The Constructed Black Male: How Fictitious Stereotypes Inform The Reality of American Cinema

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Since the early 20th century, visual arts have served as a reflection of and an escape from reality. More recently, contemporary popular culture has been effectively used as a medium in relaying messages and reinforcing beliefs for its intended audience. But what happens when these art forms begin to inform reality? What happens when art influences more than just its intended audience and becomes problematic, racist, or even malicious, eventually shaping attitudes and beliefs that inform constructs like race or gender? Using historical evidence, individuals can demonstrate how social constructs like racial stereotypes inform today's reality because of their constant and repeated use in culture. To demonstrate examples of how racist stereotypes are depicted in the various forms of popular and fine art, this paper will focus on the intersectionality of gender and race within American cinema.

It is essential to recognize that stereotyping negatively impacts many different minoritized communities within specific eras of American history. From Native American men to Asian women, eurocentric standards have developed essentializing tropes that incorrectly categorize complex and diverse communities. That is why this paper will focus on a century of stereotyping in America, from 1915 to 2018, and the unique lived experiences of Black Americans, a historically marginalized demographic within the visual and popular arts. More specifically, the chronological evolution of stereotypes in Black American history will be utilized to demonstrate how negative and positive representations of Black men in five American films influence contemporary society. This paper will illustrate how films like *The Wiz (1978) and Black Panther (2018)* demonstrate a level of cultural influence through efforts to diversify film media and create positive portrayals of Black men that combat stereotypes. Furthermore, films like

The Birth of a Nation (1915), Gone with the Wind (1939), and *Lilies of the Field (1963),* provide context regarding early portrayals of African American men and the harmful stereotypes in Hollywood movies that reinforce racism against the Black community.

Historically, Black men have been denied access to creative opportunities in the film industry and have limited roles in helping create culturally appropriate films. Black men face significant challenges regarding this exclusion from the film industry, with 2021 evidence from McKinsey & Company revealing that "Black Americans hold less than six percent of off-screen creative roles such as writers, producers, or directors."[1] It is critical to first recognize who is telling Black stories and the correlation that has to subsequent film productions. Oftentimes when Black men are included, it is for tokenizing purposes like reinforcing centuries old stereotypes, and enlightening white curiosity regarding Black culture. This phenomenon isn't new, and it certainly isn't a surprise for Black audiences who have consistently lacked proper forms of representation.

Society constantly engages with racism by perpetuating stereotypes not only in advertising, but in broad popular culture. Some examples in motion pictures include the Jim Crow, Mammy, Buck, Jezebel, Pickaninny, and many others.[2] This visual art style is not entertainment but a damaging projection of Black life based on racism used to justify deeply misrouted eurocentric beliefs. Beliefs have the capacity to inform reality, and with strong stereotypes perpetually being circulated through film media, it is no shock that individuals utilize these tropes to inform their own misguided realities.

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[1] Jonathan Dunn, Sheldon Lyn, Nony Onyeador, and Ammanuel Zegeye, “Black Representation in Film and TV: The Challenges and Impact of Increasing Diversity,” *McKinsey & Company* (11 Mar 2021).
[2] “The History of Racist Blackface Stereotypes,” Blackface!, accessed October 24, 2022, https://black-face.com/

From being categorized as brutes, thugs, or being labeled as plain violent, the synonymy of male Blackness with savagery and brutality is not new to American society. Evidence published by the *Journal of Black Studies* demonstrates that from the moment Black Africans arrived as enslaved people in the Americas, "male Africans were treated more violently and with greater brutality than any other segment of the enslaved African community."[3] Black-African men represented a direct threat to the social and racial hierarchy established by white America. Enslaved Black-Africans endured inhuman conditions, and any attempts at rebellion were depicted as evidence of their inherently violent natures. These efforts created strong dichomatic stereotype for the Black man in America: portraying them either as a Buck for being aggressive and wild for not conforming to slavery, or as an Uncle Tom for being obedient and docile when they didn't fight back. This history is fundamental, not only for conceptualizing the unique lived experiences of Black men today, but in recognizing how this history has informed narratives utilized by American films to damage the social perception of the Black male. By utilizing the trope that violent and damaged Black men posed a threat, filmmakers profited off a biased and distorted history that created fictional stories on Black behavior, thus instilling a misformed fear of Blackness into white America. These tactics were similarly employed by many early cinematic films, including the infamous *Birth of a Nation*.

