

REVISITING RACIAL POTRAYAL IN THE AMERICAN POPULAR FILM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which race has played out in American popular film, from early silent films to recent films. Even though film, especially cartoon, often perceived as merely entertainment, it is not free from racial biases. Ranging from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to James Cameron's *True Lies* to Ron Clement's *Aladdin* to Scott Derrickson's *Doctor Strange*, Hollywood cinema has been feeding not only American audiences but also non-American audiences bias stereotypical portrayal of people of color and their culture. This study will discuss how is race constructed, countered, and accommodated in such films, and problematized these types of films in relation to racial tension in the US nowadays.

Keywords: *hollywood cinema, racial bias, poc in movies*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas bagaimana ras dimainkan dalam film populer Amerika, mulai dari awal era film bisu hingga film terbaru. Meski film, khususnya kartun, sering dianggap sebagai hiburan semata, namun tidak lepas dari bias rasial. Mulai dari *Birth of a Nation* karya D.W. Griffith ke *True Lies* karya James Cameron ke *Aladdin* karya Ron Clement ke *Doctor Strange* karya Scott Derrickson, sinema Hollywood berkontribusi pada bias penggambaran stereotip orang kulit berwarna dan budaya mereka tidak hanya bagi penonton Amerika tetapi juga penonton non-Amerika. Kajian ini akan membahas bagaimana ras dikonstruksi, dilawan, dan diakomodasi dalam film-film semacam itu, dan mempersoalkan jenis film tersebut dalam kaitannya dengan ketegangan rasial di AS saat ini.

Kata Kunci: sinema hollywood, bias rasial, POC (Person of Color) dalam film

1. Introduction

"Above all, battling hates those not born in the same great country as himself." This line from *Broken Blossom* precisely depicts how race represented in Hollywood cinema. Race has become part of Hollywood's formula to differentiate characters, the "us" which the audience supposed to relate and the "other" to hate. Classic Hollywood narration required a clear cause and effect to make the story flow logically. It is necessary to orient

the audience's self-identification toward the protagonist, therefore it is crucial to have a character that everybody loves to hate in a right reason. As the leading industry in entertainment business, Hollywood cinema set a parameter how to create a story that will capture the audience by the heart. Reality can be irrational but movie has to be logical. A successful story always has the "wanna see" factor that described by script writers as what constituting a good script (Brady, Duncan, Seger). It gives the audiences things they want to see and feel. Since seeing is believing, film gives satisfaction of an experience through seeing. Beside universal themes such as underdog triumph, revenge, and love affair, character is essential to support the cause and effect that make the story believable. To create a memorable character script writers usually employ stereotype formula of physical distinctiveness and racial ethnicity. It becomes problematic because repetition of racial stereotyping which override the complexity of the identity of an ethnic group will be perceived as fact.

2. Discussion

Since the silent movie era the otherness has been articulated in many different ways. Ranging from savages to alien, and people of color in between, otherness always portrayed as something to be tame and convert. However, when is the fascination of whiteness starts? Fatimah Rony Tobing argues the fascination of the other by white audience starts since the early era of ethnographic film. Quoting visual anthropologist Jay Ruby's argument, "The vast majority of films described as ethnographic are concerned with exotic, non-Western people" she stressed that since the history of cinema starts with ethnographic film, it bears the "cannibalism – the consumers of the images of the bodies – as well as actual bodies on display – of native people offered up by popular media and science" (1996; 7-10). Drawing from the same historical perspective Clyde Taylor argues,

If the work is an epic, which means among other things that it elaborates a theme of national unity, then it goes without saying that this unity must rest in the basis of White value, particularly the hatred of miscegenation. It *The Birth of a Nation* is an epic; it is an epic of White supremacy (1996; 19).

Thus, it is clear from the historical background of the cinema, what constitute as the "other" is everything other than "white".

