Film as a reflection of society: interracial marriage and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* in late 1960s America

Katie Anderson*

*This manuscript was prepared under the supervision of Professor Janet McShane Galley,
Department of History, College of Arts,
University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

This paper explores the debate of whether Hollywood films act as influential and progressive forces in a society, or do they serve as a larger reflection of that society. I examine Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), about an interracial marriage between a black man and a white woman. Was the film progressive for its time, or was it reflective of the social attitudes in late 1960s America? I argue that although there are aspects of the film that can be construed as progressive and influential for the era, the film more accurately serves as a reflection of the larger socio-political context of 1960s America in regards to both attitudes of opposition and acceptance of interracial marriage. Furthermore, a brief comparison is also made between the film and contemporary issues surrounding race relations in 21st Century America.

During the 1960s, Hollywood films such as *In the Heat of the Night*, *The Defiant Ones*, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* dealt with issues of racism and race relations between whites and blacks in America. In 1967, Stanley Kramer's award winning film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* addressed the issue of interracial marriage between a black man and white woman, as well as the generational divide between the alarmed parents of both races and the optimistic young couple. The release of the film occurred at the height of the Civil Rights movement in America, when whites and blacks alike were fighting for social, political, and economic equality. The film also emerged just after the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which banned all laws prohibiting interracial marriage in America. Prior to this decision, sixteen States still outlawed interracial marriage. Due to the contentiousness of this issue in American society, Robert Brent Toplin, co-author of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? A Clash of Interpretations Regarding Stanley Kramer's Film on the Subject of Interracial Marriage* [1] argues that the film's discussion of interracial marriage was revolutionary for the period and only briefly mentions how some aspects of the film could be construed as a reflection of American society at large. However, closer investigation of the film demonstrates the contrary; while some aspects of Kramer's dramatization were progressive and influential for the era, the film more accurately serves as a reflection of the larger social and

political context of 1960s America in regards to both attitudes of opposition and acceptance of interracial marriage.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is the story of the interracial relationship between Dr. John Wade Prentice (Sidney Poitier), a successful, intelligent African American doctor, and Joanna Drayton (Katharine Houghton), the daughter of affluent liberal parents Matt (Spencer Tracy) and Christina Drayton (Katharine Hepburn). The film spans the course of one day, taking place primarily in the Drayton's home in San Francisco. John and Joanna arrive at the Drayton's home to announce their engagement and to receive approval from Joanna's parents before flying to Geneva for John's work with the World Health Organization. Early in the film, John confronts Joanna's shocked parents and states that if the Draytons cannot approve the marriage completely, he will call off the engagement. While Joanna enthusiastically prepares for her life with John, Matt and Christina are forced to confront their own principles and decide whether their liberal beliefs will allow them to accept their daughter marrying a black man. Tensions further escalate in a comedic manner when John's parents arrive for dinner as well. Quickly, both Mrs. Drayton and Mrs. Prentice approve of the marriage while their husbands maintain the impracticality of the union. The climax of the film is Matt Drayton's declaration of his approval of the marriage on the basis that "love conquers all". The film

earned ten Academy Award nominations, and received both commercial and critical success. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* hailed the film as a “delightfully acted and gracefully entertaining film” [2]. Before assessing how this film reflected the larger political and social context of 1960s America, it is important to first understand the long debate between scholars about whether films act as reflections of society, or serve as agents of progressive and influential change in society.

The relationship between Hollywood film and greater society was a long debated issue throughout the twentieth century. Three years before the release of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a 1964 Scribner Research Anthology, titled “Film and Society” and edited by Richard Dyer MacCann, assessed the question of whether the silver screen reflects or influences society. Irving Thalberg's article in the anthology states that it is a necessity for motion pictures to reflect society because in order to attract audiences the subject matter must correspond to current thinking [3]. In contrast, Leo Rosten's article in the anthology, “Movies and Propaganda,” claims that films which influence society and are “made for the purpose of changing attitudes” are propaganda films [4]. In 1978, I.C. Jarvie's *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology* continued this debate. Jarvie states that Hollywood films are related to what he calls the “collective social consciousness,” but he also recognizes that the relationship between society and film is neither simple nor direct [5]. John Belton's 1996 edited work, “Movies and Mass Culture” further examines this relationship and states that film, society, and culture “mutually determine one another.” While films and filmmakers can influence culture and society, they are also produced by it [6]. These continuous debates demonstrate that a complex relationship does exist between society and film, and, depending on the movie, films can and have acted as either influential or progressive forces in society, or a larger reflection of that society. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* can therefore also be construed as a film which represents both sides of this relationship. While this investigation will assess arguments by historians such as Robert Brent Toplin, which emphasize the progressive elements of the film, further analysis will demonstrate that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is an example of a film that more accurately serves as a reflection of the social and political context of 1960s America.

