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## Greenface

*Exploring green skin in contemporary Hollywood cinema*

Brady Hammond

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In the natural world human skin color has a limited range of pigments varying from dark brown to light pink. Still, even this small spectrum has been enough to fuel countless histories of prejudice where skin color has provided the justification for hate and violence. In the Western world where whiteness is presented as the norm this has often manifested itself as prejudice against those who are not white. However, given the primacy of whiteness in certain cultures authors such as Richard Dyer have argued that whiteness itself is invisible and is thus itself not perceived as a color. This invisibility has led others to develop further theories regarding color in visual media. For instance, in *Chromophobia* David Batchelor states that ‘color has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture’.<sup>1</sup> This prejudice, he argues, manifests itself by either dismissing color outright as ‘superficial’ or by denigrating it and ‘[making it] out to be the property of some “foreign” body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological’.<sup>2</sup> In this formulation white is safe and color is dangerous. Throughout color cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been numerous instances which illustrate this point.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* Donald Bogle explores the presence of racist tropes in American cinema which were directed at black characters. Beginning with early cinema, Bogle presents a decade-by-decade analysis that explores the ways that racist tropes were established and perpetuated. He focuses specifically on the tropes in his title: the tom, the coon, the mulatto, the mammie, and the buck. The same qualities that Batchelor argues to be a part of a fear of color can be found in the racist

depictions of black characters such as primitivism, infantilism, and vulgarity. Yet while Bogle limits his discussion of these tropes to black characters, Batchelor makes a much broader argument. Indeed a wider survey of racism in cinema finds that similar tropes are associated with other non-white characters. For instance, Jack Shaheen has noted that Arab characters in cinema feature the villain and the sheik, and include traits such as idiocy, threats to Western (specifically American) values, and animalistic behavior.<sup>3</sup> In short, though the negative stereotypes Bogle identifies originated in depictions of black characters, it is useful to consider the ways those same tropes apply to characters of other colors. More importantly, given the ability of the cinema screen to render fantastic spaces and colors it is necessary to consider how characters are represented when they feature an unnatural or even impossible skin color.

Cinema has permitted the fantastic ideas of artists to be realised in extravagant detail. The advent of color cinematography has enhanced this quality, allowing heretofore unseen worlds to appear on screen. Yet even as the ideas of artists soar to the realms of fantasy they remain grounded in very problematic foundations. It is the contention of this article that as overtly racist cinematic depictions associated with real-world skin colors – particularly black skin – have decreased, Hollywood cinema has relocated those tropes onto green skin. This can be seen in both *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Ron Howard, 2000) and the series of *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson & Vicky Jenson, 2001) films.

These films feature green-skinned characters that are presented as fantasy creatures but instead are proxies for black American stereotypes. Although these films tread similar ground there are subtle differences in the deployment of green to denote a black Other. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* utilises negative stereotypes without actively engaging with them while *Shrek*, which still uses negative elements, is much more aware of the stereotypes and uses the green characters to work with and through them. The article will explore the equivalency between green and black by first presenting a brief history of green in media and how it has long been associated with the Other. The article will then examine negative stereotypes traditionally associated with black characters, as it is these stereotypes which inform both films. With those stereotypes established the article will then examine *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and the first two *Shrek* films in detail, demonstrating the ways in which the films take the green Other and redefine it as black by drawing on those negative stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> The article will show that while both films are informed by these stereotypes they have very different results. The article will then

conclude with a brief discussion of how the fantasy of green skin reveals much about real-world racial anxieties.

## The green Other

As Batchelor argues, color is associated with the Other; while this is historically associated with real-world skin colors it is not exclusively the case. There have been numerous instances where different colors have been used to represent the Other. In ancient times there were numerous characters explicitly associated with green which were threats to humanity. *Akhlys* was a female spirit associated with death and was described by Hesiod as being green. Similarly, *Nemesis*, the goddess of envy, was depicted as having green bile across her breasts.<sup>5</sup> Again, both of these examples bear out the arguments from Batchelor that color has long been associated with the Other and the connection with green is one that persists in recent times.

