

FROM ANIMATION TO REALITY

Race/Gender, the Myth of the American Dream and *Tom and Jerry* Cartoons

Aju Aravind[♦]

Abstract: The animated cartoon *Tom and Jerry* (*T&J*) is widely acclaimed as perhaps one of the most 'innocent' and 'pure' forms of entertainment. But they also infuse in the viewers a perception which underlines the concept of 'preferred reading,' to propagate the ideologies of 'producers and transmitters of the text' which was essentially racial and gendered. This paper examines the animated cartoon *T&J* as a cultural-political and historical phenomenon and analyzes how they manipulate identities and images of the black female to construct a potent ideology that sustains the material and cultural interests of its creators.

Keywords: Afro-Americans, Cartoons, Gender, Ideology, Mammy Two Shoes, Popular Culture, Race, *Tom and Jerry*.

1. Introduction

Comics and animated cartoons are perhaps the "greatest leisure entrepreneur of the twentieth century."¹ *Tom and Jerry* enjoys a unique position in the genre. Comics and animated cartoons have come to occupy a significant part in the daily lives and have transformed themselves as an integral part of the mass entertainment and mass media. But at the same time they are political, and have also been severely criticised for their complacent and insensitive attitude to the portrayal of social stereotypes, stock characters, racial minorities, and women. Mostly they are also tools

[♦]**Dr Aju Aravind** is Assistant Professor at Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad. His areas of interest are Films, Popular Culture and Literary Theory.

¹Chris Rojek, "Disney Culture," *Leisure Studies* 12, (August 2007), 121-135,121.

for the propagation and re-entrenchment of the dominant ideology, and these values are invariably related to the dominant classes.

Only recently have attempts been made to analyse comics and animated cartoons on their own terms by measuring their worth against their own development standards and aesthetic principles rather than by the irrelevant yardsticks of other related arts. But at the same time it is surprising that the socio-political, historical and ideological role of cartoons like *Tom and Jerry*, perhaps the most famous of all animated cartoons, has not been clearly analysed.

This paper discusses 67 episodes of the animated cartoon *Tom and Jerry* (*T&J* from now) produced between 1940 to 1952, as a cultural, political and historical phenomenon, and analyses how it manipulates gender identities and images to construct a potent ideology that sustains the material and cultural interests of its creators. This paper also looks into the hegemonic relations between African Americans and the dominant white society as depicted in the popular animated cartoon *T&J*.

2. *Tom and Jerry*: An Overview

Tom and Jerry series was started in 1940 by William Denby Hanna (1910-2001) – a structural engineer of Italian Origin, who was forced out of academics at the beginning of the great Depression of the 1930s – and Joseph Roland Barbera (1911-2006) – a banker. Producer Fred Quimby (1886-1965), at M.G.M. paired William Hanna the story man and character designer with the experienced director Joseph Barbera to produce the most cherished of all animated cartoon *T&J*.

Puss Gets The Boot (1940) was the first *T&J* cartoon to roll out of M.G.M. studio. It depicted an unnamed mouse being tormented by a cat. After the success of *Puss Gets The Boot*, the Hanna-Barbera team produced one hundred and fourteen *T&J* episodes between 1940 and 1957. In 1960, M.G.M. outsourced the production of *T&J* to Rembrandt Films in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The Czech director Gene Ditch and producer William L. Snyder created thirteen *T&J* episodes. Three years later in 1963, the production of *T&J* returned to Hollywood. This time M.G.M. turned to Chuck Jones and Goldman who produced thirty-four episodes of *T&J*. But their

animations never matched the popularity of the Hanna and Barbera originals of the 1940s and 1950s heyday.

3. Race/Gender and the Myth of the American Dream

No serious discussion on ideology and culture in the United States is complete without a reference to the issue of gender and race. Indeed, gender and race have always defined the contours of American culture – in language, music, literature, politics, humor, and other aspects of social life, as Irish, Italian, Polish, and other immigrants from Europe have faced instances of discrimination, harassment and abuse, beginning with the genocide against native Americans. American cultural history has been filled with consistent and pervasive discriminatory practices against the Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Mexican, Arab and other people of colour. However the most distinctive feature of race relations in the United States has been and still remains the division between blacks and whites.²

Throughout American history there has been a debate that still continues, over the definition, meaning and importance of race, nationality, and ethnicity, especially in terms of the blacks and the whites. Many scholars have attempted to give scientific reasons for racial discrimination. Gunnar Myrdal in his book *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* holds that "all scientific explanation of why [blacks] are what they are and why they live as they do have regularly led to determinants on the white side of the line."³ In practice, race is almost singularly and intensely ideological, and its meaning has always been articulated through social customs and practices. Racial images in culture, especially in literature, theatre, and mass entertainment, necessarily have included a racialized language. It has also come to regulate hierarchical positions, economic opportunities, and social standards and relations of the subaltern groups. Socio-linguists have verified and asserted that the dominant social group influences public discourse by encoding social hierarchies of race,

²Lee Artz, and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000, 71.

