

DOES THE PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN FILM HAVE A DIRECT
IMPACT ON THE WAY THEY ARE VIEWED BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC?

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the false film images that are perceived as true by the general public by examining a potential correlation between the film industry's portrayal of African Americans and the conflict they experience in society as a direct result of this portrayal. The analysis also considered the intervening variables of gender, race, education, age, and the number of movies viewed with African American characters in them. The findings revealed that the majority of people actually believe portrayals in film of people of color to be true unequivocally, and this belief directly correlates with societal conflict. Film is a powerful tool that has been used as a weapon of manipulation to distort the perception of people of color. If the issue of film manipulation can be addresses and reversed, it can ultimately aid in restoring a measure of humanity back to its rightful place.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful tool in America. Americans spend millions upon millions of dollars going to respective theaters across the country to watch the latest films. Film provides for information and entertainment. However, movies that are meant solely for entertainment are often perceived as truth by the masses, thereby distorting their perception.

The question raised in this study and, hopefully, answered is, is there a correlation between the film industry's portrayal of African Americans and the conflict they experience in society as a direct result of this portrayal? As Boyd argues, "Since cinematography was invented, the stereotypical African American male has been portrayed all over the world as a debased individual; hence, society at large views them in that manner" (17).

Analyses of stereotypes revolve around the idea that the portrayals of African Americans in film affect how they are viewed by the general public. McGarty explains the situation eloquently: "African-Americans have been the victim of false historical and cultural ideology, whose best propaganda is film and its by-product, television" (36). Similar studies and surveys indicate that African Americans are not properly portrayed in film. Films do not have many Blacks, but the ones that do tend to portray roles that are neutral, stagnated, or better yet, one-dimensional. Furthermore, people have reported, in general, that they believe that films with African Americans are fact based.

The five primary stereotypical characters that have plagued African Americans in film are the Tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the Black buck. First, the Tom was the first Black characterization that was socially acceptable. Toms are usually chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, and insulted. Nonetheless, the Tom remains faithful and submissive to his White “massa,” and such behavior endears him to White audiences.

The coon, a character seen in a variety of films, was presented to the masses as a figure of amusement and buffoonery. Films typically portrayed two types of Coons: pickaninnies and the Uncle Remus character. The pickaninny gave the Black child actor his place on the pantheon. Typically, this character was harmless and had dark skin, wide, popping eyes, and thick hair that stood on its end. The pickaninny’s antics were diverting and offered comical relief. Considered the cousin of the Tom, Uncle Remus is also viewed as harmless and congenial. The defining characteristic of an Uncle Remus is his ability to be quaint, his naivety, and his comical philosophizing. The Remus character has always been used to indicate the Black man’s satisfaction with the system and his place in it.

The third figure is the tragic mulatto. This figure stirred up quite a bit of controversy in the 1912 film titled, *The Debt*. This film is a two reeler about the Old South. A White man’s wife and his Black mistress bear him children simultaneously. After growing up together, they fall in love and decide to get married. However, their relationship is destroyed once the truth unravels and the two lovebirds learn that they are brother and sister—and that the sister has a drop of Black blood.

The fourth figure—the mammy—is distinguished by her sex and fierce independence. Typically, she is bigger in physical stature, some would say obese and cantankerous. This character was made famous by Hattie McDaniel. The mammy is headstrong and “blessed” with religion.

Finally, the Black buck—he was considered to be violent, barbaric with a tendency to raise havoc. His violence was linked to him being sexually repressed. In the film *Birth of a Nation*, these characters remained nameless, subhuman, and feral, with a docile hint to them. At times, these characters are seen as sex symbols by Whites. With their hulking physique, wide noses, full lips, and the gift of being well-endowed, this figure has been and still is objectified.

The objectification of African Americans in film has occurred for a long time. The release of David Wark Griffith’s epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1915 was the first film to demonstrate Hollywood cinema’s potential scope. Films could be lavish productions and garner blockbuster ticket sales and a large amount of media attention and publicity despite the underlying message in the film. “As a result the film has cemented a place within film history. The only thing that has changed over the years is the degree to which racism and representation are occluded from discussions of the film” (Yzerbyt and Rocher 47).

This blockbuster film that sold out shows weeks in advance portrayed African Americans as uncivilized and animalistic. Throughout this film, slavery seems to be the reference point to indicate that the African American’s existence begins and ends with

slavery. “Despite the lack of action, the actions of White characters are conducted with confidence and certitude: they know what they are doing and why they are there. The Africans, on the other hand, are bewildered and passive” (Rocchio 126).

