

Carl Plantinga

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## Brecht, emotion, and the reflective spectator: The case of 'BlacKkKlansman'

Carl Plantinga

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One enduring concern of film theory has been the question of what film structures and styles encourage critical, reflective, and active spectatorship. Neo-Brechtian theory has been influential in this regard, as many of Brecht's theories regarding the epic theatre were incorporated into film theory in the 1970s, just as the field was being formalised as an academic discipline. Worries about the mystifying effects of identification and immersion can be traced in part to Brecht. So can the calls for emotional estrangement and narrative intransitivity as narrative strategies that might elicit a critical, politically savvy spectatorship.[1] Neo-Brechtian positions on the emotional and ideological effects of screen stories have come under criticism. Yet the original concern of Neo-Brechtianism – that of the encouragement of what I will call 'reflective spectatorship' – is still of central importance.

My argument here is that what I call 'late Brechtian' theory about the relationship between the play/film design and the spectator's experience, especially in regard to emotion, helps us to better understand reflective spectatorship. The value of late Brechtian theory in this regard, however, is best understood not as a theory of the alienation or estrangement of the spectator, but rather as a theory of how alienation and distancing techniques can be used in the context of an *emotionally engaging* film or play. In his early writings, Brecht drew a firm distinction between epic and dramatic theatre, and subsequent Neo-Brechtian film theorists sharply distinguished counter-cinema from mainstream cinema. With regard to the employment of the emotions,

however, we may want to question these binaries. It may be that hybrid techniques are the most effective in eliciting reflective spectatorship.

In this regard, Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) is an intriguing case study. How many films feature extended speeches about racism and contemporary politics while simultaneously fascinating so many viewers? How many films can squarely deal with troubling political issues such as racism and the continued significance of white power movements while grossing nearly \$90 million worldwide (on a budget estimated at \$15 million)? While not a perfect film by any means, *BlacKkKlansman* nonetheless demonstrates how reflective spectatorship can be encouraged in mainstream filmmaking.

### What is critical, reflective, questioning spectatorship?

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a German theatre practitioner, playwright, and theorist who also took an interest in both poetry and the cinema. Brecht is best known for his work in theatre. During the course of his life, however, Brecht was also involved in the production of at least six films and wrote dozens of screenplays.[2] In his theoretical writing about the epic theatre (and to a lesser extent, about film) Brecht probably had more influence on how film theorists have conceptualised emotion in film viewing than any other writer. In his theatre and film practice, Bertolt Brecht hoped to write and design art that would lead spectators to think, question, and learn about the social conditions exhibited in the work. Instead of encouraging immersion and illusion, or what Brecht refers to as a 'hypnotic experience', Brecht favored 'the "teaching" of the spectator a certain quite practical attitude', or what Brecht also calls a 'critical' attitude.[3] Instead of identifying with characters, Brecht wanted spectators to keep a distanced perspective. He writes of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), whereby thoughtless immersion and simple empathy would be disrupted by various techniques that led to thoughts and feelings that might challenge and change viewers, and ultimately transform human relations themselves.

For the purposes of this article, I will define what it means to be a 'reflective spectator' somewhat loosely. As a committed Marxist, Brecht wanted to elicit a spectatorship that conformed to Marxist doctrine. Here I separate Brecht's political certainties from the idea of the reflective, self-conscious spectator. Reflective spectatorship, for the purposes of this article, will refer to spectatorship that is psychologically active, questioning, critical, fascinated,

and thoughtful. A reflective spectator, then, is not necessarily committed to a particular view of politics, human nature, or society. Reflective viewing is a kind of spectatorship that can be celebrated from within democratic traditions as well, since it would ostensibly encourage a thoughtful citizenship capable of understanding complex issues.

### **Neo-Brechtianism, emotion, and empathy**

The question this article addresses is how affect generally, and in particular emotion and empathy, play into the encouragement of reflective spectatorship. Brechtian ideas about emotion were brought into mainstream film theory through the ‘apparatus theory’ of the 1970s and 1980s that combined Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Saussurian semiotics. Many apparatus theorists affirmed what they took to be Brecht’s denigration of the emotions in the viewing experience, holding that emotions contribute to entranced immersion and political mystification at the expense of a more critical distance in film viewing.