³Cited in Artz and Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony*, 72.

gender, and class into the language. Ironically, the language and lyric of 'gangsta' rap, the language used by Black characters like Mammy, reinforces stereotypical depictions of black as a dangerous, violent and anti-social community. But the most defining characteristic of race in the United States has been the colour of the skin. American culture has long been obsessed with the question of the colour of skin. The derogatory slang terms for black and white reveals the starkly racial bias of the language as well. Simon Podair says:

Language as a potent force in our society goes beyond a merely communicative device. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts but it may actually shape them. Often the process is completely unconscious . . . so powerful is the role of language in its imprint on the human mind that even the minority group may begin to accept the very expressions that aid in its stereotyping.⁴

The use of racially coded language helps the dominant hegemonic institutions to legitimately mete out coercion against specific subordinate groups and women. As an extension of this, criminality has been cast as an expression of black culture. It has helped to construct a racial discourse and language around drugs, violence, and crime, and develop new definitions of the 'black problem,' which the study does not try to analyze in detail. The idea that black crime is expressive of black ethnicity also helps mobilize popular support for the dominant group.

4. Dialectical Exchange: Black in Popular Culture

Defined by colour or otherwise, gender has always been and remains a crucial cite of social and cultural struggle in the United States. It also continues to communicate across social and cultural boundaries. Prior struggles and their outcomes, and the changes in the social and cultural structure of the contemporary American society have made racial relations more contradictory than ever before. However, an examination of the question of gender in America through the lens of ideological discourses, especially in

⁴Cited in H. A. Bosmajian, *The Language of Oppression*, Lanham: Maryland UP, 1983, 47.

popular culture, will help to unravel the chronic social conflict and the myth of the American Dream. The dominant group continually negotiates its relationship with subordinate groups through its economic and political control over the instruments of production. The hegemonic relations of the dominant group filter through the cultural practices and economic and political structure into a seemingly acceptable code.

The debate in popular culture comes into existence through the dialectical exchange between the dominant and subordinate cultures or groups. Politically speaking, the contradictions caused by the racial practices within the subordinate groups provide an opening for a new historical bloc to challenge the dominant capitalist group. A thorough study into the differentiation within the subordinate or subcultural group would state more precisely the conditions under which the subordinate or subcultural groups emerge or fail to emerge, and would state operations for predicting the content of a dialectical solution.⁵ But such a task is beyond the scope of this paper, and this question awaits a great deal of hard thinking and research. Historically, the dominant cultures or groups have attempted to dismantle and replace the cultures and practices of the subordinate group. In the course of time, however, the opposition between the dominant and subordinate cultures turned into dialogue with the dominant culture re-appropriating the subordinate culture through hybrid practices and consolidation of their position in all spheres of activity.

Popular culture continues its dialogue with the subordinate cultures. To accord popular culture its rightful place in history is to see how popular culture expresses the way subordinates live and think while simultaneously promoting the interests of the dominant culture. Popular culture is the crucial site where dominant class forces construct cultural hegemony. They lead the subordinate groups, including African Americans, towards relations and practices based on racial inequality. Economically

⁵Albert K. Cohen, "A General Theory of Subcultures," *The Subcultures Reader*, eds., Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, London: Routledge, 1997, 44- 54, 54.

and politically, the dominant groups have always used cultural creations that promote and practice relations and ideologies conducive for the maintenance of the cultural hegemony of the dominant group. Thus, economic institutions strive to produce images and coordinate practices that support the status quo and appeal to blacks and other subordinate cultures. This summarises the ongoing debate around the site of cultural production.

Understanding popular culture in this way challenges the traditional constructions of cultural history. Popular culture and popular cultural artifacts including comics and animated cartoons like *Tom and Jerry* have been usually seen as the opposite of legitimate or "highbrow culture."⁶ The dominant cultural group disagrees to acknowledge it as the integration of cultural practices by competing social groups. This is evident from the great deal of self-destructive, masochistic hostility that has been spun around the black characters and/or the myth of stereotype characters like 'Mammy' invented by the American historians. The deviance of the black woman as the slave, her physical strength, her sexual promiscuity, her propensity for dominance in the household, and her emotional callousness toward her children and her mate have become the "linchpin of theories of black inferiority"⁷ first in the historical accounts of white and black historians, and then in sociological accounts.

