Black women's responses to

The Color Purple

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CRITICAL RESPONSES

Tony Brown, a syndicated columnist and the host of the television program Tony Brown's Journal has called the film THE COLOR PURPLE "the most racist depiction of Black men since THE BIRTH OF A NATION and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era." Ishmael Reed, a Black novelist, has labeled the film and the book "a Nazi conspiracy." Since its premiere in December 1985, THE COLOR PURPLE provoked constant controversy, debate, and appraisals of its effects on the image of Black people in this country.

The film also incited a face-off between Black feminist critics and Black male reviewers. The women defend the work, or more precisely, defend Alice Walker's book and the right of the film to exist. Black males vehemently denounce both works and cite the film's stereotypical representations. In the main, adverse criticisms have revolved around three issues:

- that the film does not examine class,
- that Black men are portrayed unnecessarily as harsh and brutal; the consequences of this will be to further the split between the Black female and the Black male;
- that Black people as a whole are depicted as perverse, sexually wanton, and irresponsible.

In these days of massive cutbacks in federal support to social agencies, according to some rebukes, the film's representation of the Black family was especially harmful.

Most left publications, The Guardian, Frontline, and In These Times, denounced the film, but mildly. The Nation, in fact, commended the film and its director for fitting the work's threatening content into a safe and familiar form.[1][open notes in new window] Articles in the other publications praised particular scenes but on the whole disparaged the film for its lack of class authenticity. Black people of that era were poor, the left-wing critics stated, and Spielberg failed to portray that fact. (Uh-uh, says Walker. She said she wrote here about people who owned land, property and dealt in commerce.)

Jill Nelson, a Black journalist who reviewed the film for The Guardian, felt that the film's Black protestors were naive to think that

"at this late date in our history … Hollywood would ever consciously offer Black Americans literal tools for our emancipation."[2]

Furthermore, Nelson, refuted the charge that the film would forever set the race back in white viewers' minds by commenting that most viewers would only leave the theatre commenting on whether or not they liked the film. Articles counter to Nelson's were published in a following issue of The Guardian, and they emphasized the film's distorted perspective on class and the ideological use to which the film would be put to show the Black family's instability.

The December premiere of THE COLOR PURPLE was picketed in Los Angeles by an activist group named the Coalition Against Black Exploitation. The group protested the savage and brutal depiction of Black men in the film.[3] That
complaint was carried further by a Black columnist in *The Washington Post*, Courtland Milloy, who wrote that some Black women would enjoy seeing Black men shown as "brutal bastards," and that furthermore, the book was demeaning. Milloy stated:

"I got tired, a long time ago, of white men publishing books by Black women about how screwed up Black men are."[4]

Other hostile views about the film were expressed by representatives of the NAACP, Black male columnists, and a law professor, Leroy Clark of Catholic University, who called it dangerous. (When Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* opened on Broadway in Fall 1976, the response from Black male critics was similar.)

Black female reviewers were not so critical of the film on gender issues. Although Barbara Smith attacked the film for its class distortions, she felt that "sexual politics and sexual violence" in the Black community were matters that needed to be confronted and changed.[5] Jill Nelson emphasized that those who did not like what the messenger (the film) said about Black men should look at the facts of the message. She cited the facts: Nearly 50% of all Black children are born to single mothers; 80% of Black mothers are single parents; nine and a half out of ten Black women that she knew received no support from their children's father; and most had been physically and mentally abused.

One Black woman who had seen the film was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that she knew many Celies when she was growing up in Sunflower County, Mississippi. She said that she, her mother and her aunts had all been beaten and brutalized by their husbands and that for her, the movie "just lifted a burden." She added:

"Black women should not be sacrificed for Black men's pride. Let the film roll."[6]

On April 6, 1986, Tony Brown opened his weekly TV talk show with the statement, "You either love or you hate THE COLOR PURPLE." He had titled this particular program about the film, "Purple Rage."[7] He had as panelists four men, and they split as to whether the film positively or negatively portrayed Black people. Vernon Jarrett, introduced as a "veteran" reporter for the *Chicago Sun Times*, declared that making PURPLE was like "putting poison in ice cream." Armond White, a film critic on the *New York City-Sun*, called the film the best movie of the year, and then he was severely criticized by Jarrett, Brown and another member of the panel, Kwasi Geiggar. Geiggar heads the group Coalition Against Black Exploitation, and he adamantly repeated that the film was "the worst picture of the year."

