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Hidden Figures

Abstract

This is a film review of *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi.

Keywords

Space Program, NASA, African American, 1960s, Civil Rights

“His faith in us has no limits.”

The film chronicles true events. Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) is a de facto supervisor over the West Computing Group. She has the responsibilities, but none of the perks, for overseeing and mentoring a pool of African-American women mathematicians known as “colored computers.” From this group emerges Katherine Goble (Taraji Henson), a child prodigy turned genius mathematician, and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), an aspiring engineer. In spite of their intellect, Dorothy, Katherine and Mary must work behind the “color line” in a segregated basement office with separate facilities for less pay than their white counterparts and little chance for promotion or recognition. Faith sustains them.

Serving as foils to the trio are Vivian Mitchell (Kirsten Dunst), supervisor for the East Group of white female computers; and Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons), lead engineer of the Space Task Group. Vivian and Paul are bureaucratic and their bigotry more refined. They cite protocol as the rallying cry of resistance. As Mary observes, “Every time we have a chance to get ahead, they move the goal line.”

The director of the Space Task Group is Al Harrison (Kevin Costner). Harrison is a compulsive, gum chewing visionary. He is also a pragmatist who understands that “*we all get to the peak together or we don’t get there at all.*” He is under tremendous pressure to achieve what the United States has never done before, “putting a man on the top of a missile and shooting him into space.” For Harrison, this will be accomplished through the sheer will and determination of men. While some may take umbrage with the poetic license of the film, to the director’s credit, Harrison does not emerge as the archetypal white hero. He believes in the mission and acts purely in that regard. When segregationist policies appear to thwart the progress of the mission, it is only then that he acts to dismantle barriers.

When Mary's application to the engineering program is turned down, Vivian curtly replies that they should be "thankful to have jobs at all." Dorothy reiterates that theirs is to "learn all we can and make ourselves valuable." A third barrier to equality, which is frequently the by-product of race and gender discrimination, is that of poverty. In a more nuanced way, the film illustrates this class/caste difference. In one scene, Katherine makes the mad dash back to her office from the only designated restroom available to her, a half mile away from her desk. She passes an African-American woman custodian in the hallway, sees and acknowledges her with a quick greeting. It is a simple gesture in a fleeting moment that might easily be overlooked.

When Al returns to his office to address his staff, he walks past the woman custodian in his department and appears oblivious to her presence. She is a nonentity and blends into the background. This passing is also brief and easy to overlook. But the scenes are there. As transitory as they are, they evince an image of low wage workers who labor largely unnoticed and have little to no chance of upward mobility. As the lyrics from Pharrell William's *Runnin'* resonate in the background, "I don't want no free ride, I'm just sick and tired of running."

The use of archival news footage adds to the historical context. Excerpts of speeches by President Kennedy and Dr. King provide a stark contrast of the deep philosophical and social divide of the time. Kennedy heralded an agenda in which conquering space would ensure "new freedoms" and glory for the country. America was the peace and freedom loving nation whose mission was to stop tyranny. If Russia succeeded in the space race, bombs would fall from the sky.

Dr. King confronted the nation with its own tyranny, challenging it to focus on its own disenfranchised citizens who were neither free nor living in peace. Freedom riders, black and

white, were routinely beaten and bombed. For Dr. King, those involved in the struggle were “rendering a great service to our nation” with the goal being to “save the soul of America.”

Dorothy, Katherine and Mary did not set out to make history. At the time they were trying to survive by remaining relevant in the work force. The film illustrates the challenges they faced as women and as “Negroes” as they navigated two Americas, one white and one black. There was no escape from inequality. It was present in public spaces with signs designating separate facilities and in the privacy of the home where radio and television brought news of civil unrest. Even sacred spaces were not spared. Dr. King referred to Sunday morning worship services as “the most segregated hour in America.” In the sanctuary of their own church, the ethos of whiteness depicted in the stained glass windows is yet another ubiquitous reminder of the preeminence of the dominant culture just beyond the walls. In his sermon, the pastor celebrates the contributions of these three African-American women to the larger society. However, then as now, many mainline African-American Protestant denominations remain off limits to women as ordained clergy and in other leadership roles. The paradox is that the African-American Christian churches which played such a crucial role in the civil rights movement did not embrace equal rights with regard to gender.

While the three women are active in church, there is a distinction to be made between denominational tradition and personal faith. With Dorothy, Katherine and Mary, we glimpse the ways in which they embrace and live their Christianity day to day. Prayer plays a vital role, from offering thanksgiving grace before meals to whispered petitions for help in times of trouble. When Mary wins her petition in court to attend night classes at a segregated school and exits the courthouse, she cannot contain her jubilant praise to God for victory.

In spite of the serious themes, the film is very enjoyable and family friendly. The entire cast is superb. Spencer, Henson and Monáe inhabit their characters with wit, beauty and style. As women they defy type. As African-Americans they are not monolithic. Toward the end of the film, there is a visually stunning scene in which the West group, led by Dorothy, marches across the compound to their new assignment. The camera focuses in on headshots of the women. We see the beautiful and diverse array of hairstyle as distinctive as the individuals they adorn. Dorothy, Katherine and Mary are representative of hundreds of women whose contributions have yet to be fully acknowledged.

I highly recommend the film for exposing a little known chapter in American history. I can also recommend the book, written by Margot Lee Shetterly, which begins in the 1940s and is a more detailed narrative. It chronicles the contributions of women, black and white, as well as those of African-American men at NASA. There are more stories to be told and more hidden treasures to be revealed.