In 1899 the story *The Green Boy from 'Harrah'* by Charles Battell Loomis was published and, as the title suggests, it features an alien boy from another planet who has green skin. Researcher Chris Aubeck focuses on that story as the inception of the idea of little green men and indeed shows that the notion of small green aliens was popular, as he claims, 'long before UFOs ever came on the scene'.<sup>6</sup> However, he is careful to note that 'the transition from the world of folklore to ufology was seamless'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed the notion of 'little green men' was practically epidemic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with green increasingly becoming the color associated with the otherworldly. Since cinema had yet to perfect and mass produce a color process the fantastic creatures were more likely to be found on the full-color covers of pulp magazines. However, the proliferation of color cinematography and the rise of the fascination with aliens and other science fiction led to the solidification of green as the color of the Other in both cinema and on television. The color feature *The Boy with Green Hair* (Joseph Losey, 1948) tells the story of a boy who is ostracised from his community when his hair turns green. Using green in this fashion is a way for the film to mark the boy as an Other. However, green hair is not so striking an image as green skin is, and in 1966 two major instances of green bodies appeared on American television.

The first was in *Star Trek* (1966-1969) when an alien woman of the Orion race dances. Her skin is an emerald green and she is both hyper-feminine and an alien Other. The green skin in this case becomes associated with both, affirming the notion of 'chromophobia' that Batchelor discusses. The other use of green in 1966 was the animated adaptation of *Dr. Seuss' How*

*the Grinch Stole Christmas!* Though the titular Grinch had no coloration in the original book (which was published in 1957) he was depicted as having green fur in the television special. Since he is the only green character in the entire show the Grinch automatically exists as an Other. The use of green to mark a character as Other continued in cinema as well.

In the 1980s *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz, 1986) were both released. The former featured a horde of little green creatures who wreaked havoc on a small town; the latter showcased a large green plant as a villain. While the previous examples can easily be read in a variety of racial contexts, Ed Guerrero, in his book *Framing Blackness*, argues that the gremlins as well as the plant Audrey II (Levi Stubbs) are representative of a symbolic threat to whiteness.<sup>8</sup> While Guerrero does not expand his argument to fully consider the element of green in these films the link between these green characters and blackness shifts the discussion away from an abstract Other and to a very specific construction within American culture: the stereotyped black Other. The equivalence established in these films does not mean that green is always a substitute for black in media but it is the same link that exists at the heart of both *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and the *Shrek* series of films.

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas* tells a fairly standard story of holiday spirit being overwhelmed by materialism, but it does so by focusing on a green character (the Grinch). Expanding on the story from the original book and television adaptation the film shows how the Grinch was cast out of Whoville, the central location of the film, when he was a child due to his animalistic and cruel behavior. Years later as an adult he plans to exact his vengeance on Whoville by stealing Christmas. While *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* operates very much as a fairy tale *Shrek* adopts a much more self-referential tone and critiques fairy tales even as it follows the same story structure.

The first and second *Shrek* films detail the journey of a green ogre named Shrek (Mike Myers) who plays the part of Prince Charming and rescues Princess Fiona (Cameron Diaz). He does so with the help of a donkey named Donkey (Eddie Murphy) while managing to overcome the stereotype of the vicious ogre along the way. Shrek has some traits which connect him to those stereotypes outlined by Bogle. Interestingly, the stereotypes are not used to malign Shrek but instead are used to show how Shrek does not conform to them. Although each film draws upon the same stereotypes they do so in slightly different ways. To understand their use and their difference, particularly in terms of the color green in each film, it is necessary to first consider the stereotypes.

## Racial stereotypes

In both *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and *Shrek* the stereotypes used have much in common with those outlined by Bogle with regard to black characters in cinema. These include the brutal black buck, the tom, and the coon, though each film makes separate use of these stereotypes. The brutal black buck figure is a stereotype which Bogle argues has cinematic roots in early narrative cinema. In *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) a slave named Gus (Walter Long) is depicted as being driven mad with lust for the virginal white Flora (Mae Marsh). Bogle sees the brutal black buck as divisible into the black brute and the black buck. While the black brute 'was a barbaric black out to raise havoc'<sup>9</sup> the black buck is a 'psychopath' who is 'oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied' and constantly thirsts for white women in a way that confirms the assumption that the 'white woman was the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride, power, and beauty'.<sup>10</sup> Addison Gayle frames the stereotype in even more dire terms, observing that the "brute Negro" who, out of lust and hatred, presents a clear and present danger to the purity and sanctity of white womanhood and civilized America as well.<sup>11</sup>

Bogle identifies the coon stereotype as having multiple variations including the pickanniny, the pure coon, and the uncle remus. These characters are often presented for comic relief and exist as extremely negative stereotypes which suggest that the characters are useless. This is clear in the way Bogle defines the pure coon characters as 'unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for eating watermelons, stealing chicken, shooting crap, or butchering the English language'.<sup>12</sup> This stereotype is perhaps most familiar in the film character of Stepin Fetchit played by comedian and actor Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry. Like the brutal black buck and its subcategories, the coon stereotype and its own subdivisions are all bad characters; they are malignant stereotypes and are designed to denigrate the entire black race through vicious characterisations. An equally harmful stereotype is the tom stereotype yet it is quite different from those discussed above.

