

# The Interracial Romance as Primal Drama: *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head*

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## Introduction

In the late-1950s and early-1960s, a new genre of Hollywood films explored the theme of the interracial romance. This filmic idiom was a contemporaneous response to a turbulent and questioning period in race relations in America. With advances in civil rights and an increasingly enlightened and more liberal post-war American society, the option of interracial dating became a topical issue. Though still largely taboo at the time between some racial groups, part of the allure of the idea of interracial romance may have been the way body colour operates as a marker for establishing genetic difference. As will be discussed, recent genetic research indicates that we use various signifiers to determine mate selection, difference being one of them. In 1950s–60s America, though, there were social strictures on selecting a mate from another ethnic group, particularly between whites and Afro-Americans.

In this article, I examine the way the new Hollywood interracial romance operated within a broader genre I have referred to elsewhere as 'primal drama', and consider its historical context and audience appeal.<sup>1</sup> The two principal case studies used to investigate this theme are *Touch of Evil* (1958), directed for Universal Pictures by Orson Wells, and *Diamond Head* (1963), directed for Columbia Pictures by Guy Green. Both films feature Charlton Heston, one of the leading box office actors, who was interviewed in preparation for this article, and whose star persona is a dominant feature in reappraising the films' import.<sup>2</sup>

The genre I term 'primal drama' often features representations of the Other as its subject. It does



• Fig. 1: Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh in *Touch of Evil* (1958).

so in an attempt to present its core theme – that of our primal instinct for survival. In turn, the primal drama provides a model for analysing forms of human behaviour as perceived at the time of the film's conception. Primal narratives are necessarily reductive to permit the viewer to confront issues of survival, sexuality, self-sufficiency, exotic natural environments, and both the appeal and the threat of the Other. In *Touch of Evil*, Charlton Heston's character (Ramon Miguel 'Mike' Vargas) is the Other and serves as the object of racist taunts (Figure 1), whereas in *Diamond Head* Heston plays the role of a bigot (Richard 'King' Howland). At a time in America when race relations were undergoing a public upheaval, studios and filmmakers who wanted to capitalise on such topics did so in ways that were palatable to censors and commercially viable with potential audiences. As a genre, the interracial romance had its own benefits for tackling issues associated with race relations, allowing the filmmaker to make certain moral and ethical points that in any other genre might be less effective.

*Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* make for an intriguing comparison. The former was not

particularly successful upon its release, but has come to be lionized as one of the great films in cinema history. *Diamond Head*, by contrast, was a mainstream studio picture that was commercially popular, but which has subsequently slipped from view and about which little has been written critically. The industry trade magazine, *Variety*, did not think highly of the film when it was released, announcing that 'beneath this alluring veneer lurks a contrived and banal melodrama of bigotry and bloodlines in modern, heterogeneous Hawaii'.<sup>3</sup> Both films were adaptations from novels: *Touch of Evil* from *Badge of Evil* (1956) by Robert Wade and William Miller who together used the penname Whit Masterson, and *Diamond Head* from a book by the same title written by Peter Gilman and published in 1960.<sup>4</sup> Quickly brought to the screen, the novels presented interracial issues that were transfigured in key ways when adapted for the cinema. Previously, Hollywood's censorship code specifically disallowed films that featured acts of miscegenation.<sup>5</sup> The word 'miscegenation', derived from the Latin *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race), became enshrined in a series of state statutes throughout the U.S. outlawing interracial liaisons.

### Historical Backdrop to the Interracial Romance

In addition to featuring the same star and themes of racial prejudice and interracial romance, the two films provide neat historical bookends with their release dates of 1958 and 1963. With the rise of the civil rights movement in America and its violent backlash, racial issues were at the forefront of the domestic political scene, marked by events that included the arrest in 1955 of Rosa Parks for violating city bus segregation laws, and the lynching that same year of 14-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till for flirting with a white shop girl in Money, Mississippi. There followed the Little Rock Nine's attempts to enter high school aided by National Guard troops in 1957, the 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in, and the August 1963 Civil Rights march on Washington,

culminating in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I have a dream' speech. The year 1963 also saw a number of violent acts by opponents to civil rights, including the death of activist Medgar Evers, and the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama by Ku Klux Klan members that resulted in the deaths of four black schoolgirls – Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley. The following year, three Freedom Riders, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were murdered, shortly before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in voting, public accommodations and employment.

