The Ethical Implications of Racial Perspectives in Cinematic Media

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Executive Summary

The information age has brought about a new era of people discussing the shortcomings of cinema, as well as potential solutions. The future will hold the possibility, both ethically and socially, that any person can tell any story they would like to. This freedom, however, comes with certain responsibilities. Before one can understand the ethical implications of certain choices made in racial representation, the history of representation in cinema must be examined and understood. Historically, whiteness has become the default or normal, and Othering has reinforced negative stereotypes for other racial groups. Current films such as *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* have had their fair share of praises in representation, as well as their shortcomings. The advent of these films exhibiting more equal racial representation has brought about the discussion of who can tell which stories. Artists should follow professional recommendations for how white people, and ethnic people, can contribute to a new age of cinema where racial representation is fair and valued.

Research and Analysis

The new millenium has seen the advent of a major information boom that has brought about a new world of interconnectivity. The Internet, social media sites, and new technology have all brought about platforms for discussion and, ultimately, change. Among the many topics that have been brought under the microscope, the film industry has become a most recent victim. With controversies over whitewashing, sexual harassment, and criminal labor practices, Hollywood films and their creators are now receiving more criticism than ever, both from critics and the general consumer. Most important, arguably, has been the conversation surrounding

racial representation in this industry, including but not limited to television, news, cinema, and commercial advertising. Now, more than ever, audiences are speaking up about who and what is shown on screen, and the accuracy and truthfulness with which they are depicted. More specifically, there has been a recent discussion about the stories themselves being told, and who is allowed to tell them. In this paper, the ethical implications of racial perspectives in cinema will be explored, discussed, and compared to what the expected social response among audiences would be. Certain films will be analyzed as case studies, with the inclusion of both non-indigenous and indigenous creators included for comparison. This exploration of films and academic material seeks to support the stance that any artist may tell any story he or she chooses to; however, with that freedom also comes a responsibility to tell that story as truthfully as one can, consulting those groups who are represented within the story.

Before analyzing the ethical implications of such representation, one must understand how Hollywood has historically represented or misrepresented race, class, gender, sexualtiy, and even disability in movies. Henry Benshoff and Sean Griffin discuss these issues in *America on Film*, a comprehensive overview of the industrial, socio-cultural, and aesthetic factors that contribute to cinematic representation. Among the multiple chapters discussing the representation of various races on the big screen -- including Native American, African American, and Asian American -- Benshoff and Griffin establish how “a society’s dominant ideology functions optimally when individuals are so imbued with its concepts that they do not realize that a social construct has been formed or is being reinforced” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 53). For decades, moviegoers have been encouraged into thinking the dominant culture, i.e. white people, is the normal through emotional connection and identification with the white

protagonist. Often, whiteness "can only be recognized when placed in comparison to something (or someone) that is considered *not* white" (53). For example, Martin Freeman's character in *Black Panther* is recognized as white because the movie is dominated by African American actors and actresses; so Freeman's 'whiteness' is obvious when placed in comparison with the rest of the cast's 'non-whiteness.' The latter is also apparent when compared to previously released movies that share *Black Panther's* superhero genre, which have exhibited only white actors in the lead roles. Another complicated historical idea that has contributed to the media's misrepresentation of certain racial groups is the idea of the American melting pot. The metaphor expresses the common societal practice of "various immigrant cultures and traditions… [becoming] forged or melted together into an overall sense of American identity" (55). As a result of this assimilation, whiteness becomes hard to identify as an overall culture. Contrastingly, other races became stereotyped in media, as images routinely exaggerated undesirable characteristics and prescribed them onto one race as a whole. This 'Othering' has denied negative traits, such as being overly sexual or criminal, from white people and instead have been "projected by dominant white culture onto racial or ethnic Others…[resulting in] non-white groups…[being] frequently characterized as immoral or inferior" (54). The definition of these non-white groups in the early stages of film contributed to the lingering racial stereotypes of modern cinema.

