

Tracing the Racial History of African American Cinema and Black Narrative Control Leading to
the Success of *Get Out* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018)

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of MA in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to trace the racial history and evolution of African American cinema and the narrative control that Black filmmakers have cultivated in the process in order to tell their stories and battle cultural and racial prejudices. This control has sometimes been used to make a socio-political statement or just as a subversion of pre-existing stereotypical tropes that usually go against the true representation of the Blacks in Hollywood. This paper goes through decades of African American cinema that have been mostly directed and produced by Black filmmakers, both aesthetically and financially, and tries to find out how the culture evolved. Categorized among different eras, the history of Black representation in American cinema and the narrative control of African American filmmakers have been through many strides and stumbles, dappled with rich history. The paper seeks this racial history and endeavors to find how it culminated with the critical and commercial success of *Get Out* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018).

Keywords: Race; Black America; African American; Racial History; Film; Cinema; Black Narrative

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Introduction

The history of American cinema is riddled with ups and downs that are dappled with misrepresentation when it comes to America's Black population. Centuries of racial discrimination had a strong impact on the early American cinema to downplay and demean Blacks in movies. However, it is only when African American filmmakers and storytellers took up the task onto themselves that Black representation found any ground of humanity in American cinema with fleshed out characters with nuances that were either overlooked or completely ignored. Even after making considerable strides over the decades, African Americans are often subject to caricature in Hollywood. It has always been a debate that films made by African American filmmakers that focus on racial America cannot garner much interest among the mass audience, while films that are successful with Blacks behind or in front of the camera has to focus on commercial aspect to please the audience without any complex racial discussion. In contrary to this decades old idea, in more recent years, two films- *Get Out* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018) have ensued much discussion because of their massive commercial and critical success, while at the same time leading the discourse on racial America and Black representation in African American cinema. The successes of these two films are not mere isolated events. The history of American cinema, Black representation and storytelling of African American filmmakers have had an explicit impact on the commercial and critical success and acceptance of both *Get Out* and *Black Panther*, whose ways have been paved by the tumultuous history of African American cinema.

Throughout its history, American cinema, especially African American cinema has been through many notable moments and periods. While many of them can be mentioned as major step forward for African American cinema, some of these periods are marred because of their

perpetuating of Black stereotypes and resorting to prejudices for commercial gain. The history of African American cinema consists of many chapters most of which champion the progress of Black stories, while some weigh it down. So this paper traces these incidents and actions that led to both *Get Out* and *Black Panther's* success, and asks the following question in the process: What are the steps and incidents in the history of African American cinema that pave the way for the critical and commercial success for both *Black Panther* and *Get Out*, every single step forward functioning as a building block for the global acceptance of African American stories with racial nuances on an artistic and mainstream\financial platform?

In order to trace the success of *Get Out* and *Black Panther*, this paper follows the history of African American representation in cinema. So, even though it touches upon the early cinema history, this paper refrains from going all the way back to the beginning of cinema. Instead, it starts from the point where it finds a relevant Black representation in American cinema; relevant, in the sense that it feeds into the discussion of this thesis, which is to say it does not mean a proper and humanized representation of Black America, given that early American cinema resorted to mostly racial prejudices and stereotypes when it came to African American representation. By the term 'Black narrative control' this paper refers to African Americans being in control of their stories, instead of any White studio executive, which risks perpetuation of stereotypes.

All the films, filmmakers and cinema events that have been highlighted here, have been selected to create a clear idea as to why they are important and relevant to discuss the success of both *Get Out* and *Black Panther*. Only the major milestones of African American cinema of the past, both in terms of films and events, have been selected here to showcase how they have paved the way for future filmmakers to tell their individual stories. These films and events are integral parts of

not only African American cinema, but the larger racial narrative of American history as well. Even though the racial political events are often the subject of discussion in this paper, they are only brought up in their relation to Black cinema, and its progression.

In terms of describing and analyzing Black representation in American cinema, and the strides and stumbles of African American cinema, this paper chooses the chronological route in order for a clear and comprehensive understanding. These films, filmmakers and cinema events can function as building blocks for the foundation of the success of *Get Out* and *Black Panther*. Black representation in American cinema has seen many phases and has changed over the time. These films, made by both Blacks and non-Blacks, can be placed on either side of the spectrum when it comes to a meaningful and humane representation of African Americans. And a chronological discussion paints a clear picture of how throughout history African American representation in cinema has been through many ups and downs that continues even to this day.

Likewise, African American cinema- films that are made mostly by African Americans with financial and creative control- can also be better understood in a chronological manner. These films often create a parallel to their contemporary American politics and discourse regarding race relation, which makes for a nuanced discussion about these films. Even though African American cinema has mostly empowered Black filmmakers and their storytelling, and their progression has mostly made strides to put Black representation on screen in a nuanced and humanized fashion, many Black filmmakers have also resorted to and created stereotypes for box-office gains, which has become an integral part of the discussion regarding African American cinema throughout the decades. It should be mentioned that this paper does not discuss Black representation and African American cinema separately, nor does it further discuss their difference.

Even though other visual media have also played a major role in representing African Americans, this paper does not delve into these other media. Among these other media, television is putatively the closest and most relevant regarding the discussion of this thesis. However, it does not veer off to discuss television, as the course of the history of American cinema has always had its own independent flow when it comes to the discussion of Black representation. It cannot be denied that African American presence in American television, especially in the 80s and 90s, is quite significant, but they barely lend enough material to enrich a racial discussion. And these shows, mostly sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Family Matters*, focused mostly on entertainment value with race being an infrequent topic. Until very recently, with the rising popularity of paid cable and streaming platforms, more shows such as *When They See Us* and *Dear White People* made their way into mainstream television that delve deeper into racial nuances, that previously were absent on standard network and cable television. One exception that still holds up is *Roots* from 1977. Based on author Alex Haley's family history, this show tells the saga of a Black American family from pre-Revolutionary war up until post-Civil war. This also should be acknowledged that this show singlehandedly inspired many filmmakers, both Blacks and Whites, to tell and shape their stories, even though this show is not included in the discussion of this thesis to maintain relevant consistency.

All the information and data used in this paper are borrowed from secondary sources. Pieces of literature that discuss African American cinema either broadly or a certain aspect of it have enriched the essence of this thesis. Also, movie reviews collected from different newspapers and other publications have contributed greatly to this discussion.

Literature Review

Ever since the beginning of cinema, Black population of America has been widely misrepresented, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was still not exempted from the socio-political discourse of slavery, and racial equality was still a taboo for a significant portion of the White population. In a society where mob lynching, killing of Blacks, and looting and destruction of their properties by White supremacists was a norm that often did not face any judicial consequences, it was just as big of a taboo to expect common ground for representation for both races. Films from that era that are even now considered to be some of the greatest pieces of American culture and its expression also portray African American with a shade of inferiority on them, or just use them as stereotypical comic relief or a mortal threat to Whites. Early on, these characters were never given the center stage. They only served on the sideline to justify or support the actions or motivations of the lead White characters. Films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1913) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) can be mentioned because of such issues.

Even though there were well known Black artists such as Juanite Moore, Oscar Micheaux and James Edwards already working in the industry, they were never given the equal spotlight as their White counterparts. In the segregated society they constantly face racism and barely found their own voice or narrative control. Many of these actors simply looked down upon solely because of the color of their skin. Even the first African American to win an Oscar for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, Hattie McDaniel constantly faced racism and racial segregation throughout her career. Because of severe racism she was not even allowed to attend the premier of *Gone with the Wind* because it took place at a whites-only theater. Even at the Oscars ceremony in Los Angeles, she sat at a segregated table at the side of the room. After her

death at the age of 59 in 1952, she was denied her wish to be buried at the Hollywood Cemetery because of the graveyard being restricted to whites-only at that time.

However, as time went on, Black filmmakers took over their own narrative power to finance and tell their own stories. Ever since the founding of Lincoln Motion Picture Company in 1916, which is considered to be the first Hollywood studio founded by African Americans to provide Black storytellers with a platform of their own, stories of this neglected minority have found its own voice. This studio not only gave Black filmmakers the agency to tell their own stories, but they also had total financial control without any interference from any major studio, which were only being controlled by White executives who lacked the understanding that it took to tell a racially nuanced story. Along with Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a few other studios were also formed to give opportunities exclusively to Black filmmakers. And with this platforms, many stories that had been untold so far, found a voice to permeate into the American consciousness, because not only these stories had their own individualities and characters, they also tackled decades of racial subjugation, misrepresentations and stereotypes that the mainstream Hollywood cashed in on so far.

Despite having their own narrative control, this journey of Black filmmakers to have their own narrative power is riddled with many ups and downs. Many of the early studios that were formed exclusively for African American filmmakers to have their own voice fell into financial ruins and dissolved within a decade or so. But many filmmakers and stars were born out of this short stint that is still considered to be pioneers for the progress of not only African American cinema, but also American cinema and culture in general. These actors and filmmakers found a very firm ground in the mainstream as well, which expanded the reach of their stories and made them more

accessible for a larger White demographic. However, this success also led to stereotypes in the mainstream when it came to Black representation, especially in the 60s and 70s.

