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Ronic Ngambwe

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Get Out, Queen & Slim: A Content Analysis of How Race is Portrayed in Two Mainstream Hollywood Films

Introduction

Race has historically been a contentious issue in America; one that is inextricably built into the fabric of American society at a systematic level (Smith, 2013; Bond, 2010). Although Barack Obama's election was a significant step towards a more post-racial America, some may argue that the reaction to his election shows that we're not in a post-racial society (Bond, 2010; Smith 2013; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Thus race continues to play a significant role in how individuals form identities and engage with the culture at large, shaping various structures of society including social, political, and economic (Smith, 2013).

The film industry is one such structure that offers a lens through which various aspects of race can play out and be discussed (Smith, 2013). In fact, Bond (2010) argues that film is a narrative system that contributes to the creation of race. In that regard, films play a role in defining race and racial order. A connection exists "between the prevailing ideologies of race and how these ideologies are picked up and defined in other genres of society such as American film" (Brown and Brown, 2017, p. 146). Through this connection, ideas and belief systems about race espoused in film inform and shed light on the ideologies present in society. Hence it's essential to study how race is constructed in film as this illuminates societal constructions of race. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how African-Americans and race are portrayed in two mainstream Hollywood films: *Get Out* (2017) and *Queen and Slim* (2019) and compare emerging themes to previous research. These two films were chosen for the popularity they

enjoyed in mainstream media which is reflected in ratings and revenue and the diverse cast and crew.

Literature Review

The success of commercial films is heavily dependent on the characters it asks viewers to identify with on-screen (Bond, 2010). An analysis of these characters will reveal the ideology embedded within the film, serving as “a direct path to unpacking” its core values (Bond, 2010). Stuart Hall (1985), defines ideology as “the ‘ideas’ which people use to figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it and what they ought to do” (p. 99). However, this formation of ideology is affected by the dominant group (Gramsci, 1971/2005, p. 12). This is unfortunately inevitable in a racial order like the one in the United States where the country’s racial history has often favored the dominant group in various arenas and consequently affected the ability for minority groups to form their own ideology. But a useful addition to the process of hegemony is “a recognition that ideology is not directly imposed, but is carried out through shifting alliances and compromises between individuals and groups” (Smith, 2013). This framework reflects a process in which issues of race are challenged by the subordinate group and not just imposed (Smith, 2013).

The issue of racial inequality is one that is most illuminated through film by examining the diversity of both on-screen characters and behind-the-scenes production teams (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Smith 2013). One way racial inequality plays out on screen is through the colorblind and colorconscious framework. While colorblindness is regarded as a tool to diminish and disregard the significance of race (Smith 2013), color consciousness challenges “individualized definitions of race, racism, and inequality” (p. 794). In a study that sought to examine how Hollywood films featuring a Black actor or actress in a leading role depict

colorblindness or colorconsciousness and show the pervasiveness of racial inequality, Smith (2013), found that, while minor themes of color consciousness emerged, they were overshadowed by colorblindness. Another way racial inequality plays out is through limited representation of minority groups on-screen and behind-the-scenes. Research shows that Hollywood production tends to work against women and racial/ethnic minorities, with white men exercising “a cultural imperialism and hegemony with unilateral control over media images” (Erigha, 2015, p. 85), hence limiting the contribution by women and racial/ethnic minorities. This results in the presentation of biased images that may influence public perception of these marginalized groups (Erigha, 2015). Despite the recent appearance of increased on-screen diversity due to the emergence of figures like Shonda Rhimes and other producers of color (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016), the behind-the-scenes production team in Hollywood still lacks racial and ethnic minorities. While these minorities have made significant strides in the industry, there is still work to be done in order to achieve greater equality.

