney, to the legal issues here.

BUCKLEY: Mr. Erlone, were you surprised when you heard of the death of Miss Dalton?

JAN: I was stunned. I thought surely there was some mistake . . .

BUCKLEY: You had not expected that Negro to go that far, had you?

MAX: I object! Mr. Erlone is not on trail [sic] here. Never, Your Honor, have I heard in an American

court room such crass and contemptuous assaults upon the public decency!

BUCKLEY: (Above the shouting in the court room) You didn't expect that black boy to go as far as rape, did you?

JUDGE: (Rapping in order to be heard) The court is adjourned until 2 P.M. Will the Marshal please clear the spectators from the court . . .

LAP DISSOLVE

Anyone familiar with the text of Native Son can see that Wright severely condensed Erlone's testimony; nevertheless, he kept intact the sense of where Buckley's line of questioning was leading, for an essential element in the novel is Bigger's cognition that if he were discovered alone with Mary in her bedroom, he would be accused of rape.

Furthermore, under the section called "Crimes Against the Law," the 1930 Production Code stipulated that "the presentation must not throw sympathy with the crime as against the law nor with the criminal as against those who punish him" (Farber 124). Consequently, the remainder of the trial may have been deleted by the censors because, as the following excerpt from Wright's script indicates, Max makes it clear that he considers American society partially responsible for Bigger's crimes:

STUDIO - The court room - DAY

OPEN DISSOLVE

The court is packed. A tense atmosphere prevails and there is the rise and fall of the mob's voice outside. Just beneath the surface of the proceedings is a political fight which at times breaks out into bitter accusations which are curbed by the judge. The elections for the Office of District Attorney are pending. Buckley, the District Attorney who is presenting the State's case against Bigger, is a candidate to succeed himself and he plays upon the fears of the mob, rousing it to a white-hot pitch of hate against minorities. Max, Bigger's lawyer, is a friend of Jan Erlone, and he decides, under provisions stipulated in Illinois law, to enter a plea of guilty based upon the confession that Bigger has already signed. Max is trusting his logic and eloquence to set forth the mitigating circumstances which, he says, caused Bigger to kill. Max's strategy is to save Bigger's life; he intends to introduce evidence to prove Bigger's guilt is only partial, and that it is society, rather than Bigger himself, that is to be condemned for stunting Bigger's emotional and

> mental life, and that back of Bigger's so-called crimes lay a vast mass of socio-economic facts which ought to be taken into consideration [italics mine]. (Max's tactics generally resemble those which Clarence Darrow used in pleading for leniency in the Leob-Leopold case.) The District Attorney claims that Max's presentation of Bigger's case amounts to a sly way of saying that Bigger is insane and ought not to be held responsible for his crimes. Max denies this.

It is rather ironic that Max's speech, which constitutes almost twenty pages of the printed text of Native Son, may have been completely annihilated from the film version because the Production Code, which made ample provisions for scenes of sex and violence among whites, omitted taking into consideration the complicity that a society may share in an individual's guilt.

Nevertheless, even if some films like Native Son were mangled or destroyed in the process, the implementation of the Code appeared to benefit Hollywood in general, for it permitted the industry to continue its policy of self-regulation, and it promoted the production of Hollywood films that are to this day considered classics. As William Manchester notes about the movies produced in the mid-30s and 40s in The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of

America 1932-1972 "appealing as they did to all ages and slighting no class--except blacks, who remained unnoticed even by themselves--films had strengthened familial ties and reminded moviegoers of values they shared" (724). Unfortunately, as the above quotation makes all too obvious, if the films produced under the stringent 1930 Motion Picture Production Code happened to dismiss blacks who, as Wright definitively demonstrated with his novel Native Son, were not deliberately negating themselves, it was merely in keeping with the rest of white society's racist attitude towards African Americans.

Hollywood's immediate gain, however, would eventually become its loss since Code enforcement prevented movies from dramatizing significant moral and social issues. As a result, one of the most important aspects of film--its ability to recreate visually other modes of existence--began to diminish in 1934 with the establishment of the Breen Office. In place of offering a critique of American society by providing visions of different ways of seeing and less morally demanding ways of living, movie producers suddenly found it more financially rewarding to promote the basic economic, moral, and social mores of traditional American culture--as dictated from Italy via the Vatican--through the end of the Second World War.

Indeed, up until the Cold War, as long as film

producers upheld the Code (which changed a number of times over the years that it remained in effect), filmmakers prospered in what has come to be known as Hollywood's Classical Period. Just as the Depression had benefitted Hollywood as people flocked to movie theaters to escape reality and as puritanical restraints were loosened to encourage people to go to the movies and forget the hard times, World War II was good for Hollywood. Not only were movie producers permitted to continue making a product that had already shown itself to be a perfect vehicle to take people's minds off of their troubles at home and abroad, but also Code enforcement was lifted to encourage more people to forget their problems by going to the movies. As soon as movie producers saw that they could actually increase their profits by upholding American morality rather than by trying to skirt around it, they were anxious to go out of their way to do what they could for the war effort: They sent performers overseas to entertain the troops at no charge to the U.S. Government, and they also made movies which helped rally the American forces by portraying American soldiers heroically fighting for democracy while vanquishing the enemy. The Negro Soldier (1944) was just one of many wartime documentaries produced during World War II by consummate Hollywood filmmaker Frank Capra--It Happened One Night (1934), Mr. Deeds Goes to Town

(1936), Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939, and, following the war, It's a Wonderful Life (1946)--as head of film propaganda for the United States Armed Forces. And just as The Negro Soldier encouraged African Americans to join the Army by showing blacks as well as whites the important part they played in the fight against Nazism, Capra's earlier Why We Fight series of wartime documentaries infused patriotism into civilians as well as enlisted men. Indeed, by the end of the war, Hollywood was at its peak, for not only had the movie industry gloriously demonstrated its "collective mythmaking power," (Ray 129) but also box-office receipts reached 1.7 billion dollars--making 1946 the most profitable year ever for Hollywood.

But the U.S. Government's memory is notoriously short when it comes to expressing gratitude for past favors. Almost as soon as the Allied forces could claim victory, the Soviet Union was declared an enemy. And just as conditions did not improve for blacks once the Negro soldiers returned from Europe, the American purists were quick to reinstitute their attack against the Hollywood film industry. In fact, a number of popular prewar features like Casablanca (Michael Curtiz 1942) were suddenly considered subversive because they had portrayed foreigners as individuals who possessed intelligence that equaled or surpassed that of Americans. Furthermore, as

Robert B. Ray notes in A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980, immediately following World War II, the movie industry was bombarded with a number of severe shocks levied by the same government that it had worked so hard during the war to support:

> In quick succession during the postwar period, the industry found itself victimized by one of the first and most vigorous of the congressional witch hunts (1947), stripped of its guaranteed markets by the Paramount antitrust ruling (1948), and deprived of its overseas markets by European tariffs and freezes on the removal of revenues (1947-1950). (131)

I certainly agree with Ray's conclusion that any one of the above factors could have been responsible for a more conservative attitude toward filmmaking; however, the changes in Hollywood brought about as a result of the congressional witch hunt are most pertinent to this study.

From the start of motion picture history, social crusaders had made film the culprit when things went awry within American society, for movies had power; and even if that power was intangible, its very intangibility made them ideal scapegoats. Consequently, following World War II and Winston Churchill's official recognition of the Iron Curtain, Hollywood became the victim of the Red Scare when

the threat of a Communist takeover of America seemed imminent. Not only could redbaiters easily persuade the public that Communists would attempt to overthrow the government by taking over the entertainment and information media first, but also since Hollywood had such an enormous following, any attack upon it was bound to generate a great deal of publicity for the accusers. Moreover, in what amounts to an ironic twist, films and filmmakers were not guaranteed protection under the First Amendment.

Under intense congressional scrutiny, Hollywood again strove to maintain self-regulation by choosing Eric Johnston, the President of the United States Chamber of Commerce--the self-same organization that had suggested that Communists would infiltrate the entertainment industry first--to succeed Will H. Hays as their industry's representative. Not only was Johnston not the politician that Hays had been, but also there was little anyone could do to stem HUAC's singular determination to find and destroy all "un-Americans," once the House Committee had resolved to ferret out Communist traitors and had convinced itself they were hiding in Hollywood. Moreover, HUAC had what no other social reform or civil liberty interest group could claim before--a splinter group within the movie industry whose members were more than willing to testify against their colleagues.

A number of conservative Hollywood movie personnel dedicated to defending the industry against alleged Communist infiltrators had formed the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Values (MPA) in 1944. Unfortunately, many of its members' motives were not as lofty as they would have them seem:

> Some wanted to square old grievances, defend past decisions, get even with old enemies, advance their own careers or causes. More often than not their testimony was petty, mean, craven, even stupid. But some had also come to share a purpose they had not had in mind when they encouraged HUAC to enter their world: they wanted to limit the damage the committee was inflicting on their industry. If the wrath they had helped to unleash could be deflected toward the `unfriendlies,' perhaps their industry could still survive the hearings with its powers and prerogatives intact. (Sklar 262)

In any case, without the aid of the MPA, HUAC might have found the movie industry as impenetrable as its earlier critics had and simply left Hollywood alone. But with the assistance of the MPA's "friendly witnesses," HUAC had a powerful ally within the movie industry itself. The rest is a perpetual stain on American history.

In a second significant political move, the day following the one on which the House of Representatives voted to uphold the contempt citations levied by HUAC on the ten "unfriendly witnesses," the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA) released the following statement regarding their position in reference to the Hollywood Ten:

> We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the Government of the United States by force, or by any illegal or unconstitutional method. (Sklar 265)

With that conviction, and its unofficial implementation of the blacklist, Hollywood signed its own death certificate, for the industry ceased to be seen by the American filmgoing public as simply the purveyor of myths and the conveyors of the glorious American dream; instead, it became the harbinger of one of this country's unforgettable nightmares.

It was not the first time that Hollywood had capitulated to outside influence and turned against its own in an attempt to maintain internal censorship; it had done that before with the Fatty Arbuckle scandal. But this second move, spurred in part by the political expediency of maintaining self-regulation at any cost, would signal the

beginning of the end of movies as the quintessential medium in which it was possible to both reflect and correct traditional American values; the emerging television industry would begin to assume that function. More importantly, the MPAA's maneuver would begin to signify the end of movies as dream machines continually creating and fleshing out previously unimagined fantasies. In its place, Hollywood would tend to play it safe and endlessly recreate tried and true formulas. Not only would Wright's 1951 film adaptation of Native Son suffer as a consequence, but also Wesley's 1986 screen version of Wright's novel would too. Indeed, the long-time effects of Hollywood's 1947 capitulation to HUAC would prove devastating to a multifarious representation of African Americans on the silver screen, for Hollywood would resist the new and look back to conservative, already publicly approved images of blacks--such as those fabricated by D.W. Griffith in The Birth of a Nation for its future depictions of blacks.

The short-term effect on Wright's film version of Native Son would be less immediately obvious. In fact, in the same year that HUAC condemned the ten screenwriters, Wright received the following proposal from Hollywood producer Harold Hecht, who was eager to adapt Native Son to the celluloid screen:

> The plans are to change the leading Negro

> character to an oppressed minority white man, but rest assured that we have every desire to preserve the integrity of the original work . . . It will have a relationship to life as it is lived in this country and not be a glamourized, fictional Hollywood report. (Brunette 133)

Wright refused. Needless to say, he would not have considered making Bigger Thomas any race other than the black one, but given Hollywood's continued interest in bringing his novel to the screen--even after the advent of the Cold War and in the midst of the Communist witchhunt--one can understand why Wright felt that his cinematic rendition of Native Son would have mass audience appeal. In fact, one of the reasons perhaps that Wright adapted Native Son to the screen himself was to prevent his message from being completely obliterated by American filmmakers. As Michel Fabre notes in The Unfinished Quest, Wright turned down "a great many offers to buy the movie rights to Native Son because he felt "the desire to make a profit would lead to overaccommodations to public taste" (336).

One reason why Wright was constantly being besieged with Hollywood offers to adapt his novel to film in the decade following HUAC's investigation was that the movie industry had returned to using best-selling novels to develop their plots, since, for the most part, these works

represented uncontroversial story material. In fact, within the first ten years following the House Committee's condemnation of the Hollywood Ten, an inordinate number of commercially successful films were adapted from novels, plays, and short stories: A Place in the Son (George Stevens 1951), "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (Henry King 1952), The African Queen (John Huston 1951), East of Eden (Elia Kazan 1955), A Streetcar Named Desire (Elia Kazan 1951), High Society (Charles Walter 1956), From Here to Eternity (Fred Zinnemann 1953), The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (Nunnally Johnson 1956), and The King and I (Walter Lang 1956) are merely a few examples.

Furthermore, during the years in which Wright was engaged in adapting Native Son to the screen, the negative repercussions of HUAC's investigation of the Hollywood industry had not yet begun to take effect. "Problem pictures"--such as Gentleman's Agreement (Elia Kazan 1947), Crossfire (Edward Dmytryk 1947), Intruder in the Dust (Clarence Brown 1948) and Pinky (Elia Kazan 1949)--which examined anti-Semitism and racial injustice were doing big business and "signaling the audience's growing tolerance, and even demand, for movies that explored disturbing areas of American life previously ignored by the blithe sweep of Hollywood's reconciliatory patterns" (Ray 144). Therefore,

even though two Hollywood producers had suggested changing the race of his protagonist, Wright knew that Native Son had sold more than two hundred thousand copies with a black anti-hero at its center; more importantly, he knew that if his message was to remain intact, Bigger had to remain black.