Marriage between blacks and whites was not completely unknown prior to the 1960s, in fact in the 1870s in Fort Mill, South Carolina, for example, there were 33 mixed race marriages, in 29 of which the woman was white.<sup>6</sup> In the main, though, such liaisons were strongly discouraged and couples could be ostracized, killed or punished under the law. Black men who were accused of raping white women were severely dealt with, as in the case of Jesse Washington, a 17-year old retarded farmhand who was castrated, mutilated, burned alive and lynched by a cheering mob. Both the mayor and the chief of police joined in the lynching, which took place in Waco, Texas in 1916. Lynching became a primary tool for terrorising the black community and deterring intimate relations between the races, particularly if initiated by black men. Genital mutilation was a common component of a lynching event, including cutting off the victim's penis and stuffing it in his mouth. Through the 1930s, 'lynching postcards' retained their popularity, often featuring the amused perpetrators. Of the 4,733 persons lynched between 1882 and 1959, 85% were in southern States, with events sometimes serving as a form of family entertainment attended by large crowds in the hundreds or thousands. Over 200 bills were submitted to the U.S. Congress to make lynching a federal crime, but all were defeated, and it was not until June 2005 that the United States Senate formally apologized for its inability to enact a federal anti-lynching law.

Interest in the taboo and unjust restrictions regarding sexual relations between blacks and whites became the subject of the romance novel, *Strange Fruit*, published by the southern writer Lillian Smith in 1944. It generated substantial national interest and controversy, selling 550,000 copies by May 1945. The story, which was based on a song by Billie Holliday about a lynching, revolves around a white man, Tracy Dean, and his love for a black woman, Nonnie Anderson, set in 1920s Maxwell, Georgia. In most southern states, miscegenation laws were passed making it illegal for members of different races to marry. In a 1955 decision of the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, a ringing endorsement for the doctrine of White supremacy concluded that the State's legitimate purposes were 'to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens' and to prevent 'the corruption of blood' of 'a mongrel breed of citizens', and 'the obliteration of racial pride'.<sup>7</sup> In June 1958, two residents of Virginia, Mildred Jeter, a black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were married in the District of Columbia. Shortly after their wedding the Lovings returned to Virginia and established their marital abode in Caroline County. A grand jury issued an indictment charging the Lovings with violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages, and in 1959 they pleaded guilty to the charge and were sentenced to one year in jail. The trial judge suspended the sentence on the condition that the Lovings leave the State and not return to Virginia together for 25 years. In his judgement he held the view that:

Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, 16 states still prohibited and punished marriages on the basis of racial classifications. A Gallup poll in 1958 found that only four percent of whites approved marriage between whites and blacks, and that in the south that figure was reduced to just one percent.<sup>9</sup> It was not until almost a decade later in June 1967

that the U.S. Supreme Court declared Virginia's anti-miscegenation statute unconstitutional in the case *Loving v. Virginia*, thereby ending all legal restriction to marriage based on race in the United States. Classic films that explored themes of racism and integration, such as *In the Heat of the Night* and the landmark *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, both of which starred Sidney Poitier, were not released until 1967. While these films dealt specifically with white versus black social issues, *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* can be seen as early forerunners of the genre. In fact, the same year that *Diamond Head* was released, Poitier won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in *Lilies of the Field* in 1963. Although often confirming racial stereotypes, films of this period were also developing black characters in more nuanced ways.<sup>10</sup> The previous year, Gregory Peck won the Best Actor Academy Award for his performance in another film on racial prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Given the sensitivity of the time, it is significant that *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* highlighted issues germane to contemporary black/white relations by setting them not in Middle America but in the less contentious transitory world of a Mexican/American border town and the distant and exoticized Hawaiian islands.

*Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head* thus followed a progressive trend of exploring racist attitudes towards people of colour through the vehicle of the interracial romance. Perhaps surprisingly, both Charlton Heston and director Guy Green remarked that the racial theme in *Diamond Head* was not their primary motivation, but rather that the story itself was captivating.<sup>11</sup> Notable earlier examples of the genre include *Duel in the Sun* (1942) and *The Searchers* (1956), which like *Diamond Head* presented opposition to people of mixed ancestry or 'half-breeds'. The figure of the half-breed gave filmmakers a unique dramatic opportunity to further investigate racial prejudices. In *The Searchers* when John Wayne, symbolic upholder of traditional American values and the patriarchal order, as the character Ethan Edwards shuns his adopted nephew Martin Pawley because he is one-eighth Cherokee – that



• Fig. 2: The interracial couple in *Pinky* (1949).