With complete creative control and financial support African American filmmakers would often tell the stories that take place in the city underbelly that the Black population had moved to in the post slavery America to escape persecution and for a better future. And these films would revolve around the criminal and outlawed world of drugs and sex with characters that failed to take the high road keeping with the society's norms and the underbelly becomes their world. These stories would bring forth the side of the society that had always been neglected as taboo and prior filmmakers almost always turned a blind eye to it. However, once told, these stories soon found their audience and they were embraced for their brave and unique characters and themes. Especially the Black audience related to these stories on a more personal and emotional level, given that these stories are closer to their reality and everyday life. Many of these films were massive commercial success and the critics referred to them as a new dawn in American cinema.

But soon the stereotype of a Black character as a king of the criminal underbelly of a major city, mostly New York or Chicago, became ubiquitous in Hollywood, not because more filmmakers started delving into stories that explore such world, but because it became an instrument to make these films more hip to attract a larger urban audience mostly consisting of the youth. And that led to the era of Blaxploitation. These ultra-lowbudget movies are campy and violent with very few Black filmmakers at the helm. Even though some political relevance can be found in these films such as William Cain's *Blacula*, it was dismissed by critics and audience because of its low budget. This era soon came to an end because of public outcry and financial losses.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, many talented filmmakers emerged in the mainstream scene to tell stronger stories with African American characters and their realities. Filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton told stories that led to deeper racial discussions and bolstered the conversation regarding race relation in America, and the place of African Americans in it. Along with overwhelming critical success and major award recognitions, these filmmakers went on to find strong financial success that gave them more creative autonomy in the mainstream, widening the avenue for upcoming Black filmmakers. Even though major Black movie stars such as Eddie Murphy and Tyler Perry mostly stuck to stereotypical portrayal of funny yet one dimensional Black characters because of their lucrative prospects, many indie and mainstream filmmakers found a strong ground in American cinema culture to explore racial nuances and the politics that came with it.

Get Out and Black Panther come in that same vein of African American filmmakers taking complete narrative control to tackle decades of stereotypes that has been used in American cinema to objectify them. Both Jordan Peele and Ryan Coogler tackle the persisting racial discriminations in these films, because despite years of progress in representation in cinema, racial stereotypes is still a norm in American culture.

For decades African American characters in American cinema have always either been sidelined or stereotyped. Often stripped off of their own humanity, these stereotypes were the only characteristics that the audience could recognize these characters with, and it was difficult for them to think of Black characters outside this realm of prejudice. Not only in understanding art and culture, but audience that comprises mostly of White Americans resort to these prejudices in real life to formulate their own understanding of African Americans and African cultures.

However, in more recent times, Black characters have been given a more humanized representation in American films, even though many of them still can be deemed problematic.

The influence of media on how people consume and perceive information has always been impactful in the broader cultural landscape of America. In their book *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media & Race in America*, which Dr. Abu Noman has elucidated in his paper *Black Representation in Films: The Effects of Stereotypical Representation in Media and Film*, Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki make it very clear how media plays a vital role when it comes to the image of Blacks in the eyes of White Americans.

According to Entman and Rojecki, an average White American is ambivalent towards the racial discriminations against the Blacks, often to the extent that they even question its prevalence in present America. Entman and Rojecki discuss that there are two ‘paths of social information’: personal experience and mediated communication. Personal experience basically means when a person gains information through his own personal interactions in the society, be it conversations, educations or socializations. On the other hand, mediated communication refers to a person gaining information through media, which in this case points to radio, television, cinema, news, music, etc.

Entman and Rojecki further go on to break down the inherent tendency towards mental inertia that stems from cognitive economy and cultural influence. According to the authors, cognitive economy is supplied by *schema* and *frames*, which are the two shortcuts that people usually perceive information through. *Schema* is ‘a set of related concepts’ that allow people to come to a conclusion about new information based on already organized prior knowledge, while a *frame* is like a schema, but it only relates to media texts and public discourses.

In their book Entman and Rojecki also talk about how Whites create a social hierarchy in their minds, when it comes to judging Blacks as a person in the social order. The authors attribute mainly three aspects with this mental judgment such as body traits, communications behavior and achievements.

Body traits are characteristics that a person has almost no control over, such as skin color and hair. While communications behavior refers to aspects that a person can have some control over such as speech style accent and grammar. During his 2015 appearance on Saturday Night Live, comedian Louis CK makes a joke about how mild racism still exists in society depending on skin color and body traits, which stands to make a proper case for this. He says:

“If I’m in a gas station late at night and a young man comes in wearing a hooded sweatshirt, if he’s white I’ll think “oh, he’s athlete”. If he’s black, unless he has a big smile on his face, then I become mildly racist and I think “That’s fine. Everything’s fine. Nothing’s gonna happen. No, of course I’m fine. Why did I even think that for a second”?”

White Americans mostly depend on mediated communications to form their opinions about Black Americans because most of them have almost no real life interactions with their racial counterparts, which can vary depending on what source they are receiving their information from. News and media often portrays African Americans in a negative light with a tinge of inferiority, and that can create a great hindrance in terms of creating a proper interracial bridge. Negative representations of Blacks only further existing prejudices that can widen the gap between Blacks and Whites. On the other hand, humanized and proper representation can break these prejudices.

In *Get Out*, the protagonist feels like an alien in the suburban environment that is completely surrounded by white characters. The rich white liberals and their misconception of race and politics estrange him more and more as they try to praise him on his physical excellence. This incident in the film points out the misconception that started to permeate in America once Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. It was perceived by many privileged White liberals that America had entered a post-race era by electing a Black president, but the movie points out that racism was still a much prevalent reality, even though it only took a new form or morphed into something else. The film has a line where a white liberal says, 'I would vote for Obama a third time if I could', which became a popular meme in social media to point out misunderstandings of White liberals.

In this film, the protagonist is constantly being praised on his physical excellence, which since the beginning sets an uneasy tone. The Whites' over-affection towards a Black person solely based on his race and skin color also refers to a consciousness fueled by the mediated communication that is born out of the consumption of contemporary liberal news media such as CNN and MSNBC. Apart from eerie praises on his body, at a party every guest, all of whom is White, is looking at him with a notion that makes him feel unwelcome and alien. This is a clear indication that the Whites' lack of real life interaction. But as the movie progresses it becomes clear that these people deem body organs of Black people to be more functional and valuable, and they are trying to harvest the protagonist's organs to cure one of the rich White elites, making the so-far underlying horror much more physical and tangible.

And once the protagonist is made aware of the impending horror as he sees other Black characters that convey certain unease who are victims of the horror he was supposed to experience, he tries to escape and save himself. But his capture leads him to be drugged and

paralyzed. This incident refers to a Black man losing his agency in the face of White condescension. In this condescension, a White person treats a Black person based on their own understanding of the racial situation, even though they do not often mean harm. But the White's lack of understanding is what puts the Black person on his back foot and makes the situation more difficult for him. This context can widely be found in socio-political domain. And Jordan Peele, takes this context and turns it on its head to create a thrilling horror experience with a racial depth that has so far been unprecedented in Hollywood.

The casting of this film is also a major step forward for Black representation. It is very rare for Black actors with darker skin tone to be the lead in a movie, especially when he is playing opposite a White love interest.

In *Black Representation in Films: The Effects of Stereotypical Representation in Media and Film*, Dr. Abu Noman points out that despite recent increase of Black representation in media there are systematic absences that work against the development of greater interracial empathy and trust. Some may even go so far as to say that the contemporary media serves to promote an anti-Black agenda, which in turn consistently and constantly destroys American humanity.

Besides, in recent Hollywood, the White-savior problem has sprung up in a significant number of movies. These are the movies that focus on racial stories with a focus on racial harmony between Blacks and Whites. But in these movies the Black characters are often sidelined or put in the background while the focus mostly remains on highlighting the virtues to White characters to restore a racial equality. *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Green Book* (2018) are such examples of movies where white characters take the center stage, bearing the image of a hero, whereas the Black characters are left almost without any agency of their own.

Afrofuturism is another term that is often associated with African American cultures. Even before the term was coined, its characteristics can be traced back to Black music, but later permeated into other forms of visual arts as well. The crux of Afrofuturism is when Black artists try to determine their future being influenced by the past, while at the same time staying in the present with all its socio-political and especially racial nuances. Despite having a diverse existence, the common thread of Afrofuturism is to overcome the current ways a society remains unequal, and to show a future where these inequalities can be solved.

Afrofuturism was first introduced by a White writer Mark Dery in his book *Black to the Future* in which Dery makes a point out a significance absence of Black writers in the science fiction genre, even though African Americans are literal victims of alien abductions. According to the author in the western science fictions the subaltern position of Blacks have been relegated throughout American history. Afrofuturism also asks the question whether it is possible to look for a future for people whose past has been rubbed out.

In this book, Dery interviews a number of African American writers to cement his points. In an interview with author and literary critic Samuel R. Delany, Delany says that all of his science fictions are influenced by politics of Black nationalism. He prefers when the science fiction elements stay on the margins and more deep rooting human issues take the center stage. He also says that the reason African Americans do not have any image of their own, until recently, is because they were forbidden to have any.

Ever since its release, Afrofuturism has been widely associated with Black Panther. This film has taken the African culture, which has been portrayed for centuries by western media as brutal and regressive, and put it on the forefront as a signifier of technological advancement and one of the

cradles of modern civilization. Director Ryan Coogler, in this film, imagines an African country that has never been invaded by the Europeans for being looted and exploited. And the result is a display that contrasts the title that Africa has long been labeled with- ‘the dark continent’.

