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Which Black Films Matter?

Every year a must-see film comes out starring some of the most popular members of Black Hollywood. Selling out box offices, these films gradually generate Oscar buzz and become subject matter for a handful of online thinkpieces that are shared within seconds throughout the Twitterverse.

While the presence of more Black films is praised by many as a sign of progress, these recent hits such as *The Help*, *Django* and *12 Years a Slave*, all share a striking similarity--- they are what Roxanne Gay coins as “struggle narratives” in her latest book *Bad Feminist*. Struggle narratives are almost always set in a historical time period and tell the story of a Black protagonist who ultimately finds freedom. Surprisingly even those Black Oscar contenders that are not period pieces portray a painfully narrow view of Black life. Despite the popularity of these films, one must ask: why is Hollywood so hesitant to depict the contemporary experiences of Blacks? and why are the contemporary depictions that do exist so troublingly one dimensional?

Between 2009 and 2014, only seven of the 55 films nominated for the Best Picture at the Academy Awards featured a predominantly Black cast or had a Black protagonist. Of these, four films were historical dramas set either during slavery or during the mid 20th century struggle for civil rights.

For example, Best Picture winner *12 Years a Slave* tells the true story of a free Black man captured and sold into slavery for over a decade until he ultimately found freedom. Other films in this category would include *Selma*, *The Help* and *Django*, all of which discuss the pain that has been inflicted upon Black bodies.

While the remaining three films nominated for Best Picture depict contemporary Black life, two of them do so through a similarly problematic lens. The protagonist of *Precious* and *The Blind Side* both come from impoverished homes characterized by their weak family ties and histories of abuse. The protagonist of *The Blind Side* however is able to turn his life around, attend college and eventually become a professional football player... but only with the intervention of a white family.

What does it say about our society when the majority of critically acclaimed films starring Blacks depict either historical narratives in which African Americans face the most grotesque forms of oppression or contemporary images of depraved urban life?

The inundation of period pieces can surely impact our ability as audiences to understand and empathize with current race inequalities. By constantly looking to the past, it is easy to distance ourselves and grow convinced that we have made immense racial progress. While such dramas educate us about our nation's history and may have even been created with the intent of asking "how far have we come?", the answer becomes distorted when there are so few films that highlight where we currently are.

The absence of these stories forces us to use these period pieces which often involve unfathomable violence, as a barometer against which it is difficult to understand the gravity of our current race relations.

In July 2015, the Pew Research Center conducted a study which analyzed the racial attitudes of Americans. Researchers found that until 2014, the majority of white

respondents felt that the U.S. had made all of the “changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites”. This changed quite significantly in mid 2015 when surveys revealed that only 40% of white americans felt that the necessary changes have been made as compared to 50% who did not. The white respondents in the Pew Research study noted that the national news coverage about race related issues is what opened their eyes to the inequalities still imbedded within American society.

While it is certainly an improvement that the majority of white America is now aware of the racial barriers to equal rights, it remains troubling that 40% of those surveyed still are not. While the silver screen may not have the power to completely change racial attitudes, media does impact our lives.

The ability for news coverage to change public attitudes speaks to the ability that entertainment media may have to do the same. Thus, the absence of critically acclaimed films that address our current state of race relations allows those who identify with that 40% to remain unconvinced that our society is in need of improvement.

Even the contemporary films that we do have such as *Precious* and *The Blindside* can have negative implications. While these films include narratives that explore serious issues such as mental health, abuse and poverty, the lack of other more positive narratives gives the false impression that Black life is completely mired in degradation.

In a 1989 article defending the popular sitcom *The Cosby Show* against allegations that the show failed to address racial inequalities, professor Michael Eric Dyson writes that the shows ability to employ universal themes without always explicitly mentioning race is what enabled it to actually dismantle stereotypes. The show allowed America to view Blacks as human beings by showing that many everyday concerns are in fact shared across racial lines.

Black films that grapple with universal themes like romantic love and career aspirations while also dealing with more pedestrian challenges have largely failed to accrue critical acclaim which suggests that the Academy needs a “Cosby reality-check”. The absence of this universality in Oscar nominated Black films exacerbates the idea that Blacks are somehow different because they do not share the same struggles and triumphs that are experienced by other racial groups.

Consider some of the predominantly white films that these movies were competing against for Best Picture. While the majority touched upon serious subject matter or took place in other time periods, the range of genres, content, and themes in these films was immense. Taken together, these films depicted all aspects of the human condition with characters that were both enemies and heroes, intelligent and dim-witted, successful and downtrodden.

Wildly unrealistic lifestyles such as those depicted in the dark comedy *Wolf of Wall Street* balanced out the simple family life represented in *The Kids Are Alright*. Sci-fi films like *Inception* took us to other, unfathomable dimensions while biographical dramas such as *Moneyball* grounded us back on the baseball field.

While all of these stories were extraordinary in their own ways, the wide array of characters and narratives that they present to their viewers creates the sense that white people are multi-dimensional. This normalizes the white experience and provides the public with a multi-faceted understanding of white people that can easily be translated into real life.

This is exactly what sociologists Robin Coleman and Emily Yochim coin “symbolic annihilation” when they claim that the erasure of certain racial groups denies the public of the opportunity to see different races occupy a full range of roles. This form of erasure

however is not intentional on the parts of these filmmakers nor does it exist amongst all Black films.

The creatives behind many of these movies are Black themselves and there are a slew of films about Black life that incorporate contemporary issues in thoughtful ways. However, this annihilation is observed when we consider the Black narratives that are being lauded by the Academy which (for better or for worse) possesses the power to shape public tastes, and dictate which films we will remember in years to come.

The question here however is not whether these Best Picture nominees should have been nominated. They are all excellent films with compelling storylines and performances that add tremendous value to the Black cinematic canon. The question is why these in particular are the only films with predominantly Black casts that receive such high levels of critical acclaim from the predominately white Academy.

Perhaps, the Academy's selections are so homogenous because these tastemakers have simply grown accustomed to viewing Black life on film in narrow ways. It could be argued that these past templates have inevitably come to define what constitutes a praiseworthy Black film. Or perhaps the answer lies in something more complex than a desire to maintain the status quo...

At the best, this trend of lauding films with Black protagonists who are locked in the past or whose characterization centers around their own poverty implies that there is something unnerving about engaging with contemporary race relations. At the worst, this pattern suggests that the Academy finds it unrealistic to see Black characters grapple with the same challenges and concerns experienced by white characters.

The fact that the films that are critically acclaimed represent only a small slice of Black American life speaks volumes about how our society currently views those lives and it will

shape how millions of moviegoers come to understand the Black experience. These limited fictional worlds are misinforming and can have grave consequences. Especially at this historical moment when thousands across the nation are mobilizing to declare that “Black Lives Matter”, it is imperative that the Academy begin to consider a wider array of films that depict Black lives more comprehensively.