People of color believe that films such as these set the trend for misrepresenting minorities in film. The same holds true today. Instead of films such as *Birth*, the industry has produced new ones, such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), and *Menace II Society* (1993). In these films African Americans are not playing slave roles as they were before; however, the roles portrayed involve some form of captivity that appears to keep the characters stagnated. Whether it's due to their lack of education, which indicates a lack of intellectual savvy, or their lack of finance, which is indicative of a low position on the socioeconomic scale, the characters African Americans are portraying do not seem quite up to par with their counterparts, thus distorting the public's perception of them.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the early decades of American film, African Americans portrayed low-class roles such as maids, slaves, and buffoons. Today, the cycle continues, with African Americans playing modern versions of these roles, such as gangsters and drug dealers. The images that African Americans are portraying are being pushed into the psyches of the general public and, in turn, the general public perceives African Americans in a negative light. “The application of stereotypes to film has usually involved a more emotionally loaded, rather than neutral, aspect. As is well-known, the technique involves presenting sharply drawn characters whose features exaggerate commonly held views of the particular group which the characters are supposed to represent” (Chupa 14).

African Americans in Film in the Beginning

“Well-worn stereotypes have been applied to Blacks in film at least as frequently if not more so as they have been applied to other groups” (Turner 26). The African American image in film has pointed to several stereotypical images. These include the mammy, a slave figure who is dependable and loving in a childlike way. Another is the “clown,” whose antics lead to ambivalence in the audience because it is not usually clear whether the audience is meant to be laughing with or at this character.

In film, the characterization of African Americans has definitely changed. They are starring, producing, writing, and directing their own films and sitcoms. Still, despite this progress, it is unclear if films are giving the public accurate portrayals of African

Americans. It seems as if African Americans have shed the roles of maids and buffoons and, instead, have picked up roles such as thugs and athletes. So has progress really been made? “It has, but things are not quite there yet. African Americans are thought to be athletically inclined so they are portrayed this way. As opposed to seeing an African American portray the scientist, he instead will play the high-school football player who barely has a “C” grade average” (Berndsen et al. 93). “Since African-Americans comprise a large part of the sports that one sees on television, this is how they are portrayed and in turn this is how they are perceived” (Pred 24).

Many scholars consider *Birth* a watershed film in modern-day cinema. This work, directed by David Wark Griffith, set racism in film in motion by persuading audiences to believe that the meanings the film constructed about the African American race were true. Even though by 1915 motion picture had been around for over 20 years, it was this film that cemented a special place in film history.

The film’s opening is thus for the manner in which it establishes the primacy of race within the signifying operations of the film. At least part of that primacy stems from the manner in which the narrative begins, not the introduction of the main characters, or the specific setting, but rather with an historical thesis: the argument that the African American being brought to America is determinative of the events that unfold through the narrative trajectory. (Rocchio 32)

Furthermore, the film presents itself as historical truth. The intertitles used in this film are significant for the manner in which they leave no doubt that Africans are the core

of a particular problem. Ironically, in the film, it is not quite certain who is to blame for that, but it is clear that the African being is definitely the root of the problem. “The images that follow the inter-titles function to imply that Africans themselves are to blame for their own forced abduction, bondage and slavery” (Rocchio 32).

In this film, several subliminal tactics are used to persuade audiences. One technique is called framing. One shot in particular is framed by an iris matte, and characters are strategically arranged throughout the frame, while action is minimal. The purpose of particular shots is to bring focus to the middle portion of the frame. One example is a shot that focuses on a line of African slaves bare to the waist and flanked on each side by slave traders, some holding whips.

The other element used to establish Africans as debased individuals is costume: “The Whites in the shot are fully dressed in the clothing of colonial times, the clothes of civilization: The parson and soldier have topcoats and shirts with ruffles, they wear shoes and boots and have pressed hats” (Rocchio 32). At the very least, even the barefoot slave trader wears a vest rather than appearing topless like the Africans, who happen to be bare to the waist.

Figure movement and expression are elements that are also used to establish “difference.” As stated earlier, in this film there is a lack of action. However, “the actions of the White characters are conducted with confidence and certitude: they know what they are doing and why they are there. The Africans, on the other hand, are bewildered and passive” (Rocchio 126).

“All these elements, in relationship to the inter-title, serve to suggest that Blacks themselves are to be blamed for slavery. As in the inter-title states, Blacks were brought to America, not forcibly abducted. The language suggests a willingness to the action—similar to bringing a date to a prom” (Rocchio 33). This is a key image in the film for a number of reasons. First, it doesn’t show slaves being abducted, as they were historically. Rather, it shows the slaves waiting around in line passively, as if they are waiting to get in.

