Exploring the Evolution of Black Cinema & the Influential Power of Film

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Abstract

Film is a relatively modern form of media that possesses compelling storytelling abilities. Similar to the general concept of media, film in particular has a powerful impact on the cultivation of social structures and ideology through its incorporation, deformation and omission of historical events and depictions of discrete groups. This research focuses exclusively on the perpetual progression of depictions of black individuals throughout the course of American cinema and the correlation between these depictions and real life events. It attempts to demonstrate the social influences of Hollywood cinema by providing an overview of the historical evolution of black characters in American film as it pertains to power dynamics, exploitation and deconstruction.

Introduction

Art is a reflection of life, but life too has the potential to follow suit in reflecting art. As aforementioned in *Lost In Intersectionality*, symbolic annihilation is a key term used to emphasize the importance of accurate media representation of marginalized groups whose voices, and in this case, faces, typically go unrecognized. Symbolic annihilation is defined as the "absence or active non-representation of a cultural group [disallowing] the symbolic representation of that group or misrepresenting that culture within the mainstream media or consciousness" (Brook, n.d.). Since the emergence of filmmaking, Hollywood has flaunted an ambiguous white face to its audiences. As media consumption is a popular pastime for Americans, it proves to be a highly effective method of communicating explicit and implicit messages about the normalcy of social attitudes. As the mainstream film industry is run primarily

by white individuals, it possesses the gross amount of money and power necessary to have overruling control of these subliminal messages regardless of its intentions. Being as these individuals are white, they have not experienced life through a black lens, therefore lacking the necessary qualifications to produce authentic black character portrayals as black filmmakers do regarding their distressed history in the United States. While the historical presence of film has ironically been painted with a white face, the revolutionary influence of black filmmakers must not continue to go unrecognized.

As a collective, Black American filmmakers have produced roughly 500 films in the United States between 1915 and 1952 alone, the majority of which were "lost due to a combination of neglect and poor preservation" (Clark, 2016). All of these films highlighted the black experience through a variety of lenses. Due to the erasure of these earlier films, "black film history seems to begin in medias res," or in the middle of an ongoing narrative (Field, 2020). Nonetheless, the production of these black-produced films continued throughout the remainder of the twentieth century despite recurring financial setbacks. Throughout history, black cinema has been undeniably connected to the racial injustices in America which is all the more reason its recognition and acceptance is crucial to the progression of American society.

Purpose

The aim of this research is to explore and understand the linear progression of black cinema beginning in the earlier 20th century and how this progression has been influenced by racial injustices created by Hollywood.

Literature Review

Black People as Caricaturistic Props Instead of Characters

Upon the emergence of short motion pictures, black people made sparse appearances in films. Film roles were reserved for white actors with storylines that barbarized the black race. The few roles that black actors did manage to obtain were dehumanizing and belittling. Black people were made to act as foils to white main characters in generic degrading roles such as maids, butlers, mammies, and bucks. Sam Lucas was the first black person to appear on film screens in his role as Uncle Tom in the 1903 film adaption of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This antislavery film existed in much controversy as white audiences believed the black character portrayals were "too positive" while black critics argued these same characters were "oversimplified and stereotypical" (Cornell University, 2002). Although Lucus was the first black person on the screen, the title of the first black film star belongs to Stepin Fetchit. Despite his notable real life intelligence, Fetchitt built his career off playing roles as jovial simpleminded men content with their submissive positions. While these roles allowed initial black portrayals on screen, they subsequently contributed to the introduction of the "happy servant" narrative, a trope that would remain harmful for decades to come.

The Birth of a Nation

After the development of motion picture film projection in the late 1800s and silent films then exceeding miniscule lengths, filmmakers began to recognize the potential this effective medium held to generate a substantial income (Price, 2021). With his three and a half hour long 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, film director D.W. Griffith "created the template for

Hollywood fame and fortune" (Price, 2021). To this day, this historically inaccurate film is known as the most technologically advanced film of its time and its posters still reside in film school classrooms as an example of innovative filmmaking. While the film may have surpassed the technological expectations of its time, the detrimental conceptual elements of the *Birth of a Nation* must be considered before being regarded as a standard for the future of film.

The *Birth of a Nation* takes place during the Reconstruction era and argues against black people having the right to vote. In his book, "Colorization: One Hundred Years of Black Films in a White World," Will Haygood describes the film to depict "the Klansmen [as] heroes and the Negroes [as] sex-hungry villains who conspired with Northern carpetbaggers to destroy the South" (Whitaker, 2021). The film ends with the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremecist terrorist group, coming in to save the white people from the evils of the black race.

It is important to note that, along with its historical inaccuracies, the film's depictions of black characters are played by white actors in black face. There was not a single black person portraying these vigilante beings which speaks more to what white people thought of black people than the black races' authentic existence. Nonetheless, the film was wildly popular and was even screened at the White House by President Woodrow Wilson who was known for his racist policies. This event "[revolutionized] the way white people marketed and consumed movies" (Whitaker, 2021).

Black groups criticized the film labeling it "racial propaganda" and urged censorship boards to ban the film as they knew how it could influence its white audiences. This urgent concern proved to be within reason as on Thanksgiving Day 1915, nine months after the release of the film, the Ku Klux Klan made a resurgence despite having been annihilated 40 years earlier by President Ulysses S. Grant.

Later on in the 1930s, a similar controversy took place with the film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* starring black actress and singer-songwriter Hattie McDaniel as a subservient maid for a white family living on a southern plantation during the time of the American Civil War. According to Jill Watts, a history professor at California State University, "the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] started pressuring [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios] not to make [the film], because they were fearful that it would be a repeat of the Birth of a Nation" (CBC, 2021). Despite NAACP's resistance, MGM and studio executive David O. Selznick began production on the film anyway, assuring a more progressive version of *Gone With The Wind* than the novel. However, given the core values of the novel, the film still defended slavery and emphasized black inferiority.