Apparatus theorists found mainstream film to be both critically numbing and reactionary, and tended to see pleasure – much of which, I would add, is obtained through emotional experiences – as a trap or lure. The unspoken premise was that emotion was opposed to reason and was the enemy of distanced, critical thought that enabled the spectator to escape the narrative pleasures that brought on complacent acceptance of bourgeois ideology.[4]

Since the ‘affective turn’ in film and media studies, scholars have rejected this denigration of emotion. Referring to what she calls ‘cine-Brechtianism’ as ‘another God that failed’, Sarah Kozloff, for example, argues that the theory questionably sees the mainstream spectator as narcotised, duped, and passive. She questions whether the films of Jean-Luc Godard, whose works are central examples of what is taken to be counter-cinema, encouraged anyone to ‘man the barricades’.[5] More importantly, and like several other theorists, she affirms the potential efficacy of empathy and emotional engagement in a politically and ethically committed cinema.[6] Also, Robert Stam, noting the neo-Brechtian rejection of pleasure, wonders whether this leads to a ‘dead-end anhedonia, leaving little for the spectator to connect with’. Stam calls this a ‘puritanical attitude’, asking what good it does to have a ‘correct’ film if ‘no one is interested’ in watching it.[7]

Yet Brecht and apparatus theory may be poor bedfellows. In his book on Brecht and film theory, Angelos Koutsourakis argues that apparatus theory got Brecht wrong. Moreover, film theory since the 1970s has tended to view Brecht through the lens of apparatus theory, thus leading to a misunderstanding of Brechtian theory as it is applied to film.[8] Thus it is always important to distinguish between Brecht himself and his interpreters, who have sometimes appropriated, simplified, and congealed his work into simple antinomies between reason and emotion, linear and meandering narrative, pleasure and unpleasure, etc.

Cognitive theorists have been critical of Brecht's claims about emotion in spectatorship. Koutsourakis lumps cognitive criticisms of Brecht together, finding that in their response to Brecht, they falsely claim that Brecht rejects emotion altogether.[9] But cognitive critiques are more nuanced than Koutsourakis allows. In his 1996 critique of the Brechtian legacy in film theory, for example, Murray Smith notes that it is not *all* emotion that supposedly 'deadens our rational and critical faculties', but rather emotional responses 'of the empathetic type'. [10] Smith is right that Brecht typically rejects empathy and the 'soft' emotions elicited through empathy, such as compassion, pity, or sadness, because these emotions contribute to closeness to characters rather than the critical distance Brecht preferred. In my critique of Brechtian theory (not mentioned by Koutsourakis), I note that while Brecht is inconsistent on the issue of emotion, in his later writing he 'clearly realizes that the simplistic emotion/reason duality will not hold and that the proper target of his criticism is not emotion *per se* but emotional experiences *of certain types*'. [11]

Koutsourakis writes that 'the problem with the cognitivist critique of the Brechtian tradition is that it has not really engaged with Brecht's own writings'. [12] But Brecht's early writings, gathered in *Brecht on Theatre*, clearly evince a strong anti-emotion stance. Brecht writes, for example, that in epic theatre he aims to achieve

an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed. [13]

He adds, in the same interview, that 'feelings are private and limited' while 'reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on'. [14] Brecht writes that the essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. [15] Brecht produced a list of characteristics of the dramatic versus the epic theatre. On the side of dramatic theatre, which he opposes, we have linear development, experience, and feeling. On the side

of the epic theatre we have development 'in curves', 'picture of the world', and 'reason'.<sup>[16]</sup> By the end of the 1930s, Brecht is careful not to denigrate emotion *per se*, while in his early writings he provided plenty of grist for the anti-emotion mills.

It becomes clear that in relation to emotion, we have an early and a late Brecht, the late Brecht being much more sophisticated about the place of emotion in human life and in his own epic theatre. Thus, his thoughts in his later writings (and also as evidenced in his theatrical and film productions) provide more provocative and productive ideas about emotion and the reflective spectator.

### Late Brecht and emotion in epic theatre and cinema

What does late Brecht say about emotion and its place in spectatorship? Once again I will draw on his thoughts as expressed in *Brecht on Theatre*, summarising these as a series of four broad claims or positions that also apply to film spectatorship.