Molina-Guzmán (2016) sought to question what they referred to as, “the Hollywood paradox—the lack of diversity in film/TV production yet TV’s increasing shift towards on-screen diversity” (p. 438). They empirically examined 2014-2015 news and entertainment coverage by news outlets of Hollywood and found that three elements contribute to the perception of increased diversity on-screen: Hollywood exceptionalism, economic imperatives, and institutionalized racism and sexism. Hollywood exceptionalism contributes to the paradox by “associating improvements in TV representations of multicultural difference with market demands [and] equating the minimal on-screen visibility of marginalized groups with social progress” (p. 444). The economic imperative frame assumes that because movies and TV shows with a diverse cast outperformed those with an all-white cast in the box office and in ratings,

“diversity in Hollywood was economically inevitable” (p.445) and was therefore already taking place. However, both the Hollywood exceptionalism and economic imperative frames focus on on-screen diversity, mistakenly equating it to long term changes in Hollywood’s gender and racial structure. Lastly, the rarity of colorblind casting practices in the industry contributes to the lack of diversity.

Decision-makers in Hollywood have been pressured for decades by scholars, those in the creative industry, and even civil rights organizations to embrace greater diversity in the industry (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). But the change has been slow (Molina-Guzmán, 2016), and “the reality for audiences, actors, creators, and executives of color in the entertainment industries remains defined by exclusion from the industry and invisibility on the screen” (Molina-Guzmán, 2016, p. 438). On the other hand, research demonstrates that change in racial/ethnic demographic of US population is also changing media consumption patterns (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016) where more and more audiences, especially millennials, are actively seeking media content “by or about people from racial/ethnic groups different from their own” (Erigha, 2015, p.88). Hence, it might be in the best interest of Hollywood decision-makers to incorporate more diverse groups to meet these demands and keep up with the competition that is streaming services and other emerging methods of online production (Erigha, 2015).

However, Hollywood’s slow and seeming reluctance to diversify has deeper roots. Tracy (Twinkie) Byrd, a casting director who has worked on films such as *Fruitvale Station* (2013) and TV programs such as BET’s *Being Mary Jane*, argues that “Hollywood’s lack of diversity is the result of economic risk aversion” (Molina-Guzmán, 2016, p. 443). Because of the high production costs of movies and other television programs, decision-makers hire people already in

their circles; individuals who are “safe and familiar” (p. 443), reinforcing existing ideologies. “They live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same schools. Their kids go to the same schools. Ok. It's the system” (p. 443). For Byrd, Hollywood is also affected by the system that promotes economic and racial segregation based on housing and education, therefore reflecting its “hegemonic crisis” (Molina-Guzmán, 2016, p. 443).

Nevertheless, there is hope. Changes in technology and the rapid increase of as well as variety in streaming services could address issues of inequality in Hollywood (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Furthermore, “because streaming services do not have their content regulated in the same way as network television, they can push the representational boundaries and indulge in unconventional narratives” (Molina-Guzmán, 2016, p. 448). Streaming services afford a level of independence and flexibility in production that is not necessarily found in Hollywood cultural production.

Get Out (2017) and *Queen & Slim* (2019) challenge many of the existing ideologies and representations in Hollywood that are highlighted by the literature. The cultural identities of the production team already contribute to not only the diversity in the cast but also the framing of African Americans and race in film. Because of the time period in which they were released, they are readily accessible through streaming services, contributing to their popularity and their potential impact in challenging existing narratives of race.

Methodology

A content analysis was used to identify certain communication trends and patterns that together reflect certain ideas about how African Americans are portrayed. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). Essentially, it’s an

analysis that allows for inferences to be made about the messages within an artifact. It is therefore beneficial in examining discussions of race in film because it allows for an analysis of the ways race appears in all forms; verbal and nonverbal.

This analysis is best carried out when messages are coded or broken down. Therefore open-source coding was used to collect data in this study. This method of data collection involves taking notes whenever race is mentioned, featured, or referenced. I reviewed each film taking notes on all references to race present in the music, verbal and non-verbal interactions between characters, characters' interactions with certain objects, etc. Coding notes were then categorized based on common themes. An inductive approach was taken as these films are relatively new and may thus offer insight into whether or not there have been changes in portrayals of race in film and what that might reveal about representation in Hollywood on-screen and behind the scenes. I plan to compare findings to past literature by evaluating how representation on screen and behind the scenes differ in these two films in comparison to what the literature indicates.

