

The representation of race in mass-media assignment



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Race as a discourse, has emerged from society romanticizing the idea of biological and psychological differences existing between various ethnic groups. To comprehend and analyze the phenomenon of this racial dilemma, one must have a complete understanding of how culture and identity work hand-in-hand within our society. By controlling most of the social institutions, such as mass communication, politics and corporations; the dominant culture methodically overpowers and exploits the ethnic minority groups, in order to establish its own cultural identity.

One such institution is mass media- an industry that not only historically oppresses ethnic minority groups such as African-Americans, but also diminishes their societal status to that of a second-class citizen through the use of stereotypical representations. Because, it is controlled predominantly by the white liberal elites- an autocratic, financially driven organization, whose main objective is to protect the integrity of white culture; mass media industry is therefore, forced to reject all moral conventions, in order to present ethnic minorities as antagonists.

The ideas of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Stuart Hall accurately represent the century-old exploitative and oppressive nature of mass media- an industry that has perpetually employed racialized discourse and racist expressions against ethnic minorities such as African-Americans, in order to portray them as subordinate. Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist and sociologist from the United Kingdom, suggests that humanity should simply not just study the theme of culture, but also view it as a primary source of social interactions (Proctor 16).

Because culture is a site of an ongoing struggle of power between different ethnic groups, what Hall is suggesting is that, one should only study it with the mindset of exposing each and every one its negative consequences on humanity. According to Hall, in American culture, the mass media industry is one of the main reasons why such a power struggle continues to exist within our society.

He describes mass media as an industry that not only generates and influences the beliefs of mankind, but also produces “ representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (Hall, “ The Whites” 19). Since the beginning of time, race has played a vital role in the transformation of human consciousness. Therefore, as long as this notion exists in our society, mass media will continue to exploit it for financial profits.

During the eighteenth-century, racial stereotyping was so widespread in the United States that any illustrator could pick up a pen and draw minorities based on the two themes of their lack of culture and innate laziness (Hall, “ Representation” 249). These caricaturists and cartoonists degraded the African-American community by exaggerating their physical characteristics: big noses, frizzy hair, wide faces, dark complexion, thick lips and hips, etc (Hall, “ Representation” 249).

Hall describes such a form of ethnic discrimination as a “ racialized regime of representation”, a phenomenon that continues to exist, even in the twenty-first century (Hall, “ The Whites” 26). Throughout history, African-Americans

have always been presented as a race that is juvenile, one-dimensional, and greedy for money and sex, and perpetrators of violence and crime (Hall, “Representation” 272). The uneven distribution of power in American culture has allowed the white population to characterize the lives of African-Americans as inferior, an objectification that has been frozen in time and space.

Popular representations of racial stereotypes against African-Americans can be examined in the American cinema of the mid-twentieth-century. Donald Bogle’s 1973 critical study titled, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, And Bucks: an interpretive history of blacks in African films* analyzed the five main stereotypes that were prevalent in Hollywood films of the fifties and sixties: Toms- the good Negroes, who were always “chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted” (Bogle 6).

Coons- a black child who was “unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (Bogle 7). The Tragic Mulatto- a fair skinned, mixed-race woman, with whom the viewers sympathized, because she was refused entry into the white community because of her “tainted” blood (Bogle 9). Mammies- the predominant black female servant who was big, loud, bossy, obese and self-sufficient (Bogle 9).

Finally the Bad Bucks- physically strong characters, who were always “big, baddddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (Bogle 10). According to Hall, the feature-length film that gave birth to such African-American characteristics was David Llewelyn Griffith’s

The Birth of a Nation, released in 1915 (Hall, “ Representation” 271). The silent film provoked great controversy, because not only did it promote white supremacy, but also depict the Ku Klux Klan positively as heroes- a secret white society that was destined to lead humanity to salvation.

Griffith, a firm believer in anti-miscegenation laws and white supremacy, portrayed the African-Americans as negative characters who were a threat to white integrity; hence they had to be eliminated. Therefore, as the film demonstrates, white supremacy is upheld, and the good (whites) triumphs over evil (blacks) when the Ku Klux Klan physically assault the African-Americans, burn their houses down and lynch them in public (Hall, “ Representation” 252).