Not only did sociological accounts become social policy in the form of the Moynihan Report,⁸ but when we specifically turn to 'Mammy,' the most prominent and long lasting of 'disfigured images' of the black female, we begin to see how social policy and

⁶Eric Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, Oxford: Roundhouse Publishing, 1993, 129.

⁷Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, New York: Dial, 1979, 263.

⁸Daniel Patrick (Pat) Moynihan chaired the Commission deputed to inquire into the uses of government secrecy in the post-cold war era. The Committee studied and made recommendations on the 'culture of secrecy' that pervaded the United States government and its intelligence community for 80 years. The Committee's findings and recommendations were presented to the US President in 1997.

analysis converge with popular cultural production. Examples range from the 1915 controversial film *Birth of a Nation*⁹ to *Gone with the Wind*¹⁰ produced in 1939, from cartoons like *T&J* to the 1959 play *Raisin in the Sun*.¹¹ Even in the animated cartoon *T&J* the myth of the black woman – the 'Mammy' – configures and delimits the participation of the black female.

5. From Animation to Reality: Mammy Two Shoes

Mammy Two Shoes (figure 1) is a heavy-set, middle-aged, black woman who often has to deal with the mayhem generated by the lead characters, Tom and Jerry. As a partially-seen character, she was famous for never showing her head although her face is briefly visible in the *T&J* episodes *Saturday Evening Puss* (1950), *Mouse Cleaning* (1948), and *Part Time Pal* (1947). Mammy's appearances have often been edited out, dubbed, or re-animated as a slim white woman in later *T&J* cartoons. Since the character of Mammy is an archetype and is now often regarded racist, her appearance and language is usually edited out in many countries when shown on television, mostly due to racial sensitivity. Hanna and Barbera were greatly inspired by the African-American actress and singer Hattie McDaniel, best known for playing 'Mammy' in

⁹Set during and after the American Civil War, *The Birth of a Nation* was released on February 8, 1915. It is important in film history for its innovative technical achievements and also for its controversial promotion of white supremacies and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. The film is based on Thomas Dixon's novel and play *The Clansman*.

¹⁰*Gone with the Wind* is a 1936 American novel by Margaret Mitchell set in the Old South during the American Civil War and Reconstruction. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1937 and was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film of the same name in 1939. Over the years, the novel has also been analyzed for its symbolism and mythological treatment of archetypes.

¹¹*A Raisin in the Sun* is a play (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry based upon a family's own experiences growing up in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, as well as the first play directed by an African American (Lloyd Richards) on Broadway.

MGM's 1939 film *Cone with the Wind*, to create a 'Mammy' for the cat and the mouse duo.



Figure 1: Mammy Two Shoes

On the other hand, there are scholars who hold fast to the belief that the character of 'Mammy' is not just a myth. Or rather the power of her mythology is that she is at the same time both real and unreal. There is no question that there has been and there continues to be a strong black woman who provides profoundly crucial services to the black community and the black family.¹² There can be little question that she has also provided myriad essential services to the white community.

The *T&J* episode *Saturday Evening Puss* takes place in the duo's house one evening when Mammy Two Shoes goes out for the night. This episode is noteworthy as it is the first instance where the extent of racial stereotypical depiction of the black character 'Mammy' in this so-called innocent animated cartoon, considered by many as meant only for 'pure' entertainment, comes to light. As Mammy leaves for a party, Tom invites his feline friends Butch, a little brown kitten, and an orange cat named Meathead who emerges from garbage bins outside of the house. They rush in when Tom gives them the all-clear signal by showing them a sign

¹²Jean Peneff, "Myths in Life Stories," *The Myths We Live By*, eds., Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, London: Routledge, 1990, 36-48, 41.

written "O.K. for the party" (*Saturday Evening Puss*). The feline quartets have a ball in Mammy's absence, playing loud jazz music. This disturbs Jerry who is trying to sleep in his mouse hole. His complaints to Tom but with no success; instead, Jerry is assaulted by the four cats. The mouse tries to disrupt the proceedings by removing the phonograph recorder. When every attempt fails, Jerry telephones Mammy to report Tom's activities. She abruptly departs from bridge club to return home (Figure 2), actually crashing through the wall in anger, and evicting the feline partiers who are thrown out into the street. Mammy then decides to relax herself by playing the same recording of the jazz that the cats were playing, leaving Jerry no better off than before.