As Bogle observes, the negative stereotype of the tom is one of the 'Good Negro characters'. He describes the various tom figures as characters that will 'keep the faith, ne'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind', all of which helps to 'endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, unlike the brutal black buck and the coon – both of which antagonise the perceived white authority either by overt violence, as with the former, or inherent inability, as with the latter – the tom renders his

greatest quality, his love of whiteness, in service of his white masters. In this way the structure of stereotypes suggests the racist notion that this position of servitude is the only appropriate position for black characters to hold.

As noted, these stereotypes have many different subcategories; this is important because it shows that there is permeability to them and suggests the potential for overlap. This is exactly the case with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, where the titular character is initially one amalgamation of the stereotypes and ultimately transforms into another. For all of the permutations of the stereotypes that exist within the green character they quite clearly retain the same qualities that Bogle describes. In short, a detailed analysis of the Grinch character shows that beneath his green exterior is the dark skin of the black Others that Bogle identifies. The effect is perhaps best described by Joe Morgenstern who wrote in his review of the film that Jim Carrey (the Grinch) was '[s]tuck behind a prosthesis that's part "Planet of the Apes" and part Chewbacca as a minstrel in greenface'.<sup>14</sup>

### *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and stereotypes

Hollywood has often produced films that deal directly with issues of race and racism. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) and *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004) are both examples from very different periods in American cinema. Even as Hollywood does openly engage with race it also deals with racial elements in a very oblique fashion. In films that take this approach the racial elements are on display but are not always readily apparent. For instance, Andrew Ross observed of the 1989 version of *Batman* (Tim Burton) that 'the Joker [the villain of the film] plays his role in *whiteface*' (emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup> Ross suggests that the film then deals with race, particularly issues facing blacks in the United States, by substituting an equivalent white figure and reducing actual racial elements to invisibility.<sup>16</sup> He is specifically referring to the way that stereotypical traits associated with black characters are ascribed to the white villain of the film, the Joker (Jack Nicholson). While this process allows the film to engage with important issues the obfuscation of the connections between the masked characters and their real-world corollaries ultimately perpetuates racist notions and stereotypes instead of addressing them; this is because it presents stereotypes in a way that conceals their true nature. It is the contention of this article that by having the Grinch function, as Morgenstern says, like 'a minstrel in greenface',<sup>17</sup> the character mobilises the black Other rather than a generic Other and in so doing does not productively engage with the history of such harmful stereotypes; instead, it conceals that connection and *reinforces* the stereotypes. This is due to

the fact that the film does not present traditional skin color binaries but instead creates a new one.

In the film there are two skin colors on prominent display: green and white. The green is the domain of the Grinch – the Other – while the white is that of the Whos, the inhabitants of Whoville. There are some characters in Whoville who are not white but they are glimpsed only briefly and for a total screen time of less than ten seconds. As a result the whiteness of Whoville is underscored, particularly through its chief representative Cindy Lou Who (Taylor Momsen). In fact, Cindy Lou becomes the embodiment of everything good in the world as she is consistently shown to be the only one in Whoville who genuinely cares about such traditional values as family and spirituality. This is demonstrated early in the film during a musical sequence in which Cindy Lou sings ‘Where is Christmas’ – a song which laments the disappearance of traditional Christmas beneath a wave of materialism. This privileging of the young white girl reflects another stereotype regarding race: the pristine and virginal white girl who serves as the moral compass for the world. It is unsurprising then that the plot of the film ultimately sees Cindy Lou trying to win over the Grinch. This dynamic firmly establishes the racial binary of the film with the green Grinch in opposition to the white Cindy Lou and Whoville as an entity. However, the film does not present whiteness as uniform.

Since the plot of the film is mostly concerned with the way in which Christmas has become an overtly materialistic holiday the film presents another villain, Augustus May Who (Jeffrey Tambor), the mayor of Whoville. Augustus May is most clearly the villain since unlike Cindy Lou he embraces and encourages the materialism that has changed Christmas. Even the Grinch – who steals Christmas – is not as villainous as Augustus May, since he is simply trying to steal a holiday which is a corruption of the real holiday, as suggested by Cindy Lou. Once the spirit of Christmas is revealed after the Grinch steals the veneer of materialism the mayor, unlike the Grinch, does not change. This inflexibility means that the mayor must remain a villain even as the Grinch becomes a hero of sorts. More importantly the presence of the mayor as a negative character gives the racial binary of the film some texture, as everybody that is white is not perfect in their opposition to the green Grinch. However, even as the film does this it also draws on stereotypes associated with whiteness.