Often regarded as the most racist movie ever created, *The Birth of a Nation* by director D.W. Griffth is one of the earliest motion pictures of the 20th century.[4] The

[3] Anthony E. O. King, “name,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no.1 (Sep 1997): 88, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784895?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents
[4] “The Birth of a Nation: The most racist movie ever made,” The Washington Post, accessed October 26, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/03/03/the-birth-of-a-nation/.

three-hour silent film is an adaptation of *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan,* a novel chronicling the Civil War from a pro-confederate perspective.[5] Serving as Griffith's first major production, *The Birth of a Nation* became a commercial success and was lauded by critics for its technical advancements in motion film. But why? How was a racist movie with no dialogue able to captivate the American people and become a staple in cinematic history? While the question is complex, the answer is relatively simple – because *The Birth of a Nation's* essentializing tropes of Black men were easily digestible for predominantly white audiences to accept, further reaffirming historic false perceptions about Black male behavior. Without even using words, movies like *The Birth of a Nation* demonstrate how visual arts like film serve as powerful mediums in furthering racist social agendas. For intolerant white audiences, seeing moving pictures on screen provided more than enough evidence to reinforce prejudiced beliefs about the violent and dangerous Black male.

On the outside, the silent epic demonstrates a strong biased portrayal of key historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and the Ku Klux Klan. Griffith's reality was clearly informed by the prejudiced nature of politics at the time, giving him more reason to incite anger within white audiences against Black men. Racist stereotypes could only flourish and continue to be perpetuated in a world where the social hierarchy is rooted in white supremacy. So, despite their low positionality in the eurocentric social hierarchy, Black men still represented a threat to social order through actions like the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Unity of Black Americans, and more specifically Black men, demonstrated a counteractive level

[5] *Birth of a Nation,* directed by D.W. Griffith (David W. Griffith Corporation, 1915), 3 hrs. 0 minutes.

of social power in response to white supremacy. Organizations like the NAACP represented an oppositional force to racist creative executives like Griffith who saw America through a biased and eurocentric lens. This argument is similarly articulated by Michael T. Martin in the book, *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present,* with evidence suggesting "...*the Birth of a Nation* serves as Griffith's filmic manifesto, an affirmative declaration of the legitimacy of man (read: Anglo-Saxon) rule through his vision of an America partitioned by race, gender, ethnicity, and class."[6] *The Birth of a Nation* is not just a film; it is contemporary propaganda that pushes racial agendas of white superiority.

Furthermore, *The Birth of a Nation* perpetuates problematic and racist stereotypes within its production to inform audiences about false narratives regarding the Black male. Any depiction of Black men in the film was done with white actors in blackface, an exaggerated and extreme style of make-up used by traditionally non-Black actors to depict Black individuals. As seen in the picture of Al Jolson (Figure 2), blackface on actors would often perpetuate the same physiognomy – things like big noses or wide lips, amongst vastly different stereotypes of Black individuals which exemplified the idea that all Black people are the same. Constructs like blackface are informed by a history that began with stereotypes, with both art forms used for the purposes of white entertainment. Blackface is the product of the imagined white perception, resulting in a failed attempt to connect Black culture, and instead, producing a harsh judgment of Black life rooted in fetishization of an unknown culture. This fact becomes especially problematic when one considers how Black men in *The Birth of a*

[6] Michael T. Martin, *The Birth of a Nation: The Cinematic Past in the Present (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019), 6*