Figure 2: Mammy running from party

In this episode, Mammy's face can be briefly seen when she runs home to crash Tom's party. The figure above clearly indicates the extent of racial stereotypical depiction of Mammy. This heavily criticised cartoon exists in several forms. In the original cartoon the black Mammy is voiced by Lillian Randolph. In the 1960s Chuck Jones' and his team reanimated this cartoon, in which Mammy has been completely removed and replaced with a thin white lady (Figure 3). These versions used rotoscoping techniques to replace Mammy on-screen with a thin white woman. The voice on the soundtracks was replaced with an Irish-accented voice performed by the white actress June Foray. In some telecasts, this white-lady retains the voice of Lillian Randolph. It appears that the white lady

speaks in a black Southern accent. In some other versions the white lady is also shown dancing with a young man, making her dialogue at the 'bridge club' surreal at best, adding a Jones touch to the cartoon. In the re-animated version Jerry's stereotypical African line "Heeeyyy! Stop! ... wanna get my beauty sleep and you guys ... bah bah bah bah!" has been muted (*Saturday Evening Puss*). Usually in the re-animated version Jerry is seen yelling silently. But neither Tom nor the viewers are able to hear what Jerry says.



Figure 3: The White Mammy

"Mammy Two Shoes" first appeared in *Puss Gets the Boot*, the first *T&J* cartoon, and continued to make many appearances until the 1952 episode *Push-Button Kitty*. After the First World War women became involved in the traditional male spheres and made significant contributions. They entered the workforce in great numbers. But it was the Second World War that laid the groundwork for modern feminism.¹³ This was also the time when women characters began to appear in large numbers in comics and cartoons too. Strong women were necessary to preserve the dominant interest and workforce during the 1930s and 1940s. The tenets of the American Dream – work hard, play fair, be rewarded¹⁴ – had no meaning and existence for most of the black Americans. The overwhelming majority of blacks continued to be concentrated in low-skill and low-paid jobs. It should come as no

¹³Artz and Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony*, 69.

¹⁴Artz and Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony*, 91.

surprise if the image of the strong black woman who dominated the popular cultural artifacts of the period is a stereotypical depiction of what was real.

The civil rights movements made it clear that the old stereotypes were no longer acceptable. The depiction of black characters began to be questioned with greater intensity. As a result stereotypes of black characters like the 'Mammy' and the black gatekeeper or the housemaid began to disappear during the period of increased racial conflict in the United States. This was primarily due to the reaction of the key gatekeepers, the predominantly white publishers. As Victoria Alexander in his *Sociology of the Arts* suggests ". . . the publishers avoided portraying blacks as a strategy to avoid *troublesome issues and groups* in essence to avoid conflict."¹⁵

The producers and transmitters of cultural hegemony have produced and distributed cultural artifacts that meet the interests of the dominant group by incorporating acceptable images from black culture. Nevertheless, for the mainstream films and cartoons the black characters were essentially the same stereotypes that dominated literature and culture a century ago. Films, comics, and cartoons have questionably used black images to provide a clear illustration of their hegemonic control. It also sheds some light on how blacks are "recruited to American cultural hegemony through the reworking of the images they create or identify . . . into mediated images that simultaneously accept subordinate values,"¹⁶ thus reinforcing the interests of the dominant group.

By the end of the Second World War blacks moved into mainstream American life. Black workers had become an essential part of industrial production. They had established stable working class black neighbourhoods throughout the length and breadth of America. The black median income almost doubled in the 1940s and 1950s. As postwar prosperity erased fears that black gains would threaten white affluence and security the blacks began to be accepted as elements of the mainstream culture and gained

¹⁵Victoria D. Alexander, *Sociology of the Arts: Exploring Fine and Popular Forms*, Malden: Blackwell, 2003, 45. (emphasis added)

¹⁶Artz and Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony*, 99.

recognition and acceptance. Jackie Robinson, the first black in major league baseball, won rookie of the year honours in 1947. In 1948, Harry Truman was elected president with a civil rights plank and 2 million black votes. The U.S. armed forces were desegregated in 1950 and United Nation's diplomat Ralph Bunche won the Nobel Peace Prize. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) lawsuit against segregation led to a 1954 Supreme Court ruling that 'separate but equal' had no place in America's schools. The American Dream seemed a little less of a fantasy.

