**Analysis**

Post-Racial Societies

Suggestions of a “post-racial” society are often made in films with a multi-racial cast that frequently retell true stories of triumph. But the feel-good nature of these films can give false hope—especially since they so commonly feature stereotypical depictions of African-Americans. A post-racial society suggests that race is no longer a category of separation—not so much that it no longer exists, but that it no longer permeates our society and governs human interaction and relationships (Ikuenobe 2013). It is believed that the United States is a post-racial society since the overtly racist actions and discriminatory practices that once plagued our country no longer occur on a mass scale. In addition, recent media rhetoric would lead one to believe that race no longer mattered when Barack Obama was elected as the country’s first president of African-American descent. Yet, this large accomplishment did not mark the end of racism in America.

In fact, Obama’s racial background was strategically portrayed in the media in order to pull support from white voters. As Staples (2010) addressed, Obama’s white heritage was emphasized while his black relatives received little media attention, although he was born to a white mother and Kenyan father. White supporters were placed behind him in the camera and his campaign time in racist bible-belt states was limited and hardly advertised. Since he has taken office, he has been met with keen, subtle disrespect from congress, the media, and other politicians. His race has never worked for his advantage, with the exception of perhaps the first election.

In film and television, images of African-Americans and other people of color have improved from once strictly racist images. With shows like *Empire, Black-ish,* and *Being Mary Jane,* we now have popular images of successful black people set around the country, who never seem to forget their blackness. Yet with mass incarceration of black males, poor access to healthcare and healthy food in black impoverished neighborhoods, high unemployment rates, and the recent unjustified shootings of unarmed black people across the country, social and economic mobility is still very difficult for the black American. Despite these institutions, in 21st century American films, a post-racial society is often eluded to through images of characters collaborating to triumph despite their racial and cultural differences. While these films are well-intended, the images are coincidentally inconsistent with reality and there are also often harmful archetypes incorporated that silence characters of color and confine them into limited depictions. Examples can be found in films dating back to the 1960s after the Civil Rights Movement, and range in their portrayal of whites and blacks from overtly stereotypical to neatly problematic.

White Savior Archetypes

The white savior or white messiah complex casts white people as the heroes and heroines in civil-rights and race related films, which deprives people of color of the opportunity to empower themselves both in film and reality. According to Madison (1999) as cited by Moore and Pierce (2007), the white savior complex is a result of the demand for black equality during the mid-20th century. As black Americans redefined themselves in the public eye as human beings deserving of natural rights, whites felt a need to do the same in order to maintain the notion that they are inherently kind and good. Thus, “the emergence of ‘anti-racist, white hero films’ in the late 1980s and 1990s reaffirmed the fiction of a good white self by creating a new collective memory in which whites become the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, the leaders in the historic fight for racial justice” (Moore and Pierce 2007). Yet, the white savior complex is inherently self-centered, and stems not from a desire to help the oppressed, but a desire to reaffirm one’s self-righteousness.

The character Erin Gruwell from the 2007 film *Freedom Writers* (dir. Richard LaGravenese) offers an example of a white savior since she fails to educate her students about the institutions in place against them and teaches from a point of white privilege to invoke empathy. Gruwell’s students are almost all people of color living in the slums of East LA in the early 90s. Each student reports first-hand experience with gang activity, gun violence, and police brutality. But instead of teaching her students how these systems came about so the students can truly overcome them, Gruwell asks her class to make a commitment to change, suggesting that the institutional circumstances holding these students back is somehow their own fault. disruption

White savior characters when used in film never truly realize and acknowledge their white privilege. Using *The Diary of Anne Frank* and trip to the Museum of Tolerance, Gruwell educates her students about oppression through a lens of white privilege. Instead of using literary or autobiographical examples from the Native American Holocaust, African slave trade, Chinese exclusion, and other examples of racial oppression, Gruwell uses the oppression of white European Jews, a group that none of her students can relate to (Yosso and Garcia 2010). Relating her students’ struggles to those of white victims shows that Gruwell never challenges herself to admit the privilege she has been given nor truly remove herself from her teaching for the benefit of the students. Gruwell is undoubtedly a prime example of the tired white savior complex, in that she fails to let the students take charge of their history and teaches from a point of white privilege that her students cannot truly relate to.

Black Stereotypes

Since the culmination of film in the late 20th century, the portrayal of black Americans has only recently branched outside of demeaning stereotypes as a result of a higher population of black people in the film and television industry. According to Ward (2015), a largely reproduced stereotype of African-Americans characterized them as mentally inferior, lazy, and content with enslaved life, coined the ‘Sambo.’ Black men also were portrayed as hypersexual, dangerous, and most likely to take advantage of white women—‘bucks’—an image that stems from the fear of interracial marriage. Black women were frequently depicted through the “mammy” character—in which she dutifully served her white masters by willingly caring for their white children (Ward 2015). These warped stereotypes based in overt racism and slavery soon evolved with the abolishment of slavery and the steadily increasing involvement of black Americans into everyday society.

Commonly seen in today’s media images, the welfare queen and the hypersexualized black man remain some of the most damaging. The welfare queen developed with the increase in poverty and single mothers in black communities, during which many black families relied on government aid. This real, institutional problem somehow was manipulated into this archetype of the single black mother stuck in an “impoverished mindset” who depends on solely a welfare check and is purposefully unemployed (Ward 2015). The hypersexual black male has evolved from the buck, which relates to the slave master belief that black people are not fully human. Paired with the stigma around black male genitalia, this stereotype is one of the most pervasive in our society.