First, Brecht claims that emotion is an essential element of epic theatre, and rejects only certain types of emotion. Both epic theatre generally and gestic acting that employs the alienation effect in particular still elicit emotion, but a different 'class' of emotion than dramatic theatre.<sup>[17]</sup> As Brecht writes,

[i]t is not true, though it is sometimes suggested, that epic theatre ... proclaims the slogan: 'Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that.' It by no means renounces emotion, least of all the sense of justice, the urge to freedom, and righteous anger.<sup>[18]</sup>

Brecht favors a theatre and a cinema that 'employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself'.<sup>[19]</sup>

Second, Brecht *does* reject empathy<sup>[20]</sup> and 'self-identification',<sup>[21]</sup> but sometimes qualifies what he rejects as 'simple empathy'<sup>[22]</sup> or 'complete empathy'.<sup>[23]</sup> This leaves open the possibility that empathy in more complex forms may serve the cause of reflective spectatorship. He writes that the 'emotions of the audience must not be the emotions of the character', but should rather be untethered from the character.<sup>[24]</sup>

The question we might ask, however, is whether empathy is ever merely 'simple' or 'complete'. Murray Smith has pointed out that identification, or

what he calls ‘character engagement’, exhibits *twofoldness*. That is, the spectator’s experience of a character is one that considers the character as simultaneously both real and fictional.[25] Thus it would be rare indeed that the spectator would have exactly the same emotions as the character being empathised with. Even given twofoldness, however, it may still be the case that different forms of empathy are capable of eliciting varied levels of spectator reflection.

For Koutsourakis, Brecht reserves room for empathy if employed to facilitate spectator self-consciousness. Koutsourakis writes, Brecht ‘is ready to argue against himself and recognized the radical capacities of empathy’.[26] However determinedly one tries to eliminate self-identification or empathy, this elimination cannot be achieved completely. The effect will be a ‘contradiction’, as Brecht writes, between ‘experience and portrayal, empathy and demonstration, justification and criticism’.[27] ‘In reality’, he goes on,

it is a matter of the two mutually hostile processes which fuse in the actor’s work; ... [the actor’s] particular effectiveness comes from the tussle and tension of the two opposites, and also from their depth.[28]

These thoughts seem to suggest that an element of empathy is unavoidable, and that rather than eliminate empathy altogether, it should instead be complicated and challenged.

Third, for Brecht, emotion should lead to reflection, questioning, and critical thought. In epic theatre, the point is not to ‘make the spectator victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience’.[29] The purpose of epic theatre is ‘to make it possible for him [sic] to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely “entangled” in what is going on).’[30] This suggests that interruptions, partial empathy, challenged empathy, mixed emotions, contradictory affect, etc., may be the way forward. Emotions that lead to self-examination, reconsideration, further inquiry, the questioning of received wisdom – all of these would be laudable emotions. In this regard, Brecht favors ‘a rich and sometimes complicated emotional curve in the spectator, a fusion of feelings and even a conflict between them’.[31] He also favors rapid shifts in tone within the production that lead to unexpected emotional shifts in spectators.

Fourth, emotion should be employed in the service of dialectics. As Brecht writes, epic theatre

is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment. The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every circumstance, the joke of contradiction and so forth: all these are ways of enjoying the liveliness of men, things, and processes, and they heighten both our capacity for life and our pleasure in it.[32]

As Koutsourakis notes, dialectics is a key concept in Brechtian theory. To represent the world in its contradictions is to suggest that the world is subject to change. It is to interrogate certainties. As Koutsourakis goes on, Brecht's anti-Aristotelian aesthetic

aimed not to present a closed-off and complete diegetic world, disconnected from society, but an incomplete one which is in constant dialogue with the social reality beyond the fictional cosmos.[33]

It should be remembered that dialectics need not be *merely* questioning and critique, but can also involve assertion and commitment. Dialectics cannot preclude a strong ethical or political stance. Thus neither Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) nor *BlacKkKlansman* question the reprehensible nature of racism, for example, but reserve their dialectical questioning to consider various responses to racism – Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing*, for example, and the question of whether a black man favoring liberation can ally himself with the police in *BlacKkKlansman*.

One brief caveat before we move to *BlacKkKlansman*. In his rejection of empathy and his favoring of critique, Brecht could be seen as rejecting what I have called 'sympathetic emotions' in favor of 'distanced emotions'.<sup>[34]</sup> It is for this reason that Brecht is far more interested in humor, irony, and astonishment than he is in compassion and empathy. Both humor and fascination allow for a distanced perspective, while the sympathetic emotions call for closeness to characters. Brecht's position here, arguably, has masculinist implications. I have dealt with this issue elsewhere,<sup>[35]</sup> and given limitations of space, here I will simply draw attention to this concern.

## Spike Lee, *Do The Right Thing*, and Neo-Brechtianism

Spike Lee, one of the most important figures in US cinema today, has for decades been presenting stories on the screen from an African-American perspective, addressing issues of race, gender, and class. His filmmaking career began with low-budget independent productions such as *Joe's Bed-Stuy*

*Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983) and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), and he has since been able to get Hollywood financing for most of these films. In addition to several documentaries, Lee has produced significant features such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Crooklyn* (1994), and *Chi-Raq* (2015). Although among Lee's body of work are less overtly political genre films, *BlacKkKlansman* is the latest of his many *explicitly* political films, of which there are both documentaries and fiction.