In recent years, it seemed that there was an indication within Hollywood of a sea of change in movies portraying African Americans. Movies like *Get Out*, *12 Years A Slave*, and *Moonlight* have made enormous strides commercially as well as critically, gaining attention at the Oscars as well as in the box office. However, some critics noticed that Hollywood quickly

went back to business as usual, and the overwhelming dominance of white representation in films was only slightly altered, as compared to previous years. The 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report took the top 200 theatrically released films of 2016, as well as 1,251 broadcast, cable and digital platform television shows to study minority representation in the industry, both in front of and behind the camera. Stacy L. Smith, a USC professor who leads a similar study at the aforementioned school, has said “Every year we're hopeful that we will actually see change, [but] unfortunately, that hope has not quite been realized" (Bahr 2017). While the most recent year of movies is initially encouraging to the avid cinema consumer, this study shows that while minorities made up “nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population in 2016,” they only hold lead actor positions 13.9 percent of the time, and similarly only direct films 12.6 percent of the time (Hunt, 2018, p. 14 & 29). While certainly discouraging, this representation among employment is only one facet of the problem that needs addressing. Another area that must be considered are the stories told concerning African Americans, and the accuracy with which they are portrayed. A recent film that received much critical acclaim for its representation, both in front of and behind the camera, was the aforementioned *Black Panther*, a Marvel superhero film following T’Challa and his African nation of Wakanda directed by Ryan Coogler. The film opened to the sound of $202 million dollars at the box office, proving the importance of representation in cinema, especially when attracting audiences to the theaters. The success of the film has been attributed to “decades of the film industry hindering visibility and representation of minority actors and characters” (Khosla 2018). For the first time in Marvel’s $13.5 billion, 18-movie franchise, Africa and its people were “depicted in a powerful and positive light, free from the effects of colonialism, with characters that look like” the African American citizens filling the theater

audience (EscoBlades 2018). Additionally, the black stereotypes that had so often been at the forefront of cinema were removed. The film had "strong, powerful, educated people who…[weren't] being discriminated against or mocked. No hurtful stereotypes of blacks…[like] ghettos or slaves or thugs...just beautiful royal kings and queens" (MicaBurton 2018). Despite an almost overwhelming positive response to the film, some critics still had qualms with the story itself. In his article titled "Is Marvel's *Black Panther* African Enough?" Ziki Nelson criticized the film's portrayal of 'African-ness' to have "once again hid[den] a pastiche of cultures and traditions whose distinctiveness seems not to be relevant in Marvel's eyes" (Nelson 2018). Nelson continues by pointing out how the Wakandan culture that the film presents is rather a cultural mesh of various African cultures, criticizing the use of isiXosa, a southern African language, in a Wakanda that is geographically placed in eastern Africa. The article ends with the conclusion that "perhaps it's too much to expect informed choices" from an American movie. Despite the movie doing many things right -- having a majority African American cast, an African American director, and consulting experts on African culture -- it wasn't enough for this particular reviewer.

This is not uncommon: a film exploring a minority story with actors and creators who share that diversity is discredited by the racial group it was made for. *The Joy Luck Club*, a 1993 drama about the relationships between Chinese-American women and their Chinese immigrant mothers, was one such victim. The film, already defying the odds by portraying a minority story written by a woman and directed by Hong-Kong born Wayne Wang, enjoyed box office success in multiplexes across the country and mostly positive reviews. One such review showered Amy Tan, the writer, with praise over her intricate storytelling:

> "The tropes and themes Tan employs in *The Joy Luck Club*...mother-daughter relationships, the traumas of the past haunting the present, the difficulties of relating to Asian culture from an Asian American viewpoint - helped establish a way of thinking about Asian American identity, a concept that has yet to be...considered important in the mainstream media beyond the "model minority" myth" (Kang 2018).