The long history of anti-miscegenation in American society must be addressed. In order to understand why some historians view Kramer's film as progressive and revolutionary for its time. Interracial marriage between whites and blacks in America is a long-established social and legal taboo that is deeply rooted in the history of African American slavery. Renee C. Romano, in her 2003 work “*Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*,” states that the regulation of interracial relationships was primarily important to the establishment of the early slave

system [7]. She argues that colonies such as Virginia took initiatives to prevent interracial relationships in order to ensure slave status corresponded with race [7]. The problem with interracial relationships was that they threatened to “muddy” the clear separation between white and black, free and slave [8]. However, while some states readily enforced bans on miscegenation between black men and white women, relationships between white men and black women were legally acceptable prior to the end of slavery [9]. This difference in attitudes served to reinforce both gender and racial hierarchies [10]. During the slave period in America, the “one drop rule” defined anyone with traceable African ancestry as black and therefore a slave [11]. Furthermore, the status of children followed matrilineal lines, which designated all children of black women as slaves and all children of white women as free under law. Therefore, American society regarded white women as the guardians of white racial purity and central to the survival of the white race [12]. This meant that children born to white women and black men represented the domination of “blackness” over “whiteness,” and it was a threat to the maintenance of white male supremacy in America [13]. As sociologist Charles Stember argued in 1976, the ideologies of “sexual racism” remained central to the discrimination of African Americans into the twentieth century [14]. In 1955, one decade prior to the making of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, two white men from Mississippi brutally murdered Emmett Till, a fourteen year old black boy, for whistling at a white woman [15]. The murder of Emmett Till therefore demonstrates the severity of the taboo, particularly in the South, in the years just prior to the release of Hollywood's dramatization of an interracial relationship.

Based on this long history of interracial marriage as taboo in American society, it is understandable that some historians view the film as both progressive and influential in 1960s America. First, the film addresses interracial marriage from the relationship of a black man and white woman, instead of a black woman and white man, thereby deliberately addressing the more severe taboo in American society. Furthermore, many Americans opposed interracial marriage in the late 1960s. Toplin specifically argues that the film was revolutionary for its time, as it not only provided an “unabashedly positive picture of interracial marriage,” but also presented audiences with the first kiss between a black and white couple in a major, modern, Hollywood film [16]. However, other writers and historians, including Glen Harris, have argued that this was a very chaste or modest kiss that is only viewed by the audience through the rear-view mirror of a taxi cab [17]. Furthermore, Toplin compares *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* with previous Hollywood films on interracial marriage, such as *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Pinky* (1949), which focused only on the negative consequences of interracial marriage, thereby making Kramer's positive approach to the film revolutionary [18]. In an interview with actress Katharine Houghton, she also advocates the

progressivism of the film by describing the extreme vocal minority who sent death threats to both herself and director Stanley Kramer for making the film [19]. Renee Romano describes how the film influenced other members of the American public to consider the possibility of interracial dating in their own homes and to re-examine their own prejudices [20]. While these arguments and testimonies reveal aspects of the film that were revolutionary and influential for the period, further investigation of the social and political context of 1967 demonstrates how *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* better serves as a reflection of American society.

As previously stated, the release of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* occurred in the same year as the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. This demonstrates that in 1967 interracial marriage was a topical subject in America. The controversy surrounding *Loving v. Virginia* began in June of 1958 when two residents of Virginia, Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Jeter, a black woman, broke Virginia state law by marrying in the District of Columbia and then resettling in Virginia. The Court Circuit of Caroline County charged the Lovings with violating the Virginia ban on interracial marriage and forced the couple to leave the state. In 1963, after taking up residency in the District of Columbia, the Lovings appealed this court ruling, stating it violated the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that all laws prohibiting interracial marriage were unconstitutional [21]. In the same year, the marriage between Peggy Rusk, the daughter of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and a light skinned black man named Guy Smith also garnered much media attention [22]. The newlywed couple even appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in September of 1967, and Dean Rusk informed reporters that he was very pleased with both the wedding and his son-in-law [23]. The conclusion of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is therefore reflective of this real-life interracial marriage from 1967, as both demonstrate white American fathers coming to terms with and accepting interracial marriage. Similarly, the film also displays commonalities to the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, which further demonstrate how *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was not as progressive a film as some historians have argued. In *Loving v. Virginia*, Chief Justice Earl Warren summarized the complex history of outlawing interracial marriage as "an endorsement of the doctrine of white supremacy" [21]. As Susan Courtney argues, the only way the Supreme Court could so boldly condemn anti-miscegenation laws was to avoid explicitly describing and openly admitting the history of how these laws related to white power and oppression of African Americans [24]. Similarly, in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the Draytons never vocalize the reasons for their objections. Instead, the oppressive history of slavery as it relates to interracial marriage bans is summarized by Matt Drayton's final assessment that the couple had a "pigmentation problem" [25]. This phrase also manages to