From a hegemonic perspective, popular cultural artifacts have always struggled to depict distorted images from black culture to solidify subordinate consent to maintain the status quo. As a consequence of the various civil and political movements, the caricatures of the black in popular culture are beginning to be redefined and questioned. In the 1954 episode *Pet Peeve* of *T&J*, a young white, middle-class couple replaced Mammy as the owner of the house. One of the reasons listed above could be responsible for this dramatic change. From the 1955 episode, *The Flying Sorceress*, onwards the viewers were able to see the heads of the owner(s) of the cat and the mouse. In the mid-1990s, the cartoons featuring Mammy were edited to replace Lillian Randolph's voice with that of a new actress. The dialogue was redubbed to remove the Mammy character's use of potentially offensive dialect. In *T&J Tales*, Mammy appears in the short *Ho, Ho, Horror* as a buxom white woman and is called 'Mrs. Two-Shoes.' Several photos on a mantle also imply she has a family, a man and a boy, but only their legs and partial torsos are shown (Figure 3).

It appears that the face of Mammy Two Shoes was deliberately hidden as the viewers could see only the lower half of her body. The black maid's chin appeared once, as an exception, in *Part Time Pal* (1947), and the last shot of the episode showed Mammy Two Shoes in the distance pursuing Tom. However, the viewers are unable to see her features clearly. In addition, in this shot Mammy is seen wearing a 'bandana,' typical of black female cartoon characters of the 1930's and 1940's. For a brief second, the back of Mammy's head is visible when she 'peeks in on dem two cats',

before getting her butt slapped with a frying pan and shovel by Tom and Butch in *A Mouse in the House* (1947). Her complete body hidden in the shadow is also seen in this episode. In *Mouse Cleaning* (1948) she is shown wearing a hat with a flower on it. However, even this time her face is not revealed. The curiosity was satiated in the episode *Saturday Evening Puss* (1950) where her whole body, including her face, was shown. Fred Quimby once explained this in an article published in a 1951 edition of "The Hollywood Reporter:"

A young lady, after seeing a Tom and Jerry cartoon, inquired about the maid's face, which is never shown. To quote her (and we have it in writing lest there be any doubters among you): It gave me the impression that the operators in the booth must be having some sort of party, since every time the maid came on the screen, the only thing I could see was her feet. My curiosity is killing me. Before I go stark, raving mad, please tell me what she looks like.¹⁷

And Quimby on one occasion explained that:

[He] had an artist draw a special head of the maid to accompany the reply . . . [and] also explained that since Tom and Jerry were the stars of the pictures, we did not wish to do anything that might distract attention from them.¹⁸

The speculation regarding the actual owners of the house were laid to rest with the episode *Happy Go Ducky* (1958) where the towels in the bathroom is monogrammed with T and another with a J, implying that Tom and Jerry are the actual owners of the house.

By the early 1950's, "Mammy Two Shoes" was a supporting character just as important as Spike or Nibbles. However, by this time the stereotypical representation of black characters in Hollywood movies and cartoons were being questioned with greater intensity. This culminated with the directive of the Supreme Court of the United States in 1954 that declared racism as unconstitutional. This directive of the Supreme Court had a far-

¹⁷*Hollywood Reporter*, "Judge Orders Illinois Publisher to Stop Selling Comic," (20 Nov. 1992), 17.

¹⁸*Hollywood Reporter*, 17.

reaching impact on Hollywood movies and cartoons. The creators of *T&J* however did not wait for the Supreme Court directive, and they forced Mammy to retire in 1952 as of stereotypical depiction of blacks began to be questioned. *Push-Button Kitty* (1952) was the last episode to feature Mammy. The new law pressured MGM to reissue the cartoons with Mammy in them. Cartoons with "White Mammy Two-Shoes" or "Mrs. Two Shoe" were created by Chuck Jones in the 1960s for CBS. The soundtracks given by the actress June Foray were incidentally supposed to be Irish.

Turner Broadcasting System Inc. recently acquired some redubbed prints and re-edited some of the controversial *T&J* cartoons. This was particularly done to avoid racial prejudices. Moreover, in some cases, instead of a white woman providing the voice, they had another black woman provide a less stereotypical voice. Recently there have been dubbed prints aired on Cartoon Network. The following are the dubbed episodes of *T&J* that have been aired recently: *Puss Gets the Boot* (1940), *The Midnight Snack* (1941), *Dog Trouble* (1942), *Puss N' Toots* (1942), *The Lonesome Mouse* (1943), *Old Rockin' Chair Tom* (1948), *Mouse Cleaning* (1948), *Polka Dot Puss* (1949), *Saturday Evening Puss* (1950), *The Framed Cat* (1950), and *Triplet Trouble* (1952). Dubbed versions of other cartoons, including *Part Time Pal* (1947) and *A Mouse in the House* (1947), have been telecast a few years after Cartoon Network started. Some channels telecast undubbed and unedited version of *Fraidy Cat* (1942), *The Mouse Comes to Dinner* (1945), *Part Time Pal* (1947), *Polka-Dot Puss* (1949), *The Little Orphan* (1949), *Saturday Evening Puss* (1950), *Casanova Cat* (1951), *Sleepy-Time Tom* (1951), *Nit-witty Kitty* (1951), and *Push-Button Kitty* (1952).