Geiggar and Jarrett dominated the program, interrupting anyone on the panel or in the audience who supported the film. Tony Brown lent those two moral and physical support by taking away the microphone from anyone in the audience who wanted to tell why they liked the film. At one point in the show, White, who liked the film, had to interrupt Geiggar's denunciation of Black people for being so "ignorant" of their own history that they accepted the film's historical inaccuracies. White pointed out that there were no women on the panel. He said,

"An important issue about THE COLOR PURPLE is that it is a fiction, it's a fable, it's a fantasy. It's not simply a movie of Black social history. It is particularly a history of Black women. It is more about the oppression of Black women than about Black people."

Several women in the audience did not like the film. One took offense to how often the word "ugly" was used in the film. She said the film's promotional trailer used the moment when Shug sees Celie for the first time and says, "You sho' is ugly." She said angrily, "This sister with her strong Black features. Brothers and sisters for twenty and thirty years have been trying to turn around that standard of beauty in our community," meaning that standard that places a premium on white features. And she told Tony Brown: "We will have sisters turning to other sisters for comfort, physically and mentally." She was reacting to the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie, saying that Black women will turn to other Black women sexually, rather than to Black men.
Two women in the audience stood firm in their approval of the film. Tony Brown tried to badger them into backing down and Geiggar continually interrupted them, but in the end they got out what they wanted to say. One said that she saw the movie, read the book and liked both: "I did not take it to be a social commentary on the Black race." She also said that the film, in fact, depicted a social reality. She explained that she worked with teenage girls:

"The teenage girls were doing role playing about incest in Black families for senior citizens in the Black community, and many of those women my grandmother's age said, 'you told my story, that really happened.'"

On April 25, 1986, on his talk show, Phil Donahue also examined the controversy around THE COLOR PURPLE. He had as a panelist Tony Brown, who repeated his view that the film was racist and harmed Black men. Other guests were Willis Edwards, the president of the Beverly Hills NAACP chapter; Donald Bogle, a film historian and author of the book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*; and Michele Wallace, a professor of Afro-American literature and creative writing at the University of Oklahoma and author of *Black Macho: The Myth of the Superwoman*.

Wallace stated here that the film had had some "positive feminist influences and some positive import for Black audiences in this country." Wallace also said that art should not be reduced to mere sociology:

"Art looks at extreme conditions of conflict and then attempts to transcend those conditions. I don't think it's a valid criticism of THE COLOR PURPLE that it doesn't speak to the life of the ordinary and average Black family. Art is not meant to do that."[8]

In an earlier article in *The Village Voice*, March 18, 1986, Michele Wallace was less charitable to the film. Although she gives a very lucid explication of Walker's novel, citing its attempt to "reconstruct Black female experience as positive ground," Wallace wrote of the film,

"Spielberg juggles film clichés and racial stereotypes fast and loose, until all signs of a Black feminist agenda are banished, or ridiculed beyond repair."

Wallace also noted the film used mostly cinematic types reminiscent of earlier films. She writes:

"Instead of serious men and women encountering consequential dilemmas, we're almost always minstrels, more than a little ridiculous; we dance and sing without continuity, as if on the end of a string. It seems white people are never going to forget Stepin Fetchit, no matter how many times he dies."[9]

Wallace both sees something positive in the film and points to its flaws. I agree with her in both instances, especially in her analysis of how it is predictable that the film "has given rise to controversy and debate within the Black community, ostensibly focused on the eminently printable issue of the film's image of Black men."

In an attempt to explain why people liked COLOR PURPLE in spite of its sometimes clichéd characters, Donald Bogle, on the Donahue show, put it down to the novelty of seeing Black actors in roles not previously available to them:

"For Black viewers there is a schizophrenic reaction. You're torn in two. On the one hand you see the character of Mister and you're disturbed by the stereotype. Yet, on the other hand, and this is the basis of the appeal of that film for so many people, is that the women you see in the movie, you have never seen Black women like this put on the screen before. I'm not talking about what happens to them in the film, I'm talking about the visual statement itself. When you see Whoopi Goldberg in close-up, a loving close-up, you look at this woman, you know that in American films in the past, in the 1930s, 1940s, she would have played a maid. She would have been a comic maid. Suddenly, the
camera is focusing on her and we say I've seen this woman some place, I know her."