*BlacKkKlansman* has received significant attention since its release in August of 2018. It won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. It was listed as one of the top ten films of 2018 by the American Film Institute. It was nominated for six Academy Awards (including Best Motion Picture and Best Director) and won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. Its release was timed to occur one year after the August 10 'Unite the Right' riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, that seemed to herald the resurgence of white racist activism in the US.

*BlacKkKlansman* is loosely based on a true story, that of Ron Stallworth, who in 1979 became the first black policeman in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and then, with the help of a white colleague, infiltrated the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. *BlacKkKlansman* fictionalises Ron Stallworth's actual story, but what is arguably more important than questions about the film's historical accuracy is the role that *BlacKkKlansman* plays in contemporary culture.

Lee has been associated with neo-Brechtian techniques before, most prominently by Douglas Kellner and in relation to *Do the Right Thing*. Kellner claims that Lee's aesthetic strategies, at least in *Do the Right Thing*, draw on Brechtian modernism and are morality tales that 'convey ethical messages' that dramatise 'the necessity of making moral and political choices'.<sup>[36]</sup> Though Lee uses 'comedy, aesthetic interruption, satire, farce, and other devices' in his films, Lee's politics is cultural rather than institutional. For Kellner, Lee 'comes down on the side of culturalist identity politics, which subordinates politics in general to the creation of personal identity'.<sup>[37]</sup> This conforms somewhat to my own thoughts on Lee. Lee seems quite at home in a consumer culture that looks to 'coolness' – music, linguistic style, personal demeanor, and fashion – as important cultural currencies, and as tools to frame racism not only as immoral, but importantly as outmoded and uncool. In *BlacKkKlansman*, the racists lack style, whereas the anti-racists, and especially the young black people associated with the main characters, have that elusive quality best referred to as 'cool'.

Sharon Willis has also written helpfully about neo-Brechtian techniques in *Do the Right Thing*, arguing that rather than interpreting the film's 'message', *Do the Right Thing* ought to be seen as a kind of neo-Brechtian pastiche that pushes, pulls, and shocks the spectator as a kind of dramatic and intellectual exercise. Willis writes of antirealism and extradiegetic effects, interruption and alienation, and the use of icons, slogans, and 'static' – all of which provides the audience with competing and fragmentary discourses that the spectator must sort through. She writes that since *Do the Right Thing* 'is organized by collisions among competing discourses', the film 'presents contradictions that are highly resistant to resolution as a clear assertion or statement'. [38]

### Neo-Brechtian techniques in *BlacKkKlansman*

As soon as *BlacKkKlansman* begins, Spike Lee draws attention to representation and to historical filmic representations of race. The first image of *BlacKkKlansman* is a reproduction of the famous crane shot from *Gone with the Wind*, as the camera moves past hundreds of injured and dying – all or nearly all white soldiers – after the battle of Atlanta. We then cut to black-and-white footage of a man identified as Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard (Alec Baldwin, who also plays Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live* comedy skits), seated in front of a Confederate flag and a portrait of Robert E. Lee, the Confederate military commander. Apparently Beauregard is the onscreen narrator for some sort of racist promotional film, perhaps for the Ku Klux Klan or some similar organisation.

He spouts racial epithets about a nation under attack. 'We had a great nation,' he says, 'We had a great way of life.' But we are now in the midst of an 'assault on our holy, white, protestant values' by 'lying, dirty monkeys,' 'murderers, rapists,' and the 'international Jewish conspiracy.'

At first Beauregard sits before a desk in the manner of countless other black-and-white promotional films of that era. Soon he is wandering around the room, however, clearing his throat, loosening up his vocal chords. He yells 'Ha ... Ha ... Ha' and later 'Ma bah bah bah bah!' while looking directly into the camera (and at the audience). Some of the most notoriously racist images from another film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), are soon projected onto his face and the background behind him as he speaks, images of unruly blacks in the legislature or of Gus (Walter Long in blackface) pursuing Flora (Mae Marsh) and her suicidal plunge off of a cliff to avoid his rapacious advances.

First Beaugard is bathed in blue, then white, then red. Soon only the inter-titles from the film are projected onto his face, a surreal image. At several points Lee cuts to images of a movie projector. We have not yet met any of the film's major characters, and Beaugard will not reappear. Instead we get a Godardian, extra-diegetic, reflexive reminder that this film is part of a tradition of race representation in US film.

