Cultural Solidification and Group Marginalization in Hollywood Films

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Abstract: In the world of cinema, the evolution of screen images and storylines reflects social change and cultural concepts. From late twentieth-century classics to present-day films, Hollywood's depiction of diverse cultures has documented shifts in our interpretations of gender, roles, and identities, driven by market demands and audience expectations.

Keywords: Hollywood films, marginalized groups, media representation, gender and race, female film creators

1. Introduction

Art is a vital aspect of human history, offering contemplation and critique of the natural world, aesthetic experiences, and emotional values. On stage or screen, we often see reflections of ourselves through protagonists' experiences and shared social memories. However, many works of art contain problematic beliefs and prejudices against certain social groups. Media portrayals of marginalized groups reflect and shape social values, significantly influencing public perceptions. Representations of race, gender, and sexuality in art and media often maintain dominant power structures and reinforce harmful stereotypes, marginalizing these communities. Notably, 21st-century Hollywood films have increasingly advocated for equal rights, challenging traditional narratives. This article is primarily based on theories from *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* and is supported by cultural occurrences in well-known Hollywood films over the past 50 years.

2. Movies before the 21st century

2.1 Reexamining "The Godfather": Unveiling the Problematic Undertones of a "Classic"

The Godfather, a 1972 movie featuring a white male lead as the main character, was criticized as an example of male chauvinism, despite being known for its fantastic plots. "Male chauvinism is an ideology embedded in cultural and political structures that use symbols of power and control while women are symbols of dominance and exploitation. (Hooks 1996, 33)[1] In the film, female characters had lesser positions than males, regularly playing secondary supporting roles or backgrounds. The movie tried to legitimize the old patriarchal family structure through creative methods while displaying it. In one scene, the Godfather and other male characters wait outside as Carlo pulls Connie, the Godfather's daughter, inside the room after she is battered. Connie had no agency over her life or emotions. Her decisions were judged according to the patriarchal standards of the family's male power holders, depriving her of the right to equality and freedom. Such a narrative stresses the superiority of males and the helplessness of women, symbolically hinting that women's sole duties are to serve men or bear children and presumably suggesting that giving up oneself for the family is the best life path for women. "The movie perpetuates the patriarchal thinking pattern that equates violence with manliness" (Hooks 1996, 53)[2]. In addition to promoting the assumption that males are inherently aggressive and domineering, the movie celebrates violence and makes an aesthetic effort to obscure the inappropriateness of masculine aggression.

"The alternative pleasure in looking offered by the woman as icon is one way of escaping the split in the male psyche and of reconciling the male subject with his alienated sexuality" (Mulvey 1975, 38).[3] But the film's lack of significant female characters reinforces this male-centric philosophy and undermines women's personal development and struggle, displaying severe gender conservatism. This idea is particularly relevant in The Godfather, where Italian-American characters are often portrayed as violent and criminal, solidifying negative stereotypes of Italian Americans. Members of the Mafia in the film use racist language, including highly derogatory terms like "nigger," to demean and dehumanize black people, portraying them as inferior and their speech as dirty and ignorant. This undoubtedly deepens contradictory perceptions of black communities, counteracting progress toward racial equity.

2.2 The Hidden Culture Hegemony In "Forrest Gump"

"Run, Gump, run," a line from the iconic film Forrest Gump, encapsulates an idealized American dream that resonates deeply with audiences. In the movie, Gump's journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific, through Vietnam battlefields, and into the White House symbolizes an extraordinary life shaped by American history and values. His transformation from a

disabled boy with a low IQ to a celebrated soldier and successful entrepreneur highlights the film's celebration of American individualism and consumerism.

However, this portrayal subtly reinforces American cultural hegemony and the ideology of American supremacy and "Manifest Destiny." Gump's legendary life intersects with major historical events and social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement, feminist awakening, and anti-war and anti-racist sentiments. Yet, the film's depiction of fairness, freedom, power, and liberation is commodified and ideologically skewed, masking the struggles of ordinary people under hegemonic forces. The film's narrative of witnessing and reconciling with history is illusory, concealing irrationalities in its storyline. I contend that the film's sophisticated political propaganda subtly perpetuates white supremacy and reinforces a male-dominated society, despite its superficial nod to black affirmative action and female empowerment.