Despite this initial praise for the movie's representation of Chinese culture, the film became a relic and an embarrassment to many Asians Americans. Most important to remember is that this film, released when it was, was an anomaly; in fact the next film to feature a majority Asian cast with commercial success in the box office would be almost 25 years later, with *Crazy Rich Asians*. A successful mainstream film accurately depicting racially diverse characters was rarely seen, and so when the dominant culture reverted to old practices of stereotyping and tokenism, the burden of representation was thrust upon *The Joy Luck Club*. That is, Amy Tan's once heartfelt movie about Chinese immigrant mothers and their Chinese American daughters became the end all, be all for representing all Asian Americans. Without more Asian American stories saturating the market, *The Joy Luck Club* was left to shoulder this burden alone, leading to resentment and rejection. Inkoo Kang, in her article "It's Time to Forgive *The Joy Luck Club*," hypothesizes that "if the mainstream film or publishing industries had been more welcoming toward all kinds of stories from all kinds of communities, none of these works or entertainers would be loaded with the expectation [to] please everyone" (Kang 2018). The newest Asian American film to gain commercial success in America, *Crazy Rich Asians*, provides a new wave of hope for the future of Hollywood cinema. Not only did the film receive an overwhelming amount of praise for being "an Asian-American-centric story on the big screen for the first time

in a generation," but there is an advanced maturity surrounding the implications of this movie, as Asian American audiences seem to grasp that "the richness and complexities of the Asian diaspora cannot be tackled and addressed in a rom-com" (Cleo Yap 2018). In Audrey Cleo Yap's article entitled "*Crazy Rich Asians* Doesn't Represent All Asians Everywhere, and That's Fine," comments on the revolution that this movie is. A Hollywood film of such stature hasn't had "this many Asians with those many accents (Malaysian, American, Singaporean, British, Australian) being that many things ever before - sexy, funny and outrageous - and not doing martial arts" (Cleo Yap 2018). The successfulness of this movie comes from breaking the stereotypes that Classical Hollywood had trapped Asian Americans into. Again, this movie tells a culturally rich story without losing the general appeal of a romantic comedy. There are some critics who think *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *The Joy Luck Club* before that, are "too accessible to white (an other) audiences," in that the work becomes the "Panda Express of Asian American" filmmaking (Kang 2018). Kang and Cleo Yap heartily disagree with this sentiment, arguing that the "broadness of [the films] doesn't take away from the very specific experiences of being Asian-American and coming to terms with what that means" when people challenge the ideology. *Crazy Rich Asians*' domestic success among both minority and caucasian demographics provides a new hope for the film world. In a fiscally conservative industry, the sentiment of Hollywood hesitancy to feature untested talent or filmmakers is understandable. As Paul Dergarabedian, a senior media analyst with industry researcher Rentrak, has said, "Oftentimes it's not emotional appeal [but] the spreadsheet...the profitability of these movies...that can make the change [among those] holding the purse strings" (Harwell 2015). Despite only making up 40 percent of the U.S. population, minorities purchased 46 percent of the $1.2 billion in ticket sales sold in the United States in

2014 (*Theatrical*, 2014, p. 12). This is reflected in *Crazy Rich Asians* producing almost $174 million domestically, so it's likely that Hollywood can be persuaded of this market's viability.

