

Bromfield: 'The Green Book' won because that was its job



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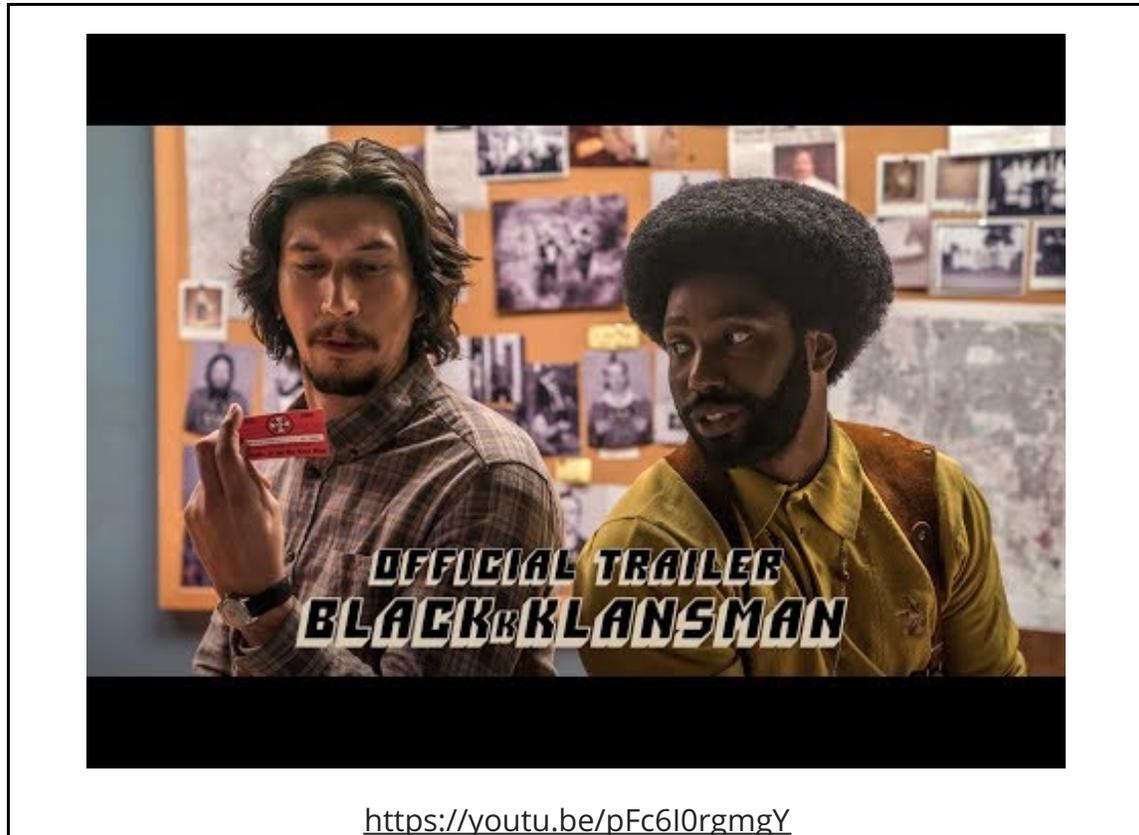
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The Green Book is a black hole designed to siphon awards from films that deserve them. Every spot it occupies in award-nominee listings, including its Best Picture win at the Oscars, could have gone to a work of political art that knows what it's talking about. Something like Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, which wasn't nominated for any Oscars, or even Spike Lee's *BlackKKlansman*, a film I didn't care for but at least had the courage to be about something. Peter Farrelly's film about a white man driving a black pianist on tour through the South was designed to win awards. That's how socially conscious dramas promote themselves, and Farrelly and his marketing goons know their best hope of lining their pockets is to get it to the highest echelons of award season. But *The Green Book* is not a truly conscious film but a race-flavored buddy comedy that makes no insights that would have been controversial even in 1990, when *Driving Miss Daisy* won Best Picture. This film is a con, and because its theft of awards means white moviegoers will see it instead of films like Riley's and Lee's that might actually inspire them to think about their role in perpetuating racism, it's arguably evil.