Black Panther constructs a space for Black people in the American cultural spectrum. Ever since they were brought to America in slave ships, their fates were always only supposed to be bound by the ship, the plantation and the grave. So, in any Black speculative culture like Afrofuturism, it has been vital to find a ground that gives the African Americans the opposite of the pain and ignominies that their coming to America brought them. Killmonger’s return to Africa and his pan-African voice “where do I come from?” can be resonated with almost all African Americans who do not know their origin or ancestry. His anger out of the loss of his heritage is one of the major driving forces in the film.

And in keeping with that trend, Afrofuturism also inspires finding a space of agency, joy and true freedom, which has been the central focus of any Black speculative culture. Coogler’s Black Panther also flows in that vein. Even after slavery, African Americans had been constantly under attacks or lynched by White mobs, that destroyed their literal and physical spaces. After slavery, to avoid lynching Black people started moving towards the cities where they built their own neighborhoods and communities, mostly because of segregation. Even after that, these neighborhoods were constantly attacked and many of these communities were destroyed by White mobs purely out of hatred and racial discrimination. Even the wealthiest Black neighborhood was destroyed in 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The politics in Black Panther cannot be ignored. The name itself comes from the organization Black Panther Party that was formed in 1966, and its initial function was to patrol Black

neighborhood to protect the citizens from police brutality. Like the organization itself, Black Panther depicts a state whose main focus is defense, as it is in the case of Wakanda. Emory Douglas is an artist who designed many posters and artworks for the organization, whose work has later been used in the film as well. Douglas's artworks have also inspired the production and character design of the film, after which the environment and the characters have been designed.

Representation of Black actors was also a significant aspect of Black Panther. African characters were rarely presented with humanity in Hollywood movies and their depictions have always had a tinge of backwardness and lacking any agency. In this film Ryan Coogler presents African culture and characters with all their glory. According to Delany, it is problematic when the obsession with fixed identity questions the fragmentation and multicultural diversity of the world, and Black Panther embraces that ideology to create a wholesome representation of Africa. Even though the film is not specific as to where it is borrowing certain aspects of its inspiration, it presents characters wearing African ornaments and clothes with a weight of dignity and personality that Hollywood was lacking before Black Panther.

Most of the Black actors in this film are of darker skin tone, whom have rarely been given the centerstage in American cinema. In the more recent times, only eight percent of American films that cover the science fiction or fantasy genre, has any Black actor whatsoever. And when it comes to the lead role in these films, it almost always happens to be Will Smith. In fact, Smith, an actor with lighter skin tone, happens to have set the standard for a screen-friendly Black lead for almost three decades. But with movies like Get Out and Black Panther, that trend of portraying only a particular kind of African American actors is now being challenged, opening up a wider avenue for all actors and characters to have their stories fleshed out. In this process,

Black storytellers also create their own agency taking over their own narrative power, while weaving a response to decades of prejudices and stereotypes.

Another African American writer Greg Tate says that Black artists insert a Black figure into a visionary landscape, be it science fiction or fantasy, positioning the Black figure as a stranger in a strange land, concurring with Delany that science fiction for a long time was out of Blacks' access. He says:

“I see science fiction as continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death.”

Living in the Shadow

For decades there have been countless movies that only perpetuated the stereotypes about African-Americans in the collective consciousness of the common American moviegoers. Instead of creating complex human characters Black roles were reduced to lifeless caricatures, used merely as instruments for creating cheap laughs. These Black actors were mostly hired to play the roles of maids and house-helps marinated with the charm of a happy household, completely overshadowing the pains and struggles of slavery, even in movies that are set before Emancipation Proclamation.

Due to the racial discrimination in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Hollywood tended to avoid using African-American actors and actress. In the 19th century, Blackface became a popular form of entertainment. Blackface let Hollywood use different characters without actually having to employ anyone with a darker skin tone. Actor Al Jolson made blackface popular with

characters such as Amos 'n' Andy and Jakie Rabinowitz. In 1930, the popularity of blackface died out because of its connotations with bigotry and racism.

The roles given to African American actors followed old stereotypes, and they can usually be broken down to a few types. There was the Tom who was someone who served white people, the Coon who acted goofy (like a clown or naive), then there was the "Tragic Mulatto" who was someone who tried to "pass for being white", the Mammy who was seen as asexual, helped to raise the young, and helped families, and the Buck who was often a male who was hypersexualized and seen as a threat.

Though the roles were demeaning for the communities with darker skin tones, some actors and actresses were desperate to represent their communities or to change the ways of Hollywood they knew that any part is a part, even though for years it only promoted a false cultural representation of the people of color. Performers such as Sidney Poitier and Hattie McDaniel would do whatever they would have to in order to pave the way for other African-American actors and actresses. McDaniel, the first African-American to win an Oscar for the role in *Gone with the Wind* famously said that she would rather play the role of a maid than being one.

Through literature and various forms of media such as radio and cinema, the demeaning of the African-American demographic was a conventional affair in the early 20th century. When the US occupied Haiti for two decades in the early 20th century, it only intensified Americans' fascination with the part of its religious culture known as 'Voodoo'- spiritual beliefs and practices originating in the West Africa where European colonial powers enslaved thousands of people and brought them to the island in the previous centuries. That fascination was a combination of fear, anxiety, and hostility toward the so called 'black magic of a primitive culture.'

It was during this period that William Seabrook, a journalist and an occultist, visited Haiti to report on the occupation, but found himself instead drawn towards the voodoo, resulting in the 1929 book entitled *The Magic Island*. Despite being alleged as sensational and insensitive, the book captured public attention. However, it is the second chapter of the whole book that has a lasting impact on the popular culture as it is going to shape the portrayal of African-American cinema for decades to come: ‘Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields.’

In this chapter, Seabrook effectively introduces the world to the word ‘zombie.’

“The zombie, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life...”

The zombies of Haitian folklore are controlled by a sorcerer called a ‘bokor’ who uses them for his own ends, often for menial work resembling slave labor. However, it took three more years for the Hollywood imagination to show the book its way into the celluloid which eventually led to the 1932 movie “White Zombie”, creating a whole popular genre of its own creating a flesh-eating monster.

Set in Haiti, the movie tells the story of a voodoo sorcerer who helps a plantation owner turn the object of his desire into a zombie so that she will be with him. The terror here is in a white couple being controlled in the same way as the Haitians, in an obvious bigoted subtext. Despite having almost no impact at the time of its release, *The White Zombie* did spawn a number of zombie films in the few following years and decades such as, *Ouanga* (1934), *The Voodoo Man* (1944), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *King of the Zombies* (1941), *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966). Each of these movies follows the conception that Seabrook outlined in his book: “slave like henchmen controlled by a master.”

Much of the early days of American cinema was marked by virulent racism. Bishetta D. Merritt, a professor at Howard University asserts, D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, "crystallized Hollywood images of African Americans on celluloid" (109). The film contained practically every racist trope of African Americans imaginable. These images would serve to be a mainstay in American cinema and functioned as a standard image of blackness in which the rest of society would come to view African Americans.

Some historians, such as E. Merton Coulter in his *The South Under Reconstruction* (1947), maintained the Dunning School view after World War II. Today, the Dunning School position is largely seen as a product of anti-black racism of the early 20th century, by which many white Americans held that black Americans were unequal as citizens. Coulter in *The South During Reconstruction*, which again treated *The Birth of a Nation* as historically correct, and painted a vivid picture of "black beasts" running amok, encouraged by alcohol-sodden, corrupt and vengeful black Republican politicians. Franklin wrote that as recently as the 1970s that the popular journalist Alistair Cooke in his books and TV shows was still essentially following the version of history set out by *The Birth of a Nation*, noting that Cooke had much sympathy with the suffering of whites in Reconstruction while having almost nothing to say about the suffering of blacks or about how blacks were stripped of almost all their rights after 1877.

Veteran film reviewer Roger Ebert writes:

"... stung by criticisms that the second half of his masterpiece was racist in its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan and its brutal images of blacks, Griffith tried to make amends in *Intolerance* (1916), which criticized prejudice. And in *Broken Blossoms* he told perhaps the first interracial love story in the movies—even though, to be sure, it's an idealized love with no touching."

In *The Birth of a Nation*, despite some similarities between the Congressman Stoneman character and Rep. Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Rep. Stevens did not have the family members described and did not move to South Carolina during Reconstruction. He died in Washington, D.C. in 1868. However, Stevens' biracial housekeeper, Lydia Hamilton Smith, was considered his common-law wife, and generously provided for in his will.

In the film, Abraham Lincoln is portrayed in a positive light due to his belief in conciliatory postwar policies towards Southern whites. The president's views are opposite those of Austin Stoneman, a character presented in a negative light, who acts as an antagonist. The assassination of Lincoln marks the transition from war to Reconstruction, each of which periods has one of the two "acts" of the film. By including the assassination, the film also establishes to the audience that the plot of the movie has historical basis. The film's depiction of Reconstruction is considered as a hellish time when black freedmen ran amok, raping and killing whites with impunity until the Klan stepped in is not supported by the facts. Franklin wrote that most freed slaves continued to work for their former masters in Reconstruction for the want of a better alternative, and though relations between freedmen and their former masters were not friendly, very few freedmen sought revenge against the people who had enslaved them. The character of Silas Lynch, a biracial character that embodies the disunion of Blacks and Whites, has no basis in fact, and during the Reconstruction no black or mulatto men served as the lieutenant governor of South Carolina.