Further, the bewilderment and passivity function to suggest that this “bringing” would not have happened if Blacks were not so inferior as to put themselves in the position of being slaves to begin with” (Rocchio 35). Although the film is three hours long and engages several textual strategies to enhance its drama, *The Birth of a Nation* is organized around constructing a very basic meaning that it presents as truth: that Blacks are uncivilized. (Rocchio 50)

African Americans as Stereotypes in Film

Nearly a century later, the same film tactics that were used in *Birth* are still being used today. *Mississippi Burning* (1988) starts by fading up from black onto the image of a wall holding two water fountains. As the image becomes clearer, the voice of a woman sings a Negro spiritual: “The image is distinct for several reasons, the first of which is its rejection of stylistic conventions” (Rocchio 96). Second, Hollywood cinema often employs specific stylistic conventions of lighting (a la *Birth*), scenic arrangement, and focal properties to provide the illusion—or at the very least the impression—of depth, a

quality the opening image in *Mississippi Burning* lacks. “The flatness of the shot gives added compositional impact to the elements within the frame, particularly the water pipes that enter at the top of the frame and bifurcates the frame vertically into two halves” (Rocchio 96). Both halves contain a water fountain, which is joined to the pipes through a junction. Each fountain has a sign over it. The one on the right reads, “Colored,” whereas the one on the left reads, “White.” “The two fountains are distinct from each other in that the one on the right is ceramic and mounted on the wall while the one on the left is made of metal and is free-standing” (Rocchio 96). The two fountains are so opposite one another, in fact, that it is a misnomer to call the one on the left a water fountain; “it’s actually a water cooler, constructed of metal because it contains a refrigeration unit. The fountain on the right designated ‘Colored,’ by contrast merely draws the water from the water-pipe” (Rocchio 96).

As this shot continues on the screen, a White man enters from the left frame, takes a drink from the water cooler, and exits. Shortly afterward, an African American boy enters from the right frame, takes a sip from the water fountain, and exits. “The similarity between the two actions, combined with the manner in which the shots’ composition draws attention to the water pipe that feeds both water units, underscores the irony of what is being represented” (Rocchio 96). It is the exact same water; however, “the social order—specifically, the laws of segregation—requires that it be separated for each race, thereby projecting the image of African-American inferiority” (Pred 77).

African Americans and stereotypes go hand-in-hand. In addition to being seen as the athlete, thug, or servant, African American characters face other unfair stereotypes.

“For instance in the film ‘The Gods Must Be Crazy,’ an African is portrayed as a Neanderthal. He is viewed this way because he has no clothing, but a sheet-like wrap to cover his genitals. He also does not speak English and he lives ‘off the land,’ meaning he hunts for his food and gets his liquids from fruits and berries” (Turner 64).

The entire movie is conducted with voice-over narration, as if to imply that Africans cannot speak for themselves. To make matters worse, “Africans” in this film are referred to as “the little people.” “The film establishes this right away by stating the ‘Bushmen’ are tiny, dainty, small and have no crime or punishment. What makes the Bushmen different from all the other races is that they have no sense of ownership at all. Where they live there is nothing to own” (Pred 63). These images imply—and place the idea into the public’s mind—that these people are uncivilized, barbaric, and lesser than the rest of civilization.

In recent years, the presence of African Americans in film has become more noticeable. These characters occur in a wide variety of settings, ranging from dope pushing pimps in “Superfly” (1972) to befuddled bobsledders in “Cool Runnings” (1993). While the presence of African Americans in film is not new, the frequency and locations in which they occur and the prominence they are accorded is. (Pred 76)

In the ’70s there were the *Super Fly* movies, which portrayed Ron O’Neal as a pimp and drug pusher. He wears silk suits, nice shoes, big hats, and a feminine hairstyle called a perm. He is a womanizer, pushes drugs, and is always in trouble with the law. He is a Black man who refuses to work, has an attitude, and does not adhere to the law.

African Americans know that *Super Fly* was just a character. However, the public perceives that African Americans are actually like this. “Traditionally, stereotypes have been viewed as important because, as a key component of prejudice, they have been seen as exacerbating conflict between groups by distorting how they see each other” (Boyd 55).

Super Fly was meant to represent a portion of African Americans, particularly the ones who stood on the street corners throughout the various ghettos in America and were looking for an easy way out. Their easy way out was womanizing or dope pushing. It is believed that the lowest form of African American culture was taken and projected on the silver screen for all to see. The same is true today. Instead of *Super Fly* (1972), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Dead Presidents* (1995), *Juice* (1992), *Animal*, and *Hustle and Flow* (2005) are all films that cast African Americans in “hood” roles and show them in a negative light.

In holding stereotypes, individuals harbor particular images of the world, which cause them to selectively seek images that bolster these images. Stereotypes, therefore, tend to be self-reinforcing, emotionally charged, and difficult to dislodge.