is one-eighth too much. The idea immediately conjures up the spectre of the Nazis' racial litmus test, in which the slightest drop of Jewish blood was sufficient to send an individual to Auschwitz. Coming so soon after the Nazi era, the poignancy of the film's message could hardly be lost. In fact, the original screenplay for *The Searchers* recorded the line as: 'one-fourth Cherokee'. That was crossed out in the script, and substituted with the figure 'one-eighth' in order to accentuate Ethan's extreme views on racial purity.<sup>12</sup>

Another early example of the interracial romance was Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949) released by Twentieth Century-Fox. The narrative featured a light skinned woman, Patricia 'Pinky' Johnson (Jeanne Crain) who 'passes' for white while training to be a nurse in the north.<sup>13</sup> Engaged to a white doctor (William Lundigan) and returning to visit her dark skinned grandmother (Ethel Waters) in the south, she comes into contact with racial prejudice which acts as a catalyst for bringing her romantic relationship to an end (Figure 2). The film, which starred Ethel Barrymore, was worthy and provocative enough to garner an Academy Award nomination for Jeanne Crain. The suggestion being advanced in *Pinky* that it is better to disavow the need for 'passing', and acknowledge the integrity of one's racial distinction, even at the price of sacrificing romance, carried mixed messages. It accepts racial divisions within American society and the inappropriateness of a black/white liaison, even between a woman who looks white (played by

a white actress) and a white man. In this way, the film aptly presages audience sympathies a decade later for the appealing Mexican lover, played by a white man in *Touch of Evil*.

Regardless of gender roles and whether the person of colour was in fact played by a white actor, in the 1940s–50s the interracial romance presented the potential risk of intimate association, rather than an acceptable societal paradigm. Other films of this period which touched on interracial relationships included *Island in the Sun* (1957), *Kings Go Forth* (1958) and *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959). Some other national cinemas, including France, were more open to exploring black/white relationships, as in *Le Blanc et Le Noir* (1931) in which a white married woman becomes pregnant by a black lover, though the film was not distributed in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Touch of Evil* and Heston's Star Persona**

Given his status, John Wayne's decision to play a role in *The Searchers* that was against type, in which his character as the hero was depicted from the outset as a blatant racist, substantially magnified the film's subtext and impact. The role of the star is fundamental in terms of how they function within the film text, and ideologically the way their presence corresponds to what Richard Dyer refers to as 'structured polysemy': namely, 'the multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced'.<sup>15</sup>

In his autobiography, Charlton Heston records his public opposition to racism during the 1960s, and includes a photograph in the book that shows him holding a placard, protesting against racial prejudice.<sup>16</sup> He took part in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 Washington march, and was photographed at the demonstration with Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier (Figure 3). His desire to transcend traditional racial stereotypes is given further credence by having appeared as Mercutio in a 1946 theatrical production of *Romeo and Juliet* in which half the cast was white and half



• Fig. 3: Charlton Heston, Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, March on Washington, DC, 1963.

black. In an interview with the actor published in 1974 he reflected on that era, stating that ‘the social comment implied in [certain films] was important to me’.<sup>17</sup> Although Heston later became known for holding strongly conservative political views, as symbolized by his speeches while President of the National Rifle Association (1997–2003), when interviewed by the author during this period he expressed pride in those of his film roles that advanced the theme of racial equality.<sup>18</sup>

Charlton Heston’s popularity was founded on two benchmark films, *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben Hur* (1959), for which he received the Academy Award for Best Actor. Heston’s star persona was infused with the aura of moral figures, such as Moses and Ben Hur, who were prepared to face death rather than compromise their beliefs. As a star, Heston embodies a social type, an idealized concept of how one should act.<sup>19</sup> In both *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur*, Heston’s character

is oppressed because of his Jewish ancestry. He is made a slave and we see him, bare-chested, in chains (Figure 4) – an image reprised in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), where again we see him subjugated and bare-chested in chains. Thus, *Touch of Evil*, which was bracketed by the release of *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur*, represents an important continuum in Heston’s evolution as a character subjected to racial prejudice.

In *Touch of Evil*, Heston’s Mike Vargas is a law official with the Mexican government, whose honeymoon with his young bride, Susan (Janet Leigh), is interrupted at the outset of the film by a murder. The Texan policeman in charge of the case is Frank Quinlan (Orson Welles), who immediately takes a dislike to Vargas, and sees him as an obstacle in his attempt to frame the suspect, Sanchez (Victor Milan), a Mexican shoe clerk. As an illicit counterpart to the interracial romance between Mike and Susan, Sanchez is a boyfriend of Marcia Linneker (Joanna Moore), the white American daughter of the wealthy murdered businessman.

