

Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*: Looking Back to See Now

By Patricia Escarcega

"Why does this movie annoy me?" asked Michael Ayadele. The movie in question is Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (New Line Productions, 2000), and Ayadele's question was just one of many raised during a lively forum at ASU in November. Organized by English professor Neal A. Lester and presented by the African American Studies Program, the forum provided a rare opportunity to view and discuss *Bamboozled*, a film that articulates questions seldom raised in the discourse of American popular culture and overlooked by many audiences and critics during its short-lived theatre run. The forum brought together three panelists—Elizabeth McNeil, an academic advisor in the English Department; Beverly Austin, an Anthropology student and ASU East library staff member; and Stacy Graber, a graduate student in English Education—and an audience eager to discuss a film that, as Ayadele's question indicates, always elicits strong and often ambivalent reactions.

The film traces the rise and fall of Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans), an executive at the CNS television network. His ideas for shows depicting middle-class African Americans are dismissed as "too white" by his white boss Dunwitty, who pressures him to create something "edgy" that will boost ratings. Delacroix responds by producing something so outrageous, so excruciatingly offensive, that he expects to be immediately fired and released from his contract. The result is *Mantan*:



The New Millennium Minstrel Show, an updated version of the minstrel shows that entertained white Americans throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The show, which stars black performers in blackface, is set on an Alabama plantation, and features the buffoonery of *Mantan*, Sleep 'n' Eat, and various other racist stereotypes and caricatures. It becomes a smash hit. The film takes a dark turn as the creators of *Mantan* plunge into self-destruction, crumbling under the weight of their own creation.

As with Spike Lee's other movies, *Bamboozled* is a bold, complex film that always draws from an audience some reaction. McNeil admitted that the movie left her "nauseous and depressed" but added, "I like the way the film



The panelists—Elizabeth McNeil, Beverly Austin, and Stacy Graber—respond to a student's questions on Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. The forum was organized by Professor Neal A. Lester (left).

doesn't answer all of its own questions." Austin also admitted not liking the film: "I have never seen a film with so much negativity," she said. But the movie ultimately succeeds where many contemporary films do not—it jolts viewers from their moviegoer complacency, forcing them to confront images and stereotypes that continue to plague the way African Americans are and have been historically (mis)represented in American popular culture. "The movie shows how the media is morally flawed in the way it represents African Americans," said Geoffrey Mauci, who attended the forum. The film suggests, moreover, that we are all responsible for the images that our culture promulgates.

One of the most poignant moments in *Bamboozled* depicts how, as the show's success grows, its audience begins to embrace the blackface costume—donning white gloves, red lips, and blackened faces. At the pre-taping warm-up for the show, audience members take turns standing up and declaring giddily into a microphone, "I's a nigger!" Rather than invoke widespread revulsion, the show succeeds as a commodity that ultimately perpetuates the old, hurtful stereotypes that Delacroix initially set out to destroy. And this is precisely what makes *Bamboozled* such a powerful film—it forces viewers to become inextricably embroiled in the controversy. Attorney Melanie Hart, who also attended the forum, suggested that "Spike Lee is calling out everybody—bourgeoisies and

pseudo-revolutionaries [alike].... He draws you in and makes you think: 'I'm doing what the audience [in the movie] is doing.'" Despite mixed reactions from viewers and critics—folks either love it or hate it—the film leaves an indelible impression on all who see it, and hopefully presses them to consider the issues long after the last credit rolls off the screen. As Charisma Howell, another forum participant, concluded, "The movie ends at such a strong point. It asks, 'What are you going to do from now on?'"

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