The abundant and elaborate mythology that has been assigned to Blacks or African American women has been characterized by many authors and activists as 'malicious.' "Black women have been molested and abused; they have suffered economic exploitations; they have been forced to serve as maid and wet nurse to white families."¹⁹ There are historical and cultural accounts that suggest

¹⁹Lisa E. Farrington, "Faith Ringgold's Slave Rape Series," *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed., *Journal of Dharma* 41, 1 (January-March 2016)

that these women have been socially manipulated, physically raped, and used to undermine their own households in the service of the white. For the African American women racism and sexism have worked together to create "a hell of a history to live down," and the false paradigm that portray black women as both "physically unattractive and sexually promiscuous, passive and aggressive good caregivers to white children and bad mothers to their own children" have now often been challenged.²⁰

6. The Blackface Gag in *Tom and Jerry*

The notion of the American Way of Life and American Dream that held out reward for superiority and tempted its residents with an initially salubrious America was also the land of ill-fated fortune for many especially the blacks. The various historical, cultural, and political challenges and the efficacious dominant group laid before them the hypothesis of the myth of the self-made people and the American way of life. The conceptualisation of equality, in both America and the comics, echoed the formulation of the previous century. The increasing role of the labour and civil rights movements in the post-war era soured a transition that involved a modified notion of equality.

It thoroughly advertised America as a middle-class society, of which the blacks were now a part. Of the various mass media, comics and animated cartoons are perhaps the most appropriate source for the exploration of the American legitimating apparatus. However, the modified notions of equality were peculiarly absent from the American cultural products of the time, as suggested by the depiction of blackface gags in comics and animated cartoons.

Blackface was a style of theatrical makeup that originated in the United States and was used to affect the countenance of an iconic, racist American archetype. It has an important tradition in the American popular cultural artifacts for over hundred years. Stereotypes embodied in the stock characters of blackface have played a significant role in cementing and proliferating racist

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002, 128-152, 132.

²⁰Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, 135.

images, attitudes and perceptions of the blacks worldwide. In some quarters, the caricatures and cartoons that were the legacy of blackface persist to the present day and are a cause of ongoing controversy.

Between 1928 and 1950, America's premier animators from the Walt Disney Corporation, Warner Bros., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Merrie Melodies and others, painstakingly assembled brilliant and offensive animated vignettes requiring no undue stretches of the imagination to predict their immediate victims.

Like a number of other animated cartoons in the 1940s and 1950s *T&J* was politically and culturally challenged in later years for racial depictions. For instance, in a cartoon like *The Truce Hurts* (1948), the scene that shows Tom, Jerry, and Spike in blackface after the meat truck splashes mud on them is deleted in some later cartoon versions (Figure 4). In *Mouse Cleaning* (1948), the final scene where Tom speaks stereotypically in blackface is usually edited and the cartoon ends just after the coal is dumped into the living room. In other versions of the same cartoon the voice of Mammy has been dubbed to make it less offensive. In the episode *Safety Second* (1950) the scene showing Jerry in blackface and a flower around his face is also edited. The scenes showing characters in blackface with a sunflower around their face was common amongst the animators of the day. Other episodes including *Casanova Cat* (1951), and *Life with Tom* (1953) also use the blackface gags. However, the blackface gag is still retained in the episode *The Yankee Doodle Mouse* (1943). The CBS cleaned up the blackface scene in *The Little Orphan* (1949) by editing Tom's Indian headdress that was burnt in the original version.

By the middle of the twentieth century, changing attitudes about race and racism effectively ended the prominence of blackface performance in the United States as elsewhere to a great extent. However, it still persists as a theatrical device in comics and animated cartoons, and is more commonly used today as an edgy social commentary or satire. Perhaps the most enduring effect of blackface is the precedent it established in the introduction of African American culture, albeit through a distorted lens. The use of blackface in comics and animated cartoons as a groundbreaking

appropriation, exploitation, and assimilation of African-American culture as well as the inter-ethnic artistic collaborations that stemmed from it was but a prologue to the lucrative packaging, marketing, and dissemination of African-American cultural expression and its myriad derivative forms in today's world popular culture.