From Quinlan’s first sneering remark to Vargas, ‘You don’t look like one of them . . . a Mexican, I mean’, the spectator feels flummoxed. After all, despite his darkened complexion, this is not a Mexican stereotype, but Charlton Heston, an all-American hero dressed in a well-cut suit:

I have Orson to thank for the fact that the part is as interesting as it was, because it was his idea to make it a Mexican detective, recalls Heston. I said, ‘I can’t play a Mexican detective!’ He said, ‘Sure you can! We’ll dye your hair black, and put on some dark makeup and draw a black moustache’ . . . And they did, and it’s plausible enough I suppose.<sup>20</sup>

It is Quinlan, with his bloated form, accentuated by Welles’ liberal use of the wide-angle lens, who is positioned as a figure of disgust. In this regard, his representation of the excesses of power mirrors his role in *Citizen Kane* (1941). The spectator’s natural sympathy, though, is with Heston. His star prestige underscores the inappropriateness of any racist attitude directed towards him. ‘*Touch of Evil* is about the decline and fall of Captain Quinlan’, observes Heston.



• Fig. 4: Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

'My part is a kind of witness to this'.<sup>21</sup> The suggestion that Mike and Susan's sexual relationship is injudicious is denoted three minutes into the film when the couple have just crossed over to the American side of the border. Their kiss is immediately interrupted by an explosion, a metaphorical retort signalling society's indignation. The bomb was placed by a Mexican, as we ultimately learn, in Linneker's car, ending his illicit relationship with a stripper. Vargas' response: 'This could be bad for us', can be variously interpreted, indicating the friction between white America and people of colour in the late-1950s.<sup>22</sup>

In this tangled eroticized racial web, the film positions Susan as the sexual aggressor and Mike as the distracted husband. The only time we hear him called by his Mexican forename, Miguel, is when she uses it in the heat of passion; thus encouraging the spectator to see him in the stereotype of the desirous Latin lover, despite his physical awkwardness. Rather than legitimize the relationship, Susan's advances serve to foreshadow her ultimate vulnerability, when she later becomes the victim of drug usage and implied gang rape by a group of Mexican youths.

Vargas spends much of the film with his Latin machismo constrained within a three-piece suit and an uncertain manner – ill at ease in negotiating interracial relations with his newlywed and her society's overbearing hegemony. Yet, his white bride quickly loses her clothing, her breasts projecting against a tight sweater under the scrutiny of an alien flashlight. Removing her top in front of an open window, she exposes herself to the scopophilic gaze of the inappropriate Mexican Other: Pancho, his leather-jacketed Mexican gang members, and Uncle Joe Grandi. The film is suggestive in its sexual overtones, but refrains from being explicit. The director explained: 'I do not like to show sex on the screen crudely. Not because of morality or Puritanism; my objection is of a purely aesthetic order.'<sup>23</sup>

As Terry Comito observes, Janet Leigh and Charlton Heston 'seem out of place in such a terrain'.<sup>24</sup> They constantly appear in a state of discomfort, as if the border between their two countries provides a liminal space in which neither can establish a comfort zone or secure their authority. The backdrop is one of destabilization, whether attempting to cross

the border, as they do at the outset of the film, or in close proximity on either side of it. The urban and rural settings are hostile, making them emblematic of society's dismay at their new and sexualized union. Ultimately, these factors encourage the couple's estrangement. In working against his traditionally over-confident persona, Heston felt that he 'probably learned more about acting in that film from Welles than I have in any one film from any director, which is not necessarily to say that I gave my best performance in it, because I don't think I did, but just about acting overall'.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Diamond Head* and the New Border**

When Columbia Pictures released *Diamond Head*, it was publicized as 'The Giant Story of Modern Hawaii' (Figure 5). The poster shows King with a whip, as he attacks a native Hawaiian, echoing the whipping of plantation slaves in the south, and of Afro-Americans in later years by the Ku Klux Klan. The word 'modern' in the headline refers to the fact that Hawaii became the country's fiftieth state in 1959, the year in which the film is set, and as such represented a new border territory. As with the locale for *Touch of Evil*, this narrative exists on the periphery of America's mainland – a transitional place where unseemly unions might take place without necessarily achieving society's blessing. Set on the beautiful island of Kauai, the narrative offers a subtextual examination of contemporary American race relations. *Diamond Head* was directed by an outsider, Guy Green, as his first film in America, having won an Academy Award at the age of 33 as director of photography on David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946). The British cinematographer also shot Lean's other Dickens classic, *Oliver Twist* (1948).