greatly subdue the harsh language of racism and avoids the oppressive history of African American exploitation and white privilege [26]. In an interview with actress Katharine Houghton, she admits that Kramer deliberately constructed the film as a light comedy rather than a serious provocative drama in order to make it more palatable with hesitant white audiences [19]. By the end of the film, the fact that the fate of the couple rests on Matt Drayton's decision further demonstrates how the film still upheld white male patriarchy and control [27]. Therefore, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* not only reflected important social and political events in 1967, but its relationship to both Peggy Rusk's wedding and the *Loving v. Virginia* case demonstrate how the film was not as progressive as some historians argue since it avoided serious confrontations with racism while maintaining elements of white dominance in order to attract white audiences.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner and *Loving v. Virginia* were not the only texts to address the issue of interracial marriage in the late 1960s. African American author Eldridge Cleaver presented a far more provocative, radical, and confrontational analysis of the subject of interracial sex and marriage in his book, *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver published the book in 1968, which again demonstrates how interracial marriage was topical in late 1960s America. However, in comparison to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, "Soul on Ice" is a far more progressive and explicit discussion of miscegenation. Cleaver wrote the book while he was in prison for having raped and assaulted black and white women [28]. While Cleaver's actions seem reflective of *Birth of a Nation* ideologies, as will be discussed later, "Soul on Ice" otherwise explains Cleaver's actions in relation to his views on the history of white oppression of African Americans. He states very explicitly, "I know that the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a black woman I'm embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I'm hugging freedom" [29]. Therefore, Cleaver explains his attraction to white women as an attraction to the long established symbols of freedom and racial supremacy. This idea is comparable to the symbols of freedom in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Toplin argues that love and the ability to choose a mate without restrictions symbolized freedom in Kramer's film [30]. However, this view of freedom is far more palatable to moderate white audiences than Cleaver's extreme and provocative description in which he admits his rape of black women was "practice" for future "white prey" [31]. Some critics viewed "Soul on Ice" as promoting white hatred, but despite these reviews, Cleaver's book, similar to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, was a commercial success [32]. The *New York Times* labelled "Soul on Ice" as "Book of the Year" in 1968. It sold one million copies initially and then two million copies within the next decade [32]. The combined success of both the book and film reveals the

extent to which interracial marriage was a prevalent topic in late 1960s America. Yet, Cleaver's discussion of interracial marriage as it related to the history of slavery rather than as a "pigmentation problem" demonstrates how *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was not the most progressive or provocative text on interracial marriage to emerge in the late 1960s.

While Cleaver's "Soul on Ice" presents one possible African American perspective championing interracial relations, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* accurately reflects how fears surrounding interracial marriage also greatly concerned many blacks in American society. The most vocal figure to express concerns for the marriage in the film is the Drayton's African American domestic helper, Tillie. She not only states that she does not "care to see a member of my own race get above himself," but she also privately confronts John about her fears of Joanna's safety [25]. Tillie preaches, "I brought that child up from a baby in her cradle and ain't nobody gonna harm her none while I'm here watchin' ... you bring any trouble here, you'll just likely find out what black power really means!" [25]. Tillie's comment about "black power" is a reference to the increasingly vocal African American Civil Rights protestors that emerged in 1966 and 1967. In its most extreme form, "black power" represented militant groups such as the Black Panther Party. In the summer of 1967, armed Black Panthers, led by Eldridge Cleaver, marched on the capitol building in Sacramento to protest a bill prohibiting citizens from carrying loaded weapons within the city [33]. Susan Courtney demonstrates how these calls for "black power" took place across San Francisco Bay from the Drayton's elaborate home, thereby demonstrating how the film subtly reflects this charged political atmosphere. Tillie's fears and suspicions of the marriage also reflect one of many reasons why some black citizens opposed interracial marriage. As Romano explains, some African Americans were suspicious of the whites' motives and felt they could never overcome their own internal prejudices to make a mixed-race marriage succeed [34]. Other African Americans, particularly black females, associated interracial relationships with sexual exploitation [34]. However, Romano also describes African American attitudes towards interracial marriage as "ambivalent acceptance," meaning that black citizens were evenly split between those who thoroughly or hesitantly accepted interracial marriage and those who openly opposed it [35]. This split in attitudes is again reflected in the film. While Mrs. Prentice is quick to approve the marriage, both Mr. Prentice and Tillie maintain their opposition until the end of the film. Furthermore, as will be discussed later, a young teenage African American girl who sometimes assists Tillie with domestic work evidently has no reservations about interracial relationships. This demonstrates how *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* not only reflected African American attitudes towards mixed-race relationships during

