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CINE 399: Intro to African American Cinema

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*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Using Hollywood to Impact Reality*

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) depicts the story of a young, optimistic white girl, Joey (Katharine Houghton), and her new sensitive doctor fiancé, John (Sidney Poitier), and their visit to introduce him to her parents. However, in the late 1960s, when interracial marriages were considered taboo, the fact that John is a black man startles the people in their lives and threatens to prevent the continuation of their relationship. It was released in 1967, at the height of the civil rights movement, and the decision of *Loving v. Virginia* was six months before the release. Many of the laws and Supreme Court decisions were established so quickly that the older generations felt blindsided by the progress in the world. Young people rebelled against the long-standing traditions of their parents and grandparents, demanding change and progression. Stanley Kramer felt that progression in the relationship between white people and people of color (specifically the black community) “in very personal terms and in such a way that any moviegoer could relate to the characters” (McGillicuddy, 2003). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* employs the external strategies of advertising stars like Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn, and Spencer Tracy to unite people of many perspectives and beliefs to watch the movie and uses internal strategies of depicting their feelings on the silver screen to communicate the acceptance of interracial marriage and progressive ideals to benefit society through each prominent character.

Kramer employed the star power of Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn, and Spencer Tracy to attract the diverse demographics of their fans to the same theaters to convey the message of interracial understanding. Sidney Poitier's role in both Black film and Hollywood history was seen as divisive. At this point in Poitier's career in 1967, he had already won the first Best Actor Oscar won by a black man for his film *Lilies of the Field* (Nelson, 1963), and he was at the height of his fame (McGillicuddy, 2003). Both White and Black American audiences adored Poitier's roles— White Americans loved the way Poitier pushed against the longstanding prejudices that the previous generations set upon in movies like *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) by depicting a smart, even-tempered, level-headed, and cool Black man for the first time on their screens (Conner, 2022), and Black Americans were pleased to have the boundaries placed on seeing themselves on screen cross into the bounds of Hollywood despite the sanitization of Poitier's characters to cater to white people (Knight, 2012; Anderson, 2022). Choosing Poitier to play the role of Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier) attracted both the white audiences that adored his movies (no matter the dimensional characters he played) and the black audiences that appreciated his efforts to put black people in Hollywood in dignified roles and the black audiences that criticized the roles he played and the audiences he played for. Katharine Hepburn and her niece Katharine Houghton play Christina Drayton (Katharine Hepburn) and her daughter Joanna "Joey" Drayton (Katharine Houghton) in *Guess*. Katharine Hepburn was famous on the silver screen for 30 years at this point in her career, and her niece K. Houghton was looking to start hers. Katharine Hepburn was the daughter of a famous women's suffrage leader in the first wave of feminism, a known member of the Democratic Party, and had allegations of being a Communist during the Red Scare (Mann, 2006). She was a trailblazer in acting and won as many as four Oscars in her lifetime. Her appearance in the movie attracted the star power of her

mainstream (white) fame in Hollywood as well as her leftist fans who were interested in the content of the film. Spencer Tracy, in his final role as Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy), was known in his career to be “one of classic Hollywood’s greatest male leads,” according to Britannica (Spencer Tracy, 2024). Not only did Tracy attract the viewers of people (typically men) who appreciated his films across the span of his career because he was considered a good actor, but due to his death about ten days after the end of shooting *Guess*, the movie marked itself as the final hurrah of Tracy’s impactful and impressive career, boosting publicity (Ebert, 2012). Both Tracy and Hepburn attracted the mainstream older white audiences that weren’t familiar with Poitier and his filmography and introduced them to the message Kramer was trying to convey. This allowed Kramer to achieve an audience of a hopeful and skeptical white and black adult audience.

After attracting a diverse set of audiences that Kramer wanted to hear his message, he portrayed their perspectives within each of the major and supporting cast members. The perspectives of the mothers in the film depicted the reserved but willing-to-be-open older women hesitant to disagree with their husbands. Both John’s mother (Beah Richards) and Christina are initially shocked (and teary-eyed) when learning that the couple is interracial, but they learn to accept while grappling with disagreeing with their husbands. The fathers in the film represent the conservative parents who are stuck in the ways of their previous generation and believe that the way they grew up is the way life must be for their children. One of the most famous scenes of the film highlights this through Dr. John Prentice telling his father (Roy E. Glenn) that “you and your whole lousy generation believes that the way it was for you is the way it’s got to be, and not until your whole generation has lain down and died will that dead weight of you will be off our backs.” These depictions allow for a call to action and a direct message to be placed on the

audience members who find themselves aligning with the viewpoints of these characters. Joey represents the white optimism of the younger generation. Throughout the entire movie until the final speech by Spencer Tracy as Matt Drayton, Joey has no idea that her parents are skeptical about her relationship. She doesn't notice the grief-stricken looks on their face when they meet Dr. Prentice for the first time, nor does she notice their tone when talking about their relationship. She represents the optimistic Americans with an idealistic hope for progression in the country, and her ignorance further provokes those audience members to think about how progression occurs in society. Dr. Prentice represents the viewpoint of the people-pleasing viewpoint of being afraid to move forward; the conflict in the movie revolves around Prentice's promise to stop pursuing Joey if either parent had any reservations about their relationship but learns to focus on building a fulfilling life for the two alone rather than revolving round the opinions of others on their love. Kramer, through these characters, reaches out to the types of audience members who find themselves in the shoes of these characters.

Stanley Kramer brilliantly communicates his message of tolerance and progression in interracial relationships in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* through his approach external from the film in his strategy in his actors bringing in his audience and through his internal approach within the film's characters and their relatability to his audience.

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