

Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, and the "Problem" of Interracial Relationships: A Re-view of Martin Ritt's *The Great White Hope* (1970)

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This essay will show that *The Great White Hope* characterised the ambiguities of Martin Ritt's liberal attitude to race, demonstrating, on the one hand, a deep humanist impulse in his handling of interracial relationships while, on the other, reinforcing conventional images of African-American victimisation and subordination to whites (see Appendix One for plot synopsis). In adapting the life of Jack Johnson for the screen, the film balances its faithfulness to the historical record with an inevitable fictionalisation of events for dramatic purposes. On the one hand, *The Great White Hope*'s portrayal of national anxieties about race and interracial relationships at the beginning of the twentieth century establishes for spectators a specific historical context. On the other, the filmmakers' use of dramatic licence helps to illustrate the human cost of such racism upon the film's central characters. This essay will further consider the parallels encouraged by *The Great White Hope*'s Study Guide between Johnson and Muhammad Ali, as well as those between *The Great White Hope* and Michael Mann's recent biopic, *Ali* (2002), and the issues of black leadership and white injustice against blacks that both films raise.

From *Edge of the City* in 1957 to *Conrack* in 1974, Martin Ritt made films that dealt with issues relating to black people in the United States from a liberal viewpoint (Crawley, 1980: 226-32; Jackson, 1994; McGilligan, 1986: 38-46; Miller, 2000; Rickey, 1990: 34-40). A product of both the Group Theatre and the Method school of acting, Ritt used classical Hollywood techniques, in particular long takes and an emphasis on actors' performances, to project an ideology of liberal humanism. Ritt in particular attempted to explore the effects of racial discrimination upon what he saw as the universal "human condition", emphasising problems and anxieties within human relationships that are asserted to transcend racial and ethnic differences. However, by the time of the release of *The Great White Hope* in 1970, such views had, to a young, predominantly urban, generation of blacks, come to seem outdated and patronising. Radical groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party, along with some African-American intellectuals, had, like Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association during the 1920s, begun to criticise assimilationism and integrationism as white liberal constructs that ignored African-American history and culture and encouraged black subordination to whites (Van Deburg, 1993: 14-28; Marable, 1991: 55).

Production Background

In the wake of the advances made by the Civil Rights Movement and the increasing radicalism of young black people during the late 1960s, *The Great White Hope* symbolised

Hollywood's attempt to address contemporary political issues that related to blacks on film (Ryan and Kellner, 1988: 122). Twentieth Century Fox's decision to make a movie that dramatised the controversial issue of interracial relationships, with a comparatively large \$7 million budget, seems curious given that the studios were in the midst of an economic crisis at this time. However, as a 1967 *Variety* survey suggested, blacks made up more than thirty per cent of the audience in first-run urban theatres. Black middle-class *Ebony* readers, *Variety* found, spent \$450,000 a week on movie-going (Beaupree, 1967: 3). This indicated to the studios that there was a market amongst black people that could provide an element of stability, which was subsequently confirmed by the box office success of *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1970), which grossed over fifteen million dollars, and *Shaft* (1971), *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972) (Guerrero, 1993: 81). These "blaxploitation" films appealed to young, urban blacks as they featured African-American characters at the centre of their narratives who actively stood up against, rather than capitulated to, their white oppressors. Released after *Cotton* and before *Shaft*, *The Great White Hope* was an attempt to take advantage of this demand.

The Great White Hope tried to appeal to the increasing political consciousness of young, urban black people by equating Jefferson, the fictional character based upon Jack Johnson, with their contemporary hero Muhammad Ali. Indeed, the film's Study Guide suggested this comparison:

The similarities between Jack Jefferson's Mann Act conviction and Muhammad Ali's conviction for draft evasion come quickly to mind. What other parallels are there between the lives of the two champions? Has *The Great White Hope* helped Ali in making the public sympathetic to his plight? (McLaughlin and Twentieth Century Fox, 1970: 2; see also Appendix Two).

Jack Johnson figured as an important forerunner to the Black Power rhetoric that endorsed nonconformity to mainstream, "white" values. According to boxing historian Randy Roberts, he seemed "tailor made for a generation looking for forceful, independent leaders" (Roberts, 1983: 228). Like Ali, Johnson was independent, successful and black. Moreover, the reprinting of Johnson's autobiography in 1969 and the release of Jim Jacobs' documentary, *Jack Johnson, The Big Fights*, in 1970 demonstrate the interest in someone whose career many thought mirrored that of Ali. In his sleevenotes to the documentary's soundtrack, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, Miles Davis wrote that Johnson "portrayed Freedom" in beating white opponents and enjoying, much to the white establishment's chagrin, a fast-living, flamboyant lifestyle (Davis, 1970). That Ali had, during the early 1960s when he was known as "The Louisville Lip", displayed the same kind of boastful behaviour as Johnson encouraged many whites and blacks to draw a parallel between the two men.

However, Johnson himself was uneasy with the leadership role given to him by black intellectuals. As he wrote in his memoir: "I do not countenance racial antagonism. I would be the last one ever to appear in the role of an agitator" (Johnson, 1969: 238). Nevertheless, the image of Johnson as a courageous leader was later appropriated by black activists in the late 1960s, as was that of Ali, on the basis that both boxers' victories over whites shattered the myth of white superiority over blacks. Johnson's victories in particular challenged the idea of black inferiority behind the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy versus Ferguson* decision, which endorsed the "separate but equal" philosophy of legally segregated public facilities (Grieverson, 1998: 45; Streible, 1989; Streible, 1996; Cook, 1998: 24).