The depictions of mass Klan paramilitary actions do not seem to have historical equivalents, although there were incidents in 1871 where Klan groups traveled from other areas in fairly large numbers to aid localities in disarming local companies of the all-black portion of the state militia

under various justifications, prior to the eventual Federal troop intervention, and the organized Klan's continued activities as small groups of "night riders".

The civil rights movement and other social movements created a new generation of historians, such as scholar Eric Foner, who led a reassessment of Reconstruction. Building on W. E. B. DuBois' work but also adding new sources, they focused on achievements of the African-American and white Republican coalitions, such as establishment of universal public education and charitable institutions in the South and extension of suffrage to black men. In response, the Southern-dominated Democratic Party and its affiliated white militias had used extensive terrorism, intimidation and outright assassinations to suppress African-American leaders and voting in the 1870s and to regain power.

Also, even though some of the later movies do not contain any anti-black agenda, they often portray African-Americans as lesser than the White characters. *Gone with the Wind* has been criticized as having perpetuated Civil War myths and black stereotypes. David Reynolds writes that "The white women are elegant, their menfolk noble or at least dashing. And, in the background, the black slaves are mostly dutiful and content, clearly incapable of an independent existence." Reynolds likens *Gone with the Wind* to *The Birth of a Nation* and other re-imaginings of the South during the era of segregation, in which white Southerners are portrayed as defending traditional values, and the issue of slavery is largely ignored.

The film has been described as a "regression" that promotes both the myth of the black rapist and the honorable and defensive role of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, and as a "social propaganda" film offering a "white supremacist" view of the past.^[94] From 1972 to 1996, the Atlanta Historical Society held a number of *Gone with the Wind* exhibits, among them a 1994 exhibit titled, "Disputed Territories: *Gone with the Wind* and Southern Myths". One of the

questions explored by the exhibit was "How True to Life Were the Slaves in GWTW?" This section showed slave experiences were diverse and concluded that the "happy darky" was a myth, as was the belief that all slaves experienced violence and brutality.

W. Bryan Rommel Ruiz has argued that despite factual inaccuracies in its depiction of the Reconstruction period, *Gone with the Wind* nevertheless reflects contemporary interpretations that were common in the early 20th century. One such viewpoint is reflected in a brief scene in which Mammy fends off a leering freedman: a government official can be heard offering bribes to the emancipated slaves for their votes. The inference is taken to be that freedmen are ignorant about politics and unprepared for freedom, unwittingly becoming the tools of corrupt Reconstruction officials.

While perpetuating some Lost Cause myths, the film makes concessions in regard to others. After the attack on Scarlett in the shanty town, a group of men including Scarlett's husband Frank, Rhett Butler and Ashley raid the town; in the novel they belong to the Ku Klux Klan, representing the common trope of protecting the white woman's virtue, but the filmmakers consciously neutralize the presence of the Klan in the film by referring to it only as a "political meeting".

Thomas Cripps reasons that the film in some respects undercuts racial stereotypes; in particular, the film created greater engagement between Hollywood and black audiences, with dozens of movies making small gestures in recognition of the emerging trend. Only a few weeks after its initial run, a story editor at Warner, the production studio, writes a memorandum to Walter Wanger about *Mississippi Belle*, a script that contains the worst excesses of plantation films, suggesting that *Gone with the Wind* had made the film "unproducible". More than any film since *The Birth of a Nation*, it unleashed a variety of social forces that foreshadowed an alliance

of white liberals and blacks who encouraged the expectation that blacks would one day achieve equality. According to Cripps, the film eventually became a template for measuring social change.

Traditional film scholarship has often attributed the emergence of African American cinema to the necessity for a response to the prevalent racial stereotypes in the mainstream films. It is with absolute certainty that the early representations of [African Americans](#), as in *Chick Thieves* (1905) and the Edison shorts *The Gator and a Pickanninny* (1903), in which a fake alligator devours a black child, and *The Watermelon Contest* (1908), relied on staid and pervasive stereotypes common in literature, vaudeville, minstrel shows, and the culture in general. Though cinema would progress, as an industry and as an art form, the stereotypes of [African Americans](#), rooted in slavery and used to justify racist ideologies and acts of discrimination, remained, though often adapted to fit changing cultural contexts.

According to Donald Bogle, the most common archetypal forms include ‘the mammy’, a dark, large-bodied, asexual woman whose role is to provide maternal comfort for white characters. ‘The coon’ is a sexless comic figure, who is dull-witted, lazy and cowardly, mostly used for comic relief in the movies. Then there is the ‘Uncle Tom’, a servile and overly solicitous person to the white folks. Another stereotype of a black character is ‘the buck’, mostly defined by his physicality; this brutish hypersexual black man is painted as someone who lusts after white women. Also, there can always be found a mixed-race woman who is caught between the races and denied access to the privileges afforded by a white identity, being a symbol against miscegenation-‘the tragic mulatto’. Finally, there is ‘the jezebel’, the hypersexualized amoral temptress who is defined as promiscuous as nature.

Era of the Race Movies

It has been recorded many times during the last century that many African American entrepreneurs have ventured into filmmaking due to, and as a response to the inhumane representations of Black characters that have always framed them in a negative image, with a purpose to correct this negative image.

Among the pioneers, one of the notable names is Bill Foster, founder of the Foster Photoplay Company, the first Black film production company that was established in Chicago in 1910. In 1916, a Hollywood character actor named Noble Johnson established Lincoln Motion Picture Company with his brother George in Los Angeles. However, the most prominent name in this aspect is Oscar Micheaux, a noted novelist who formed the Micheaux Film and Book Company in 1916 that opened a new door for Black representations in Hollywood. Their companies led the production of "race movies," films that only featured all-black or predominantly black casts and were marketed to black audiences. Another important figure who would emerge as a writer, producer, and director, though decades later, is the actor Spencer Williams, the maker of *Blood of Jesus* (1941), the most popular race movie to ever have been released during that era.

These studios, established in the early 20th century gave the first platform to Black people to raise their voice through visual medium. This sound film, and the silent films that preceded it, like Lincoln Picture's *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916) and Micheaux's *The Homesteader* (1919), are the first feature film by an African American, presented themes in concert with the racial uplift movement, an effort by African Americans to combat the unrelenting ideological and physical assaults aimed at their communities. During the period in which these film companies were formed, African Americans had to contend with race related

violence and persecutions almost all over the United States. The practice of lynching was at its height between 1880 and 1940. Besides, race riots, the philosophy and practices of eugenics (pseudoscientific theories of racial inferiority), and psychological theses that rendered African Americans deviant and pathological were also prevalent ideas.

The ideologies of racial uplift based their opposition to racial stereotypes of Black characters in the assertion of African Americans as civilized humans deserving of equality and social justice through an emphasis on education and morality. In films, this was realized in narratives that valued temperance, adherence to the tenets of Christianity, and social mobility through education. Characters who engaged in criminal acts, gambling, infidelity, and substance abuse received punishment by the end of the film. *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, for example, is centered on James Burton, played by Noble Johnson, a civil engineer who leaves his rural surroundings to seek out his fortune in the oil industry of California. Using the knowledge he gained while attending Tuskegee Institute, a black college founded in 1880, he surmounts a series of obstacles, including employment discrimination, and eventually discovers oil and returns home with newfound wealth.

There have been many other films later on that are also linked to racial uplift through the references made to actual community leaders and places of importance. For example, the schoolteacher Sylvia Landry, played by actress Evelyn Preer, the protagonist of [Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*](#) (1920), travels north to Boston in order to raise funds for the Piney Woods School, historically the largest black boarding school in the [United States](#), located in rural Rankin County, Mississippi. By referring to the school in the film, Micheaux used his film as a publicity tool, aiding the institution's goal of providing for young black students a "head, heart, and hands education."

As the popularity of these race movies skyrocketed, a new industry also grew in parallel, virtually a separate cinema with its own stars, distribution system, and exhibition venues, such as the Howard Theater (1910) in Washington, D.C., and the Madame C. J. Walker Theater (1927) in Indianapolis. The development of this industry, in addition to its formation as a "counter cinema," has also been considered as a logical outgrowth of already established forms of African American expressive culture. Bill Foster, for example, had a background in theater and vaudeville, and [Paul Robeson](#), a noted stage actor, made his film debut in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1924). The films often highlighted African American forms of dance, fashion, and literature.

The [Great Migration](#) between 1910 and 1920, also known as the Black migration, was also a significant factor in the development of African American cinema. During this period close to two million African Americans moved from [the South](#) to northern cities, such as Chicago, [New York](#), Cleveland, and Detroit, and west to [Los Angeles](#), to escape feudal tenant farming, the lack of gainful education and employment, and [Jim Crow laws](#), in search for better opportunities. Even though their choices remained limited and they were still subject to racism, the access to greater education, factory jobs, and positions of skilled labor and professional employment led to the growth of a black middle class.