It appears to me that one of the problems most of the film's reviewers have in trying to analyze the film, with all of its faults, is to make sense of the overwhelming positive response from Black female viewers. When Bogle talks about viewers' schizophrenic reaction, he is also pointing to the confusion felt by critics and scholars.

DIFFERENT VIEWING STRATEGIES

That Black female viewers liked the film THE COLOR PURPLE is becoming increasingly evident. Although no one has taken a poll on this, word of mouth among my Mends and family, as well as among Black women scholars, seems to indicate this. Barbara Christian, associate professor of Afro-American Studies at U.C. Berkeley and a close friend of Alice Walker, had advised Walker to sell the film rights to the novel. In May 1986 at the University of Oregon, Christian presented a paper entitled "Devisioning Alice Walker and Steven Spielberg," in which she offered a comparison of the novel and film. She talked about the different audiences for each work and how they shaped the structuring of each.

She saw a vast difference between the audience to whom Walker was writing and "Hollywood's concept of a mass audience." Christian felt that Spielberg "de-radicalized" Walker's vision, which showed how a group of people, specifically Celie and the other characters in the novel, could transcend the abusive conditions of class exploitation, sexism and racism — with their perverse manifestations of incest, wife-beating and rape — to forge a sense of Black nationhood that is dependent on a healthy Black family. Christian felt that Spielberg sentimentalized the novel, made it less harsh, and made "the purple pink. Sentimentality replaces the passion for living."[10]

In talking about the audience response to the film, Christian said that she had been run ragged in the months between the premiere of the film and her talk at the University of Oregon, analyzing the book and the film. She said that she had spoken to a variety of gatherings across the country, from university groups to assemblages in churches. She emphatically stated that Black females adored the film despite Black middle-class intellectuals telling them that they should not like it. Christian said her mother had seen the film seven times.

One of the reasons Alice Walker sold the screen rights to her book was that she understood that people who would not read the book would go to see the film. Walker and her advisers thought that the book's critical message — about a young, abused, uneducated girl evolving into womanhood with a sense of her worthiness which she gained through her bonding with the other females around her — needed to be exposed to a wider audience than those who read books. Christian contends that the audience for the novel was a very specific one and one drastically different from the mass audience toward which the film is directed. Although the novel was not directed exclusively at Black women, those who shared a common cultural background and experience could more readily identify with the issues explored by a Black woman writer.

Identification with the film would have to be a different matter in that it was a commercial venture produced in Hollywood by a white male according to all of the tenets and conventions of commercial cultural production in this country. The manner in which an audience would respond to such a film would be varied, diverse and complex. I am especially concerned to analyze how Black females have responded to the film THE COLOR PURPLE. If I find that on the whole Black females have found something progressive and useful in the film, it is crucial to understand how this could be possible from viewing a work that has been manufactured according to the encoding of dominant ideology.

Lawrence Grossberg in his "Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation" contends that cultural texts can be read and used in different ways. Grossberg cites Stuart Hall's studies that contend that the processes of cultural production encode particular meanings into the structure of the texts. These "meanings" attempt to represent experience in ways which support the interests of those already in power, both economically and politically. The producers of a cultural product are under "ideological pressure" to reproduce the familiar. Even when the producer is being radical, the form of the presentation in most cases will be that of dominant
Grossberg cautions, however, that the fact that texts encode certain readings does not guarantee that they are read accordingly. As he states, effects cannot be assumed from origins. There are alternate ways for an audience to decode a text other than that of the preferred one. There can be a negotiated and/or an oppositional reading. A dominant (or preferred) reading of a text accepts the content of the cultural product without question. A negotiated reading questions parts of the content of a text but does not question the dominant ideology which underlies the production of the text. An oppositional response to a cultural product is one in which the recipient of the text understands that the system that produced the text is one with which s/he is fundamentally at odds.[11]

A viewer of a film (reader of a text) comes to the moment of engagement with the work with a knowledge of the world and a knowledge of other texts, or media products.

"At the moment of textual encounter other discourses are always in play besides those of the particular text in focus..."[12]

What this means is that when a person comes to view a film, s/he does not leave her/his histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual at the door. The viewer also brings to the film knowledge, not only of other films, but also of films of this type. Viewers often have an oppositional stance in the act of viewing a film.