African Americans as Stereotypes

The common threads linking past and present portrayals have been stereotypes, as “African-Americans, West Indians have been portrayed as coons, mammies, tortured mulattoes, and so forth; but, perhaps even more than has been the case for African-Americans” (Turner 101). African Americans have been struggling to break the stereotypes they have been bound to. Today African Americans are still playing those

same roles that got them nowhere in terms of progress. The primary difference is that they are making more money to do “those roles.” “Next to theoretical schema, coined conceptual entrapment by media imagery, was introduced to illustrate how the public conceptualizes, and consequently believes the stereotypes depicted by the media of African American males as criminals” (Boyd 41). According to Boyd,

African American stereotypes are best seen as imperfect guides to action in situations in which an individual possess limited information. Because of this, stereotypes—and, therefore, discrimination—are most likely to thrive in large-scale, heterogeneous, urban situations because these situations increase the likelihood that relationships between strangers and, therefore, transient. (34)

Based upon the information gathered for this literature review on African American stereotypes, I hypothesize that the portrayal of African Americans in film does distort the general public’s perception of them.

The images seen in film directly create race-relations conflict in society, particularly for relationships pertaining to African Americans, and how they are perceived. Whatever is seen in film and how it is perceived is there by design; that is, the images are intentional. It is intentional to be seen a “certain” way. It is intentional to make the viewer “feel” a certain way. And, ultimately, it is intentional to coerce the viewer into “thinking” a certain way. This cinematic effect is primarily accomplished via violence.

The racial coding of crime is also evident in widespread popular media coverage associating black rap music with gang violence, drugs and urban terror. Motion pictures depicting “realistic” portrayals of black ghetto life add fuel to the fire by becoming a register in the popular mind for legitimating race and violence as mutually informing categories. (Giroux 17)

The consequences of such racist stereotyping produce more than prejudice and fear in the White collective sensibility. Racist representations of violence also feed the increasing public outcry for tougher crime bills designed to build more prisons and legislate get-tough policies with minorities of color and class.

Violence in film often serves a mechanism that aids the distortion of African Americans. Films contain several types of violence. The first type is called ritualistic violence; it is ritualistic in the sense that violence is at the center of the genres that produce it—horror, action-adventure, Hollywood drama—utterly banal, predictable, and often deeply masculine. At its very best, ritualistic violence is pure spectacle in form and superficial in content. “Audiences connect with such depictions viscerally, yet it is not edifying in the best pedagogical sense, offering few insights into the complex range of human behavior and struggles” (Giroux 4). This form of violence is campy, shallow, and masturbatory. It does not attempt to recast ordinary events or critically shift sensibilities. However, it serves as spectacle, shock, and contrivance and, by all accounts, is formulaic. Films that fall into this category are the Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis films such as *Die Hard 2* (1990) and *Terminator 2* (1991). Although these two films aim to

stimulate the “lower-self,” both were blockbusters. Other examples can be found in films such as *Speed* (1994), *Blown Away* (1994), and *The Fugitive* (1994). These films contain an echoing attempt to maximize the pleasure of violence for the sake of violence. This brand of violence has no redeeming or morale factor.

“Representations of ritualistic violence derive their force through countless repetitions of graphic cruelty serving to numb the senses with an endless stream of infantilized, histrionic flair” (Giroux 11). For example, the hero in *Robocop II* massacres 81 people, and Bruce Willis brandishes a body count of 264 people in *Die Hard*

2. Excessive violence, as in the films mentioned above, valorize to the degree that it provides the genre with new psychological and visual twists, yet in return, it asks nothing of the audience but the mere methodical, programmed response. “Hollywood blockbuster films offer viewers voyeuristic identification rather than providing an opportunity for the audience to think through and scrutinize the mechanisms and implications of violence” (Giroux 11).

The second form of cinematic violence is hyper-real violence. This cinematic portrayal of violence is fairly young in comparison to its counterparts, making itself evident in various contemporary films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). *Reservoir Dogs* chronicles the gang violence and torture of a police officer after an attempted jewelry heist goes wrong. *Natural Born Killers* tells the story of Mickey and Malory, two young serial killers who become media sensations, and *Pulp Fiction*—the most recent of the prior mentioned films—depicts a new violence that pays homage to pulp crime dramas of the 1930s in the United States.

The newest form of violence that has found its way to the silver screen is ultraviolence. This particular brand of violence is ever present, especially with African American characters. Ultraviolence is “marked by technological overstimulation, gritty dialogue, dramatic storytelling, parody, and an appeal to gutsy naturalism” (Giroux 31). Whereas ritualistic violence lacks critical social engagement and hyperviolence tends to exploit the seamy side of controversial issues, ultraviolence appeals to the primal affectations and has a generational quality to it that captures the bona fide violence that youth encounter in the streets and neighborhoods of an increasingly racially divided America. Forms of ultraviolence can be viewed in movies such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Menace II Society* (1993).