Films provided not only a reflection of their striving but also, for many it provided a way to engage in an urban form of modernity, that was still an alien space for them. It is estimated that more than five hundred race movies were produced and distributed between 1910 and 1948, the most prolific era of black-directed and black-themed films, even though not all race movies were directed by African Americans. However, this separate cinema was crushed by a number of industry shifts, including co-optation by Hollywood and the coming of sound, and by the 30s

Depression. Interestingly, the introduction of synchronous sound and the genre that would develop with it, the musical, are rooted in African American popular culture, and it is this link that brought about the end of the race movies.

Oscar Micheaux, who is one of the most renowned African American filmmakers, produced and directed forty-three films over three decades. Though he was not the first African American director or the first to head an African American motion picture company, he *was* the first to direct a feature-length film. His skills as an entrepreneur were revealed when he prospered as a novelist, selling his works first to his fellow South Dakotans, white farmers whose land surrounded his own, and later nationally. His third novel, *The Homesteader* (1917), attracted the interest of the Los Angeles-based Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which wanted to adapt it into a film. Micheaux agreed, under the stipulation that he be hired to direct. When Lincoln refused, he founded the Micheaux Film and Book Company, which would later grow to include distribution offices in three locations: Chicago; Roanoke, Virginia; and Beaumont, Texas.

Oscar Micheaux's first film, the first feature film directed by an African American, was *The Homesteader* (1919), financed through the selling of shares. Micheaux earned enough profits from that film to finance his second production, *Within Our Gates* (1920), a provocative film that challenged the racist ideologies that were presented in D. W. Griffith's [*The Birth of a Nation*](#) (1915). Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* presents African American characters who seek education, despite poverty, as a means to social mobility, while it critiques the failure of the judicial system to afford racial minorities equal protection under the law. Even more controversially, it blatantly portrays racial violence as it more commonly occurred, not committed by African Americans against whites, but just the opposite, through a tense scene of lynching. *Within Our Gates* was released during the height of lynching in the [United States](#) and

immediately following the "Red Summer," a period of time in 1919 when twenty-six race riots erupted across the nation.

Micheaux would include such sensational elements in his work throughout his career. His *Body and Soul* (1925), the first film to star [Paul Robeson](#), was a scathing critique of corruption in organized religion. Contemporary production companies such as Foster Photoplay Company would produce comedy and Lincoln Motion Picture Company was known for their middle class melodrama, which is why Michaux's movies stood out from other contemporary black movies because of their socio-political subtext.

Blacks in Classical Hollywood

Warner Bros.' [The Jazz Singer](#) (1927) is considered the first commercially released feature to make use of the new technological development of sound, even though it was not a full sound movie. The conflict in this drama centers on the struggle of a Jewish singer, Jakie Rabinowitz, played by [Al Jolson](#), who wants to perform as a jazz artist, despite his father's wish that he becomes a cantor. Though in his nonreligious persona Jack Robin is not actually singing jazz, his performances in blackface draw from the blues tradition and black spirituals, capitalizing on the appropriation of black expressive culture. It can also be attributed to the act of attracting a group of audience by appropriating their culture and misrepresenting the elements of it to a degree.

Hollywood's affinity for black musical forms continued with the production of the early musical *Hallelujah* (1929), an all-black cast feature, directed by King Vidor, which featured black folk music and spirituals. The industry's incursion into sound race movies with this film and others, including *The Green Pastures* (1936) and *Bronze Venus* (1938), had a dramatic effect on the independent producers. Increasingly, the stars of the race movie industry migrated to the

Hollywood studios, lured by the offer of higher salaries, despite the reduction in their roles to performers in item numbers or supporting characters, often as servants to white protagonists.

Despite some of the directors like Micheaux continuing to work in the sound era, the talent drained and the inability to invest heavily in sound equipment led to the collapse of many of the independent studios. To make matters worse, the devastating collapse of the US economy that began in 1929 ravaged a community whose economic stability had been tenuous since the beginning. African American audiences had less money to spend on entertainment and sought out the better-financed, high production value spectacles of the Hollywood oligopoly, where the Black filmmakers had almost no authorship to represent their own community.

At the beginning after the collapse of the race movies, African Americans were either nonexistent or reduced to gross caricatures on silver screens that were almost completely dominated by white actors. However, the restricted roles offered to African American actors in Hollywood expanded with the US entry into [World War II](#). As participants in the war, in the armed forces and on the home front, African Americans could not be ignored by the culture industry, certainly not when the country was engaged in a war to ensure freedom and democracy. In films like *Casablanca* (1942), *Sahara* (1943), and *Lifeboat* (1944), African American characters were constructed with greater complexity and humanity. The actor [Rex Ingram](#) plays a pivotal role in the war film *Sahara*, as a sergeant in the Sudanese army who fights alongside British and American troops. He performs heroically in the fight against the German AfrikaKorps and takes charge of Axis POWs, a stepping stone in terms of recognizing the contribution of Black community in America and also attracting a marginalized audience by showing the valor of their audience.

Breaking down Barriers

Postwar liberalism led to even more change, as dramas directly addressing issues such as race and power emerged from the studios in films like *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *Home of the Brave* (1949), and *Pinky* (1949). By the 1950s, the "separate cinema" had ended, and African Americans no longer had creative control over their images. Hollywood had sought and highlighted black talent in front of the camera, but continued exclusionary policies in the unions and administrative offices, thus black culture failed to flourish in cinema and African Americans were stereotypically misrepresented for over a decade for the lack of Black authorship.

[Social change](#) brought by the [civil rights](#) movement saw changes at the box office, as the first group of African American movie stars emerged in the 1950s. Prominent among them were [Sidney Poitier](#), the first black superstar; [Harry Belafonte](#), the first African American male sex symbol; and [Dorothy Dandridge](#), the first African American screen siren. Even though in hindsight their films are somewhat problematic, the roles performed by these three talents brought new images to the screen, often challenging society's perceptions about race and "proper" social roles. *Island in the Sun* (1957) by Robert Rossen, for example, contains what has been identified as the first real interracial kiss in a Hollywood film, whereas previous films usually involved two white performers with one in blackface. In the film, a political scandal erupts when a family in the [West Indies](#) is found to have "mixed blood." The situation is further complicated by the presence of two interracial romantic couples: one played by [Dorothy Dandridge](#) and John Justin, and the other played by [Harry Belafonte](#) and Joan Fontaine. It was still considered a transgression in Hollywood that an African American man can kiss a white woman, which in the 50s postwar American society was still a taboo.

Struggles and Successes of the 50s and 60s

Dorothy Jean Dandridge's career however was impeded by typecasting. More often than not, she was offered roles that took advantage of her physical appearance, casting her as a sexual siren and object of desire. The exception was a film earlier in her career, *Bright Road* (1953), a low-key drama in which she plays a small-town schoolteacher trying to reach a troubled student. Ironically, the same can be said of Harry Belafonte, who played the principal in the same film. His films also exploited his good looks and physique, often placing him in competition against his white male costars. In *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), Belafonte plays one of three survivors of the nuclear apocalypse. The struggle for survival is made more difficult by the contest of masculinity between Belafonte's character and the white male survivor played by Mel Ferrer over the sole surviving white woman, played by Inger Stevens.

Of the three new black stars, only Poitier would go on to enjoy a long and varied career, one that would last for decades. Dandridge's was cut short by her death in 1965. Belafonte, frustrated by the lack of roles, turned his energy toward music and a more involved role in the global [human rights](#) movement. Poitier became a Hollywood icon and a popular star with audiences. He was the first African American to receive an Oscar nomination for a leading role, in 1959 for his work in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and he would eventually win the award for his performance in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). His groundbreaking performances in films like *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), in which he plays a Philadelphia police detective who, in Mississippi to visit his mother, works with the local racist sheriff to solve a murder, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), in which a seemingly liberal father is introduced to his daughter's fiancé, played by Poitier, foregrounded issues of racism in American and the need for progress.

However, it was only in 1962, when a renowned photographer named Gordon Parks was hired by Warner Bros., that would be the stepping stone for African American directors in Hollywood be laid out. Parks was contracted to direct the adaptation of his autobiography, *The Learning Tree*. The film, a sensitive and poetic drama completed in 1969, chronicles the coming of age of a black teen in 1920s Kansas. It influenced the theme of most subsequent African American coming-of-age films, which, unlike their white counterparts, do not focus on sexual initiation. Instead, they center on the emergence of racial consciousness.

Melvin Van Peebles is notable for being one of the earliest African Americans to work within the independent realm, as well as the Hollywood studio system, securing a three-picture deal with Columbia Pictures after the success of a film he made in France, *Story of a Three Day Pass*, in 1967. His second film, his first in Hollywood, was *Watermelon Man* (1970), a comedy examining racism and its stereotypes. In the film, the comedian Godfrey Cambridge plays a white bigot who wakes one morning to discover his race has changed to black. That same year, United Artists released the first film by the actor/playwright/activist [Ossie Davis](#), who would go on to direct four more feature films.