Scholars persistently criticized Hollywood on how they portrayed People of Color (POC) as mostly sex object, backward, superstitious, violence, ungrateful, primitive, brutal,

uncivilized religious fanatic, faithful servant, money-mad and many other negative features deem by society (Danzin 2002; Fregoso 1993; Friedman 2009; Guerrero 2009; Roberts 2009; Shahan 2009). D.W. Griffith legendary *the Birth of a Nation* (1915) portrayed African-American as untrustworthy, backward and immoral through Silas Lynch, Gus and other African American characters. Appointed as lieutenant governor after the civil war, Silas Lynch took advantage of the situation for his own benefit and to marry Elsie Stoneman (which is, of course, a white woman). Although historically interracial marriage is forbidden, the way in which Silas Lynch try to have his way on Elsie Stoneman highlighting the barbaric feature of POC. On the other hand, the backward and immoral feature were shown in the election scene and the house of representative scene: Lynch's crony only allowed black people to vote and some of them cheat to ensure Lynch winning, moreover "Negro party" that control the house of representative was shown drinking and putting their feet on the table during the assembly which is considered unethical. African-American brutality and uncivilized were shown in the scene when Gus pursuing the innocent Flora Cameron which led to her death.



Picture 1. Pursuing an innocent girl without family escort (left) and Casting second ballot during the election (right) (screenshot from *the Birth of a Nation*. Primadewi, June 8, 2021).

Interracial relationships as transgressing social value also shown in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) and D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossom* (1918). Aside from showing the stereotype mammy character, in the scene when Sarah Jean was beaten by her boyfriend because her mother is black articulating the same value that interracial relationship was not acceptable. Similar to that, *Broken Blossom* shows an interesting

ambivalence in picturing racial stereotype. Battling Burrows, Lucy Burrows' father, was depicted as a violent guy, while Cheng Huan was pictured as a solemn-loving guy. Burrows' character might be a negation of civilized white characteristic; however, he was, at the same time, pictured as a man who use violence to defend his daughter honor. Thus, his violent behavior in the end is not seen as negative virtue, but an act of necessity.



Picture 2. Sarah Jean beaten by her boyfriend.
(screenshot from *Broken Blossom*. Primadewi, June 8, 2021).

One may argue that those racist depiction of the “other” only happen before the civil right movement. However, as Jack Shaheen argues the continuing stereotype is hard to stop because it happens unconsciously,

It is difficult to imagine that screen writers who draft scenes of fat, lecherous sheiks ogling Western blondes, or crazes Arab terrorists threatening to blow up America with nuclear weapons, are not precisely aware of what they are doing. But we sometimes forget that one of the elements that makes stereotyping so powerful, and so hard to eliminate, is that it is self-perpetuating. Filmmakers grew up watching Western heroes crush hundreds of reel “bad” Arabs. Some naturally repeat the stereotype without realizing that, in so doing, they are innocently joining the ranks of the stereotypes’ creators (346).

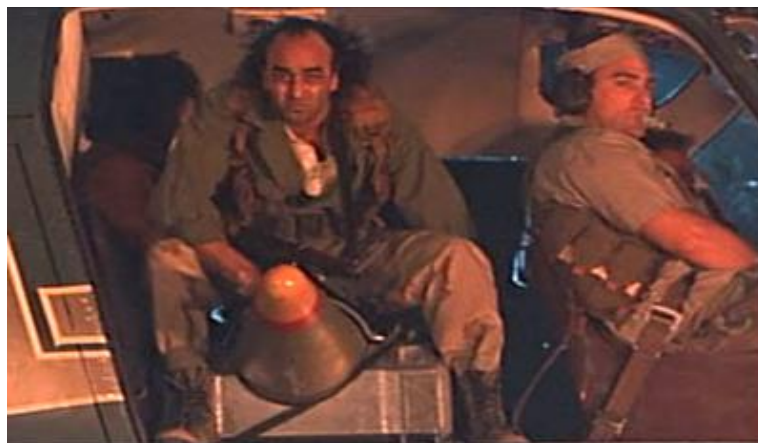
Since the late 50’s film with racial character shift to a different genre to accommodate the growing racial sensitivity in the US. Romantic comedy, action, horror, animation and science fiction replace melodrama to address conservative value with lighter approach. *Mulan* (1998), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), the *Cat in the Hat* (2003), *Avatar*

(2009), *The Lone Ranger* (2013), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Ghost in a Shell* (2017), and *Birds of Prey* (2020) presenting a different form of racial stereotyping or white washing in Hollywood cinema.