At the beginning, however, the viewer accepts a film for the way it is presented, and that presentation will initially elicit a preferred reading on the part of the viewer. The preferred reading is usually that of the dominant ideology, that of mainstream society which is governed by white, middle-class males. What this means is that a film will lead a viewer to see it in a certain way, because of the way the film is made. The film's producers are under both commercial and ideological constraints to structure an expensive media production in a manner that is familiar and therefore non-threatening to mainstream society. Consequently, this is the interpretation that the audience will initially make of the film, a mainstream interpretation. If the viewer accepts the film in the way that it is presented, this is the creative work's preferred reading.

If something strikes the viewer as amiss, subversion can occur. Subversion occurs in a filmic text when a moment arises that doesn't seem to fit. Behind the idea of subversion lies the notion of "making strange." When things appear "strange" to the viewer, the viewer will then bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film and will "see" things other than what the filmmakers intended. Then the viewer will read "against the grain" of the film.

BLACK RESPONSES TO TRADITIONAL DEPICTIONS

All of this is not to imply that producers of media products are aligned in a conspiracy against an audience. When a filmmaker constructs a work s/he will draw on her/his background, experience, and social and cultural milieu. A filmmaker will also draw on other films. To connect this back to the idea of a subversive reading of a mainstream text, when the filmmaker draws on her/his store of experience and other films, a viewer will also tap into her/his collective store of media experience. It is this, in part, that may lead a Black audience into an oppositional posture in the act of viewing. An example of this can be seen in the film THE COLOR PURPLE.

When THE COLOR PURPLE is compared unfavorably with THE BIRTH OF A NATION (1915) and CABIN IN THE SKY (1943), these are not accidental references. Steven Spielberg's THE COLOR PURPLE cross-references or refers back to both of these films as it does HALLELUJAH! (1929). In fact, according to Donald Bogle in Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks, almost every Black "leading lady" in motion pictures, from Lena Horne in CABIN IN THE SKY to Lola Falana in THE LIBERATION OF L.B. JONES, owes a debt to the "gyrations and groans" of Nina Mae McKinney's character executing sensuous "bumps and grinds" in the famous cabaret scene in HALLELUJAH![13] The corollary of this can be seen acted out by Margaret Avery as Shug in the juke-joint scenes in THE COLOR PURPLE.
There are also other aspects of Spielberg’s THE COLOR PURPLE that recall the other two films. In the beginning of THE COLOR PURPLE the young Celie gives birth to a child fathered by the man she thinks is her father. She is aided in the birth by her sister Nettie. The scene is not so much graphically rendered as it is vivid. The viewer can recall the beads of sweat on Celie's face and the blood in the pan of water as Nellie wrings out the cloth she is using to wash Celie.

The next shot of blood is on the rock that one of Mister's bad kids throws and hits the young Celie with. We look at Celie and then there is a close-up of the blood on the rock. Further along in the film, and this is where Spielberg imitates D.W. Griffith in THE BIRTH OF A NATION, there is a scene of the grown Celie taking up a knife that she will use to shave Mister. It should be noted that this scene was not in the book and was entirely the film's invention. As Celie brings the knife closer to Mister's neck, there is a continual cross-cutting with scenes of the initiation rites of Adam (Celie's son) and Pasha in Africa. This cross-cutting is interspersed with shots of Shug dressed in a red dress running across a field to stop Celie from cutting Mister's throat. As the back and forth action of the three scenes is done, eventually the kids' cheeks are cut, and we see a trickle of blood running down one of their faces.

In fictional filmmaking, scripts utilize what is known as the rule of threes: first there is the introduction to a concept that is significant, then the set-up, then the pay-off. Without reaching too hard for significance, we can see in the meaning of the shots of blood with the blood-red of Shug's dress as she runs to rescue Celie, and then the bloodletting of the African initiation rite, that these shots and their use of red culminate in the pay-off: these are "savage" people. This connects up later in the film with the overall red tone to the juke joint sequences and the red dress that Shug wears while she is performing there. As Barbara Christian put it, the gross inaccuracy of the African initiation ceremony coupled with the shots of Celie going after Mister with the sharpened knife seemed intended to depict a "primordial blood urge shared by dark peoples in Africa and Afro-Americans."

As Spielberg called on his store of media memories in making THE COLOR PURPLE, he used a cinematic technique that made Griffith famous, cross-cutting, toward the same end as Griffith that of portraying the savage nature of Black people. Another use of cross-cutting that seems to comment on the "inherent nature of Black people" derives from an earlier film, CABIN IN THE SKY. Here we see Shug overcome with remorse while she is singing in the juke-joint and then leading the "jointers" singing and prancing down the road to her father's church.