As mentioned earlier, the film presents Cindy Lou as a perfect image of whiteness; coupled with this perfection is an ethic of chastity. While it could be argued that this innocence is a product of her youth there is another character, Martha May Whovier (Christine Baranski), which undermines



this claim. Martha May is a character introduced in the film adaptation and serves as the love interest of the story. She is positioned in a love triangle with the Grinch and Augustus May. In another major addition to the story the film shows the three characters as children in Whoville. It is during these flashbacks that it becomes apparent that Martha May was a sexually precocious child who expressed desire at a young age. In so doing Martha May becomes categorised as a 'bad' girl. This is problematic for a variety of reasons but perhaps none more apparent than the fact that the object of her affection is the young Grinch. In addition, her attraction is explicitly due to his greenness and his muscularity. The latter point is highlighted in recounting the moment when the child Grinch ran amok in school after being mocked by the other children. Augustus May and Whobris (Clint Howard) remark 'the anger' and 'the fury' in turn, while young Martha May says 'the muscles' in a lusty voice. Thus, even as a child Martha May is a sexualised counterpoint to the pristine Cindy Lou and shown in a way that presents both her lust and the greenness of the Grinch as negatives. Even as Martha May represents a tainted woman in a sense, this taint exists within the dynamic of racism established by the other stereotypes – specifically those surrounding the Grinch.

As noted, even as a child the Grinch is positioned as a figure that cannot control his 'anger' or 'fury'. Also, the Grinch lusts for Martha May. The combination of these elements suggests the Grinch is not a generic Other but instead is very much in line with the brutal black buck stereotype discussed earlier. This is largely due to the fact that he is 'oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied'<sup>8</sup> and constantly thirsts for white women in a way that resembles the black buck figure. It is worth noting that while both of the descriptions given for the brutal black buck suggest his violence and savagery are sexual in nature, the family dynamic of the film results in a more repressed version of the stereotype here than the traditional stereotype. For instance, in *The Birth of a Nation*, Gus (one of the original brutal black bucks) is so driven by his lust for white women that he pursues the virginal Flora to her death. By contrast the Grinch has no sexual feelings or agenda with regard to Cindy Lou. This is not to say that the Grinch shares nothing with Gus. Beneath the sexualised and frenzied pursuit of Flora, Gus desires to destroy whiteness even as he lusts after it. In this way Gus manifests his hatred for whiteness by pursuing the white woman who is the symbol of 'civilised America'. The Grinch also assails 'civilised America', but instead of doing so by lusting after Cindy Lou the further binary the film establishes between the 'good' whites and the 'bad' whites means that 'civilised America' has become synonymous with a materialistic culture.

Thus, the Grinch is able to direct his hatred toward the rampant capitalism of Whoville instead of the pristine Cindy Lou. In fact, this construction permits the film to maintain the position of Cindy Lou as the symbol of 'civilised America' since she ostensibly represents the true America instead of the bastardised one sold in the stores of Whoville. Regardless, the alignment of the Grinch with such a powerful and negative stereotype only underscores the way that green skin stands in for black skin – though the Grinch is not solely presented as the brutal black buck stereotype.

The Grinch is also closely aligned with the pure coon stereotype due to his depiction as a 'lazy, subhuman [creature]'.<sup>19</sup> Even considering this strong connection it is important to note the fact that the Grinch deviates from this stereotype to some degree. This is most apparent in his mastery of language, something that the coon stereotype and its subdivisions do not feature. In this way the stereotype is not a perfect fit but it contains enough similar points to remain applicable. This is clear in the way he is often seen lazing about in his filthy home speaking to himself like a buffalo. The development of this stereotype with regard to the green Grinch attempts to provide the film with comic relief but it more importantly functions as a means for the Grinch to be positioned as a likeable character that *can* be redeemed, something that a character based entirely on the brutal black buck stereotype could *not* do. However, the redemption of the Grinch ultimately reinforces the racism of the film as it is not Whoville that changes to become more inclusive but instead the Grinch who changes from antagonist to supplicant. This change comes as the Grinch decides that the whos of Whoville are indeed superior and it was him who was in the wrong. Effectively, the Grinch transforms from the buck and coon stereotypes to the tom.