Karl Heinrich Marx, a renowned German philosopher, political theorist and sociologist argues that society is comprised of two classes: the exploited and the exploiters (Balkaran 1). He suggests that in any given society, one class will eventually conquer the other and exploit it thereafter, through any means necessary (Balkaran 1). Looking back at the American society of the nineteenth-century, it is evident that there was an existence of such class system, one in which the white population overpowered the African-Americans, and forced them to be slaves (Balkaran 1).

Even in present day, such a form of exploitation can be discovered in the racial stereotyping of ethnic minority groups. According to Stuart Hall, the uneven distribution of power between the exploited and the exploiters can not only lead to economic profiteering, but also physical violence (Hall, “

Representation” 259). This power has such a strong influence that it can allow one to represent the other in any form desirable: positive or negative.

Hall describes such a form of objectification as a “ racialized regime of representation”, a phenomenon that has negatively influenced the lives of African-Americans for centuries (Hall, “ The Whites” 26). In the eighteenth-century, American culture granted an extraordinary power to the white population- the authority over African-Americans; forcing them to be slaves, hindering their success and confining them to lives to subordination. The white owners overpowered the black male slaves physically and emotionally by illustrating them as a gender, which did not have the capacity to own land or provide adequately for their families (Hall, “ Representation” 262). As a result of the denial of these male attributes, black slaves were portrayed to the rest of the world as adolescents, who could neither take care of themselves or their families- a stereotype that is present, even in present day. Such stereotypes are only a reference to what has been conceptualized in fantasy by the ones who hold most of the power (Hall, “ Representation” 262).

By representing the African-American slaves as lazy and incompetent, the elites are corrupting the minds of and perceptions of the general public. For Hall, racial stereotypes only present one-half of the story, the other half is where the deeper meaning lies (Hall, “ Representation” 263). What he is referring to is the notion of a single racial stereotype leading to two different and independent human perceptions. This idea of a double meaning existing in a single stereotype can be examined in Antoine Fuqua’s 2001 motion picture *Training Day*.

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In the film, whenever Denzel Washington's character, Detective Alonzo Harris acts 'macho', he negatively portrays the African-American community as perpetrators of violence, in addition to promoting the stereotypical black childlike behavior. However, in accordance with Hall's notion of an implicit meaning existing in every stereotype, one can see that the 'macho' behavior is validating a much more disturbing and complicated white fantasy- that African-Americans are in fact aggressive, better endowed than their white counterparts, over-sexed and superspade (Hall, "Representation" 263).

Henry Louis Gates Junior, an eloquent commentator on issues of multiculturalism and racism argues that the direct correlation between race and racism can be disputed. What he is suggesting is that discrimination against ethnic groups is linked more to the phenomenon of power relations than any biological assimilation (Daley 1). He believes that the notion of race is simply a fabrication, one with no real purpose with the exception of formal discussions, because: 'races', put simply, do not exist, and to claim that they do, for whatever misguided reason, is to stand on dangerous ground...

For, if we believe that races exist as things, as categories of being already 'there,' we cannot escape the danger of generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if the differences were consistent and determined, a priori (Gates 402). He is arguing that the notion of race has simply been etched in humanity's consciousness with one goal in mind- to confine ethnic minorities to lives of subordination. Throughout the nineteenth-century, the Iroquois in Canada and the blacks in America were

being forced into the so called 'civilized' white Christian society, because the bodies of these ethnic minorities were deemed inferior.

Therefore, Gates believes that the portrayal of minorities was due to the wrongful employment of racial characterization, a process in which: one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly). Such generalizations are based upon a predetermined set of causes or effects thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group who are also assumed to share certain 'metaphysical' characteristics... can have rather little to do with aggression or contempt in intent, even if the effect is contemptible (but often 'well-intentioned') (Gates 403).

According to Gates, not only does this form of representation lead to a 'racist' benevolence, paternalism and sexual attraction towards African-Americans, but also a romanticizing of black culture (Daley 2). This form of racial representation was condescending to the African-Americans, because it depicted them as having instinctual physical, structural, and biological characteristics of greed and violence. Through the use of mass media, white supremacists represented black culture as being an entity that was separate from the African-Americans (Daley 2).

