

The (Mis)Representation of Minorities in American Films throughout the Twentieth Century: A Historical Retrospective.

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Abstract:

Throughout the twentieth century, American cinematic productions have not only represented the American hero character but also his antagonist, i.e. the American “Other” which refers to individuals from minority groups. The later are categorized according to distinctive ethnic, racial, or religious groups and include Hispanics, Black or African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, Arabs and other Eastern Americans, and less commonly mentioned as minority groups but still were brought by immigration: Irish, Italians, Polish and other Roman Catholic Europeans. These representations have always been through the eyes of American directors; commonly directors from a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin who have always depicted a hero, from a WASP origin too and his “Other,” most of the time an anti-hero from a minority group origin. These representations mirror the political and historical contexts of their time.

Keywords:

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hollywood is the biggest exporter of culture, yet it has long ignored the importance of diversity since its creation and further created, maintained and spread stereotypical images of minority groups in its productions. In fact, throughout the history of cinema and media industries, films have had a poor track record in accurately representing diversity. Since its inception in the early twentieth century, the film industry has long involved systemic, institutionalized racist practices either in misrepresenting minority groups or not representing them at all. The purpose of this paper is to explore the representation of minority groups or immigrants in American films throughout the twentieth century. In fact, the prejudiced representations of Roman Catholic Europeans, African-Americans, Native Americans South Americans, Asians and Muslims in media in general and films in particular serve to enhance white supremacy, or more precisely WASP, i.e. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy.

Therefore, I will examine the initial depictions of these groups in selected films that best picture the wide representation of these groups and stand as the best examples of the discrimination towards their representation by Hollywood. These selected films, I believe, have marked the history of Hollywood productions and the world's perception of these groups and the stereotypes that evolved out of a prejudiced portrayal as well as the impact, almost negative, that resulted from it. It should be noted that the different contexts of productions as well as producers' intentions have profoundly impacted these representations. Indeed, each and every time the United States of America witness an event from whatever nature that has to do with these groups, Hollywood consolidates the historical moment by producing films that go along these events and thus strengthen the prejudice that affect the whole community inside and outside the U.S. It is therefore very important to acknowledge the impact such stereotypes have on actual people.

2. Representation of Minorities in Hollywood Production.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, “to misrepresent” is “to give information about somebody or something that is not true or complete so that other people have the wrong impression about them” (*Oxford* 815). In Hollywood productions, misrepresentation of minorities is a failure to represent. Further, it is a subjective definition or depiction of a group of individuals from the same ethnic, racial or religious background or descent. In fact, it is shaped by how the source, i.e. the producer, views representation and their intention. Moreover, the lack of inclusion of minority groups or individuals that are not WASP or their association with evil encourage narrow worldwide views or a completely wrong ones across cultures. It further sends a hostile image, intended or not, that other voices are not valued or even devalued. Misrepresentations, thus, cause an accumulation of negative effects of inaccurately portraying minorities in society.

Hollywood has created some roles for people from minority groups which are, unfortunately and tragically far too often, derogatory. For minority groups, the entertainment and media industries often project stereotypical narratives which are most often negative such as the mafia, the drug dealer, the savage, the criminal, or the terrorist. What is even more detrimental is when these roles are played by white actors to portray individuals from other races, ethnicities, religion and cultures, i.e. roles for non-white actors are played by white people, exactly as when women's roles in William Shakespeare's plays were played by men. Media industries tend to push prominent white actors at the forefront, for example, with Angelina Jolie playing an Afro-Chinese-Cuban in *A Mighty Heart*, Emma Stone in *Aloha* as a part Hawaiian and Chinese character, or Tom Cruise in *Edge of Tomorrow* playing what was supposed to be a Japanese character (Lauren Washington).

Across these minority groups and worldwide, people inevitably start to internalize the misrepresentations and believe the false realities. Young people are yearning to figure out their identities and Hollywood and media industries play an important role in shaping identities and affirming their existence as good or evil. In fact, in the age of mass communication, what

we watch on screens dictate much of what we believe we are in real life. Therefore, without accurate representation, there is the tragic erasure of the multifaceted society that exists in the U.S.A. and the world at large.