At the time of the release of *The Great White Hope*, Ali, a member of the Nation of Islam, had just returned to the ring after serving a three-year ban for refusing to serve in the army in Vietnam. To many young blacks he was a hero, as Johnson had been before him, because he stood up to the white establishment. James Earl Jones sustained this analogy when he told Ali, after a performance of the theatrical version of *The Great White Hope* in 1968, that "Johnson, in his time, was as much a rebel as you in your time" (Ali and Durham, 1976: 391). Ali also described his own exile from the ring as "history all over again" (Remnick, 1998: 224). Moreover, he told Jones: "I grew to love the Jack Johnson image. I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn't like" (Remnick, 1998: 224). Indeed, Ali assisted in amplifying the parallels with himself and Johnson by publicly sparring with Jones, posing for photographs outside a theatre where the film was playing, and by stating that, "If you just change the time, date and the details, it's about me!" (Canby, 1970: 46; Murray, 1970: 1).

However, Ritt himself tried to distance the movie from its connection with Ali, stating that he "really wasn't too concerned with the film's contemporary meaning" (Knapp, 1971: 1). Instead, he was more interested in the film as a form of history, noting that "black history is an important part of American life and unless we deal with it correctly, there will be a big rip" (Anon, 1971a). When one looks closely at *The Great White Hope* in light of these statements, it becomes clear that Ritt and scriptwriter Howard Sackler selected, condensed, and fictionalised events from Johnson's life to create a liberal, humanist fable about one man's fight against an unfair system, and thereby to highlight racism in white America.

Sackler based both his play and the film's screenplay on Jack Johnson's autobiography, and, as Randy Roberts has argued, constructed Jefferson "as Jack Johnson wished to be remembered" (Roberts, 1983: 228). Portraying him as a monogamist and victim of racial prejudice, Sackler ignored other parts of Johnson's life, particularly his philandering. He also overlooked the race riots that followed Johnson's victory in Reno, Congress's subsequent ban on interstate transportation of fight films, and the year-long prison term Johnson served at Fort Leavenworth for violating the Mann Act. Sackler thus created a one-sided, romanticised account that stressed Jefferson's heroic aspects instead of following what actually happened in the case of Johnson.

Oversimplification of the life of Muhammad Ali also tarnishes Michael Mann's *Ali*. Written by five scriptwriters, the film plays down Ali (Will Smith)'s womanising, shameful treatment of his spouses, and neglect of his children. By compressing the film into the decade between 1964 and 1974, Mann ignores earlier events, such as Ali's childhood and the issue of his Olympic medal. The thorny issues Mann does address, like Ali's relationship with the Nation of Islam and, in particular, Malcolm X, lack insight. At one point, for example, Ali turns his back on his mentor without providing an adequate explanation. Likewise, Ali's refusal to be drafted is clumsily handled, coming across as an act of obstinacy rather than religious conviction. Playing up to the image of Muhammad Ali as black America's hero and martyr, *Ali*, like *The Great White Hope*, accentuates its protagonist's heroic aspects while playing down his less palatable facets (see Appendix Three).

The Great White Hope thus raises questions concerning the film's interpretation and use of the historical past. Critics who have written on the slippery relationship between history and film point out that the fictionalisation of the past is an unavoidable element in movie-making (Toplin, 1996; Rosenstone, 1996). Indeed, Robert Rosenstone argues that, "on the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true" (Rosenstone, 1996: 70). To bring the past to life in images and sounds, filmmakers have to condense, synthesise, symbolise and generalise

past events. "What happens on screen", Rosenstone argues, "can never be more than an approximation of what was said and done in the past; what happens on screen does not depict, but rather points to, the events of the past" (Rosenstone, 1996: 71). However, he cautions that, "to be taken seriously":

The historical film must not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past. All changes and inventions must be apposite to the truths of that discourse, and judgement must emerge from the accumulated knowledge of the world of historical texts into which the film enters (Rosenstone, 1996: 79).

During the production of *The Great White Hope*, an argument arose between scriptwriter Sackler and executive producer Richard Zanuck which exemplifies the issue of truthfulness as applied to filmed adaptations of the past. According to the film's correspondence files, Zanuck initially insisted on a prologue explaining the historical basis of the film in Jack Johnson's life. In a letter to producer Lawrence Turman, however, Sackler opposed Zanuck's proposal, because to start the film with a long historical explanation would, in his opinion, mislead audiences by obscuring the fact that important parts of the film were fictionalised. "The more I think about this prologue the more I dislike it", Sackler wrote, adding:

It creates a weakness where none exists, announcing that we call upon History for support. Particularly since much of the story is *not* strictly true to history. And obviously we can't begin with a lecture about why or how it may be more true than history (Sackler, 1970).

Sackler's notion that a film may be "more true than history" suggests that fictional texts like *The Great White Hope*, even if they are not "strictly true" to their historical sources, can be true to the social attitudes generally held during the period in which the film is set. The prologue that was eventually used in the film, "Much of What is to Follow is True", represents a compromise between the two parties.