The First Black Owned Film Companies

Contrary to popular belief, black cinema began right alongside mainstream Hollywood cinema. Many early black filmmakers were the children of enslaved parents, yet still managed to produce archives worth of films starting as early as their white counterparts. Several black-owned film companies existed in the earlier 1900s and were dedicated to creating real portrayals of black people. In 1910, William D. Foster founded the first independently owned black film company, Foster Photoplay Company, two years before the founding of the oldest publicized Hollywood film company, Universal Studios. These films marked the beginning of countering negative stereotypes perpetuated by black character portrayals in Hollywood films. Popular actor, Noble Johnson, became an asset to the production of Foster Photoplay's films as he had much experience as an actor under a Universal Studios contract playing racially

ambiguous characters. These characters were never explicitly black. This was made possible by Johnson's lighter complexion, a common "advantage" for aspiring black actors of this time.

In 1916, Noble Johnson founded the Lincoln Motion Picture Company with support from his brother George Perry Johnson and Clarence Brooks. Similar to Foster Photoplay, Lincoln produced films that featured black actors in inspiring roles unrecognizable in the era's mainstream media. Some of these movies included *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), *Trooper of Troop K* (1917) and the most well known, *The Birth of a Race* (1918) which some critics argue was created in response to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. To earn money for the funding of Lincoln, Noble Johnson continued work with Universal, taking on regressive roles such as "Cannibal Chief," " Slave Broker" and "Nubian Servant." Shortly after Lincoln's founding, Johnson was faced with an ultimatum: sign a non-compete clause contract with Universal or lose his contract entirely. As Universal offered a promise of steady income and the future of Lincoln Motion Picture Company was uncertain, Noble chose to sign the contract leaving his company behind where it ultimately ended after two successful years. All of its seven films were lost aside from four minutes of deteriorated footage from its 1921 film, *By Right of Birth*. This is a prime example of how Hollywood has managed to halt the advancement of black cinema.

Oscar Micheaux

In 1918, Oscar Micheaux created the Micheaux Film and Book Publishing Corporation in Chicago, Illinois. Micheaux is one of the most notable figures within black cinema and has even been referred to as the "Jackie Robinson" of film. Like Foster and Johnson before him, Micheaux's productions starred all black main casts and centered on the black experience. With

roughly 50 films in his portfolio, Micheaux is easily one of the most prolific black filmmakers of his time. Prior to his filmmaking career, businessman Micheaux worked as a self taught author writing semi-autobiographical novels such as “The Homesteader” which he later adapted into a film making his directorial debut. The 1919 film was the first feature length film produced by a black American. Unfortunately, *The Homesteader*, like several other black films from this period, does not have any surviving prints. Aside from *The Homesteader*, some of Micheaux’s more well known works include *Body and Soul* (1925), *God’s Step Children* (1938) and *Within Our Gates* (1920), “a bold rebuttal to the anti-Black stereotypes rampant in Hollywood” at this time (Great, 2020). Although Micheaux’s work was popular amongst black audiences, it did not exist without controversy. Some black audiences claimed Micheaux’s films perpetuated negative stereotypes of the black race. Others went as far as to refer to them as sacrilegious. “The argument went, so why participate in such degradation by furnishing further negative depictions” (Field, 2020). Despite this controversy, he continued to make such films as he responds “the recognition of our true situation will react in itself as a stimulus for self advancement” (Field, 2020).

With limited funding due to the effects of Jim Crow laws, Micheaux found creative ways to sustain cost effectiveness by refusing to redo takes with actors as well as using title cards to progress his stories along in a condensed time frame. Amidst the Great Depression and the introduction of sound in films, the vision of black owned film companies was discontinued as black filmmakers were unable to invest in the expensive audio equipment; they simply could not afford to keep up with this advancement of technology. Despite his determination to continue making films for black communities, Micheaux filed bankruptcy in 1928 resulting in a reorganization of his company amongst white investors which some argue evolved in a diversion

of the tone of his films. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Hollywood reeled in Micheaux's most prized black actors such as Evelyn Preer and Paul Robeson and began using them in their own productions.

Palatability As A Requirement for Blackness

Around the 1940s, Hollywood began to promote "Negro tolerance movies" which depicted lighter skinned Black individuals "framed as interlopers who could 'pass' and enjoy white privilege while exposing racism" (CBC, 2021). This became an attempt for Hollywood to explore racism through the "passing" narrative while coming to terms with "the other." This narrative "eases" white people into tolerating the black race as it allows them to deny the blackness of these characters therefore watering down their existence. This genre of film introduces the idea of "colorism" which still remains an obstacle today even inside of the black community itself. As critic and novelist Ralph Ellion wrote, "[these films are obviously] not about Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes" (CBC, 2021).

Understanding its harmful effects, the NAACP managed to convince white Hollywood executives to get out of traditional roles for black Americans and also negotiated more behind the scenes positions for black people. After World War II, mainstream Hollywood studios began to cultivate a handful of African-American stars "[preserving] just enough mainstream opportunity to keep an independent movement from taking a hold" (Price, 2021). While more black actors were getting increased attention from Hollywood, the film crews remained primarily white.

