His Trust and His Trust Fulfilled: racist art or morality tale?

by Phillip W. Weiss

Art is subject to different interpretations and as an art form film is no exception. This adage applies to two D. W. Griffith movies, *His Trust* and its sequel *His Trust Fulfilled*, both produced in 1911. It can be argued that both films are examples of racist cinema. First, the principal character, a black slave, is played by a white actor performing in blackface; second, black people in general are portrayed as being subservient to white people; and third, the black slave is depicted as being forlorn and disheveled, all of which could be considered racist. Yet, to summarily label these films as racist based strictly on these subjective impressions would be wrong. Based on careful analysis of the text of these films and documentary evidence derived from a comprehensive list of authoritative published sources, I will demonstrate that despite the racist-like features of these films, they actually represent an attempt to present a dignified and positive portrayal of a black man, and therefore of African-Americans in general

First, here is a combined synopsis of both films. Set in the South during the Civil War, a white man goes off to fight for the South, entrusting the care of his wife and daughter to his house slave, George, (who is played by a white actor in blackface). Subsequently, the soldier is killed in action, and his sword is returned to his wife. Soon after, Union soldiers pillage the home and torch the house, and at the risk of his life, George rushes into the burning building and saves the sword, but the wife and daughter are now homeless. George provides them shelter in his cabin while he sleeps outside; then the wife dies, and George arranges that the daughter live with another family and secretly pays for her education out of his

own meager funds, which renders him destitute. Yet, so devoted is George to the daughter that he is even willing to steal to ensure that she can continue her education. The story concludes with George being thanked for his service, and for honoring the trust that had been placed in him.

This story raises a question: Is the idea of a black slave remaining selflessly loyal to a white slaveholding family a contrivance, that is, is the plot deliberately distorted for dramatic effect? The answer to this question is no. Such a story is plausible. It is true that not all slaves remained faithful. Their reactions to the war varied widely, from some firing their masters' rifles at the invading Union soldiers to others joining the Union Army (Roark, 2005, 140). During the war, many slaves ran away from their masters, and some masters had to use threats and outright force to compel the slaves to remain obedient (Roark, 2005, 141). Page Smith writes how one manager of several Louisiana plantations

> **found it increasingly difficult to control the behavior of his slaves. He wrote one slaveowner "that but very few are faithful – Some of those who remain are worse than those who have gone … they will not even gather food for themselves." (Smith, 1982, p. 378)**

In Mississippi the provost marshal of Adams County reported that "there is a great disposition among the Negroes to be insubordinate and to run away and go to the federals" (Smith, 1982, p. 379).

But there were also many instances in which slaves remained completely devoted and steadfast. Some slaves were intensely protective of their masters, especially those "who were closely associated with their owners" (Wiley, 1938, p. 64). In one case in Texas, a slave disarmed his master and locked him in a

smokehouse to save him from being killed by Union soldiers (Smith, 1982, p.379). In other cases, when a family learned that the master was dead, "the tears of the black members of the household were often more profuse than those of the whites" (Wiley, 1938, p. 64). One slave said she would be happy if she "could kill me jes' one Yankee." She hated them because "dey hurt my white people" (Smith, 1982, p. 379).

The Emancipation Proclamation also failed to incite widespread rebellion. After its publication "the great majority of slaves remained on the plantations and farms" (Smith, 1982, p. 389). D. W. Griffith recalled how one of his father's ex-slaves who, "with the heads of four other Negro families," had refused to leave the plantation (Geduld, 1971, p. 13). Booker T. Washington talked about how a "Negro rarely betray[ed] a specific trust" (Wiley, 1938, p. 65). In the 1936 movie *Show Boat*, which is set in the South shortly after the Civil War, a black dock worker, Joe, played by Paul Robeson, risks his life to get help for Magnolia; and in the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind* a house slave, Mammy, played by Hattie McDaniel, remains intensely devoted to Scarlet, even after the South had lost the war. Both McDaniel and Robeson's were lauded for their performances.

The feelings of devotion shown by some slaves were often reciprocated by their masters. For instance, after hearing that a cholera epidemic was threatening certain plantations, a slave owner, Alfred Huger, vowed to join his "Negroes" and share their fate (Roark, 2005, p. 141). In other cases, "many planters responded to the plight of the blacks with genuine pity, feeling almost as sorry for them as they felt for themselves" (Roark, 2005, p. 142). Griffith remembered how his father

had joked with black ex-slaves (Geduld, 1971, pp.13-14). When a slave owner was preparing to depart for war, calling together the slaves prior to his departing "and the commitment of his family to them for safe-keeping seemed to have a salutary effect on their later conduct" (Wiley, 1938, p. 65).