The Great White Hope and *Ali* (by its title) nonetheless typify the Hollywood tendency to personalise history, and to dramatise it as the acts of individuals. The capacities of the film medium -- particularly the use of facial close ups, long takes, sound effects and music -- all encourage this process (Rosenstone, 1996: 57-9). In *The Great White Hope*, Jefferson's love, anguish, and suffering thus become the main focus for spectatorial sympathies. The Study Guide's suggestion that it is "always the *man as a man* who ultimately concerns us", and the publicity pamphlet's claim that the movie's drama stems from "man's fight to survive as an individual -- regardless of colour, race, time or place", confirm this individualisation of history, as does Ritt's statement that he "accepted Jack's courage and his will and his fight for his identity" (McLaughlin and Twentieth Century Fox, 1970: 1; Twentieth Century Fox, 1970a: 2; Twentieth Century Fox, 1970b: 8).

Historian Pierre Sorlin argues that these conventions share the drawback of privileging "individual destinies [rather] than generalities of social life" (Sorlin, 1990: 45). In this respect, it is true that what happens to Jefferson in the film is more important than a depiction of the conditions that created his dilemma in the first place. Nevertheless, the figure of Jefferson also symbolises wider social developments by exemplifying the victimisation of blacks by whites at the time when the movie was set. In this way, the "generalities of social life" that Sorlin describes are implied by what happens to the movie's central character. *The*

Great White Hope's individualisation of the historical past through specific filmmaking techniques thereby helps to highlight issues of race and interracial relationships in American society.

Film Analysis

The establishing scenes of *The Great White Hope* corroborate this interpretation by showing whites conspiring to defeat someone they believe to be both inferior and, paradoxically, dangerous. The movie begins with a half screen image showing two boxers, one white and the other black, viewed from waist down, battling it out in the ring. The widescreen frame only hints at the off-screen action of a black boxer beating a white man. This use of off-screen space gives the viewer what Carlton Jackson calls "knowledge by insinuation" (Jackson, 1994: 113; Bordwell and Thompson, 1979: 73). Burnett Guffey's cinematography then emphasises the wider context of the scene by showing agitated white boxing fans in a deep focus shot. From the start, then, *The Great White Hope* foregrounds racial animosity as one of the "generalities of social life" to which Sorlin refers (Sorlin, 1990: 43-62).

The movie then cuts to the farm of former champion Brady, where members of the boxing establishment and press implore him to pick up the mantle of the white race. Promoting the former champion as the "white hope", Cap'n Dan tells Brady that it is his duty to reaffirm white supremacy in the ring by defeating Jefferson. "How're you going to like it", he asks Brady, "when the whole damn country says Brady let us down, he wouldn't stick a fist out to teach a loudmouth nigger, stayed home and let him be Champion of the World?" As Dan emphasises "the whole damn country", Ritt employs a reverse angle shot to cut to a close up of Cap'n Dan, while using a deep focus lens to frame the reporters behind him. This shot firmly establishes for the spectator the idea that the white boxing establishment and press are in collusion to prevent Jefferson's success.

According to the production records, producer Lawrence Turman tried to dilute the radical criticism of white society evident in Sackler's play. In the published version of the play, Cap'n Dan delivers a monologue direct to the audience after the Reno fight. In it, he warns of impending trouble from other blacks, and vows to do his best to dethrone Jefferson. "We beat those bushes for another White Hope", he says. "If he's no good we'll find another White Hope, we'll find them and we'll boost them up till one stays -- what the hell is this country, Ethiopia?" (Sackler, 1968: 36-7). During the screenwriting process, Turman had penned a memo to Sackler urging him to cut out this monologue, feeling that the pressure on Jefferson should come from different, unrelated quarters, rather than from a single conspiracy. "I think", Turman wrote,

The pressure is greater if it comes simultaneously from several, indeed all, sides rather than indicating virtually a conspiracy. Even if I am not right about this (and I think I may be), this aspect of the script needs, I think, more clarity (Turman, 1968).

The subsequent elimination of Cap'n Dan's monologue from the film version nevertheless fails to dampen the suggestion of a single conspiracy against Jefferson.

Indeed, the scene in which Cameron, the District Attorney of Chicago, questions Eleanor, indicates that white society's victimisation of Jefferson has reached State and Federal levels. Ritt here conveys in visual terms the dubious legality of the attempt to undermine Jefferson

by using a deep focus lens and placing the actors in a triangular formation. Dixon, a Bureau agent, is placed in the background space between Eleanor and Cameron, and becomes the pivotal figure in the scene. When Dixon continues to question Eleanor about her involvement with Jefferson, Ritt moves in for a close up to emphasise his involvement in the plot against Jefferson (Whitaker, 1972: 20).

In contrast to the film's unequivocal construction of white society, its construction of Jefferson's blackness is ambivalent. Edward Mapp suggested that Jefferson is an "amalgamation of Negro stereotypes with strong emphasis on 'the superior athlete' " (Mapp, 1972: 233; Pieterse, 1992: 149). He pointed to Jefferson's clean-shaven head, bare chest, excessive sweating, wide grin, and endless posturing as proof that the film reinforced old stereotypes of blacks. However, it may be argued that James Earl Jones's Oscar-nominated performance as Jefferson nullified, rather than perpetuated, the stereotype by adding psychological complexity to the role. Jones gives a powerful and nuanced performance that, under Ritt's direction, brings out the contradictions of Jefferson's position as a successful black man in a white world and a potential role model for other black people to follow.