One of these black stars soaking in the limelight was Bahamian-American actor Sidney Poitier. Poitier was most notably known for his roles in the 1961 film *A Raisin in the Sun* and

1967 film *Guess Who's Coming Dinner*. A commonality existed amongst all the roles he played; they were all "dapper" classy black men oftentimes holding professional well respected jobs such as doctors and engineers. Poitier was well received by white audiences which landed him roles in several major Hollywood films. Some people pinpoint his success to an undeniable charisma and handsome appearance, qualities that Hollywood generally did not recognize in black characters. CEO of Toronto International Film Festival Cameron Bailey noted that "[Sydney Poitier had] to look great, [had] to be the most handsome person on screen, perfect in every way… to be accepted within white society" (CBC, 2021). As a black man in America, Poitier was highly conscious of the types of roles he decided to take as he understood the long-lasting effects they could have not only on himself, but on the entirety of the black race. Due to racial double standards, black actors were now confined to classy roles that guaranteed respectability and acceptance from white audiences. The existence of black actors in Hollywood was now dependent upon white audiences' level of tolerance of them.

Despite the prominent presence of the Civil Rights movement in America, Hollywood chose to ignore the movement's grotesque events such as protests, burnings of buildings, and the assissination of political leader Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. without a trace of these occurrences being recognized in mainstream films. "Hollywood typically has not been in the business of showing the harsh reality of [black] lives to us," said Bailey (CBC, 2021). In 1968, writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin wrote "The industry is compelled, given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life" (CBC, 2021). In the eyes of Hollywood, these aspects of black lives were not marketable therefore these unpleasant portrayals had no space in its agenda.

Blaxploitation

While the aftermath of World War II allowed more space for black depth in film, it wasn't until the emergence of the Blaxploitation era that the traditional ideas of subordination came to a true halt. The blaxploitation era produced low budget films which starred black protagonists in primarily urban settings with themes that "often spoke to fighting back against corrupt systems and oppression in whatever way [they] could" (Jackson, 2020). This film genre unintentionally began with Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a 1971 film meant by Peebles as a political statement on police brutality against the black community. Peeble's film was highly successful, grossing roughly $15 million in the box office compared to its $500,000 budget made possible by support and simple conversation within black communities. Although it garnered success, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was surrounded by controversy originating from both black and white audiences. Nudity was one of the critics' main concerns. The Motion Picture Association gave the film an X rating as a result of Peebles' refusal to submit it for an official rating as he believed that white standards should no longer be imposed upon black audiences. Instead, Peebles took advantage of this rating and began to advertise the film as being "rated X by an all-white jury." This resulted in praise from Huey Newton, founder of the African American revolutionary group, the Black Panther Party which began requiring mandatory viewings of the film within the Party. Some black audiences disliked the film's portrayal of Sweetback as a violent and lewd individual believing it to perpetuate the same negative stereotypes that Hollywood had been placing on black Americans for years. Some praised these films for their embodiment of black empowerment as they believed these negative stereotypes were now being transformed into a new form of power. Although controversial, blaxploitation allowed new opportunities for black representation on screen which black

audiences yearned for "[even if it was] just one version of black life, and not representative of a whole community" (Jackson, 2020). Blaxploitation gave black filmmakers, actors and musicians another opportunity to create their films.

Consequently, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* acted as a catalyst for a spurt of blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972). In 1972, NAACP president Junius Griffin disapprovingly coined the term "blaxploitation" in an attempt to "decry what he saw in these films as 'models of degradation, destruction and dope'" (Jackson, 2020) Although these portrayals repeatedly highlighted a harsher side of black life, black audiences readily consumed it. Hollywood quickly began to notice the attention and financial gains coming from this genre. Aware of the black community's strong desire to see these stories, major production companies began to produce similar films on the same low budgets and casted black actors to star in them. By way of exploitation of black actors and storylines, white filmmakers had taken over a film genre specifically cultivated by and for the black community, turning these black stories into a trendy profit. According to a 1977 *Ebony* article, there were a plethora of films that starred black protagonists and themes in 1973, but this number shrank drastically by 1977. By this time, the budgets for blaxploitation films had gotten lower and lower while the plots became more formulaic. The era began to wane, placing audiences' eyes back solely on Hollywood.

The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers

Following the Blaxploitation era, a group of young black and brown filmmakers from the University of California at Los Angeles became known as the The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers. This group, also known as the LA Rebellion, fought for more nuanced portrayals of black characters in film with more personal issues as opposed to the previous era's limited

portrayals revolving around drugs and violence. Throughout its existence, the LA Rebellion movement produced films exploring stories of deep-rooted emotions through a black lens. Among the filmmakers of this movement was trailblazer Spike Lee who made his directorial debut with the release of the 1986 film *She's Gotta Have It* later followed by *Do the The Right Thing* in 1989 which fought racial injustice while "reflecting a nuanced and loving portrait of a Black community" (CBC, 2021).

They've Gotta Have Us

In the summer of 1991, New York Times magazine wrote an article inspired by Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* that read, "Black film properties may be to the 90s what the carphone was to the 80s every studio executive has to have one." Black film properties gained high popularity in American film culture. One of these properties included music. From these movies and other black centered stories from the 1990s came the popular emergence of the hip hop music genre with rappers like Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur and Queen Latifah starring in some of the most popular films of the decade. "Hip hop, and white audiences' interest in it, fed into the movement" (Rose, 2016). As Hollywood began to understand the high demand for authentic black centered stories, thus came the "New Black Wave." Like the previous era, the 1990s birthed an influx of films centered around all black casts and their everyday lives. Some of these films include *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Friday* (1995) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1995).