this period, but also highlighted the generational divide that existed in American society during the 1960s.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner accurately addresses the differences between the older generation's conservative opposition and the younger generation's more open minded acceptance of miscegenation during the late 1960s in America. As Susan Courtney recognizes, the location of the Drayton's home in San Francisco was not only across the Bay from calls for "black power," but was also across the Bay from the "Summer of Love" [36]. In the summer of 1967, large numbers of young people gathered in San Francisco in celebration of sex, drugs, and rock'n roll [36]. As Charles Stember explains, during the late 1960s, the "black revolution" corresponded with a "sexual revolution" [37]. As the Civil Rights movement began to change America's attitudes toward African Americans, young people's attitudes toward sex were also transforming. More couples openly participated in premarital sex, while issues around homosexuality and abortion became popular subjects [38]. It is important to note that those who participated in this counter culture or "Summer of Love," as well as those who embraced interracial relations, did not represent all American youth. Stember explains that the majority of whites in America, approximately 65%, in 1968, still disapproved of interracial marriage [39]. However, information from a decennial census by the U.S. Census Bureau shows that in 1960, 0.4% of marriages in America were interracial, but this number increased to 0.7% by 1970, and then to 2.0% by 1980 [40]. While these numbers represent a small percentage of the population, they still represent a significant growth in interracial marriages, and therefore represent 1960s youth who engaged in interracial marriages as adults in the 1970s and 1980s. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* reflects the differences in these generational attitudes, particularly when John confronts his father and states, "You think the way it was for your generation is the way it's got to be . . . you think of yourself as a coloured man, I think of myself as a man" [25]. While John rejects the beliefs of his father's generation, he still understands the repercussions of an interracial relationship. Therefore, it is the youngest individuals in the film who demonstrate the highest acceptance of interracial relationships. In one minor scene, Dorothy, Tillie's young African American helper, and a white delivery boy enthusiastically bond, flirt, and dance together to rock'n roll music. They evidently have no reservations or problems with interracial relationships, and although this is not reflective of all youth in the late 1960s, it again demonstrates how *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* serves as a reflection of the changing attitudes and generational divide between American youth and their parents regarding interracial relationships.

If films can be interpreted as reflecting I.C. Jarvie's "collective social consciousness," then *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, in comparison to the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, can arguably reflect the change in America's social

