B.A. THESIS
AMERICAN LITERATURE SPECIALISATION
Stereotypical Depictions of African Americans on American Film
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The thesis skillfully captures the shift in filmic depictions of African-Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ms. Žáčková analyses both Hollywood classics and works of independent cinema, including Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, Spielberg’s *Amistad* and *The Color Purple*, Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* and Hill’s *Coffy*. She convincingly highlights the persistence of old stereotypes even in contemporary films—be they Hollywood “buddy” films such as Donner’s *Lethal Weapon* or certain African-American-authored Blaxploitation works.

On the whole, the text is informed, analytical and elegantly written. The first few sentences from the Introduction—i.e. “First they were villains, losers or slaves, played by white actors with black make-up on, now they are heroes, rulers and mentors. [. . .] What was once considered entertainment is now seen as taboo, what was then educational and cautionary is racist today” (1)—are rather imprecise and they imply what the thesis does not really argue: that now African-Americans are glorified by the movie industry and that racism is simply relative. The thesis, I think, largely points to the contrary.

The subsequent set of questions about stereotypes is crucial, although I am not always convinced by Ms. Žáčková’s answers. We read: “Being fed such an amount of clichés based on race, do we possess the ability to recognize the borderline between what is still a stereotype and what can be already considered accurate?” (3) Is the answer that we each get to decide, i.e. that “everyone criticizing a film or being involved in a production of a film holds his or her own specific opinion on what is still a stereotype and what is already a faithful interpretation” (49)? Is it true that “each individual has its own opinion on how reality should be reflected on screen, disregarding of the person’s race or status, and most importantly, he or she is free to express that opinion today” (47)? Should there be perhaps at least some discussion of power?

Is a stereotype different from a type? Gerima seems to make a distinction when he argues that “he knows a great number of people who are fast to analyze certain African American ‘types’ as stereotypes” (12).

In the Conclusion, it is argued that “we all, regardless of race, have to recognize that the omnipresence of stereotypes in our society, our minds and of course, our films is, indeed, very strong and it would probably be even unnatural to try to dispose of them completely” (50). Why would it be “unnatural” to dispose of stereotypes?

Finally, the chapter that discusses the experience of African American movie-going is captivating and it compensates for the somewhat problematic remarks about sheepish
audiences that appear elsewhere in the thesis; i.e. when it is argued that “today’s moviegoers are not a complicated crowd, they are easy to please. Yet, sadly, easy to be influenced by what is served to them on the screen” (49). Of course, “they” in this sentence is also “us”—and has not this thesis demonstrated that “we” are not so easy to influence and please? Nevertheless, having said that, I think the text can be graded excellent (výborně).

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August 31, 2011