Aside from film, there were also a number of 90s sitcoms that focused on black American families and friends such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Moesha*, *Family Matters*, *Living Single* and *Sister Sister*. "For the first time, mainstream cinema and TV audiences were getting honest, intelligent portrayals of both modern African-American life and US history from a black

perspective" (Rose, 2016). Although black characters were seeing new life in Hollywood, "filmmakers themselves seemed sensibly cautious of being lumped into a moment," a concern which later proved to be within reason (Rose, 2016). While these black films and sitcoms held a high demand for much of the decade, this spotlight dimmed as the new millennial approached. After the year 2000, a newer trend of superheroes became the next big thing. Black stories were no longer considered marketable for Hollywood's white target audiences which took the majority of black actors out of work. The remaining black actors moved forward still getting casted in mainstream Hollywood productions while the black filmmakers whose films catapulted them into stardom were swiftly forgotten.

While black people actors continued to be casted in Hollywood productions, the films were not necessarily about "black stories." Instead of continuing productions focused on black protagonists, Hollywood began offering numerous "supportive" roles for black characters. These roles introduced the idea of the "token black friend," a name given to roles usually reserved for a black person or person of color in attempts to gain representation points from audiences. Black actors were once again being used by Hollywood as pawns in the goal of regaining viewership from black audiences. As the majority of the black films during this decade were made on small budgets as compared to their sizable gross profits, it is plausible to conclude that the profitability of the black community was the ultimate selling point for Hollywood. Instead of appreciating the black stories for what they were, it chose to profit off black culture, turning it into a commercial aesthetic.

Contemporary Black Cinema

Despite being faced with many obstacles, 1990s black filmmakers paved the way for today's black artists. Inspired by their demand for more nuanced portrayals of black characters, contemporary filmmakers have satisfied this demand with varying films about everyday black experiences depicting black characters as heroic protagonists and even reimagined identities from older films. Although there has been more diversity in mainstream media in its recent years, this diversity was more or less demanded by activist April Reign. Upon her viewing of the 2015 Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars, Reign highlighted the discrimination in Hollywood cinema by tweeting the hashtag "#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair." This tweet references a common microaggression performed by white individuals unfamiliar with physical ethnic qualities of black people. Surprised by its thickness and texture, white people commonly ask to touch black hair unaware of its cultural discourtesy. In that year's Oscars, only two people of color were nominated in major categories which prompted Reign's frustration. In an interview with The Root, Reign stated "One time is a fluke, two times is a pattern," referencing the prior year's similar nomination lineup. This hashtag powered by the powerful influence of social media began trending and demanded immediate attention from Hollywood as multiple big name celebrities also joined in on the discussion. In the 15 years prior to the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag, there were five separate years when no person of color was nominated for any of the major categories, either in front of the camera or behind it.

On this note, the idea of the "white savior complex" must be mentioned. Hollywood has become obsessed with white saviorism with films such as *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Help* (2011) and *The Green Book* (2018) to name a few. Even in films such as these where racial injustice is the dominant theme, white people are still praised, and awarded Oscars, for the

"accomplishment" of rescuing people of color from themselves. In these roles, the majority of bkack Oscar wins have not been for Best Actor but rather for Best Supporting Actor, like first ever black winner Hattie McDaniel's 1939 win for her subservient maid role in *Gone With The Wind*.

Now seven years after the creation of the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag, black filmmakers and actors are receiving more recognition for their work. Along with major productions, black filmmakers are also making strides with independent films like Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* which received Oscars for Best Original Screenplay and Best Picture in the later years. While film festivals aid significantly in the marketing for independent films, the new emergence of multiple digital streaming platforms offer ample opportunity for young filmmakers to release projects on their own without dependency upon large companies for marketing. Now with unwavering support from social media, black filmmakers are backed by the people of the nation in their journey to create a more progressive collective idea of black imagery.

Research Questions

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1. How has the film portrayals of Black individuals changed since the beginning of Hollywood film?
2. In what ways have Black people taken back their power through film?
3. What results have come from this retrieval of power? Are these results positive or negative?

Methodology

This research uses rhetorical analysis to analyze six films from three varying time periods spanning from the earlier 20th century to the present day. Miami University defines rhetorical analysis as "[a consideration of] all elements of the rhetorical situation - the audience, purpose, medium, and context - within which a communication was generated and delivered in order to make an argument about that communication" (Miami University, n.d.). The time periods were divided into three major eras: the Jim Crow Era including films from 1900 to around 1950, the Civil Rights Era including films from 1950-2000 and the Modern Age which includes films released after the year 2000. The Jim Crow Era focuses on the films *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1925). The Civil Rights Era focuses on the films *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Do The Right Thing* (1989). Lastly, the Modern Age era focuses on *Get Out* (2018) and *Moonlight* (2018). All films were gathered based on repeated occurrences in literature resources during the conduction of background research. After viewing the films, central themes were identified in film separately as then as pairs to acknowledge prominent general ideas developed from recorded notes.

<u>Jim Crow Era</u>

Both *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul* share the central theme of cooperative subordination and manipulation.

Within Our Gates (1920)

Within Our Gates follows Sylvia Landry on a trip to the North to visit her cousin Alma. Along with other personal problems within the story, Sylvia returns to the South after viewing

Reverend Wilson's ad for a school dedicated to the education of the black race. Sylvia believes "it is [her] duty and the duty of each member of [the black] race to help destroy ignorance and superstition" (Micheaux, 1920). She asks for help from white anthropologist Elena Warwick who gives her $50,000 to go toward the funding of Wilson's school. This donation is strongly opposed by Geraldine Stratton who believes a lesser amount would be of better use if given to black preacher Old Ned to continue spreading the word of God to black communities. This is the first instance of manipulation.