When Wright's screen adaptation of Native Son was sent by the Walter Gould Agency for review to the New York Board of Censors, it had been scheduled to premiere at the Criterion Theatre on 15 April 1951, just about the same time that HUAC--led this time by Senator Joseph P. McCarthy--reopened its congressional investigation of Hollywood. Because of problems with the censors, Native Son's opening had to be postponed two months; and when it did finally premiere, more than thirty minutes of footage had been cut.

Given the fact that Wright's film version of Native Son tells the story of a young black man who kills twice and is subsequently defended by a Communist (thinly disguised as a labor lawyer) who asserts that America's unjust society has partially turned the young man into the murderer he has become, it is not surprising that a group of loyal American citizens would relentlessly slash Wright's film before approving it suitable for public viewing. Indeed, the need to extricate themselves from any

understandably be a primary consideration on the censors' agenda. As a result, one could conclude that the New York Review Board of Motion Picture censors used their scissors without regard to race or sex. One could even argue that members of the Board were merely attempting to excise what could have resulted in severe political reprisal--if it were not for the fact that the same crucial scenes from the text are absent from the 1986 film adaptation of Native Son.

Taking into consideration the fact that Ronald Reagan, who had served as a "friendly witness" for HUAC during the 1947 congressional investigations of Hollywood, was the President of the United States in the 1980s--which suggests the extent to which American politics had after the 1960s reverted back to the conservatism of the 1950s--a great deal had nevertheless changed within the film industry between the premieres of Richard Wright's 1951 film adaptation of Native Son and Richard Wesley's 1986 cinematic translation of Wright's novel. First and foremost, the 1930 Production Code had been abolished in 1968 and replaced with a ratings system--still based, of course, on the principle of industry self-regulation. In revoking the Code, newly appointed President of the MPPA Jack Valenti remarked in a public statement reminiscent of a more informal one made by Will H. Hays more than forty

years earlier, "censorship is an odious enterprise . . . alien to the American tradition of freedom" (Farber 112). Since 1968, in fact, the ratings have changed a number of times to allow movies to be even more sexually, verbally, and violently explicit.

Moreover, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) underwent a name change in 1969 and became the House Internal Security Committee before it was abolished completely in 1975. Additionally, independent production companies replaced the large Hollywood studios, and actors and actresses began to wield more clout than their producers. Furthermore, many Hollywood stars became willing to take active political roles and to voice, if necessary, anti-establishment positions. And, finally, sympathetic treatments of Communists, like the one portrayed in the movie Reds (Warren Beatty 1981), had become big box-office and received major film industry awards. Indeed, so much had changed since Wright adapted Native Son to the screen that the similarities between the two film adaptations of Native Son are almost uncanny--particularly given the fact that Wesley wrote the 1986 version of the screenplay before he even saw Wright's 1951 film.[6]

More specifically, missing from both film adaptations of Native Son is the dialogue among the newspapermen after

they discover that Bigger has killed Mary, the rape of Bessie Mears, and the critical trial scene, which takes up more than one-third of the novel but in both versions of the film is allotted a few disjointed minutes. Since these topics have been "safely" covered in other films, one cannot simplistically assume that little has changed over the span of thirty-five years regarding what is and what is not permissible when it comes to the portrayal of African Americans on the silver screen. However, the striking resemblances between the two commercially and critically unsuccessful screen adaptations of Wright's Native Son, which become glaringly apparent in the contemporary reviews, suggest that the abrogation of the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code in favor of the 1968 ratings system has not furthered a multifaceted visual representation of African Americans on the silver screen. The following is an excerpt from one reviewer's critique written shortly after the premiere of the 1951 film version of Native Son:

> On the screen Richard Wright's masterful novel, `Native Son,' has had its human heart cut out, along with the deep insight into the bitter and baffled Negro youth, Bigger Thomas, and its flashing illumination for the rest of us of the defeats and torments in this world that drive Bigger inevitably to his doom.

> This 'Native Son' emerges only as a crude and tawdry and gravely unbalanced shocker, which details endlessly all the lurid, nightmarish facts of Bigger's slaying of his rich employer's daughter and his subsequent efforts to cover up, while giving the bum's rush to the vital matter of the forces and motivations in Bigger's life, to the blows of the spirit that twist him and scar him almost beyond endurance.
>
> Understand him? Explain him? Through three or four paltry minutes "Native Son" makes a perfunctorily, wholly unconvincing stab at revealing Bigger's inner nature. But through 88 minutes this shabby, sensational movie concentrates externally on a surly, bullying, yet spineless Bigger who lies, cheats, connives, pulls a knife, brawls, and kills.

The preceding review appeared 18 June 1951 in the Daily Compass. For those who saw the 1986 film version of Native Son, with the exception of the phrase "bum's rush" (which is no longer used), and the mention of eighty-eight minutes (the 1986 screen version of Native Son is slightly longer), the above could have served as an appropriate critique of both.

In fact, the following excerpt from a review of the

1986 Native Son, which appeared in the Washington Post on 16 January 1987, is as incriminating as the earlier one:

> The filmmakers have simplified, condensed and emasculated Wright's angry prose to the point of ridiculousness. All the moral horror of black life in segregated America is toned down, from Bigger's fear and hatred of white people, to the violence he directs at his friends and his indifference to his own family, to the hateful actions of most of the whites in the book.
>
> The horror of Bigger's first murder is diluted (in the book he must decapitate his victim to stuff her body into a furnace; in the film, she fits nicely, though this destroys one of Wright's most potent symbols). The second, even more brutal killing--of his black girlfriend--is eliminated altogether. Bigger's trial, which takes up more than a third of the novel and which brings out so much of Wright's thoughts and feelings on racism, justice, and social responsibility is compressed into a couple of brief scenes. The defense lawyer's final plea, a blistering indictment of American society, is condensed from 18 pages to two nonspecific sentences.

The enforcement of the 1930 Production Code might justify some of the absences in Wright's cinematic version of Native Son, but it does not explain why the same essential scenes are missing from the 1986 film adaptation--which was produced almost twenty years after the Code had been abolished. Indeed, the similarities between the reviews received by the 1951 and 1986 film adaptations of Native Son lead one to conclude that current Hollywood censorial practices, which permit filmmakers to endlessly depict graphic scenes of sex and violence among whites, delimit the portrayal of analogous scenes among blacks and whites. In other words, it seems that a different set of restrictions are in effect when it comes to the representation of African Americans on the silver screen. As I attempt to illustrate in Chapter 4, it appears that one of Hollywood's unwritten codes--which proved detrimental to the commercial and critical success of both film versions of Native Son--prohibits the destruction of cultural myths involving black male sexuality in commercial American cinema.

CHAPTER 3

THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

> *I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and distributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role it is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.* (Foucault 216)

Richard Wright's Native Son did for the American novel what D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation did for American film. As Irving Howe in "Black Boys and Native Sons" remarks, "the day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever" (Hakutani 41). No United States President, however, ushered in Wright's achievement with words to the effect that "it was like writing history with lightning"--as Woodrow Wilson reportedly said of Griffith's epic (Carter 9). In actual fact, the critical reception that Native Son received upon its publication was quite problematic. Not only were the contemporary reviews indicative of the way in which criticism is used by the existing hegemony to subvert the revolutionary import of an African American text that does not support the ideology of dominant white society, but also they were partially responsible for the subsequent failure of the two film

adaptations.

Howe, who specialized in African American narrative, was just one of many critics who proceeded to gloss over the distinctive features of Wright's narrative strategy and to elaborate upon those aspects of Native Son that, in his opinion, made it a work of such considerable significance:

> Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. Speaking from the black wrath of retribution, Wright insisted that history can be a punishment. He told us the one thing that even the liberal whites preferred not to hear: that Negroes were far from patient or forgiving, that they were scarred by fear, that they hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often they hated us, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity of neglect shared in the responsibility for their plight. (Hakutani 41)

Howe's claims may be exaggerated since Native Son is a work of fiction envisioned by a single black author and not an entire race, but Howe's overall conclusion is correct: the publication of Native Son represented more than just an incident in African American letters; it constituted a

momentous event in American literary history.

As critic and writer Sterling Brown noted about Native Son in the June 1940 issue of Opportunity:

> A Book-of-the-Month Club selection, its first edition sold out within three hours, a quarter million copies called for within six weeks, Richard Wright's Native Son is a literary phenomenon. Magazines have run articles about it after the first reviews. It is discussed by literary critics, scholars, social workers, journalists, writers to the editor, preachers, students, and the man in the street. It seems important to the reviewer that debates on Native Son may be heard in grills and `juke joints' as well as at `literary' parties, in the deep South as well as in Chicago, among people who have not bothered much to read novels since Ivanhoe was assigned in high school English.
>
> One commentator writes that the book has `torn the surface veneer from a condition which is awakening the conscience of the entire nation.' Only the future can decide whether the revelations in Native Son awaken the conscience of the nation; according to history that conscience is not easily aroused. But, if such

> a great and difficult task could be achieved by a single book, Native Son is that book.

Brown was not the only one to recognize the novel's revolutionary status, and Wright was catapulted into instant fame:

> Everyone asked Wright for interviews, talks, autographs. His fan mail was voluminous, ranging from strangers offering their friendly congratulations, to readers asking him agonizing questions on how they could help "solve the black problem." (Fabre 180)

Everyone, of course, was not enamored of Richard Wright, and Native Son certainly received its share of negative reviews. But the opportunity to "[enter] the mind of a black man," which Native Son allegedly provided its white readers, outweighed the protests of its detractors and had little deleterious impact on sales (Reilly xiv). In fact, much of the immediate commercial success of Native Son was directly attributable to the overwhelmingly favorable responses the book garnered from the press; and, although most reviewers indicated that the novel had its faults, they were, nevertheless, significantly impressed with its power, its intensity, and its ring of truth regarding the African American's reaction to her or his condition in the United States.

Few contemporary critics were content, however, merely to comment on Native Son's literary merits. Even those who were most enthusiastic in their reception of Native Son felt it was incumbent upon them to abandon their usual critical approach and to speak at length about the novel's "otherness"--its black author, black protagonist, and black subject matter. A number of the reviewers actually acknowledged outright that they were deviating from normal critical practice because of the unique nature of Native Son (in other words, its blackness). The fact that the commentators admitted that their preoccupation with Native Son's "otherness" made them cast aside the norms they usually applied to literary texts corroborates the poststructuralist position that criticism is neither innocent nor unbiased. Rather, as W. Lawrence Hogue in Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Text suggests:

> Criticism as practiced by editors, publishers, reviewers, and critics, then, is not scientific; it is a preeminently political exercise that works upon and mediates the reception of literary texts. It is an active and on going part of literature and the cultural apparatus as they produce objects whose effects' function to reproduce a particular literary experience, or

> particular literary conventions and stereotypes. As a series of interventions within the uses of which so-called literary texts are to be put, critical practice sends out signals as to the worth and value of literary texts. Those literary texts that reproduce particular literary experiences are promoted and certified. Those that do not reproduce certain experiences or ideological effects are repressed or subordinated. (5)

In short, criticism is a tool that can be used by members of the dominant society to diffuse the potential power of any text that threatens to upset the existing hegemony. As examples from contemporary reviews of Native Son reveal, many critics were all to willing to make that hidden aim of criticism blatantly clear.

In a predominately negative review of Native Son entitled "Uneven Effect," which appeared in the Boston Evening Transcript the day after Native Son was published on 2 March 1940, Howard Mumford Jones admitted, "I am compelled, contrary to rule, to reveal the plot in order to discuss the novel." Jones was not alone in straying from convention, for the majority of Native Son's reviewers divulged the entire plot of the novel within a week of its appearance on the bookshelves. The reason why Jones and

the others felt that they had to give the story away before the readers had a chance to discover it for themselves is never explicitly stated. But one can conclude from a perusal of their reviews that Jones and the others wanted to protect the white reader from the shock of the plot or to control the way in which he or she responded to Native Son's incendiary content.

The critics' attempt to mitigate Native Son's effect on the American reading public took a number of different avenues. One route was to compare Native Son to novels of similar ilk. Although new works of literature are typically critiqued in light of other texts that have preceded them, Native Son's intertextuality was only cursorily mentioned. The effect was two-fold: first, it deradicalized the novel by identifying Native Son with a pre-existing literary movement and mode; second, it allowed reviewers to gloss over Native Son's distinctive literary features. For example, Henry Seidel Canby's advance review for the Book-of-the-Month-Club News merely promises its subscribers that Native Son, "like Grapes of Wrath, is a fully realized story of unfortunates, uncompromisingly realistic, and quite as human as it is Negro." Lewis Gannett, whose review of Native Son was printed in the New York Herald Tribune on 1 March 1940, concurs with Dorothy Canfield Fisher's opinion, as expressed in her introductory

essay to the first edition of Native Son, that the novel is "comparable only to Dostoievski's revelation of human misery in wrongdoing." Gannett concludes his review with the following remarks:

> Dorothy Canfield says that there is no finer effect in Dostoievski than the last page of "Native Son." Henry Seidel Canby says that "Native Son" is `certainly the finest novel as yet written by an American Negro.' It is more than that. It is a super-shocker; it is also a deeply compassionate and understanding novel. As nearly as anything can be it is the "Grapes of Wrath" of 1940.