Figure 4: Blackface gag in *T&J*

In 2006 the Boomerang channel edited *Tom and Jerry* cartoons with smoking scenes. This followed a complaint from a viewer that the cartoons were not appropriate for younger viewers, and a subsequent investigation by U. K. media watchdog *Ofcom*. It has also taken the U. S. approach by editing out blackface gags, though this seems to be random as not all scenes of this type are edited. It is interesting to note that the episode *His Mouse Friday*, is often banned from television as the cannibals are seen as elements of racist stereotypes. If shown, the cannibals' dialogue is edited out, although their mouths can be seen moving.

Blackface gags also contained buffoonery and comedy, by way of self-parody. The darky icon itself – googly eyed, with inky skin, exaggerated white, pink or red lips; and bright, white teeth – became a common motif first in the United States and then in the worldwide entertainment industry.

Unlike in the United States, in Europe and Asia, scant resident populations of black African descent posed little challenge to the racist attitudes of the day. As a result, blackface and darky iconography and the stereotypes perpetuated and find places in

their living and drawing rooms with little or no notable objection. Consequently, sensibilities regarding them often have been very different from those in America. Internationally, darky icons proliferated far beyond the minstrel stage, and for many non-blacks became reified in the human beings they caricatured. The grinning, pop-eyed distortions acquired a life of their own.

Cartoons produced in the United States from the 1930s and 1940s often featured characters in blackface gags as well as other racial and ethnic caricatures. Blackface was one of the influences in the development of characters like Mickey Mouse. This changed by the 1950s, for the NAACP had begun calling attention to such portrayals of African Americans and mounted a campaign to put an end to blackface performances and depictions. For decades, darky images had been seen in the branding of everyday products and commodities such as *Picaninny Freeze*, the Coon Chicken Inn restaurant chain and the like. With the eventual successes of the modern day Civil right Movement, such blatantly racist branding practices ended in the United States, and blackface became an American taboo. Animated features with even the slightest reference to alcohol (including rum cake), adultery, breasts, chewing tobacco, cross-dressing, gambling, marijuana, pornography, profanity, "rim jobs" that is, dogs licking each other, vaguely sexual or flirtatious situations, recreational sex toys as seen in *T&J* where Tom sticks a vacuum cleaner behind Mammy's Skirt producing giggles were removed while shown on television. In the UK the Boomerang channel edited out the cigar smoking scenes in the *T&J* episodes *Tennis Chumps* (1949) and *Texas Mouse* (1950).

Darky iconography, while generally considered taboo in the United States, still persists around the world. When trade and tourism produce a confluence of cultures, bringing differing sensibilities regarding blackface into contact with one another, the results can be jarring. There are black face performance traditions, the origins of which stem not from representation of racial stereotype. These stereotypical depictions raise questions about the institution and site of their production. "The politics of pictures

occurs in least public, least political places,"²¹ and the public domain here is the space inside the picture frame. These pictures are political when they enter the political domain where they are caught up in the myriad of power struggles, by means of which people sort themselves into different communities with allegiance to different ideologies. It is founded on the oppositions of 'civilised people' and 'nations' against the 'aboriginals.'

7. Conclusion

Though infinitely varied in detail the conceptual centre of a story/plot, usually, revolves around a set of binary oppositions in which "the good qualities are ascribed to the hero on the one hand and evil qualities to his wild opponent on the other" and in the case of western cartoons like *T&J* the black woman was also associated with evil.²² The white hero is often described as a gentleman who is sober, neat, rational, honest, and law-abiding, whereas, the villain is a pirate, who is dirty, drunkard, irrational, deceitful and is a criminal. This dualism or binarism works best in films, comics, and animated cartoons emphasising the necessity to foster a language to assert the political visibility of women.²³ They usually attribute the villainous characteristics to the black characters, even as the white characters remain the embodiment of rationality. For example, the black coloured alley cat in *T&J* is shown in some episodes attempting to kiss the white cat against her wish. The action of the black cat sometimes amounts to sexual harassment. The depiction of "sexual harassment and rape are not accidental to the gender relations within a sexist order"²⁴ but are part of a larger conspiracy that aims to show the blacks as utterly disenfranchised. The burned hair, the mad scientist, and characters in blackface are

²¹John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media*, London: Routledge, 1992, 33.

²²Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, London: Routledge, 1997, 17.

²³Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 1.

²⁴bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, New York: Routledge, 1994, 109.

