

Why does Western culture look at other cultures for entertainment in film?

Disney's production of '*Black Panther*' (Coogler, 2018) presents a strong source for cultural representation of the black community in film due to having a majority black cast and crew. My interest lies in the negative and positive effects on minority communities with how cultural influences are approached in television and film. I will mainly be exploring '*The White Man's Indian: Stereotypes in Film and Beyond*' (Vrasidas, 1997) and '*The controversy around Black Panther's supposed "appropriation" shows the necessity of pan-Africanism*' (Ziyad, 2018) as these articles lend themselves to the topics of stereotypes, culture and representation. In this essay, I will explore whether representation- positive or negative- plays a key role in entertainment, whether that be relating to a certain character or satirizing them.

To begin with, it is important to gain an understanding of what entertainment is defined as- which seems easy in theory, but is quite complex when delved into. As such, I will try to keep my explanation as simplified as possible. A key figure in defining what is considered 'entertainment' by modern standards is Molière, 'who in having to elaborate a defence of his plays [against the Church and salons on the rules of art] developed a new definition of what the theatre should do.' (Dyer, 2002 p.6) In doing this, he created a new distinction between what art and entertainment are in theory, severing the two from one another.

Entertainment became identified with what was not art, not serious, not refined [...] - art is what is edifying, élitist, refined, difficult, whilst entertainment is hedonistic, democratic, vulgar, easy. (Dyer 2002 p.6)

Dyer goes forth to state that this distinction is harmful, expressing its falsity in context to what entertainment and art are- but explains that, despite this 'it remains one built into our education and the decisions of television programmers.' (Dyer, 2002 p.6) This statement is understandable when you think on the distinction between the two. Art is typically stereotyped by the visual of wealthy patrons discussing and buying artwork at a gallery while entertainment is defined quite heavily by the individuals interests- as one could be as easily entertained by watching ants walk by as they might be watching a production in the theatre.

But the reality of the situation is that art and entertainment are heavily linked as stated by Dyer in previous statements- through 'song and dance by tribal societies [for the purpose of having] an effect on life' or 'celebrate [...] a systematically structured [event] governed by the church and tied to seasonal- hence, economic- festivals.' (Dyer, 2002 p.6) I won't delve into the intricacies of what is defined as art- but it is tremendous. I believe what Dyer was trying to suggest through his division of art from life, was that the definition of art at the time did not fit his conception of entertainment. Due to this, he created a defence which would allow him to freely depict what he found entertaining. To me, entertainment and art are strongly intertwined- but it depends on your own perception of what art is and how you define entertainment.

Due to the complexities of what entertainment is, how do film and television invoke mass appeal? My theory is that this is done through the enthralling act of representation. This may be through a character you feel you can relate to, or an interesting depiction of another culture. Humans are enticed by the unknown, but still want some stability in the form of what they consider the norm. '*Indiana Jones*' (Spielberg, 1981, 1989, 2008) is a great example of this as it represents a character from one culture and society coming in and exploring another. You may not be able to relate to the character of a white male coming from a western culture, but you can relate to the experience of entering or learning about another culture- either through the eyes of the character or from your own experiences. The issue with this though, is that these representations are typically coming from one perspective- which can lead to stereotypes being spread or reinforced as expressed by Vrasidas in the following statement.

Film and television have the unique power of reaching mass audiences in an entertaining way. [...] Stereotypes were very entertaining, and as such, movies with stereotypical characters were well liked among the masses. (Vrasidas, 1997 p.65)

As evidence for the importance of positive representation shown through the '*Black Panther*', Vrasidas reinforces that the black community and other minority groups have been represented by stereotypes construed through movies as displayed in the above quote. These stereotypes are typically narrow minded, targeted views on either individual experiences or groups that negatively represent said community. The reason why these typically harmful stereotypes are kept in film is due to 'money.' This negative representation of these communities have become tropes, well liked by movie goers. An example of this is the trope of cowboys vs indians depicting the Native American community as aggressive savages who carry around tomahawks and bows and arrows- a representation of the effects of colonialism to push for control and force others to conform to that society's ideals.