The 70's Renaissance

The films made by Parks and Van Peebles are often misidentified, commonly assumed to be a part of the film movement known as blaxploitation (black exploitation), because of the lack of understanding of the black movies that came out in the 70s. The movie-viewing public often assumes incorrectly that all black-themed films of the 1970s, regardless of origin, style, or content, can be categorized as such. A close examination of the period, however, reveals that there were three major trends of African American filmmaking during the 1970s: films produced

within the Hollywood system; films produced by exploitation studios, such as American International Pictures (AIP); and another independent movement—an aesthetically challenging cinema politically grounded in issues of [civil rights](#) and the global pan-Africanist movement.

The representation of the African American cinema took a new turn in the 1970's, which also marks it as a unique period in American film history. It was the first time since the race movies of the silent era that such a high volume of black-themed films were played in commercial theaters, many of them helmed by African American directors. The reception of the early works by Parks, Van Peebles, and Davis, by both critics and popular audiences, resulted in a new acceptance of African American talent in Hollywood, both in front of and behind the camera. Films moved beyond the usual social problems to treat African American communities more broadly, from comedies about everyday life, teen films, and romance to biopics, period films, and action thrillers. Though many noted films that featured black actors and themes, such as *Sounder* (1972), *Claudine* (1974), and *The Wiz* (1978), were not directed by African Americans, a great many of them were. Several of these directors would go on to develop significant careers, lasting decades and expanding into television.

One of the most prolific African American director from that era is Michael Schultz. He is most noted for *Cooley High* (1975), a coming-of-age film set in 1960s Chicago; [Car Wash](#) (1976), a "day in the life" film about an ensemble of workers at a Los Angeles car wash; and *Greased Lightning* (1977), based on the story of Wendell Scott, the first African American stock-car champion. Though his films are considered comedies, they contain moments of profound sadness and despair. For example, the slapstick and verbal play in [Car Wash](#), provided by the pranks and jokes the workers play on each other, reveal an attempt to counter the monotony of their dead-

end, working class jobs. Further, the viewer gains access to the workers' outside lives and dreams, made difficult by the social circumstances of their lives.

[Gordon Parks](#) followed up *The Learning Tree* with *Shaft* (1971), introducing the first African American private detective film and a new treatment of African American masculinity. Considered the first African American film hero, John Shaft, played by [Richard Roundtree](#), was the epitome of cool. Equally comfortable in the underworld and the mainstream, he was very popular with the ladies. His persona as a man of action and power is made thoroughly apparent at the beginning of the film, when Shaft emerges from the subway to walk the streets of New York as if he owns them, accompanied by [Isaac Hayes](#)'s Oscar -winning score.

Parks's son, Gordon Parks Jr., would continue in his father's tradition, directing some of the most well-received films of the period. His works include *Aaron Loves Angela* (1975), a tender story about the romance between an African American teen and a Puerto Rican girl living in the slums of New York, and *Thomasine and Bushrod* (1974), starring Max Julien and Vonetta McGee as a bank-robber couple in the early 1900s. He is best known, however, for *Superfly* (1972), starring Ron O'Neal.

Being a highly stylized film this movie, scored by Curtis Mayfield, shows the protagonist's decadent lifestyle as a successful pimp and a drug dealer, played by O'Neil. This film shows the details of the crime in a stylized manner as well. It is perhaps for this reason that this film in particular would be identified with blaxploitation film. Because young people became infatuated with the surface details that overwhelmed the underlying social critique, it was at the center of controversy in the African American community. While middle- and upper-class African Americans saw the film as sensationalist, promoting the lifestyle of the main character, others

championed the film for its presentation of an African American protagonist, Youngblood Priest, who stands up to "the Man," and for its treatment of police corruption. Looking deeper into the film, *Superfly* provides an insightful commentary on the lack of opportunity for African American youth and the ways they may be driven to achieve the American ideal of consumerism. The legal system is presented as corrupt, and through its imagery, the film reveals the devastation the drug trade has wrought on urban communities. However, the movie ends by showing criminality as a dead-end profession as we can see the protagonist trying hard get himself out of his underground lifestyle.

The new forms of masculinity represented in the films noted above, in which African American men function in narratives to benefit themselves and their communities, rather than the white communities in which they were usually socially isolated in earlier Hollywood films, were accompanied by a different kind of physicality. Previously, actors with large, muscular physiques were seen as threatening, drawing on the stereotypes of the black brute. With former athletes such as [Fred Williamson](#) and [Jim Brown](#) becoming actors, and with characters like John Shaft, African American men were no longer sidekicks in action films, supporting the heroism of the white lead actor; they became heroes themselves. Changes were also seen in regard to African American women, and the desire for more complex female characters was met in films like *Mahogany* (1975), featuring the singer [Diana Ross](#), who received an Oscar nomination for the costume designs she created for the film. Directed by the Motown music mogul Berry Gordy, the film focused on the development of an impoverished girl who becomes an international fashion model. Another film *Five on the Black Hand Side* (1973) by Oscar Williams reflects the ideological tensions between African American middle-class conservatives and more progressive feminist and black nationalist liberals. Even though the struggle of female African American

actors was far greater than men who were making significant strides early on in the industry, a struggle that is going on even today.

Sidney Poitier and Other Pioneers

[Sidney Poitier](#) remains the most highly recognized African American actor in the history of American cinema. His triumphs on stage, television, and in film countered the typically demeaning stereotypes of African Americans. The first African American superstar, he entered Quigley's "Top Moneymaker's Poll" in 1967, and ascended to number one the following year, beating the popular icons Steve McQueen, [Paul Newman](#), and [John Wayne](#). His dramatic characterizations brought dignity, complexity, and depth to African American depictions during one of the most tumultuous periods of social change in US history, the civil rights movement.

After training at the American Negro Theater, he appeared in several plays, the most noted being [Lorraine Hansberry](#)'s Tony-nominated *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first work by a black playwright produced on Broadway. He received a Tony nomination for the role he would reprise in the 1961 film. His film debut was in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *No Way Out* (1950). Despite positive reviews of his performance as a doctor confronted with racism, he struggled for years to land significant roles. He hit his stride in the mid-1950s, gaining momentum with a number of highly touted films. With his role in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), he became the first African American nominated for an Academy Award in a leading role. He would win five years later for *Lilies of the Field* (1963). He has been lauded with numerous awards throughout his career. In 2002 he was awarded an honorary Oscar for his "extraordinary performances and unique presence on the screen and for representing the industry with dignity, style, and intelligence."

Despite being a pioneer for African American actors working in Hollywood, Poitier's success as an actor often eclipsed recognition for his work as a director on nine feature films. One of the first African American directors in Hollywood, he reworked genres such as the western in *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) to reflect the contribution and struggles of African Americans. In addition to his work in cinema, Poitier has served as a dedicated activist in the fight against apartheid in [South Africa](#) and in the US civil rights movement.

Sidney Poitier made his debut as a director with *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), a film that would allow him to break out of his usual persona and bring his fellow 1950s star Harry Belafonte back to the screen. This western restored African Americans to the history of the settlement of the West, as it concerned the journey of African American homesteaders from [the South](#) to what they imagined as new opportunities after the [Civil War](#). Accosted by white landowners who want to return them to tenant farming, the settlers seek the aid of a wagon master, Buck (Poitier), who is assisted by Preacher (Belafonte). The film revised the implicit ideology of the all-American genre of the western, providing a critique of US expansionism. Poitier later on went on to establish his own production company, E and R Production Corporation which also gave him an unprecedented creative control for an African American actor. It was because of his insistence that caused a significant number of people of color to be included in the crew as technicians. He made eight movies in twenty years before his retirement.

The Independent Spirit

These movies were mostly being produced within the Hollywood studio system where Black filmmakers were not given the full creative independence on the script and the final edit, which led some filmmakers, who were unwilling to compromise their ideology or artistic integrity to

work independently. Others saw entry into the industry as a sell-out, bowing to a capitalist oligarchy that had historically denigrated their communities. [Melvin Van Peebles](#) abandoned his deal at Columbia to independently produce, direct, and star in *Sweet Sweetback'sBaadasssss Song* (1971). The film represents a radical break from Van Peebles's earlier work. Dedicated in the opening credit sequence to "All the brothers and sisters who have had enough of the Man," it is a touch-stone example of African American counter cinema, utilizing a loose shooting style, experimental editing, and a discourse rooted in Black Nationalism. Sweetback, played by Van Peebles himself, starts out as a politically naive and uninvolved sex worker who has his consciousness raised and becomes a folk hero. While in police custody, he witnesses the beating of a community activist by the police. Sweetback uses his handcuffs to fight off the two policemen, saving the activist's life, then spends the rest of the movie as a wanted man, evading the authorities with the help of the local community. *Sweet Sweetback'sBaadasssss Song*, which was produced with a budget of only \$500,000, earned more than 10 million dollars, and secured for Van Peebles the sobriquet "Father of Soul Cinema." The film was highly lauded in the US and Europe, and its success became a massive impetus for the Blaxploitation movement.

[Ossie Davis](#) is another notable name who, like Van Peebles, would remove himself from the "Hollywood plantation" to work independently. In 1972 he helped create the [Third World](#) Film Corporation, a New York-based company that functioned both as a film training center for people of color and a distribution house for their works. Two of [Third World](#)'s most well known productions are *Greased Lightning*, starring [Richard Pryor](#), and *Claudine* (1974), with [Diahann Carroll](#), who garnered an Oscar nomination for the lead.

