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Mark Holcomb

To Kill a Mockingbird



*The movie myth about the wise lawyer
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of the color of his client's skin . . .*

By now, the iconic status of Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is as entrenched in popular culture as its story line is ingrained in the popular imagination. A few fans may compare it unfavorably with Harper Lee's more sharply observed 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning source novel, but for most people the film is the more resonant work—inaugurating the movie myth about the wise lawyer who defends an innocent man knowing he'll lose the case because of the color of his client's skin. According to Gregory Peck, the star of *Mockingbird*, F. Lee Bailey once confided to him that he became a lawyer "because of Atticus Finch,"¹ and Peck himself went on to say of the role, "It was like climbing into a favorite suit of clothes. . . . I knew all about that man, those children and that small-town background." Another high-profile fan, director and screenwriter Cameron Crowe, became a virtual one-man cheering section for *Mockingbird* during the publicity blitz for *Almost Famous*; in addition to mentioning it in seemingly every interview he gave, he created opening titles for *Almost Famous* that pay homage to the celebrated title sequence in Mulligan's 1962 film, while its central, adolescent character is at one point urged to grow up to be "like Atticus Finch." Crowe also placed *Mockingbird* at number five on his list of "a dozen movie musts" and called it his "first favorite film."² In another movie list, the American Film Institute ranked *Mockingbird* 34th in its roster of the "100 best American films of all time" in 1998.

Worlds beyond the movie industry have also taken the film to heart: some law schools have structured whole ethics courses around the fictional Atticus, and Notre Dame Law School's Thomas Shaffer even wrote a 1981 law review article entitled "The Moral Theology of Atticus Finch." In a 1998 television interview on ABC's "20/20," independent counsel Kenneth Starr told Diane Sawyer, "I love the model of Atticus Finch of doing what he thought was right when everybody was saying, 'Why are you doing this? This is a terrible

thing.' There is truth, and the truth demands respect."³ (This was at the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio, so Starr was either conveniently overlooking the outcome of *Mockingbird*'s case or flagrantly hedging his bets.) Perhaps writer Albert Murray—who, ironically enough, was honored as Alabama's most distinguished writer with the first-ever Harper Lee Award in 1998—put commentary on the film into its proper perspective when he graciously, ambiguously, referred to *Mockingbird* as a "Sunday school lesson."⁴

It has of course become more than that, and yet—accolades and misty-eyed, well-meaning hyperbole aside—*To Kill a Mockingbird* is actually not, in purely technical terms, a cinematic masterpiece. Robert Mulligan is best remembered for an indistinct directorial style: most of his films seem somehow beyond his control, as if they could careen off course at any moment (*Inside Daisy Clover*, 1966) or coast to a halt from sheer apathy (1969's lugubrious *The Stalking Moon*). Screenwriter Horton Foote's sensitive adaptation of Lee's novel, composer Elmer Bernstein's delicately mournful score, and Peck's totemic central performance are, in large part, what make *Mockingbird* an exception among Mulligan's films.

The director's metier was mood, which *Mockingbird* has to spare. The bittersweet ambience of the Finch household and mysterious, Gothic milieu of fictional Maycomb, Alabama (especially in the nighttime sequences, which are shot in the style of Universal's horror programmers of the 1930s and 40s) are the stuff of childhood fancy, and Mulligan captures them with aplomb. (In this regard, the film diverges from Lee's novel, which unfolds with a distanced, mildly sardonic tone.) Little wonder that *Mockingbird* has such a strong hold on those of us who first saw it as children.

But aesthetic excellence, or the lack of it, isn't what gives movie myths their power, any more than fond recollections make a movie mythic. *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s hypercinematic charge derives instead from a

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convergence of powerful feelings of nostalgia and the movie's standing as what Peck called, in a 1997 documentary on its making, a "social problem" film. His dated terminology is revealing, for *Mockingbird* relies on a late-1950s liberal conception of race and class as its sociopolitical touchstone. Fair enough—the movie is 40 years old. But like a child forced to grow up too soon (or not allowed to grow up at all), it has since been pressed into service as a complacent, fanciful, bourgeois creed uninformed by the Civil Rights movement, scarcely altered by subsequent history, and wholeheartedly sanctioned by the mainstream media. As outmoded as its underlying principles are, they're upheld every time *To Kill a Mockingbird* is extolled as anything more than an entertaining and evocative populist relic. But in fact the film obscures the very questions of class and race that underlie its mythic reputation, relying on a portrait of America as a place in which racism and hatred are incidental to social and political inequality. As film scholar Linda Williams has

noted, *Mockingbird* "neither radically changed national feeling about race nor innovated new forms of media."⁵