Nation are portrayed as sexually-aggressive – specifically towards white women – unintelligent, and simply animalistic. More specific examples of racist stereotypes from this film can be drawn from the portrayal of Black Guerrilla fighters, where Black regiments were depicted raiding a South Carolina town in an utterly barbaric manner. The almost ten-minute scene demonstrates these Black regiments mercilessly killing, robbing, and attacking white residents who were ultimately saved by a local white militia. Ten minutes of Black violence with no dialogue did not happen by accident; it was a purposeful stylistic choice created to exhibit Griffith's racist ideologies. Another example can be drawn from the film's entirely white cast, who would depict parts of the Black ensemble. In the film, a formerly enslaved person named Gus (played in blackface) attempts to rape Flora, the youngest daughter of the Southern white protagonists, eventually leading Flora to commit suicide in response. As seen in the still from *The Birth of a Nation* (Figure 1), Gus is retaliated against by the KKK because of his actions, creating a graphic and unsettling scene. These impressions formed ideas for white audiences that Black men are unregulated creatures with no control over their desires.

Furthermore, characters like Gus demonstrate to white Americans that Blackness is a perpetual threat to the security of the white order, regardless of the time period. History has seen this phenomenon repeatedly, most infamously in 1955, with the murder of Emmett Till, a young Black boy, who was savagely murdered after being accused of sexually harassing a white woman in a grocery store.[7] Stereotypes of Black men were not just fictional stories for entertainment; these actions prompted real

[7] "From Emmett Till to Pervis Payne — Black Men in America Are Still Killed for Crimes They Didn't Commit," The Innocence Project, accessed October 26, 2022, https://innocenceproject.org/emmett-till-birthday-pervis-payne-innocent-black-men-slavery-racism/.

violence and consequences for an already marginalized community. Negative portrayals of Black men, including Gus, demonstrate the presence of racist white intolerance within film and an inability to co-exist peacefully, especially when portrayals are associated with historic stereotypes like the Buck. The Buck represents the American stereotype of large, proud Black men who sometimes appeared menacing and had perpetual interests in white women.[8]

Gus is indistinguishable from the Buck caricature, especially in his efforts to constantly engage with Flora, despite the implication these interactions create as a Black man in the 19th century. Griffith knew the severity of these implications and meticulously created *The Birth of a Nation* as a product of his misinformed narratives about Black life, rather than using fact to depict male Blackness. The ways Black men are problematically displayed perpetuate efforts in America to construct stereotypes that would eventually inform how white Americans regarded the Black male identity for years to come. While it would take another half century for Black males to begin having positive portrayals of themselves in cinema, it is critical to recognize what representation looked like after *The Birth of a Nation* was released.

In reaction to *the Birth of a Nation's* release*,* Black communities were justifiably angered and perplexed. Much of their community, especially Black men, were inaccurately depicted in manners that could garner violent responses from their white counterparts. While organizations like the NAACP fought for the film's destruction, incalculable damage was already done, and any remnants of positive Black male imagery were shattered.[9] While better depictions of Black life eventually came to fruition

[8] "The History of Racist Blackface Stereotypes."
[9] Stephen Weinberger, "*The Birth of a Nation* and the Making of the NAACP," *Journal of American Studies* 28, no.1 (Sep 1997): 88, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016760#metadata_info_tab_contents

on the big screen through films like *The Wiz,* it is vital to recognize what happened in the time period between both films. After 1915, Hollywood was in a state of disarray as it sought out its next big cinematic break. The *1915* release of *The Birth of a Nation* proved to be a domestic success for white American audiences, giving other creative executives the rationale to utilize misinformed, racist, and essentializing eurocentric material. If the formula proved to be successful for one film, why not use it for the rest?

This rationale was similarly employed by hundreds of films during the early 1920s through the 1970s such as *The Jazz Singer (1927) and Song of the South (1941)*, leading creative executives to begin casting actual Black actors for film roles. The need for Black representation resulted from film creators needing small and often diminishing roles filled in by individuals of color. When Black people found limited opportunities on film, it was usually for roles that fit historic stereotypes they could portray. Profiting off the stereotypes of Black males wasn't enough, so a violent cycle of exploitation against the Black community continued, perpetuating other stereotypes that changed the meaning of being a Black actor during the mid-20th century.