With his second film, *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), Davis became the first African American director to shoot films on the continent of Africa. Adapted from a work by the Nigerian Nobel

Laureate [Wole Soyinka](#), who also played the starring role in the film that is set in the Congo and concerns the attempt of an African leader to modernize and unite his nation made up of different tribes, while at the same time keeping the country's cultural roots intact. Davis's last effort as a director was *Countdown at Kusini* (1976) which was financed by Delta Sigma Theta, the largest African American women's service organization in the United States. Written by Davis and his fellow African American thespian Al Freeman, Jr., the film, shot in Nigeria, is an anti-neocolonialist action/drama that encouraged coalitions and solidarity between Africans and the Diaspora.

Ivan Dixon is another pioneer in the 70s who is memorable for his roles in film and television. He is one of the most notable as the lead in the groundbreaking feature *Nothing But a Man* (1964). Dixon began directing television shows in 1970. In 1973 he directed the film that took him five years to get off the ground: *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, adapted from Sam Greenlee's famous 1969 novel. The funds were raised through private investments from supporters in African American communities across the country, instead of corporations or wealthy individuals. Despite its initial success, the film was withdrawn in several cities because it was deemed too controversial.

In this fashion, African American directors regularly employed established Hollywood genres, such as the action film, western, crime thriller, romance, and spy film, to reveal the contradictions and ideologies on which they were based. The formulaic conventions and iconographies were recoded to work as tools of social criticism. The horror genre was no exception. *Ganja and Hess* (1973) by the writer Bill Gunn, an experimental vampire film in the mode of art film, is a complex treatise on race, addiction, and assimilation that violates conventional Hollywood norms of linear temporality, characterization, and causation. Even

though the film was lauded at the Cannes Film Festival and was handed the Critics' Choice Prize, it failed to prove itself commercially viable and was withdrawn from distribution by the producers.

The L.A. Rebellion

From this point on, African American filmmakers were permeating into every facet and genre of the American cinema with their unique story and narratives. As many African American veterans of the cinema created socially significant feature films that were aesthetically grounded in African American (and in some cases African) cultural forms, a new group of filmmakers would emerge, trained in university film schools located primarily in Los Angeles. Their educations in graduate programs went beyond technical training. Their "coming-of age" coincided with the push for ethnic studies programs on campuses around the country, nationalist movements in the Asian/Pacific American, African American, Latino, and Native American communities, and global struggles against neocolonialism and for independence. Armed with a knowledge of "traditional" film history now infused with an introduction to the Third Cinema movement and exposure to revolutionary films from [Latin America](#) and Africa, these filmmakers took advantage of their "outsider" positioning, reinvigorating the push for a politically driven cinema, in a movement that became known as the "L.A. Rebellion." The first group of graduates from the [University of California](#) at Los Angeles (UCLA) included Billy Woodberry, best known for *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983), and Larry Clark, director of *Passing Through* (1977).

Charles Burnett and Haile Gerima are two of the most prominent names from the contemporary African American independent cinema movement. [Charles Burnett](#), who started his career as a cinematographer and camera operator for his contemporaries, is considered to be one of the most

important American filmmakers. Burnett has made more than fourteen films, both within and outside the Hollywood industry, as well as several works for television. His most acclaimed film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), is considered the first neorealist masterpiece of African American cinema. Selected into the National Film Registry by the [Library of Congress](#) and recognized internationally, the film, completed in 1973 as his MFA thesis for UCLA but not released until 1977, uses poetic imagery to detail the day-to-day struggle of the working poor who, despite their efforts and dreams, are caught by a social structure that benefits from their oppression. Besides his own work, Charles Burnett has helped many other minority communities to tell their stories via the medium of cinema.

Haile Gerima, who is also a professor at Howard University, remains one of the most politically committed African American filmmakers. His films do not just depict oppression, they theorize historical and global conditions, interrogating not only what, but also why. His works genuinely function as "counter cinema," linking the storytelling function in film with African cultural and aesthetic traditions to advance consciousness and politicize audiences. As was the case for Burnett, Gerima's MFA thesis film at UCLA, *Bush Mama* (1979) also brought him wide attention. Like *Killer of Sheep*, *Bush Mama* focuses on poverty in the Los Angeles area. With his dynamic and stylized visual paired with a powerful use of sound, Gerima presents a challenging narrative that raises the consciousness of the audience simultaneously with that of the film's protagonist.

Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation

Even though black filmmakers have made their marks both in the indie real and in the main Hollywood studio system by creating ideologically and aesthetically thoughtful films, most people associate African American cinema of the 1970s with blaxploitation, a series of extremely low budget, sensationalist features of which there were more than two hundred. Produced from the early 1970s through the middle of the decade, these films capitalized, or exploited, the desire of African Americans, and at times other minorities as well, to see transgressive characters in urban settings. Many attribute the birth of this movement to the success of Van Peebles's *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which was released with an X rating, and Park's *Superfly*, exciting films that featured characters involved in "underground" economies, the sex and drug trades.

Very few of these ultra-low budget, campy, violent films were written, directed, produced or even financed by blacks, which only lead to an exploitation and overindulgence of stereotypical portrayal of the black community. Those that were, such as William Crain's *Blacula* (1972), were often politically relevant, but they fell victim to the designation of blaxploitation because of their lower production values. Nevertheless, the power of the movement was a significant one, as it influenced more mainstream productions. For example, the 1973 installment of the James Bond series, *Live and Let Die*, makes use of the established iconography. The short-lived movement however came to an end because of public protest and financial losses. Besides, over-reliance on the formula also repelled many movie goers at that time. Despite the formula ending within a short period, it did create some opportunities for African Americans in the film industry, creating a new galaxy of stars, including [Pam Grier](#), Tamara Dobson, [Fred Williamson](#), and Jim Kelly.

80s and 90s

By the end of the 70s, many African American filmmakers reached prominence with many great works. There was a great diminution of films by African American directors. This was particularly the case in Hollywood, for the industry had committed to the blockbuster model of filmmaking, more or less abandoning the production of low-to-middle budget films, the range in which most African American movies were generally placed. Many of the established directors moved to television, while still others worked on direct-to-video releases. A few directors capitalized on the newly developing youth subculture of hip hop with films like *Beat Street* (1984) by Stan Lathan and *Krush Groove* (1985) by Michael Schultz; these films are centered on the music industry. Another link to popular music was *Under the Cherry Moon* (1986), a black and white feature directed by and starring the musical artist Prince.

Later in the 1980s, the emergence of Spike Lee made a massive dent on the spectrum of not only just African American cinema, but also the culture overall. As a newcomer in 1986 Lee saw great success with his independently produced first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It*, an irreverent look at an African American professional woman and her romantic relationships. Well-received by critics and audiences, *She's Gotta Have It*, along with *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) by [Robert Townsend](#), a comedic treatment of Hollywood's racist production practices, and Keenan Ivory Wayans's *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988), a parody of blaxploitation films, heralded a new era in African American filmmaking. The popularity of these three films, as well as the ascendancy of [rap music](#), opened the door for a new generation of directors.

In 1991 sixteen African American–directed movies were released theatrically, the most since the era of the race movie. It was also the year of release for *Boyz N' the Hood* by [John Singleton](#) and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* by Matty Rich. Both films were tense coming-of-age dramas about male teens trying to make it out of the ghetto in South Central L.A. and Red Hook, Brooklyn, and they are all stuck in its pervasive cycle of poverty. While Singleton's film was supported by Columbia Pictures, a major mainstream Hollywood studio, Rich's film was funded by family credit cards and an address on a local radio station for investors. Both went on to receive widespread attention. Singleton became the youngest person ever nominated for an Oscar for Best Direction, as well as a nominee for Best Original Screenplay. A number of movies followed in their wake, all featuring young men in urban locales keeping the subtext of the films mostly focused on the crime, such as *Juice* (1992) and *Menace II Society* (1993), causing many critics to wonder if it was a case of blaxploitation revisited. In addition, cultural critics lamented the masculinist perspective of the films, concerned that the films perpetuated the stereotype of young urban African American males as crack-dealing gangsters pervasive in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ergo, the issue of generalizing all of the African American communities stripping them any of their diversity and nuances was also apparent in this movies. Many critics often expressed concern about these movies presenting a singular construction of the different Black communities.

However, the male filmmakers were making almost all these movies and women filmmakers were yet to make a mark in either the mainstream studio cinema or the indie scene. One film that did diverge from the urban male hegemony was *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by [Julie Dash](#). The first feature-length film by an African American woman to be released theatrically, this unique vision, which took more than twelve years to bring to the screen, is a hypnotic period drama, set

in 1902 on one of the Sea Islands off the East Coast of the United States. It is a celebration and remembrance of Gullah, a distinct African American culture that developed during slavery. Because of the islands' relative isolation, the inhabitants were able to build a culture more closely linked to that of Africa than were those enslaved on the mainland. With a setting built with strong and rich cultural tradition, *Dash* tells a story of a family that gathers for their last apparent meal.

Toward the end of the 1990s, African American filmmaking was no longer typified by the narrow parameters that defined its renaissance. Haile Gerima provided a harrowing and much needed lesson on slavery in her 1994 film *Sankofa*, which is considered to be one of the most successful self-distributed independent feature of African American cinema. Later, with *Malcolm X* in 1992, Spike Lee brought the story of the slain activist to the attention and consciousness of a generation with no experience of the civil rights movement. In that same decade, many female African Americans also made their mark in the American cinema culture.