To be fair, *Mockingbird* encourages its skewed reputation by adopting a rigid, neatly implied internal hierarchy of race, class, and character, and a near-acrobatic ability to subvert those distinctions whenever convenient. The social structure of rural Maycomb is made plain almost from the film's opening scene, in which one of Atticus's clients, a white farmer named Walter Cunningham, delivers food to the Finch household as a payment against his "entailment." Cunningham is duly deferential to middle-class Atticus, and his hard-working decency is underscored by an awkward yet proud demeanor and neat, if frayed, appearance. Cunningham's homespun virtue is undermined only when he turns up with a mob intent on lynching the jailed black field hand Tom Robinson (who's guarded by Atticus), but is immediately redeemed once he convinces the other men to abandon the enterprise when Atticus's young daughter Scout recognizes him in the



crowd. The incident goes unmentioned for the remainder of the film, but in Lee's novel it gives Atticus the opportunity to trot out *Mockingbird's* pet metaphor. "You children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute,"⁶ he tells son Jem and Scout, temporarily disregarding the rather more vulnerable position of the man standing in Tom's.

Poor working-class whites like Cunningham comprise the visible majority of Maycomb, as Lee reveals in her description of Tom Robinson's jury: "Sunburned, lanky, they seemed to be all farmers. . . . One or two of the jury looked vaguely like dressed-up Cunninghams" (166-67). On the next level up are working townspeople such as Sheriff Tate and professionals like Atticus and Judge Taylor. Above them, evidently, are only the benevolent government of FDR, alluded to in an ironic bit of opening narration taken directly from Lee's novel ("It was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told it had nothing to fear but fear itself" [10]), and God.

Somewhere in the mix, one presumes, are Maycomb's blacks, but they remain a largely nebulous presence.

Maycomb's black community may be as invisible as its ruling elite, but its lowest-of-the-lower classes—the Ewells—are distinctly palpable. Lee describes the family and their habitat in nearly subhuman terms:

No economic fluctuations changed their status—people like the Ewells lived as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of a depression. No truant officers could keep their numerous offspring in school; no public health officer could free them from congenital defects, various worms, and the diseases indigenous to filthy surroundings. . . . [T]he Ewells gave the dump a thorough gleaning every day, and the fruits of their industry (those that were not eaten) made the plot of land around [their] cabin look like the playhouse of an insane child. (172-73)



Lee's metaphor is taken to absurd lengths in the film, in which the repugnantly racist Bob Ewell and his daughter Mayella, Tom's purported rape victim, pitch their performances somewhere between pantomime and barely contained hysteria. The Ewells are thoroughly despicable creatures for whom we need feel no compassion, to the point that by the film's end there is a sense that the family has gotten precisely what it deserves. This may be understandable in the case of the predatory Bob, but one can't help wondering about Mayella and the seven other Ewell children mentioned repeatedly during the trial. Fatherless and with no means of support, what's to become of them? The movie never says.

It doesn't say much about race, either, although that's ostensibly the crux of its argument. There are essentially two speaking roles for African-American actors in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—Tom, and the Finches' servant, Calpurnia. As individuals they are solidly and humanely portrayed (Calpurnia disciplines the recal-

citrant Scout with real authority), but neither provides the film with any sense of a unified black presence. We do see Tom's cabin and his wife Helen on the two occasions that Atticus visits on business, and while there are friends and family members gathered outside, we never hear their dialogue or glimpse an establishing shot of the surrounding neighborhood as a whole. And Calpurnia, who brings order to the Finch household, appears to exist in a complete vacuum: no husband or family are mentioned, and when Atticus demands that she stay overnight while he protects Tom from the lynch mob, she complies without hesitation. It's somewhat surprising to learn that she has a home to go to at all.

Graciously depicted though they may be, Tom and Cal fit snugly into familiar and distinct types in a genre that Linda Williams has dubbed the "melodrama of black and white." Tom is both the virtuous, suffering Uncle Tom-like black victim (something Harper Lee must surely have been aware of when she named her



The courtroom drama . . . making us act as the film's jury in place of the trial's jury.

character) and the implicit, hypersexualized threat to white women, while Calpurnia is a nurturing, attentive mammy whose presence theoretically allows the Finches to “more fully exercise the privileges and authority granted by white skin.”⁷⁷ *To Kill a Mockingbird* may function in part as a critique of the Southern desire for plantation-era “old days” and the “Tom/anti-Tom” dialectic Williams elucidates, but the presentation of its focal black characters fails to convincingly challenge the stereotypes that spawned them. Ultimately, Tom and Cal are as one-dimensionally good as the Ewells are broadly evil.