3. Italian-Americans: *The Godfather* (1972-1974-1990).

Produced by Francis Ford Coppola, himself from an Italian origin, *The Godfather* saga (1972-1974-1990) depicts Italian-Americans between 1945 and 1955 and revolves around the Corleone family, one of the major mafia families in the U.S.A and their activities of ruthless criminals. Even if the film forewarns with a disclaimer that the characters were not representative of any ethnic group, the violent, multi-generational saga of the Corleone family refers to Italian-Americans. In fact, much of the early part of the film takes place in Sicily and large segments of the film are spoken in Italian with English subtitles, and most characters bore such names as Barzini, Clemenza, Brasi, and Tattaglia. The disclaimer has set *The Godfather* as a controversial film and since then has been used as an irony in films to show the power of the media. One of the key reasons for the film's supreme success was its representation of Italian-American families and their struggle for the American Dream. Many Italians saw the reflections of their families for the first time. Americans saw them too. However, it set a very negative view of the Italian community in the U.S.A and Italians worldwide.

In fact, the film is not totally a misrepresentation; still, the image it vehicles about Italian-Americans has remained since then the only one world audience has about them. As a matter of fact, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, Italians, mostly farmers, craftsmen and unskilled labourers immigrated to America for better financial and economic opportunities. They were the first generation of Italian-Americans. In 1920's, Italian-American gangs started acquiring liquor businesses and transformed themselves into sophisticated criminal enterprises, skilled at smuggling, money laundering, drugs and other illegal activities after the U.S. constitution banned the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcoholic beverages and was termed as the Prohibition era. Meanwhile in

Sicily in Italy, criminal groups started operating with a common enterprise of protection racketing. It was the birth of the Sicilian Mafia, a criminal organisation which called itself a “family”, “clan”, and “cosca.” They claimed power and control over a town or a village and operated its rackets. Members of the Sicilian mafia escaped to the U.S. and in the late 1950’s and early 60’s the U.S. saw the rise of organized crime and violence which resulted in court trials and had raised public’s curiosity towards mafia and their operations.

The film thus brings this historical reality to the screen as it reminds audiences of their ancestors’ struggle in America and their own struggle as well. In fact, the film vehicles a great amount of cultural value by exposing the struggle of an Italian immigrant for the American Dream and representing Italian and Italian-American culture in cohesion. Films prior to the release of *The Godfather* had always portrayed gangsters as murderers and cruel men but *The Godfather* showcases these men as family-men and patriarchs attending weddings and baptisms, having daughters and grandchildren. They were people who would give utmost importance to their families and are committed. They would dine with their families and still not discuss crime and family business at the table. Audience could experience the so called human side of a gangster. The film brought out this contrast evidently which was one of the few main reasons for its success.

The film’s central themes, which are money, power, greed, revenge, gambling, drugs, murder, robbery, masculinity, violence and also the failure of the American dream, are now fossilized in the world’s consciousness as they have been sustained through repetition by Hollywood throughout the twentieth century. *The Godfather* is a representation/misrepresentation of Italian-American criminals and gangsters who operate outside the law, focusing on their mannerisms, lives, lifestyles and their specialized modus operandi; glorifying their rise and fall of crime kingdoms. They also highlight the crime victim’s life and their struggle to justice. All these representations and association made with Italian-Americans have become since then stereotypes about this community.

4. African-Americans: From *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *I'm Legend* (2007).

One of the most despicable films that misrepresented African-Americans in the History of Cinema and that later served as a catalyst for African-Americans to produce their own films is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a silent film, produced by D.W. Griffith which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan and reiterates blacks as inferior beings. Set during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the Reconstruction era that followed, it dramatizes Reconstruction and portrays blacks as the root of all evil and unworthy of freedom and voting rights. In addition, male African Americans are depicted as always lusting after white women. In contrast, the KKK is portrayed in a heroic light as a healing force restoring order to the chaos and lawlessness of Reconstruction. Indeed, early filmic practices presented African-Americans in inhumane frameworks, as ignorant, clownish, and animalistic. In fact, this is a continuation of the historical paradigm as since their arrival to the New World, Africans have been the victims of white supremacy. Their discrimination had even started on the African lands when they were sold or exchanged for goods during the Triangular Slave Trade. Throughout the history of the United States, African-Americans have been the victims of discrimination, persecution and prosecution. Added to the discriminatory depictions of African-Americans in Hollywood films, African-Americans were not even afforded the opportunity to play themselves, as whites dressed in blackface to reinforce white supremacy, creating a cycle of negative effects with society's perception.