The third form of violence is symbolic. Symbolic violence has a lengthy cinematic tradition and can be recognized in recent films such as Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997), Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1992), and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Symbolic violence, unlike hyper- and ritualistic violence, attempts to connect the visceral and reflective. It couples the mobilization of emotion and the haunting images of the unwelcome with an attempt to “give meaning and import to our mortal twitchings. . . . [I]t shakes everything up, reforming the fictive environment around itself” (Giroux 20). Symbolic violence does not become an end in itself. It serves to reference a broader logic and set of insights (Giroux 20). Instead of providing the viewer with stylistic gore, instant pleasure, and escape, symbolic violence probes complex issues that shape human agency, questions the limits of rationality, and explores the existential issues that bond us together as human beings and a broader social world.

Of the varieties of violence, symbolic violence stands to bring about a redeeming factor to something, someone, or a cause in and of itself.

Violence viewed from a symbolic perspective stands to serve a purpose, a higher purpose that transcends the run-of-the-mill, shoot-'em-up films that are on display in theaters across this country. Symbolic violence refuses the mechanism of fast-paced, rhythmic frames or a dizzying pattern of repetitious images. "Instead, it attempts to 'find ways of scrutinizing the mechanisms and implications of violence through different processes of framing, juxtaposing, repeating and quoting images' within a context that invites critical and meaningful commentary" (Giroux 23).

For example, in the movie *The Walking Dead* (1995), Preston A. Whitmore II uses "violence as a vehicle for rewriting the Hollywood war movie and in doing so attempts to demystify national chauvinism as a legitimation for waging war in Vietnam" (Giroux 23). Violence utilized in movies is not the issue; rather, it is the purpose of violence that draws concern and criticism. As mentioned above, hyper- and ritualistic violence are banal. *The Walking Dead* also foregrounds violence as an explosive indicator of class and racial tensions that give rise to contradictory loyalties, acts of aggression, and the many excruciating psychological experiences that many troops had to endure in the jungles. In this case, violence serves a determining role that connects morality to human agency. In a variety of ways, violence can serve a meaningful purpose that actually seeks to elevate humanity. However, hyper- and ritualistic violence serve as the antithesis of symbolic violence as it aims to please the "lower self," which is committed to sex, blood and guts, greed, gore, and so forth.

In films about violent White youth, such as *Laws of Gravity* (1992), *Kalifornia* (1993), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), the language of hopelessness and desperation cancels out any investigation into how agency is constructed as opposed to simply guaranteeing it in the larger political and social sense. But in Black youth films such as *Sugar Hill* (1993), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993), “there is a haunting sense that blacks are responsible for reducing their sense of individual and social agency to the degree that they will live out lives of little hope amidst a culture of nihilism and deprivation” (Giroux 25).

“Due to manner in which violence is presented and framed, in the end, Black powerlessness becomes synonymous with criminality” (Giroux 25). By totalizing the limiting constraints that Blacks have to face in everyday life, these films avoid altogether how agency functions as a historical and social construction, pointing in turn to larger determinants outside of the language of racism, biology, psychology, and cynicism. “Dominant representations of black and white youth violence feed right wing conservative values of the Newt Gingrich variety but offer no insights into the culture and densely populated landscape of violence at the heart of white, dominant society” (Giroux 26).

Combining these forms of violence in films can and has already had a staggering effect on people of color, particularly African Americans. These tools have been perfected in such a way that they play on the subconscious mind at such an abyssal level that, when people view films, they believe what they are seeing is true.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study poses the question: is there a correlation between the film industry's portrayal of African Americans and the conflict they experience in society as a direct result of this portrayal? To investigate this question, several strategies were developed to determine the perceptions that respondents had toward a film's influence on the general public, based on how African Americans are portrayed in film. The strategies used for this particular test were formulated around independent, dependent, and intervening variables. I attempt to show a relationship between the independent variable (the portrayal of African Americans in film) and the dependent variable (how African Americans are viewed by the general public). The intervening variables that shape the dependent variable are age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, age, and the number of movies viewed with African American characters in them.

Evolution of the Questionnaire

This survey was administered to a purposive sample of a 110 randomly selected individuals to reveal their responses about the portrayal of African Americans in film. The sample was purposive because all the respondents were asked if they viewed films prior to being given a survey. The survey contained questions involving both the independent and dependent variables. The survey consisted of thirteen questions: nine general questions and four Likert-Scale statements. Four demographic questions were also included; these questions were the intervening variables that had an effect on the

answers the respondents gave. They also indicate how the general public felt about African Americans' portrayal in film.

The Likert-Scale questions are designed to elicit responses about the respondents' perceptions about the influence of film and the effect it has on the portrayal of African Americans in film. Below, I itemize the Likert-Scale statements found in the research instrument, coupled with a statement of intent as to why the questions were asked.