These stereotypes have penetrated society to the extent where they are replicated even in progressive films created by black people. Although it is unapologetically representative of some of the realities of the black ghetto, *Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire* (dir. Lee Daniels 2009) features modern stereotypes as the basis of their characters. As cited by Baum (2010), the characters are portrayed as victims of circumstance and poor choices, but not of “racism and its legacy.” Claireece “Precious” Jones is an obese, illiterate 16-year old living in late 80s Harlem and is pregnant with her second child. Precious alone fits many stereotypes of black people, and her family members neatly fit into broader character types that although truthful, also come across as harmful and misrepresentative. Her mother, Mary (played by Mo’NiQue) is mentally and physically abusive toward Precious. Dealing with emotional damage herself, Mary is unemployed and estranged from Precious’ sexually abusive father—suiting simultaneously the welfare queen and angry black woman stereotypes. Precious has been twice impregnated by her father, and later in the film we hear of his death via the AIDS virus, rendering Precious HIV positive. This harsh image characterizes the father in the most gruesome version of the hypersexualized black male: not only did he repeatedly molest Precious from infanthood, but his contraction of sexual transmitted disease suggests consistent promiscuity without regard for the lives of partners. Despite these negative images and the multiple strikes against her, Precious begins to change as she is inspired to read by a teacher and a social worker attempts to understand and aide her situation. By the end of the film, Precious gives birth to her second child, cuts ties from her abusive mother and moves into a halfway house with plans to complete GED requirements. The ending is on one hand the triumphant coming of age of one character and an uplifting end to an otherwise depressing storyline. Yet on the other hand creates the illusion of post-racialism through this character since she manages to defeat (to an extent) circumstances that many members of this community fail to accomplish. Advocates for post-racialism can point to *Precious* and point out that racial barriers no longer exist since Precious was able to succeed despite her circumstances. Arguably, they would most likely ignore the stereotypes and harmful ideologies embedded in this movie that provide Precious with very limited success.

Colorblindness

Post-racial societies are further condoned in films where there are African-Americans and people of color present, sometimes even in lead roles, but they are detached from their individual communities because they are exceptional examples of their race. Although it is rarely stated ­­­explicitly, the separation of a black character from some of the struggles and negative qualities of black people convey the message that the character is not truly “black,” because blackness can only be defined by a rigid set of standards. This concept is part of a broader theme called “colorblindness.” According to Smith (2013), colorblindness is defined as the denial or lack of recognition of the pervasiveness of race in social institutions. When incorporated into films colorblindness often both condones and dismisses stereotypes by holding characters of color up to a single definition of their race, which at times discounts the character’s cultural accuracy when they don’t fit the definition.

Films can have evidence of both colorblindness and colorconsciousness, as discovered in a study conducted by Smith (2013). The study included films released between 1989 and 2009 that featured diverse casts and a random selection of 25 was screened for evidence of colorblindness; significantly, “the interaction between characters of different races and how race was understood and experienced between those characters” (Smith 2013). An example was made of the film *Bringin’ Down the House* (dir. Adam Shankman 2003), in which Peter, an upper middle class white male, crosses paths with Charlene, a black female escaped convict. Smith (2013) notes that throughout the film the line is blurred between satirical and authentic racism, such as a point in which Charlene surprises Peter at his upper class, exclusive country club, and the only excuse Peter can find to explain her presence to his fellow white colleagues is that she’s his nanny. Charlene plays along but puts on a phony southern accent, saying,

“Yessir. Now I’m gonna go on down to the pool wit the child’n, maybe we can make fun of the White folks again, huh kids?”

By doing this she subliminally points out how racist the context of the situation must be, and alludes to the outdated time period in which black folks worked for whites almost exclusively-since Peter cannot give her the dignity of even the title of a fellow client. This kind of comedy continues throughout the film—Charlene repeatedly acknowledges the racist undertones of many of Peter’s colleagues in a tasteful and comical manner.

This film in particular interestingly plays into post-racialism while still exhibiting some degree of authentic colorconsciousness. Although Charlene fits a couple of black stereotypes, Peter and his children learn, over the course of the film, that she is not dangerous, inherently violent, ignorant, or irate. She’s a real person who happened to fall into the wrong crowd. But this lesson is on a severely individual scale, since there is no mention of the ways in which a black person falls into the prison system, nor are there any other significant black characters incorporated into the world of Peter and his family despite their new perception of black people. At the same time, Peter’s coworker, Howie, displays textbook signs of fetishization of Charlene. In the scene where they first meet, Charlene executes a classic “model sequence” where she swishes her hips, flips her hair, and licks her lips because she knows Howie is watching with his mouth agape. Howie proceeds to invite her for a “smart cocktail” by the pool with a sexual prowess in his demeanor. Their relationship progresses from here as Howie works with Peter to help Charlene clear her name, but the development is very physical, and less rooted in Charlene’s personality. Charlene represents black people as a unit because she is the only person of color that each of the characters have contact with, besides the antagonist who allegedly framed her for a crime. Therefore, it’s likely that Howie’s impression of her distorts her into a rare phenomena, rather than an ordinary girl who happens to be black.

Conclusion

From my analysis one could conclude that post-racial narratives incorporate harmful stereotypes in attempts to make authentic characters, silence people of color by excluding larger narratives of social and historical oppression, ignore the influences of privilege on heroic storylines, and include lessons on racism and oppression on a largely individual scale. All of the films cited in this paper have the intent to be awakening and uplifting, and while many of them portray accurate storylines, there is also room for improvement in some of the characters and plot development. They aim to challenge the audience to think about their prejudices, but at the same time incorporate stereotypes and colorblindness to a fault.