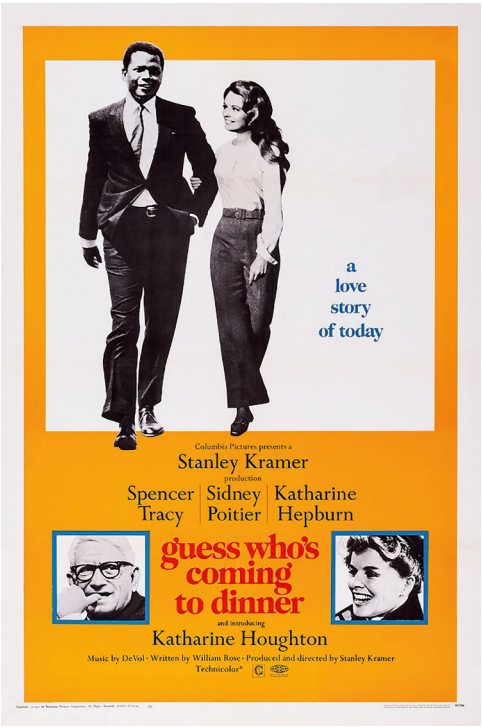
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Katharina Gerund

dir. Stanley Kramer; prod. Stanley Kramer; screenplay William Rose; photography Sam Leavitt; music Frank De Vol. 35mm, color, 108 mins. Columbia Pictures, distrib. Columbia Pictures.



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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner negotiates interracial romance as a family affair. Its production and release coincided with the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared the prohibition of interracial marriages unconstitutional. The film ultimately became a box office hit—even in the U.S. South, where it was initially met with protest. The film uses a »classic family melodrama structure« (Willis 49) to contain its contentious subject matter and it relies on melodrama »as the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has ›talked to itself‹ about the enduring moral dilemma of race« (Williams xiv). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* eventually turned into »the most popular interracial text of its era, and arguably of the late twentieth century« (Courtney 187).

The film's star-studded cast includes Sidney Poitier in one of his signature roles as well as legendary Hollywood couple Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy in their last film appearance together. The fact that Tracy died shortly after filming, and Hepburn's later acknowledgement of the couple's not-so-secret romantic relationship, contributed to melodramatic discourse surrounding the cultural text itself. Critics, however, have not only singled out the performances by Hepburn and Tracy for praise but have also pointed out the film's many flaws, including its improbable yet predictable plot elements, its reliance on stereotypes, and its evasive take on crucial social issues such as structural racism and racial prejudice. Author, critic, and activist James Baldwin, for instance, tauntingly summarized the film's message: »We can conclude that people

have the right to marry whom they choose, especially if we know that they are leaving town as soon as dinner is over« (78).

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner begins with the arrival of Joanna »Joey« Drayton (played by Katherine Houghton) and her fiancé, Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier), at San Francisco International Airport. Joey returns from Hawaii, where she fell in love with her husband-to-be, whom she brings along to meet her parents. John Prentice, a widower and significantly older than Joey, is presented as the perfect son in law: a doctor and medical expert of international standing, who is also »charming, good-looking, mannerly, and brilliant« (Bogle 195). This character epitomizes the screen personality that Sidney Poitier—the first black actor to win an Academy Award for a leading role, for *Lilies of the Field* in 1964, and by then a superstar—had established for himself. Navigating the culturally vexed terrain of the anxieties and fantasies attached to white womanhood and black male sexuality in the cultural imaginary of the U.S., John and Joey mostly keep an »appropriate« distance from each other. They are only once shown kissing, and merely as a reflection in the rearview mirror of a taxi under the scrutinizing gaze of the driver. The central conflict around interracial love and »miscegenation« is determined by a heteronormative, reproductive logic (with several characters explicitly considering the future of the children that supposedly result from John and Joey's marital union). At the same time, the film offers a highly sanitized image of the romantic couple that is mostly devoid of hints of intimacy or expressions of sexual desire. Joey explicitly tells her mother that they did not have sex because »he wouldn't.« Despite his impeccable reputation and demeanor, John still poses a »problem« for Joey's parents, Matt and Christina Drayton (played by Tracy and Hepburn), as they are confronted with the limits and potential hypocrisy of their ostentatiously liberal worldview. Over the course of the day—Prentice has to catch a flight to New York the very same evening—the Drayton family, a cast of minor characters, and finally Prentice's parents (played by Beah Richards and Roy E. Glenn Sr.), who have flown in from Los Angeles, debate the situation from various angles and in different constellations in a setting reminiscent of a chamber play. Despite their initial surprise and skepticism, both mothers rather quickly side with John and Joey, while the fathers oppose their marriage plan. In overtly didactic fashion, the film focuses mostly on convincing the father-of-the-bride (and, by extension, the audience) to give his blessing, without which—as Prentice had previously assured the Draytons (and viewers) behind his fiancée's back—he would not marry Joey. John, however, also confronts Matt Drayton with his professed liberal convictions, and marks Joey's colorblindness as a product of her upbringing: »Well, you made her, Mr. Drayton. I just met her in Hawaii.« In his final verdict, the family patriarch has been persuaded and »sums up the young couple's dilemma as ›a pigmentation problem,‹ reducing the matter to a language of color that avoids histories of exploitation and privilege nonetheless evident in his hilltop mansion with seemingly all white interiors and all black servants« (Courtney 195). With Tracy's death, this scene gained additional melodramatic force as it constitutes the beloved actor's last words on screen.