No further connections are made between Wright and either Dostoevski or Steinbeck. In a similar fashion, writing for the 2 March 1940 edition of the New York World Telegram, Harry Hansen mentions in passing that Native Son "carries so much truth and justice in the telling that we read it to the end with the rapt attention that we gave Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy over 15 years ago." Needless to say, no additional references to Native Son's similarity to An American Tragedy are noted.

Clifton Fadiman's review of Native Son, which appeared in the New Yorker on 2 March 1940, went further than most in comparing Native Son to other novels. Even though

Fadiman does not attempt to establish other connections when he remarks that "Richard Wright's Native Son is the most powerful American novel to appear since the Grapes of Wrath," Fadiman proceeds to argue:

> Native Son does for the Negro what Theodore Dreiser in An American Tragedy did a decade and a half ago for the bewildered, inarticulate American white. The two books are similar in theme, in technique, in their almost paralyzing effect on the reader, and in the large, brooding humanity, quite remote from special pleading, that informs them both.

Fadiman's critique may only skim the literary surface; nevertheless, it offers far more insight into Native Son's intertextuality than most of the other contemporary reviews, particularly the one entitled "Bad Nigger," which appeared anonymously in Time magazine on 4 March 1940. Although the Time review was only one of many that summarized the plot of Native Son, it was unique in that it made little attempt to disguise the political ideology of its writer. As one can see from the following quotation, the reviewer is primarily using the critical convention of citing other texts as an acceptable means of expressing her or his own bigoted and inflammatory opinion:

> For all its murder-mystery suspense, Native Son

> is no more simply a crime story than was Crime and Punishment. Bigger's murders only pull the trigger of Author Wright's bigger story--the murderous potentialities of the whole U.S. Negro problem.

Unfortunately, the Time reviewer was not unique in her or his inability to see the fictional work apart from its author or distinct from the threat to "innocent" whites that Bigger's murder of Mary dramatized. In fact, a number of critics seemed to feel that the most efficacious way to defuse the potentially revolutionary consequences of Native Son's premise was to compare or contrast Richard Wright with Bigger Thomas.

For instance, some reviewers were quick to point out that Wright, like Bigger, was a black migrant from the South with little or no education; the implication was clear: if Wright could become an important novelist, then Bigger Thomas and the other "Biggers" of the world could too. Other reviewers reminded their audiences that Wright, who in many ways resembled Bigger, had, nevertheless, not turned out like Bigger, so there was no real reason for whites to fear the black retribution Wright wrote about.

Few reviewers were willing to distinguish between Richard Wright and his fictional protagonist Bigger Thomas. Consequently, one must assume that the attention the

reviewers paid to those details of Wright's life that corresponded most with Bigger's served an extraliterary purpose. Indeed, one could conclude that the paradoxical impulse to prove that Bigger was very much like Wright in many ways but quite unlike Wright in others was prompted by the desire to militate against any possible negative consequences that could be triggered by Wright's assertion that "real-life Biggers" actually existed.[7]

The excessive biographical information included in contemporary reviews of Native Son support the above contention. Gannett, for instance, suggests that Native Son is "the story of the boy Richard Wright just missed becoming." In fact, after summarizing Wright's life in a brief biographical sketch, Gannett proceeds to remark:

> But somewhere in that shift from truant to creative writer there is another--and a less harrowing--story which I hope Richard Wright will set down on paper. It is no less, and no more, true a part of the story of the Negro in America than is the story of Bigger Thomas.

Unlike many other reviewers, Gannett openly admits that he intentionally included details of Wright's life in his evaluation of Native Son to suggest that black life in America need not be as bleak as Wright presents it. Most reviewers, however, were not as overt as Gannett in stating

their reasons for digressing from their normal critical method. Not only are the contemporary reviews of Native Son peppered with plot summaries and superficial references to its literary predecessors, but also they are spiced with interesting though irrelevant incidents from Wright's life.

Fadiman, for example, could not refrain from adding biographical data to his review of Wright's novel. Although Fadiman appears sincere in his intent to judge Native Son on its literary qualities, he, nevertheless, informs his readers:

> Mr. Wright is too explicit. He says too many things over and over again. His characterizations of upper-class whites are paper-thin and confess unfamiliarity. I think he overdoes his melodrama from time to time. He is not a finished writer. But the two absolute necessities of a first-class novelist--passion and intelligence--are in him. That he received the most rudimentary schooling, that for most of his life he has been an aimless itinerant worker are interesting facts but of no great moment in judging his book.

One can sense from the above quotation that Fadiman does not believe that extraliterary factors should be considered in appraising a work of art; therefore, the fact that he

offers his readers irrelevant biographical information about Wright is an excellent indication of the extent to which "explicating the black difference" skewed the critical reception of Native Son. Indeed, so many of the reviewers' responses to the publication of Native Son diverged so far from normal literary practice that two critics took it upon themselves to respond at length to commentaries: one was Richard Wright, himself, and the other was Samuel Sillen.

Although Native Son received a number of negative reviews, Wright was so infuriated by two of them that he subsequently took the "unusual course for a novelist under review of sending vehement denunciations of the presumptions of Rascoe and Cohn to American Mercury and Atlantic Monthly" (Reilly xviii). In view of Wright's uncommon reaction to Burton Rascoe and David Cohn's condemnation of his novel--particularly in light of some of the other unfavorable comments previously cited--we need to understand what Rascoe and Cohn said that so provoked Wright. Cohn's review of Native Son, which appeared in the May 1940 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, begins by calling Native Son "a blinding and corrosive study of hate." Cohn is especially disturbed by Bigger's attitude toward whites:

> The race hatred of [Wright's] hero, Bigger Thomas, is directed with equal and demoniac

> intensity toward all whites, whether they are Mary Dalton, the mooney Negrophile whom he murdered, or the vague white men who seemed to bar his youthful ambition to become an aviator or join the navy.

At the same time, Cohn praises Native Son for its characterization of Bigger:

> This book has far-reaching qualities of significance above and beyond its considerable virtues as a novel, because Mr. Wright elects to portray his hero not as an individual merely but as a symbol of twelve million American Negroes.

Unfortunately, Cohn does not clarify his remarks by enunciating any of Native Son's "considerable virtues." Instead, Cohn sums up Native Son's 359 pages in a paragraph and follows his summation with the intimation that Wright's vision is distorted because "Bigger's crimes and his fate in the electric chair . . . are consequently to be laid at the door of white society." Cohn, who does not agree with Wright, elliptically quotes the following lines from Max's speech at Bigger's trial:

> "This boy," says lawyer Max, "represents but a tiny aspect of the problem whose reality sprawls over a third of a nation. . . . Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for

> environmental and temperamental variations . . . and you have the psychology of the Negro people. . . . Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights."

Not only does Cohn overlook Max's qualifier, which allows for environmental and temperamental variations in the Negro populations make-up, but also he suggests that "Mr. Wright might have made a more manly and certainly more convincing case for his people if he had stuck to fact": facts that Cohn feels will help Wright see the correct point of view that he and other African Americans should adopt toward the oppression of black people in the United States. First, Cohn reminds Wright that most, if not all, of the Negroes in the United States enjoy suffrage. Second, Cohn informs Wright:

> If [the Negro] is sometimes put in jail for no reason at all in Memphis, so too are whites put in jail for no reason at all in Pittsburgh. This is the unjust fate, not of the Negro alone, but of the poor, the obscure, and the inarticulate everywhere, regardless of pigmentation.

Why Cohn chose to include these particular observations in

his review of Native Son is not clear, since Wright's point is not that Bigger is unjustly incarcerated or that Max's statements are only to be construed as applicable to blacks. What is clear from the above quotation, however, is the extent to which Cohn was willing to stray from the actual text to repudiate the novel. As one would expect, Cohn's other comments to Wright are equally expressive of his overall intention to denigrate the novel by undermining confidence in its author.

In addition to telling Wright that Negroes in the South own "more than a billion dollars'worth of property," Cohn recalls the "unparalleled phenomenon--unique in the world's history--of the first American Civil War, in which millions of white men fought and killed one another over the issue of the black slave." Cohn's need to reiterate to Wright the circumstances surrounding the Civil War must stem from the unsubstantiated conviction expressed in his review that Wright wrote Native Son to incite "Negroes, in conjunction with others, towards a new civil war in America." Moreover, one can only assume that Cohn's fear of Wright's allegedly subversive purpose in writing Native Son is behind his admonishment to Wright to look at the history of the world and to go slow, for, in Cohn's opinion, Wright's revolutionary attitude toward Negro oppression in America is the result of his ignorance.

As Cohn sees it, Wright "obviously does not have the long view of history. He wants not only complete political rights for his people, but also social equality, and he wants them now." According to Cohn, Wright needs to remember "the experience of the Jews in England, who were first granted full civil rights only after five centuries of living in the country"; furthermore, Wright has to recognize that "the social structure of America, despite many racial admixtures, is Anglo-Saxon. And nowhere on earth--save in isolated instances--do whites and Negroes in Anglo-Saxon communities intermingle socially or intermarry."

Regrettably, Cohn is able to support his position regarding the appropriate place that blacks should be willing to take within the existing social order by quoting from a speech that Abraham Lincoln once delivered to a black delegation:

> You and we are different races. . . . But even when you cease to be slaves you are yet far from being placed on an equality with the white race. . . . The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this continent not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. . . . Go where you are treated best, and the ban is still upon you.

Given Lincoln's statement, Cohn's inability to understand why Wright chose to "make his hero [Bigger] so hopelessly despairing of making a good life for himself because of white repressions, that he drives him to crime and execution when his adult life has hardly begun" reveals more about Cohn than it does about Wright. Perhaps Cohn is so blinded by his own anti-Negro prejudice that he cannot see that his notion that "the Negro problem in America is actually insoluble" is not one that Wright shares. As a result, Cohn misses Wright's point that the conditions that created Bigger can be changed and finds Native Son intolerable because "hatred, and the preaching of hatred, and incitement to violence can only make a tolerable relationship intolerable."

Most readers of Native Son can readily understand why Wright would be vexed enough by Cohn's blatantly racist remarks--remarks only surpassed in their distortion of the facts by their degree of condescension--that he would be moved to write a rebuttal. Nevertheless, it was not until Rascoe's review appeared in the American Mercury in the same month as Cohn's that Wright actually undertook the task of responding to the fallacious arguments of both. The result became literary history, for Wright wrote the essay "How `Bigger' Was Born," documenting "the social sources for his conception of the violent protagonist of

his novel" (Reilly xvii). Initially delivered as a lecture, then printed in the 1 June 1940 issue of The Saturday Review of Literature, then released later that year in its entirety as a pamphlet by Harper and Brothers, and finally published in subsequent editions of Native Son as Wright's introduction to the novel, "How `Bigger' Was Born" was Wright's answer to Cohn and Rascoe and all the other critics who wished to insinuate that Wright's hero was merely a figment of the author's too fanciful imagination.

Rascoe's review of Native Son was as harsh as Cohn's, but it had a different thrust. Instead of berating Wright for misapprehending the political exigencies that help circumscribe black life in the United States, Rascoe rebuked those reviewers who praised the book because "sanely considered, it is impossible for me to conceive of a novel's being worse, in the most important aspects, than Native Son." Although Rascoe concedes that "[Native Son] has many technical excellences," like Cohn, Rascoe does not delineate what those "technical excellences" are. Instead Rascoe broadly defines them as "such as any Street and Smith editor would applaud, or as Walter B. Pitkin, in his writing classes at Columbia would grade as A-1." Unlike Cohn, however, Rascoe's indignation is not directed as much at Wright as it is towards his fellow reviewers whom he

feels:

> Concerning no novel in recent times, with the possible exception of The Grapes of Wrath, have displayed a more utterly juvenile confusion of values than they have shown in their ecstatic appraisal of Richard Wright's Native Son.

Rascoe cannot comprehend how his colleagues could have missed the "faults in the novel which even a tyro in fiction should not be guilty of"; therefore, he proceeds to enumerate them for the edification of his peers, whom he has already accused of being both infantile and insane in their regard for Native Son. Even though Rascoe never overtly admits that Native Son's revolutionary content is what he finds so disturbing about the novel, one can read between the lines and see that it is not the medium that finally concerns him but the message. The following synopsis of the faults that Rascoe finds Wright guilty of can serve as an example of the way in which he uses literary convention to camouflage his own reactionary position. First, Rascoe attacks Wright's narrative and thematic strategy by pointing out Native Son's weaknesses in those aspects:

> If there is a moral message to be emphasized, that message should be made implicit in the consistent action and dialogue of the novel. It

> should not be in the form of a running commentary by the author, particularly not when the author is very confused about what he wants to prove.

Second, Rascoe specifies the faults he finds in Wright's characterization of Bigger:

> If a character is conceived as being inarticulate about the economic and social forces which have (in your mind) been responsible for his social and moral delinquency, it is an artistic error to portray that character, at times, as being fully conscious of the `conditions' which have mentally and emotionally crippled him.

And lastly, Rascoe attributes those weaknesses in Bigger's characterization to Wright's ignorance of literary convention:

> It is a violation of a fundamental esthetic principle--sanctioned from Aristotle on down--to portray a character in speech, thought or action in a way not consistent with what you, the writer, might conceivably do in similar circumstances and in similar conditions.