Analyzing Portrayals of African-Americans and Race

In the following section, I present a discussion and analysis of *Get Out* (2017) and *Queen & Slim* (2019). The key theme that emerged in both films was that of racial solidarity which was also challenged in *Queen & Slim*.

Race in the Storyline

In this section, I offer a brief plot summary of each film, and provide examples of how race is highlighted throughout.

Get Out

This film tells the story of a young African American male, Chris Washington who's invited to spend the weekend with his girlfriend, Rose Armitage's parents. Things seem fine at first but a series of strange discoveries lead to a truth he never could've imagined.

Race is highlighted very early on in the film, which opens with Childish Gambino's "Redbone." The choice to incorporate the song in the film was intentional. Director Jordan Peele said in an interview that this song satisfied the black horror film audience's need for characters to stay alert as reflected by the line, "stay woke." Although it's a song about relationship issues, its feature on *Get Out* gave it a new meaning. Hillary Crosley of Genius, a digital media company that interprets song lyrics, explains that the lyrics' meaning now centered around the African-American experience and their distrust of the country's principles at face value. The first few minutes within which this song plays, convey a significant message about race relations in the United States. It's illustrative of the way African-Americans live in this nation: on guard, feeling the need to protect themselves from the dominant group that exercises control in many areas including in the establishment of ideologies and the country's principles that do not necessarily favor the minority race.

Race comes up again during the first verbal interaction between Chris and Rose. As Chris packs for the weekend, Rose starts asking him if he's packed various items including a toothbrush and deodorant. Chris answers these questions but appears to be worried as reflected in his slumped posture and lack of eye contact. Sensing his unease, Rose puts his puppy down and gets up from the couch as she says, "I gotta pry something out of your dad." This gets Chris's attention because he quickly looks up at her. She walks over to him, and asks, in an exasperated tone, "what?" Chris asks with hesitation, "do they...do they know I'm black?" Because Chris is the first black man that Rose (which we later discover is untrue), he wants to make sure that he

doesn't "get chased off the lawn with a shotgun" (Blum, Hamm Jr., McKittrick & Peele, 2017, 0:07:54). Rose reassures him that even though her parents don't know about his race, her dad would've voted for Obama a third time. This interaction between Chris and Rose reflects the complexities of interactional relationships and that African-Americans tend to be more concerned about how they'll be perceived by the dominant race because this perception affects the way white people behave toward them. Because behavior towards black people by dominant groups has historically been negative and at times violent, it's only normal that Chris is concerned about his safety as a black man. Race continues throughout the whole storyline including the climax which reveals that the Armitage family was abducting black people to use their organs on white members of their community.

Queen & Slim

This film centers on two black individuals, Ernest Hines and Angela Johnson (who remain unnamed until the end of the film) who go on a first date after which things go awry when they kill a police officer and run instead of turning themselves in.

The fact that they choose to run instead of turning themselves in, communicate a message about race. The reason they chose to run is revealed early on in the film. After Ernest kills the police officer and begins to drive away, he pulls out his phone to call his family. But Angela throws it out. Ernest pulls up on the side of the road and gets out of the car to look for someone with a phone so he can call his family. Angela warns him against that because then it would inform law enforcement of their location. He ignores her warning and continues to walk away when she says:

Angela: "What if they kill us?"

Ernest: "Don't say that!"

Angela: “There’s no guarantee they won’t. You’re a black man that killed a cop and then took his gun.”

Ernest: “I’m not a criminal”

Angela: “You are now”

They run because their race has come to be associated with criminal activity even when, as in their case, the killing is done out of self-defense. Such association has historically been known to influence the ability for minorities to be treated fairly by the justice system. Altercations between law enforcement and black men have often resulted in the death of one party, and divisions along racial lines. This particular scene is a reflection of the police brutality that has been taking place in the U.S. for quite some time now. In that regard, racial construction in these scenes is based on an issue of great contention that reflects an aspect of how race plays out in American society.

