We Are All *Sinners*: Race and American Identity in Coogler's Racial Project

Branching from the Marvel and Rocky universes, Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025) stands as a racial project, addressing themes of Black identity and societal liberation in the form of a vampire-horror narrative. In this genre-bending horror, twins Smoke and Stack (Michael B. Jordan), return to Mississippi looking to open a juke joint with their guitarist cousin, Sammie, whose music unleashes a supernatural force. Through *Sinners*' setting in the Jim Crow South, the film critiques the deep entanglement of American identity with Whiteness and Christianity. In contrast to the protagonists' Black community, which champions spiritual and ancestral connection through music, the villains in the film propose a substanceless escape from racist society by creating a literal vampiric "hive mind" which merges the characters' identities into one communal consciousness. Central to understanding the social and political critiques in the film is the stylistic use of a full circle ending, allowing for a secondary viewing of the opening sequence, and simple cinematography paired with casual, conversational dialogue. In this paper, I will examine how Coogler's film utilizes cinematic elements which invite a broader conversation about race, specifically connecting to W.E.B. DuBois' double-consciousness and bell hooks' "Oppositional Gaze."

Before analyzing the theoretical work of the film, I will establish why *Sinners* functions as a "racial project". Omi and Winant define this term as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganise and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi, Winant 406). Through flashbacks and a circular ending, *Sinners* pushes viewers to reinterpret earlier scenes with the insight gained by the end of the film. Concurrently, the reexamination prompts viewers to question their initial interpretations and reactions. The hope is that the ideological work in Coogler's film, which I will unravel in the

next paragraphs, reorganizes and redistributes racial ideas for the audience, causing them to internally assess their biases and ideology.

Following the title screen, *Sinners* dives into its main themes using Sammie's abstract introduction to set up important context about race and spirituality. This opening scene challenges viewers to confront their racial biases and forces them to question whether Sammie is a victim or villain, while also commenting on the historical positioning of Black bodies within spaces of Christianity. In the opening long take, Sammie, the aspiring guitarist cousin of the twins, drives up to a white, windowless church as a young choir sings "This Little Light of Mine." In this established religious setting, he walks up to the entrance with the broken neck of a guitar, his intentions unknown to the viewer. In the film's opening minute, Sammie is introduced as a Black man with a weapon, suggested to be a potential villain or a danger to the community. Furthermore, once he enters the church, a series of shots which intercut between him, the preacher (also his father), and flashes of vampires, continue to disorient the viewer. Instead of laying out Sammie's role as a villain or hero, the audience is left questioning if he has been an accomplice to violence or if he has been the force pushing back against it. The stylistic choice of working backwards from the ending of the film creates an opportunity for the audience to formulate their own backstory about Sammie, therefore allowing Coogler to rewrite the audiences' fabricated narratives following the opening sequence.

The composition of the scene, specifically costuming and allegorical references, continue the film's work as a racial project, representing racial dynamics in conversation with religion. Covered in torn bloody clothes, Sammie creates a stark contrast to the "clean" and unscathed presence of the church. His ragged clothing and "dirty" appearance starkly contrast the pristine white interior, where other Black Americans are dressed in white, positioning him as a misfit in

the church. When he enters the church, his father (the preacher), begins to recite “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a dramatic depiction of God’s wrath upon unbelievers. This historical reference points to the exploration of Sammies’ story of faith and redemption. Simultaneously, his stark contrast to the others in the Church comments on Black Americans’ positions in an America dominated by White Christians who weaponize their religion. This racial representation is further reinvisioned by the end of the film as the audience reframes the narrative through reflecting on the work.

The circular nature of the film draws framework from W.E.B DuBois’ term, the double consciousness. In his book, “The Souls of Black Folk,” DuBois states that Black Americans are “gifted with second-sight” which causes them to “always [look] at one's self through the eyes of others” (DuBois 3). In this sense, he argues that Black people are not only conscious of their existence as Americans, but also how they are perceived to be American by the dominant group (White Christians). Coogler, a Black American himself, strategically utilizes the theory about the double unconscious to make a statement in the opening scene of *Sinners* by intentionally permitting the audience to believe Sammie may be the “monster” in order to align with the vilification of the image of a Black American with a weapon. Coogler, a Black American himself, is intentional with the abstract introduction, using it in order to confront the viewer with their own unconscious perception of Black Americans. Thus, by repeating the same sequence as the ending, this time intercutting with emotional flashbacks, the double consciousness is brought into harmony for a complete understanding after witnessing the brutal metaphorical fight for racial equality. This allows them to read the same scene through the context of a Black American, mostly due to the use of flashbacks which recalibrate the viewer with instances from the film which aim to ground their new interpretation of the opening sequence.