With the advance of technology, Hollywood cinema is able to present a form of entertainment beyond their audience imagination. While there are not many changes in how Hollywood cinema portrayed racial stereotype, these genres give more emphasis in entertainment rather than depicting social situation thus, it perceives as less threatening. The lightness in the name of entertainment is subconsciously normalized racial portrayal of POC. The subtle normalization of what supposed to be racist values is manifest in the way in which Walt Disney explained how to perceived Disney movies,

Anything carrying the Disney name was going to mean entertainment – this I insisted upon. We'd have authenticity, of course, but we'd also have drama and laughs and music. Our intent is not formal education in natural science. Our main purpose is to bring interesting and delightful entertainment to the theater (Wasko 2001; 148).

Disney statement more or less represents the entertainment industry's stands toward the critics on the bias racial representation that has been going on for decades. James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994) and Disney's *Aladdin* (directed by Ron Clement) are exemplifying neutralization of the racial bias in the form of action comedy and animation. *True Lies* main story line is the evolution of Harry (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Helen Tasker's (Jamie Lee Curtis) marital relationship, from boring to adventurous.



Picture 3. Aziz, a depiction of terrorist
(screenshot from *True Lies*. Primadewi, June 10, 2021).

Harry, a spy disguised as a salesman, and Helen's marital relationship is dying. Getting the idea from Simon, a fake spy he captured, Harry tries to spice up the relationship

by making Helen believed that she was recruited by CIA to plant a hearing device to an international spy played by Harry. Unfortunately, during that fake espionage mission both of them were kidnapped by a real terrorist organization Harry has been spying. As the story goes on, Arabs characters were depicted in constant stereotype as stupid, misogyny, brutal, and religious fanatic. The misogyny stereotype of Arab men is were visually mocked through a scene depicted Aziz sitting in a missile (picture 3). The phallic image of the missile represents patriarchy ideology that always associated with Arab culture.

Similar depiction of violence Arab men is also appearing in *Aladdin*. Simplified interpretation of Islamic law, Disney creates royal guard's dialog threatening Aladdin "I will have your hands for a trophy" as depiction of Islamic law that stated punishment for thievery is hand mutilation. Although represented in entertaining way, Arab stereotyping in *Aladdin* was no different than representation on the news. They are portrayed as brutal, hungry for power, cunning, greedy and, again, stupid. Returning to the argument of the need of stereotype in creating a believable character, Jack Shareen quoted Maureen Downd,

[S]tereotypes are not only offensive [but] they are comforting. They ... exempt people from any further mental or emotional effort. They wrap life in the arch toastiness of fairy tale and myth. They make complicated understanding unnecessary (347).

Portrayal of simplified Islamic law in *Aladdin* is a perfect example of the simplification of complicated understanding. And it was repeated once more in the scene when Princess Jasmine gives an apple to a hungry boy, but doesn't have money to pay for the apple (picture 4).



Picture 4. Market vendor tried to cut Princess Jasmine's hand for stealing an apple. (screenshot from *Aladdin*. Primadewi, June 10, 2021).