Race is mentioned again shortly after this incident when Ernest and Angela make a stop for food. As they eat and engage in small talk, Ernest asks Angela if she’s a good lawyer. “I’m an excellent lawyer,” she replies. “Black people, why we always gotta be excellent, why can’t we just be ourselves?” While this conversation ends here and this reply is dismissed by Angela, it illustrates another important aspect of the black experience. Angela’s response might reflect the pride associated with black achievement while Ernest’s reply may be a criticism of what may appear as a need to overcompensate as a minority and perhaps prove oneself. This theme of race continues throughout the film as their case continues to be talked about in relation to their race.

Racial Solidarity

Racial solidarity was the most common and consistent theme throughout both films. It emerged multiple times and was later challenged in *Queen & Slim*. It's regarded as a theme of “minority nationalist movements” (Wilson, Turner, Darity, 1973, p. 365) that’s expressed in a

variety of ways including in symbols designed to promote race identity and as a way for minorities to gain control of their political, social, and economic institutions which is sometimes done by establishing separate societies removed from majority groups (Wilson, Turner, Darity, 1973). In these two films, it's reflected primarily in the way black people relate to and support one another.

Get Out

Chris's best friend is a black man named Rod. He proves to be his confidant throughout the film as Chris wrestles with and tries to make sense of all the strange occurrences taking place at the Armitage property. For instance, Chris experiences a series of strange encounters during a family function, where his genetic makeup as a black man is brought up several times.

References are made to his agility as a black man, an elderly white woman admires his biceps and even squeezes one of them, an elderly Asian man asks him if he finds that African Americans are more advantaged or disadvantaged in the modern world. Yet another man, talks about the black race being "in" now as opposed to fair skin. Chris is introduced to another elderly man who used to play golf and is sure to mention his love for Tiger Woods. Such subtle racial remarks are made throughout the film, making Chris feeling incredibly uncomfortable as he removes himself from the crowd and goes up to his room.

He calls Rod and tells him about how he was hypnotized by Rose's mother the night before and alludes to the strange behaviors of the guests at the function. In keeping with the director's theme initially communicated in the song at the beginning about the need for black characters to stay alert, Rod senses an issue with what Chris has been experiencing and is shocked that Chris does not seem to be alarmed by all this. This is racial solidarity because Rod is able to understand Chris's experience as a black man and respond appropriately. In this case,

by warning him of potential danger. During that same family function, Chris approaches what appears to be the only other black man present and taps his arm as he says, “good to see another brother around here.” Although a loose example of racial solidarity, what Chris says, illustrates that African-Americans will at times seek each other out in social situations where they may be underrepresented, as this gives them a sense of comfort and safety.

As the film progresses, Chris finds himself in increasing danger as he discovers that the groundskeeper and cook were once in a relationship with Rose and that the one black man at the function was there against his will as he had been reported missing in another town. He shares this information with Rod who, when Chris is not back when he had intended to, sets out on an investigation to find him. In the end, it’s Rod who saves Chris from the Armitages. Chris and Rod’s relationship is illustrative of the trust that develops through racial solidarity.

Queen & Slim

The first instance of racial solidarity is mentioned within the first few minutes of the film. Ernest and Angela are having dinner at a restaurant and making small talk when Angela leans in and asks, “do you really like this place or is it the only spot you could afford?” “It’s black-owned,” he replies. Within these first few minutes, racial solidarity is reflected through Ernest’s support of black-owned businesses. Later, they stop for food and hit a black man in their car. On the way to the hospital, he expresses support for their action and approval of their criminal activity. He even likens them to the Black Panther Party of the 1960s, who were heavily involved in the protection and support of minorities. He further expresses his support by raising his fist at them as he exits the car. The clenched fist was associated with Black Panther and was recognized as a sign of solidarity and support.

When still on the run from law enforcement, Ernest and Angela stop at a bar where there appears to only be black people. When Ernest goes to get drinks, the lady who serves him, tells him that they're safe there. Other people's reactions at the bar indicate that they know them and what they've done but they're protecting them by not notifying law enforcement. In this regard, the individuals at the bar show that they are in solidarity with their fellow African-Americans. Later in the film, a black police officer sees them about to leave someone's premises and lets them go. In these two instances, racial solidarity is reflected as protection and perhaps as a way to show that they understand their decision and believe in their innocence as well.