As Reilly points out in his introduction to The Critical Reception, Rascoe's first two examples of the problems he experienced with the novel "could have been legitimate points for analysis of Native Son," but Rascoe did not

apply them to an explication of the book. Instead, as Reilly notes,

> Rascoe applied them ad hominem by recounting a literary luncheon at which Wright appeared to be consumed by hatred for the whites present, going so far as to say that he hoped they all would have a chance to meet the murderer Bigger Thomas. (xvii)

What Wright meant, of course, was that he hoped all of the guests present would have an opportunity to read Native Son. But just as Rascoe misread Wright's novel, he misconstrued Wright's remarks and concluded that Wright's statement was "insufferable but consistent with the moral of Native Son which justified loathsome behavior on the specious grounds that Bigger suffered hardships, the same as many another person had endured without becoming a killer" (Reilly xvii).

Rascoe's final criticism lacks substance since Aristotle definition of the poet's role in the section of The Poetics entitled "Problems of Criticism" clearly contradicts Rascoe's:

> The poet is an imitator . . . the object of his imitation must always be represented in one of three ways: as it was or is, as it is said or thought to be, or as it ought to be. . . . What

> is right for a politician is not right for a poet; indeed, what is right for a poet is not the same as for any other craftsman. (54-5)

In other words, Rascoe deliberately misrepresents Aristotle whose thesis is evident: the poet, and the poet alone, is free to create reality as he or she perceives it to be. Moreover, I find it difficult to believe that Rascoe really feels that the actions of Macbeth and Ahab reflect what Shakespeare and Melville "might conceivably do in similar circumstances and in similar conditions."

Wright's vehement denunciation of Cohn and Rascoe's captious commentaries could be read as extreme, but when one considers that both reviews served more as platforms for Cohn and Rascoe's personal views regarding race relations in the United States than as legitimate critiques of Native Son, Wright's reaction is commendable. Where Cohn used his review to assert the supremacy of the Jews over the Negroes in their tolerant and patient manner of dealing with oppression, Rascoe used his review to assert the supremacy of self, as he tried to convince his readers that, "sanely considered," it was his reading alone of Native Son that mattered. Consequently, Wright fought back in the best way he knew how; as a revolutionary author, Wright used unorthodox means to ensure that the social upheaval that he sought was not defused by critics like

Cohn and Rascoe who wished to perpetuate the status quo. Like Wright, Samuel Sillen was also acutely aware of the peculiarly subjective nature of the critics' responses to Native Son. Since Sillen was a left-wing contributor to New Masses, the Communist Party magazine for which Wright also wrote, there was no need for him to mask the fact that his perspective was neither ideologically innocent nor free of bias. Nevertheless, Sillen followed up his praiseworthy review of Native Son, with three, additional articles: the first epitomized much of the critical commentary generated by Wright's novel; the second was a more extended response to the reviewers' overall tendency to isolate various parts of the text from the novel's total meaning; and the third presented a selection of his readers' impressions of Native Son.

In his initial review, which appeared in New Masses 5 March 1940, Sillen compares Native Son to The Grapes of Wrath. Unlike many other critics who also chose to relate Native Son to previously published works, Sillen explicitly elucidates what the two novels share: the "ability to jar men and women out of their routine ways of looking at life and sweep them toward a new conception of the way things are and the way they ought to be." Furthermore, even though Sillen compares Bigger Thomas to a Dostoevskian character, unlike other contemporary Wright critics, the

comparison Sillen draws is not between Bigger and the murderer Raskolnikov from the novel Crime and Punishment but between Bigger and Dmitry Kamarozov from The Brothers Kamarazov. Sillen, who is not overwhelmed by Bigger's blackness, feels that Bigger's acceptance of Mary's murder "as his own act" is equivalent to Dimitry's own feelings of guilt since "in his heart he had wished his father's death." Moreover, Sillen recognizes Bigger and Dimitry as kindred spirits--men who "killed many times before" even if `there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic [their] will to kill'--and as brothers "whose acceptance of moral guilt [allows them] to feel free for the first time."

As one would expect in a review whose primary purpose is to assess the literary merits of Native Son, a biographical sketch of Wright's life is not an integral part of Sillen's commentary. Sillen occasionally veers from the actual text of Native Son to draw upon other published works by Wright: for instance, he quotes Wright's comment that `if the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is submerged'; however, Sillen does not employ extraliterary sources to substantiate his critical judgment. Nor does he merely summarize Native Son's plot; rather, in keeping with his

Marxist perspective, Sillen offers an analysis of the novel that indicates that he considers Native Son as much a literary phenomenon as a social, economic, and political one:

> It is difficult to think of an American novel that provides a more brilliant analysis of the interplay of social and psychological factors in experience. Wright has fused the valid elements in the naturalistic and psychological traditions, and the result is something quite new. For a lack of a better phrase, `dramatic realism' will do. . . . As a sheer achievement in structural craftsmanship Native Son is worth careful study. There is nothing wayward, either in detail or mood. It is the work of a writer who feels his material deeply and authentically at the same time that he can view it from an ideological perspective. . . . It is a first novel, but it places Richard Wright, incontrovertibly, in the first ranks of American literature in our time. There is no writer in America of whom one can say more confidently: He is the creator of our better world and our greater art.

Sillen's definition of what constitutes literature is derived from Wright's own Marxist analysis of society.

Quoting from Wright's description of what a Marxist vision brings to the African American writer, Sillen praises Native Son for exemplifying a vision of the world that "restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself."

Certainly Sillen's review of Wright's novel is not neutral; his belief that a work of art has a political as well as an aesthetic function is as transparent as his belief that a Marxist analysis of society offers the only correct ideological perspective. Nevertheless, Sillen's evaluation of Native Son strikes one as far more objective than the reviews of most of the other contemporary critics who try, unsuccessfully, to disguise their subjectivity.

In actuality, Sillen's Marxist orientation (which Wright shared at the time) made him cognizant of the "larger social effects" that the novel's revolutionary content would generate among readers and critics alike. Consequently, in his second review of Native Son, which appeared in New Masses on 23 April 1940, Sillen "examined over two hundred press clippings, evaluated their tendencies, and sorted out representative expressions for citations" in response to the following questions raised by his readers:

> Has this novel by a Negro been used by the press

> to reinforce anti-Negro prejudice? Has this novel by a Communist been used against Communists? Are there any variations in the sectional approaches to the novel? What has been the response of the Negro press?

In this first follow-up article to his review of Native Son, Sillen provides excerpts from a number of commentaries to demonstrate that the way in which Wright's novel was judged had more to do with the reviewer's race, politics, or location than with Native Son's intrinsic strengths or weaknesses.

One critique by Ellen Tarry, a black woman who published a leading feature article on Native Son entitled "Native Daughter" in the Catholic weekly Commonweal on 12 April 1940, shows the extent to which Native Son required one to take a partisan line:

> As a Negro, I have been greatly pleased to note the haste with which the literary world has acclaimed Richard Wright . . . as the greatest writer of his race. . . . However, it is not Richard Wright's laurels that concern me so greatly. It is rather that in Catholic circles many have lamented the fact that the Negro writer who has arisen as the spokesman for his race should be a Communist. . . . Yet as an American

> Mr. Wright is entitled to his own political and religious beliefs. And we must accept, even if regretfully, the fact that Richard Wright, acclaimed America's most powerful Negro writer, is a Communist. . . . There may be Catholics who will not read Native Son because its author is a Communist. But did you ever stop to think that Catholics may be among those who are responsible for some of the conditions that have led Richard Wright into the ranks of the Reds? The time has come for Christian America to shed its coat of hypocrisy and admit its sin.

Tarry's response to Native Son accords with other contemporary African American reviewers who, like Sterling Brown, praised the novel, felt that it should be read by everyone, and believed that if any book could arouse the conscience of the nation regarding the plight of the Negro in the United States, Native Son was the one; her review is particularly interesting because it reveals the degree to which reviewers, whether black or white, felt impelled to consider Native Son in light of their own beliefs. In Tarry's case, of course, she puts the politics of race over the politics of religion and of state and commends the novel even though many of Wright's tenets do not coincide with hers.

Other reviewers were not as willing as Tarry to put their personal bias aside for a consideration of some of the larger issues that Native Son raised. As two additional examples from Sillen's first article illustrate, the Communist element impeded an objective evaluation of the novel. In a commentary printed 3 March 1940 in the New Bedford Sunday Standard Times, John Selby, an obviously anti-Communist reviewer, "attacks Wright's `warped ideology' and asserts that the major fault of the book is that `its course is twisted by an attempt to make the Communist Party seem the friend of the Negro.'" On the other side, in a review of Native Son that appeared in the Sunday Worker on 14 April 1940, black Communist Party leader Ben Davis, Jr., finds Native Son "the most powerful and important novel of 1940" because of its "terrific indictment of capitalist America." In either case, the reviewer's political views interfered with an impartial assessment of Native Son's worth.

Regionalism was also a distinctive factor in the critical reception accorded Native Son. Even though, as Sillen notes in his 23 April review, "the response of the Southern press was far from uniform," the reviews of Native Son published in newspapers and journals in the deep South were particularly hostile. The following excerpt from a review of Native Son by Albert Goldstein that appeared 3

March 1940 in the Times-Picayune and New Orleans States is representative of the kind of negativity that Native Son generated in Louisiana and Texas:

> While it is a striking and, in spots, beautifully written story, its implications fail to impress us, despite the apparently sincere flavor of the author's psychology. . . . Most Southern readers will find this material irritating, if not outright revolting; if we thought that Native Son were significant enough to warrant the advice, we would recommend that they shove aside their bias and read it in any case. But somehow we do not have that feeling about the book.

As one can see, Goldstein's attitude toward Wright's novel is not far removed from the one expressed by Thomas Jefferson in his review of Phillis Wheatley's poems more than 150 years earlier: the author and the work are not distinguished enough to merit further consideration.

At the same time, reviewers living in the Southern border states were much more open to Wright's message. The following extract from a commentary written by Doris McDowell and printed 10 March 1940 in the Louisville, Kentucky, Courier-Journal will suffice as an example:

> There are those today who are daring to tell us the truth, however unpleasant it may be. One

> cannot but think of Hugo, Zola, Tolstoy, Dostoevski, and Gorky, and the name of Richard Wright must be added to the list of those who through the medium of the novel have cried out against injustice and oppression.

The mere fact that McDowell compares Wright to authors of such stature indicates that she at least feels that Native Son is worthy of scrutiny by fellow Kentuckians and other Americans who are interested in righting wrongs.

At the end of his 23 April article, Sillen rhetorically asks: "what is one to conclude from all of these reactions"? He then provides the following answer:

> There is fairly universal agreement that Richard Wright, who was virtually unheard of a year or two ago, is one of the leading American novelists. Most readers and critics are agreed that Native Son is a novel of tremendous dramatic impact. On the social meaning of the novel there is a division of opinion. The Negro press regards Native Son as a smashing challenge to inequality. A section of the nation's press uses the book as a confirmation of anti-Communist prejudice. Another treats it as a propaganda tract for Communism. The press reaction indicates that there is a correlation between the

degree of a reviewer's progressivism and the degree of his enthusiasm for the book.

In other words, Sillen's perusal of the notices received by Native Son allowed him to affirm the revolutionary nature of the novel--a novel that impelled a critical response even from those whom it most castigated and offended--and to reveal the extent to which the reviewers of Native Son were so caught up in their individual ideological perspectives that they were unable to maintain their usual pretense of critical impartiality.

The lack of objectivity on the part of Native Son's commentators was indicative of the reception generally accorded African American texts expressing views that do not coincide with those held by dominant white society. In Wright's particular case, not only would three decades elapse before he would receive widespread recognition as an illustrious American author, but also the reviewers' subjectivity would significantly contribute to the obstacles Wright encountered in bringing an unexpurgated, cinematic version of Native Son to the American public. Political pressure from the United States' government--which must have emanated in part from the novel's critical reception--would prevent Wright from filming Native Son in either France or Italy where it would have been less costly. Moreover, the consequences of having to shoot the

script in Argentina would not be confined to shouldering additional expenses. One unfortunate result, as Fabre notes in The Unfinished Quest, was that "the lesser roles were played by obvious amateurs and the film suffered accordingly (350)." But more importantly, the film industry's desire to maintain its internal censorial apparatus in the wake of external political pressures would makes its already skittish censors even more apprehensive about retaining controversial scenes adapted from such a polemical novel as Wright's Native Son.

CHAPTER 4

UNSPEAKABLE IMAGES

> *The problematic of black male sexuality re-emerges then at multiple levels of cultural participation as fragments in a discussion about `race' as that which is never mentioned, and `gender' as that which is always mentioned (although these criteria are usually reversed in black discourses). When it finally takes apparent form it is as race/(gender), the combination that is almost always present in any compelling American cultural event, yet which is never talked about: we might best describe it as an absent presence or a present absence.* (Wallace 55)

The enormous success of Wright's novel gave him every reason to believe that his screen adaptation of Native Son would be received by the American public with an equally enthusiastic response. With a plot that involves extortion, kidnapping, murder, and rape all luridly reiterated during a sensational trial, Native Son seemed destined for the silver screen--particularly given the fact that the Hollywood film industry had always financially flourished on the vivid depiction of sex and crime. Although Wright realized that the best way to retain the integrity of his novel was to adapt it to film himself, he could not have accurately ascertained the extent to which HUAC's investigation of Hollywood--which resulted in a more

stringent enforcement of the 1930 Production Code--would effect his film after it was produced. The 1986 version of Native Son, however, which is remarkably similar to the 1951 film adaptation, was not subject to the same political exigencies that circumscribed the already eclectic nature of Hollywood's censorial apparatus in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. That the deviations from the novel in the later film so closely coincide with the cuts made by the New York Board of Review in the earlier one lead me to conclude that perhaps a particular aspect of Native Son placed it outside the parameters of films that the Hollywood establishment could sanction: Bigger's physical response to both Bessie and Mary rendered Wright's novel ideologically unacceptable to dominant white society.

