

Slanted Screen: Emasculation of the Asian Male In Film

By Sheila Hamanaka

East Asia Radio Collective

WBAI Womens Collective

Slanted Screen: Asian Men in Film and Television

Written and Directed by Jeff Adachi

RECOMMENDED: 4.5 fists (out of 5)

Anyone interested in their own consciousness and how it was formed should see Slanted Screen, Jeff Adachi's look back at Hollywood's attempt to emasculate what today amounts to two thirds of the world population. Or at least half of it.

Slanted

Screen, winner of the Best Short Documentary award at the NY International Independent Film & Video film festival, lives up to its double entendre name by taking us on a 60 minute time traveling trip, stopping to look at over 60 movies and tv shows that have shaped the American image of the Asian male since the era of the silent film. Many of these films are forgotten, and it's really important to see them as a foundation for newer forms of stereotyping that young people are still exposed to.

My

father is a retired Asian actor, and like many of the actors depicted and interviewed in Slanted Screen he had the fortune and misfortune of playing just about every Asian stereotype you can think of: houseboy, karate chopper, Japanese tourist, Eskimo, Japanese naval officer, even Chairman Mao! Several of the actors that writer/director/producer/(and San Francisco public defender) Jeff Adachi interviews were household names when we were growing up: Sessue Hayakawa, James Shigeta, Mako. Adachi also interviews actors Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Dustin Nguyen, Phillip Rhee, Will Yun Lee, Tzi Ma, Jason Scott Lee, comedian Bobby Lee, producer Terence Chang, ascerbic writer Frank Chin, and directors Gene Cajayon and Eric Byler.

In

the end, Ahachi's point is clear: it takes an entire industry from writer to producer to actor to distributor to audience to create, deconstruct, and recreate the Asian male. This is an inspiring message: we all have to pitch in. Our kids will thank us. The Slanted

Screen interviews an educator who points out the harmful effect of negative stereotyping on children. This is something I can attest to. Like many people of color, I grew up suffering from the effects of "internalized racial oppression." I wanted white features, and heroes to me were white males.

The cultural institutions of entertainment are themselves created and buffered by other institutions: education, labor, law, segregation in housing, the armed services, and on and on. It all adds up to "The System". If Adachi's film falls short, it is in not tying all the historical pieces together with history itself, except in the most general sense.

For example: whereas Adachi and his interviewees show us how Asians were disempowered by emasculating the male image, what's the dynamic with African Americans. Who have been distorted by the opposite stereotype: the hyper-sexualized male image.

Actually, in order to understand "disempowerment" in all its chameleon-like forms, one has to first understand "power." According to movement historian David Billings of The People's Institute, an anti-racist training organization, an interesting change took place in the social services in the 1970. There was a shift from looking at poverty, addictions, etc, as social ills as having social roots which must be addressed socially, to individual pathologies which had to be treated individually with counseling and drugs.

If Asians are disempowered by being de-sexualized, are African American males empowered by being hypersexualized? Of course not. Because sexual conquest has nothing to do with real power. Power is the ability to wage war, to invade another country, to form a union and win a decent wage, to cross a border when you want to, to provide for your family, to have and exercise freedom. The ability to have sex with white women, to kick a white actor's butt, to see a stereotypically handsome male on screen of your own color is NOT power.

While we might see Sidney Poitier coming home for dinner, we will not see the battalions of Black soldiers picking up arms against racist whites in the South during World War II. While we might see Bruce Lee flex his muscles we will not see the Viet Cong driving the US out of Vietnam. While we might see Antonio Banderas carve a Z with his rapier, we won't see Hugo Chavez slash a V for Venezuela into the chest of US hegemony in South and Central America.

Who are these racist movies for? They are not for people of color,

primarily. People of color have for the most part managed to have their own social institutions and art forms, which were largely ignored by the white public. These racist films are really designed to "empower" white people, by putting people of color in other, more "animalistic" groups that should be detested, pitied, gawked at, but not feared, because they are ultimately inferior.

I am no expert, but I'll wager that if you measured the testosterone level of white males after watching racist movies in which the villain was a male of color, it would be higher. In reality, the Black males hypersexualized by racist white culture have historically been, and continue to be, set upon and literally emasculated by white mobs who are protected by the racist system.

Racism = racial prejudice + power

Power, then, is not simply a feeling. I am not empowered because I feel powerful, or sexy.

Asians, Africans, Latino/Mejicanos/Chicanos, Arabs, and Indigenous males are all stereotyped with a slightly different twist. Each group has been subjected to racist genocide either here or abroad. What Hollywood and mainstream tv does is to lift everyone out of context and turn the world into one steamy, lurid sexualized soap opera with the white female the prize, the victim, the ideal image, the Helen for all wars foreign and domestic.

Do you think this is intentional? Is there a hidden motive? That is another movie.

Had Adachi dipped a little deeper into the cinematic pool he could have come up with exceptions to the rule. Such as the unforgettable Toshiro Mifune in many Kurosawa films, from The Seven Samurai to Yojimbo. Or Tatsuya Nakadai, who played a complex character in a real political setting in Masaki Kobayashi's must see but seldom seen trilogy, The Human Condition, a movie that showed me how Japanese fascism worked in its army.

In one scene the young Japanese protagonist, a pacifist/socialist who is disgusted with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, talks to an old Chinese revolutionary who tells him that no matter where he goes, he will always meet someone who is in the

struggle. This is a different kind of power than the fascist male stereotypes fed to the Japanese public, and helped turn it into a brutal killing machine.

We will meet these people who embody true power in films coming out of independent media, like Third World Newsreel or Paper Tiger TV. Or the other people's cinemas around the world.

Catch this movie!

Sheila Hamanaka

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Radioladies@juno.com

The website for Slanted Screen is: <http://www.slantedscreen.com>.

UPCOMING NY AREA SCREENINGS:

New York International Asian American Film Festival
The Slanted Screen plays at the New York
International Asian American Film Festival on Saturday, July 15, 2006, 3:30pm.
Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium, the Asian Society,
725 Park Avenue, New York City (at 70th Street)
For more information, visit www.asiancinevision.org

The Slanted Screen plays at the Long
Island International Film Festival on July 17, 2006, at 1:30pm at the
Bellmore Theater. For more information, visit www.longislandfilm.com.