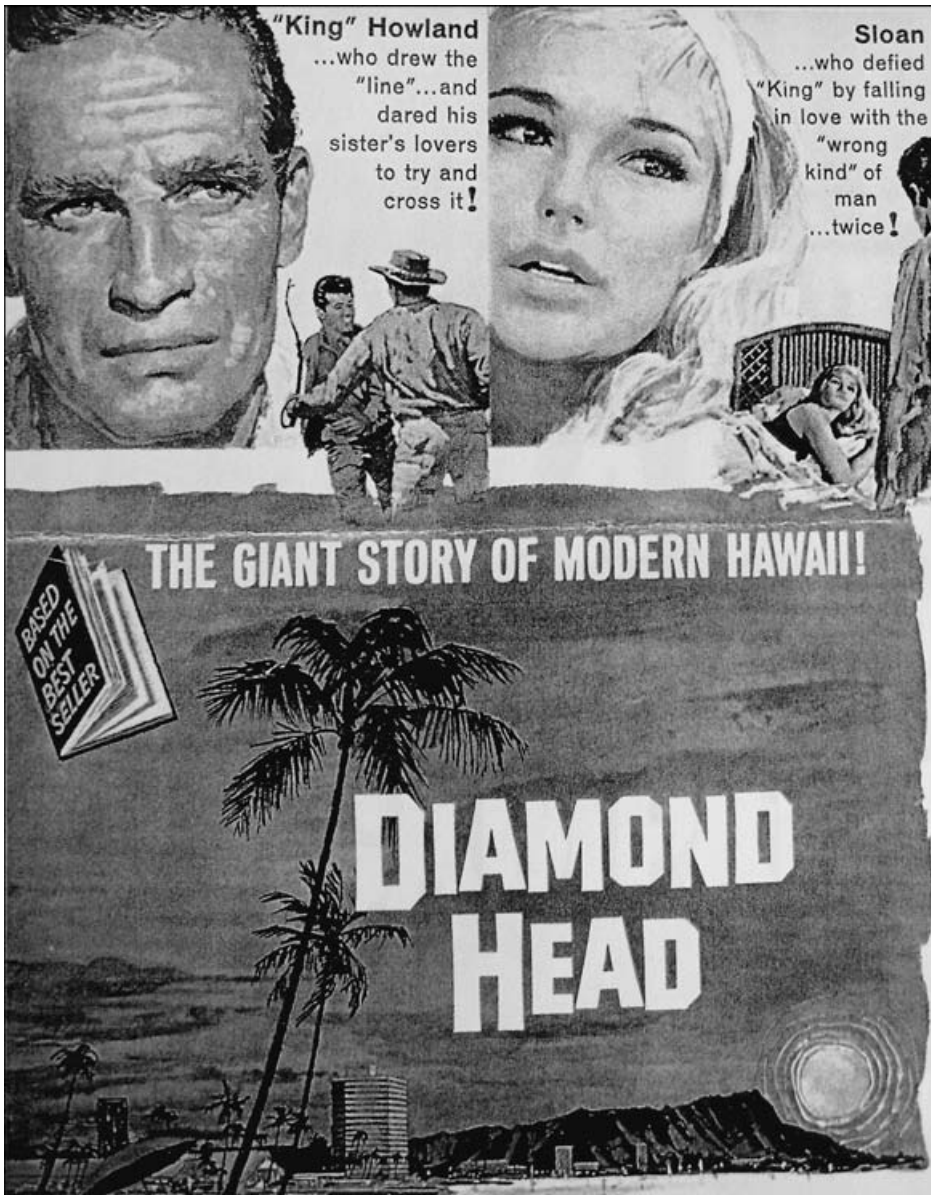
Charlton Heston's Howland is the proud scion of a blue blood family who has extensive plantations, cattle and shipping interests in Hawaii. His position as the symbolic patriarch is underlined by the nickname 'King', used by his sister Sloan (Yvette Mimieux) and others. Sloan defies King's objections to her engagement to a young Hawaiian man (Figure 6), Paul Kahana

(James Darren), and then after he is killed, falls in love with his half-brother Dean (George Chakiris). As if to underline the hypocrisy behind his own narrow-minded views, Howland has a Chinese-Hawaiian mistress, Lei Villanueva, (France Nuyen), whom he sleeps with but refuses to marry. After Lei becomes pregnant, King encourages her to have an abortion rather than risk a mixed race offspring inheriting his estate. When she dies giving birth to King's illegitimate child, he rejects not only the baby but also his sister and her Hawaiian lover. Following a torturous searching of his conscience, King decides in the closing minutes of the film that a humanistic approach to his blood kin is more important than upholding his stance on racial purity. His actions mirror those of John Wayne's character, Ethan Edwards, at the end of *The Searchers*, who rescues rather than kills his niece Debbie, who has been raised as a Native American.