In refusing to take up the mantle of the black race, Jefferson is a typical Ritt outsider figure who eschews group membership to express and preserve his individuality, a philosophy that tragically increases his sense of alienation and victimisation at the hands of his white oppressors (see Appendix Four). Jefferson reveals his individualist viewpoint early on in the movie when he rejects the white journalists' idea that he is "the black hope". "I ain't fighting for no race", he tells them. His later meeting with the African-American deacon and his followers outside the Reno stadium confirms his rejection of the idea that he is a symbol of black empowerment and collective struggle:

JEFFERSON: Hey man, what's my winning gonna do for you?

DEACON: Give him self-respect, that's what!

YOUNG NEGRO: Yeah - Ah be proud to be a cullud man tomorrow!

JEFFERSON: Well, country boy, if you ain't there already, all the boxing and all the nigger-praying in the world ain't gonna get you there!

DEACON: You look cullud, but you ain't thinking cullud.

JEFFERSON: No sir, I'm thinking cullud...I'm so busy thinking cullud I can't see nothing else. I just ain't thinking cullud else like you. You tell me you praying...you expect me to say "thank you reverend." You ain't praying for me...I ain't nothing to you apart from a black ugly fist.

To Jefferson, the deacon's idea of being "cullud" implies inferiority and subservience to whites, a notion the boxer firmly rejects. The deacon, however, feels that Jefferson has a unique chance to use his position as a black champion in a white-dominated sport to raise black consciousness and self-respect.

Jefferson's rejection of the idea that he is a symbol of black empowerment is, however, ambiguous, as the following scene confirms, when Scipio, a black tramp, interrupts Jefferson's victory celebrations. Ritt here uses long takes, incorporating a backtracking aerial

crane shot, to show Jefferson dancing to music in the street with his fans. This scene suggests Jefferson's willingness to share his victory with the black community. However, Ritt then visually undercuts the group celebration by framing Jefferson in medium close ups during his dialogue with Scipio, thus alienating him from the group. The crowd's jubilation thus does not form the basis for collective unity, because Jefferson, in his own words, "ain't fighting for no race".

Scipio further shows up Jefferson's ambiguous position as a successful black athlete in a white society when he accuses the champion of aping white values (see Appendix Five). The most overt mouthpiece for black nationalism in the film, Scipio, argues that Jefferson is impressing upon other blacks an insidious form of black self hate by immersing himself in white values and ignoring his black roots. "How much white you up to?" Scipio asks him, adding:

How much white you done took on? How much white you pining for? How white you wanna be and how white you gonna get, now you tell me! Hustling for the white man's sporting prize, itching for the white man's piece of poontang! Strutting around like you's the white man's nigger!

In neglecting his blackness, Jefferson is not for Scipio the figurehead of black empowerment that other blacks, like the deacon, suggest. Instead, he sees him as submitting to, rather than resisting, white power.

A possible interpretation of Jefferson's actions in the film is that he adopts the same strategy of resistance to white power as Tommy (Sidney Poitier) in Ritt's first film, *Edge of the City*, that of "laughing at" whites rather than "beating their brains in". This strategy is hinted at early on in the movie when Jefferson explains to the press his plans for the Reno fight:

If I lets it go on too long in there, just sorta blocking him and keeping him offa me, then everybody say, "Now ain't that one shiftless nigger, why they always so lazy?" And if I chop him down quick, third or fourth round, then they holler, "No, it ain't fair, that poor man up there fighting a gorilla!" But I am gonna work it out.

Jefferson here ridicules white stereotyping of blacks, using his blackness to turn the stereotype of the lazy, animalistic black man against the white establishment. Jefferson, as black critic Jim Pines puts it, "understands and exploits the nigger in him (when) he grunts and grins and slurs nonchalantly" at the Establishment (Pines, 1970). "Blackness" thus becomes a masquerade by means of which Jefferson attempts to resist white power.

In particular, Jefferson performs the "happy negro" role that white society expects of him as a means of gaining control over his life. The scene in which he arrives for the weigh-in at Reno demonstrates his strategy of using what the reviewer in *Playboy* called his "plantation nigger's smile" to give the false impression that he is happy (Anon, 1971b). Despite facing obscene taunts from the white crowd, Jefferson grins widely while sitting in the weighing chair. After he finds out that Brady weighs more than him, Jefferson jokes about the racial connotations of the fight, quipping: "This man says I'm lighter than you!" Later, Jefferson caricatures the white racist idea that "all niggers look alike" when he absconds to Europe under the guise of a member of a black baseball team. Later still, he amuses a group of German soldiers by acting like a gorilla. He then tells Eleanor that "I will fool whenever I

wants to", a recognition that his blackness is a performance that he puts on in order to survive.

However, the film ultimately demonstrates the shortcomings of Jefferson's masquerade when he is compelled to perform the leading role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a Budapest bar. Even though Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel of 1852 vilified the institution of slavery, it still moulded misleading stereotypes of blacks into the general public consciousness and has come to symbolise blacks' supposed inferiority to whites in American culture (see Appendix Six). In *The Great White Hope*, acting in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* humiliates Jefferson because it reinforces the very values that he sought to transcend. Ritt starts the scene with a static medium close up of Jefferson, his trainer Tick, and Eleanor huddled together in costume backstage to convey their alienation from mainstream society's ideas of blacks. A five second, static medium close up of Jefferson on stage dressed in dungarees and white-haired wig then emphasises his contempt for such ideas. Ritt then singles out boxing promoter Pop Weaver in the white crowd and, in a series of shot/reverse shots, dramatises an intense staring match between the two men. Jefferson reacts by exaggerating his "Uncle Tom" role, dancing around the stage wearing a huge grin. However, deciding he can no longer play a role he thinks is degrading, Jefferson finally removes his wig and hat, symbols of an inaccurate, Eurocentric representation of African-American culture. Jefferson has realised that his strategy of playing up to white stereotypes of blacks has backfired, and he projects open defiance of his treatment by white society.