Following this period, there were voices of protest railing against stereotypical and demeaning representation; yet the industry still remained guilty of perpetuating false narratives and provided limited opportunities for African-Americans. Thereafter, a wave of films showcasing blacks in authentic, fully dimensional roles developed by African-American filmmakers from independent black studios like at the Lincoln Motion

Pictures Company and the Micheaux Film Corporation which challenged the notion of single narrative, stereotypical roles (Lauren Washington).

More recent films casting African-Americans tend to be more inclusive and less misrepresentational. In fact, more recent Hollywood productions depict African-Americans as America's and world saviours. One of these films that depict such characters is *I'm Legend* (2007) starring Will Smith who in a post-apocalyptic Manhattan, three years after a deadly virus that has killed every healthy human on the island, except Neville and his dog. The virus has turned world's population into predatory zombies that Neville tries to find vaccine for. In fact, the last straw shows Neville sacrificing himself for a small remaining community to live thanks to the antidote he has elaborated. This shift in representation shows how African-Americans image moved from the clownish to the scientific brave saviour of America and the world showing African-Americans as multi-dimensional heroic characters.

5. Native Americans: From Westerns to *Dances with the Wolves* (1990).

Native Americans have also been the subject of discrimination by mainstream Hollywood. In fact, since the early inception of cinema in the American culture, Native Americans have been unfairly depicted in mainstream Hollywood; depictions of Native Americans as savages, that is, as bare chested, shoeless, or in feather costumes and irrational warriors, who, when they are not running through the woods and yelling, are most likely obsessed with superstitions and irrational matters. Likewise, other stereotypes have been dominant representations of Native Americans: those of "noble savages" which might visually appear savage, but who are sentimentalized, and have some sort of wisdom to impart to the dominant culture (Olivia Kuhn 2). In fact, these depictions are to be found in the majority of Western films that explore the "Wild West" during the first half of the twentieth century where Indians are depicted as savages impending whites' Manifest Destiny.

Hollywood racist depictions of Native-Americans began to fade away after the Second World War. Films like *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Apache* (1954) paved the way for the shift in representation. In the 1990s, the film industry in the United States experienced an increase in the variety of its Native American portrayals. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), which won the Best Picture Oscar, has been created by white Hollywood for a mainstream audience and largely focused on historical depictions of Native Americans. Spoken in its majority in Lakota or Pawnee, the film is set shortly after the American Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century and praises the Sioux for their spirit which is a real re-evaluation of Native-Americans in mainstream Hollywood.

Other popular, but less known films such as *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Naturally Native* (1999) were produced and directed by Native Americans about Native Americans. In contrast to the historical settings of the white-produced films, these films focused on modern Indians, more particularly, reservation-dwelling individuals with unique family histories and unique insight on the United States' on-going colonial project (Olivia Kuhn 2).

6. South-Americans or Hispanics: *Scarface* (1983).

Historically, Hollywood films have negatively characterized Latinos. Hispanics, just like Italian-Americans, are universally depicted as culturally different criminals, invaders, and a threat to national security. Accordingly, film productions such as *Scarface* (1983) depict Latinos as criminals. *Scarface*, produced by Oliver Stone in 1983, filled with action-oriented content, drastically affirms the Latino stereotype within American society. The Italian-American actor, Al Pacino, plays the main character in the film who along with the main supporting characters, depict the roles of Cuban-Americans who are uneducated, drug dealers, live a life of violence, and portray the view that this is the only possible "Latin American Dream" which refers to the idea of Latinos reaching a higher socioeconomic status through alternative pathways which the film achieves by becoming a drug dealer (Quinones Rivas 7).

In addition to moral degradation and disregard for ethical standards due to the corruption affiliated with the drug industry, the focus of the film's actions is to achieve wealth and to choose money versus morality, a theme that the film seems to emphasize. Overall, the film conveys that success within the Latino community is only available to those who defy all human and law-abiding characteristics and murder, blood, violence, and drug dealing is their pathways for social progress; as opposed to obtaining a higher educational degree in order to receive the same kind of upper class life as whites (Quinones Rivas 7). This is therefore a misrepresentation of Latinos, considering the fame the film has made worldwide, and the fossilized images U.S. and world audiences have now integrated on South-Americans.