As seen in the still of Sidney Potier and Hattie McDaniel (Figure 4), this change became the same reason why the first two Black Oscar winners received critical acclaim for their portrayals in historically stereotypical roles. After its 1939 release from director Victor Fleming, the film *Gone with the Wind* became an instant domestic success. Set during the American Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction Era, *Gone with the Wind* tells the story of a Georgia plantation owner's daughter named Scarlett O'Hara, and her romantic pursuits during the film.[10] It won eight academy awards, including Best Picture,

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[10] *Gone With the Wind,* directed by Victor Fleming (Selznick International Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939), 3 hrs. 41 minutes.

Best Director, and, more infamously, Best Supporting Actress for Hattie McDaniel's role as the Mammy.[11] In this controversial role, McDaniel portrays a fictional house slave who embodies many racist narratives of how older slave women acted. Mammy is proud and independent, serving as an almost motherly figure for Scarlett O'Hara.

While Mammy is played by a Black woman and the focus of this paper continues to be black men, it is important to recognize how stereotypes negatively inform the intersectionality of race and gender for both Black men and women. A point of analysis can be drawn when discussing how cinematic stereotypes have chronologically evolved for all of the Black community. History constantly informs the present, and because racist depictions of Black men had high profitability, racist depictions of Black women soon followed suit. These actions made it rather clear for white directors like Fleming and Griffith that the exploitation of the Black community didn't have to stop with Black men, but could include a plethora of other marginalized groups as well. The gross popularity of *The Birth of a Nation* allowed for films like *Gone With The Wind* to not only come to fruition in a world where white supremacy and eurocentrism dominate mainstream popular culture, but is lauded and celebrated for its existence. Once individuals can conceptualize the historical beginnings of stereotypes within contemporary cinema, it is easier to corroborate the evidence that supports their repeated use throughout American film history.

For example, only twenty-four years later the film *Lilies of the Field* was released by director Ralph Nelson to American audiences*,* receiving five Academy Award nominations and one win. This win, another first in Black history, was for Best

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[11] "The 12th Academy Awards Memorable Moments," Oscars, accessed October 29, 2022, https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1940/memorable-moments

Actor in Sidney Poitier's role as Homer Smith. *Lilies of the Field* tells the story of Smith, an itinerant worker who meets a group of white nuns who believe he is sent from God to help them build a new chapel.[12] In his role, Poitier delivers what is believed by many to be one of the first positive portrayals of Black men on screen after the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Yet when the film is examined closer, audiences will realize that Ralph Nelson has Homer Smith serve in a subservient role throughout the entirety of the film, especially in his constant attempts to answer to the requests and demands of the white nuns. Although Homer Smith is not an inherently racist depiction of Blackness, like Mammy, the nuance behind his character attempting to constantly satisfy the needs of white people demonstrates a level of conformity to white America. These details are important when recognizing that these behaviors embody the same characteristics as Uncle Tom. The Uncle Tom stereotype was perpetuated against Black men who appeared to be too gentle, docile, or excessively subservient, especially when their status in the social hierarchy depended on their race. While *Lilies of the Field* makes significant strides in allowing for greater representation of Black actors on film, what Ralph Nelson does as director continues to perpetuate appealing, yet fallacious stereotypes of how the Black male behaved to a predominantly white audience. Details like these in early cinematic history help to demonstrate the central idea of how stereotypes were so influential in their negative impact against Black American men.

Moreover, all three films, *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind,* and *Lilies of the Field,* were released twenty-four years apart from one another, yet the influence of the first of these films changed the rest of cinematic history. These films were lauded

[12] *Lilies of the Field,* directed by Ralph Nelson (Rainbow Productions, 1963), 1 hrs. 34 minutes.

and acclaimed for offering portrayals of African Americans that utilized negative and untrue stereotypes. Actors like McDaniel and Poitier were forced to take diminishing, reductive, and underpaying roles like Mammy or Smith due to scarce job opportunities for Black actors. Furthermore, having predominantly white creative executives write racist depictions of Black men informed how other marginalized groups were viewed and effectively treated as well. Both *Gone with the Wind* and *Lilies of the Field* represent a style of cinema that is problematic. Within twenty-four year intervals, individuals can see how just one film sets a precedent for the rest.