Mass media at time of the twentieth-century played a vital role in forming and reflecting public opinion on the issues of racial representation and discrimination. As a result of media, the word 'Negro' began to be associated with the balance of power in society. It became a metaphor of the conflict between good and evil, educated and barbaric, master and servant-

a fight for the control of power; a struggle that was etched into the consciousness of all Americans (Daley 2).

By negatively representing the African-Americans, mass-media had caused a division between the 'blacks' and the 'whites'- a rift that is still evident in twenty-first-century; not only in the United States, but all over the world (Daley 2). One can argue that not only has this gap dictated every discussion related to race and racial bias of our time, but that it will continue to do so for centuries to come with no end in sight. Media will continue to depict African-Americans as individuals who perpetrate violence, and are only motivated by greed and ex, because this approach allows the industry to gain a mass audience- a predominant white population that believes in white supremacy and wants to see the black race oppressed and destroyed. Linking back to Gates view on minority groups being confined to lives of subordination in the eighteenth-century, one can see that mass-media in present day carries out the same form of oppression. Because the industry is driven by monetary profits, it employs racial prejudice in its broadcasts, and enforces certain negative stereotypes against minorities, in order to confine them to deteriorated lifestyles.

The American cinema of the mid-twentieth-century is regarded by many cultural sociologists as an era that promoted the positive representation of African-Americans for the first time. Motion pictures released in the early fifties enlightened the general public of the sensitive issues of race and stereotypes. In spite of the industry being controlled predominantly by the elite class of White-Americans, the films that were generated, characterized the black community as positive role models.

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A clear-cut example of such positive racial representation in mass media can be found in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*, a 1958 cult classic, in which the character of Noah Cullen portrayed by Sidney Poitier disregards the notion of differences in race; instead assisting a white prisoner escape from jail. Not only did the portrayal of Noah Cullen allow Poitier to score a BAFTA award for best actor in a lead role; it also secured his admission into mainstream Hollywood films.

Following the success of *The Defiant Ones*, Poitier's on screen roles now exemplified everything that the stereotypical African-American figure was not (Hall, "Representation" 253). Even though the white elites controlled American cinema, they continued to construct characters for Poitier in such a way so as to positively portray the African-American community. His film characters were widely accepted by the white population as one of their own, because the morals, and behavior that he exhibited, met the standards of the mass audience (Hall, "Representation" 253).

Poitier's characters represented the quintessential Caucasian male: one who was fluent in English, well-educated, smart and had proper table etiquette (Hall, "Representation" 253). History had repeated itself in the case of Sidney Poitier, because by portraying the role of a reformed African-American male, he relinquished the very little power that he had, to the white elites. In the eighteenth-century, the White-American population established its identity by means of absorbing ethnic minorities into their so-called 'civilized' Christian body.

Because white elites had transformed Poitier's African-American character, from an un-cooperative, over-sexed, savage beast into a sexless, docile and sterile 'civilized' gentleman; he no longer posed a threat to the integrity and dignity of white culture (Hall, "Representation" 253). In the late sixties and early seventies, American cinema implemented different strategy, in order to financially exploit the African-American community. The industry introduced a new class of African-American heroes- individuals who challenged the notion of white culture as superior to all others.

Case in point, Gordon Parks' 1971 box office success, Shaft, in which the main character- a black detective disputes the very existence of white patriarchal power in American society (Hall, "Representation" 271). To attain maximum pleasure in his 'mythic' life, John Shaft resorts to violence, drugs, illegal money and sexual relations with white and black women (Hall, "Representation" 271). The stereotypical notion of an African-American's child-like dependency on the white community that had been prevalent since the eighteenth-century could no longer be applied to John Shaft, because he was confident and self-sufficient.

Because, his elegance and charisma appealed to the African-American audiences, they were susceptible to the exploitation of the film industry. Black viewers were able to identify with characters such as John Shaft, because they represented a "mythic" life- one which was glorious and heroic (Hall, "Representation" 271). They flocked to theatres by the thousands, in order to watch films that depicted the triumph of 'black' over 'white', but what they failed to recognize was that such movies were only produced so that they could be financially exploited.

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