

2008

## Bamboozled and the Satiric Mask

Danny Conine  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Conine, Danny (2008) "Bamboozled and the Satiric Mask," *Articulāte*: Vol. 13 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol13/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.



Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* is an unusual film for a number of reasons. The film is powerfully controversial in its choice of subject matter – a television show that re-enacts the tradition of the minstrelsy, blackface and all – and critically complex for its metacritical nature as a filmic satire that is chiefly “about” a satire created by its main character. It is unsurprising, given this complexity, that *Bamboozled* had a rather small theatrical run and received very mixed, and often very negative, reviews. Critical commentary, while necessarily more patient with the film than popular reviews, is similarly mixed. As one author participating in a “critical symposium” on the film published in *Cineaste* only months after its release writes, “*Bamboozled* is an extremely complex film, one that demands careful viewing(s), and speaks to its various audiences in a number of ways” (Davis 16). Indeed, the film all at once grapples with issues of media, advertisement, popular culture, racial identity, racial subculture, cultural appropriation, and more, such that it becomes difficult to know the best or most inclusive angle from which to approach it.

*Bamboozled*'s opening sequence offers a vital clue to understanding its overarching structure, and one way in which these issues can be understood together. In the first words spoken in the film, the main character and effective narrator – Pierre Delacroix – reads a dictionary definition of “satire.” In the story that follows, Pierre creates a professedly “satiric” television show (*The Mantan Show*), which becomes the film's central subject. In this paper, I intend first to look at *Bamboozled* from this angle, as a satire about a satire, with special attention to satire as a “masking” process. As John R. Clark writes in his essay “Vapid Voices and Sleazy Styles,” the satirist often “dons a mask, adopts an alien voice or antic pose” in order to best criticize his target (Clark 21). This often means that the satirist masquerades as the very subject he

intends to ridicule. For *Bamboozled*, the issue of the satiric “mask” is particularly important in a number of ways. Satiric maskings in the film occur in many different contexts and on many different layers. These successive maskings have everything to do with the film's articulation of its key concerns: first, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of establishing a true sense of racial identity in a postmodern world that is so highly masked, and referential, and second, the dangerous ways in which that society empties historically significant signs of their meaning, presenting them under the guise of benign entertainment and consumer product.

To begin with, I intend to look at the main character of the film – Pierre Delacroix – as a character who operates under a series of masks. Looking at this first, outermost layer of the film's masking process reveals the aspects of Pierre's persona that Lee is satirizing – which are, ironically enough, his own masking and masquerading behaviors. These behaviors define and structure the concerns of the rest of the film. The next critical layer of masking is the mask which Pierre creates for himself as a satirist within the film: his *Mantan Show*. *The Mantan Show* can be read, as Pierre proposes in calling it a satire, as a satiric attack on the masked (in blackface) persona through which it speaks, and on the history of the minstrel show itself. However, what is most important in looking at *The Mantan Show* is the ways in which Spike Lee – as the authorial voice behind the mask of Pierre Delacroix – complicates this goal. In particular, Lee uses numerous motifs and stylistic elements to underscore the show's failure to articulate such a critique effectively as it interacts with and is received by the “real world” within the film, and the ultimate dangers of this failure. Among other things, *The Mantan Show* becomes caught up in economic concerns of consumerism and entertainment, such that the satiric mask itself is the thing being consumed. The following narrative (and all of its negative fallout) can be read as an aftermath of this, and this process of consumption and designification thus takes shape as one more of the main overarching satiric targets of *Bamboozled*. This ultimately brings us full-circle to the issues that structure Pierre's initial dilemma – the articulation of racial identity in a postmodern



world which, as the rest of the narrative goes to show, corrupts and manipulates race as a sign system, due to the way in which a consumer-oriented society interacts with that racial sign.