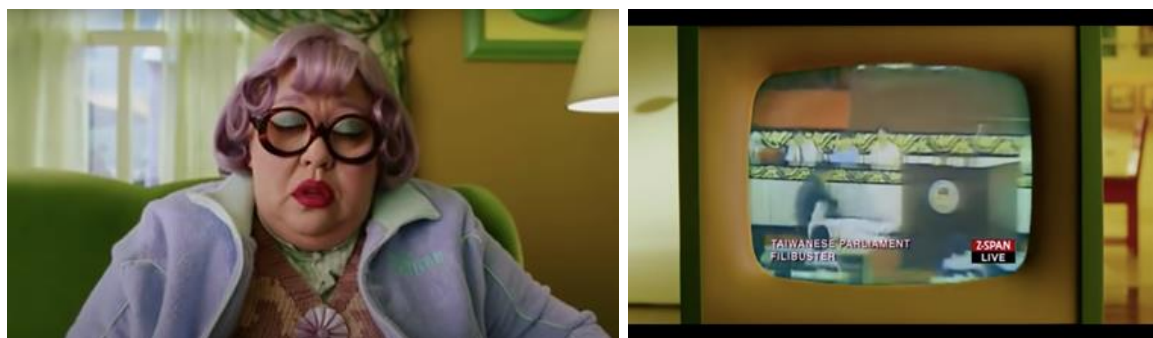
Wrapped in humorous characters and entertaining story line, *Aladdin* subconsciously planted the notion of barbaric Arab to the mind of the children not only in America but all over the world. The notion of “harmless cartoon” raised Ed Guerrero’s concern of the misconception danger lurking in cartoon and animation characters,

Yet, however innocent their makers allege animation to be, its ideological effects are pervasive. Cartoons and animated features most deeply influence the habits and perceptions of Hollywood’s youngest and therefore longest-term consumers: children (291).

Ian Wojcik-Andrews voices the same concern as Guerrero regarding the influence of seemingly harmless children’s films,

Children’s film is not just about children but also about what they watch and that is why the impact may vary throughout what they see on television (Wojcik-Andrews 2000; 20).

The Cat in the Hat (2003) is a perfect example for Guerrero and Wojcik-Andrews’ concern in the way in which films stereotyping Asian. When Joan needs to go back to the office, she calls Mrs. Kwan to babysit her children; Conrad and Sally. In this film Mrs. Kwan is portrayed as an irresponsible woman who is constantly falling asleep during her job. Aside from Mrs. Kwan, *The Cat in the Hat* also stereotyping Asian as unruly and always do the opposite of what they are told through *Thing 1* and *Thing 2* characters, and television program watched by Mrs. Kwan.



Picture 5. Sleepy Mrs. Kwan (left) and Brawl at Taiwanese Parliament (right)
(screenshot from *The Cat in the Hat*. Primadewi, June 12, 2021).

The subtle negative portrayal will be embedded in the children’s mind and in the end will construct their injustice understanding of Asian.

With the rise of racial tension during President Trump presidency one might think that Hollywood cinema will be more conscious with how they represent POC. However, the reality is quite a far fetch. In *Birds of Prey* (2020), when Harley Quinn was hunted by

every criminal after her break up with Joker, the person who reveal her hiding place is a Chinese man whom she trusted, Doc.



Picture 6. Doc revealed Harley Quinn hiding place
(screenshot from *Birds of Prey*. Primadewi, June 27, 2021).

Formerly portrayed as a wise and kind old man, Doc in the end is willing to double-crossed Harley so that he can open his own restaurant. Chinese characters in Hollywood cinema are often depicted as either as a wise man or as a cunning traitor, this shallow representation of an ethnic group can create false understanding and possibly fueling future violence toward a person in a real-life situation.

Injustice portrayal of POC is so subtle in Hollywood movies hence the audiences sometimes falsely perceive it as empowerment. *Mulan* (1998) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) give the audience the illusion of stereotyped-free character and empowerment in their female heroine, although the conclusion of the movies stated otherwise. *Mulan* is a Chinese girl expected to bring her family honor by marrying a man from respectable family. In the film, *Mulan's* preparation to be a perfect bride to-be was accompanied by the song *Honor to Us All* that depicts what is expected from women in Chinese family. After the matchmaker disaster scene, she sings *Reflection* lamenting her failure: "Look at me I would never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter. Could it be I am not meant to play this part". *Mulan's* realization of her differenced than found it catharsis by posing as his father son and join the army. Even though *Mulan's* character was not following the usual stereotype for Asian girl, the story still presenting Chinese culture as a patriarchic society

when Mulan almost executed for pretending to be a man. Furthermore, since Disney animation targeting family, it always ended with happiness, optimism, and good triumph over evil. Therefore, the ending of *Mulan* is the reunification of Mulan and her father, and restoring her family honor:

Mulan: Father, I brought you the sword of Shanyu and the crest of the emperor.
They are gifts to honor the Fa family.

