

Stephany Qiouyi Lu
COMPSTD 7380
March 20, 2013

Migrating to the Movies

Migrating to the Movies provides a fascinating, multifaceted account of the representation of Black people in preclassical cinema, the way cinema impacted and was impacted by Black life, Black viewers, and Black producers, and the way cinema reflected and was affected by the state of race relations during its time. The analysis is thorough and provides a deep understanding of an underacknowledged aspect of Black life and history.

What I found particularly interesting about the book was the first chapter on the representation of race and Blackness in preclassical cinema. Stewart goes beyond a simple analysis of representation as stereotype and universally negative and instead takes a more nuanced approach to the representation of Blackness on screen. Not only did I find Stewart's analysis comprehensive and interesting, but I also noted that not much has changed in terms of representations of race on screen, particularly in terms of blackface and other forms of colorfacing.

Although the use of blackface has significantly declined in recent years, it nonetheless still lives on in Hollywood cinema. *Tropic Thunder*, released in 2008, featured Robert Downey Jr. in a prominent role in blackface—in fact, he is in blackface on the movie poster. Vexed representations of Blackness, alongside vexed representations of other people of color, continue to appear in Hollywood films.

Stewart's analysis is particularly compelling because not only can it be applied to representations of Blackness in preclassical cinema, but, with some changes to the context and the setting of analysis, we can apply a similar framework to understanding phenomena such as yellowface, redface, brownface, etc. For instance, Stewart points out the seemingly contradictory nature of representing Blackness on screen by pointing out the fact that, on some occasions, white actors in blackface and Black actors would appear side-by-side in the same frame, with the expectation that the audience would recognize each form, and with the understanding that both were meant to somehow portray Blackness. In particular, Stewart notes that, in many of these instances, sympathetic characters were often portrayed by white actors in blackface, whereas other characters would be played by actual Black actors.

We can understand the use of yellowface in multiple prominent media forms in a similar way—2010's *The Last Airbender*, based on the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* had its three protagonists in yellowface/brownface, with a villainous antagonist-turned-protagonist played by an actual Asian actor, and extras played by actual Asian actors. *Cloud Atlas*, 2012, also used yellowface and multiple other colorfaces while still using actors of color for more background or supporting roles. The TV series *Firefly*, released in 2002, had multiple white actors playing roles that were almost explicitly marked as Asian, specifically Chinese. As Stewart noted of preclassical audiences, today's audiences are also expected to be able to distinguish these forms, and we can see that sympathetic characters are still wrapped in whiteness, marking Asianness, Blackness, etc. as unsympathetic.

By comparing preclassical cinema with current Hollywood practice, we can apply Stewart's framework to see that the state of race relations in the United States has not changed much. As Stewart shows, cinema reflects the state of its social context. An analysis of contemporary cinema with the same nuanced care as Stewart's analysis would reveal much about the current state of race relations and racial anxieties in the US.