Charlton Heston's Howland is a strong and decisive man in his prime, who is being headhunted by the politicians to become one of Hawaii's first senators. A synopsis of the film prepared by Columbia Studios' publicity department gives a colourful impression of Howland's exaggerated reputation:

The striding figure, the sure voice, and the hard money of Richard 'King' Howland (Charlton Heston) dominates the fertile island of Kauai. . . . The big 'H' is on the imposing gate of Manoalani, the plantation estate. . . . It stands for power. For both benefactor and bastard. Howland is Emperor of Kauai.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the feudal overtones and the image of a virile ruler occupying a fecund environment, Heston's figure is out of step with the modern world. His character has obvious similarities to the patriarch in *Duel in the Sun*, Senator McCanles (Lionel Barrymore), whose intolerance of Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones), a young woman of Mexican/Indian descent, is encrypted in the wheelchair that embodies the twisted perspectives that cripple his worldview. Howland's assumed moral authority and role as upholder of the status quo is signified by the white Cadillac he drives and the white stallion he rides. When Howland faces the severity of the



• Fig. 5: *Diamond Head* (1963) publicity poster.

racial views that separate him from his only close relatives, his son and his sister, he embarks upon a frenetic ride on his stallion. The white horse becomes lathered in sweat and covered in dirt, as does Howland, sullied with the distasteful

and outdated views he holds. His final act of redemption is to drive his convertible, with an empty bassinette in the back seat held by a sympathetic Chinese butler, in search of his mixed-race son, his sister and her mixed-race





• Fig. 6: *Diamond Head* (1963) poster insert.

fiancée – a bold new paradigm for the multi-cultural American nuclear family of the future.

The representation of the three principal Hawaiians in the film, Paul and Dean Kahana and their mother is telling. The actor selected for the role of Paul was James Darren, a singer and performer popular with teenage audiences, ensuring that his character would attract sympathy and throw doubt on the racism he is subjected to. George Chakiris, fresh from winning an Academy Award for his role as Bernardo in *West Side Story* (1961), was cast as Dean, a ‘hapa-haole’, half-white and half-native Hawaiian – a character who operates across racial boundaries like Martin Pawley in *The Searchers*. In a confrontation with Dean 22 minutes into the film near the beginning of Act II, Howland remarks: ‘Let’s take a look at you. A hapa-haole. Two people jumping around inside the same skin. It’s so crowded in there you can’t sit, stand or lie down.’

The Hawaiian brothers are depicted not as beach boys, but as college educated and cosmopolitan. Dean is a doctor – another device used to legitimate the worthiness of Sidney Poitier’s character, Dr. Prentice, as a suitor for Joanna Drayton in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Dean Kahana rises in his role as a

self-styled advocate for change, following Martin Luther King, Jr’s Gandheisque model of non-violence, positioned in marked contrast to Howland’s fierce demeanour. Despite his high standing as a wealthy white rancher, King represents a backward and rural past – until he demonstrates an ability to change.

### Adapting the Novels

While *Touch of Evil* bears many similarities to the novel on which it is based, the two differ in salient ways that highlight the degree to which Welles decided to foreground the racial theme. In the novel, the bomb explodes in the victim’s San Diego beach house, rather than at the Mexican border. As a place and space, the border provides Welles with greater opportunity to explore racial intersections. The hero of the novel is not the Mexican Mike Vargas, but Mitch Holt, an Anglo-Saxon married to a Mexican named Connie. As John Stubbs notes, ‘American prejudice against Mexicans, crucial in the movie, is not a major issue in the novel.’<sup>27</sup> However, towards the end of the novel when Connie is being implicated in drug usage, Mitch Holt warns the district attorney that: ‘On top of everything else, she’s of Mexican descent. You can make a lot out of that because,

as every American jury knows, it's the foreign-born that cause all our crime and vice'.<sup>28</sup> His comment echoes long-standing nativistic perspectives.

