



The Butler Did It

A Review of

Lee Daniels' The Butler (2013)

by Lee Daniels (Director)

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Reviewed by

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Now into the 21st century and (as I write this) with our first African American president, our nation continues to struggle with and process our racist, segregationist, and slave-owning past. We are at a remarkable and difficult time in our history, having come far in the past few decades in promoting equality between ethnic groups yet still struggling with educational disparities and fewer employment opportunities for minority youths. Despite the election of a Black president, polls suggest that prejudice toward minority groups has not slackened (e.g., Agiesta & Ross, 2012). Integrating people of all ethnicities and backgrounds remains a struggle for our society.

Artistic considerations of our nation's racist past remain remarkably popular, however. Perhaps it is because, in watching a movie or reading a book in which ethnic minorities triumph against majority prejudice and in identifying with the minorities' protagonists, we (and I speak about ethnic majority viewers such as myself) can identify with their plight and separate ourselves from our nation's racist history. Looking at what we used to be like, we might think, "It's so good we've moved beyond that." *Lee Daniels' The Butler* is a new film in this tradition, plotting the experiences of an African American butler in the White House through several historical presidencies during the civil rights era. It is a flawed if poignant consideration of ethnic relations within the United States, but overall it is well worth seeing.

The past year has seen several films examining the plight of African Americans against White racism in the United States. This flurry of films began with *Django Unchained* (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES*; Erelu, 2013), which documented the efforts of an escaped slave to rescue his wife from Leonardo DiCaprio's cartoonishly evil depiction of a White slave owner. *Django Unchained* was a controversial film, in part because some felt that, in essence, a White director used the issue of slavery to promote a violent action film (e.g., Platon, 2012). This raises questions about how and by whom the story of Black oppression should be told. Since then, the film *42* considered the integration of major league baseball (reviewed in *PsycCRITIQUES*; Wall & Remondet Wall, 2013), and *Fruitvale Station* considered the racial profiling of African American young men.

Lee Daniels' The Butler is loosely based on the real-life story of Eugene Allen, a butler who served in the White House for 34 years and rose to the rank of majordomo. The film itself follows fictional character Cecil Gaines as his life progresses, from working on a southern

cotton plantation where he witnesses his father brutally murdered and his mother raped by a White man, through a successful career working in service in Washington, DC.

The Butler can be compared to *Forrest Gump* for its quality of portraying an individual who is a personal witness to history. In this case Gaines works at a career of quiet service while watching a host of presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan grapple with the issue of civil rights. His eldest son, meanwhile, takes a more active role in the civil rights movement, riding on a freedom bus, sitting at segregated lunch counters, and eventually joining the Black Panthers. This inevitably sets up intergenerational struggle about whether a more active or passive approach is correct in challenging prejudice toward African Americans in the United States. It's a poignant story, helped along by an ensemble cast that includes Forest Whitaker as Gaines, Oprah Winfrey as his wife, and characters played by Cuba Gooding Jr. and Lenny Kravitz.

The Butler is wise not to take itself too seriously. There's a guilty pleasure in watching a variety of actors play the U.S. presidents. Little effort is made to make Robin Williams look or sound like Eisenhower or John Cusack like Richard Nixon. As Alan Rickman takes a turn as Ronald Reagan we get more a sense of what a Severus Snape presidency might have been like than we do Reagan's actual presidency. The film has been criticized on this score, for alleged inaccuracies in portraying Reagan as unconcerned about apartheid in South Africa (e.g., Bond, 2013). Although these half-serious portrayals of the presidents are amusing, they may serve to undermine the sense of the story being one of the true nature of racial oppression in America.

Two other issues work against the film. First, it is not, in fact, an accurate portrayal of the life of the actual White House butler Eugene Allen. The movie plot is considerably dramatized. In my case, I admit I was initially unaware of how divergent the movie is from Allen's actual life. Some of the most powerful scenes of savagery toward African Americans in the movie lost some of their poignancy when I learned that they were fictionalized.

This is not to say that similar events did not really happen to real African Americans; of course they did. But it seems that in merging the inspiration of Allen with some shocking but fictional scenes of White cruelty, the movie settles into an underwhelming middle ground. Had the movie told the story of some *true* moments of White cruelty, or had the movie simply placed Allen (or his fictionalized counterpart of Cecil Gaines) in the context of the less physical but no less oppressive prejudice of American politics, the movie could have been that much more powerful. Nonetheless, early scenes of a Black man murdered openly by a White man with no consequence and of the savage treatment of African Americans (and one or two White supporters) at a segregated lunch counter are among the most powerful and uncomfortable in the movie. Even if they are fictionalized, one can't help but know that they are rooted in a truth of centuries of brutality inflicted by one group of citizens upon another.

Where the movie also stumbles is in the typical vein of most movies that consider racism in the United States. Ethnic hatred is portrayed as rooted in a blatantly ignorant and inhuman savagery. In the vicious Whites who attack Black youths sitting at a segregated lunch counter, we (and I speak for ethnic majority viewers once again) recognize nothing in ourselves. Living decades later, in a new generation that prides itself on ethnic and sexual egalitarianism, it's easy not to see ourselves in these caricatures. The Whites at the lunch counter are as far from ourselves as Leonardo DiCaprio's silkily evil slave owner in *Django*

Unchained. Sure, some racism takes the form of this blatant, Nazi-like oppression that is easy to loathe. But racial oppression and even current disparities in education and economic opportunities could not occur without the complicity of average people who either went along with racism or did nothing.

I suspect that this narrative of the “evil racist White” is a comfortable narrative in which we can consider our nation’s racist past without taking any responsibility for it. I have yet to see a movie that considers racism as a part of the human condition or looks at the horrible decisions or attitudes carried by people who were not monsters, who loved their children, who went to church or temple or mosque, who tried to be the best person they could and yet, for some reason, hated another group of people on the basis of nothing but the color of their skin or the house in which they prayed.

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