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REFLECTIONS ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF A FILM TREATING
AMERICAN NEGROES, FOR DISTRIBUTION OVERSEAS

JAMES BLUE

Of all our American problems, that of racism is the one for which we are the most criticized overseas. It is the aspect of American life for which we are the most mistrusted. It is not, however, the one which is the most clearly understood. The foreign conception of the general, social and economic status of the negro in American life is perhaps distorted and an attempt to correct this conception, if successful, would be certainly desirable.

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President emphasized the need for strong action in a moral crisis. The realization of this need should play a part in the film program. Nowhere does the President dilute the strength of his attitude with any mention of progress already made. The overtly positive "progress" film might come, then, not only as an attitude curiously out of place in the recent complex of events, but as a danger to the great overseas propaganda value of the President's speech and of the strong intransigent policy implied therein.

Mr. Hobart Taylor, Executive Vice Chairman of the President's committee on equal opportunity, expressed in an informal interview on June 11 the following attitudes to such a film:

"Of course, when you start talking about progress, you're losing track of the issue. The issue is the DE-RACIALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN MIND." He feels that such a film would be paternalistic, and that it is possible that the foreigner "has a fundamentally accurate view" of the United States. Later he told me: "I would say that most of these people (Negroes in the USA) are living under conditions that are entirely inconsistent with our concept. That it's been bad; and it's still bad.....I think you've got to say that part of it is our federal form of government and part of it is that we haven't grown up. I just don't know how you can get around saying it because the other fellow knows it." "...you cannot really talk about progress because it's still on too small

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a base. Everything is relative and this is relative to too little, and if you aren't going to do anything factual, I don't think it's worth the time to take intelligent people to do a propaganda job."

I have felt for some time that the only way to make an effect abroad, is to present a film which hits squarely into the sensitive area of American racism, condemning it forcefully on moral grounds. Coming directly from the U. S. Government, such a film dealing with Birmingham, Little Rock and Oxford would catch the foreign spectator off balance. He would expect us rather to "white-wash" the situation. By being honest, we could score very direct propaganda points overcoming a great deal of his lack of confidence in our motives.

The film I propose would not avoid acknowledging the sensationalistic aspects of the race problem that are known around the world. In condemning them, we could even destroy the propaganda value of such scenes in the hands of those who want to mar our image.

This, however, is far from being the goal of the proposed picture. I hope to communicate, sometimes by touching upon effective historical material, a profile of prejudice and discrimination as a phenomenon deeply rooted in human nature. I want to transmit this profile in terms of the various and successive struggles on the part of both blacks and whites in the United States to gain

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ground for human rights. I would like to show the difficulties involved in uprooting prejudice. Instead of talking about the evolution and "progress" of the Negro, I want to talk about the evolution of his struggle and of the slow and cumbersome but sure evolution of the white man's mind.

There is, however, a way to imply progress. One of the most interesting things about the recent polarization of the Negro effort is that more and more the effective force is coming from the Negro middle class, a social group which has achieved a high economic and educational level. This, in fact, permits us to show progress on a social level even while we are talking about his struggle for human rights. For the struggle is more effective now that more of the Negroes have the tool of an educated mind. The fact that we are talking about a struggle for human rights lends believability to scenes which, in fact, imply social and economic growth. In my mind, scenes that are included only because they are designed to show progress look faked and are not believed by suspicious people. Whereas scenes which are believable because they show things that one would not ordinarily expect to see coming from the U. S. Government, could show progress through the surroundings of and clothes worn by the Negroes involved and their professional positions. Take, for example, an undeniable evidence of economic growth: ^{The effectiveness of} Negro boycotting of segregationist stores and busines.

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The effectiveness of the boycott is an indication of the Negro's own economic improvement. Our film, then, in treating openly the moral issue and the human issues involved, will be treating in a subliminal manner the evolution ("PROGRESS") of the Negro, thus correcting an overly simplified and distorted idea that most foreign nations have, without running the risks that a direct treatment or "Progress Report" might entail.

One of the important by-products of this film treated as a profile of the phenomenon of prejudice and the difficult and necessary struggle in the USA to overcome it, could be the implication that prejudice is a world-wide problem. It appears in human beings in so many places on this globe that a being from another world might think that it was as natural to us as breathing and, from our reluctance to give it up, maybe just as necessary. Nor was slavery a wholly American problem. Many other nations could be led through the film to share our guilt. Slaves were turned over by Negro chieftains to Arab traders who in turn sold them to European dealers who transported them on Dutch boats. Everyone was involved.

The principal goal of the film I propose is to make felt out of all of these considerations, the tremendous and exciting moral challenge that Americans must face right now if America is to continue as a great nation. That Americans who discovered a new land and built upon it a new nation and fought to establish

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a government founded upon new laws which guaranteed rights to everybody should not falter and fail because they could not finally conquer themselves. No other nation has yet faced up to this moral problem. No other nation has arrived at a point where its continued existence depended upon its ability to blot out of each of its citizens the age old pox of prejudice. If America can do this, it will lead the world not only in the ability to conquer outer space, but in the ability to conquer itself. I believe that this film - an official government film - should present the racial struggle in the United States as the focal point of an age old and world-wide struggle, and show that Americans as human beings are now called upon to face up to and overcome if their nation is to survive - something that other nations and peoples have hitherto avoided. Incorporated into this, the theme of progress of the Negro can be treated effectively almost without talking about it. What really appeals to me in the principal theme that I have outlined - the challenge of an age old moral issue that Americans must resolve if they are to continue to exist - is that such a film built upon this theme can elicit from the foreigner the tremendous sympathy that one has for those who are fighting with tremendous difficulty to overcome the human failings within themselves.

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