Some argued that the slaves were treated better than the white workers in the North. A Vermont woman who had worked in North Carolina reported that the "slaves received good food and appeared contented" (Saun, 1980, p. 172). Another Northerner who traveled to the Natchez, Mississippi area in December 1838 said that the slaves were given the week off from Christmas to New Years at a time "when the Christmas day itself often went unobserved in the North" (Saun, 1980, p. 172). Commenting on the labor unrest in the North in the aftermath of the Panic of 1857, the chairman of the Democratic Party in North Carolina, William W. Holden, said: "How eagerly would those poor wretches devour what our well-fed slaves waste." (Huston, 1987, p. 80). Unlike the factory workers in the North who were being reduced to destitution, in the South slaves were valued and treated as a capital asset (Huston, 1987, p. 80). On November 18, 1857, The Mobile *Daily Register* wrote: "Labor is capital in the South, and therefore, while paying the cost of government, it is as carefully and tenderly guarded as the humanity and the avarice of its owners can induce" (Huston , 1987, pp. 80-81).

While there was economic turmoil in the North, the slave-based economy of the South was producing and exporting cash crops such as cotton and tobacco which brought money into the Southern coffers and which shielded the slaves from the deleterious effects of the economic dislocations which were disrupting

Northern white workers, many of whom were immigrants (Huston, 1987, pp. 9, 210-214). It was only after the Civil War, when the black slaves were transformed into tenant farmers and workers and now had to fend for themselves that they became a target of open hatred, as had happened with every other minority group who was vying for a larger piece of the economic pie. Blacks had freedom but they no longer had security, which placed them at an immediate disadvantage in a highly competitive and ethnically and racially diverse culture in which they, from an economic perspective, were newcomers. Thus, nostalgic depictions of the Old South, with kindly white plantation owners and smiling, contented slaves, while seemingly farfetched, may have contained at least a kernel of truth. This does not mean that slavery as an institution was not brutal. Rather, all it means is that in some cases the brutality was blunted, which did not make the master-slave relationship any less racist and reactionary (Huston, 1987, p. 7).

Nevertheless, it is unfair to then presume that D. W. Griffith was racist just because he was a white Southerner. He did not create the problem, and to impugn his motives based upon his ethnic background alone is equally racist too. Writing on whether Griffith was a racist, Bryan Curtis wrote that Griffith "didn't have a coherent political idea in his head" (Curtis, 2003). Griffith himself vigorously denied that he was anti-Negro (Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, 1989, p. 16).

Regarding the Southern attitude toward slavery, James Huston writes: "Southerners … advocated an economics based on paternalism," (Huston, 1987, p. 81). For the white Southerner, while the slaves were under their control, the slave was not an object for hatred, but rather was someone to be cared for. These

views were "surprisingly widespread" (Huston, 1987, p. 81). Hence it should not be surprising that a Southern white man going off to war would have left his family in the care of a slave, for whom he would have felt a genuine feeling of love and further, it is doubtful that any slave owner would have entrusted the care of his family to his slaves unless that feeling was mutual.

Another key question that must be asked is: Is the portrayal of George by a white actor in blackface inherently racist? This question defies an unequivocal response. An actor of one race playing a character of another race is a custom as old as theater itself, and extends back to antiquity. Regarding the practice of blackening or masking the face, Hans Nathan writes:

> **Actors and dancers blackened or masked their faces long before the practice established itself in the popular American theater. We recall the Greek *phallophoroi* who used soot; the demons, goblins, savages, Indians, Turks, Moors, and Negroes of the lavish entertainments at the courts of the Renaissance and the early Baroque; and Pulcinella and Arlecchino of the *Commedia dell'Arte* who wore their black masks up to the past century. (Nathan, 1962, p. 3)**

Of course, Nathan's comments are not completely analogous to the situation that existed in the United States, in which the practice of blackening the face took on overtly racist overtones, but it does indicate that the practice was not a uniquely American contrivance and that its adaptation by white American entertainers predated the founding of the United States by several centuries.