Hollywood films "became a major transmitter of 'assimilationist' values and helped to reinforce a narrow conception of American life to which all groups were expected to conform" [...] dictat[ing] how Americans should behave, what they should believe in, and what they should look like. (Vrasidas, 1997 p.65)

For years, Hollywood has been a white-washed industry, with limited positive representation for minority groups. In recent years, positive representation has become more desired by the general public- especially with the growth of movements lobbying for equal rights, the LGBTQ+ community and the lives of minority groups. In this sense, the '*Black Panther*' carries more responsibility as it has to positively represent the black community in an entertaining way- it has to perform well in the industry so that other films like it will have more incentive to be produced. Currently, because of the desire for representation, the positive representation of other communities has become more sought after in film- which has in turn made movies like the '*Black Panther*' more profitable and therefore more desirable to the film industry. The issue that comes with this is presented when communities are misrepresented.

In the case of television series like '*Bridgerton*'- there are quite a few issues with negative representation. According to Carolyn Hinds from the Observer, the television series contains 'negative stereotyping of its Black characters and colorism in the casting' (Hinds, 2021). An example of the negative stereotyping is presented through the Duke's and Marina's fathers, who play into the 'typical racist stereotype of being a Black man who abandons [their] child'. (Hinds, 2021). Stereotypes like this may hold true to some degree to multiple different ethnic groups- providing representation to some, however; by further utilizing these overused negative stereotypes- they start to become harmful tropes, misused to represent a whole community. Alternatively, in terms of colourism, Hinds claims that 'The two most powerful Black people in this show [...] are both light-skinned. [...] When it comes to casting black people in certain roles, white people tend to go for the lighter side of the color palette because that's who they're most likely able to relate to.' (Hinds, 2021) This can be harmful to black communities as it neglects the representation of those with a darker skin tone- further enforcing the negative concept presented in multiple different cultures that you have to be a lighter skin tone to be considered beautiful or of worth.

The '*Black Panther*' in comparison, avoids many of these negative stereotypes. It is not perfect though, as it still holds its quelms within the African community. According to an article by Ziyad, the '*Black Panther*' brought up some controversy amongst the Black community between African continentals who claimed diasporic black communities were appropriating their culture, who counter- claimed charges of bigotry. Ziyad explains that diasporic communities can 'do a better job respecting the African cultural customs they adopt', however; it is nonsensical to call this appropriation.

Black diasporic people are Africans, simply displaced and systematically denied our ties to our homes over centuries. Trying to find a way back to our roots [...] does not carry with it the historical significance or abuse of power as appropriation of Black customs by non-Black people, which always furthers Black oppression. (Ziyad, 2018)

According to this statement, Ziyad claims that what the diasporic black community have produced through the '*Black Panther*' is not cultural appropriation due to the community attempting to reconnect with their ancestry. In my opinion, there are both positive and negative aspects surrounding the film. It positively represents and shares knowledge and interest in a real culture(s) although the country is fictional. However, the film runs the risk of creating negative stereotypes by grouping multiple African cultures into one as it could possibly upset tribes that don't get along with one another for being grouped together or give the impression to someone less knowledgeable on the culture that this is a representation of all of African culture. There are some positive aspects to this though, as this method does not single out a single culture and/or tribe. In the following statement, this viewpoint is further emphasised by Ziyad from his own point of view.

Speaking from a Black American perspective, I know how easy it can be to ascribe the ideologies of a few African continentals to many, given that honest representations here are few and far between. (Ziyad, 2018)

Overall, Western culture looks at other cultures for entertainment in film in order to explore and experience things from a different perspective whilst still being represented. With the increased demand for positive representation of minority groups in film by both those within said minority groups and outside them- we find that there is an unspoken obligation to be more aware and understanding of the positive and negative impact these films can have on these communities through stereotypes and tropes. It is impossible to create something that is wholly positive as there are groups and communities that will react negatively to the dismissal or inclusion of different concepts, whether that be cultures or communities. What's important is that we acknowledge these viewpoints and choose how we personally wish to proceed. Entertainment is perceived differently by different people and it is our responsibility to represent what we believe is important to ourselves as well as to our current society and culture.

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