One Black reviewer of THE COLOR PURPLE wondered, in reference to this scene, if it were obligatory in every film that contained Black actors and actresses that they sing and dance. It appears that this is so, for if they did not, a mainstream audience (which is the one toward which commercial films are aimed) would still see them acting as such. Lorraine Hansberry, in an essay in which she analyzed her play A RAISIN IN THE SUN wrote about the collective store of associations that a mainstream audience brings to the viewing of works by Black people. 

“My colleagues and I were reduced to mirth and tears by that gentleman writing his review of our play in a Connecticut paper who remarked of his pleasure at seeing how ‘our dusky brethren’ could ‘come up with a song and hum their troubles away.’ It did not disturb the writer in the least that there is no such implication in the entire three acts. He did not need it in the play; he had it in his head.”[14]

THE MYTH OF THE EXOTIC PRIMITIVE

One of the critical questions that arises in connection with a subversive reading of a text is how a specific audience becomes motivated to read the work as they do. In a study of the plays, speeches and political writings of playwright Lorraine Hansberry, I found a consistent thread that runs through her writings. It appeared that the playwright was writing in response to a pervasive element in artworks from mainstream society which portrayed Black people.

I think this is relevant to this examination of Black females’ response to the film THE COLOR PURPLE because it sheds light on the reasons why a particular audience would have an oppositional stance when viewing mainstream works. The negative assumptions that Hansberry was confronting and that she countered in
her works I have identified as the *myth of the exotic primitive*. I label it a myth not because of the concept's falseness but because of its wide acceptance, and because of the manner in which it functions as a cultural belief system.

In contemporary terms, a myth is a narrative that accompanies an historical sequence of events or actions. A body of political writings and literature develops around this narrative. This becomes the formulated myth. The myth is constructed of images and symbols which have the force to activate a cultural belief system. This means that if a culture believes a myth to be true or operable in their society, a body of tradition, folklore, laws and social rules is developed around this mythology. In this way myths serve to organize, unify and clarify a culture's history in a manner that is satisfactory to a culture.

Mark Schorer, in *Myth and Mythmaking*, states that

> "all convictions (belief system), whether personal or societal, involve mythology. The mythology, although historically grounded, does not have to be historically accurate. The truth or falsity of the myth is not important when considering the function of the myth (that of validating history), for the convictions or the cultural system of belief are not rational and are based on the controlling image and set of assumptions in the mythmaking process … Belief organizes experience not because it is rational but because all belief depends on a controlling imagery and rational belief is the intellectual formalization of that imagery."[16]

In other words, we believe first, and then we create a rationale for our beliefs and subsequent actions. The formal expression of our beliefs can be seen in the imagery used by a culture."

The characteristics of the myth of the exotic primitive are these:

- Black people are naturally childlike. Thus they adjust easily to the most unsatisfactory social conditions, which they accept readily and even happily;
- Black people are over-sexed, carnal sensualists dominated by violent passions;
- Black people are savages taken from a culture relatively low on the scale of human civilization.

In one of her political writings, Hansberry outlined what she considered to be the genesis of the myth:

> "The sixteenth-century spirit of mercantile expansionism that swept Europe, and gave rise to colonial conquest and the European slave trade, was also father of a modern concept of racism. The concept made it possible to render the African a 'commodity' in the minds of white men, and to alienate the conscience of the rising European humanism from identification with the victims of that conquest and slave trade. In order to accommodate programs of commerce and empire on a scale never before known in history, the Negro had to be placed arbitrarily outside the pale of recognizable humanity in the psychology of Europeans and, eventually, of white America. Neither his soul nor his body was to be allowed to evoke empathy. He was to be — and, indeed, became, in a created mentality of white men — some grotesque expression of the mirth of nature; a fancied static vestige of the primeval past; an eternal exotic who, unlike men, would not bleed when pricked nor revenge when wronged. Thus for three centuries in Europe and America alike, buffoonery or villainy was his only permissible role in the ball of entertainment or drama."[17]

As a panelist on "The Negro in American Culture" that aired on WABI-FM in New York in January 1961, Hansberry spoke eloquently about mainstream artists' need to portray Black people in a negative light. She said:

> "And it seems to me that one of the things that has been done in the American mentality is to create this escape valve of the exotic Negro, wherein it is possible to exalt abandon on all levels, and to imagine that while I am dealing with the perplexities of the universe, look over there, coming down from the trees is a Negro who knows none of this, and
wouldn't it be marvelous if I could be my naked, brutal, savage self again? This permeates our literature in every variation: I don't believe that Negro characters as created thus far have overcome that problem."