consciousness regarding the portrayal and ideologies of African American men. Keith M. Harris states that mainstream film can include visual codes that reflect or sustain popular convictions about “blackness” or black sexuality [41]. The 1915 D.W. Griffith film *Birth of a Nation* is based on Thomas Dixon’s novel “The Clansman.” The film is a Southern perspective of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods in the American South and uses very explicit visual codes of black sexuality in an attempt to redeem the defeat of the South after Civil War [42]. The film presents African American men as out of control after their emancipation and lustily advancing on helpless white females [43]. While members of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People protested the film, this ideology of the “black rapist” largely reflected the social consciousness and context of white America, particularly the South, in the early twentieth century. It was a hugely successful film - the most profitable of its time - and was even supported by President Woodrow Wilson [44]. The film also served to sustain these popular convictions and influence white audiences. Many historians and scholars have argued that Griffith designed the film to glorify and justify the Ku Klux Klan as protecting white women’s virtue while degrading and controlling the status of African American men as inferior [45]. As Klan membership fluctuated in the 1920s, the film functioned as an example of Leo Rosten’s “propaganda movie,” in that the Klan used the film to influence recruitment [46]. Fifty years later, the character of Dr. John Prentice in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* is the antithesis of the “black rapist.” Not only is Dr. Prentice an intelligent, award-winning, well-mannered doctor, but as Glen Harris states, he appears virtually “sexless” [47]. Few scenes in the film indicate that his interest in Joanna is sexual, and overall their relationship appears to be platonic [48]. Christina Drayton asks her daughter how intimately involved she is with John, and Joanna clearly replies that although she wanted to, they had not “been to bed together” because John wanted to wait until they were married [25]. Some historians, such as Glenn Harris, have criticized the character of Dr. Prentice as being idealistic and not a true representation of African American men [48]. However, as previously stated, Robert Brent Toplin does acknowledge that some aspects of the film reflected American society and recognizes that Kramer deliberately made Poitier’s character impeccable so that, by removing all potential economic or social objections to the marriage, the film could specifically target race [49]. Toplin also describes how progress made during the Civil Rights movement allowed a growing number of African Americans to begin advancing to higher education and status by the late 1960s [50]. This was actually one of many roles for Sidney Poitier in the 1960s which reflected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s colourblind ideology about judging people not by “the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character” [51]. Based on the success of the film and its reflection of

American society compared to Hollywood’s portrayal of the “black rapist” in *Birth of a Nation*, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* reflects a growing change in America’s social consciousness and ideologies about African American men.

Although coincidental, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* not only reflects its contemporary context of the 1960s, but also the social and political context of twenty-first century America. In the film, Matt Drayton confronts Dr. Prentice about the problems his and Joanna’s racially-mixed children will encounter. Dr. Prentice explains that, while he has fully considered these problems, Joanna “feels that every one of our children will be President of the United States, and they’ll all have colourful administrations” [25]. This is a remarkable foreshadowing of the recent inauguration of President Barack Obama, the child of an interracial couple, who eventually became President of the United States, which is exactly what Joanna Drayton predicted. Furthermore, President Obama was born in 1961 in Hawaii, which is coincidentally the place where Joanna meets Dr. Prentice in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. This is highly coincidental, but Alicia Moore’s article titled “*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*: The importance of multiculturalism in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,” presents another example of recent scholarship on the film that has emerged due to contemporary events in America. While the inauguration of Barack Obama is one contemporary example of interracial relations, Moore focuses on the 2005 New Orleans Hurricane Katrina disaster. She states that while *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* concerned a white family’s tolerance of one African American family coming to dinner, after the Katrina disaster, white America now had to cope with accepting a “symbolic dinner” with 372,000 displaced African American children and their families [52]. Considering the mistreatment of a significant portion of black families in America after the Katrina disaster, not only historians but many people in American society are re-examining films such as *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* in order to understand contemporary prejudices regarding interracial relations.

While it is apparent that Stanley Kramer’s film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, can be construed as progressive for its time by the fact that it addressed the taboo subject of interracial marriage, numerous aspects of the film otherwise demonstrate that it better serves as a reflection of the social and political context of America in the late 1960s. Based on the long history of anti-miscegenation laws and attitudes in the United States, historians such as Robert Brent Toplin view the film’s positive representation of interracial marriage as revolutionary for its time. However, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was not the only medium to address interracial marriage in the late 1960s. The film’s release coincided with both the Supreme Court Case *Loving v. Virginia* and Eldridge Cleaver’s book “Soul on Ice.” However, the subdued language of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, in order to attract white audiences, also reflects the softened

language of *Loving v. Virginia*, as both sources significantly avoided any thorough discussion of the oppressive history of interracial marriage as directly related to slavery. Eldridge Cleaver's work otherwise explicitly discussed this relationship between interracial sex and slavery, and this demonstrates how his text was a far more progressive analysis of the taboo subject than Kramer's film. Furthermore, the film accurately reflected other aspects of American society, such as its acknowledgement of African American oppositions to interracial marriage, as well as the generational divide regarding attitudes toward miscegenation. Based on I.C. Jarvie's statement that films can reflect a collective social consciousness, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner's* portrayal of a black man as sophisticated, intelligent, and successful can arguably reflect a change in America's social consciousness regarding the ideologies of African American men since *Birth of a Nation's* representation of the "black rapist" in 1915. While the film was a commercial and critical success, the greatest success of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is not only how it reflected the social and political context of late 1960s America, but how it foreshadowed and maintained its relevance to the social and political context of twenty-first century America.

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