As was also discussed previously, the tom stereotype describes a black character that is willingly and eternally subservient to a white master. For almost the entire film the Grinch is actively trying to bring about the downfall of Whoville and the white society it represents. When he finally succeeds in stealing Christmas, the Whos in Whoville celebrate the holiday anyway and the Grinch decides that he was wrong about the Whos. He decides that they are a wonderful group of people and that they were right to ostracise him. In this moment of realisation his theft of Christmas nearly kills Cindy Lou Who, as she is atop the sleigh of presents he has stolen which begins to fall off of the mountaintop he has taken them to. Seeing her in peril he marshals all his energy to save her by pulling the sleigh away from the precipice and hoisting it above his head. In his triumphant moment the camera frames him atop a mountain as he holds both the presents he has

stolen and Cindy Lou high above him. This image of the green Grinch physically supporting the avatar of whiteness suggests a major transformation to the tom figure. To symbolise his newfound faith in the white community the Grinch then decides to return Christmas to them, effectively sanctioning their beliefs and traditions which were earlier deployed to ostracise him due to his green skin.

When he returns to town the first act he performs is to offer himself up to the town police. Though he does this in penance for stealing Christmas on a larger scale this gesture serves to apologise for not previously acknowledging the authority of the white community over him, a green/black Other. This act of surrender suggests that the Grinch has been tamed, as the stereotypes of the brutal black buck and coon transition into the tom who is perpetually loyal to his new 'white masses, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind'. Not only is the Grinch tamed as a tom figure but he is metaphorically castrated. As a reward for coming back to the community on their terms rather than on his own, he is reunited with Martha May. At first glance this coupling would seem to be indicative of progressive politics as it is an interracial relationship. However, a closer look reveals that the relationship is not entirely normal. For instance, the coupling is not sealed with physical contact – a kiss or even a hug – but instead by Martha May returning to Augustus May the engagement ring he had earlier given her. She then proclaims her love for the Grinch. So while the film has a mixed-race couple, the threat of miscegenation is absent since this tom Grinch cannot even kiss his new partner. In fact, the only kiss he receives is one of respect from Cindy Lou. The implicit message is that this tom Grinch has been desexualized and neutered in a way, which allows him to coexist with the white community without threatening it with the potential for reproduction. This is of course coupled with the notion that Martha May has been tamed as well. The result is that the 'bad woman' is now if not a good woman then a safe woman who is in a relationship that guarantees her own taint of lust for a non-white will also not be reproduced through mixed-race progeny.

The combination of all of these negative stereotypes in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* suggests that the green Grinch is a thinly-veiled and very harmful representation of black characters. The Grinch is a character in 'greenface'. Yet at the same time the actor playing the Grinch, Jim Carrey, is white and the implications of this stretch quite far. For instance, the discussion above is based upon examining the negative stereotypes the film deploys around black/green characters and for that reason it runs the risk of normalising whiteness. However, the very fact that Carrey is a white

actor passing as a different race points to the developments in race theory surrounding the notion of mobile whiteness. For Priscilla Peña Ovalle, this mobility surrounding whiteness suggests that whiteness is not an objective standard of race but rather requires performativity as well.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Ovalle speaks specifically about Latino populations in the United States but her arguments can still remind us that although films like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* establish a binary between whiteness and black stereotypes, it is useful to still regard them as binaries between dominant and non-dominant races. Regardless, the position of whiteness is challenged by Carrey's mobility.

In a discussion of masculinity during the Clinton Presidency, Brenton J. Malin argues that the racial status of Bill Clinton challenges the notion of speaking for another race that Dyer articulates when he said that 'non-raced' people can speak for other races 'for they do not represent the interests of a race'.<sup>21</sup> Malin argues that the mobile whiteness Clinton exhibits suggests that whiteness too can be racialised. For this reason it is important to consider that Carrey first achieved fame as 'the white guy' on *In Living Color* (1990-1994), a sketch comedy show on Fox produced by Keenan Ivory Wayans and many of his family members. While there were other white performers on the show, the fact that Carrey would be so often called upon to perform his whiteness suggests that he is already a liminal figure in terms of race. The argument Malin ultimately builds is that Clinton established a sort of universality for whiteness that glossed over the history that makes it so problematic.<sup>22</sup> This is relevant to *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* because the performance of Carrey in greenface suggests a performance of whiteness in the rest of Whoville. While the film does subtly engage with this via its own hierarchy of whiteness it does not develop it in an explicit way. However, it does leave the film very open to a diverse set of racial readings. That said, the mobilisation of negative stereotypes associated with black characters does strongly align the green skin in the film with black skin. *Shrek* manages to create a similar equivalency but does so in a very different way.