Knowing that this concept of exoticism underlies the products of mainstream cultural production, I think this is one of the reasons that most viewers of a film such as THE COLOR PURPLE have what Bogle described as a schizophrenic reaction. I think this is one of the reasons also that Michele Wallace appeared to contradict herself on the Donahue show. THE COLOR PURPLE did have something progressive and useful for a Black audience. At the same time some of the caricatures and representations made the viewer wince. It is my contention that a Black audience through a history of theatre-going and film-watching knows that at some point "some grotesque expression of the mirth of nature" is going to be presented to us. Since this is the case, we have several options available to us. One is to never indulge in media products. This would be impossible considering that we live in an age of a media blizzard. Another option, and I think this is more an unconscious reaction to and defense against racist depictions of Black people, we can filter out that which is negative and select from the media work that which we can relate to.

EXTRACTING OUR OWN READINGS

There is a concept developed by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* that explains how readers of a literary work can extract meaning from a creative work other than that which is anticipated or desired by the makers. I think this has a relationship to the manner in which Black females responded to THE COLOR PURPLE in that it posits a theory of how an audience makes meaning from a cultural product. To tie all of this together I think this is the way it works. An audience member from a marginalized group (people of color, women, the poor, etc.) has an oppositional stance as they participate in mainstream media.

This oppositional posture can lead to a subversive reading of a work. The motivation for this counter-reception is that we understand that mainstream media has never rendered our segment of the population faithfully. We have as evidence our years of watching films and television programs and reading plays and books. Out of habit, as readers of mainstream texts, we have learned to ferret out the beneficial and put up blinders against the rest. What Barthes does in *S/Z* is suggest how this is possible and he also examines how meaning is created in the mind of the reader.

Barthes' goal in *S/Z* is to make the reader of a text (probably a university student) a "producer" of the work rather than a passive consumer. He does this through an examination of the process of the text's production. Barthes establishes various tools for evaluating texts, and he groups texts into the "readerly" and the "writerly." The readerly text is well-ordered, full of representations and presents itself as "natural" and "innocent." The readerly text is consumed by the reader. In the readerly text the reader more or less follows the breadcrumbs laid out by the producer of the work. As a readerly text presents itself as natural, or as a "window on the world," it seduces the reader into reading it in only a limited way.

The writerly text, on the other hand, is "ourselves writing," as Barthes puts it. The writerly text does not assume that there is a coherence to a text and that its meanings are immanent within the text. The writerly transforms not only the text but the reader as well. It challenges her/his assumptions about cultural products and about reality in everyday life. The writerly process trains the reader to see multiple meanings in a work rather than merely what the creative work attempts to present. Beyond this, Barthes trains readers in *S/Z* to have a more "writerly" response to texts that others would unthinkingly receive as closed. In other words, if we take Barthes one step further the same attitude that would allow a reader to grasp a writerly text can be seen as a "writerly attitude." And this attitude can be applied to more closed mainstream texts. This was Barthes' whole project in *S/Z,* as he taught his students how to "open up" the literary process of production of a mainstream "classical" work.\[19\]

A creative work constructed according to the encoding of dominant ideology will attempt to elicit only one true reading. This is a characteristic of a readerly text. Barthes contends in *S/Z* that there is a limited plural in readerly texts. This limited
plural, as opposed to only one true meaning, has fissures that betray its innocence and transparency, according to Judith Mayne in "S/Z and Film Criticism." Mayne states,

"It is the reader's task to follow these 'cracks' opening them up even wider. Since ideology is borne most commonly by those conventions which are unnoticed, the kind of reading proposed by Barthes is a political act, an attack on dominant modes of perception."[20]

What this means in regards to THE COLOR PURPLE is that there are cinematic conventions at work in the construction of the film. A viewer is hypnotized by the lavish sets, the lush photography and the opulent musical score. The viewer is "manhandled" into a trance in the watching of THE COLOR PURPLE and is cinematically manipulated. For example, even though you know that when the sisters are reunited at the end of the film, they will play their children's hand-clapping game, and you are on guard against its emotional tug, it is difficult not to cry when the game begins. The film is an expertly crafted, emotional rollercoaster ride. But there are cracks; there are moments that don't quite fit.