Despite the many instances of racial solidarity in the film, there are occasions where this is questioned and challenged. At one point, Ernest and Angela have to get their car fixed. When they discover that the man who's about to fix the car knows who they are, Ernest is surprised that he didn't offer them a discount. He lets them know that he does not approve of what they did because in his opinion, they gave law enforcement a license to kill black people. Even though he does not approve of what they did, he doesn't turn them over to law enforcement. So while he's not supportive of their actions, he still displays a form of solidarity by protecting them. At the very end of the film, we see a complete absence of solidarity, as a black, who had initially shown a sense of solidarity as he had helped them get to their next destination and had even smoked with them, informs law enforcement of their whereabouts for the monetary reward of \$250,000. This ultimate end raises questions about the trust that's easily given to someone of the same race.

Discussion

Get Out highlights the ways in which dominant groups try to relate to minorities by bringing up other minorities they might know regardless of whether or not they genuinely admire them. Chris's reaction to these attempts reflects how African-American sense and are very

uncomfortable with these seemingly forced attempts to relate. These interactions also illustrate the potential assumptions white people hold about how to relate to minorities. In this film, race is portrayed as playing a significant role in relating to racial and ethnic minorities. The entire premise of the film is an illustration of how power dynamics play out in a racial order. In this case, Chris's genetic makeup is considered advantageous because of assumptions associated with his race. But because he comes from a minority race in a country with imbalanced hegemonic ideals, the dominant group can still exercise power over him, as they have the upper hand.

Queen & Slim places a magnifying glass over the racial issues in the United States. It closely examines the economic and social aspects of race. Light is shed on the economic aspect of it through a look at the neighborhoods through which the lead characters drive which speak to systematic racism based on housing and racial solidarity as the social aspect, is portrayed with more nuance. The premise of the entire movie is based on actual lived experiences. African-Americans are portrayed in complex roles where they wrestle with the consequences of their actions and find themselves in a position where they have to justify them to other black people. Assumptions of trust based on racial solidarity are challenged.

Past literature indicates that African-americans are often placed in stereotypical and limiting roles. They're also incredibly underrepresented on-screen but particularly behind-the-scenes. However, both of these films show the opposite. Being a predominantly black cast with lead black actors, *Queen & Slim* is breaking barriers of representation and doing so behind-the-scenes as well. The film was produced, directed, and written by predominantly gender and racial minorities including Lena Waithe and Melina Matsoukas, who are both women of color. *Get Out* is led by a black actor with a fairly diverse cast and a black writer and director, Jordan Peele. The cultural identity of the production team played a significant role in portraying African-Americans

in more nuanced roles. These films indicate that the representation in Hollywood is improving behind the scenes, resulting in complex roles for African-Americans as well as a more nuanced telling of their stories and experiences. This in turn creates room for more minorities to develop their own ideologies and more themes of color consciousness.

Conclusion

This paper sought to analyse the portrayal of African-Americans and race in two mainstream Hollywood films. I wanted to see how this portrayal compares to what the literature shows and what it may reveal about representation in Hollywood on-screen and behind-the-scenes. First, I offered a brief outline of how race is portrayed in each film, and then using content analysis, I found racial solidarity as the key emerging theme in both films. It's presented in two forms, as protection and approval. An examination of how this plays out revealed some nuance in how African-Americans use this in their relationships with one another.

I concluded that the portrayal of African-Americans in these films is based on their lived experiences. Therefore race is constructed in a way in which it reflects societal portrayals and experiences of racial minorities. Film construction mirrors how race plays out in society, presenting African-Americans and race with more complexity and nuance. This differs from what the literature says about the portrayal of black actors and actresses and their representation in Hollywood. However, as research indicates, this is what more and more audiences have been craving: stories by people of color. These two films show that there is a change taking place behind-the-scenes which is resulting in an on-screen change in representation of African-Americans and their experiences.

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