At this point the narrative proper begins, and it is in some ways a conventional narrative. We meet Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) as he approaches the Colorado Springs Police Department for his job interview. We see him as a rookie cop, initially banished to the records room, but soon he is given an assignment to infiltrate a Stokely Carmichael, or as he prefers to be called, 'Kwame Ture' speech and rally put on by the Colorado College black student union. There he meets Patrice Dumas (Laura Harrier), the head of the union. The two are immediately attracted to each other, beginning a conflicted relationship that will extend through the film. Stallworth establishes contact with the local Klan by telephone, and eventually recruits his colleague Flip Zimmerman (Adam Driver), who is white and Jewish, to attend some of the Klan meetings. Eventually David Duke himself (Topher Grace) is brought into the mix, and Stallworth has extensive conversations with him on the phone. By the film's end, Zimmerman (pretending to be Stallworth) will be inducted into the Klan in a ritual led by David Duke himself.

In the context of a somewhat conventional narrative, however, Lee infuses challenging content and Brechtian techniques, remarkable especially for a mainstream film. First, the film features at least four extended speeches, each of them an exposition on issues having to do with race. We have already covered Kennebrew Beaugard's racist screed. We also hear Kwame Ture's fiery speech about racial prejudice and the need for black action. As played by Corey Hawkins, the speech is energised and compelling. When Zimmerman (as Stallworth) is later being inducted into the Klan, Duke gives an extended exposition from the Klan's perspective, and this is intercut with Harry Belafonte, as elderly activist Jerome Turner, recalling a lynching he saw in 1916 to a room full of college students.

If dialectics are at the heart of Brechtian epic theatre, Lee also infuses dialectics into *BlacKkKlansman*. The speeches mentioned above are from radically different perspectives, obviously. Duke's speech is intercut with the elderly activist's account of the lynching. But such dialectics are also highlighted in tensions and conversations between various characters in the film.

One tension between Ron and Patrice is that when she learns he is a policeman, she thinks she may not be able to continue seeing him romantically. Can a member of the police force still promote black liberation? Ron believes one can; she disagrees. This tension is never resolved. After Ron hears Ture's speech and is visibly moved, he asks Ture about violent resistance, and Ture tells him to be sure he has a gun. How a black policeman ought to respond to this remains an open question in the film.

Brecht favored what he called 'gestic' acting in epic theatre so that the audience would not be inclined to identify with the character. As Walter Benjamin notes, 'making gestures quotable' is one of the hallmarks of epic theatre, as a gesture becomes a kind of interruption of the acting.[39] John David Washington employs such gestures frequently in his performance, for example, stopping to self-consciously touch his Afro as he approaches the Colorado Springs Police Department for the first time, engaging in playful martial arts moves after an encounter with a racist fellow cop, or his comical 'walk of triumph' as he enters his workplace after having thwarted the bombing plot and engineered the arrest of racist cop Andy Landers (Frederick Weller). Stallworth struts into work the next morning, his head held comically high and a look of exaggerated self-satisfaction on his face. On the soundtrack we hear Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's 'Lucky Man' as his colleagues congratulate him with high fives all around. But all of this celebration, which is highly gestic and seemingly too good to be true, will soon be undermined, as we will see below. This is all part of Lee's 'putting on a show', which is also a characteristic feature of epic theatre.[40]

Another factor that complicates identification here is the role playing and false identities that are prominent features of the film. Ron Stallworth impersonates a white man while on the phone with David Duke and other Klansmen, 'talking white' in a way that one assumes would resonate with the experience of many black audience members. Moreover, the Jewish Flip Zimmerman impersonates Ron Stallworth (as a white racist) during his face-to-face encounters with the Klan.[41] All conversations and behaviors that occur in such 'false identity' scenes take on a double meaning and tension that allows for complex forms of character engagement.

The ending of the film is open and complex, and to my mind is one of the most aesthetically intriguing and surprising segments of the film. Stallworth pranks David Duke by putting his arm around Duke and an associate just as a photo is taken, after which the white men react in disgust (since they believe blacks to be 'dirty'). This fits with Spike Lee's identity politics, since

for Lee, the battle against racism is largely a matter of cultural attitude. Who is cool? Who gets the last laugh? Who has the best music? (This can also be seen in the ‘Red Lantern Scene’, in which Ron and Patrice dance a well-choreographed set-piece, along with dozens of other young, beautiful, and well-rehearsed black dancers, to the sound of the 1972 hit ‘Too Late to Turn Back Now’).