Within the reunion sequence of Celie and Nettie and the hand-clapping, we see the return of Celie's children. Many viewers wondered why children who were raised by U.S. missionaries would come back unable to speak coherent English. This "crack" would also lead the viewer into questioning the African segments in their entirety. Although Africa was depicted in the book, the manner in which Africa entered the film was disturbing.

I think the characterizations of Harpo and Sofia would be another of the questionable representations in the film that would force a "writerly" viewer into another reading. Barbara Christian found the most maligned figure in the film to be Harpo. She said that in the book he couldn't become the patriarch that society demanded that he become. Because the film cannot depict a man uncomfortable with the requirements of patriarchy, Harpo is made into a buffoon. Christian adds that "the movie makes a negative statement about men who show some measure of sensitivity to women."

The film used the characterizations of Harpo and Sofia as comic relief. Many Black viewers were upset with Harpo's ineptness in not being able to repair a roof. Supposedly that became even funnier if he fell three times. In her Village Voice review, Michele Wallace attributed other motives to the film's representations of Harpo and Sofia than as comic interludes. Wallace considered their appearances to be "white patriarchal interventions." She said:

"In the book Sofia is the epitome of a woman with masculine powers, the martyr to sexual injustice who eventually triumphs through the realignment of the community. In the movie she is an occasion for humor. She and Harpo are the reincarnation of Amos and Sapphire; they alternately fight and fuck their way to a house full of pickaninnies. Harpo is always falling through the roof he's chronically unable to repair. Sofia is always shoving a baby into his arms, swinging her large hips, and talking a mile a minute. Harpo, who is dying to marry Sofia in the book, seems bamboozled into marriage in the film. Sofia's only masculine power is her contentiousness. Encircled by the mayor, his wife and an angry white mob, she is knocked down and her dress flies up providing us with a timely reminder that she is just a woman"[25].

Sofia lying in the street with her dress up is almost an exact replica of a picture in a national publication of a large Black woman lying dead in her home after she has been killed by her husband in a domestic argument. This image plus some others in the film makes one wonder at Spielberg's unconscious store of associations.

Christian and Wallace's comments about the film are examples of the cracks that a writerly reading of THE COLOR PURPLE will open up. The political act that will be performed is that the viewer will become more aware of the process of the creation of a film and then will be able to discern when mainstream ideology is coming into play. Mainstream ideology in THE COLOR PURPLE attempted to portray Black people in the standard way, that of exotic savage creatures. Black female viewers "re-wrote" the work and were able to uncover something worthwhile and progressive from the film.
NOTES


ADDITIONAL WORKS CONSULTED


The Color Purple. Plot overview and analysis written by an experienced literary critic. Full study guide for this title currently under development. To be notified when we launch a full study guide, please contact us.

The Color Purple Summary. In 1930s Georgia, Celie—a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old, black girl—writes letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Celie has already been pregnant once, with a baby girl her father took from her and killed in the woods. The mayor slaps Sophia in response, and she answers by punching the mayor and knocking him to the ground. The police quickly respond by brutally beating Sophia, and she's sentenced to twelve years in jail. The Color Purple focuses on the relationships between women and the effects of racism. What was your introduction to The Color Purple? I saw the film first at church or summer camp, but my first real memory of The Color Purple was when I got to see it when I was 15. About 11 years ago, my dad took me to see The Color Purple on
Broadway, and that was my first moment with it. Sofia and Taystee are both strong black women trying to survive in oppressive environments, though Taystee more so by choice. How do you approach their two very similar stories sometimes even in the same day? I think they both inform each other. Watch Brooks perform "Hell No" in The Color Purple: There's that element of the sassy black woman stereotype at play in each character. Do you ever worry about being typecast or having to find nuance within that stereotype to add depth? Women list purple as a top-tier color, but no men list purple as a favorite color. (Perhaps this is why we have no purple power tools, a product largely associated with men?) The above infographic from KISSmetrics showcases the disparity in men and women's color preferences. Keep this information in mind when choosing your brand's primary color palette. Given the starkly different taste preferences shown, it pays to appeal more to men or women if they make up a larger percentage of your ideal buyers. The studies Aesthetic Response to Color Combinations and Consumer Preferences for Color Combinations also find that while a large majority of consumers prefer color patterns with similar hues, they favor palettes with a highly contrasting accent color.