In the spring of 1940, at just about the same time that Native Son was at the top of the country's best-seller lists, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gave its first Oscar to a black performer: Hattie McDaniel won best-supporting actress for her role as Scarlett's "Mammy" in the 1939 screen adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (Vincent Fleming 1939). Gossip columnist Louella Parsons was only one of many Hollywood insiders to remark upon the significance of the event:

> Only in America, the Land of the Free, could such a thing have happened. The Academy is apparently

> growing up and so is Hollywood. We are beginning to realize that art has no boundaries and that creed, race, or color must not interfere where credit is due. (Menand 79)

For in the early 1940s, when Hattie McDaniel received her Oscar, and her reminder of her station in life, moviemakers, who had recently begun to recognize their influence on American culture, were unconsciously perhaps demonstrating their ability to create reality both on and off the screen.

Wright, I presume, realized that Parson's optimistic view of Hollywood's maturation was overstated just as he recognized that her conclusion regarding the improvement of the status of blacks in the film industry was exaggerated. Throughout his life and career, Wright steadfastly refused to let Hollywood adapt his work. But I also assume that Wright took note of film's capacity to transmit dreams and to redefine reality. As one critic points out, Wright, himself, was enthralled with the cinema:

> In his daily life he remained fascinated as well as entertained by the movies, and the interviews he gave after the publication of Native Son reveal his interest in photography and cinema to the extent that "he sometimes went to as many as three movies a day." (Pudaloff 4)

Indeed, in both the film and the novel, Wright has Bigger and his friend Gus see a movie and use the images on the screen to fantasize about the way whites live and to visualize how pleasurable Bigger's life might be if he were to work for the Daltons. Moreover, as Sartre points out in his essay "For Whom Does One Write?" Wright created Native Son for a "split public" (57-59)--a public divided not only by color lines but also by economic and political differences. In other words, Wright wrote to blacks as well as whites, the rich as well as the economically deprived, and Communists as well as those who did not embrace the party line.

Given the fact that Wright wished to reach the largest possible audience, there were a number of reasons why he believed that film was the perfect medium with which to bring to every segment of the American public his vision of fear, flight, and twisted fate that he predicted would be the inevitable result of white America's refusal to correct the imbalance of power and privilege. One primary reason had to do with audience:

> For the first half of the twentieth century--from 1896 to 1946, to be exact--movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. They were the first of the modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of

> cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principal support from the lowest and most invisible classes in American society. (Sklar 3)

Consequently, in addition to attracting such a large number of culturally, economically, and socially diverse people, film also offered Wright an opportunity to communicate his message to those who either could not or did not read.

Another obvious motivation was that Native Son had been a best seller, and in the 1940s "filmed best sellers continued to dominate the box office" (Sklar 194). In fact, Darryl F. Zanuck's 1940 movie version of The Grapes of Wrath--the novel to which Native Son was most frequently compared--garnered two Academy Awards and extremely favorable reviews. Furthermore, the 1941 stage version of Native Son presented by John Houseman and Orson Welles had been "a hit and did excellent business" (Houseman 100). Canada Lee, who played the role of Bigger Thomas, was so moved by the commendations it received when the dramatic version of Native Son was presented at the Ford theater in Baltimore before a racially diverse, popular audience that he was prompted to exclaim, "You can't imagine what it means to say what you've always wanted to say and to say it precisely to the people it was meant for" (Fabre 217)--a sentiment that must have echoed Wright's own response to

the outstanding reception his play had been accorded.

Additionally, the ability to use film successfully as a tool for needed social change had also recently been demonstrated with the release in January 1944 of The Negro Soldier, a United States Army orientation film designed to promote black and white racial harmony within the Armed Forces by showing "not just Hollywood but all America that civil rights was not only a moral necessity but also a logical necessity" (Cripps and Culbert 133). And finally, Native Son was almost written for the screen, for the language Wright uses in the novel is the language of film:

> [I]n the writing of scene after scene I was guided by but one criterion: to tell the truth as I saw it and felt it. That is, to objectify in words some insight derived from my living in the form of action, scene, and dialogue. . . . And always I tried to render, depict, not merely to tell the story. (NS xxx-xxxii)

All in all, Wright had every reason to expect an accurate film adaptation of his hugely popular novel to attract a large audience and to produce substantial profits. As a result, when French film producer Pierre Chenal approached him with the idea of turning Native Son into a film--and promised "to stick scrupulously to the novel"--Wright not only agreed (for he had more faith in European producers

than in American ones) but secretly "had his agent Paul Reynolds buy back the rights from the Paul Green and Welles-Houseman group" (who had produced the play) for the substantial sum of $6000 (Fabre 337); it represented a financial risk, but one that Wright was confident would pay off.

I do not wish to imply, here, that Wright's aim in bringing Native Son to the screen was precipitated by his desire for financial gain. In fact, monetary compensation was the least of Wright's concerns; his first consideration was that the film should honestly represent the novel, and he feared what a Hollywood producer would do. Indeed, the adaptation of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath suggests that Wright's apprehensions were well-grounded. Although there was a serious desire on Zanuck's part to adhere closely to Steinbeck's novel, more than one film scholar has remarked upon a major discrepancy between the critically acclaimed film translation of The Grapes of Wrath and its equally recognized source:

> In the final analysis, the film projects the images of a ritualized world, a world in which change is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, survival and endurance and the continuation of traditional values are apotheosized by the Joads and their odyssey

> through `a timeless world that cages men, while allowing them the freedom of movement to dignify and humanize their lives through action and comedy.' This is certainly not the world of John Steinbeck. (Sobchack 86)

Needless to say, Wright, would not have wanted his powerful indictment of America's racism to be similarly defused by Hollywood.

In fact, the racial element of Native Son gave Wright even more reason to fear what a Hollywood filmmaker might do to his novel if he or she was ever given the chance to produce it. The following synopsis of a letter Reynolds received in March 1947 from a Hollywood producer named Joseph Fields exemplifies the kinds of changes that a number of filmmakers contemplated making in a movie version of Native Son:

> Bigger Thomas, recast as a member of a white ethnic minority, would be one of four character types--a Negro, an Italian, a Jew and a Pole--applying for the same job. The Negro and the Jew, voluntarily withdrawing in favor of the neediest candidate, the one who had a family to feed, would realize at the end of the film that they, too, could have benefitted from solidarity, as could anyone who did not enjoy equality. The

> message of the film would be that if a minority is deprived of its civil rights, the meaning of life disappears. (Fabre 336)

To further "deter any future producer from such a ridiculous idea," Wright told Reynolds to ask Fields for the outrageous sum of $75,000 for the rights and probably concluded then and there that the best way to ensure the integrity of Native Son would be to translate the novel to the screen himself (Fabre 336).

When Wright and Chenal's unexpurgated Argentinean film version of Wright's Native Son premiered under the subtitle Sangre Negra at the Rex Theatre in Buenos Aires on 30 March 1951, it "was such a triumph, confirmed by box-office receipts from the rest of the country, that Wright began to have real reason to hope for its success in America" (Fabre 347). When the excised film adaptation of Native Son premiered in the United States at the Criterion Theater in New York City on 16 June 1951, it was a commercial and critical failure. Even if Wright may have been partially responsible for the poor reception that the film version of Native Son received, for he was far too old, too polished a speaker, and too inexperienced an actor to play the part of his fictional protagonist Bigger Thomas, he cannot be blamed for the cuts made to the film by the New York Board of Censors just before its North American release. Wright

was understandably perturbed by the unauthorized cuts, which had been sanctioned by the film's American distributor Walter Gould, and stated in a letter to Reynolds dated 6 August 1951:

> People everywhere know that the film was cut, that the killing of the rat was cut, that making of the homegun was cut, that the real heart of the boys' attempt at robbery was cut, that most of the dialogue between the newspaper men was cut. . . .
>
> But the cut that did the greatest damage was the cutting of the trial. As you know, the trial is shown with arms waving and mouths moving but nothing is heard. (Fabre 348)

Wright had every reason to be angry when he learned how the censors had butchered his film, for he had undergone financial and personal hardships to ensure that the screen adaptation of Native Son would remain true to the revolutionary vision he had expressed in the novel.

Where Wright blames the selective editing for the film's failure, however, cultural historian Thomas Cripps--one of the only film scholars to accord the 1951 screen adaptation more than a cursory review--feels that most of the blame lay solely with Wright. Cripps rebuts Wright's complaint to Reynolds by claiming that the film's lack of

either commercial or critical success was predominately attributable to Wright, who "through ignorance, vanity, and finally abdication of his responsibility for the final release print, contributed to making his powerful novel into a stumbling movie" (Cripps 104). Cripps' accusation that Wright knowingly relinquished his right to oversee the final cut might have more validity if it did not contradict Fabre's painstakingly researched account of that period of Wright's life--and if the New York Board of Motion Picture Censors (also known as the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures) had not insisted that over thirty minutes (twenty-five hundred feet) be deleted before the film could be shown in the United States. In fact, even with the cuts demanded by the Board, the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin still refused to let it be shown, for they feared it would contribute to racial misunderstanding (Brunette 136).

Although no copy of Sangre Negra exists, contemporary reviews refute Cripps' contention that Wright was primarily responsible for the failure of his screen adaptation of Native Son because he neglected to exercise his right of final cut before he left Argentina. Local newspapers called the film "a credit to its producers, the most carefully executed job to have come out in Argentina for ten years," and the Canard Enchaine of 16 May 1951

ironically pointed out that "Argentina was making a hit out of Native Son while America was executing Willie McGee" (Fabre 347-8). Equally important, the adaptation of Native Son that was shown in Argentina was over an hour and forty-minutes long compared to the edited eighty-eight minute version that first screened in the United States. Moreover, when the film was exhibited with "some of the soundtrack for Max's speech restored and the cuts reduced to a minimum" at the Venice Film Festival on 22 August 1951, it received favorable reviews in Italy (Fabre 349).

But Cripps' criticism of Wright goes beyond accusing him of negligence for not insisting upon final approval of Native Son's release print; his primary reason for denouncing Wright's participation in the screen adaptation of Native Son is that he feels that Wright was guilty of believing that he could "use the larger-than-life mythical quality of movies to stretch his reach to a new audience" (Cripps 103-4). Cripps insists:

> As surely as Bigger groped for some real contact with Mary Dalton, the white girl whom he accidently kills, Wright wanted movies to speak to blacks and whites in ways he could not achieve in novel form. And as surely as Mary must die and pull Bigger after her, the movie industry must strangle the life from Wright's literary

work. (Cripps 104)

It is certainly true that the New York Board of Censors succeeded in mutilating the 1951 film adaptation; however, there is no evidence to support Cripps' conjecture that Wright became so bedazzled by Hollywood that he lost sight of reality and chose to relinquish the power of his pen to become a black pawn in a game where all the important players are white:

> Like Paul Robeson and Oscar Micheaux before him and the Poitiers and Gordon Parkses and Melvin Van Peebleses after him, he had learned the hard lesson that the most impervious white institution was like Mary Dalton, well meaning, solicitous of black plight, but ultimately useless for the kind of strong black expression that was possible in the solitary medium of fiction. (115)

Cripps is absolutely correct in asserting that any African American film imbued with the revolutionary content of a work like Native Son would be diluted by the movie industry's notorious habit of whitewashing controversial material. Nevertheless, Cripps' belief that Wright compromised his art because he became so mesmerized by the fictionalized world of the movies that, like Bigger, he could no longer separate the reel from the real is unsubstantiated. Wright, a man who clearly demonstrated

through his life and work an astute understanding of the racist schizophrenia in the American psyche, never expected a Hollywood adaptation of his cinematic refutation of America's melting pot to remain unadulterated. The obstacles he willingly confronted in his effort to bring an unexpurgated Native Son to the screen effectively negates Cripps' allegations of such naive assumptions about Hollywood on Wright's part.

Wright knew from the start that the filming of Native Son would be fraught with difficulties. To begin with, political pressures prevented Chenal from shooting Native Son in either Italy or France, where it would have been more economical. Although Wright initially had received permission to make the film in France, he was subsequently informed on 4 February 1949 by Monsieur Genin, the director of Productions Cinematographiques, "that the Centre National de la Cinematographie Francaise had advised him to postpone the filming indefinitely `for reasons dictated by international policy'" (Fabre 337). Since France was obligated to the United States following the Allied victory during World War II, Wright knew it would be useless to protest the decision. So, even though he distrusted South American businessmen, Wright had little choice but to accept producer Jaime Prades' suggestion to collaborate with Attilio Mentasti, the head of Sono-Films (one of the

largest movie companies in South America) and shoot most of Native Son in Argentina.