The first is the most severe black affirmative action conflict in American society in years. The Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci argued that "Dominant social classes maintain their power and control over the subordinate classes through cultural and ideological means. The dominant class establishes a cultural hegemony by promoting their ideas, values, and beliefs as the norm, which makes it difficult for the subordinate classes to challenge the status quo" (Abdellatif, 2017, p001) [4]. For this part, the history of America's development is a history of black and Indian blood and tears, and the process of American democracy has not been smooth. What calls for special attention is that the director avoids the risk of quietly preserving the idea of "white supremacy" while leading more people to see Gump as a part of the government's advocacy of equal rights for blacks. The film dismantles and reconstructs the label of "discrimination" by using the model of the "magical black man" as the "white savior." When Gump sits on a park bench in the sunlight and talks about his American dream, the first audience is a black woman. Then Gump told her about the classic line from the film, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get" (Zemeckis 1994). [5]Moreover, his mother first used the Southern general "Nathan Bedford Forrest" fate of her son (in the subsequent identity reconstruction and replacement cleverly concealed the year of the Civil War racial discrimination and conflict). On the Vietnam War battlefield, he befriended Bubba and returned to save this black man with the image of a "hero." Although Bubba eventually passed away, Gump prayed with blacks in a church in his subsequent life, and even the people of his financial support after his success were black. Besides, Bubba's black wife also hired a white maid after receiving money sent by Gump.

Noticeably, a striking scene shows a white woman in uniform serving a well-dressed Black woman. This identity reversal provides viewers with a sense of satisfaction. However, his essence is built on the contributions of Black characters. Bubba's death leads him to a superficial understanding of interracialism, highlighting Black sacrifice to evoke white sympathy rather than genuine recognition of racial equality. The film's portrayal of racial reconciliation remains fictional, offering a false sense of equality and fairness. The grateful acceptance of Gump's gifts by Black characters reflects a societal belief that Black people should be thankful for white benevolence.This is very much in line with what Wesley Morris mentioned "The fear of black culture was more than a fear of black people themselves. It was an anxiety over white obsolescence" (Morris 2019: p11). [6]America at the time desperately needed a glorious, inspiring, legitimate image of a white hero who could represent the government and carefully hold on to the no-longer-solid white hegemony.

Another prominent and acute contradiction lies in women's marginalized and instrumentalized role. The director uses "de-othering" when dealing with the two female characters, Gump's mother and his girlfriend Jenny, that is, highlighting their extremely vulnerable side, making them instrumental characters in the narrative, portraying them as some representative symbols, and even instilling the audience with the social consciousness of male dominance and female subordination through them. This setting is particularly prominent in Jenny. Her image represents a rebellion against becoming a tedious "man's appendage." Despite her repeated attempts to achieve freedom and independence, the film never shows Jenny truly independent. Ironically, she aspires to be in Playboy, a magazine catering to male consumption. Her pursuit of freedom involves drug use, promiscuity, failed relationships, and eventually contracting a fatal disease. Jenny's character becomes a cautionary tale within mainstream values, failing to achieve her dreams and ultimately marrying Gump. She symbolizes the idea that family is the ultimate fate for women, reflecting the objectification of women and reinforcing male supremacy. The film undermines feminist efforts by selectively portraying the challenges of women's self-awakening, reinforcing hegemonic ideology, and guiding audiences to reaffirm traditional morality while rejecting avant-garde culture.

In summary, rewatching the film nearly 30 years after its release reveals the implicit cultural ideas and Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. The film, as an American fable, combines history, culture, legend, dreams, and ideals, yet fosters false self-satisfaction. Storey mentioned in his book that "Hegemony involves a specific consensus: a social group tries to portray its specific interests" (Storey 2018: P84)[7].The film subtly rationalizes the legitimacy of the Vietnam War and undermines affirmative action and the progress of Black individuals and women, leading audiences to accept white and male dominance. It transforms from encouraging personal initiative to constructing a white supremacist and male-dominated

society, achieving cultural hegemony through subtle design and ideological manipulation. As Gramsci noted in the Prison Notebook, "One of the most important characteristics of any hegemonic apparatus is its capacity to give an appearance of 'historicity' to its particular vision of the world" (Gramsci 1971:175)[8]. Therefore, when we look back on this classic film, in addition to being thrilled by its subtle picture conception and storytelling, we must also be careful and rational enough to recognize the cultural traps.

2.3 Color Affirmation and Gender Resistance in the Film Crooklyn

Hooks argues that film representations often reinforce patriarchal norms and expectations, thereby limiting women's opportunities and perpetuating systems of oppression. In Spike Lee's Crooklyn (1994), the father is depicted as the dignified, all-decisive head of the family, reinforcing the idea that women should be submissive wives and mothers. This portrayal legitimizes male dominance in family relations and undermines women's rights.