As much as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is preoccupied with interracial love, it negotiates its central issue mostly within the hermetic space of the Drayton home and is largely detached from its historical context and specific setting. In fact, it »reduce[s] the scope of the civil rights movement, and the turbulence surrounding it, to a manageable form in a tightly circumscribed terrain where meaning promised to emerge

from private negotiations« (Willis 7). The most explicit references to the black liberation struggle are articulated by Tillie (played by Isabel Sanford), the Draytons' maid, whose depiction draws on stereotypical Hollywood images of domestic servants such as Mammy in → *Gone with the Wind*. She vehemently opposes the interracial relationship and the presence of the Prentices at the Draytons' dinner table. She comments on the situation, for instance, by stating that »Civil Rights is one thing« but »this here is something else,« and—protective of Joey—threatens John: »You bring trouble. You'll know what ›Black Power‹ means!« When in the last scene Matt Drayton introduces Tillie as a »member of the family« and ushers her into the living room to listen to his monologue alongside everyone else, the film once more uses the rhetoric of the family to gloss over structural inequalities. The film's final line, directed at Tillie, reassures not only patriarchal authority, but also the established racial and social hierarchy: »Well, Tillie, when the hell are we going to get some dinner?«

Not only does the film marginalize the black liberation struggle, but one could even argue that it is not primarily concerned with integration, interracial love, nor the young couple's prospects. John and Joey are merely passing through, and the origins of both their romance and future are imagined outside of the continental U.S. They are assigned a rather »transcontinental or global identity« (Warren 152)—and with the imminent departure of John and Joey to New York, and then on to Geneva, they are a temporary presence in the microcosm of the Drayton residence, as well as of U.S. society at large. At its core, the film probes »the limits of racial tolerance that liberally minded white and black Americans possess« (Warren 146), and, as Andrea Levine holds, could even be regarded an »interracial romance« in name only that, upon closer inspection, is actually »far more preoccupied with delineating relationships between black and white men« (367). More specifically, it is the aging white father whose masculinity, racial identity, class status, and liberal mindedness are at stake, but whose normative and discursive power is ultimately (re)affirmed. »The entire story articulates a pedagogical project that aims to remind Matt Drayton of what he really believes in« (Willis 50), and most characters and plot elements are put into the service of this project.

Relying on the melodramatic mode, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* contains questions of racial (in)equality within the domestic sphere and its strictly gendered roles and spaces. Predictably, it turns structural issues into matters of personal conviction and, more importantly, feelings. It also preconditions its happy ending on the approval of white male authority as well as on the interracial couple's future being conveniently located outside the U.S. Its very title and its iconic black star have been turned into a popular (and often nostalgic) shorthand for narratives of racial reconciliation and integrationist agendas that forgo any significant challenge or »substantive change to the ›white‹ world or to ›white‹ culture, and especially to white privilege« (Willis 5). What Sharon Willis has termed the »Poitier effect« therefore continues to serve »as a defense, or a compensatory gesture, averting or deflecting the possibility of a kind of critical thinking that would involve a serious reciprocal interracial exchange« (5).

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