The Great White Hope's ambivalent construction of blackness continues in its treatment of interracial relationships. While Ritt sought to naturalise the relationship between a black man and a white woman through classical Hollywood techniques, his handling of it is nevertheless marked by dominant white assumptions. In this respect, the movie ignores the effects of Eleanor's whiteness upon Jefferson, and focuses instead solely on those of Jefferson's blackness upon Eleanor. "Whiteness", as Richard Dyer argues, is both "everything and nothing", a position that is "the source of its representational power." "The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness", he continues, "secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to see 'whiteness'." That the white media portray whites as belonging to a specific ethnic group and class before they are white makes any analysis of whiteness difficult (Dyer, 1988: 734-5). The same media, in contrast, represent black people as black, as racial "others", before they are people. This gives spectators the impression that black people's colour is more important than their human status. Whiteness is thus a social construct that naturalises and perpetuates racist attitudes without the appearance of doing so. When read in this way, *The Great White Hope* elides the social and cultural power of being white by tacitly assuming that whites do not possess racial markings because they are white, and therefore "normal", and by constructing blackness alone as problematic.

To comprehend fully the historical context to which *The Great White Hope* alludes, a brief inquiry into general attitudes towards "miscegenation" at the beginning of the twentieth century is in order here (Pascoe, 1996). Intermingling between the races was deemed undesirable by those claiming to be of the superior race. White men in particular feared that blacks would seek equal status with whites through racial miscegenation. Indeed, Gunnar Myrdal argued in 1944 that white opposition to racial amalgamation was "the end for which the other restrictions are arranged as a means" (Myrdal, 1944: 591). Sex and race fears, in his view, were the main defence for segregation and the whole caste order. However, Myrdal overlooked the idea that white males envied black males' supposed sexual potency and performance. To overcome such anxieties, white southerners created the mythical "black

beast rapist" figure. Black men, according to this myth, were sexual savages, raping and enslaving white women, and threatening the purity of their race by having sexual intercourse with white women (Williamson, 1986: 84-88, 187-90).

Opposition against Jack Johnson was driven by such ideas. In the early 1900s, he had openly cavorted with white women, including prostitutes, and had had three white spouses. Johnson, however, defended his right to marry whomsoever he pleased because it was a private matter: "I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation of any man", he said (Gilmore, 1975: 14). However, Johnson's activities provoked Members of Congress to propose laws proscribing racial inter-marriage (see Appendix Seven).

The Great White Hope recreates these attitudes in an early scene in which citizens' groups lobby the District Attorney of Chicago. One white councillor deems Jefferson's relationship with Eleanor "an outrage, a threat to every decent home in America." An African-American councillor then ratifies such concerns, but on different grounds, stating that Jefferson's behaviour perpetuates negative stereotypes of blacks that whites generally held. "We can't pretend that race is not the main issue here", he argues, adding:

The deportment of this man does harm to his race. It confirms certain views of us you may already hold: That does us harm. But it also confirms in many Negroes the belief that his life is the desirable life, and that does us even greater harm.

This character represents a black middle-class elite who see Jefferson's relationship as worsening an already tense situation between the black, urban middle class and those rural blacks who were, at this time, migrating from southern fields to northern cities (Lemann, 1991). The doctor thus typifies those black leaders, like Booker T. Washington, who disapproved of Johnson's activities. "In misrepresenting the coloured people of the country", Washington wrote, "this man is harming himself the least. I wish to say emphatically that his actions do not meet with the approval of the coloured race" (Gilmore, 1975: 102).

The Great White Hope criticises the opposition to biracial relationships by portraying in a positive light the intimacy between Jefferson and Eleanor. Ritt explained in a promotional interview that the movie emphasised the plight of two people who, in his view, "could have had something beautiful, except they couldn't because a whole society wouldn't let them" (Knapp, 1971: 1). Ritt first introduces the spectator to the couple as Jefferson works out on a punching bag with his trainer and Eleanor sits quietly admiring him. After a short time, Jefferson kisses his lover. Later, when Jefferson and Eleanor honeymoon in the countryside, Ritt's *mise-en-scène* presents them as young lovers as they run through the trees and fields. Shot in soft focus, the scene's pastoral element offers an idealised, humanist image of love. However, the use of blues music ironically undercuts this idealised image. The blues, emblematic of sorrow, signify that Jefferson and Eleanor's moment of togetherness will soon be interrupted (Whitaker, 1972: 21).

Later, as the couple relax inside a nearby cabin, Ritt provides the spectator with the clearest expression of the film's humanist attitude to interracial relationships. Ritt eschews complex camera angles and framing here, and chooses to use a kerosene lamp for illumination to create what appears to be a moment of intimacy between Jefferson and Eleanor. Shot in one long take, the scene starts with Eleanor lying naked under the bedsheets while Jefferson, wearing only a towel, massages champagne into her back. They then cuddle each other in

bed. *The Great White Hope's* naturalistic and positive representation of an interracial romance here marks a significant shift in Hollywood's traditionally circumspect treatment of the subject.