Welles also transformed the shoe clerk engaged to Linneker's daughter into a Mexican. The switch allows Welles' character to frame an individual of minority background with the crime, thereby playing to the scapegoat fear, while Vargas, of the same ethnic origin, is able to assist his countryman by uncovering the crime, and exposing Quinlan to investigation. Despite his brutal tactics, Quinlan's hunch proves to be right. Welles also changes the ethnicity of the novel's gangster family, the Buccios, from Italians to the Mexican Grandis. Welles has refigured the locale and the racial roles in order to maximize the dramatic opportunities for interracial conflict. By altering the focus from Mitch as the central character in the book to Quinlan in the film version, Welles assures that the perpetrator of racial prejudice occupies centre stage. 'He totally re-wrote the script in about seventeen days, which I knew he would,' recalled Charlton Heston following his agreement to do the picture if the studio appointed Welles as director.<sup>29</sup>

Peter Gilman's novel differs in various ways from the film adaptation of *Diamond Head*, but the main characters and essential themes of cultural difference, interracial romance and social acceptance are transferred to the screen version. In its review of the film, the *LA Times* noted that such 'cattle-baron-dynasty affairs . . . usually take place close to the Mexican border, so that racial conflicts can be added to all the others'.<sup>30</sup> Although both Charlton Heston and Guy Green were drawn to the screenplay, written by Marguerite Roberts, neither had read the novel.<sup>31</sup> Gilman is forthright in his descriptions of King Howland's racial attitudes (he is called Aaron Howland in the novel) and associates being native Hawaiian with blackness. When Sloan first mentions that she is going out on a date with Paul Kahana, Howland's response is:

I've got nothing against him. Except that he's not for you. Why? I mean, how do you seem so sure? Why? Goddamn it, Sloan, he's black, that's why, Aaron said irritably. It's one thing being friendly and cordial with

these people, to go out with them is another matter. You of all people. Be friendly with them, Sloan. But don't – well, never get too close.<sup>32</sup>

In the film, this line is given to King's sister, Laura, who retains her contemptuousness of Hawaiians throughout the story: 'At least Paul has always known his place. . . . Now, it's one thing to be friends with these people, if you must . . . ' The rhetoric of both Laura and King correspond to rigid, stereotyped views of the Other and a fear of miscegenation.

As a contemporary drama set in Hawaii around the time of the book's publication in 1960, it would have been out of keeping for a Hawaiian-born white man to refer to a native Hawaiian as being 'black'. It is more likely that the author is using the premise of racial conflict to reflect mainland black/white relations. What makes it doubly unusual in this context is that during the civil rights era there were few such public tensions between Hawaii's multi-cultural (white, Chinese, Japanese, Philippino and native Hawaiian) communities. The author makes reference to this point later in the book, perhaps in an effort to emphasize Howland's bigotry. A visitor to the islands observes: 'Perhaps, she thought, this land in the middle of the vast sea was a real racial paradise. Or as close to one as could be fashioned. There were thirty different racial groups in the Territory, and never a race riot.'<sup>33</sup> However, in an exchange in the novel between King and Dean, King underlines his objections to interracial couplings: 'If these – these mixed marriages are becoming more accepted nowadays, it doesn't make them more correct. It's just a sign of our decaying standards and ideals. A lessening of human dignity for both races involved.'<sup>34</sup>

Hawaii, where mixed marriages were commonplace, provides the artificial setting for a verbal exchange that was more indicative of debates relating to racial attitudes in mainland America. This approach is germane to the film and the book, rather than a subtext imposed by the filmmakers. Howland's position as a segregationist is given further elaboration when he says to Paul Kahana: 'Don't you tell me what



• Fig. 7: Dream sequence in *Diamond Head* (1963).

to do, you lousy nigger! . . . Look, boy, maybe my bird brained sister turned out a nigger-lover, but that doesn't mean the whole Howland family can be pushed around and degraded!'<sup>35</sup> He goes on to call Paul a 'Gook bastard!'<sup>36</sup> This rhetoric in the book is substantially toned down in the film, and the direct association with Afro-Americans made more discrete.

### **The Interracial Romance and Its Genetic Appeal**

A rationale for the considerable public interest stimulated by the interracial romance genre may be found in recent genetic research on mate selection. In studies conducted with mice and humans, researchers have established a connection between odour preferences and MHC (major histocompatibility complex) genes – which encode the proteins that make up a vital part of our immune system.<sup>37</sup> These indicate that our natural instinct is to seek out mates who offer a greater degree of genetic difference. This way of assisting sexual selection by using scent to distinguish between individuals with similar or dissimilar genotypes, abets humans and other animals to avoid inbreeding and minimize the risk of copying mutations that could result in birth defects and greater susceptibility to disease.