Casting was also a problem. Wright had difficulty finding an actress who would play the part of Mary Dalton, for, up until the time that Jean Wallace accepted the role, all of the white actresses Chenal and Wright approached had turned them down because they did not wish to be seen in the arms of a black man. Moreover, even though experienced Hollywood actors and actresses accepted the leading roles of Bessie, Bigger's mother, Mr. Dalton, and the detective who finds evidence of the murder, the lesser parts had to be cast in Argentina--with the main prerequisite being the ability to speak English, not act. As Fabre notes in assessing the reviews that the edited version of Native Son first received when it premiered in the United States,

> Exclusive of the damage due to cuts and some unfavorable reactions prompted by the current political and racial situation in the United States, the critics (whose opinion will have to be respected in lieu of a firsthand judgment) were unanimous on one score: the lesser roles were played by obvious amateurs and the film suffered accordingly. (350)

Given the success of the theatrical adaptation of Native Son, Wright must have been particularly disheartened to see

his film panned for personnel reasons beyond his control.

The hardships Wright encountered during the filming of Native Son were not limited to actors and actresses with South American accents who lacked the skill to play their parts. Not only did the slums of Chicago have to be recreated in Argentina in the midst of a corrupt regime under the dictatorship of General Peron, which maintained constant police surveillance over all of Wright's telephone calls and correspondence, but also Wright's Argentinian business associates, who had surreptitiously removed a copy of the financial agreement from his hotel room, allowed production costs to escalate from an estimated $100,000 to $300,000 U.S. dollars. In fact, Wright was so distressed about the money being wasted that he was forced to devise a code, so he could privately communicate his concerns about the film's financial backers to Reynolds. Unfortunately, Wright's secret code proved to be of no avail; the corruption that pervaded the production eventually resulted in Sono-Film's declaration of bankruptcy. As a result, Wright never recouped his initial investment, and he never obtained either a cut or uncut version of his film.[8] To make matters even worse, Wright felt compelled to ask Reynolds to keep his and Chenal's plans secret throughout the filming of Native Son because he still feared political and racial repercussions from the

United States--repercussions that prompted Wright to make certain concessions in translating Native Son to the screen.

Wright retained much of the novel's original message, but he softened Bigger by turning the film adaptation of Native Son into "the story of a boy born amid poverty and conditions of fear which eventually stop his will and control and make him a reluctant killer" (Fabre 338). Concomitant with his mellowing of Bigger, Wright humanized him by augmenting Bessie's role: He made Bessie one of the star attractions in the black nightclub to which Jan and Mary coerce Bigger into taking them, and he had her sing "The Dreaming Kind," a blues song that Wright himself wrote; he created a love relationship between Bigger and Bessie that was not just based on sex; and, he had Bigger kill Bessie (not by bashing her head in with a brick but by pushing her down an elevator shaft) only because he thought that she had betrayed his whereabouts to the police. Wright also added several dream sequences, so he could focus more on "psychological and human interest rather than on the quasi-detective plot of ideological significance" (Fabre 338). One consequence of this change in orientation was that Jan became a labor organizer instead of a Communist sympathizer.

All in all, Wright spent more than a year of his life

trying to give cinematic life to Native Son. Consequently, no one could have been more disappointed than Wright when he saw what the members of the National Review Board of Motion Picture Censorship had done to his film. In fact, Wright refused to give the cut version his approval because he knew how much it would compromise his position as a "militant intellectual" (Fabre 348-349). For all intents and purposes, Wright found himself caught in a doublebind. If he let the French cinema unions and the French left-wing press boycott the edited version, as Chenal wanted him to, the Americans would attack the uncut film. On the other hand, even though it was not politically exigent to owe the Communists for their support of the uncut version, if he let the cut film be shown, then the French Left would think that he had capitulated to the Marshall Plan and reject Wright altogether. To resolve the dilemma, Wright persuaded Chenal to forego the boycott and convinced Gould not to distribute the film in France. In his 6 August 1951 letter, Wright describes his predicament to Reynolds:

> I shall not concern myself at all with what happens to the film over here [France]. Frankly I don't think I shall see any money from it and the reviews make it plain that my reputation is not being done any good by the film being shown. . . . Chenal is really in the right and Gould is

> wrong. . . . Gould told me that they were planning to enter the film in some kind of festival in Venice; I've heard nothing about this; it was supposed to take place in July; I hope that they did not enter it; and if they plan to, I hope they don't. People over here are more intelligent than Gould thinks and they will not be fooled into believing that the Negro problem in the USA is what the cut version of the film tries to pretend it is. (Fabre 349)

In short, Wright had been effectively silenced by the inimical and pervasive power of cinematic censorship.

Censorship was not new to Wright. As the authoritative text of the Library of America's 1991 edition of Native Son shows, the novel published in 1940 was significantly altered from the one that Wright had planned to publish, and perhaps even from the one that Wright had initially written.[9] In describing his efforts to restore the manuscripts to what Wright had intended before the original publishers had mangled them, Arnold Rampersad, editor of the Library of America's two-volume collection of Wright's major works points out:

> Native Son required a major salvage operation. At the very moment that the book was set to appear from Harper & Brothers in 1939 came the

> electrifying news that the Book-of-the-Month Club was interested in Native Son--provided that certain revisions were made. (17)

Many of those revisions had to do with Native Son's racial and sexual candor, and, as anyone familiar with black/white relations in the U.S. might expect, the racial issue was seen as most inflammatory when it came to sex. As Rampersad shrewdly observes:

> Bigger's vibrant sexuality had historic significance. Never before in literature, except in scurrilous attacks on black men as rapists or likely rapists, had black male sexuality been represented with such frankness. Wright understood that, with few exceptions, there could be no serious discussion of race in the United States without reference to sexuality. . . . To nullify Bigger's sexual drive was to dilute or even to sabotage the central power of Native Son as a commentary on race in this country. (18)

Nevertheless, before agreeing to publish his novel, the Book-of-the-Month Club insisted that Wright abbreviate or entirely delete a number of sections emphasizing Bigger's sexual response to Mary. Some of those sections included his masturbation in the movie theater when a newsreel showing Mary Dalton is on the screen, his acknowledgement

to his friend Gus that Mary Dalton was "a hot-looking number, all right," and his sexual arousal when he is taking the inebriated Mary up to her bedroom:

> He tightened his arms as his lips pressed tightly against hers and he felt her body moving strongly. The thought and conviction that Jan had had her a lot flashed through his mind. He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind. (17)

Consequently, as a direct result of his publishing agreement with the Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright was all too familiar with the kind of censorship that his material elicited--at least, that is, from the American literary establishment.

But even if Wright had had to tone down certain key sections of his work to reach the largest possible audience, he had still succeeded in publishing one of America's most controversial and explosive novels. Indeed, as one recent commentator describes Native Son's plot:

> It is not a novel for sentimentalists. It involves the asphyxiation, decapitation, and cremation of a white woman by a poor young black man from the south side of Chicago. The man, Bigger Thomas, feels so invigorated by what he has done that he tries to extort money from the

> woman's wealthy parents. When that scheme fails, he murders his black girlfriend, and even after he has finally been captured and sentenced to death he refuses to repent. Nobody in America had ever before told a story like this, and had it published. (Menand 79)

No one, that is, until Richard Wright appeared on the scene. The above synopsis may be stark, but it is also an accurate summary of Native Son--a novel that sold an unprecedented two hundred and fifteen thousand copies within the first three weeks of its publication. So Wright had every reason to believe--particularly with the efforts he took to temper the shooting script--that even a censored film adaptation of Native Son would still cinematically render much of what he had to say. Wright, however, could not predict the extent to which the censor's would go.

Hollywood's collapse under HUAC's surveillance of the film community in the late 1940s had resulted in a chastened industry forced to bend to political pressure in order to retain its privilege of self-regulation. As a result, in an effort to insure that the ideological import behind its graphic depictions of sex and violence would receive the endorsement of even its most reactionary critics, the film industry turned increasingly to movies that had already been approved by traditional white middle-

class audiences for its formal and thematic patterns. When it came to portraying the relationship between blacks and whites, Hollywood naturally tended to look back to popular "classic" films like D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915) and Harry Pollard's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1926) for acceptable images.

Bigger Thomas, however, does not conform to the paradigms established by either Griffith's racist portrayal of blacks or Pollard's sentimental depiction of them. Bigger is neither a frenzied rapist obsessed with sexually possessing white women nor is he a submissive and subservient eunuch. In fact, Bigger's sexuality, which is an integral part of Wright's novel, explodes the myths of black male sexuality visually exploited by Griffith, Pollard, and other Hollywood filmmakers by showing them to be racist and stereotypic fabrications used by whites to deny blacks their humanity. Consequently, to ensure audience acceptability by patterning both film adaptations of Native Son after existing Hollywood models, the same scenes from the novel--Mary's responsiveness to Bigger's sexual overtures, Bigger's rape of Bessie, the dialogue among the newspapermen, and the trial--had to be deleted, for Bigger's sexuality pervades those sections of the novel. Unfortunately, as a direct result of the cuts made to the 1951 screen version of Native Son by the New York

Board of Censors and the choices made by Diane Silver, the producer of the 1986 film adaptation of Wright's novel, both films failed, commercially and critically.

Wright, as we know, was not responsible for the critical absences in his and Chenal's screen version of Native Son. Silver's decision to omit certain portions of the novel from her film adaptation, however, was at her own discretion--a discretion that makes one ponder why she wished to remake Native Son if she planned to eliminate so many crucial scenes from the original text. But there were substantial reasons to believe that a cinematic translation of Wright's novel would be appreciated in the politically conservative mid-1980s. In addition to the fact that Native Son had been a best-seller and teemed with crime and sex, it had been written by an African American, who had warned whites that continued racial injustice against blacks would eventually produce severe consequences for all segments of the American public. By the 80s, one could see how prophetic Wright had been, for most major cities were being threatened by gang violence. Furthermore, Native Son brutally explored racial oppression from the vantage point of a young black male who, in utter frustration at being denied what whites seem to have in abundance, needs to kill to feel alive--not unlike perhaps many teenage gang members today. Moreover, the warning inherent in Wright's text was

couched in a way that should have attracted a large audience. After all, the American public never seems to tire of seeing justice meted out or withheld as attested to by Hollywood films and television shows that center around trials.

Critically acclaimed movies and box-office smashes such as Twelve Angry Men (Sidney Lumet 1957), Inherit the Wind (Stanley Kramer 1960), Jagged Edge (Richard Marquand 1985), and Presumed Innocent (Alan Pakula 1990) have revolved around courtroom dramas, and television has made legal proceedings a mainstay of its regular programming. Popular shows such as "The Judge," "L.A. Law," "Civil Wars," "Law and Order," and "The People's Court" disclose America's continuous fascination with the legal system at work. And given the fact that film and television have all but replaced cultural forms like the novel, one of the only ways to get Wright's prophetic message across to a large segment of the population is to adapt it to the medium of film or television. Unfortunately, as a result of Hollywood's desire to appease the most conservative audience, the emasculated version of Wright's novel that finally appeared on the screen in 1986 only made contemporary black youth scoff at a Bigger Thomas who was so intimidated by white society that he allowed himself to be caught.[10]

As one would expect, there were notable differences between the two screen versions of Native Son. In Silver's production, for instance, the scene in which Bigger kills the rat is retained, although the rat is so small and Victor Love, the actor portraying Bigger Thomas is so tall, that instead of foreshadowing both Bigger's victimization and his inclination to blot out anyone or anything that he finds threatening, the scene merely makes him look like a psychotic bully. In the 1951 film adaptation of Native Son, the rat incident is missing; perhaps it was deleted by the censors because the Code specified under the heading of vulgarity that "the treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should be guided always by the dictates of good taste and a proper regard for the sensibilities of the audience" (Farber 126).

However, without an extant copy of the unexpurgated film, it is difficult to accurately determine which scenes from that novel that Silver maintains may have been edited out of Wright's version by the New York Board of Censors, for it is quite possible that certain parts of Wright's script were never filmed and that Chenal or Wright chose to excise existing footage, themselves, during final cut. In the case of the killing of the rat, Wright's 6 August correspondence to Reynolds is the only proof we have that the rat scene was actually photographed and inserted into

the film before it left Argentina. Moreover, even though we know that the 1951 film version of Native Son that screened in the United States was at least thirty minutes shorter than the one that played in Argentina, I can only formulate conjectures as to why the New York Board of Motion Pictures Review may have found certain scenes objectionable based on the absences that Wright notes in his letter to his agent. Consequently, I can draw more definitive conclusions as to what Hollywood may have found unmentionable in both film versions by examining the numerous similarities between the two.

Both film adaptations were, of course, plagued with the type of budgetary, casting, editing, and distribution problems that frequently beset independent films. More importantly, in each case the shift from an independent production to a more commercially viable one was directly responsible for the extensive deviations from the novel. Wright, who had gone to great lengths to preserve the integrity of his film adaptation of Native Son, was, nevertheless, unable to prevent his Argentinian associate Attilo Mentasti from sending the release print to the Walter Gould Agency in New York City for distribution within the United States. According to Fabre, Gould, who like Mentasti was primarily interested in profit, sanctioned the cuts made by the New York Board of Censors

without obtaining Wright's approval. The 1986 movie version of Native Son, according to its screenwriter Richard Wesley "was originally designed as a television movie for American Playhouse on PBS." The projected audience changed when "the script, which adhered scrupulously to the novel, led Silver to believe that there might be a serious motion picture here and therefore a good vehicle for her to make the translation from television to film," Wesley informed me during an interview conducted in November 1988.