However, the movie goes on to exaggerate the negative effects of Jefferson's blackness upon Eleanor. This ambiguous handling of interracial relationships is confirmed towards the end of the movie when Jefferson and Eleanor arrive in Mexico. By this time they are penniless, and living in squalid conditions. During the long scene at Jefferson's training camp, Eleanor is shown to have assumed the burdens associated with black women. Covered in bug bites, stinking from a lack of bathing, and wearing dark glasses to cover up the bags under her eyes, Eleanor tells Jefferson: "The two of us smell. Whatever turns people into niggers, it's happening to both of us." Jefferson's response, that it is "her wish coming true", implies that Eleanor has finally embraced the blackness which, ironically, he himself has tried to reject. Jefferson's opinion of Eleanor consequently changes, and he rejects her because she has turned into a "nigger", a symbol of the black experience of subordination and hardship that he wishes to transcend.

Having achieved the abject state of being a "nigger", Eleanor realises that the social exclusion and poverty associated with being black is not so desirable after all. Feeling that they have suffered enough vilification, and that Jefferson's arrogance is making their situation worse, she implores her lover to submit to the authorities. "Say yes, [to the offer of a rigged fight] and get it over with, for God's sake", she pleads, "you're letting them do this to you." After hearing her pleas, Jefferson accuses Eleanor of "batting for the home team", that is, of acting in the interests of the white establishment. He now considers her whiteness the sole reason why he has been unable to pursue his career:

Evvy time you pushes dat pinch-up face in fronna me, Ah sees where it done got me, dass whut Ah lookin at, de why, de wherefore an de Numbah One Who, right down de line, girl, an Ah mean YOU.

After Jefferson has cast her out, Eleanor commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. Her transgression of white society's attitude towards interracial relationships is thus punished, as the movie yields to the Judeo-Christian ethic of punishing sin. When read in this way, the movie reinforces the racial binarism that underpins Hollywood's treatment of black people and culture generally by associating whiteness with normality and blackness with dirtiness and depravity. It also perpetuates the old, conservative narrative in which interracial relationships end unhappily (see Appendix Eight).

After Eleanor's suicide, Jefferson's resistance diminishes and he agrees to relinquish his belt in a fixed fight in a scene that further demonstrates the film's ambiguous racial politics. Ritt explained in a promotional interview that he intended the final fight sequence to suggest that Jefferson was still resisting white efforts to humiliate him:

Turman, Sackler and I sat down and talked about it. One thing we decided to do was to make clear that Johnson -- Jefferson, that is -- had accepted the offer to throw the last fight, and then decided not to. It wasn't clear in the play, but I thought Sackler had the same intention (Knapp, 1971: 16).

However, the scene is open to a more ambiguous reading than Ritt's stated intentions suggest. In other words, it is unclear whether Jefferson throws the fight or not. During the bout,

Jefferson takes a fall during one of the rounds as arranged. While he lies on the canvas, Ritt fades out the sound of the crowd and includes a slow motion, twenty second close up of his bloodied face, aligning the spectator with the doomed outsider hero. Jefferson then resumes the fight with an added vigour which may suggest he has decided to fight seriously. When he is ultimately floored and stays down for the count, however, it is unclear whether he has been beaten fairly or has thrown the fight after all.

Whether Jefferson has thrown the fight or not, what is clear is that, either way, he is ultimately defeated by white power. At the fight's climax, the white characters' desires are shown to have been sated when ex-champion Brady, now the referee, holds the belt up high, as if to glorify the supremacy of the white race. Ritt then pulls back from the ring in an aerial crane shot that shows thousands of delirious white boxing fans celebrating the return of the belt into white hands. Ritt ends the movie with a long shot of Jefferson, with his back to the camera, as Goldie and Tick carry him away through a series of arches, arms outstretched in a Christ-like posture. Whereas Sackler had ended his play with the triumphant "white hope", Ritt chose instead to focus on his battered, but elevated, black hero. As the sound of the cheering white fans fades into an eerie silence, there is a cut to a freeze frame of Jefferson's bloodied face, emphasising his position as a sacrificial victim of white power.

Jefferson's defeat at the hands of a white opponent (whether fixed or not) can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a critique of the dominance and power that whites hold over blacks. On the other, it can be seen to reinforce traditional images of African-American victimisation. In this respect, his subjugation confirms Shohat and Stam's argument that Hollywood's images of blacks "assume a bourgeois morality intimately linked to status quo politics." "The taboo", they suggest, "was not so much on 'positive images' but rather on images of racial anger, revolt and empowerment" (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 203). Thus although Jefferson has exhibited anger and defiance against whites, he is still beaten at the end of the film and accordingly falls short as a figure of black empowerment. As in *Edge of the City*, when the black male character dies so the white hero can overcome his problems, in *The Great White Hope* both Jefferson and Eleanor must sacrifice themselves to expose the racism of American society (see Appendix Nine).