As the Bible was used by slaveholders to justify slavery, the film claims that white people use religion as a manipulation tactic. Old Ned, whom white counterparts refer to as a "good colored man," recites falsified sermons to black audiences in return for a "a miserable mess of pottage" (Micheaux, 1920). Although he himself does not believe in the submissive words he recites, he continues to deliver these sermons as it acts as his meal ticket. He assures his white counterparts of his faithful sermons emphasizing that "this is a land for the white man and black folk got ta know their place" (Micheaux, 1920). Old Ned quotes one of his sermons that read "Let the white man go to Hell with his politics, wealth, and sins. Give me Jesus" (Micheaux, 1920). This manipulative strategy is a prime example of how white people have conditioned black people into subordination through means of community. White townspeople understood the bonded trust black people shared with one another and how these messages would be better received by another black person who could be bribed into participation.

Efrem, a gossipy servant, tells his supposed white friends that Jasper Landry, Sylvia's adopted father, killed Philip Griddlestone, a tyrannical white landowner. Efrem, under the impression that his "tattletale" behavior would keep him on good terms with the white townspeople, is ultimately lynched by a white mob as a result of impatience after not being able

to find Jasper Landry (Micheaux, 1920). This highlights a point that all black people stood on equal footing with one another in the eyes of the white race. This deceitful act supports the idea that white people used black people as a prop to gain leverage while pitting them against each other in an attempt to further please the white race. This act also restates one of Micheaux's aforementioned statements: In order to advance as a race, black people must remember and face their past.

Sylvia is distraught to find that Dr. Vivian, her Northern lover, is now familiar with her family's past and feels ashamed of his knowing this information. While Sylvia's original goal was to help the Reverend's school stay open, by the end of the film, Dr. Vivian convinces her that she is experiencing "warped thoughts," and reminds her of the great pride in being an American (Micheaux, 1920). The film ends with Sylvia accepting Dr. Vivian's hypothesis and seemingly forgetting all about the racial struggles in the South. This suggests that black race could only advance if all black people upheld their duty to help others of their race.

Body and Soul (1925)

The film title "Body and Soul" suggests yet another form of subordination. Georgian woman Isabelle wants to marry Sylvester, but her mother Martha Jane disapproves because she views Sylvester as a good for nothing "Niggah" (Micheaux, 1925). Isabelle attempts to discourage her mother from using this word due to its vulgarity. Traced back to the original latin word "niger," meaning black, the word became the noun "Negro" in the English language referring to a black person. After modernization by the French language, the word was cultivated into "Negre" or "Negress," meaning black woman. This derogatory term then came to be

“nigger,” stemming from the phonetic spelling of white southerners’ mispronunciation of “negre.”

Martha Jane instead wishes for Isabelle to marry Sylvester’s seemingly godly twin brother, Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins, whom she believes is a good respectable man. Unbeknown to Martha Jane, Jenkins, also known as “Jeremiah, the Deliverer,” is actually an escaped convict impersonating a reverend. He is in the business of drinking and gambling. Ironically, it is later revealed that he also has a history of sexually assaulting Isabelle, a recurrence that goes unnoticed by Martha Jane, leading to Isabella’s runaway to Atlanta after he steals her mother’s money.

At the end of *Body and Soul*, a title card reveals that none of the film’s events actually transpired. In reality, Martha Jane simply had “a dream of a tortured soul.” After learning that Sylvester has secured an impressive job and will soon come into a large amount of money, she finally approves of Isabelle's union to him.

Martha Jane’s conditional acceptance of Sylvester demonstrates the point that the white race had already successfully implanted an inferiority complex in the minds of the black race; black people have internalized this derogatory term believing that in order for a black person to be worthy of respect, they must be perceived in such a light that white people would consider them respectable. This means that a black person would have to follow the Christian faith and obtain financial security, a luxury that was virtually impossible for the majority of the black race to achieve due to systemic racism.

The film also depicts the term “Niggah” being used by Yellow-Curley, Jenkins’ white cellmate from prison. Jenkins and Yellow-Curley are both convicts with bad habits making them moral equals. Despite their mutual bond, the fact that Curley feels comfortable enough to use this

term in reference to Jenkins suggests the message that Curley views himself as better than Jenkins solely due to his whiteness. Both the black man and the white man are equally bad, but given its historical context, this derogatory term still suggests Jenkins' inferiority, despite his perceived status as a minister.

Similar to *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux suggests that religion is used as a manipulation strategy to assure black people understand their inferiority to white race and most importantly, that they are content with this proclaimed inferiority. The film title "Body and Soul" suggests seizure. It can be inferred that Micheaux claims that white people first took black people's physical bodies via enslavement and are now successfully acquiring the souls of black people through their own falsified religious viewpoint that has been instilled in the black race.

Civil Rights Era

Both *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Do The Right Thing* share the central theme of exploitation and making political statements.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song begins with a message that reads "Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality," emphasizing that the film depicts real acts that have taken place. In one of the opening scenes, a young seemingly unhoused Sweetback finds lodging in a brothel full of older women who take him under their wing. One of these women seduces young Sweetback into having his first instance of sexual intercourse which marks the beginning of his embodiment of a hypersexual fetishized black male. The name "Sweetback" is given to him by this prostitute as she is

participating in this sexual act with him. This fetishization continues when an older Sweetback works as “the greatest ever” performer in a live sex show in which many women desire to engage in sexual intercourse with him due to his sexual prowess (Peebles, 1971). The host of the show asks if any of the women would like to “try” Sweetback out to which a white woman eagerly volunteers. She is quickly shot down as the host clarifies that the invitation is only for “sisters,” an endearing term used in reference to black women (Peebles, 1971). The white woman’s eager participation symbolizes the fetishization of black people by white people. Specifically, black men are seen as sexual objects used to satisfy sexual desires of white women.