Good political art puts the audience on the spot. It asks us if we're part of the problem and has hope we can change. *Sorry to Bother You* asks us why we choose to turn our heads in a time where atrocities are a normal part of the daily news. *Blackkkklansman* argues racism is an intrinsic part of American history. *The Green Book* plays it safe for its white audience by fostering an us-vs-them mentality where if you're woke enough to pay for a ticket you can assuage yourself that you're one of the "good ones," floating above the seething mob of rednecks responsible for racism in America. According to *The Green*

Book, New York is devoid of racism except for one Italian family, while the South teems with hateful bar hooligans. How else to interpret the scene toward the end where they're on their way back to New York and a cop pulls over the Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali characters? We think he's going to bust them for something arbitrary because Ali's black, a scenario that's already happened a few times in the movie. Instead, he politely tells them one of their lights is out and lets them go with a smile. We're in the North now, Farrelly is telling us: no more racism. Never mind that *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, the real guidebook for black travelers that gives the film its name, was authored by a New Yorker and maps not only the South but the rest of the country. Or that sundown towns, a plot point here, were a Northern phenomenon.



The scene that comes closest to actually accomplishing something happens when Ali's become fed up with Mortensen telling him he's not "black enough" because he doesn't eat fried chicken and hasn't heard of Little Richard. Walking from the car in a tearful rage, Ali explains that when he's onstage people see him as an artist, but when he's offstage people just see him as another black man. It's true that enjoying art by marginalized people doesn't make one less racist. Spike Lee has a great scene about this in *Do The Right Thing*, where a racist white character explains his favorite black athletes and musicians are somehow "more than black." But in another scene, one of Ali's arch European consorts tells Mortensen Ali plays for white audiences to change their perceptions on what a black man is capable of. This statement is so contradictory to what Ali himself tells Mortensen it points to the void at the center of the movie where an argument should be. The end of the movie finds Mortensen's family automatically accepting Ali at Christmas despite being shown earlier to be racist and no doubt

fostering the Mortensen character's own view of black people. The Mortensens don't accept Ali because they've changed or because anything meaningful has happened to cause that change. They accept him because a feel-good film demands a happy ending.

Predictably, the film starts with Mortensen and arrives at Ali. We learn nothing about the Ali character, apparently an esteemed musician, or his art. We do not meet his family. We learn specifics about his life only when the film needs them to reinforce his patrician credentials. When one of his records is pulled out, it's as the setup for a joke: Mortensen has been calling it "Orphans," but it's "Orpheus." (The film has inspired no reissues of Don Shirley records, and none of his songs have more than 100,000 Spotify plays as of this writing.) It should be no surprise that, while the film was co-written by the Mortensen character's real-life son, the family of Ali's character has universally condemned his portrayal. This film does not care about Don Shirley. He's seen as a symbol of the Mortensen character's redemption and spends most of the film draping his endless fingers over armrests while staring felinely into space. Briefly, we learn that he's gay after Mortensen has to pick him up from the YMCA after the cops bust him with another man. Ali's let off the hook, of course. No word on the other gay man, who we see hanging his head in shame. What happened to him? The film doesn't care, and it doesn't go into any further depth about the Ali character's queerness, which after seeing headlines that call *The Green Book* a "queer film," was no doubt wedged into the film just to have another social justice bona fide. It's a black movie and it's a queer movie, except it's neither.

The Green Book just won Best Picture at the Oscars. That's not because it's a particularly good movie — it's not even visually interesting — but because it was designed to win Best Picture at the Oscars. It's like the scion of a political dynasty whose ascension to office is inevitable. Start with resources: Peter Farrelly is one of the Farrelly Brothers, who made *There's Something About Mary* and some other very good comedies. Then add just enough social consciousness not to upset the white people in the audience with the inconvenient fact that racism exists and they benefit from it. Then release it during a time when fascism is normalized and a lot of people want to both create and consume political art — but don't forget to release it around Christmas, because this is a Christmas movie, and the Mortensen character's desire to come home for the holidays is a central plot point. The old joke about *Die Hard* being a Christmas movie irks me as much as anyone else, but *The Green Book* is more of a Christmas movie than what it pretends to be about.

Featured image courtesy of Universal Pictures