Statement 6 reads, "In general, I believe film has the power to influence people's perceptions." This item was intended to determine whether the respondents believed that film has an influence on people in general. The responses to this question indicated participants' views regarding films' influence over people.

Statement 7 was, "When at the movies, I see African Americans portraying a stereotypical character." This item attempted to establish with the respondents the regularity of African Americans portraying stereotypical roles.

Statement 8 was, "In general, I learn something about people from watching film." This item aimed to examine whether respondents believed they learned something about people in general from watching film.

Statement 9 was, "A lot of what I see in movies in regards to minorities is fact-based material." This item was presented to the respondents to determine if they felt that the movies they had seen were fact based. Agreement indicated that the respondent believed that the movies' portrayal of people was also fact based.

Statement 10 was, "As a moviegoer, some things I saw in the film influenced my opinion toward African Americans." This item was intended to have the respondents to

relate what they saw in the movies to their opinion toward African Americans. This statement bridged the gap between the respondents seeing a film and having an opinion toward African Americans.

Statement 11 was, “In general, film helped mold my view of how African American people are.” This statement derives from item 10. It was presented to the respondents to determine whether their view had been molded by the films they watched. Agreement was indicative of films’ influence over people.

Statement 12 was, “I believe I learn something about African Americans from the different films I watch.” This item examined whether respondents thought that they learned something about African Americans from the films they had seen.

Statement 13 was, “Overall, I feel that African Americans are not positively represented in film.” This statement, which summarizes items 1 through 12, was designed to encourage the respondents to think about their previous answers.

The statements that comprise this research instrument were prepared to obtain pertinent information from a random research sample of 110 respondents to measure whether the study participants believed that the portrayal of African Americans in film affected how this social group is viewed by the general public.

Questionnaire Distribution

This study’s analysis required 104 surveys. It took four weeks to obtain 120 completed surveys. Extra surveys were collected in case some surveys were not properly filled out. The survey was self-administered in locations throughout Los Angeles,

including California State University, Dominguez Hills. The locations in Los Angeles included the Magic Johnson and Bridge Theatres.

These two locations helped target a more mature audience catching matinee shows. On-campus sites included vendors' walkways and spots near the theatre building. The on-campus sites targeted a younger and more diverse population. These two locations blended the young and the mature audience, hopefully providing some interesting feedback for the survey.

The primary difficulty was that some of the respondents did not want to follow the survey instructions thoroughly. Also, some of the mature respondents did not like being asked certain questions and were reluctant to answer them; in the end, with some persuasion, they did.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected through the 110 surveys. The results in Table 1 reveal how respondents felt about African Americans being represented in film, by gender of survey participant.

Table 1

Responses to the Item “Overall I Feel African Americans Are Not Positively Represented in Film,” by Gender

Category	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
Male	22 (37%)	14 (23%)	9 (15%)	9 (15%)	6 (10%)	60 (55%)
Female	10 (20%)	20 (40%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	10 (20%)	50 (45%)
Totals	32 (29%)	34 (31%)	14 (13%)	14 (13%)	16 (14%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This statement measured how male and female respondents alike felt about the representation of African Americans in film. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

The results revealed that 60 percent of the male respondents agreed with the statement, “Overall I feel African Americans are not positively represented in film”; 25 percent of the men disagreed, and 15 percent were neutral. Females responded similarly, with 60 percent were in agreement; 30 percent in disagreement, and 10 percent feeling neutral. Although the overall percentages indicated that 60 percent agreed that African

Americans are not positively represented in film, it is interesting that the men and women gave such similar responses to this statement. In total, 60 percent strongly agreed or agreed; 27 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 13 percent were neutral.

Table 2 strongly supports this study's hypothesis by establishing a pattern between moviegoers and the perceptions they had of African Americans in film.

Table 2

Responses to the Item "A Lot of What I See in Movies, in Regards to Minorities, Is Fact-Based Material,"
by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
Hispanic	9 (34%)	6 (23%)	3 (12%)	5 (19%)	3 (12%)	26 (24%)
African American	16 (36%)	17 (39%)	0 (0%)	6 (14%)	5 (11%)	44 (40%)
Caucasian	7 (27%)	12 (46%)	0 (0%)	5 (19%)	2 (8%)	26 (24%)
Asian	0 (0%)	9 (65%)	0 (0%)	3 (21%)	2 (14%)	14 (13%)
Totals	32 (29%)	44 (40%)	3 (3%)	19 (17%)	12 (11%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This statement helped determine whether or not the respondents believe what they see in film is fact based or fiction. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Created by the author of this thesis.