After the scene at the Klan initiation, the Klan bomb plot is thwarted and three of the worst offenders are killed when the bomb explodes in an unexpected location. Ron then engineers the arrest of racist cop Landers with the help of white officers in his department. Ron dances into work the next day with comic gestures of victory and triumph. It is here that a more simplistic and mystifying mainstream film would end. But Spike Lee takes it all back. He gives us the triumphant but false happy ending, only to undermine it shockingly.

First, in the chief’s office we learn that due to ‘budget cuts’ the investigation of the Klan will stop. The chief orders all evidence destroyed. Ron’s celebration of triumphs then continues when he calls David Duke and makes fun of him as his colleagues listen in and laugh in derision. This is a kind of public shaming that fits well with Lee’s identity politics. Later Ron is at his home with Patrice, and she asks him if he has handed in his resignation to the police department. Ron responds that he has always wanted to be a policeman. Patrice says that she can’t ‘sleep with the enemy’.

With this conflict between Ron and Patrice still unresolved, we hear a knock on the door. Ron and Patrice draw their guns and walk warily toward the door. Suddenly they are moving, seemingly without walking, down a surrealistically long corridor, guns aimed forward, vigilant. The camera tracks back as they move toward it. We cut to a reverse angle tracking shot, moving toward a window at the end of the corridor. We do not see Ron and Patrice again. Instead, the film expands outward, away from Colorado Springs and our two main characters. Through the window we see a ritualised cross burning, with men in KKK robes and hoods. The diegetic space in which this burning occurs is unclear. Is this early 1970s world of Ron and Patrice, or is this our world? Then Lee cuts to footage of what is *definitely* our world – of the 2017 marches and riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, during which far right ‘Unite the Right’ groups clashed with anti-racists. We see President Donald Trump talking about ‘good people’ on ‘both sides’. We see the real David Duke saying that this rally is the beginning of a movement. We see horrific video of a car crashing into anti-racist protesters. We hear shouting and

screaming. We see visual remembrances of Heather Heyer, who was killed in the Charlottesville car attack, and the slogan 'Rest in Power'. Finally we see an image of an American flag, upside down. The red, white, and blue of the flag turns to black and white, and then the image fades to black.

This ending serves the purpose of reflective spectatorship in various ways. First, it is emotionally complicated and jarring. We first get a satisfying, if somewhat ridiculous happy ending. Then, for a sympathetic audience at least, disappointment sets in with news of the end of the investigation. Finally shock and horror replaces any remaining relief or satisfaction, when the news footage of the Charlottesville riots is shown.[42] Second, it is an open ending, refusing to resolve the question of whether Patrice and Ron will come to an understanding about his being a policeman, and who it is that is knocking on their door. Third, the undermining of the superficial happy ending that Lee had earlier provided, and which might suggest that the problems identified in the story have been resolved, refuses to release the spectator from further concern or need for action. Fourth, this ending relates Ron Stallworth's story, which occurred decades earlier, to the events of the present. As critic Richard Lawson writes, '[t]he movie's satire ultimately proves damningly meta, with Lee practically appearing on camera and saying, "Did you really think it would be this easy?"'[43] Thus *BlacKkKlansman* relates the past to the present, the fictionalised diegesis to the actual world, and this film to earlier representations of race in the US.

Brecht considered the epic theatre to be an occasion for instruction, and Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* can be considered likewise. In addition to the techniques just mentioned, one could also point to the frontality of much of the staging, for example in the scene in which Ron is being interviewed for the position of policeman in the Colorado Springs Police Department. As the chief and Mr. Turrentine (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.) interview Ron, the framing has them looking directly down the camera's lens, as though they are interrogating the audience as well as Ron. This relates to the four speeches (mentioned previously) in the sense that both this confrontational frontal staging and the speeches may incline the audience to reflect and respond rather than merely observe.

## Emotion and empathy: *BlacKkKlansman* as a hybrid text

So far I have shown that *BlacKkKlansman* makes use of Brechtian techniques that arguably elicit reflection on the part of the spectator. As Lawson remarks of the film, it is ‘an invigorating jumble of ideas and moods’, thus participating in the separation of the elements that Brecht favored over a kind of simple, immersive viewing experience that leaves viewers thinking solely about the personal responses of characters.