As previously mentioned, Pierre Delacroix is the narrator of *Bamboozled* from start to finish, and in fact, his words are both the first and the last that we hear in the film. The question of masking applies to Delacroix in two ways, the first of these relating directly to his role as narrator of the film. Delacroix's opening narration begins with a dictionary definition of "satire," reminding us rather overtly that the film we are about to see is, itself, a work of satire. As John R. Clark asserts, "What the satirist does frequently and does well is to adopt the tone and character of his victims" (Clark 23). In particular, satirists often adopt the tone and character of their victims through the creation of "self-damning narrators," a type best exemplified by Swift's classic character, Gulliver from *Gulliver's Travels*. This type of narrator stands between the author and reader (or filmmaker and viewer) as an intermediary mask, which the satirist can implicitly (or explicitly) poke fun at for its various absurdities, mannerisms, and viewpoints. In the case of the classic Gulliver, for example, Gulliver's blind patriotism, classism, and gullibility are all traits which are intended to come across to the reader as absurd, laughable, or reprehensible. In the case of *Bamboozled*, the chief trait being satirized in the masking narrator of Pierre Delacroix is, ironically enough, the various masquerades Pierre creates in his own life. Specifically, Pierre wears a number of "masks" in his life to confuse and obscure his racial identity, and as is implied throughout the narrative, to disassociate himself from black racial identity, so that he can more easily maneuver in the white corporate world he lives and works in. This obscuring of his "blackness" is something that many other characters directly criticize Pierre for. It is what constantly allows his white boss, Dunwitty, to claim he is "blacker" than Pierre. It is what his assistant, Sloan Hopkins, subtly mocks in a board meeting later in the film, commenting that Pierre is "not black; he's a Negro."

As Cristy Tondeur writes, "Dela shapes his appearance and personality to defy racial expectations. As the

movie opens, Dela is shown shaving his head and speaking with an obscure accent that renders his cultural background indiscernible" (Tondeur 4). Delacroix's racial masquerade is indeed evident from the film's very first scene, and manifests itself across the film in a number of ways. His stiff and stilted manner of speech, which another critic describes as an "odd Grace-Kelly-meets-James-Earl-Jones accent" (Lucia 10), is undeniably over the top. Not only does this render Pierre's cultural background unclear, as Tondeur suggests, but it also implies – through both vocabulary and diction – a level of pretension and feigned intellectuality that necessarily sounds ridiculous. Again, other characters (for example, Dunwitty, Womack, and even Pierre's father) at many points in the film directly mock his speech. Pierre's racial masquerade is perhaps most directly apparent in his name, which we learn later in the film has been changed from "Peerless Dothan" to the French-sounding "Pierre Delacroix" – a particularly arbitrary and, given the stereotypical associations given to French culture, intellectually pretentious change.

By presenting us with a narrator whose absurdities are so over the top (Damon Wayans is often criticized for overacting his role as Pierre), and are directly called into question by numerous characters within the film, Lee necessarily frames the audience's critical attention toward those absurdities. In other words, Pierre, as the narrator who is self-damning by virtue of his extensive racial masquerade, necessarily establishes this subject of "masquerading" as one of *Bamboozled*'s chief satiric targets. It is important to note that it is not only Pierre who participates in masquerading behavior in the first half of the film. Perhaps the most obviously masquerading character, next to Pierre, is his boss, Dunwitty. Dunwitty's absurd behavior takes an opposite form to Pierre's, as a white man putting on what he perceives as "black" speech and appearances. If Pierre's dialect is overly restrained and intellectual, then Dunwitty's goes to the other extreme: overly (and intentionally) crass and colloquial. Dunwitty makes abundant use of (usually outdated) slang that he perceives as "black" – "dope," "ill," "get jiggy," "keepin' it real" – and prides himself on the pictures of "brothers" on his office walls and on his marriage to a black woman. In



conversations between Pierre and his boss, this mutually masquerading behavior has quite uniquely reversed the racial dynamic in terms of who has claim to the labels of "black" and "white." When Dunwitty says that Pierre's writing is too "white bread," and that he has more claim to the word "nigger" than Pierre, he has justification for these seemingly contradictory arguments in the outward signifying behavior of each. (For example, in another scene, Dunwitty challenges Pierre to identify a black athlete pictured on his office wall. When Pierre cannot name this, albeit very superficial, signifier of racial identification, Dunwitty considers his point proven – that he is "blacker" than Pierre.) In this way, masquerading behavior of the sort Pierre engages in is constructed, within the first few scenes of the film, as absurd and capable of creating certain logical inversions, so much so that a white man can construct a seemingly logical argument – based on outward signifiers, the masks that each wears – that he is "blacker" than Pierre.