### ***Shrek* and whiteness**

The story of the first *Shrek* film focuses heavily on race and difference. When first introduced, Shrek is shown going about his daily activities at his home in the swamp. These activities are presented for comic relief and feature him bathing in mud and ultimately eating strange creatures. This primitivism aligns him with the brutal black buck figure. In the subsequent sequence darkness falls on his swamp home and villagers arrive with torches and pitchforks to chase him away. While Shrek does resort to the stereotypical

behavior of an ogre/black buck, which involves roaring and acting like a beast, he then has to explain to the petrified villagers that he is attempting to scare them off and that they should run. This clarification reveals that *Shrek* is a film which is aware of the racial stereotypes and is attempting to present a character that does not conform to them. Even so it is clear that the engagement with such stereotypes activates a number of issues surrounding race. For instance, though there is no direct citation of the Ku Klux Klan, the late night assault by all-white villagers with torches and pitchforks on a non-white to get him to leave his home bears a striking resemblance to the activities of the KKK. Like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, this particular iconography associates green not with a generic Other but with a black American Other. Despite the primacy of green to the Other, Shrek is not the only Other in the film.

After the opening the film shows that the military is engaged in a resettlement campaign; they are paying citizens to turn in any magical creatures or beings so that the government can relocate them. While the film does not overtly deal with the politics of these actions there is again a very clear correlation to racial purity and genocide. That is not to say that all the creatures being rounded up are non-white, as some characters are; those characters are in the vast minority and their magical powers align them with the inhuman and otherworldly, thus rendering them impure in the eyes of the fictional government. Despite the magnitude of the implications of a resettlement the film opts instead to focus on the individual journey of Shrek, making him the avatar of the Other and by extension privileging his green skin. This broad representational element of Shrek is enhanced by the fact that he speaks with a Scottish accent. Thus, although the stereotypes attached to Shrek connect the character to black American culture, his voice does connect him to stereotypes in the UK. In both instances Shrek remains an Other and it makes the contrast between green and white even stronger as the film specifically deals with his quest to rescue the white Princess Fiona.

As further evidence that the film eschews the traditional stereotypes outlined by Bogle, the eventual relationship between Shrek and Fiona is not driven by mad lust as it would be if Shrek truly adhered to the black buck stereotype. Shrek is very different from Gus in *The Birth of a Nation* and indeed even disregards Fiona as a love interest until well after their initial meeting. The film instead opts to show that the feelings that develop between the two do so through a series of shared adventures. While skin color is not presented as an issue in getting to know one another the film

does still treat race as a significant issue that cannot be dismissed. This is evidenced most clearly in the character of Fiona.

By day Fiona is a pristine white princess but by night she turns into a green ogre; the resolution of the film has her turn permanently green. This suggests that she was a green character all along who was attempting to pass as a white character. As Marcia Alesan Dawkins notes, passing was regarded as a thing of the past for a while but returned in the 1990s as part of what she terms a 'passing renaissance'.<sup>23</sup> In this renaissance stories of racial passing returned to popular media. Though Dawkins explores the notion of passing outside of race one of her points is that an engagement with the notion of passing permits audiences to 'abandon the notion that passing is simply somebody else's racial problem'.<sup>24</sup> By having Fiona effectively play a multiracial character the film destabilises the racial binary to some degree by making race a liquid element. As with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Shrek* shows whiteness as a mobile and performed quality. In other words white is as much a race as green in the film, because Fiona not only passes as white but *is* white; yet the film still presents green as a problem for Fiona who longs to be pure white. She views her white self as her true self while her green body is ugly and to be hidden. In effect Fiona has a severe case of body dysmorphia which is attached entirely to race.

Of course Fiona ultimately accepts the fact that she is a green ogre and not a white princess – but this literally magical ending trivialises the issues of race that undergird the conflict in the film. Specifically, race is not a choice and passing does not change who a person is. The problem with the message the film articulates of accepting who you are is that the film also spends a lot of time arguing that whiteness is better than greenness, while the resolution of the film suggests that green is acceptable. This conclusion does nothing to address the imbalance established throughout the film wherein the green skin is associated with ugliness while white skin is associated with beauty. There is a brief moment at the end when Shrek sees Fiona as an ogre and he tells her she is beautiful, but that single remark does not compensate for the issues that came before. Furthermore, after stopping the marriage between Fiona and the villain of the film, Lord Farquod (John Lithgow), Shrek and Fiona return to the swamp to have their own wedding. This too draws on stereotypes of impoverished minorities and wealthy, landed whites without addressing the real socio-economic issues at play. However, what makes all of this more textured is the fact that *Shrek* is an animated movie.