The main message behind this film surrounds the issue of police brutality against the black community, an act that Peebles subtly relates back to the enslavement of the black race in America. In the film, white police officers make an agreement with Sweetback to arrest him for a crime he did not commit to appease their boss. After his voluntary cooperation, Sweetback witnesses these policemen beat another arrested black man. During this encounter, the officers refers to black people as “niggers,” which suggests the officers’ awareness of Sweetback’s innocence and compliance, but simultaneous view of the black race in a negative light. Sweetback reacts by beating and killing the officers with his handcuffs requiring him to go on the run. As a result of this, the Chief of Police holds a meeting in which he voices his fear an uprising from “copkillers” and “niggers” and urges his officers to find Sweetback (Peebles, 1971). After this meeting, he assures the only two black officers that his use of the word “niggers” was merely a figure of speech and had no harmful intent. The Chief also suggests to the black officers that the act of turning Sweetback in would be a “a credit to their people” (Peebles, 1971). This manipulative tactic is an attempt from the white Chief to exploit members of the black community for his own gain of getting a hold of Sweetback. The Chief’s statement

suggests that their status in the police force is more important than their status as black individuals.

The film suggests that police do not actually care about the criminal history of black individuals because in their eyes, all black people share the same inferior status. After orders from the Chief, the police officers storm into MuMu's home and beat him thinking that he is Sweetback. After realizing their attack on the wrong black man, one of the officers replies with "So what?" This nonchalant response from the white officer proves that this brutality is in fact targeted, as there is a stereotypical belief that all black people are criminals so therefore it does not matter if they unintentionally assaulted a black man who was not on their original radar.

This stereotypical belief is depicted again as a black woman yells at an officer to leave her alone insisting that she's "clean." While her occupation is not disclosed, it can be assumed that she has previously abused drugs and now the police officer continues to snoop around to keep an eye on her. A gambling man that Sweetback goes to see emphasizes the struggle that black people face in their lives. "Life is tough, baby," he states. "A real struggle from the womb to the tomb." He also suggests that black people are so far behind because every dollar they make is divided and taken away from them so they never receive the full advantage of anything required to advance in life.

Towards the end of the film, Sweetback is in route to escape across the country border. In order to prevent this, white officers release dogs on him with the intent of the dogs killing Sweetback. This act is a direct relation to the outdated use of hound dogs to locate runaway slaves, a tactic used to assert control and dominance over enslaved black people. The officers rejoice at the discontinued barking of the dogs who they assume have successfully reached Sweetback. Unbeknownst to them, Sweetback has killed the dogs and continues on his run.

Peebles ends the film with a quote that reads “A baad asssss nigger is coming back to collect his dues.” Reparations are a common topic brought up with the black community. The film’s final song “Won’t Bleed Me” reads the lines “You bled my mama. You bled my papa [but] you won’t bleed me.” The act of bleeding refers to the extortion of a person to gain maximum use of their resources such as in slavery when black enslaved people were overworked in order to gain benefits of their physical labor. These lines also act as a reference to how enslaved people were beaten and tortured in countless ways in order for white masters to assert their control and dominance. This song emphasizes that the white race may have broken the previous black ancestry, it will not succeed in its attempts to break the current and following generations. These generations will receive what is owed to them as a result of ancestral trauma.

Do The Right Thing (1989)

Do The Right Thing instantly gives off a warm loving atmosphere starting from the first few scenes. There is an immediate sense of community and family as Mookie walks along the sidewalk being greeted by multiple members of the community. One older neighbor is referred to as “Mother Sister” which emphasizes the familial relationship between herself and the rest of the characters. Similar to a mother or older sister, Mother Sister watches over the neighborhood from her window and knows all that goes on in it. There is clear unity amongst the people of the neighborhood.

The film begins with a title sequence and song by black musical group Public Enemy called“Fight The Power” which becomes the film’s theme song that is played repeatedly on Radio Raheem’s boombox. Some of these lines read “Most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps,” implying that it is rare that black figures are represented in America. This becomes a

central problem as Buggin Out complains that there are no black people on the wall of fame in the neighborhood pizza shop which is more or less funded by regular paying black customers of the surrounding area. Sal, the Italian American owner of the shop, disputes him by declaring that only Italian Americans are allowed on his wall.

Pino, the oldest son of Sal, makes it known to his father that he wishes to move the shop back to their own neighborhood and away from the black neighborhood, which he refers to as "Planet of the apes," a trope rooted in racism towards the black community. While Sal disagrees with Pino, defending the black residents as people who have always been good to him, his true feelings eventually rise to the surface in a heated argument with Radio Raheem, Buggin Out and Smiley. Amidst this argument, Sal calls them all "niggers" which sends the entire crowd into a frenzy. It became known that despite his previous actions, Sal thought as little of the black race as other white people had. It becomes apparent to the community that Sal only exploited the black residents for their money in order to keep the shop open. Angered by Radio Raheem's loud boombox and the ongoing argument amongst them, Sal destroys the boombox with his bat which results in a huge fight started by Radio Raheem, arguably the most peaceful character. While Raheem made a point to Mookie earlier in the film that love was the ultimate champion over hate, the smashing of his boombox was the final straw that sent him over the edge.

This idea of losing control also comes up when Mookie throws a metal trash bin into the window of Sal's shop after the police arrive and kills Radio Raheem in an illegal chokehold. Mookie, a then current employee at the shop, had too had enough. He acted as a mediator throughout the entirety of the film, educating a racist Pino and consoling Buggin Out after his suggested boycott of Sal's pizzeria over the wall of fame. Mookie's lashing out is a clear

example of the point that black people are generally seen as violent criminals, but in reality, black people only result to violence when provoked by racial injustices such as police brutality.