It's arguable that, for the purposes of the movie's narrative, black life in Maycomb is more than adequately represented by Tom, Calpurnia, and the spectators in the courthouse gallery. But if the blatantly fabricated charge against Tom and his disastrous trial are meant to be emblematic of a society that fails to protect blacks against such specious accusations—and worse, the cruel and unusual punishment (legally sanc-

tioned or not) that follows—the lack of a viable black community or distinguishable black individuals in the film's Maycomb diminishes the scope of Tom's predicament. Moreover, the grotesque flamboyance of the Ewells gives the impression that ugly acts of racism are perpetrated only by the most degraded members of white society—Lee's “insane children,” whose genesis, incidentally, goes unexplained.

To Kill a Mockingbird obscures the complexity of its subject matter not only with low-key warmth, comfortable stereotypes, and ossified good intentions, but also through an implicit desire for race and class to simply not matter. Or to matter, perhaps, only as indicators of personal aberration and failure—the failure of single individuals to “stand in the shoes” of others and deny them the right to sing innocuous mockingbird songs. The film's questions of systemic corruption and of our own complicity in or indifference to such systems fit into its conception of what a social problem is only insofar as we're led to identify

with its white characters. All well and good, except that it's a foregone conclusion which ones we're likely to identify with.

Explicit in the film's view of race and class relations is the notion that social problems are best "solved" through the actions of official bodies, in this case the American judicial system. A good deal of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s second half is taken up by Tom's trial, which would appear to move the film squarely into the genre of courtroom drama, where it resides as legitimately as it does in the genre of black-and-white melodrama. Yet, as Carol J. Clover remarks, trial films "[position] us not as passive spectators, but as active ones, viewers with a job to do."⁸ In one of its cleverer strokes, *Mockingbird* meets this criterion by making us act as the film's jury in place of the trial's jury, whom we see in only a handful of long and medium shots. Unfortunately, the predetermined outcome makes us as moot and inert as they are, and whatever outrage we may rightly feel is thus thwarted along with Tom's chance of a fair trial. Only Jem is moved to anger by the judicial travesty, but by then the film is too far along for him to assume the role of galvanizing key figure.

Jem's nascent activism is, in any event, subordinate to Boo Radley's climactic act of rescue, which provides the trial with its effective culmination. According to Kathy Laster, "Courtroom films of all persuasions mostly manage to re-establish the legitimacy of the prevailing system or at least belief in the rule of law."⁹ To its credit, *Mockingbird* is an equivocal exception to this rule. Boo may be the least socially and politically powerful white male in Maycomb, but he is white and male nonetheless, and as such is an agent of the prevailing system. Yet the fact remains that he is firmly outside that system, and Sheriff Tate and Atticus's ultimate reliance on his act of rough justice proves how impotent they and the system have become.

In his "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss asserts that "myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact . . . as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths."¹⁰ He was referring to the mythological systems of traditional, so-called primitive societies, but he could just as easily have been describing the way movies operate—or "think"—in ours. On a more pragmatic level, movies do little more than reinforce private mythologies or reflect the fragmentation of modern life. Even so, a few films, deserving or otherwise, live up to the phenomenon Lévi-Strauss de-

scribes. It is possible to enjoy and even champion *To Kill a Mockingbird* without turning a blind eye to its thematic flaws or overestimating its relevance. It daringly rejects the bland conformity of the not-so-recently-past (at the time of the film's original release) Eisenhower era by casting Atticus's futile challenge to the status quo in a heroic light. At the very least, it tells its story in the context of race and class, which precious few films have attempted to do even in the intervening four decades. Perhaps that's only a modest accomplishment for a film of such widely perceived importance, scaled more to preadolescent personal inspiration than all-encompassing cultural myth. I first saw *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I was five years old; the film was three. It kindled my love of "serious" movies and my sense of social justice as well. In some measure, the film's unique mixture of amiable sentimentality, atavistic dread, and warmed-over New Deal liberalism is responsible for who I am today. I have no doubt that I'm in good company. But if *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s true lasting strength is its ability to appeal to and inspire children to thoughts of equality and justice, it's probably best to remember that children, unlike myths, grow up to find themselves in a world decidedly more complicated than the one in Robert Mulligan's film.

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Notes

1. Eleanor Ringel, "Climbing into a Favorite Suit," *Y'all.com* (April 29, 1998).
2. Cameron Crowe, "A Fan's Notes," *Film Comment* (September/October 2000), p. 64.
3. The interview aired on Wednesday, November 25, 1998.
4. Quoted in Roy Hoffman, "Long Lives the Mockingbird," *New York Times* (August 9, 1998), sec. 7, p. 31.
5. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 301.
6. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), p. 160.
7. Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 203.
8. Carol J. Clover, "'God Bless Juries!'" *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 256.
9. Kathy Laster, with Krista Breckweg and John King, *The Drama of the Courtroom* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2000), p. 12.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 12.