Although negative portrayals of Black men were rampant in the beginning to the mid-20th century, the Black community took it upon themselves to wage war against their stereotyped representations in American cinema. One of the earliest examples of this came shortly after the release of *Gone with the Wind*, when in 1936, four Black actors came together to form the Negro Actors Guild of America, as seen in a photograph of the founding guild members (Figure 3). According to the historical website *Black Past*, the guild's goal was to "eliminate the stereotyping of African Americans in theatrical and cinematic performances. It also stressed the need for more realistic roles for people of color, helped foster the skills of African American actors, and worked to generate more acting opportunities for Blacks."[13] While not all efforts were successful for the Black community, many still were, and during the next two decades, Black life finally began to flourish and rightfully prosper on the big screen. From names like James Earl Jones to the impeccable Cicely Tyson, during the mid-to-late 20th

[13] "Negro Actors Guild of America," Blackpast, accessed October 30, 2022, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/negro-actors-guild-america/#:~:text=The%20Negro%20Actors%20Guild%20of%20America%20was%20founded%20by%20African,in%20theatrical%20and%20cinematic%20performances.

century, many Black actors were finally able to break the shackles that white Hollywood bound them by for far too long. Dozens of film productions started integrating Black actors into more culturally significant lead roles, finally deconstructing old narratives of what it meant to be a Black actor in America. For some of the first times in history, Black men would not only be the face of film but could also portray complex and loveable characters that both white and Black audiences could come together to enjoy.

Most notably, films like *the Wiz* and *Black Panther* demonstrate this unifying phenomenon in full effect. Released in 1978 from director Sidney Lument, the story of *The Wiz* puts a remix on *The Wizard of Oz (1939)* by taking place in New York and using big names like Michael Jackson and Diana Ross to attract a more diversified audience, as seen in a promotional photo for the movie (Figure 5). While the film was not a commercial success due to focus on social issues like the Vietnam War, *The Wiz* was eventually nominated for four Academy Awards and remains a staple in Black culture today.[14] The cultural successes of *The Wiz* can be attributed to many factors, but most importantly, it is due to the positive depictions the film creates of Black men. Like many of the directors recognized in this paper, Sidney Lument was a white creative tasked with the difficult role of developing a successful film. Yet, where Lument differentiates himself from directors like Griffith, Nelson, or Fleming is in his collaborative efforts with a predominantly Black cast to create uplifting and positive roles within culturally appropriate contexts. For example, one character that demonstrates the more tolerant attitudes of directors like Lument is the Scarecrow, played by Michael Jackson. Despite not having a brain and being made entirely of garbage, Scarecrow is an incredibly intelligent character that audiences grow to love. From helping Dorthy find the

[14] *The Wiz,* directed by Sidney Lument (Motown Productions, 1978), 2 hrs. 13 minutes.

Yellow Brick Road to warning the Tin Man of the deadly poppies, Scarecrow serves as one of the earliest positive portrayals of Black men in cinema. Scarecrow is indisputable proof of that fact that Black men are not two dimensional stereotypes, but instead are real people with unlimited potential to be anything they set their minds to. Audiences grow to love Scarecrow not because he embodies racist tropes that are easy to agree with, but because his character has a quality story that all humans can relate to, regardless of their skin color.