It is also important to note that in one of these early scenes, Lee also implies a certain amount of danger to Pierre's masked behavior: that it entails a certain amount of repression, of anger in particular. In the aforementioned scene where Dunwitty lays claim to the word "nigger," we momentarily see Pierre jump out of his seat and assault his boss, screaming "whitey, whitey, whitey." The outburst is promptly revealed to be only Pierre's fantasy, as the next cut shows Dunwitty sitting smug again, but Lee's point here is clear. Though Pierre projects a very composed exterior and attempts a freedom from racial labels, beneath this veneer there lurks a strong resentment of the racial game, which threatens to emerge violently. This is crucial in how the film transitions its to larger issues of racial labeling, masking, and signifying, as the implications will eventually be the same on a larger cultural level.

Pierre's creation of *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* entails the creation of a new mask in several regards. Perhaps the most intentional of these is the creation of a satiric mask. Pierre intends the show to function as a satire, which he describes to Sloan as "so negative, so offensive and racist; hence, I will prove my point." For Pierre, this "point" is

that the network is not willing to air shows starring black people unless those characters are portrayed as buffoons. In accordance with classic satiric theory, and with the masking theory described by Clark, Pierre intends to masquerade behind that very practice – a show all about buffoonery by black characters – to call it into criticism. This satiric aim is, at least, Pierre's intention. As we will see, the film goes on to undercut this intention, and demonstrate the terrible failure of the show to really communicate its criticism of the negative art form in which it engages.

The *Mantan* show is not only a mask in this conceptual satiric sense. There are numerous other maskings at work in the *Mantan* show. The most obvious of these is the literal application of blackface, worn by all of the show's black performers. The mask created by blackface is essentially at the core of the film's relation to the powerful issues of race and racism. As will be discussed later, the mask of blackface is a sign that carries powerful, historically significant meaning with it, and this is a consequence that, as the film progresses, can be ignored less and less. With regards to the act of masking, the show requires its performers to engage in its masquerade by literally putting on the mask of blackface. This act, like Pierre's daily masquerades, is constructed as clearly absurd not only for the strangeness of a "black" actor wearing black face (a complicated issue of signification and the meaning of the term "black" as a racial label), but also for the ignorance of that significant historical consequence that such an act implies. Manray and Womack are furthermore asked to mask themselves in another way, by changing their names to "Mantan" and "Sleep'n Eat." The parallel to Pierre Delacroix's name change should not be overlooked. Here two more black characters are asked to change their name – as Pierre has done – and the effect is also a racially related one, although for Pierre his name change entails a *denial* of his racial background, while for Manray and Womack, the name change entails a participation in a historical attack on their racial background, in the legacy of racism represented by the minstrel show. Of course, the hook and the enticement for these characters to participate in the masquerade of the show is a matter of money and success. In the opening scenes,



"making it" is established as a powerful central desire for both Manray and Womack, and their economic situation (very poor, and just having been run out of their apartment, no less) leaves them hard pressed for any help they can find. Thus their participation in the masking behavior is coerced and, as will be discussed later, ultimately bound by these desires (for success and money) and virtually impossible to escape.

Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, the filmmakers directly utilize elements of film style to establish the show as a "masked" entity, creating a distinction between the high production value of the show and the comparatively unmediated nature of the narrative "real world." As Spike Lee has explained in numerous interviews, and as Zeinabu Irene Davis explains in her essay, "Spike Lee and director of photography Ellen Kuras combined traditional film stocks with digital video to create a unique look and mood" (Davis 16). Specifically, the filmmakers use digital video for every scene in the film *except* for those scenes intended play as part of the *Mantan* show. The result is a look for the show that is significantly more polished, refined, and in line with Hollywood norms, while actions that play out in the "real world" of the narrative appear much grittier and amateur by comparison. Other devices, particularly framing and lighting, also reinforce this effect. The result is the creation of a continuum, wherein the most "real" of scenes – for example, the scene that introduces Manray and Womack, or the conversations between Manray and Sloan – seem to be the ones in which the most devices of traditional film style are discarded. These scenes are often done with hand-held camera work, unconventional or random compositions, very wide shots, or occasional out of place zooms. As it relates to the theme of masking in the film, the connection is fairly literal, but creates a sweeping allegory across the film. The *Mantan* show is, by contrast with the "real world" scenes, a world of style before substance, where the conventional norms of Hollywood entertainment are applied true to form – a world that is decidedly masked, to meet the demands of popular, consumer-driven entertainment.