Unlike *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* in which the constraints of live-action cinematography mean that Jim Carrey is literally in greenface for

his performance, the animated world of *Shrek* opens the door to a much more fluid articulation of race. For instance, although all the characters are designed to naturally look as they do, this total creation conceals the racial passing taking place with the voice actors. The voice of Shrek is provided by Mike Myers and Fiona is voiced by Cameron Diaz. Thus, even though Shrek and Fiona are green on screen behind the scenes they are both white. The result is a film which once again attempts to address racial difference by having white actors play green characters and, like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, these green characters are proxies for black ethnicities, effectively implementing a virtual greenface. Interestingly Eddie Murphy, the one major black actor in the film, voices the character of Donkey. Unlike Shrek and Fiona who are able to confront and subvert the negative stereotypes attached to their characters Donkey actually conforms to those stereotypes, particularly the coon and its subdivisions as Bogle identifies them. Between the use of greenface and the fact that the one black actor in the film is made to perform a negative black stereotype, the goal the film seems to have of destabilising traditional notions of racial difference are jeopardised; race just becomes a superficial trait and the structures of racism that permeate society are not adequately addressed. While the film does not entirely do what Ross argues *Batman* did (which was to substitute an actual white figure for a non-white character) its fairy-tale ending manages to avoid dealing with any actual issues surrounding race. *Shrek 2* (Andrew Adamson & Kelly Asbury & Conrad Vernon, 2004) directly confronts these issues.

## Shrek comes to dinner

*Shrek 2* picks up where the previous film left off, with Shrek and Fiona going on their honeymoon. In an opening montage it is established once again that there is a strict racial binary in the film with green and white being the opposing colors. As in the first film, the appearance of angry villagers with pitchforks and torches suggests a link to violence against black people in the United States. While that link is as subtle as it was in the first film the main plot makes the connection much more overt.

While the first film was a parody of the standard fairy tale plot, *Shrek 2* draws its inspiration from films which deal with mixed-race couples. This is most notable in the first half of the film which is essentially a retelling of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. As with that film where a young interracial couple goes to meet the parents, Shrek and Fiona are summoned to the

castle by her parents to attend a wedding ball where Shrek and Fiona will receive the blessing of the parents. The *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* plot device here frames the relationship between Shrek and Fiona not just as one of star-crossed lovers but specifically of interracial lovers. Unlike *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* though, in which the white daughter of a couple returns home with her black fiancé, Fiona returns home not just *with* a green husband but she now *is* a green woman. Through this cinematic allusion the green skin of Shrek and Fiona once again becomes directly linked to black skin. While *Shrek 2* does not utilise the negative stereotypes that Bogle identifies with the main characters its more open engagement with real-world race issues make the connection to black minorities much stronger.

When Shrek and Fiona receive the invitation to the castle Shrek immediately resists, as he has experienced racism his entire life. He sums up the racism by noting that he will not be receiving any invitations to the country club. This citation of the traditionally white institution of the country club demonstrates that the film is very aware of the racial issues it brings up, particularly as they relate to minorities in the United States such as blacks and Latinos. Despite his protestations, Shrek, Fiona, and Donkey all ultimately travel to see her parents without notifying them that Fiona is now permanently green.

When the three arrive at the castle a huge all-white crowd awaits them. When it is revealed that Fiona and Shrek are green ogres the crowd falls silent and becomes very angry, with some people brandishing pitchforks and torches. The parents also immediately disapprove. This disapproval is played out in much more detail during the ensuing dinner sequence where Shrek and the King verbally spar over the issue of race. This is first broached when the issue of homes is brought up and it is revealed that Shrek and Fiona live in a swamp – the fairy tale equivalent of a slum. The contrast between the swamp and the gated/walled community of the castle introduces the class-based differences that are entwined with racial differences. The film quickly moves to another issue as the Queen mentions the potential of having grandchildren.

Unlike *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* which creates a sterile mixed-race couple, Shrek and Fiona are both fertile and the potential of having children – despite the fact that Fiona is green – activates fears of miscegenation. The King articulates the traditional racist opinion by nearly getting sick at even the thought of such children existing. Despite touching on these fears the film does not dip too far into stereotypes, allowing the King to preserve some dignity as it is eventually revealed he has a secret past of his own. Specifically, he was once a green frog. In other words, the King



himself is passing as white and wants nothing more than to truly *be* white. This desire to be white suggests that whiteness is the privileged norm and conversely that non-white skin is a negative trait. However, once again the notion of performing whiteness is activated in a way that destabilises it as a privileged race. The film engages with this more fully as it progresses when Shrek begins to seek a way to become white.