Reception

Upon its release, the racial politics of *The Great White Hope* were criticised by many commentators, both black and white. *Variety* predicted that Jefferson's capitulation to white authority at the end of the film would "ironically make play-off quite palatable in racially sensitive [southern] areas" (Murf, 1970: 17). Moreover, the newspaper anticipated the negative reaction that the film would receive from the black community, commenting, "Blacks don't cotton to such pics...[as] they feature blacks in a losing light" (George, 1994: 52). In contrast to the black heroes of the later blaxploitation films who triumphed over whites, Jefferson's defeat at the end of the film was not an image of black empowerment that many young, urban blacks supported. In addition, some African-American women, according to African-American critic Maurice Peterson of *Essence* magazine, despised the movie's "glorification of a black man's love of a white woman" (Peterson, 1974). In this respect, film critic Dennis Hunt wrote that some black women in the theatre where he saw the movie responded with "hoots and catcalls...when Jefferson scorns a fiery, curvaceous black woman for [a] wallflowerish white girl" (Hunt, 1971: 56; Bogle, 1988: 98. See also Appendix Ten).

Muhammad Ali also contested the film's representation of interracial relationships because such liaisons undermined his Black Muslim religion that forbade all interracial sexual contact. In his 1964 *Playboy* interview, Ali had said that "a black man *should* be killed if he's messing with a white woman." (Remnick, 1998: 271. Original emphasis). Writing specifically about *The Great White Hope* in his autobiography, he emphasised that "a black hero chasing white women was a role I didn't want to glorify. I thought a black male hero needed to glorify, in real life or on the screen, some of the black women who brought them and their brothers into the world" (Ali and Durham, 1976: 391). For many African-American spectators, then, *The Great White Hope* reinforced the stereotype of black subservience to whites, and perpetuated the idea that blackness signified inferiority to whiteness in American society.

The adverse reaction from many black spectators led Ritt to remark, in an unpublished interview four years after the film's release, that:

I put something into *The Great White Hope* that does not exist for a black audience. I saw them get angry at the film, and I was more surprised than anyone else. Never in my life had I ever thought I could do anything that would get a black audience angry. But I did, and I've paid the price for it (Peterson, 1974).

The defensiveness Ritt shows in such comments is the other side to his liberal paternalism, and was seen again in the way he fended off similar criticism of *Conrack*, a movie that celebrated the work of a white teacher trying to educate a class of poor, rural black children.

In an interview six months after its release, Ritt also observed that there was a "white backlash" against the movie (Anon, 1971a). This was confirmed by Peterson who suggested that white audiences had resented the "guilt-mongering advertising campaign" behind the movie (Peterson, 1974). Posters that read, "He could beat any white man in the world. He just couldn't beat all of them!" suggested to many whites that *The Great White Hope* one-sidedly portrayed white society as institutionally racist (Anon, 2002).

Comments made by Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker* further exemplified this "white backlash." The idea that white society was conspiring against Jefferson was, Kael wrote, a fault with the film, as was its portrayal of white Americans as "conspiratorial monsters... [and] sneaky rotten whites plotting against one noble black." The movie's suggestion of a "national-conspiracy" was, she continued, a tactless "all-purpose accusation" designed "to build up a sense of injustice and rage, and to make what the black accuser says that the hateful white man really wanted to do more true than the facts of what white men actually did." *The Great White Hope*, Kael concluded, takes the spectator into "Fakesville" (Kael, 1970: 157). James Powers of *The Hollywood Reporter* concurred with Kael, writing that this part of the film was "overdone", adding: "Would the whole majesty of the U.S. government devote itself, lend itself to connivance, to get a black champion back to the United States to establish the superiority of white over black in this particular fashion?" (Powers, 1970: 7). For these two critics, then, the film's suggestion of a white conspiracy against Jefferson was not "more true than history", as scriptwriter Howard Sackler had earlier claimed for the film as a whole, but distorted history.

Conclusion

The Great White Hope thus characterised the ambiguities of Ritt's liberal attitude to race. On the one hand, it may be seen to have successfully naturalised a passionate relationship between the races in a humanistic way through classical Hollywood filmmaking techniques. On the other, it can be seen to perpetuate the disempowering notion of blacks as passive victims of white prejudice and unable to resist white dominance. However, as a fictionalised account of the life of Jack Johnson, the film can be defended as being faithful to the truth of its historical sources. Ritt and Sackler used material from the historical past for their creative exploration of controversial issues, such as black leadership, racial mixing and black sexuality. "There's always the risk of being accused of revising American history", Ritt said in an interview just prior to the movie's release, adding, "but that's one of the best things about film. You can be provocative -- not ordinary and predictable" (Jackson, 1994: 230).

Appendices

Appendix One

The Great White Hope was based upon Howard Sackler's Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play of 1968 that fictionalised the life of John Arthur "Jack" Johnson, who in 1908 became the first African-American boxer to win the heavyweight championship. The title is an ironic reference to the boxing establishment's search for a white boxer to win back the heavyweight crown for the white race. In the film, after Jack Jefferson (James Earl Jones) wins the heavyweight championship in Australia, the American boxing establishment, including Cap'n Dan (R. G. Armstrong), Smitty (Lloyd Gough), and Pop Weaver (Chester Morris), coax a former white champion, Brady (Larry Pennell), out of retirement. Jefferson's relationship with a white woman, Eleanor Bachman (Jane Alexander), further outrages the white authorities, including Dixon (Robert Webber), an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Cameron (Hal Holbrook), the District Attorney of Chicago. Their relationship also infuriates Jefferson's black ex-girlfriend Clara (Marlene Warfield), his mother, Mama Tiny (Beah Richards), and Scipio (Moses Gunn), a black street philosopher. Convicted under the Mann Act, legislation designed to block the transportation of women across state lines "for immoral purposes", Jefferson absconds with Eleanor to Europe where he tries, but fails, to consolidate his championship status. Eleanor blames their lack of money upon her lover's stubborn refusal to co-operate with the authorities. Unable to reason with Jefferson, Eleanor commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. Plagued with guilt, Jefferson then agrees to a fixed fight. The film then ends with his defeat in the ring. My quotes from the film, with linguistic colloquialisms, appear as written in the published version of Sackler's play.