Objectively, the idea of a white actor performing in blackface should not be cause for consternation, yet the very mention of it stirs controversy. Its employment in film implies a public putdown of nonwhite people and, in the words

of C. Vann Woodward, a "capitulation to racism" (Bernardi, 1996, p. 108). The blackface is interpreted as being demeaning and pejorative, and there seems to be a general consensus among many film academicians that Griffith's film technique, which included casting white actors in blackface, was racist. Sergie Eisenstein found that "among most repellent elements" in Griffith's films was that through his films Griffith became an "open apologist for racism," and following Eisenstein's lead, other researchers, including Thomas Cripps, Robert Lang, Julia Lesage, Michael Rogin, and Clyde Taylor, more recently "have centered their investigations on the racist practices found in Griffith's works" (Bernardi, 1996, p. 103).

But Griffith did not introduce blackface as an art form. When Griffith made *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*, blackface was already a well-established and highly popular form of entertainment in the United States and England (Nathan, 1962, pp. 3, 32; Waters, 2007, pp. 94-99). His use of blackface was well within the norms for the times. Further, there are no statements in which Griffith impugns or attacks blacks, either as individuals or as a group. If Griffith did harbor hateful thoughts about blacks, he did not express them.

Further, much of the criticism of Griffith seems to be subjective. For instance, in a discourse on Griffith's decision to use blackface in the *Trust* movies, Sarah Louise Childress writes:

> **Blackface is less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure arising from contradictory racial impulses at work. George is a white man representing a black man and thus becomes neither and both simultaneously. The burnt cork on his face designates him as "black," but the objectivity of his "black" face is also a subjective fiction. (Childress, 2005, p. 19)**

Yet Childress's entire statement is inferential as well as not entirely accurate. George is not a white man representing a black man. Rather, George is a black man played by a white man, which is a significant difference because if Childress is correct, then George is actually white, which is an absurdity. Another Griffith critic, Robert M. Henderson writes:

> **There is little doubt that Griffith was actively perpetuating a popular Southern myth about the faithful black with these two films. (Henderson, 1972, p. 98)**

This statement presupposes that the films were based on a myth, which is a matter of opinion, and second, it suggests that Griffith was more interested in promoting a political agenda than in selling a commercial product, which is conjecture. A third Griffith detractor, Cedric J. Robinson, writes:

> **In his earlier films, Griffith's racism had assumed a sentimental, paternalistic form." (Robinson, 2007, p. 101)**

This statement, like the previous two, is entirely impressionistic, and therefore is far from being conclusive.

In 1910, Griffith made eighty-six movies, and that in two and a half years at Biograph he made two hundred and eighty-eight films of which *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* were but two (Henderson, 1972, p. 98), the purpose of which was not to promote a social agenda but to produce a commercial product that would appeal to an audience and make money. Commenting on the risks associated with making movies, Griffith wrote:

> **Most motion-picture producers hesitate about going too near the limit of popular approval. Naturally. With so much invested in a single film, it is obvious that only disaster could attend the making of many photoplays that failed to please. (Geduld, 1971, p. 63)**

It is highly doubtful that Griffith would have spent money making two movies a week to promote a social agenda. He was not a politician. His goal was to make movies that would be pleasing, not offensive, and meet the needs of a public that demanded to be entertained. As Jack Temple Kirby writes, "public interest in things racial and ethnic was high" and Griffith accordingly made movies dealing with subjects for which there was a high interest. For Griffith, any ethnic group could be a subject for cinematic treatment. Besides making movies about blacks, he also made movies depicting Hispanics, Jews, Italians, Indians, and Orientals (Kirby, 1978, pp. 118-120). He was an artist, a businessman, and an impresario. Some could argue that Griffith was insensitive to the feelings of blacks because they were not part of the general audience that went to see his movies, but the work of Oscar Micheaux seems to dispel the notion of black disinterest (Cripps, 1977, p. 11; Green, 2000).

Although there are many who decry Griffith's depiction of George as being derogatory of African-Americans (Henderson, 1972, p. 98; Robinson, 2007, p. 119; Butters Jr., 2002, p. 65), and granted that one could reasonably object to a character that is reminiscent of a good-natured Uncle Remus[1], a shamelessly obedient Uncle Tom, or a "lazy, no-account, good-for nothing" pickaninny or coon (Bogle, *Tom, Coons*, 1989, pp. 7-8, 41), nevertheless George is a heroic figure who is worthy of respect. He exhibits some of the finest and most sublime human characteristics and comports himself in a dignified manner that warrants not disgrace but honor.

[1] **Uncle Remus is a black character featured in a series of southern American folk tales by Joel Chandler Harris first published in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Source: "Joel Chandler Harris, 1848-1908," *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org, online.**

He is a man caught up in a situation which presented him with certain choices that put his strength of character to the test. He could have easily forsaken the colonel's wife and daughter and gone about his business, but he was not that kind of person. His lack of rancor may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, but in fact it is evidence of immense strength of character. In this respect, then, George is portrayed in a positive light.