Table 2 reports the effect movies have on minorities. The Hispanic participants responded to the statement as follows: 57 percent agreed, 31 percent disagreed, and 12 percent were neutral. The African American participants responded as follows: 75

percent agreed, and 25 percent disagreed. The Caucasian participants responded as follows: 73 percent agreed, and 27 percent disagreed. The Asian participants responded as follows: 65 percent agreed, and 35 percent disagreed. Interestingly enough, none of the African American, Asian, and Caucasian respondents were neutral on this point. They either agreed or disagreed, with very little to no room for middle ground. Among all participants, 69 percent of those surveyed were in agreement, compared to 28 percent in disagreement, leaving just 3 percent neutral. In relation to the hypothesis, these findings reveal that people believe what they see in the movies, which creates distorted perceptions of African Americans.

Table 3 reports how respondents of different ethnicities felt about their opinion being influenced by film. The prompt was “As a moviegoer, some things I saw in film influenced my opinion toward African Americans.” Sixty-five percent of the Hispanic respondents strongly agreed or agreed, and 35 percent remained neutral. Oddly, none were in disagreement. The majority of African American participants agreed with the statement: 64 percent strongly agreed or agreed, 11 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 25 percent remained neutral.

Of the Caucasians respondents, 81 percent strongly agreed or agreed; 8 percent disagreed, and 11 percent remained neutral. All of the Asian participants either strongly agreed or agreed, with no disagreement or neutral responses. Overall, 71 percent of the total respondents strongly agreed or agreed; 6 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 23 percent were neutral. These results strongly support the hypothesis, providing further evidence that the respondents formulated opinions about African Americans based

on the films they had seen. In addition, a staggering 71 percent of participants agreed with this statement, in contrast to a meek 6 percent who disagreed.

Table 3

Responses to the Item “As a Moviegoer, Some Things I Saw in Film Influenced My Opinion toward African Americans,” by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
Hispanic	10 (38%)	7 (27%)	9 (35%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	26 (24%)
African American	6 (14%)	22 (50%)	11 (25%)	4 (9%)	1 (2%)	44 (40%)
Caucasian	9 (35%)	12 (46%)	3 (11%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	26 (24%)
Asian	5 (36%)	9 (64%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (12%)
Totals	30 (26%)	50 (45%)	23 (23%)	6 (5%)	1 (1%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This statement bridges the gap between the respondents seeing a film and actually having an opinion toward the African Americans. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Created by the author of this thesis.

Table 4 reports that 58 percent of the respondents ages 18 to 24 strongly agreed or agreed that, in general, film has the power to influence people’s perceptions. Twenty percent of the respondents of the same age strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement, and 22 percent remained neutral. Among respondents ages 25 to 34, 61 percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, whereas 18 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 21 percent remained neutral. Among participants aged 35 or above, 58

percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 23 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 19 percent remained neutral.

Table 4

Responses to the Item “In General, I Believe Film Has the Power to Influence People’s Perception,” by

Age						
Age	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
18–24	14 (31%)	12 (27%)	10 (22%)	5 (11%)	4 (9%)	45 (41%)
25–34	13 (38%)	8 (23%)	7 (21%)	5 (15%)	1 (3%)	34 (31%)
35+	14 (45%)	4 (13%)	6 (19%)	4 (13%)	3 (10%)	31 (28%)
Total	41 (37%)	24 (22%)	23 (21%)	14 (13%)	8 (7%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This table measures how the respondents feel about the statement according to age. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Created by the author of this thesis.

Overall 59 percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this item, whereas 20 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 21 percent remained neutral. Table 4 illustrates that the majority (60 percent) of respondents across all age ranges agreed that film does have the power to influence people. These results unequivocally support the hypothesis that film influences people’s perceptions, regardless of age. Old and young alike are all susceptible to the images they see in film, whether they are distorted or not.

Table 5 shows that most of the participants who were high school graduates agreed with the statement “When at the movies, I see African Americans portraying a stereotypical character”: 76 percent strongly agreed or agreed, 12 percent strongly disagreed, and 12 percent remained neutral. Of the respondents who had some college education, 56 percent were in agreement, 27 percent were in disagreement, and 17 percent were neutral. The college graduates responded as follows: 62 percent were in agreement, 19 percent were in disagreement, and 19 percent were neutral. The college graduates responded as follows: 49 percent agreed, 29 percent disagreed, and 22 percent were neutral. The college graduates had the highest disagreement rate of all the educational levels.

Table 5

Responses to the Item “When at the Movies, I See African Americans Portraying Stereotypical Characters,” by Education.

Education	SA	A	N	D	SD	Totals
High school diploma	6 (35%)	7 (41%)	2 (12%)	0 (0%)	2 (12%)	17 (15%)
Some college	13 (43%)	4 (13%)	5 (17%)	3 (10%)	5 (17%)	30 (27%)
College graduate	7 (27%)	9 (35%)	5 (19%)	5 (19%)	0 (0%)	26 (24%)
Post-college graduate	11 (30%)	7 (19%)	8 (22%)	6 (16%)	5 (13%)	37 (34%)
Total	37 (34%)	27 (24%)	20 (18%)	14 (13%)	12 (11%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This statement is an attempt to establish with respondents from various educational levels the regularity of African Americans portraying stereotypical characters. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Created by the author of this thesis.