Another recent film that has sparked controversy within the Hollywood industry brings up another consideration when it comes to accurate racial representation on film: which people can tell which stories. In 2017, *Detroit*, starring John Boyega, Will Oulter, and Algee Smith, followed the events of The Algiers Motel Incident that occurred during Detroit's 1967 12th Street Riot. The film has been praised for portraying the harrowing experiences of the African American citizens who were terrorized by white police officers as a "psychological excavation of the roots of police brutality" (Gleiberman 2017). Despite the critical acclaim bestowed upon the film, there has been some discussion surrounding Kathryn Bigelow being chosen to direct such a film. Owen Gleiberman, in his article "Should White Filmmakers Be Telling the Story of 'Detroit'?" performs an in-depth conversation about the ownership of the ethnic narrative. In a new age of heightened sensitivity, there is a "flavor of absolutism in the air" about whether or not there is a moral right for artists to tell stories that might not necessarily be their own. Gleiberman fears that policing this freedom leads to "a place of culturally determined slots that's not only restrictive but racially pigeonholed in the very ways it seeks to fight against" (Gleiberman 2017). Gleiberman's reasoning against there being a restriction on white filmmakers comes from the inability to place a solid line between right and wrong, because ultimately, the decision is subjective and varies among the minority group members who would decide such a thing. A recnet movie that saw the shifting perspectives about how to tell minority stories was with the 1992 drama *Malcolm X*. Spike Lee, a renowned African American filmmaker, stirred controversy around the *Malcolm X* film in 1991 when the veteran director

Norman Jewison was attached to direct. Lee employed a letter-writing campaign to Warner Bros., "insisting that the nuances of the civil rights activist's story would be better served by a black filmmaker" (Hornaday 2016). As a result, Jewison dropped out of the project only to be replaced by Spike Lee himself. Before beginning production in mid-September, writer and activist Amiri Baraka spoke out against Spike Lee's involvement on the project, "afraid Lee [would] exploid the life of the Black Muslim leader, taint his legacy and distort the history of a whole activist era" (Trescott 1991). The project had been stalled and abandoned for 24 years at Warner Bros., most likely due to the subjectivity surrounding how Malcolm is viewed by various people, which is bound to be on a spectrum with extreme hatred, extreme adoration, and everything in between. Lee responded to the eloquent essayist and political theorist to Amsterdam News, stating "I'm gonna make the kind of film I want to make...Nobody tells him what poems and plays to write, so why is he trying to tell me what kind of film to make? He can write whatever he wants and I want the freedom to make my films" (Trescott 1991). Gleiberman tries to draw a line from the events surrounding the *Malcolm X* movie to *Detroit* and asks: Why wasn't there an outcry for a black filmmaker here as well? Gleiberman then launches into an extended defense for Kathryn Bigelow's creative vision for *Detroit*:

> "When it comes to the possession of subjects and the freedom of expression, there are no one-size-fits-all answers. Yet let's look at "Detroit."... Kathryn Bigelow, a brilliant and humane hair-trigger filmmaker, has [worked] to re-create that experience — to imagine it, to place herself and the audience inside it — as a powerful act of empathy, and as a cleansing act of art. I would argue that she has used her knowledge, and imagination, to step over the boundaries of her own experience and enter the lives of others. That's what

> great filmmakers do. That's what artists do. Do we now want to live in a watchdog state of artistic correctness in which even adventurous filmmakers don't have the right to do that? In which it's frowned upon, discouraged, and branded "appropriation" for someone to make a movie representing those of a different race? My view is that we should always use a moment like this one as a clarion call for the equality of opportunity...And maybe the one rule we should strive for is to say that no one of any race, gender, or sexuality owns any story. That the only factor that should dictate who tells it is, ultimately, the power of the telling" (Gleiberman 2017).

Gleiberman truly believes that Kathryn Bigelow was the right person to tell that story. Even though she didn't share personally in the cultural implications that the film needed to analyze, she adopted the empathy and creativity and imagination needed to tell the story well.

With such a culture of sensitivity, navigating the social taboos of who can direct which films can get discouraging. However, there are many advocates for a new era of filmmaking that seeks to tell stories without the fear of backlash for a subjective perspective. Ann Hornaday, for example, would agree with Gleiberman's assessment of Kathryn Bigelow's role in *Detroit*, especially with the center and core of filmmaking being defined as empathy. Barry Jenkins, the director of the 2017 Oscar winning film *Moonlight*, expressed concerns about appropriation in the context of sexuality. Jenkins said, "I'm a straight guy who's made a film about a gay protagonist, and...I was like, 'Am I the right person to tell this story? Because there's an aspect of this person's identity that I don't have a first-person perspective on.'" What Jenkins, Hornaday and many other filmmakers today have realized is that the cinematic medium itself lends the key to telling these stories well and right: empathy. More frequently, filmmakers have

"quietly demonstrated how the fraught territory of 'writing across difference' might be navigated with self-awareness and sensitivity, rather than unexamined privilege, solipsism and general un-woke-ness" (Hornaday 2016).