Studies in which participants identify body odour on T-shirts worn by the opposite sex they

find least and most appealing, demonstrate that females prefer MHC-dissimilar over MHC-similar males, resulting in greater offspring heterozygosity and viability. This outcome signifies the potential fitness benefits of preferences based on those qualities. Since infant health is critical for evolutionary success, our conscious desire and our apparent latent ability to assist mate selection by opting for difference goes to the heart of this article in regard to the role it reflects in filmic representations of interracial romance. Our flexibility in mate selection is traditionally mediated by familial pressures and expectations, which are themselves presaged by social and cultural boundaries. Taboos against forging intimate relationships in America between whites and blacks, particularly in the 1950s–60s, as discussed above, acted as both a restriction and potential attraction.

Skin colour provides an instant and visible marker for ancestral geographical difference, and hence potential favourability for MHC-dissimilar mate selection. The interracial romance as primal drama therefore responds to our genetic survival instincts. *Diamond Head* presents a clear illustration of this point, when in the film King appears to have incestuous desires for his sister Sloan. In a dream sequence while the two are bathing, she imagines him as her lover – a cultural taboo that corresponds to a deleterious genetic outcome (Figure 7). Even the trade



• Fig. 8: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967).

journal *The Hollywood Reporter's* review at the time mentioned the film's implied incest subtext.<sup>38</sup> The supposition is advanced that such is his desire to retain a 'pure' bloodline, that failing to find an appropriate white suitor, he imagines a sexual union with his sister, rather than permit her to cross the colour bar. Thus the film implicitly balances two genetic alternatives, allowing the audience to evaluate the merits of each.

Successful liaisons rely on more than 'good (genetically enhancing) chemistry', but are also determined by sufficient shared values, cultural commonalities and social acceptance. By the time the Civil Rights movement had led to a more liberal social climate and greater racial sensitivity in American society, the 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, was able to conclude with a successful liaison between a black man and a white woman (Figure 8). But, it only occurs because Sidney Poitier's character is highly educated, charismatic and exceptionally accomplished professionally; and his lover's family are liberal and affluent, living in that most liberal of American cities – San Francisco. The fact that they have a black maid (Tillie Binks, who

speaks her mind but 'knows her place') is an indicator of racial roles linked to the country's slave past, and a comment on received views on racial typecasting and traditional employment prospects. It is not until Katherine Hepburn's character (Christina Drayton) agrees to the suitability of the match, and Spencer Tracy's character (Matt Drayton) carefully works through the pros and cons in a public forum and bestows his secular blessing, sanctified by his priest friend's approval (Monsignor Ryan), that the interracial union is allowed to proceed.

The Academy Award Katherine Hepburn received for her performance as the understanding and supportive parent in the film was, in part, tacit approval of Hollywood's desire to embrace a new open-mindedness. The crux of this integrationist drama performed a bridge to white society's long-standing fear of black penetration of the white woman. Maid Tillie (Isabelle Sanford) observes, 'Civil Rights is one thing, but this here is another!' Hepburn and Tracy's careful reasoning is too early historically for either *Touch of Evil* or *Diamond Head*, where even attractive and professionally talented members of other races (relying on heavy make-up in Heston's case) who are not actually black are still castigated. Fear of black penetration is made explicit in Heston's speech in *Diamond Head*:

These islands are the showcase of the United States.

The place where we prove to all the races of the world that all men are equal in all things. This is where we open all doors to all people [but]. . . Not the door to my sister's bedroom.

Although *Diamond Head* is a forerunner of black/white interracial romances (a.k.a. *Guess Who's Coming to the Luau*), it and *Touch of Evil* result in characters being subjected to violence or death. The travails suffered by the main characters and the hostility they endure corresponds to the violent racial conflict American society was experiencing at the time. In 1965, for example, a white woman, Viola Liuzzo, was shot dead for sitting in the front seat of a car with a black man in Selma, Alabama; and in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., who received the

Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee the year after *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released. In *Touch of Evil* the white lover is attacked, and in *Diamond Head* the Hawaiian fiancée is stabbed to death. Both films are examples of primal dramas, signposting our on-going obsession with cultural and ethnic difference, theories of racial superiority, and a desire to imagine the Other's landscape as an exotic site to be controlled. The role of the star within a primal drama serves to accentuate these areas of interest and conflict, while steering the spectator towards a particular moral judgment.

Despite the tentative advances made in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, 40 years later there remains a dearth of mainstream Hollywood films that present black/white sexual relationships.<sup>39</sup> In films such as *The Pelican Brief* (1993), *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *I, Robot* (2004) and *Inside Man* (2005), the black and white leads are not permitted to go further than assisting each other. While interracial liaisons are commonplace in film narratives, Hollywood's social restrictions on black/white romances continue to be the rule. Some borders are hard to cross, irrespective of instinctual genetic desire.

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