In either case, whether prompted by financial or professional gain, the desire on the part of the producers to have the films seen by the largest possible audience was predominately responsible for the failure of both screen adaptations of Native Son, for significant sections of Wright's novel were subsequently deleted. Given the fact that the 1930 Production Code had been revoked almost two decades before the 1986 film version of Native Son went into production, Silver's selective editing of Wright's text before, during, and after the filming (since she retained the right of final cut), could not have been precipitated by the same prohibitions that apparently justified the New York Board of Censor's edits of Wright's screen adaptation of Native Son in 1951. Once the decision had been made to turn the project into a commercial feature

film rather than to recreate visually Wright's novel for a more select audience, Silver's choices regarding which portions of Wesley's screenplay should remain and which could be discarded had to be prompted more by a consideration of what she felt mainstream America would accept than by her initial desire to bring an accurate cinematic adaptation of Native Son to the screen.

Wesley, who sat in for twenty-two of the sixty days during which Silver's production of Native Son was being shot, had the following comments to make regarding those choices:

> There were a lot of things that Wright had addressed that I had addressed in the script that for one reason or another had to be cut out, and I felt that those deletions mitigated against the kind of impact that the film should have. Bigger Thomas in our version comes across as too watered down. There's too much of an attempt to make him a standard commercially viable hero rather than the kind of angry, rage-filled, and alienated young man that he was in the novel. I know that the producer Diane Silver was worried at the onset of our production. She was very concerned about the way the audience would react to Bigger--if he would come across as too vicious or too

> angry or too much of a killer; in other words, if he would come across the way that he did in the novel. For it is one thing to read about Bigger Thomas; it is quite another thing to see him. And so, the producer really wanted to water his character down, and she succeeded pretty much. The script was rewritten by her a number of times between the time I last submitted it and the time it went into production. Since she had final control of the editing, scenes were edited out that I thought should have remained. In other places, the director Jerrold Freedman just didn't seem to make the right choices in terms of capturing the essence of Bigger Thomas. As a result, the picture seems very slow and very plodding and not very well-paced.

In response to being asked what specific scenes were cut by Silver from his final draft of the screenplay, Wesley replied:

> The producer wanted to cut scenes that she thought would mitigate against audience acceptability of Bigger Thomas, so Bigger cutting the swatch in the billiard room table, Bigger raping and then murdering Bessie, Bigger being hounded by the vigilantes, Bigger being

psychologically destroyed by Buckley--all that was cut. Now the reason that Bessie's death scene was cut had to do with time, supposedly. The picture had fallen behind; there wasn't enough money to pay for the extra days that would have been necessary. I thought that this was just a smokescreen because the producer just wanted to get rid of that scene. She didn't want Bigger killing Bessie, for it was very important to her that Bigger be sympathetic because she felt that the overall message of Richard Wright's novel was what was important, not individual moments involving Bigger and the other characters. If scenes were left in that would obscure that message or cause the audience to pull away from Bigger Thomas, then the overall effect of the movie would be lost, for the producer is Mary Dalton. I teased her about this, and she admitted it herself. When she was nineteen, she was just like Mary. The world was her oyster; she saw it with rose-colored glasses; she had the same kind of ultra-liberal views, and she still has a lot of those. So for the producer, sympathy for Bigger was the most important thing to her. Anything that threatened

> that perceived sympathy had to be obscured, so Bigger's murder of Bessie was not seen by her as crucial to the novel. Bigger's persecution was what she believed was crucial, so anything that caused the audience not to sympathize with Bigger had to be cut, including the trial, for some of the things that the prosecuting attorney Buckley had to say about Bigger, the producer didn't want repeated on the screen.

Wesley candidly admits that if he has regrets about his participation in bringing Native Son to the screen, they are that he did not fight forcefully enough for some of the things that he believed. In hindsight, Wesley realizes that a black producer and a black director (Diane Silver and Jerrold Freedman are white) might have brought subtle nuances to the film and might have stayed closer to the prophetic threat inherent in Wright's message. Since he did not see Wright's version until a year after the 1981 screen adaptation of Native Son premiered, perhaps Wesley did not notice that Silver's editing choices almost duplicated those made by the New York Board of Censors more than thirty-five years earlier, albeit for apparently different motives.

Wesley's explanation for why Silver may have cut specific scenes do not sufficiently explain the deletions.

Buckley's language is offensive, but his abrasive, belligerent, and overtly racist cross-examination of Bigger and the other witnesses would increase the viewer's sympathy toward Bigger. More importantly, even though Wright wished to depict Bigger as a victim as well as a victimizer, he made it perfectly clear in his introduction to Native Son that he did not want Bigger to elicit sympathy:

> The second event that spurred me to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle. I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of Uncle Tom's Children. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (NS xxxvii)

Although in his own screen adaptation of Native Son, Wright did temper Bigger by creating a love relationship between him and Bessie, Wright nevertheless had Bigger ultimately kill her, for Bigger's wish to survive, his need for self-

preservation at any cost, is part and parcel of human nature. Consequently, the disturbing absences in the 1986 adaptation of Native Son do not reflect a desire on the producer's part to preserve the integrity of Wright's message. One can only concur with Jerrold Freedman, the director of the 1986 film adaptation of Native Son, that "the scene [in which Bigger kills Bessie] is pivotal in the novel because it underscores the disintegration of Bigger Thomas, a victim of racism and segregation in Chicago of the 1930s who in turn becomes a victimizer" and that Silver removed the scene from the movie "to make it more commercial" (Harmetz). In fact, scholar Abena P. A. Busia, whose sister Akosua Busia played the role of Bessie in the Silver's production, told me in a brief interview that the actual reason why Bessie's murder was removed from the film at the very last minute was because of possible negative reactions from the African American community, who were still reeling from the devastating effects of the controversial depiction of black males in Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple.

It is futile even to try and condone the gaps and spaces in the adaptation and to conclude that Diane Silver meant well but was ultimately blind to the reality of Bigger Thomas, for she made her choices intentionally and in doing so deliberately went against the advice of her

director, her screenwriter, and her actors; moreover, she defended her changes by alleging that "the angst that worked in the book was impossible to put on the screen" (Harmetz). It is not apparent what Silver means by "angst," for it is clear that Bigger's feelings of depression and persecution do not stem from psychological factors. Bigger has every reason to believe that he lives in a world that has no place for him, so the angst that Silver alludes to could only pertain to Bigger's sexuality--a sexuality that is continually being belittled, denied, exaggerated, imagined, threatened, and questioned by the white people with whom he comes in contact.

In Wright's novel, Buckley's neurotic preoccupation with whether or not Bigger raped Mary before he killed her is shared by almost all of the white males in Native Son. Outside of Bessie and his family and friends, Jan is the only other person in the novel who does not assume that the reason Bigger killed Mary and placed her body in the furnace was to cover up the fact that he had raped her. When Jan tells Bigger, "in a certain sense, I'm the one who's really guilty" (244), he is not referring to Bigger's alleged rape of Mary but to the collective guilt he shares with all white men in having so viciously oppressed blacks, for Jan also says: "You believed enough to kill. You thought you were settling something, or you wouldn't've

killed" (246). Max, on the other hand, confidentially asks, "Bigger, tell me, did you feel more attraction for Mary than for the women of your own race?" (298), even after Bigger has assured him that he did not sexually assault Mary.

As bizarre as it is, Max's question reflects the fixation in Native Son that the whites have concerning Bigger's sexuality. Equally important, it refutes the myth that it is the black man who is obsessed with a desire to possess white women sexually and makes glaringly apparent that it is actually the white man who is preoccupied with the idea that the black man is driven to have white women sexually--an obsession that has historic significance, for it can be traced back to slavery when the white man took the black woman sexually without her consent. In fact, a number of the scenes that Silver deleted from her adaptation of Native Son, which she perhaps feared might impinge upon the film's commercial viability, exploded myths fabricated by white society to justify their inhumane treatment of black people. Indeed, most of the critical absences in both film versions of Native Son can be explained by the fact that they destroy two cherished myths: that black men ' desire white women more than they desire black women and that white women are superior to black women.

The section of Native Son in which the newspapermen accompany Bigger and the police back to the Dalton's home is most probably missing from both film versions because the newsmen insist that Bigger "get over there by that bed and show us how you raped and murdered that girl!" (NS 285). Although Bigger may well have raped Mary if her mother had not interrupted him, Wright's use of dramatic irony highlights the fact that the press's demand to have Bigger re-enact Mary's rape and murder is actually a request to have Bigger act out their fantasies, for the reader knows that Bigger never raped Mary. Of tantamount importance, of course, is the fact that the trial is virtually omitted from both film adaptations. Even though it is true that Buckley's remarks are racially charged, Wright included them in his novel because they accurately reflect the views that the majority of white society holds of blacks. Indeed, Buckley's overt racism is an integral part of the reason why Max tells the court that mitigating circumstances make Bigger only partially responsible for his crimes. Consequently, to omit Buckley's cross-examination of Bigger and the other witnesses is to erase Wright's graphic confirmation of the racial oppression that drives Bigger to commit murder. To include Buckley's prosecution of Bigger in the film adaptations of Native Son, however, is to reveal the extent to which the white

race is absorbed with the idea that black men are bent on defiling white women.

Moreover, there is the question of Bessie's murder. Although the New York Board of Censors left in the fact that Bigger had murdered Bessie, Silver fought a major battle with her director, her screenwriter, and the actress playing the role to keep it out. Since Wright augmented Bessie's role in his screen adaptation of Native Son, perhaps the censors let her murder remain because it represents Bigger's one contrite moment.[11] Once Bigger learns from Max that Bessie did not disclose his whereabouts to the police--his reason for killing her in Wright's film version--he acknowledges before going to the electric chair that there was love in the world--even for him--if he had only recognized it. The Silver's production portrays Bessie as Wright characterizes her in the novel, a depiction that may help to explain why Silver was so adamant about omitting Bigger's murder of Bessie from the 1986 film adaptation, since Wright so clearly equates Mary with Bessie--an association that contradicts the myths that black men desire white women over black women and that white women are superior to black women.

To Bigger, both Bessie and Mary are Medusas: women who attract and repel. Even Bigger is acutely aware of his contradictory feelings toward Bessie:

> As he walked beside her he felt that there were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie's face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold the other Bessie to advantage. He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him. He would then gather her up and put her in his chest, his stomach, some place deep inside him, always keeping her there even when he slept, ate, talked; keeping her there just to feel and know that she was his to have and hold whenever he wanted to. (NS 119)

Bigger's feelings toward Bessie, his desire for her body on the one hand and his loathing for her inquiries on the other, reflect his ambivalent reaction to Mary Dalton.

For instance, when Bigger first meets Mary, he simply thinks that "she [is] very slender" (NS 44), a purely physical observation devoid of any real emotion. Yet, seconds later, the moment that Mary questions him regarding his membership in a union, Bigger immediately feels that "he hated the girl then" (NS 45), a deeply personal, even if not completely unwarranted reaction to Mary's question. Still, later the same night, when "[Mary] was not able to

get to her room alone. . . . in spite of his hate for her, he was excited" (NS 71). Bigger's oscillating feelings--his hatred at one moment, and his sexual desire at the next--for both Bessie and Mary indicate that Bigger finds the two women simultaneous barracudas and seducers.[12]

More importantly, Bigger's physical attraction towards Bessie and Mary is very much the same. He desires their bodies, and he abhors their minds: an attraction directly rebutting one scholar's argument that "Bigger could perhaps be inspired to dream about Mary Dalton; Bessie would probably be wrapped in the smells of onions and cabbage, sending any possibility of a dream, . . . scurrying down corridors and out the door" (Harris 81-2). Indeed, it is my contention that Wright intentionally emphasizes Bigger's lack of regard for anything more than the sheer physicality of either Mary or Bessie when he has Bigger decapitate one and use a brick to destroy the head of the other--horrific acts that serve to symbolize Bigger's equal hatred of both women's minds.

In fact, Bessie and Mary could be twins, even if, at first glance, the rich, white Mary and the poor, black Bessie appear total opposites. Consciously making each woman reflect the other, Wright continually draws our attention to the similarities between the two. An instance of the doubling that Wright sets up between Mary and Bessie

is in their drinking habits; both women are alcoholics--an affliction that brings about their deaths at Bigger's hands.

After all, Bessie's need for liquor--"her hankering for sensation" is what Bigger--"liked about her." Moreover, "since she worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, . . . when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led" (118). But as Bigger is all too aware in his convenient, symbiotic relationship with Bessie, "most nights she was too tired to go out; she only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and she would give him herself" (NS 118).

Mary too hankers after sensation. As Peggy confides to Bigger, "she's kind of wild, she is. Always in hot water. Keeps her folks worried to death, she does. She runs around with a wild and crazy bunch of reds. . . . The Lord only knows where she got her wild ways, but she's got them" (NS 49). Indeed, Wright's descriptions of Bessie and Mary further accents the resemblance between the two, while Mary's habitual drinking links them that much more. Although Wright offers no explicit excuse for Mary's desire to drink herself into a stupor, the connections he draws between Mary, who lives the American dream, and Bessie, who

drinks to escape from the "narrow orbit of her life," allow Wright to implicitly comment on the vacuousness of white society.