Similar to *Sweetback Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, there are themes of police brutality and appropriation as non-black people attempt to exploit black communities to benefit themselves. In *Sweet Sweetback*, white policemen exploit black officers to find black men as well as white women using black men as sexual objects. In *Do The Right Thing*, Sal uses the black community to gain financial income by positioning his shop in their neighborhood knowing it would be more successful there than in his own neighborhood. This is an economic exploitation of black communities. In both films, even though the true feelings are disguised, all black people are falsely viewed as inferior villainous beings by other non-black groups. Both films point out political flaws such as racism, police brutality and economic exploitation.

Modern Age Era

Both *Moonlight* and *Get Out* both share the central theme of deconstruction.

Moonlight (2017)

Moonlight offers a detailed deconstruction of masculinity through a black lens, providing several examples of how toxic masculinity negatively affects the emotional intelligence of black men. The film follows a young Chiron as he navigates life as a homosexual male in the black community. Starting as a young boy, Chiron is bullied for being perceived by peers as "gay." Juan, a local drug dealer, takes Chiron under his wing, becoming a sort of a father figure in his life. Juan cares for Chiron in several ways such as providing food, teaching him how to swim and offering life lessons. Immediately, this relationship fights the stereotype that all black men

are “hard” individuals with a lack of desire to care for children. Juan’s care for Chiron immediately shows a sense of gentleness.

Chiron’s childhood friend, Kevin, is a prime example of performative masculinity, a term which refers to a set of socially constructed ideas of what it means to be masculine. Men will act, or perform, a certain way in order to appear masculine to others. This film highlights the social connection between violent aggression and masculinity. In the audience’s first encounter with a young Kevin, he tells Chiron that in order to keep the other boys from picking on him, he must prove to them that he is not “soft.” Based in the social construction of gender roles, this idea of being “soft” is generally associated with the concept of femininity, a trait that Kevin has fought against since he was a young boy. In order to argue his hardness, Chiron begins a fight with Kevin which ultimately showcases his masculinity. In his teenage years, Kevin attempts to exude his masculinity by boasting about his sexual experiences to Chiron. As heterosexual sex is socially linked to masculinity, Kevin’s need to flaunt his sex life is understandable especially for his age. He also provides another example of performative masculinity in “Knock Down, Stay Down,” a game where a player must punch another person down, continuously hitting them until the other person gives up and stays on the ground. Terel, Chiron’s bully, convinces Kevin to play this game with Chiron as the target. Due to his perceived masculinity, Kevin’s attraction to Chiron goes unnoticed which presents bias. Terel’s bias against Chiron as opposed to Kevin demonstrates the argument that the performance of gender roles do not necessarily equate to “masculinity” or “femininity.” These roles are constructed and given meanings by society that are not necessarily based in fact.

While Juan teaches Chiron several lessons, the most monumental lesson he teaches him is that he must decide for himself who he will be in life, emphasizing that he must not let anyone

else make the decision for him. After his first violent explosion, a teen aged Chiron is sent away to juvenile. Upon his release, he "[builds himself] from the ground up," making himself "hard." While an argument could be made that Chiron did in fact decide for himself who he would be, it could also be argued that due to a difficulty navigating life as a queer black man, Chiron defaults to presenting a facade of hypermasculinity to mask his queerness. Ultimately, this facade leads to Chiron bottling up his emotions into his adulthood resulting in a dishonest life. As shown in the film, this emotional withholding acts as a common obstacle in the relationships of black males as any act of vulnerability, a key aspect of healthy relationships, is met with disapproval. Moonlight offers a breakdown of the results of long lasting results of toxic masculinity.

Get Out (2017)

Get Out deconstructs racism by comparing the concept to a horror story. The film follows black man Chris on his first visit to his white girlfriend, Rose's family home. Rod, Chris' friend, warns him not to go because historically, black people have not trusted white people with their safety. This concern proves reasonable as Chris gets tricked into a psychiatric session with Rose's mother Misty who places him at a "heightened level of suggestibility" to hypnotize him. This act is later revealed to be a manipulation tactic in the family's plan to swap Chris' brain with a white man's in order to achieve a form of eugenics. From his initial encounter with the family, Chris feels uneasy with their presence as the family continuously uses microaggressions unaware of their inappropriate behavior. In addition to this discomfort, the family has two black servants who seem to display a strange contentment with working at the house. Through tears, Georgina, the housemaid, claims that the family "treats [her and the groundskeeper, Walter] like family." As aforementioned in the literature review, this "happy servant" narrative is a common

theme in earlier Hollywood films as they promoted the idea that black people were content with their subordination.

Writer and director Jordan Peele makes several connections to slavery through the film. The first connection is shown through the inclusion of the Bingo game played by white party goers to “win” ownership of Chris. This emphasizes the fact that despite their admirability by white people, enslaved black people and servants were treated as property rather than human beings. Rose symbolizes the specific oversexualization of black men by white women. Chris discovers that Rose routinely brings black boyfriends to her family home after telling Chris he was her first black partner. This concept is further supported by a white older woman at the family’s party who inappropriately touches Chris’ arm asking if the racial assumptions of black men being more sexually advanced are true. This assumption is based on stereotypes that black men have larger penises than other races. The touching of his arm also speaks to the idea of slave masters examining slaves’ stamina to gauge whether or not they would be capable of completing desired tasks before making the commitment to purchase them.