7. Asian-Americans: *The Year of a Dragon* (1985).

In the early days of film, Asians were played by Caucasian actors and actresses. White actors who played Asian characters in films include: Katharine Hepburn in *The Dragon Seed* (1944), Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), and Shirley Maclaine in the film *My Geisha* (1962). There were many other white actors who played leading roles as Asians, in order to perpetuate whites as protagonists, while actual Asian people were relegated to minor background roles. In fact, many steps of makeup transformation were taken to "Orientalize" whites, a process called "yellowface" (Benshoff and Griffin). Similarly to the "blackface", "yellowface" has been criticised as being racist and inauthentic.

Similar to all immigrants and minority groups in the U.S.A, Asian immigrants have suffered from discrimination and prejudice in Hollywood productions. *The Year of a Dragon* (1985), as an example of many Hollywood productions about Asians, explores Asian gangs, illegal drug deals and Chinese organized crime in Chinatown in NYC. In this film, Asian organized criminals are associated with the Italian mafia fostering thus misrepresentation about both communities. Asian criminals and the Italian mafia are depicted as being at the origin of many whites' murders, emphasizing on the evil that these communities bring to whites in the U.S.A. The depiction of Asians and Asian Americans in films thus impacts

their perception in by broader societies. Therefore, in the audience unconsciousness, Chinatown is synonym of organized crimes and associations with the Italian mafia.

8. The Representation of Muslims: *The Siège* (1998).

Muslims face similar exclusion and stereotypical misrepresentations in Hollywood films. The attacks of 9/11 propagated negative associations with Muslims that continue to plague Muslims around the world and the entertainment industry is guilty of unfairly depicting Muslims as criminals, brutal, cruel, inhumane terrorists or even members of ISIS who thrive to murder non-Muslims in the name of Allah. According to A. Eijaz,

Hollywood cinema has stigmatized Muslims as dangerous, pre-modern and uncivilized people who do not fit with civilized western culture. Therefore, western non-Muslims perceive Islam as a religion promoting intolerance and violence. The concept of binary ideologies of “Self” vs “Others” is becoming more pervasive in the western media (Eijaz, 22).

The Siège (1998) is one of the many examples of post 9/11 films depicting Muslims and Islam as a threat to the security of the U.S.A. and the world at large, as Muslims, according to Westerners, possess nuclear weapons of mass destruction and threaten the world of non-Muslims. The film depicts an alliance of terrorists that threaten the security of the U.S.A. with a potential bombing of a bus and a crowded theatre, a hostage-taking at an elementary school, and the destruction of One Federal Plaza, the location of the FBI’s New York City field office, with over 600 casualties. Similar to *The Siège*, comparable scenarios are presented by other films representing Muslims as extremists. This has forcibly impacted on the world audience’s perception of the Muslim community and, by due process, their treatment as potential terrorists one has to be careful about.

9. CONCLUSION

Hollywood continues to exclude partially or completely minorities from television and film and portrays minorities inaccurately: depictions that are exclusionary, damaging, and not objective primarily as criminals, terrorists, uneducated, or highly sexualized people. The presence of these stereotypes in films serves as a record of prejudice toward minority groups or Americans from an immigrant descent. Such stereotypes promote an ideology that validates certain practices toward racial, ethnic and religious minorities.

More than that, Hollywood has created harmful false narratives which influence audiences worldwide and has a tremendously substantial responsibility. It has the power to create, maintain and reinforce discrimination and to spread an ideology that serves social, political and economic interests of the United States of America. Undeniably, mass media in general and films in particular promote and reinforce racist stereotypes of minority groups in societies worldwide. In fact, Hollywood productions have the power to socialize the American and the World public and shape social norms worldwide. The images and ideas presented through the screen, reinforced over years of viewing, become reality and these stereotypes and misconceptions become embedded in the psyche of Americans and world audiences.

Finally, throughout films, Hollywood has been capable of creating, delimiting, establishing and maintaining racist stereotypes by presenting a set of evil characters from a minority group origin opposed to the unlimited goodness potential of white heroes, namely from a WASP origin who incarnate the roles of superheroes and America's or further world's saviors. Within the industry, there is this dynamic of white America being the majority representing America's and world's protectors and saviours. The incorrect and stereotypical depictions of minorities and the themes that convey these representations as well as their repetition have served to maintain and strengthen their validity by the viewing audiences and reinforce the idea of the whites as conveyors of eternal goodness.

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