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Alice

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Alice

Abstract

This is a film review of *Alice* (2022), directed by Krystin Ver Linden.

Keywords

Slavery, Blaxploitation Films

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Alice (2022), dir. Krystin Ver Linden

Krystin Ver Linden’s provocative dramatic feature, *Alice*, begins with a black woman, electrically played by Keke Palmer, running through a forest in what looks like colonial dress. She stops, she screams—and that’s when, in odd stylistic contrast, the film’s title flashes bright yellow across the screen, in the rounded Cooper font familiar to 1970s Blaxploitation films.

Immediately, we are sent back in time to reveal how Alice, a house slave in the service of Mr. Paul (Johnny Lee Miller), ended up on the run. Readable markers of the deep South cinematically entice—dangling Spanish moss, the drone of cicadas. Indeed, the green and brown hues of the film’s first half give off the aura of a story that has been lifted out of the soil. So, too, are there readable markers of a master-slaves relationship on the edge of breaking: a marriage on the sly between Alice and fellow slave Joseph; whispers as they conspire how to escape; and Mr. Paul’s tightening and conjointly

unraveling hold on his “domestic livestock”: whippings, manacles, even a bridle for insubordinate slaves’ heads. Perhaps Mr. Paul asserts his dominance out of fear of the ratio of their 12 to his 1, a proportional relationship that has not escaped Alice when it comes to strategies for escape. Or maybe Mr. Paul really does think himself a victim: “What did I do to deserve this?” he bewails when fettering and putting Alice into that iron muzzle because of her having attacked and attempted to choke him to death.

Everything additionally signals *when* we are: from the local church service where slaves are made to sit outside the wooden chapel and the fields where, under Mr. Paul’s vigilant eye, they hack away at sugarcane; to 1885’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, which Alice reads out loud to Mr. Paul (it’s for this purpose that he taught her to read)—sometimes followed by his coercing her to meet him in his room for sexual servicing. At the least, this gives her time to peruse—and stealthily borrow from—his collection of books. When she puts her face next to a sketch of Anna Karenina from inside the pages of that eponymous novel, the juxtaposition is quietly fierce: What is the suffering of a bourgeois Russian female in comparison to that of an enslaved woman about to be raped?

Things take an unexpected turn when Mr. Paul’s young son, Daniel, arrives for a visit from town where Mr. Paul’s wife prefers to dwell. Alice hears strange, almost extraterrestrial noises emanating from Daniel’s room, a bizarreness only complicated by Mr. Paul’s ailing mother’s equally peculiar statements: “The whole world [is out there], don’t you see it?” And then there is the story told by one of the slaves of how his grandfather long ago witnessed a black man falling from the sky right onto their property. Upon digging for that aerial visitor’s buried corpse, Joseph finds—of all things—a silver pocket lighter. (Did those even exist in the late nineteenth century?) But for Joseph it’s

proof that, beyond their environs, there is “something from somewhere, someone from someplace ... Someone like us. There’s more than we know. More than we can see.”

This, Alice will discover firsthand when, after having stabbed Mr. Paul in the eye, she manages to escape (recall her racing and then stopping in the forest to scream). But that “somewhere” turns out to be something shockingly unexpected. Not only does she find herself on the road of an unknown “someplace,” that road happens to be a highway, and the year happens to be 1973. Slavery, it turns out, legally ended over a century before. This, she learns from Frank (Common), the African American semi driver and politically deflated former civil rights activist, who picks her up on that highway (after almost hitting her). With his genial assistance, Alice starts to piece together this new “New World”: No, those aren’t domestics tending the fields, but employees; no, those aren’t “little people” but Sanford and his son on a small screen, followed by a televised interview of that “baddest chick around,” the doyenne of Blaxploitation film heroines, Pam Grier.

It’s while on her own at Frank’s place one day that the extent of the nation’s political and cultural transformation transforms her. Thanks to Frank’s collection of books, photographs, records, and more, Alice learns—admittedly, a tad too swiftly for this viewer, given the measured nature of all that precedes it—everything from the history of the word *slave* and the contents of the Emancipation Proclamation to the specifics of the civil rights movement and the legacies of Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers. As if now emboldened *to be*, to inhabit an identity all her own, “It’s Alice,” she tells Mr. Paul’s wife whom she reaches by telephone. “I’m free.”

While a film that may have been “inspired by true events”—because in the deepest reaches of the South, people *really were* kept enslaved on plantations into the 1960s—*Alice* indubitably takes great license with that historical truth. That’s in no small measure because the film ultimately *becomes* a 21st-century Blaxploitation film, with Alice, now sporting an Afro and black sleeveless turtleneck, ready to execute a Grier-like vengeance on Mr. Paul. The showdown (with guns, gasoline, and that silver pocket lighter) is consciously pulpy and Tarantino-esque. It’s also a tonal shift that may delight some viewers, given the way Ver Linden flips the conventional slavery narrative, exploding it from the inside in ways that assert not toothless subservience, but vitalized female Black Power. Ultimately, she gives us a debut film that is entirely bracing—because of its willingness to risk such bold moves.