Across all levels of educational attainment examined in this study, 58 percent of participants agreed with the statement, 24 percent disagreed, and 18 percent were neutral. The outcome aligned with the hypothesis, revealing that, collectively, nearly 61% of the participants were in agreement with the statement. This finding is interesting because it indicates that the respondents, despite their educational background and age, are consciously aware of the images they see in film.

Table 6 reports that 56 percent of the respondents within the age range of 18 to 24 strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “In general, film helps mold my view of how African American people are.” Twenty-two percent strongly disagreed, and 22 percent were neutral on this item. Among participants aged 25 to 34, 53 percent strongly agreed or agreed, and 47 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed. For the respondents 35 and older, 48 percent strongly agreed or agreed, 29 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 23 percent were neutral.

In total, 53 percent of the respondents were in agreement, 32 percent were in disagreement, and 15 percent remained neutral. This finding supports the study’s hypothesis, indicating that film has the power to—and ultimately does—distort people’s perceptions of one another.

Table 6

Response to the Item “In General, Film Helps Mold My View of How African American People Are,” by

Age						
Age	SA	A	N	D	SD	Totals
18–24	13 (29%)	12 (27%)	10 (22%)	0 (0%)	10 (22%)	45 (41%)
25–34	8 (24%)	10 (29%)	0 (0%)	9 (26%)	7 (21%)	34 (31%)
35+	4 (13%)	11 (35%)	7 (23%)	3 (10%)	6 (19%)	31 (28%)
Total	25 (23%)	33 (30%)	17 (15%)	12 (11%)	23 (21%)	<i>N</i> = 110

Note: This statement will attempt see to what degree does it influence the respondents. It’s generally

understood that film does have an effect on people. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Created by the author of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The hypothesis of this research study was, the portrayal of African Americans in film leads to distorted perceptions by the general public. The data in Chapter 4 confirmed this hypothesis. In some cases, the overall results were overwhelming and downright staggering. As Table 3 clearly indicates, 71 percent of all respondents agreed that some things they see in film influence their opinion toward African Americans.

Interestingly, despite the differences of opinion that often occur across generations, the results of younger respondents largely coincided with those of the older respondents. As Table 4 reveals, the responses were very similar across age groups, with a 58 percent overall agreement rate. For the most part, respondents ranging from 18 years of age to 66 years of age mutually agreed with the statement, “In general, I believe film has the power to influence people’s perception.”

Contrary to the common popular-cultural statement that women are from Venus and men are from Mars, the responses in this study did not vary much by gender. Not only was the overall agreement response identical at 60 percent, but their disagreement responses were also similar, with the females edging out the males 14 to 13 percent. The item analyzed in Table 1 helped get participants thinking about film images and race by establishing a pattern between moviegoers and the perceptions they have of African Americans in film.

A book entitled *Am I Black Enough for You?* was referenced in Chapter 2. The author, Todd Boyd, claims that the public itself is to blame for these false, negative images of minorities because it is the people who demand these very same images by purchasing tickets for the films that portray them. Boyd continues,

[T]here are two halves to the human make-up. The two halves are considered to be upper and lower. The lower half consists of elements like greed, lust, mood, etc. Basically, the lower half doesn't stimulate the brain. The upper half, on the contrary, is everything the lower half isn't. The upper half consists of elements that are creative, thought provoking/stimulating, morally inclined, etc. (119)

Boyd goes on to say that images in the media, let alone film, primarily cater to the lower half. The images that are portrayed do not challenge people mentally or morally, and society at large tends to be perfectly alright with this. People would much rather turn out in the millions to see something that is entertaining as opposed to something that is educational or morally sound. For example, the blockbuster movie *Independence Day* was considered a mega success, raking in millions of dollars, whereas its counterpart, *The Arrival*, flopped at the box office.

Both movies had the same storyline, but *The Arrival* was more fundamentally sound in terms of its plot and data gathering. The movie was well written and taught a lesson about earth being invaded by extraterrestrials, whereas *Independence Day* was written in a matter of months and followed a typical shoot-'em-up theme; however, it garnered more revenue than *The Arrival's* filmmakers could ever imagine.

These two movies are an example of how a film with nonstop action, poor storyline, and a great advertisement campaign can outdo a film that is well written, fundamentally sound, and stimulates the right and left hemispheres of the brain. In short, one movie caters to the lower half, and the other to the upper half.

The tables found in Chapter 4 reflect the contention that, regardless of ethnicity, educational level, age, or gender, film does misrepresent minorities as a whole, especially African Americans.

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