With these devices set in place and the *Mantan* show established as a distinct "mask," the film proceeds in its second

half (following *Mantan*'s premiere in the narrative world) to undercut that mask and suggest that the historical and racist associations (the actual meanings) that lie beneath it are too significant and too negative, to remain hidden beneath the mask without consequence. This is a message that is present from the very beginning; Pierre and the others know from the outset that blackface and the minstrelsy are part of a dangerous tradition. Pierre's initial conception is of a "negative, offensive, racist" show. Womack objects strongly during the initial pitch to Dunwitty at the very mention of blackface. Sloan objects to the initial proposal, saying the show is too risky, and objects multiple times during the initial pitch to Dunwitty. However, these objections are all ignored, and the show is produced regardless. Yet, from the *Mantan* show's premiere all the way through to the end of the film, the historical significance of the blackface minstrel "mask" is portrayed as lurking dangerously beneath that mask, ever threatening to break out violently – as it does in the end.

Again, this message is reinforced through a number of narrative and stylistic motifs. The most direct and consistent reminders of the historical significance and consequences of the minstrel tradition come from Sloan. At four different points in the film, Sloan presents direct artifacts of that minstrel tradition to other characters. The first is the portfolio of posters and images from early minstrel acts, which she gives to Womack and Manray in discussing their roles with them before the show goes into production. The second is the "jolly nigger bank" she gives as a gift to Pierre. Third, she gives a similar gift, a dancing blackface doll, to Manray after Pierre has fired her. The final of Sloan's artifacts is the video tape she leaves on Pierre's desk, which is given special prominence in its place at the very end of the film. Sloan's intentions in unearthing these artifacts is consistent. As she says in presenting the "jolly nigger bank" to Pierre, her goal is to remind the others working on the show "of a time in our history, in this country, when we were considered inferior, and subhuman." For Sloan, the signifiers of blackface and the minstrelsy cannot, and should not, be separated from their original signified concept: the subjugation of blacks.



Sloan's position is one that stands in direct contradiction to the way that the "face" of the show is processed, packaged, and consumed as an object of popular culture and entertainment. The *Mantan* show becomes an icon and item of popular consumption, a point which is made clearest in the montage halfway through the film, where images from *Mantan* are displayed alongside images of historically popular entertainment icons like the hula hoop, yo-yos, pet rocks, beanie babies, and Pokemon. Over this montage, Pierre narrates, "The latest, hottest, newest sensation across the nation was: blackface!" Recalling the notion of the *Mantan* show, and "blackface" in particular, as a part of a theme of masking in the film, Pierre's narration in this scene emphasizes that what the public has consumed and is most enamored with about the show is its face – its mask, certainly not the historical signified of that mask that Sloan's artifacts recall. This process, the emptying of historical context and significance from a sign, is one that arises, at least in the narrative of *Bamboozled* from a consumer- and media-based culture. As Greg Tate summarizes, "What Lee eloquently reminds us of in *Bamboozled* is the degree to which the dehumanization and commodification of Africans that occurred during slavery lingers on as a fetish in American entertainment ... blackness remains a commodity to be traded on whatever auction block will have it – whether the corporate board room or the TV sound stage" (Tate 15). This aspect of popular entertainment, as Tate and others suggest, is one of Lee's biggest satiric targets in the film. By portraying this commodification of the mask of blackness to the extreme that it does (to the point where, in the aforementioned montage, children are wearing blackface masks for Halloween), *Bamboozled* calls that process into satiric criticism. Alongside and in contrast to this exaggerated commodification, then, Lee places the objections of characters like Sloane – reminders of the reality of the historical context that lurks beneath the apparently emptied signifier. The recurrence of such objections and reminders of the historical reality ultimately forms an undercurrent that builds a crescendo throughout the film to the finale, and is in large part what drives the film to its violent ending.