Fa Shu: The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter

As touching and harmless as possible this scene might be, it brings back Mulan to where she is starting, a daughter. Though it seems supporting the notion that family is more important than fame, Mulan achievements were overruled by the importance of being a daughter (and of course scoring perfect suitor, General Li Shan and life happily ever after).

Similar pattern appeared in Jennifer Lopez's character development in *Maid in Manhattan*. Starting as a maid, pretending to be a rich lady, get fired, find a new job, become a manager and get the senator. The basic tenant of this romantic comedy is similar to Cinderella story, where the oppressed heroin gets the prince. *Maid in Manhattan* is very similar to *Mulan* in the way in which the family pressuring them to comply with their destiny as POC and women; as shown in the dialog of Marisa and her mother:

Veronica (Marisa's mother): Has this doesn't tell you anything, Marisa? Wake up little girl, you have responsibilities. And they come every month like a clock work. You want to back in the program? Keep dreaming. Dreams that never happen. You want to put food on the table? Call Sigñora Rodriguez.

Marisa: I'm a good cleaning lady. I'll start over but not misses Rodriguez. I'll find a job as a maid in some hotel, after some time passes, I'm gonna apply for the management program. And when I get the chance to be a manager, and I will ma, I know I will. I will take that chance without any fear. Without your voice in my head telling me that I can't.

Marisa's dialog with her mother breaking the stereotype of Latina and show optimism, however, the ending of the film reinforced the concept of white superiority by picturing Marisa as middle-class manager and accepted by white community by having relationship with senator Marshal.

From postcolonial point of view, submission to the white superiority as shown in *Maid in Manhattan* is very problematic as it is repackaged old formula in to new, more subtle approach as it clearly shown in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). With 3D technology advancement Cameron repackaged the conqueror vs native savage genre to a different level. Following the mass curiosity of life in other planet, James Cameron represents the

native-savage plot as represented by *Dances with Wolves* (1990) with a different twist. Since *Avatar* setting is in outer space it appeared to be less offensive because, after all, the Na'vi not another *human* race. The story starts with Jake Sully, a paraplegic veteran, turned into Na'vi man by the Avatar technology engineered by Dr. Grace Augustine to study Na'vi culture so that they can conquered them for the benefit of a mining company. This plot is a textbook classic colonial story when Jake Sully fall in love not only with Na'vi culture but also to a native humanoid female Neytiri, and turn his back to his own people to defend the newly found society. In his avatar form, Jake Sully teams up with Na'vi tribe and defeat greedy corporate figurehead Parker Selfridge and save the planet. Badly injured during the battle, the only way to save Sully's life is through permanently transferred his "soul" to his Avatar form.

Jake Sully, a white man, in his avatar form proven himself to be worthy as a leader to native Na'vi people when he can defeat the toruk and become the Toruk Mato. Therefore, his transformation is not based on the necessity to save his life, but even before that he is already proven himself worthy through some kind of rite of passage and earn his place as Na'vi.



Picture 7. Jake Sully's attempt to become the Toruk Mato
(screenshot from *Avatar*. Primadewi, June 1, 2021).

Transforming to other, fall in love with the other, saving the dying culture, becoming the white savior is in line with Rony's taxidermist concept in ethnographic film. "The taxidermist—often euphemistically referred to as a "naturalist"—must kill his/her subject, so that it can be brought back to life, a stilled representation of its former self" (101). The

Avatar has to show the defeat of Na'vi tribe, so that Jake Sully could save them and become their white savior. "Scrutinizing and unravelling the codes of misunderstanding embedded in simulations of sign and signifier in such ways as to transform them from reel to real" (Churchill 2003; 47), the way in which *Avatar* presents the conflict and solution can be perceived as ethnographic in a sense that this film represents the "authentic humanity". People fascination to film based on the suspension of disbelief in the moment of watching they are merged to the logic presented by the film, thus the way in which *Avatar* represent Jake Sully's transformation reversing the lens.