Nadia Latif and Leila Latif, writers for The Guardian, outline a simple technique to fix Hollywood's race problem, which they label the Bechdel test for race. Building upon Nikesh Shukla's eponymous test, the Latifs propose five questions to tests a film: Are there two named characters of color?, Do they have dialogue?, Are they not romantically involved with one another?, Do they have any dialogue that isn't comforting or supporting a white character?, and Is one of them definitely not magic? Nadia and Leila even put their test to the test with the eight Best Picture Oscar nominees for 2015. Out of the eight nominated films, only two passed the women's' test: *American Sniper* and *Selma*. More surprisingly, however is that "half of the films nominated did not feature a single named character of color" (Latif 2016). There are most definitely drawbacks to the test, most importantly the fact that passing the test does not mean the movie is a diversity ideal. In fact, one of the films that passed the test in 2015, *American Sniper*, has "faceless violent Arabs" that reinforce rather than dismantle previously established stereotypes for that racial group. Nadia and Leila clarify that their test is meant to "force you to analyze what you notice in a film...[and that] once you see these things, you cannot unsee them." (Latif 2016).

Lauretta Prevost, in her article "Power and Perspective in Storytelling," she discusses how to support others and authentically represent characters in the realm of documentaries, which can also be applied to that of the fictional cinema world. Edwin Martinez, a Bronx-born filmmaker whose film *To Be Heard* won the Audience Award at DOC NYC, stresses the

importance of "represent[ing] humans as their own complete beings going on a journey" (Provost 2017). The worst thing a storyteller can do to a character, especially one based on real people like documentaries often are, is to define a person by one quality of theirs. Laurie Deason, a screenwriter at Azusa Pacific University, emphasizes this in her intermediate screenwriting course. She encourages her students to write with different perspectives, whether that is race, religion, or sexuality, but to never let those characteristics overtake the humanity of the character. A person isn't just gay or just Christian or just black; they are a complex, three-dimensional person with unique experiences that differentiate them from everyone else. A controversial idea that Martinez posits is that "Brown folks can't fix racism. That's a white problem," which to a point is true (Provost 2017). The first step to solving a problem is admitting that one exists, and so the first step in reaching equality within the Hollywood industry is "acknowledg[ing] we live in a white supremacist power structure, with a traditional colonial white lens" over filmmaking (Provost 2017). Geeta Gandbhir, an acclaimed director and editor, stresses that if a director or producer doesn't share the culture or isn't from the community that is the subject of the piece being created, that the bare minimum requirement is to have team members that are. She goes even further and explains her own actions when it comes to accurate representations: "If a film comes my way and I think someone could do it better or someone from that community could do it better, I pass it on, I won't take it...Or I find an equal partner" (Provost 2017).

In conclusion, there aren't, and shouldn't be, absolute restrictions when it comes to who can tell what stories in the world of film. As an extension of free speech, and an intrinsic value of expression, the artist should be allowed to create visual stories in whatever realm they choose.

However, there is a responsibility, as someone who comes from and reaps the benefits of the dominant culture, to understand when there may be another person who is better equipped to tell the story. With such a powerfully empathetic mode of art should be respected and the power of different perspectives must be understood. Additionally, even if cinematic stories don't revolve around a particular racial group or issue, there is still a responsibility to hire or recommend workers who are non-male, non-white, and non-straight, therefore increasing the number of working professionals who have these perspectives. At the end of they day, no inclusion effort is to small or insignificant when attempting to change the Hollywood entertainment industry for the better.

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