As previously mentioned, this undercurrent is emphasized through several motifs, the first of which is Sloan's repeated presentation of historical artifacts. Another of these motifs occurs in the film's use of music. As Davis suggests in her essay, the film's main musical theme is repeated at multiple times in the film, each time gaining significance in counterpoint to the superficial application and reception of the black mask of the *Mantan* show (Davis 17). This theme, every time it enters, seems to connote a moment of contemplation on the act of masking. It makes its first appearance in a scene between Sloan and her brother Julius (a.k.a. Big Blak Afrika) on the subject of his name change – an act of masking in his own life. It also plays beneath all three scenes of Manray and Womack applying blackface before the show. The act of applying blackface takes a visibly, successively greater psychological toll on the two in each of these scenes, and the music seems to parallel this growing sadness and toil associated with the masking act. Meanwhile, in each of these "blackening up" scenes, the sound of the waiting crowd's roar and Honeycutt's booming introduction grow louder on the soundtrack until they eventually overtake the musical theme – spectacle, masquerade, and entertainment overtaking contemplation in this transitional process. The theme also enters in a couple of scenes where Pierre and Sloan discuss the social implications of, and their commitment to, the show. The theme makes its final, and most powerful, appearances in the scene in which Womack finally opts out of the project, the final performance in which Manray also opts out, and in the final montage, where Sloan's video on the history of blackface plays alongside the image of the dying Pierre. In all of these scenes, the characters are being called to engage in some form of contemplative reflection on the act of masking, and in particular, on the otherwise-neglected historical significance of it. This is particularly true of the "blackening up" scenes, where Manray and Womack are literally at a crossroads of whether or not to apply their physical masks, and similarly in the scenes where each finally decides that he has donned his mask for the last time. (It is important to note, also, that in the scene in which Manray opts out of the production, not only does he go onstage without



blackface, but the filmmakers underscore this denial of the mask by shooting the ensuing performance in digital video, not with film.) This also holds true for the decision-making scenes between Sloan and Pierre, who are faced with the decision of whether or not to go through with the creation of the satiric mask. Even in Sloan's debate with Julius over his name change, the debate is fundamentally one over masking one's identity – along similar lines as Pierre's name change and general racial masquerade. These scenes crescendo in importance from the film's start to its finish, with the final scene of Pierre's death drawing the final violent consequences of the *Mantan* project in direct analogy with the history of blackface as played out on Sloan's video tape. A second, similar musical motif builds the threat of the show's eventual consequences in a more violent light. The Mau Mau's theme – a dark, heavy rap track – directly brings violence in the theme, eventually culminating in their abduction and murder of Manray.

As this undercurrent of historical significance and potential for violent consequence grows, it would of course seem wise for the characters involved in the show to abandon the "masquerade" of the show. However, *Bamboozled's* final and most damning point is that once the mask has become a cultural icon, and has become widely consumed as such – and furthermore has become tied to the characters' dreams of success and their monetary well-being – it becomes impossible for the characters involved in the show to extricate themselves from the mask. Womack and Manray are eventually able to do so, but only at significant costs and difficulties. Womack must sacrifice his best friendship in leaving the show, and Manray, while he does effectively quit the show in the end as well, has become too closely associated with the blackface mask in the public eye to avoid his abduction and murder by the Mau Maus. For Pierre, the case is different. Perhaps due to his creationary role in the masquerade, or due to his own previously-established, deep-seated personal issues with racial masking, he is ultimately and tragically unable to get out from behind the mask he has created for himself. Multiple shots near the end of the film position Pierre in the frame with an icon of blackface between

himself and the object of his conversation – the most notable of these scenes being his final phone conversation with his mother, and his argument with Manray after firing Sloan (see figs. 1-4, attached). The blackface images in these shots establish a literal barrier – a mask – between Pierre and the people he interacts with. This point is driven home in the final scenes, as from the moment of Manray's death through the end of the film, Pierre is inexplicably wearing blackface himself. The mask, of blackface, that he has created and projected into the public sphere of entertainment has now literally become part of his own face – the face he will die wearing.