Mary is frequently drunk, and in a scene, which parallels our glimpse of Bessie and Bigger drinking and having sexual intercourse in Bessie's room, Wright shows Jan and Mary getting drunk and kissing in the back of the car as Bigger drives them around the par^U^\^\+(^U0 ^^^Stends the analogy, one finds Bigger giving money to Bessie, and Jan getting money from Mary--an ironic reversal that forces us to re-examine Jan and Mary's relationship and question if it is really based on love. And, after both Jan and Bigger have succeeded in getting sexual favors by making their women drunk, neither accompanies his inebriated woman home: an omission that will prove irremediable on Jan's part. Jan, like Mary, however, is also drunk and perhaps blinded by his idealism and his blurred alcoholic vision to Bigger's precarious position when he is forced to take an intoxicated Mary home--a situation that is further complicated when she passes out and he has to try to sneak her into her room without waking the other members of the Dalton household.

Bigger, who has been mesmerized by countless images in which the white woman is projected as the epitome of every man's sexual fantasy and terrorized by an equal number of

stories in which black men are lynched for even looking at a white woman, may as Max argues be only partially responsible for his subsequent actions in Mary's bedroom. When Mrs. Dalton blindly enters the room, Bigger must keep Mary quiet; he must keep her from revealing to her mother his black presence in the bedroom of this white woman, whom, moments before as "he tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him" (NS 73), he was about to rape. And it could only have been rape, for even if Mary appears willing, she is too blindly drunk to know what she is doing. But, needless to say, Bigger has never backed away from getting sexual satisfaction from women, like Mary and Bessie, who are under the influence. Bigger's killing of Mary is triggered by the same instincts that will eventually cause him to kill Bessie: fear and self-preservation. Bigger smothers Mary to keep her from sottishly revealing his presence to her mother.

Ironically, Bigger achieves far more in smothering Mary than merely concealing himself from Mrs. Dalton. When Mary's mother is repelled by the smell of whiskey on her daughter's breath and compelled to retreat into prayer, Bigger learns that Mary was constantly drunk and a wayward daughter. Revealing her own helplessness in curbing Mary's deviant ways, Mrs. Dalton's prayers increase Bigger's

feelings of potency, for by killing her, he had managed to control Mary. As a result, Bigger does not behave as one would normally expect. Instead of fleeing as fast and as far away as he can from "the scene of his crime," Bigger gruesomely disposes of the body, and the following morning waits patiently for his mother to fix breakfast while he reflects on the newly found vision that his act of violence against Mary has brought him:

> Elation filled him. He sat at the table watching the snow fall past the window and many things became plain. No, he did not have to hide behind a wall or a curtain now; he had a safer way of being safe, an easier way. What he had done last night had proved that. Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one. Bigger smiled slightly. . . Mrs. Dalton had not known that he was in the room with her; it would have been the last thing she would have thought of. He was black and would not have figured in her thoughts on such an occasion. Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind. . . . (NS 91)

It would appear that Bigger's glimpse into the shortsightedness of whites, whom he once considered all

powerful, has catalytically stripped him of his own feelings of impotence and given him new insight into the myopic world of all the people around him, including Mrs. Thomas, Buddy, Vera, and Bessie. For just as Bigger now perceives "in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded" (NS 91), he sees that "Bessie, too, [is] very blind" (NS 118). More importantly, Bigger recognizes that Bessie's drinking, which he has previously manipulated for his own sexual gratification, could impede his flight from justice:

> He could not leave [Bessie] here and he could not take her with him. If he took her along she would be crying all the time; she would be blaming him for all that had happened; she would be wanting whiskey to help her forget and there would be times when he could not get it for her. (NS 199)

Consequently, Bigger knows he has no choice but to kill her, for "it [is] his life against hers" (NS 200).

Bessie's murder duplicates Mary's: it is bloody, gory, and preceded by non-consensual sex--only this time Bigger manages to complete his rape:

> Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her

> whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind. don't don't don't Bigger And then the wind became so strong that it lifted him high into the dark air, turning him, twisting him, hurling him; faintly, over the wind's howl, he heard; don't Bigger don't don't At a moment he could not remember, he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted. (NS 198)

By the time Bigger has finished with Bessie and Mary both women's bodies have been mutilated.

Further connections between Mary and Bessie exist. Bigger, for example, frequently associates the two women in his mind; when he is thinking of one, the other often intrudes upon his thoughts. When Bigger is alone in his room at the Daltons and decides that "he would bring Bessie here some night" (NS 51), his pleasant daydreams of their rendezvous and his new "easy life" are ruined when he thinks about Mary:

> Everything was all right, except that girl. She worried him. She might cause him to lose his job if she kept talking about unions. She was a funny girl, all right. Never in his life had he met anyone like her. She puzzled him. She was

> rich, but she didn't act like she was rich. (NS 51)

Additionally, when Bigger has his arms around the inebriated Mary and is reeling from "the scent of her hair and skin," he compares her with Bessie and concludes that "she was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer" (NS 73). Finally, when Bigger actually visits Bessie, although her teasing at first makes him look at her with "eyes full of reproach" (NS 112), he later admits that he liked it, for Bessie's teasing "took him away from that terrible image of Mary's head lying on the bloody newspaper" (NS 113).

The most significant association of Bessie and Mary occurs at the trial when the coroner insists on displaying Bessie's naked, raped, and mangled corpse "to enable the jury to determine the exact manner of the death of Mary Dalton, who was slain by the man who slew Bessie Mears!" (NS 280). Silver and the New York Board of Censors would have to edit out this portion of the trial, for Bessie becomes Mary's proxy. Equally important, the fusing of Mary and Bessie that occurs in the novel is no mere repetition. Rather, Wright's matching of Mary and Bessie, not to mention his pairing of Mrs. Dalton and Mrs. Thomas--who both pray futilely--and of Peggy and Vera--who appear neurotically concerned about being seen by Bigger in a

state of undress--point to the kind of signifying that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests is intrinsic to the black tradition in literature--repetition, but with a difference. Even though Gates in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism is specifically speaking about "intertextuality" and the "tropological revision . . . between two or more texts" (xxv-vi), his analysis of the black tradition as "double-voiced" is particularly relevant to Wright's treatment of Bessie and Mary in Native Son.

So much of the brilliance of the novel stems from Wright's ability to step into the white world and still maintain a solid footing in the black one. Through his comparison of Mary and Bessie, Wright reinforces his notion that the only difference between the two women is in the way they are perceived. As Bigger even recognizes when Bessie's body is wheeled into the courtroom to replace Mary's unrecoverable one, Mary is "subject" where Bessie is merely "object":

> He understood what was being done. To offer the dead body of Bessie as evidence and proof that he had murdered Mary would make him appear a monster; it would stir up more hate against him. Bessie's death had not been mentioned during the inquest and all of the white faces in the room

> were utterly surprised. . . . They were bringing Bessie's body in now to make the white men and women feel that nothing short of a quick blotting out of his life would make the city safe again. They were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for having killed Mary, to cast him in a light that would sanction any action taken to destroy him. Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely "evidence." And under it all he knew that the white people did not really care about Bessie's being killed. (NS 281)

And Bigger is right. In Wright's polarized black and white world, where blacks are confined by whites to a particular place on the South Side of Chicago--as if they were another species and not merely another race--Bessie is simply "object," a person or thing that occupies space that can be viewed but never "seen."

If whites are blind to the harsh realities of the lives that they force the Bessies of this world to live, Wright was not. Indeed, Houston A. Baker, Jr., notes in his essay "Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature": "[Wright's] motion picture

version of Native Son has a moment in which a blues song that he himself wrote is sung by none other than Bessie Mears" (113). Mary Dalton, in both Wright's novel and in his subsequent film adaptation, has no blues moment--no moment in which she recognizes the poignancy of her condition. Unlike Bessie, Mary dies voiceless and blind to the tragedy of her own existence.

One reason Wright created Bigger was to protest the inequities of racist America by showing whites the kind of monster their relentless oppression of blacks would produce. When Bigger kills Mary in Native Son, part of the revolutionary import of Wright's novel becomes unmistakably explicit. Bigger is black, and Mary is white; moreover, even if Bigger's first murder is accidental, he, himself, renders it intentional. But Wright does more than merely prophesize black retribution for white America's past and present injustices against African Americans--even though at the time that Wright published Native Son in 1940, the very fact that a black man had remorselessly killed a seemingly innocent white completely obliterated any other missive that Wright wished to express. Moreover, Wright, himself, couched his other subversive message in a way that hid its implicit meaning by catering to established beliefs held by dominant white society about the black man and his incessant need to possess white women sexually. In fact,

Bigger's physical desire for Mary's body, which results in her death, parodies D. W. Griffith's portrayal of Gus--the newly freed slave whose unwanted sexual advances force Flora Cameron to commit suicide--in The Birth of a Nation.

Wright's pastiche of Griffith's racist portrayal of Gus, however, effectively constitutes what Gates suggests is intrinsic to the black tradition in literature--repetition, but with a difference. That black difference becomes most apparent in Native Son with Wright's inclusion of Bessie, a character who is entirely superfluous if his sole intention was to generate social reform by intimidating whites and making them fear repercussions from the people they had abused. Rather, Bessie is an integral part of Wright's novel and his film adaptation of Native Son because she so effectively conveys Wright's other purpose: to explode the American cultural myths that white women are superior to black women and that black men sexually desire white women over black women.

The obstensible parallels between Bessie and Mary make Wright's ancillary intentions evident. Even if one could by some stretch of the imagination negate the obvious similarities between the two women in Wright's novel, it would be visually impossible to miss their conspicuous connections in an accurate film translation of Native Son: both women drink; both women are promiscuous; both women

are killed and mutilated by Bigger following a sexual encounter--to mention just a few of the likenesses Wright creates between Bessie and Mary. Unless, of course, those scenes in which the resemblance between Bessie and Mary is most acute are not depicted on the screen. By 1986 when Silver's production of Native Son premiered, there was little that it could have revealed about black male sexuality that had not already been shown--particularly in light of the rash of blaxploitation films that proliferated during the 60s and 70s. Consequently, the only logical explanation for the critical absences in both film versions of Wright's Native Son resides not in what each might have unveiled but in what it would represent. Hollywood may no longer be perceived as merely a dream machine miraculously manufacturing incredulous fantasies, but film is still dominant white society's most potent medium for advancing its own ideology by promoting American cultural myths. When Wright chose to expose the fact that the myths circumscribing black male sexuality were actually fabrications of dominant white society used to justify the atrocities inflicted by whites on African American males and females, he inadvertently relegated any commercial cinematic rendition of Native Son to obscurity. The myths surrounding black male sexuality represent, unfortunately, two of dominant white society's most indispensable

ideological tools for rationalizing its brutal enslavement and subsequent rape of African Americans. As the unofficial gatekeeper of the illusive American dream, Hollywood must undermine any film that shatters American cultural myths to ensure its own survival.

NOTES

[1] In his essay, "The Evil Demon of Images," Jean Baudrillard hypothesizes that the film The China Syndrome was the real event and the actual incident at Harrisburg merely the simulacrum.

[2] During a nationally televised program entitled "The JFK Conspiracy," Oliver Stone stated that he waited until he felt the public was ready to accept the idea of a government plot before he proceeded to make JFK into a feature film.

[3] I refer here to Donald Bogle's Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films as well as to Thomas Cripps' Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film (1900-1942) and Black Film as Genre.

[4] During the 1988-89 year that I resided in France, I was informed by a number of native inhabitants that whites refused to drive taxis because they considered it beneath them.

[5] It is also quite possible that the Hollywood community bypassed The Color Purple during the 1986 Academy Awards Ceremony because it wished to avoid being embroiled in what had become a major public controversy concerning

the film's depiction of African American males; however, the Hollywood film industry is notorious for ignoring black achievement--particularly in light of its singular disregard of Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing, John Singleton's Boys N the Hood, and Morgan Freeman's portrayal of the chauffeur in Driving Miss Daisy.

[6] During a personal interview with Richard Wesley in November 1987, he informed me that he chose not to see Wright's version of Native Son until after his own film adaptation was released, so he would not be unduly influenced by what Wright had done.

[7] Richard Wright. Native Son. (New York: Harper, 1966) vii-xxxiv. Subsequent page references to Native Son will be noted parenthetically in the text by NS. In what would later become the standard introduction to Native Son, Wright, in response to some of his critics' assertions that an actual Bigger Thomas could never exist, wrote "How `Bigger' Was Born" to document the reality of his fictional protagonist.

[8] During a personal interview with Wright's daughter Julia in February 1992, she informed me that the family has never possessed a copy of Wright's film adaptation of Native Son.

[9] In an article that appears under the heading "Personal Impressions" in Richard Wright: Impressions and

Perspectives, Benjamin Appel states: "In the original draft, Wright said, Bigger'd raped the girl before killing her. I can't recall whether it was editor or publisher who convinced Dick to unrape (my phrase) Bigger's victim" (76).

[10] Since Wesley hoped that a 1986 screen adaptation of Native Son would help deter black teenagers from following in Bigger's footsteps, he informally surveyed groups of young black males to get an idea of their impressions after the film's premiere.

[11] It is also possible that the New York Board of Censors allowed Bigger's murder of Bessie to remain in his and Chenal's film adaptation of Native Son because they did not feel that the violent death of a young black female mattered.

[12] In Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius, Margaret Walker uses the terms "Medusa," and "barracuda," to describe how Wright, himself, felt about women.

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