3. Conclusion

As the aftermath of Black Lives Matter movement, Conservatives American using the term "Cancel Culture" to label the effort to acknowledge the injustice befall to POC in America. It became interesting that actually Hollywood has been doing this for decades through whitewashing¹ characters in films. Take *The Lone Ranger* (2013), *Doctor Strange* (2016), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) for example. In *The Lone Ranger*, Disney choose to cast Johnny Deep as Tonto, despite the fact that in the original story Tonto is a Native-American. Related or not, the movie flunked in the market and get many backlashes. Similar with *Ghost in the Shell*, a film based on comic by Shirow Masamune, the comic fanatic was appalled by the choice of casting Scarlett Johansson as Major. Although in the comic *Major* was shown in several different body, prosthetic body, and sometimes even without a body indicated the ambiguous of their ethnicity but choosing white actress to play them sparks the notion of whitewashing issue. Although the case is similar, casting white actor for POC character, but the choice of casting Tilda Swinton as *the Ancient One* have a different back story. Kevin Feige, the President of Marvel studio, explained the problematic decision on casting Swinton "We thought we were being so smart and so cutting-edge. We're not going to do the cliché of the wizened, old, wise Asian man. But it was a wakeup call to say, 'Well, wait a minute, is there any other way to figure it out? Is there any other way to both not fall into the cliché and cast an Asian actor?' And the answer

¹ Whitewash actual meaning is "to gloss over or cover up vices, crimes or scandals or to exonerate by means of a perfunctory investigation or biased presentation of data". However, in cinema whitewashing meaning became literally make everyone white despite the original race of a character in a story.

to that, of course, is yes". (<https://deadline.com/2021/05/doctor-strange-tilda-swinton-the-ancient-one-whitewashing-kevin-feige-marvel-studios-1234761666/>; accessed June 10, 2021, 17.07).

Although the casting choice provides a comic relieve when Stephen Strange mistakenly thinking the ancient one as an old Asian man, thus addressing the stereotyping Marvel studio try to break, but it still gains negative review as part of whitewashing act.

As Disney argues, film is merely entertainment the active interpretation of the audience cannot easily ignore. Hollywood tends to assume that there is global "homogeneity of taste" that made Hollywood cinema can be accepted all over the world (Miller 2009; 262). However, as Sarah Berry argues audience acceptance are based on their pre-notion of what they expect from a movie (220). Thus, it is unclear, if not impossible, to predict how film will be perceived by the audience. To complicated Toby Miller's conclusion in *Global Hollywood 2* that Hollywood is global for the acceptance of people all over the world for its products (362), I want to argue that although for decades Hollywood has been successfully creating the image of "American value": optimistic, equal, harmonious, and logic society; which partially satisfied abroad audiences who crave for idealistic social justice. Now, that ideal is being challenge by American image circulating through social media. If Hollywood solidified the image of ideal America, social media countered it with postings such as "Karen" phenomenon² and other racist and xenophobic tendencies straight from the Americans. Dare to say, post-Trump presidency required Hollywood to rethinking the way in which they will represent themselves through film. Despite of the corona virus pandemic, some Hollywood films and television programs has been addressing racial and injustice issues. However, as Feige stated can Hollywood be free of cliché and doing just to the racial diversity in the US without being overtly righteous?

² Karen is a derogatory term for a entitled white woman. The term also refers to privileged women (most likely white) who over demand respect, act in their own way and often being prejudice to POC .

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Filmography

the Birth of a Nation (1915)
Broken Blossom (1918)
Imitation of Live (1959)
Aladdin (1992)
True Lies (1994)
Mulan (1998)
Maid in Manhattan (2002)
the Cat in the Hat (2003)
Avatar (2009)
The Lone Ranger (2013)
Doctor Strange (2016)
Ghost in a Shell (2017)
Birds of Prey (2020)