Ironically enough, the face Pierre is stuck with at his death is, as a profoundly negative and racist label of black identity, the very thing Pierre sought to avoid with his initial daily masquerade as "Pierre Delacroix" rather than "Peerless Dothan." In this way, the issue of masking comes full circle in the film, connecting Pierre's initial concern over racial identification with the terrible aftermath of the satiric "mask" he has created in the *Mantan* show. In this way, the film's satiric targets encompass both the daily, comical masquerades of Pierre Delacroix, as well as the broad cultural process by which consumer-oriented media in postmodern society can empty important signifiers of their meanings for the purpose of entertainment – and the dangers of both processes. These targets are ultimately both unified under the film's overarching theme of masking. In the case of the *Mantan* show, the issue is a widespread cultural ignorance of the substance behind the mask (behind the sign), a substance which characters like Sloan try, and ultimately fail, to remind Pierre and others of throughout the film. It is in light of these themes that the film's final image – the smiling, masked face of "Mantan" – takes on such terrible significance. Though the mask is smiling, and the laugh track roaring beneath it at Pierre's dying request, the truth of the narrative has revealed that beneath that mask lurks a great deal of cultural, racial, and historical significance (exemplified by the final roll of Sloan's video tape), the ignorance of which can have devastating consequences.





Fig 1: Manray addresses Pierre from  
Behind a cutout of his "Mantan" persona

Fig 2: Pierre addresses  
a cutout of "Sleep 'n Eat"

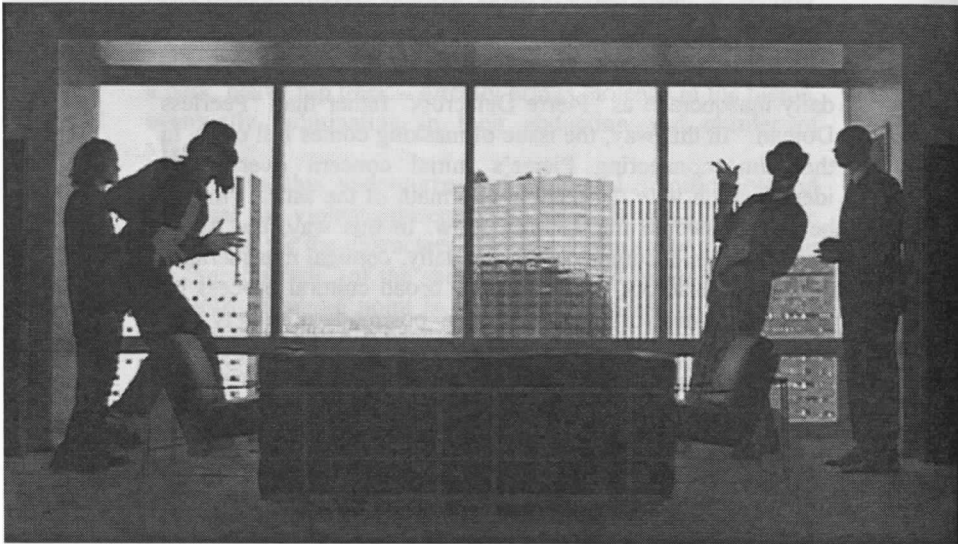


Fig 4 (below): Pierre on the phone with his mother, his line of sight and  
conversation interrupted by the blackface figure in front of his face.



## Works Cited

- Bamboozled*. Dir. Spike Lee. DVD. New Line Cinema, 2001.
- Clark, John R. "Vapid Voices and Sleazy Styles." *Theorizing Satire*. Eds. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Davis, Zeinabu Irene. "'Beautiful-Ugly' Blackface: An Esthetic Appreciation of *Bamboozled*." *Cineaste* 26.2 (March 2001): 10-11, 16-17.
- Lucia, Cynthia. "Race, Media and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*." *Cineaste* 26.2 (March 2001): 10-11.
- Tate, Greg. "*Bamboozled*: White Supremacy and a Black Way of Being Human." *Cineaste* 26.2 (March 2001): 10-11, 15-16.
- Tondeur, Cristy. "'Bamboozled' by Blackness." *Black Camera - A Micro Journal of Black Film Studies* 16.1 (2001): 4, 10-11.