It is true that George seems to have many stereotypical traits – his sad features, his shuffling gait, his apparent lack of power – yet these are superficial features that have no substantive bearing on the character's goodness, which is evident through his actions. When the sword is delivered, he takes it and places it on the wall; when the house is burning he rushes in to save the little girl and then the sword; when he is desperate for money to help the daughter, he is willing to put his own freedom at risk ("George's love for the child leads him to temptation" – Griffith, *His Trust Fulfilled*, 05:54). These are not the actions of a vacuous man; instead they are the actions of a hero ("George risks his life to be faithful to his trust" – Griffith, *His Trust*, 09:54).

Just because George is in a subordinate position does not make his actions demeaning. In fact the opposite is the case: his actions are altruistic. He acts not out of self-interest, but rather in the interest of others. After the daughter becomes orphaned, "George with his savings provides support for the child, pretending it comes from her estate" (Griffith, *His Trust Fulfilled*, 01:25). That he is black recedes into irrelevancy, replaced by his essential humanity which transcends his inferior social position to attain a level of spiritual purity that is almost divine. George, like

Jesus Christ, eschews wealth and does good, thus becoming sublime. If Griffith had really intended on using these films to smear the black race, he could have had depicted George as a "brutal black buck" joining the Union soldiers in committing acts of mayhem, or he could have portrayed him as hate-driven fanatic, "full of black rage," who would stop at nothing to wreak his revenge for years of enforced servitude (Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, 1989, p.13). Acts of sheer depravity would have sensationalized the character, but that would not have made the depiction less racist, only more brazen. Being a quiet man does not meanthat George was a fool. Nor does Griffith's choice of casting a white actor in therole mean that the character itself is somehow tainted. In this respect, the race of the actor who played the role should not be the overriding issue; in a character-driven story such as that found in *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled,* in which George is the principal character, what should matter is the actor's understanding of the character and his ability to effectively play the role, artistic considerations which transcend race.[2] Regarding what he wanted from an actor, Griffith wrote:

> **The worries then were pretty much the worries now; better stories, finding actors who could be natural and interesting, struggling to put into pantomime effects which your imagination painted. (Geduld, 1971, p. 66)**

Wilfred Lucas plays the role skillfully; his rendition of George, although obviously performed in blackface, nonetheless is dignified, and after watching these films, the audience knows something about George, the person.

[2] **Development of character-driven stories is discussed by Francis Glebas in *Directing the Story – Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation*, 2009. Focal Press: Burlington, MA.**

The role of George is not a parody, that is, he is not reduced to a caricature, and despite the use of blackface the character's credibility and nobility remain intact. Griffith believed that "what pictures need above everything else is a good story," and the *Trust* movies present a good story (Geduld, 1971, p. 64). Nowhere in the text of the two films is George specifically belittled because of his race, and nowhere in these stories is George treated as a joke. He does not dance a jig, does not eat watermelon, and does not act like a fool. Just the opposite is the case. He is the epitome of responsibility, the consummate adult, and is treated as such. In both movies, white people shake his hand (four times), ask him for help, come to him for aid and afford him respect. His generosity is evident throughout the story. None of this is racist, and that George helps the daughter can hardly be considered foolish or demeaning. Instead, it is something that should elicit feelings of pride. For the fact is that George is an honorable man. Expanding on this point, Robert Jackson writes:

> **Griffith endows George with a strong sense of pathos here; his paternalistic portrait of the slave (or legally if not practically, the ex-slave) seems quite ingenious and blind to the irony of the lawyer's final handshake with George. Rather than understanding the handshake as a hearty endorsement of the ongoing servility and inferiority of the black man – which at a fundamental level it most certainly is – Griffith invests the gesture with affection and respect, with a disarming sense of the lawyer's appreciation of the black man's honor. It is this vision of honor that the film so fully celebrates. (Jackson, 2011, p. 39)**

That George is played by a white man in blackface can be perceived as offensive, yet his affectionate and respectful depiction alluded to by Jackson

gives *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* less of a racist edge. And even if Griffith was a narrow-minded "paternalist-style racist" (Kirby, 1978, p. 118), he was also, in the words of Marian Hansen, an "artistic genius" (Hansen, 1991, p. 163) who used his creative skills to produce two movies which, through the character of George, are not completely denigrative or dismissive of blacks. This view may run counter to prevailing opinions regarding Griffith and his cinematic treatment of race, yet the evidence seem to suggest a more complex picture.

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