Film and Civil Rights: Race Relations and Film

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Abstract: Though a slow and painful road, Black integration into Hollywood has improved film portrayals of the Black community as well as interracial relations within the United States and other parts of the world. By explaining how film as a medium of communication has a special influence on viewers' comprehension—via cultural transmission—and by summarizing some landmark events in Black film history, this essay aims to show that Black integration in the film industry has played an integral role in the civil rights movement by altering how Blacks are perceived and increasing the roles they are given to better reflect the community and their contributions at large.

Race Relations and Film

On February 29, 1940, Hattie McDaniel made history when she walked on stage to receive an Oscar—the first Academy Award ever given to an African American—for her role in *Gone with the Wind* (Breznican, 2020). Long before racism was addressed in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Black actors like Hattie began gaining screen time in films that predominantly consisted of white American actors. Unlike the vaudeville-type acts that came before her (Rogin, 1992), Hattie used her roles as opportunities to represent herself and other Blacks in a more respectable light. Her screen time helped pave the way for other Black actors, and over time their cumulative efforts have shifted the way Blacks are portrayed in media. This in turn has affected how African Americans are perceived by audiences. Black integration into Hollywood has helped transform the racial atmosphere and history of the United States via cultural transmission through film, which has positively impacted racial relations leading up to and following the civil rights movement.

Since the invention and distribution of silent films in the late nineteenth century, movies have reigned as one of the most popular forms of entertainment around the world. Box office hits influence society at large, and frequent references in pop culture help old films to persist against time—even Gen Z can understand references to nearly fifty-year-old cultural phenomena like *Star Wars* and *Jaws*. However, to better understand the influence of movies and how they can both shape pop culture and shift racial dynamics in the United States, it is important to understand the sociological theory of Cultivation Analysis. This theory describes how the media that people consume influences the ways in which they view their personal realities. Mass media outlets such as film can transmit cultural information, such as traditions and customs, to their audiences. Media outlets might also dramatize reality for the purpose of creating a more

interesting story, which could potentially cause viewers to perceive exaggerated information as accurate[1]. Film has particular power in this regard due to cutting/editing, cinematography, special effects, and other medium-specific storytelling techniques which greatly influence how viewers *think about* and *understand* the content presented (TEDx Talks—Brighter, 2018).

African American pioneers in the film industry started transforming American culture as they transitioned from playing menial roles to main characters. Before this transition, Black performers were mostly confined to roles that were seen as demeaning and humiliating, which only worked to perpetuate negative stereotypes (see: Stepin Fetchit (Wikipedia, 2020)). In this regard, many members of the Black community, including the NAACP, publicly disapproved of Hattie McDaniel for her willingness to portray maids and house servants. Even today, as classic films like *Gone with the Wind* have come under increased scrutiny for their racist portrayals, modern viewers have argued over whether Hattie was a perpetrator against or humble champion for Blacks through her roles (Johnson, 2020). In response to her critics, and as a demonstration of her perseverance in staying true to herself, she "responded that she would rather play a maid on the screen than be one in real life," (History.com Editors, 2009). Hattie's determination helped pave the way for others to gain more positive and influential roles.

In the article *Desegregating Hollywood*, author Steve Ryfle (2017) discusses how certain films have reflected racial attitudes and promoted damaging societal perceptions, specifically analyzing the 1967 hit, *In the Heat of the Night*. In the article, director Norman Jewison recognized the important historical context for his groundbreaking film, saying, "When I was making *In the Heat of the Night…* Cities were burning down. There was tremendous struggle in

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[1] Mean World Syndrome is an example of how persuasive media can be on viewers' perceptions of reality. In this instance, media consumers that had watched large amounts of violent tv shows (such crime dramas) were more likely to perceive the world around them as more violent than it actually was.

the 1960s to integrate a country that had been segregated." In the film, actor Sidney Poitier (the

second African American to receive an Oscar, for his role in *Lillies of the Field*) plays Virgil

Tibbs, a detective assigned to solve a murder mystery in a backwards, segregated Southern town.

