

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Desegregating the Two Shot: The Use of the Frame in *The Defiant Ones*

In this audiovisual essay, I offer a close reading of a single formal device – the patterned use of the two shot – across the unfolding of a single work. I hope to suggest how aesthetic significance can be found in surprising places, even in a film that seems almost devoid of craft and subtlety. Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958) is often dismissed as a prime example of the crudities of the Hollywood 'message movie' in its desire to correct the behaviour of a white racist by chaining him to a black man (and setting the two on the run together). But if one can see past its shouts for racial tolerance, one may find something more complex at work. The audiovisual format allows me to draw attention to an understated aesthetic development, one perhaps drowned out by a bombastic narrative. Here, I privilege a few of the film's quieter moments, where an expressive interaction between image and character unobtrusively complements and complicates the film's otherwise blunt 'message'.

More specifically, I draw attention to the left-right pattern developed by the film's use of the frame. Initially, the two men are kept in separate parts of the two shot – white man left, black man right – as though the space of the screen was itself racially segregated. But eventually this will change. The white man, about to be lynched, will see the world from



the perspective of the black man, something he recognises the first time he occupies the other's half of the screen. Later, when the two men encounter a small home hidden away in the woods, the black man encounters a white version of his fantasy: wife and child hidden away from the rest of the world. He too sees from the other half of the two-shot, but only for his fantasy to exclude him from the frame.

By organising its character interactions into a spatial pattern, the film invites us to consider its treatment of race beyond the narrative insistence on interpersonal understanding. Rather, we are invited to consider race relations as a consequence of the kind of spaces that bodies are allowed to occupy, and to explore the possibility of those spaces becoming more open. In this way, the film resonates with its moment in American history – when the segregation of black and white spaces weakened (though at other times was violently reaffirmed) in the successive struggles of The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In part, I hope to show how the aesthetics of *The Defiant Ones* participated in this context. Perhaps the film's aesthetic unfolding recognised

something more difficult in the complexity of racial relations during its historical moment, something that it could only whisper beneath its own fantasies of a racially tolerant America.

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Watch 'Desegregating the Two Shot' here:
<https://vimeo.com/378416180>