At the same time, the film also features many techniques that elicit empathy and emotions in ways that are not uncommon in mainstream film, and which are characteristic features of dramatic (or Aristotelian) theatre. In his later writings, Brecht saw room for a hybrid theatre that drew from both traditions. His epic theatre did not necessarily oppose empathy, because some element of empathising with characters is inevitable, and the combination of empathy and alienation could lead to reflection. He did not oppose emotion, but only certain sorts of emotion. As Koutsourakis writes, Brecht did not even consistently oppose linear narrative, but did oppose ‘stories that prioritize abstractly human factors rather than social ones’.[44]

Peter Wollen, in a well-known 1972 article celebrating the films of Jean-Luc Godard, juxtaposes ‘orthodox’ cinema to ‘counter-cinema’ by identifying several binaries, for example, identification versus estrangement, pleasure versus unpleasure, and single diegesis versus multiple diegesis. Wollen somewhat archly refers to these as the ‘seven deadly sins’ of mainstream cinema versus the ‘seven cardinal virtues’ of the ‘revolutionary, materialist’ film. Though Wollen may not have intended them as such, these could be seen as totalising binaries that the late Brecht would not have supported.[45] In this regard, *BlacKkKlansman* can be seen as a hybrid text, forging a meld of Brechtian and Aristotelian (or orthodox) techniques.

For one, the film is designed to elicit pleasurable emotions at every turn. Some of these are the sort of emotions that maintain a distance between characters and viewers, especially those associated with irony. Think of amusement, disdain, and contempt, for example. Brecht was supportive of amusement, since it often elicits emotions that keep their distance and imply critique – disdain, contempt, curiosity, satirical correction, and fascination, for example. In line with this, Spike Lee not-so-subtly makes fun of David Duke and the other Klansmen by portraying them as nerdy rubes and the object of several pranks, not to mention being regularly fooled by the false identities of Ron and Flip. Yet accompanying disdain for the Klansmen is the viewer’s

admiration for and allegiance with Ron and Flip. Admiration is not a distancing emotion, but rather one that draws us closer to the characters.

This brings us to the subject of character engagement and empathy, which play a prominent role in the film, though it is not the ‘complete empathy’ that Brecht warned us against. The ‘complete empathy’ that Brecht disavows, in which the spectator shares exactly the emotions of a character, is in my opinion psychologically impossible. I argue in *Moving Viewers* that spectators do not experience empathy, so defined, and that a better word would be ‘sympathy’, whereby spectator emotions are congruent with those we suppose a favored character to have, but *never wholly shared*.<sup>[46]</sup> Thus viewers are encouraged to sympathise with Ron Stallworth, or in other words, to align their desires with the attainment of his goals. Ron is hip, good-looking, and personable. His co-workers like him and applaud his efforts. He wins the affection, although perhaps only temporarily, of the equally talented, attractive, and sympathetic Patrice. We are both physically aligned with Ron throughout the film (through spatial proximity and point-of-view shots) and encouraged to have allegiance for him, to like him or root for him.

This sympathy, however, encourages reflection and does not thwart it. For one, it is a mixed sympathy. The activist students represented by Patrice are also presented sympathetically, but oppose the police as representatives of oppression. Thus when Ron attends the Kwame Ture speech for the purpose of police surveillance, for example, sympathy for him may be mixed and ambiguous, or at least questioning. During the speech, Lee cuts to many close-ups of the heads of audience members, showing us their rapt attention and encouraging viewers to share in that attention. But no face gets more attention than that of Ron Stallworth, the cop infiltrating the meeting on behalf of the police department, but also a black man whose views seemingly resonate with much of what Ture says. At one point, Ron responds, ‘Right on. Right on’. Later Ron raises his fist. ‘All power to the people’, he chants along with the crowd.

Yet our sympathy with Ron facilitates reflective thought. Ron’s rapt attention makes what Ture says more salient, but also creates a friction due to the conflicting roles Ron plays – that of cop and potential activist. We ask ourselves how Ron is going to respond, and whether his audible responses are genuine or a put-on. Ture says, ‘We are being shot in the streets by white racist cops.’ ‘I’d rather see a brother kill a white racist cop than a Vietnamese.’ We are led to ask, how can Ron remain both a cop and a black activist? How should we see the police today, given the contemporary ‘Black Lives Matter’

movement? How should we see black activism in relation to violent protest? As he leaves the meeting, Ron asks Ture if a violent race war is inevitable. Ture responds that he thinks it is. But Ron would be on the front lines if such a war were to occur. Our sympathy for Ron makes all of these contradictions more salient. It would be plausible to argue, then, that questions and contradictions regarding sympathetic characters would in many cases lead to reflection.