Upon arriving at his destination, he is nearly arrested by the local police as a suspect—on

account of his skin color—for the murder he's supposed to investigate. After proving his

competence and skill as a detective by continuously outwitting his white contemporaries, he

gradually earns the respect of those he works with and eventually solves the murder. Describing

why this particular character was so monumental, the author of the article states:

> Ball's novel and Silliphant's screenplay rejected one significant trope: in this scenario,
> the wrongly accused black man is, unlike Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* never
> portrayed as a victim. He consistently outmatches and outmaneuvers his white
> antagonists—intellectually, morally, and even physically. Indeed, Tibb's unspoken
> motivation to stay and investigate the crime is not to prove his equality but his
> superiority. (p. 6)

In the climax of the film, Detective Tibbs is slapped in the face by an older, deeply prejudiced

white man. Without hesitation and most importantly without consequences, Tibbs returns the

blow with what is affectionately known as "the slap heard round the world." In relation to this

scene, Ryfle quotes a radio commentator who reminisced that, "[It was a] slap on behalf of every

adult black man who had ever been called 'boy,' relegated to the back of the bus, or harassed by

the police." (p.7)

　　　　Many justifiably argue that the process of positive integration has been *too* slow, and that

Hollywood should have taken greater measures earlier on to promote greater equality and

integration. In the piece *Hollywood and the Civil Rights Movement*, Jason Housley (2004)

admits the reluctance of film studios to take on race-centered movies. He states:

> Historically, Hollywood has treaded cautiously in its handling of racial themes. Despite
> the concurrent ascendancy of black actors like Sidney Poitier, the subject of the Civil

Rights Movement was rarely examined in films of this period. Not surprisingly, the first feature films to deal with this topic were low-budget independent films that usually exploited the more sensational aspects of the race struggle in America (p.7).

Even today, with the release of many period pieces such as *Hidden Figures*, *Selma*, and *42*, these films"more often hold up a mirror to society in the past tense rather than the present" (Ryfle, 2017; p. 8).

It should be noted that occasionally, even blatantly racist films—as unexcusable as they are—were catalysts for positive reform. In the 1910s, the release of some popular (and racist) films prompted some people to advocate change. Following the distribution of the infamous *The Birth of a Nation*, legislators in Illinois released a new set of guidelines for what could be shown in movies (Scott, 2012), because "as legislators forbade segregation of the *physical* space of a movie theater, many felt it a natural extension to regulate on-screen racism" (p. 222). These social advocates understood what Hirschman and Thompson (1997) noted concerning the influence of mass media when they said, "Cultural critics argue that the seeming plethora of media images, plot lines, and character portrayals is organized around a limited set of themes that continuously reproduce a particular cultural system of beliefs or ideology. Through routine exposure… consumers are continuously immersed in this ideological system" (p. 44). In other words, what people *see* is what people *believe* (Polan, 2014). Small reforms have been made concerning Black representation on-screen, and the ideology of white audiences has slowly shifted to reflect those changes. Over time, the pervasiveness of Hollywood has become evident internationally, influencing not only how Americans view each other and their history, but how global audiences interpret and apply our history to their own countries (Minchin, 2010).

Regrettably, history has shown that the road to a more integrated and fair Hollywood is long and slow. However, even small steps in the right direction are valuable in providing white

audiences with diverse perspectives and Black children with relatable role models. Movies such as *In the Heat of the Night* and more modern commentaries such as *Get Out* show important narratives in a way that only the medium of film can convey. In an issue of *Film Quarterly* published in 2016, an article overviewing the revolutionary work of social critic Michael Gillespie reads, "There have always been multiple ways of being black, becoming black, performing blackness, challenging blackness, embodying blackness, defying blackness, and transcending the conventional understanding of blackness" (Longo, 2016). While Hollywood roles have been limiting and destructive in the past, Black actors have established a legacy of courage and dignity while pushing for social equality and deserved recognition. The production of more movies dedicated to portraying Black narratives and equalizing Black actors will result in a more integrated and equal society. Although the true impact of film on American audiences is subjective and cannot be easily measured, I believe that movies of the past have laid the groundwork for more integrated movies in the present, and improved racial relations in the future.

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