"prototypes of shared cultural meanings"²⁵ that hinge on lacunae and the strategic abridgement of historical and mythical narratives in order to produce a particular ideological reading.

The process of representing the other entails the "dialectic of representational inclusions and exclusions"²⁶ by attributing a segment of the population, including women, with certain characteristics in order to categorize and differentiate it as the other. By defining Africans and other subaltern groups as 'blacks' and 'savages,' the Americans and Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries excluded the 'other' from their world, thus representing themselves as 'white' and 'civilized.' Moreover, by using the discourse of race and gender to exclude and inferiorise the other, the producers and manufacturers of the texts invert meanings to include and superiorise themselves.

By attributing a particular segment of the population and women with certain characteristics in order to categorize them as the other, the signifiers or the dominant group establish the criteria by which they themselves are represented. In the act of defining African Americans and other people of colour as blacks and savages, the dominant groups exclude them from their world. The development of dualism has been a historical process that is open to question. However, it does not fall within the purview of the present study.

It is important to recognize the binarism that is forcefully at work in comics and cartoons. An aid to recognize this binarism is to look at the black version of the story to find traces of the white. The dialectical discourse also centres around the creators and producers of the text and its receptors. The producers of the text are usually the dominant class who own and operate the systems of production. The receptors include those segments of society who are reduced to the position of receptors because of their structural inequality in the hierarchical strata of the society. These discourses

²⁵Tessa Perkins, "Rethinking Stereotypes" *The Media Studies Reader*, eds., Tim O'Sullivan and Yvonne Jewkes, London: Arnold, 1997, 75-85, 78.

²⁶Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, London: Routledge, 2001, 2.

also raise questions about the institutional site of production of these popular cultural artifacts which is usually the United States, yet again pointing fingers at its role in the 'culture industry' and its aims in articulating the ideologies of its producers and transmitters.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that popular culture is akin to a factory producing standardised cultural goods to manipulate the masses into passivity or the condition of mere receptors which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women.²⁷ It may cultivate false needs, that is, needs created and satisfied by the capitalists for the promotion and satisfaction of their own needs often making representation of the 'other' political. But the true needs, in contrast, are freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness. The producers of these cultural artifacts subtly argue that the problem with capitalism is that it blurred the line between false and true needs altogether. Adorno and Horkheimer were influenced by the 'dialectical materialism' and 'historical materialism'²⁸ of Karl Marx as well as the revisitation of the 'dialectical idealism' of Hegel.

They theorized that the phenomenon of mass culture has a political implication, namely that all the many forms of popular culture are part of a single culture industry whose purpose is to ensure the continued obedience of the masses to market interests often through the contingent and retractable operation of choice. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* they postulated a modern form of "bread and circuses"²⁹ – the method used by the rulers of Ancient Rome to maintain their power and control over the people by judicial notions of power to regulate political life. This new "iron system"³⁰ helped to fill the leisure time with amusements to distract the consumers/viewers from the boredom of their increasingly automated work often exploiting the images of the

²⁷Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990, 1.

²⁸Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, London: Verso, 1997.

²⁹Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 65.

³⁰Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 6, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.

blacks and women. The consumers/viewers were never left alone long enough to recognise the reality of their exploitation by the agents of capitalism, and to consider resisting the economic and social system. This pessimistic view of prevailing culture as an anti-enlightenment opiate for the masses draws strongly on Marxism for its condemnation of what is characterised as being continuing capitalist oppression.

Western culture uses the modern view of mass culture as a single marketplace in which the best or most popular works succeed. This recognises that the consolidation of media companies has centralised power in the hands of the few remaining multinational corporations now controlling production and distribution. The theory proposes that culture not only mirrors society, but also takes an important role in shaping society through the processes of 'standardisation and commodification' creating objects rather than subjects. The culture industry claims to serve the consumers' needs for entertainment, but conceals the way that it standardises these needs behind the mouse's glove, manipulating the consumers to accept what it produces. As a result mass production nourishes a mass market that minimises the identity and tastes of the individual consumers who are as interchangeable as the products they consume.

Adorno claimed that enlightenment would bring pluralism and demystification. The rationale of the theory is to promote the emancipation of the consumer from the tyranny of the producers by inducing the consumer to question beliefs and ideologies. Unfortunately, society is said to have suffered another fall, corrupted by capitalist industry with exploitative motives.

The discussion of discourse and representation in this paper has been detached to a large extent, although not completely, from the political and economic context of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Consequently, the nature, determinants and consequences of the American representation of the other have not been discussed explicitly. The intention and result of this paper has been descriptive.