Shrek stays in the childhood room of Fiona and sees that her dreams all involved a pristine white couple – something he cannot provide for her as he is. His desire not just to pass as white but to *be* white leads to him and Donkey drinking a potion that will give them a 'happy ending'; it does this by turning Shrek into a handsome white man and Donkey into a white stallion. Since the potion is designed to produce an ideal ending, the fact that both are turned white suggests that whiteness is in fact what the film regards as an ideal skin color, though the film also presents a contradictory point by arguing that skin color is a superficial quality; it does this by having both Shrek and Fiona see beyond the surface level and ultimately choose to remain green because that is who they are. This is coupled with the King returning to his green frog form. Yet even as the film espouses these messages of acceptance not only of others but of oneself it remains firmly fixed in greenface, where these fantastic racial revelations conceal their real-world corollaries. Additionally, the problem of Donkey being a negative racial stereotype goes unaddressed. In this way, though the sequel engages more directly with issues of race it does not overcome the same issues that beleaguered the first film.

## Conclusion

Green has long been a color associated with the Other; this has increasingly become the case in contemporary times. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States the rise in the use of green paralleled the growing intolerance with negative racial stereotypes in cinema. Perhaps the most prevalent of these stereotypes in American cinema were those attached to black culture. Rather than eliminate the stereotypes films simply relocated them to the fantasy space and attached them to the color green. Thus, instead of signaling an abstract Other, green came to represent a very specific Other in many films. While Hollywood continued to make features during the millennial period that overtly engaged with racial difference (*Crash* and *Guess Who* [Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2005] for instance), racial difference is also negotiated in the fantasy space.

While the issues of race dealt with in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Shrek*, and *Shrek 2* are not drastically different from those explored in non-fantasy films, those other films are usually explicitly the domain of an older audience. By contrast the three films analysed here are family films. As the analyses suggest, audiences of all ages are being exposed to films that explicitly engage not only with racial anxieties in the contemporary world but also with historical issues surrounding race, particularly in the United States. Despite the fact that the deployment of these racial elements form the central axes of the stories, the displacement of the anxieties away from real-world skin color to fantasy skin color effectively conceals the functions of the films much the same way that Ross described with *Batman*. However, in so doing the fantasy element managed to enlarge the viewership for each film. Thus, while a film like *Crash* earned the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2004 it did not even earn \$100 million USD worldwide. By contrast *Shrek 2* was released in the same year and earned almost \$1 billion USD worldwide. While these films diverge in style and content both deal with racial difference. By putting a veneer of green over the issues *Shrek 2* became a true blockbuster and was the highest grossing film of that year. It is important to recall the criticism of Ross regarding racial invisibility, and perhaps it is the very invisibility of race that makes films like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Shrek*, and *Shrek 2* so popular.

It is not the aim here to suggest that using green to represent a real-world skin color is something new; instead it is to remind that cinema is a complex art form and even seemingly mundane films are filled with political issues that directly relate to the period in which they are released. As Mike Chopra-Gant suggested in his analysis of popular cinema in the post-Second World War era, film and culture are ‘involved in a dialogic, discursive relationship’.<sup>25</sup> In that same way, these analyses of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Shrek*, and *Shrek 2* (all blockbusters) reveal a millennial culture intimately concerned with racial difference, and that a consideration of colour – specifically green – can provide an avenue to analyse such films.

## Notes

1. Batchelor 2000, p. 22.
2. Ibid., pp. 22-23.
3. Shaheen 2001, p. 15.
4. Although there are four *Shrek* films and multiple short films featuring the character this article will only focus on the first two features, as they will be sufficient to show the trend of representation that the films establish.

5. Atsma 2011.
6. <http://caubeck.tripod.com/littlegreenmen/index.html>
7. Ibid.
8. Guerrero 1993, p. 59.
9. Bogle 1989, p. 13.
10. Ibid., pp. 13-14.
11. Guerrero 1993, p. 13.
12. Bogle 1989, p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 6.
14. Morgenstern 2000.
15. Ross 1990.
16. Ibid.
17. Morgenstern 2000.
18. Bogle 1989, pp. 13-14.
19. Ibid., p. 8.
20. Ovalle 2008, p.183.
21. Dyer 1997, p. 2; Malin 2005, p. 99.
22. Malin 2005, p. 100.
23. Dawkins 2012, p. 2.
24. Ibid., p. 5.
25. Chopra-Gant 2006, pp. 1-2.

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**Brady Hammond** earned his PhD at Victoria University of Wellington writing about violence in Hollywood cinema before and after 9/11.



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