## Conclusion

My brief analysis of *BlacKkKlansman* leads me to propose the following. These antinomies – epic versus dramatic theatre, counter-cinema versus mainstream cinema – have misled film theory in at least one regard. They have made it more difficult to recognise that no epic theatre and no counter-cinema can withhold the pleasures of narrative completely and still make an impact. No cinema of reflection, no critical cinema, can operate without pleasurable emotion and some degree of character engagement. As Robert Stam writes, films ‘can play with fictions rather than do away with them altogether; tell stories, but also question them; articulate the play of desire and the pleasure principle *and* the obstacles to their realization’.[47]

Thus I propose that we think of late Brechtian screen stories – and in this category I would include Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* and *BlacKkKlansman* – not solely as works of estrangement or alienation. They may also be films of engagement. They may fascinate and move audiences emotionally. They may encourage rapt attention and immersion. They may encourage strong sympathies and antipathies for characters. On this bedrock of narrative pleasure, however, they build an edifice of questioning and provocation, using complications, contradictions, dialectics, interruptions, and political content to elicit further thought and reflection.

With regard to emotion in film, then, the issue is to distinguish between emotional experience that encourages and discourages reflection. To do this, we need to theorise the nature of emotion much more fully than Brecht was able to do. We need to better understand the role of affect and emotion in human experience and in film viewing in particular. We need to understand the complex types of affects and emotions and their implications in varied contexts and for diverse audiences. In the past decade, the recognition of the

*importance* of emotion in spectatorship has been established. The *understanding* of emotion in film spectatorship, however, has only just begun.[48]

## Author

Carl Plantinga is Professor of Film and Media at Calvin College. His authored books are *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford University Press, 2018), *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Response* (University of California Press, 2009), and *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). Plantinga is former president of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image. He is currently writing a book entitled *Alternative Realities*, about the relationship between realism and the imagination in narrative and documentary film.

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## Notes

- [1] See, for example, Wollen 2016, pp. 365-373.
- [2] Curran 2009, p. 323.
- [3] Brecht 1964, p. 78.
- [4] Plantinga 2018, pp. 123-127.
- [5] Kozloff 2013, pp. 2-7.
- [6] In addition to Kozloff's article, see also Stadler, Sinnerbrink, and Plantinga (2018).
- [7] Stam 2000, p. 150.
- [8] *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Apparatus theorists did debate perspectives on issues relevant to Brecht and cinema. For that reason, it is better to take the 'position' of apparatus theory on Brecht as a *tendency* rather than an exceptionless perspective. For example, although apparatus theory tended to reject emotion in what its representatives took to be Brechtian terms, one can find debates about the implications of Brechtian theory in issues of *Screen* (perhaps the chief organ of apparatus theory in the 1970s) devoted to Brecht and the cinema. See, for example, *Screen* #16, 4 (Winter 1975) and *Screen* #20, 3-4 (Winter 1979).
- [9] For another recent account of Brechtian theory in light of both apparatus theory and cognitive film theory, see Jovanovic 2017.
- [10] Smith 1996, p. 132.
- [11] Plantinga 2016, p. 376.
- [12] Koutsourakis 2019, p. 101.
- [13] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1926), p. 14.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- [15] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1927), p. 23.
- [16] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1930), p. 37.
- [17] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1951), p. 140.
- [18] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1952), p. 227.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p.190.
- [20] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1951), p. 145.
- [21] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1929), p. 28.
- [22] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1957), p. 71.

- [23] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1933), p. 58.
- [24] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1948), p. 193–194.
- [25] Smith 2011.
- [26] Koutsourakis 2019, p. 98.
- [27] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1955), p. 277.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- [29] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1935), p. 78.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- [31] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1938), p. 101.
- [32] Brecht 1964 (orig. in 1960), p. 277.
- [33] Koutourakis 2019, p. 18.
- [34] Plantinga 2009, pp. 170–172.
- [35] Plantinga 2018, pp. 128–129, 135–156.
- [36] Kellner 1997, pp. 74–75.
- [37] *Ibid.*, p. 93, 96.
- [38] Willis 2005, p. 792.
- [39] Benjamin 1969, p. 151.
- [40] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- [41] Since Stallworth's real life partner was not known to be Jewish, one wonders if it was Spike Lee's intention to use Flip's Jewishness in *BlackKlansman* to refer to Al Jolson, a Jewish-American performer known as the 'king of blackface' performers.
- [42] For a discussion of divergent audience responses in relation to film rhetoric, see Plantinga 2018, pp. 86–88.
- [43] Lawson 2018.
- [44] Koutsourakis 2018, p. 100.
- [45] Wollen 2016, p. 365.
- [46] For an extended version of this argument, see Plantinga 2009, pp. 98–101.
- [47] Stam 2000, p.150.
- [48] Thanks to this special issue's guest editors Jens Eder, Julian Hanich, and Jane Stadler, and to an anonymous reader, for their helpful editorial suggestions.