This connection leads into the idea of eugenics. As Rose is able to examine Chris’ stamina by familiarizing herself with his “qualifications” throughout their romantic relationship, she plans to make use of his desirable genetic makeup and physical physique which the white characters continuously point out through relations to famous black male athletes. It is later established that Rose’s grandparents' brains have been placed in the bodies of Georgina and Walter as an attempt to combine white people’s “determination” with black people’s “natural gifts” to create a “greater” species (Peele, 2017). The use of the phrase “natural gifts” implies that the aspects of black culture are in fact naturally derived. Another white party goer proclaims that “black is in fashion,” implying that white people view blackness as an aesthetic “trend”

rather than a cultural identity. One example of this false ideology is shown when a white art dealer, fallen victim to blindness, buys Chris' brain in hopes of obtaining his artistic "eye" shown through his photography (Peele, 2017). Another example is demonstrated when Chris goes to fist bump Andre, an assumedly black man whose body had been taken over by a white man, Andre reaches for a handshake instead. These events demonstrate the point that being black is not simply a hobby that white people can just pick up on. It is an experience that can only be had by black individuals which highlights the importance of black filmmakers telling the stories of black people. This film breaks down racism for the white race as it reveals both explicit and implicit manipulation used to exploit the black race for their own benefit.

Findings

During this research, a few discoveries were found. The first discovery is that a lot of film related controversy within the black community came from the perceived perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Although not all black people found these black filmmakers' portrayals of black characters as regressive, the criticism from those that did find fault in these portrayals is what ultimately led to subsequent eras of black cinema.

Another discovery is that several black cinematic eras were created in response to an undesirable image of black life that existed already. Blaxploitation films fought against the submissive image of the polished black person by portraying black characters as unapologetic angry individuals working to call out the white race for their wrongdoings. The LA Rebellion fought for more nuanced portrayals of black experiences in response to the one sided images of blaxploitation characters.

The final discovery is that each black cinematic era attempts to educate audiences of historical occurrences from a black perspective that have gone unrecognized by Hollywood.

Discussion

An interesting concept derived from the conduction of the literature review is the effects of born nationality on the confidence of black people. Bahaman raised film star Sidney Poitier was highly admired by Hollywood as he was casted in numerous major films playing highly respectable black men. Some linked his stardom and recognition to an overwhelming exudation of confidence. Growing up in a place where being black was the standard, it is not surprising that Poitier oozed self-assurance on and off screen. Gifted the luxury of having grown up without racial discrimination, Poitier did not have the opportunity to form early developmental insecurities about his ethnic features resulting in an overwhelming confidence unknown to black Amerians accustomed to racial injustices from their births.

As mentioned in the findings, many black filmmakers were faulted for their perceived continuation of negative black stereotypes introduced by Hollywood. While Micheaux's films faced criticism for its “sacreligious” aspects, his conceptual takes on the topic of religion were quite stimulating. While Christianity is widely practiced within the black community, some black people criticize what they view as “white Christianity.” This type of christianity is rooted in racism as shown in Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates*. During slavery, slaveholders would allow for “slave preachers” to recite sermons to the slaves mimicking a false sense of freedom. Like Old Ned, these black preachers would often recite manipulative sermons justifying their subordination to the white race. Oscar’s inclusion of this manipulation holds a mirror up to the

black community revealing a form of social control originating from the Christian religion introduced by white Americans.

While at the time of its existence it captured dominant unapologetic portrayals of black characters, blaxploitaion's single dimensionality only created a different kind of villainous behavior for white audiences to attach to the black community. The LA Rebellion's acknowledgement and counteraction of this film genre was the first essential step in the progression away from this limited portrayal. As filmmaker Spike Lee once said, "If one black filmmaker messes up, the rest of us will be made to feel it" (Grigsby, 1991). While Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* unintentionally acted as a catalyst for the mass production of blaxploitation films, it is a prime example of how unlike their white counterparts, black filmmakers and actors have a unspoken responsibility to aid in the constructive progression of the black race. Given the difficult history of black Americans, black artists must be consciously aware of the messages that their work is communicating to audiences, specifically nonblack audiences.

While many older black films have been lost due to neglect, it is only reasonable to acknowledge the large potential of unknown films produced by black female filmmakers. While portions of this footage still exist, most of this widely recognised footage belongs to males. Historically, the black man has been set to a low caliber while the black woman is set to an even lower one in relation to man. Fortunately, organizations like Kino Lorber are currently overseeing restoration and distribution projects such as the Pioneers of African American Cinema which works to bring forgotten black-produced films from the earlier 20th century to light. This project will allow for the recognition of a more realistic timeline of black cinematic history. These older films alongside more contemporary works have the potential to give black

people of all ages a sense of inspiration, courage and belonging as they would finally be able to identify a piece of themselves in these authentic nuanced depictions.

While films produced by black individuals are important to acknowledge, it is equally as important to remember that Black cinema is simply cinema. Just as race is a social construct, the idea of "Black cinema" is also constructed in such a way that assumes conceptual contrasts from mainstream cinema placing yet another separation amongst different racial groups. Regardless, these culturally specific Black stories told by black filmmakers are crucial to understanding the experiences that black people have endured and as well as the ongoing repercussion of these experiences.

Conclusion

Black cinema is American cinema as well as American history. Black filmmakers have overcome counteless adversities yet continued to produce their art rigorously and unapologetically within a system structured for their impairment. Despite the scarce resources available to them, these black artists have managed to create masterpieces out of scraps showcasing black cinema's embodiment of creativity, cultural affirmation and freedom.

Black cinema acts as a collective voice for the black community allowing black filmmakers and actors the opportunity to create multifaceted images of the black community while dismantling the caricaturistic images cultivated by mainstream Hollywood.

Contrary to what is widely believed, black filmmakers and actors helped build American cinema. Although the works of black cinema are being recognized and celebrated more, there remains still a substantial amount of progress to be made. Despite this seemingly greater

recognition of black artists, racial injustice still exists within the film industry whether these injustices are intentional or not. Conversations on diversity and racial disparities must continue onward in order to hold Hollywood accountable for its discrimination and prevent social and creative regression.

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