Similarly, the 2018 release of *Black Panther* from director Ryan Coogler was incredibly impactful in its positive portrayal of Black men for diversified audiences. As depicted in a promotional photo for the film (Figure 7), *Black Panther* was nominated for seven Academy Awards, becoming the first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to win not just one, but three of these awards. Furthermore, because the story is brought to life by a Black director there is a level of cultural competence that is demonstrated for some of the first times in Hollywood. Having Black voices tell Black stories is a phenomenon that has been historically absent from American cinema, thus giving white creatives the platform to make films that perpetuate historic stereotypes. Yet, over 100 years after *The Birth of a Nation's* release, audiences can now see the shift in progression from having white directors making racist and diminishing films to now having white and Black directors creating culturally competent productions. *Black Panther* tells the story of a newly crowned king named T'Challa, played by the late Chadwick Boseman, and his efforts to save the most powerful nation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe from civil war.[15] Similarly to Lument, Ryan Cooger was tasked with the difficult role of taking a

[15] *Black Panther,* directed by Ryan Coogler (Marvel Studios, 2018), 2 hrs. 14 minutes.

story written by white creatives and turning it into something that is not only uplifting, but is culturally appropriate in its portrayal of Black men. Yet, *Black Panther* brought in over $1.3 billion dollars at the box office, proving that its story wasn't the only thing unifying and attracting audiences to watch the film, but also because of the relatable and likable character developments of individuals like T'Challa.

Although released almost forty years apart, both *The Wiz and Black Panther* represent significant steps to creating diverse films. In both productions, predominantly Black casts are used to convey positive fictional stories created by white Americans, a significant change from historical trends of earlier productions in film. This phenomena created a ripple effect that allowed for the positive representation of Black men to diversify how film media portrayed other marginalized communities as well. Changes in casting and writing from Hollywood creatives demonstrates more contemporary efforts to uplift positive portrayals of Black men that a wide array of audiences can be invested in. While individuals will continue to advocate for better representation in film, the process of casting within Hollywood cannot be neglected. Casting is the process which allows for more diversified representation on the big screen, and without ensuring that casting is an equitable and fair process for all, there will never be culturally appropriate forms of representation within cinema. Instead of having Black actors serve as stand-ins for insignificant roles that were racist, stereotypical, and diminishing, both *The Wiz* and *Black Panther* demonstrated a developing term in American cinema. This term, color-blind casting, is a process where "characters for a performed work (theater, T.V., film) are cast without regard to race, gender, age, etc."[16] Instead of choosing actors

[16] "Colorblind Casting," TV Tropes, accessed October 30, 2022, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ColorblindCasting.

because of how dark their complexion is or what stereotype they could best fit, cinema has put more emphasis on the importance of acting capabilities. As seen in the drawing of Chadwick Boseman (Figure 6), positive representation in film reflects the progression of a more tolerant society and is a critical aspect in development for any individual. Yet, this has consistently been a historical challenge for marginalized groups like the Black-American man.

For the last hundred years, American cinema has perpetually repeated itself by engaging with racist stereotypes that skewed mainstream perception of Black men. From *Birth of a Nation* to *Black Panther,* there has been a clear evolution in the ways Hollywood represents Black men in film. For Black men across the nation, including myself, it can frequently feel like society has already constructed ideas for who we are. Yet, in attempts by popular culture to define who the Black man was using racist tropes, Black-American communities refused to adhere to or accept these beliefs. Instead, Black Americans began a decades-long infiltration into the world of cinematic productions. From producers and directors of color, to predominantly Black casts, contemporary cinema is widely different from films produced during the early 20th century, and continues to grow towards inclusivity today.



Figure 1 : Alexis Clark, How the Birth of a Nation' Revived the Ku Klux Klan, 1915, A scene from director D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*



Figure 2: Heritage Auctions, 1930, actor Al Jolson wearing blackface in the musical *Mammy*



Figure 3 : Joseph Bernardo, 1938, Officers of the Negro Actors Guild of America,



Figure 4 : D'Shate Lee, 2022, Side by side photo of first two Black Academy Award winners.



Figure 5 : Michael Ochs, 1978, The cast of *The Wiz* pose for a publicity shot.



Figure 6 : Ryan Meinerding, 2020, Marvel Studios Tribute to the late Chadwick Boseman.



Figure 7 : Christine Dinh, 2019, 'Black Panther' Makes History Yet Again with Oscars' 'Best Picture' Nomination

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