The mother's contributions and dedication to the family are depicted as expectations rather than choices, suggesting that women's worth is tied to their self-sacrifice for their husbands and families. The film normalizes the idea that women should handle housework and the social and emotional pressures of their husbands, cementing the notion that a woman's most valuable role is that of a housewife. Lines such as "I'm the man of this house, and I make the decisions" and "Boys should play with boys' toys, and girls should play with girls' toys" further reinforce patriarchal dominance. These elements highlight how gender inequality is deeply entrenched in everyday interactions and societal expectations, subtly reducing women's bargaining power and social status within the home.

The film, from the perspective of Troy, a young girl from a Black working-class family in Brooklyn, illustrates the early socialization of children into patriarchal norms. Boys are encouraged to engage in activities like basketball, fostering independence, while girls are confined to domestic tasks, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting potential. In *Crooklyn*, the housewife mother subtly resists prevailing social norms. Despite her domestic role, she expresses a desire for self-fulfillment beyond the home, captured in the line: "I'm not just a housewife; I'm a person with dreams and aspirations" (Lee 1994). This highlights her challenge to societal expectations and patriarchal ideology.

3. Movies after the 21st century

3.1 From the Shadows to the Light — The Proud Rainbow Colors in "Moonlights"

Hooks argues that "Hollywood movies present a limited and idealized view of freedom and citizenship, ignoring the reality of systemic inequality and oppression"(Hooks 1996, 123). [9]As we have seen in the preceding two instances, Hollywood movies repeatedly attribute individual oppression to cultural differences while neglecting the structural causes of inequality and harming the rights of oppressed groups. The 21st century has brought a break from these clichés in recent films. In pursuing racial and gender equality, they bravely question prevailing cultural narratives and give voice to underrepresented groups. Two new Oscar-winning movies show this tendency exceptionally well.

In Moonlight (2016), director Barry Jenkins powerfully portrays the coming-of-age journey of a young black man in a turbulent Miami community. Through photography and storytelling, the film challenges mainstream narratives of black masculinity and provides representation of black gay identity. Hooks' "oppositional gaze" theory is also reflected in Moonlight, as the film centers on the perspectives of black sexual minority characters, often ignored or stereotyped in mass media. As Hooks writes, "Oppositional black audiences demand that we resist the power of images to shape who we are and how we are perceived" (Hooks 1996, 120). [10]Moonlight presents a complex depiction of black characters' lives, subverting the mainstream gaze and providing a powerful alternative perspective.

3.2 Seeking Peace and Reconciliation - Black and White Balance on the Piano

In Green Book (2018), the friendship between Black musician Dr. Don Shirley and white driver Tony Lip, played by Mahershala Ali and Viggo Mortensen, examines issues of race, class, and identity. The film challenges racial prejudices through their unexpected relationship, exploring the history of racial segregation in the South. The Green Book itself, a guide for Black travelers during the Jim Crow era, symbolizes systemic racism and the need for Black people to navigate a hostile world. Dr. Shirley's character, who is both Black and gay, highlights the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation in his experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

These works offer nuanced representations of marginalized groups and envision a just and equitable society. Media representations can challenge mainstream ideologies and promote alternative perspectives on identity and social justice. Critiquing harmful depictions and creating equitable narratives are crucial, as media narratives not only reflect societal values but also shape them.

4. Conclusion

We can see clear examples of race representation in these Hollywood films. Depictions in visual media can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce oppressive systems. However, media also has the potential to boldly challenge conventions and break free from the confines of gender and racial stereotypes in mainstream narratives, reshaping new cultural values and transforming media representation from merely reflecting societal values to actively participating in constructing them. "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that the answers have hidden." (Baldwin 2011, 79)[11] In the future, art can become a tool for individuals to critically analyze and resist harmful statements and narratives and strive to promote fairer and just representation systems and social change. As for this, the media implicitly express the attitudes of marginalized groups in a way that greatly affects individuals' perceptions of these groups and the construction of power structures.

As we celebrate the achievements of these trailblazing women, we must also remain committed to supporting their work and advocating for greater representation and diversity in the industry. By doing so, we can ensure that the voices of female directors continue to be heard, and their stories continue to inspire and resonate with audiences around the globe.

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