Concept of Inspiration in John Mueller's Book on Fred Astaire: Analytical Essay

In the introduction to John Mueller's book on Fred Astaire, he quotes several critics and dancers on how Astaire's work in Hollywood shows "genius", and that for Astaire, artistry "just happens." But artistry never "just happens", it takes its inspiration from elsewhere and repurposes it. Astaire is famous in Hollywood for his dance routines in musicals, routines which he had control over not only choreographically, but also cinematographically. Astaire was not a director, but as a star he increasingly had a great element of creative control. His dance routines however owe a lot to black dancers whose work would never be given this accolade of "genius". Tap dancing stemmed from a mixture of Irish step dancing and African American buck dancing, a synthesis of black and white cultures, but on screen, black and white dancers are rarely seen performing together. Joel Dinerstein identifies the ways in which Astaire's tapping style is derived from African American techniques, with his use of the whole foot and a heavier tap sound. Todd Decker comments on how race affected the Hollywood musical, but mainly points to the lack of black stars as the consequence of this racism. However, Hollywood's racism is not just about these stars, but rather is embedded even when black actors are not on screen. Dinerstein highlights the appropriative aspect to the dances which I will explore, but I will analyse both the dances and the diegetic context to demonstrate how, even when the films may be argued to be showcasing or paying homage to African American culture, it is always through the lens of white appreciation and consequent appropriation.

The number "Mr Bojangles" at the climax of Swing Time (1936), is the bluntest example of Astaire's racism. He appears in blackface in an attempt to pay homage to the black dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Performing in black face is a problem in itself, but the way it is set up in the diegesis makes this performance even more problematic. In the scene before the routine starts, Astaire is shown at his mirror applying dark paint to his face, happily humming to himself. This demonstrates how the culture he is apparently paying homage to, is to him as simple as applying paint to his face, it is a character he can superficially assume by putting on a costume and singing a song. Furthermore, the routine, Dinerstein notes, is more in the style of John W. Bubbles than Robinson, as if the black dancer were a stereotyped character who always performs the same way. A character who is identified for his blackness without anything more specific to the individual.

This performance is doubly mediated as it is a staged performance within the diegesis. There are intradiegetic spectators appreciating the performance, demonstrating how the dance is intended to be perceived by its viewer, and the normalcy of performing in blackface. In 1936, picture houses in the south were still not comfortable with having black and white dancers performing together, and consequently any sequences featuring black dancers had to be inconsequential to the plot and easily cut. Astaire dances with a chorus of white women, as well as with large projected shadows on a screen at the back of the stage, and Dinerstein points out how the shadows which dance behind Astaire in the second half of the routine are "shadows of "real" African American dancers" that this dance is inspired by. They can only appear as "shadows" as any meaningful interaction between black and white dancers would risk profits. Kristi Rowan Humphreys asserts that the classical Hollywood musical "is ultimately about integration" which is performed through song and dance but fails to recognise the racial aspect

of integration. Swing Time highlights that the only way a black dancer could appear on stage integrated into a chorus of white women, was if he were really a white dancer playing a role.

The dance in Swing Time is asserted as being a homage to African American culture, but it is filtered through a lens of white appreciation. This is also true of the dance in the engine room in Shall We Dance (1937), and, just like in Swing Time, the moments before the dancing highlight the appropriative aspects of it. The previous scene shows the ballet dancers on the top deck of the boat and their uninspiring performance, and the film then cuts to the engine room of the ship where Astaire is sitting with the black workers who are playing jazz music. This could be interpreted as a progressive move, having Astaire sit with the black musicians and appreciate their artistry, but the way in which the following dance number unfolds shatters this fantasy of integration. As Astaire gets up and begins to dance, the camera follows him, quickly isolating him from the workers as a solo dancer. This is also reflected in the music. The music of the band is quickly replaced with a more typical Hollywood orchestration with the music cutting out occasionally to focus entirely on Astaire's tapping rhythms, which he initially establishes to the meter of the black workers' music. This demonstrates how he takes the rhythm and style from African American culture, but then distances himself to dance as a solo performer, taking black culture and repackaging it for a white audience.

This is especially problematic when considering the theme of labour in this sequence. The scene begins with black workers in the engine room of the ship, who time their work to the rhythm of the engine pistons. This calls to mind the image of the plantation workers who would sing together while working, but here, the "black workers [are] absorbing machine rhythms into a tradition of work song to lighten (and collectivise) the drudgery of menial work" (Dinerstein). They are forced into absorbing rhythms that would go on regardless of their presence and which set the tempo of their work for them. This association with slave-songs renders the following sequence all the more uncomfortable. Astaire dances moving up staircases until he is on a platform where he is eventually applauded by the workers below him. Where the workers are forced to comply with the rhythm of the machines to help them perform their tasks, and to "collectivise", Astaire can take this rhythm and movement and use it as a soloist for purely aesthetic and enjoyment purposes. This is not only a cultural appropriation, but also economic theft of black labour, since Astaire takes the style born out of labour and appropriates it, bringing in money for the studio and himself. Additionally, this appropriation evokes an aspect of primitivism: Astaire's character goes down from the top deck of the boat filled with high society and classical dance, to the belly of the boat, to find inspiration. This reinforces the structure of oppression in which white people are able to profit from black culture.

This political problem of labour and race in dance is highlighted in Band Wagon (1953) in a scene in which Astaire dances with a black shoe shiner. The two perform a routine together based on the action of shining shoes, initiated by Astaire tripping over the shoe shiner's foot. As in Shall We Dance, there is an economic inequality between Astaire's character and the black worker, but here it is even more pronounced as the man playing the role of the shoe shiner, Leroy Daniels, actually worked as one. While looking for inspiration, a producer remembered seeing Daniels dancing to attract customers. While it might have been seen as progressive to include an amateur in a high budget Hollywood production, Daniels' presence highlights the racial inequality. Daniels had developed a routine to perform while shining shoes as a way of attracting customers in a saturated market, it was born out of economic necessity. In the film, Astaire's character uses these steps as inspiration for a dance on Broadway while the shoe shiner is left to continue his job at the arcade. Again, as in Shall We Dance, Astaire

can take this dance and use it for his own profit without having the background of work which constructed it in the first place, both in the diegesis and in real life. Furthermore, although this performance launched Daniels's show business career, he was underpaid and did not feature in the credits despite his dance sequence being one of the most memorable. In fact, Mark Knowles notes that Astaire even asked for some of Daniels's performance to be cut as it would detract attention from him as the star.

In the dance, racial inequality is played out in the gestures and camerawork. For most of the routine, Daniels's feet are not in shot, therefore taking away the possibility of comparing the two as dancers or having them presented as equal partners. Decker argues that "Astaire had no need to fear competition from even the most skilled black dancers" but here, the competition cannot even take place. Additionally, in a similar manner to Shall We Dance, once Astaire's character has taken inspiration from the worker, he leaves for a solo routine and the camera follows. This demonstrates how the cinematic perspective is always focused on Astaire even if this is framed as a partner dance. During the solo, Daniels is left holding Astaire's hat and is relegated to the role of spectator. In the final part of the dance, they perform together again but Daniels spends much of his time on his knees, and in being placed in this position of servitude, Daniels cannot perform the same choreographic gestures as his partner.

These dances and their place in the diegesis do not "just happen". They take inspiration from and ultimately appropriate the labour and dance of African Americans and this is emphasised in the score and camerawork. In all three of these films, blackness is a novelty, a source for inspiration which is ultimately performed by a white man in a solo dance. Astaire appropriates the rhythm of dance from black labourers and can use it simply for aesthetic pleasure for a white audience.