In *Sinners*, the vampires represent a greater societal evil who suggest an escape from this double consciousness into a communal hive mind. In the film, once a character turns into a vampire, their memories are merged with and shared among the other infected characters. At first, this can seem as a solution to DuBois' double consciousness as he states Black Americans have a "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge [their] double self into a better and truer self" (DuBois 3). Yet, because assimilating into the vampire hivemind requires death, it ultimately strips characters of their Black American individuality, identity, and culture. Coogler strategically employs vampires, entities who must be invited indoors, as the oppositional force to suggest a level of agency and reciprocity necessary to join them. The villains are polite, asking for permission to enter spaces and using gently persuasive conversations to lure others in. Remmick, the "lead" vampire, acts as the head of the hive mind, but unlike other vampire horror films, his followers are equally powerful, if not more efficient in luring their family members from the new juke joint into joining the collective consciousness.

While the first hour of the film is spent building up the richness of Black histories, the latter half is both thematically and spatially centered around the juke joint. This setting and the stylistic use of simple cinematography are crucial elements in completing the work of the racial project. The juke joint thus serves as the film's central haven for Black American culture which resists the hive mind through musical expression. Although there's more physical space and an illusion of community among the vampires, the night's dark emptiness contrasts the vampires' taunts which tempt those insides to take the easy way out and join the collective. Coogler pairs the setting with simple stylistic choices which steer the audience to primarily focus on the dialogue at hand. The closeness of the over-the-shoulder shots and (at times) lack of visual stimulation create an emphasis on sound and storytelling which reveal the easy-goingness of the

villains and lack of verbal violence. In this confrontation between Remmick and the survivors inside the juke joint, he reveals that the property was built on lies. In a flashback sequence, the audience learns that Hogwood, the property owner, who claimed "the Klan don't exist no more," had always intended to reclaim his land through brute force. Thus, instead of death through the Klan, Remmick persuasively offers the survivors an "out," essentially saying, if you can't beat them (the Klan/racism), join them (the vampires) in death. In a way, the closeness of the shots and mellow, polite dialogue almost causes the viewer to empathize with the monsters. The scene begs the question: Is complicity the worst outcome?

This scene in *Sinners* further reorganizes and redistributes racial dynamics through the shot choices and dialogue in a key scene between Smoke and his now vampire twin, Stack. Their conversation exemplifies bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze. Within this theory, hooks pulls from Foucault, when she states "that in all relations of power 'there is necessarily the possibility of resistance.'" (hooks 116). The film then prompts viewers into searching for "those margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found," primarily through the composition of the shots. Continuing with the visual simplicity, the emphasis is placed on the brothers' conversation where Stack urges his brother to join the collective, telling him, "We was never gonna be free. We were running around that way looking for freedom. You know damn well we was never gonna find it. Until this. This is the way" (*Sinners* 1:43:19). The shots, primarily single close-ups, isolate their conversation and thus uncover how the dialogue appeals to the trauma of racial inequality and the seductive promise of death as freedom. Stack conceals the confinement and cultural stripping within the hive mind by masking his death as a form of agency. But, Coogler instead plants agency in other gaps such as Sammie's resistance to the vampires and commitment to building Black community through music. Thus, Sammie,

whose ambiguous introduction prompts the audience to explore their perceptions of racial dynamics, becomes a metaphor for the oppositional gaze. Poetically, he embodies hooks' theory as the second time we see the opening scene, his body is a site of resistance just as the oppositional gaze.

The limitations of this paper restrict further exploration of hooks' theory in relation to Black female spectatorship. As mentioned in lecture, this theory necessitates a refusal to participate in gendered looking where Black female spectators choose not to identify with the picture since it's dis-enabling. It's important to know that this film does center around a male-dominant narrative, and the audience has been critical of how *Sinners* perpetuates the Mammy stereotype through Annie's character. Interestingly, the film also utilizes a somewhat outdated practice (the crossfade) to transition between scenes. Akin to Pedro Almodóvar's 2004 film, *Bad Education*, I believe this practice emphasizes how the film's racial commentary blends across generations, especially through the final scene set in 1992 with grown-up Sammie confronted by the vampires once again. Coogler ends this film with a clear message: Jim Crow history is more recent and prevalent than we think. *Sinners* works as a racial project to bring this to light by "reorganis[ing] and redistribut[ing] resources along particular racial lines" through its cyclical narrative and emphasis on dialogue over complex visual stimulation.

Works Cited

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