Appendix Two

The Bureau of Investigation charged Jack Johnson on eleven counts under the Mann Act (U.S. Code, White Slave Traffic Act, 1910, vol. 18, sec. 2421) in 1913, including unlawful sexual intercourse, aiding prostitution, debauchery and sodomy. According to the Act, any man who crossed state lines with any woman apart from his wife and had sex with her was liable to prosecution (Sammons, 1990: 38; Gilmore, 1975: 117).

Appendix Three

Ali is not the first film to have dramatised the life of the boxer, as Ali played himself in *The Greatest* (1977). Of the many films that feature Ali, including his brief appearance in

Requiem For a Heavyweight (1962), it is two documentaries -- Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings* (1996) and William Klein's *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* (1964, re-released in 2002) - that come closest to capturing Ali's athletic prowess and cultural impact.

Appendix Four

Ritt's use of an outsider figure is a clear indication of a Jewish influence in his work. David Desser and Lester Friedman argue that this is a common motif found in both Jewish literature and film. Looking upon themselves as "cultural hybrids", immigrant Jews found themselves facing a choice between adapting to the needs of their new environment and maintaining their inherited identities. Partially accepted and partially rejected by mainstream American society, Jews viewed themselves as marginalised outsiders. Through his employment of the outsider motif, Ritt comments upon what he sees as a fundamental polarity between the democratic ideals of American society and the denial of these ideals for those whom the white majority defines as subalterns. The outsider figure also appears in *Edge of the City*, *Conrack* and *Norma Rae* (1979) (Desser and Friedman, 1993: 7).

Appendix Five

bell hooks argues that for blacks, "aping whites, assimilating their values (i.e. white supremacist attitudes and assumptions), was clearly the way to achieve material success" in American society (hooks, 1995: 110).

Appendix Six

In Stowe's book, Uncle Tom is a messianic figure who symbolised the kindness, patience, humility and altruism that nineteenth-century "romantic racialists", like herself, held to be true about blacks. Later stage and film adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reinforced misleading stereotypes of blacks through the use of minstrelsy, in which whites, dressed in blackface, performed what they felt were realistic representations of black life and behaviour (Moses, 1982: 49-55; Toll, 1974: vi).

Appendix Seven

Representative Seaborn A. Roddenberry of Georgia pressed for legislation curbing mixed marriages in response to the Johnson-Cameron marriage on December 11, 1912. "Intermarriage between whites and blacks", Roddenberry said, "is repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit. It is abhorrent and repugnant. It is subversive of social peace." (Gilmore, 1975: 108)

Appendix Eight

This narrative continues in more recent films, such as *Jungle Fever* (dir. Spike Lee. 1991), *The Bodyguard* (dir. Mike Jackson. 1992), *A Bronx Tale* (dir. Robert De Niro. 1993), and *One Night Stand* (dir. Mike Figgis. 1997), in which interracial sexual liaisons are shown to either break up the safe sanctity of marriage, imperil family life, or jeopardise the security of employment. However, in Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball* (2002), the interracial sexual relationship between Hank (Billy Bob Thornton) and Leticia (Halle Berry) is seen to succeed as the couple remain together at the end of the film.

Appendix Nine

The black boxer as a sacrificial figure can also be found in *Body and Soul* (1947), written by Ritt's friend Abraham Polonsky (who, in the 1950s, refused to co-operate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and was blacklisted), and directed by Robert Rossen (who eventually named names and continued working). The film featured Canada Lee in a significant supporting role as the boxer who dies so that the white hero Charley (John Garfield) can face up to his problems. This film, as Michael Rogin points out, remade Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1939, staged originally by the Group Theatre in 1937, with Ritt in a minor role in later performances), with William Holden as Joe Bonaparte, a young musician driven by poverty into the ring, and James "Cannonball" Green as Chocolate Drop, a black boxer whom Joe kills (Rogin, 1996: 217). In both films, boxing serves as a metaphor for the capitalistic exploitation of the human body for monetary gain. Richard Fleischer's *Mandingo* (1975) firmly linked the issues of interracial sex and boxing. Set on a Louisiana plantation in the 1840s, the film unflinchingly confronts white slave owners' practices of using their slaves (in particular heavyweight boxer Ken Norton in the title role) as prize fighters and, in the case of the plantation owner's daughter (Susan George), sex aids. White injustice against black boxers reappears in Norman Jewison's *The Hurricane* (1999), the story of how an African-American teenager and a group of Canadian activists helped clear the name of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a middleweight title contender who was framed for murder in 1966.

Appendix Ten

Such criticism was, however, not universal in the black community. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded Ritt its annual Image Award for his directorial efforts on *The Great White Hope*. (Jackson, 1994: 115).

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