When Steve Martin uttered "I was born a poor black child" in the movie "The Jerk," he was sending up a subgenre of American film a friend of mine dubbed the Why We Be Black movie. Such films explore the sorrows of being a Negro in America with a cornball earnestness that could make you snicker at a lynching or at the sight of yet another black mama in curlers, running out into the street to cradle her bullet-riddled son: "Oh no lawd! NOT MY BAYBEEE!"

"The Color Purple," arguably the greatest WWBB flick ever made, contains a gorgeous rendition of "Maybe God is Trying to Tell You Something" that sends a church congregation and choir out into the countryside to harmonize with juke joint sinners and sharecroppers. It was a fantasy of restoration: The preacher's wayward daughter reunites with her father; black folk stop fighting and fearing one another, gathering into something like a family (if not a force, which would be anathema to Hollywood's unwritten production code).

"Lee Daniel's The Butler" is a WWBB movie about the centuries-old split between House Negroes (the middle class) and Field Negroes (the working class/underclass), and about the clarifying shocks and upheavals required to heal the rift. Right up front, the filmmakers present a visual metaphor for black grief as horrific and eerily beautiful as the drowned wife in "Night of the Hunter" sitting in a car at the bottom of a lake, her hair undulating like some kind of angelic rays: two dead black men hung high by the neck, facing each other in a sad embrace. There is no snickering at this one.

Yet there's plenty of snickering and full-on laughter throughout "The Butler," which Lee Daniels directs in about five styles at once, like a Bollywood maestro. No, it's not a musical, but it makes plenty of visual music.

Everybody decries comparing mainstream "black" directors, but everybody secretly does it, so, what the hell, let's play: On the evidence of "The Butler" alone, I'd say Daniels will grow in greater esteem with cineastes than either pioneer Spike Lee or box office champ Tyler Perry. Daniels assimilates their scattershot styles and ambitions into his own alternately operatic, comic book, hyper-realistic, improvisatory and programmatic style. If Quentin Tarantino is a "mixtape" filmmaker, Daniels is a channel-surf director, flipping through several types of TV melodrama with confidence and a sense of righteous purpose—and sometimes even imagination that ranges beyond the cable dial.

Working from the true story of Eugene Allen's rise from field hand to longstanding White House butler, Daniels and screenwriter Danny Strong attempt to "Forrest Gump" African-American history, from Jim Crow to Obama's election. Whitaker's Allen-modeled Cecil Gaines backs into historical moments like Forrest, but what looks like passive obliviousness is just a black man playing one of the only roles that granted him upward mobility in the 20th Century, the unquestioning servant. Gaines learns the value of silence as a boy, seeing his father shot to death for simply objecting to his cotton field overseer taking liberties with his wife (Mariah Carey). Almost every instance where Cecil feels compelled to protest is haunted by this memory. Speak up and you die.

So where's the funny in all that? Hard on the heels of various horrors, "The Butler" offers good laughs, some deep, some cheap, but most of them intentional and calculated to make the ugly stuff that much more disheartening. Gaines tends to a series of U.S. presidents comically scrambling to keep pace with the times. Soul-searching Eisenhower (Robin Williams), "smooth white boy" (as a butler played by Lenny Kravitz describes him) Kennedy (James...
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To the moon, Stanley! Jim Emerson

(UPDATED) Stanley Kubrick faked the Apollo 11 moon landing. The Newtown massacre and Boston Marathon bombings were "I..."
Don Jon ★ ★

Rush ★ ★
**LEE DANIELS’ THE BUTLER (2013)**

**Cast**

- Forest Whitaker as Cecil Gaines
- Oprah Winfrey as Gloria Gaines
- John Cusack as Richard Nixon
- Robin Williams as Dwight Eisenhower
- James Marsden as John F. Kennedy
- Alan Rickman as Ronald Reagan
- Minka Kelly as Jackie Kennedy
- Liev Schreiber as Lyndon B. Johnson
- Jesse Williams as Rev. James Lawson
- Cuba Gooding Jr. as Carter Wilson
- Terrence Howard as Howard
- Jane Fonda as Nancy Reagan
- Mariah Carey as Hattie Pearl

**Director**

Lee Daniels

**Screenplay**

Danny Strong

**Genre**

Drama
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★★ Don Jon
★★★★ Inequality for All
★★★★ Metallica Through the Never
★★★★ Muscle Shoals
★★★★ We Are What We Are
★ Wedding Palace
★★ After Tiller
★★ Battle of the Year
★★ C.O.G.