With *JustAnother Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992), Leslie Harris provided a female perspective on teen life in an urban locale. *I Like It Like That* (1994) by Darnell Martin, the first film directed by an African American woman to receive studio funding, provides an interesting tale of a woman who, driven by a family crisis, finally comes to full self-realization. Other women directors who would emerge in the 1990s include Bridgett M. Davis, Alison Swan, DeMane Davis, Cauleen Smith, and Neema Barnette. Cheryl Dunye directed *Watermelon Woman*, the first African American lesbian feature, in 1996, and in 1997 Kasi Lemmons delivered a haunting, atmospheric drama, *Eve's Bayou*, the most successful independent film of that year.

The Revolution of Spike Lee

Considered by many to be the most prolific African American director since Oscar Micheaux, Spike Lee is credited with heralding a renaissance of African American filmmaking, initiating a radical break from Hollywood's neo-minstrelization in the 1980s, and reestablishing the commercial viability of "political" cinema. As one of the few African American directors considered an auteur, his films concern the dramatic tensions of personal conflict informed by social hierarchies of power, particularly of race and class, encoded in a highly expressive and recognizable style. Lee is one of the few American directors who paved the way for films with contemplative pictures to have commercial viability.

Lee's master's degree thesis film *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* gained him great attention. Despite that he could not manage to find work in the industry with the support of big studio, which is why Lee went independent, securing financing with the help of friends and the Black Filmmakers Foundation for *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). The film, produced by Lee's newly formed company, 40 Acres and Mule, a reference to America's broken promise to African Americans during Reconstruction, was shot in twelve days with a budget of \$175,000. It went on to earn more than 8 million dollars at the box office and the Prix du Film Jeunesse at Cannes. *She's Gotta Have It* is considered the catalyst for a resurgence in African American filmmaking. This movie demonstrated the commercial viability of African American films by Black filmmakers, the result of which is much more apparent with filmmakers like Jordan Peele and Ryan Coogler.

In that same vein, *School Daze* (1988), his second feature film, also did well at the box office, earning more than twice its production costs. It was his third film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989),

that would secure his reputation as a director of artistry and vision. This postmodern masterpiece, concerned with rising tensions in a Brooklyn, New York neighborhood over the course of a hot summer's day, is a complex and compelling film examining race relations, police brutality, class differences, and gentrification.

Despite his contributions in American cinema as an African American filmmaker, Lee expanded his talents working in the area of music videos, television commercials, and public service announcements. He won an Emmy for a segment of "Real Sports" and he directed two documentaries: the Oscar-nominated *Four Little Girls* (1997), about the 1963 bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, that resulted in the death of four African American girls; and [*Jim Brown: All American*](#) (2002), a feature on the sports icon. Further, his impact on the industry includes the introduction of a number of African American actors to the cinema and the reinvigoration of the careers of Ossie Davis and [*Ruby Dee*](#). He has also produced films by other African American directors that have become classics of African American cinema. He also collaborated with many other African American filmmakers providing opportunities with many Black filmmakers that offered many classics of African American cinema, such as *I Like It Like That* (1994), *The Best Man* (1999), and *Love & Basketball* (2000).

Do the Right Thing (1989), considered by many to be Spike Lee's best work, was a massive commercial and critical success that led to discussions about racial discrimination in a new light. Covering issues such as racism, gentrification and police violence, this film tells the story of the hottest day of the year in Brooklyn that leads to race riot and a Black man getting choked by the police and dying, a frequent scene in the crime ridden cities of America. This film uncovers the uncomfortable systematic racism hidden at the core of American society. This film echoes more strongly even in the recent times when police brutality against unarmed Black men is still

rampant in America. It also sheds a proper light on the recent killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests that took over the western world.

Stepping into a New Millennium

At the beginning of the new millennium many opportunities had already opened up for African American communities. In 2002 Denzel Washington became the first Black actor to win the Oscar for Best Actor since 1964, thirty-eight years after it was bestowed upon Sidney Poitier. Denzel Washington won his Oscar for his role in *Training Day* (2001) directed by Antoine Fuqua, also an African American filmmaker, an honor that was received for the first time by a film directed by a Black filmmaker. Along with cinema, African Americans became a major force behind art and entertainment in the United States. Their presence started to become far more noticeable both in pop culture and in deeper aesthetic expressions.

MTV, the video music network powerhouse, entered into the realm of filmmaking with *Save the Last Dance* (2001), a teen film directed by Thomas Carter. It was the first time that African American directors were given the green light to direct big-budget films with high commercial prospect, films that did not necessarily feature African American characters. This status granted to African American filmmakers holds great promise but also may bode ill. Hollywood's interest in maximizing profits mandates films centered on white protagonists more often than not. If African American directors are to concentrate on the larger-budgeted films, that leaves the untold stories of the African American community without a voice once again.

However, the new millennium also came with problems regarding the African American cinema where the racial misrepresentation is still a problem. Even though there had been notable achievements both commercially and critically, both at the end of the 90s and the beginning of

the twentieth century, some of the most popular characters were bland caricatures that only pushed forward the stereotypical representation. Along with Denzel Washington's Oscar, Halle Berry became the first woman to win an Academy Award for her performance in *Monster's Ball* (2001), strengthening a place for women of color in the field as well. And yet, Eddie Murphy as a fat awkward man and Tyler Perry as a granny in a fat-suit were the most recognizable and popular characters in the films that were coming out of Hollywood at that time. Despite their commercial success and popularity both White and Black communities, pioneers like Spike Lee dismissed them as 'coonery buffoonery'. However, the assumption was still there, especially outside the African American community that the war had been won and African Americans have established themselves with their complete agency in the industry, a proposition that is still being proven wrong with a slew of movies that push forward the notion of self-congratulatory white savior race movies.

Despite the struggle, however, African American filmmakers have made a space for themselves in the global cinema market where they are telling their stories not only to a certain pocket of community in America, but all over the world. Their movies are being met with overwhelming commercial and critical success, while the integrity of the story is kept intact. This rising popularity of African American cinema and overall culture on the global state is also a manifestation against the assumption that Black actors cannot generate the interest in order to get commercial success on a global scale.

A new generation of black film-makers is starting to respond to this reality, down the road those 90s pioneers paved. Emergence of filmmakers such as Ryan Coogler and Jordan Peele is the shining example of the beacon of the African American films being carried forward with new stories challenging the social norms that create racial divide and discriminations against the

Black community. Also, these instances of the Black filmmakers telling their own stories are also empowering both the commercial and aesthetic aspects of the films they make, where the story is in the hand of someone who experienced certain aspects of it and holds a nuanced understanding in that matter; as opposed to, stories told by White filmmakers with misrepresentation and wrong appropriation.

Ryan Coogler made his mark with his 2013 film *Furtive Station*. An indie spirit, this movie sensitively dramatizes the police shooting of Oscar Grant, an unarmed Oakland commuter. In that case not only is the movie a depiction of a real incident, but also it works as a voice against the ongoing police brutality against the Black minority and the collective silence to it. Coogler, however, made bigger splash in Hollywood with his next film, *Creed* (2015), a sequel to Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* series.

Since the 70s, Rocky, the protagonist of Stallone's titular series has been labeled as the quintessential American hero that emerges from the working class. The achievement of the American Dream also plays a major role in these movies, even though throughout the decades these movies have changed to tell the story of the time and the progression of its protagonist. In this movie, Rocky who is a broke 30 year boxer, manages to make his own American dream come true through hard work. Ryan Coogler's *Creed* was released forty years after the release of *Rocky*. In *Creed*, Coogler shows a protagonist who is black, and instead of being a White character, Coogler tells the story of an African American character. In doing so, he put a Black character at the very center of a story that tells the tale of the struggle of a quintessential American hero, which has been considered to be a giant leap for African American filmmakers.

Even though Coogler's next film has divided the audience and the critic somehow, the impact of it is undoubtedly beyond any measure. In 2018, Ryan Coogler becomes the first ever African American filmmaker to direct a movie with the first ever African superhero on a silver screen, *Black Panther* (2018).

Black Panther: Unraveling the Threads in between

With the beginning of the 21st century, superhero films became the most lucrative movie genre for studios to put their money in and every year the rise of its popularity has only been growing. Films like *Spider-man* (2002) and *X-men* (2000) raised the popularity of the superhero movies to a new height, even though this genre has existed since the late 70s that began with Christopher Reeve's *Superman* (1975). However, since the inception of this genre in cinema, these movies have always been directed and produced by White people. Even though, in 1998 Wesley Snipe became the first Black superhero in the film *Blade*, this movie did not make much of a cultural mark in the landscape. Snipe's portrayal in this movie was just another caricature of an action hero with superhuman ability. There was hardly any political or racial statement made in the movie and Snipe himself was lost from the limelight.

Banking on the rocketing popularity of the superhero movies, studios started making series of movies by the end of the last decade, focusing most on the arc of one central character that will evolve around two or three movies. And all these movies largely portrayed White characters, while there were not many roles for Black actors. Marvel Cinematic Universe, however, profited the most from the growing popularity of superhero movies. At the end of last decade, Disney bought the MCU and started making movies with an assortment of superheroes, with mostly white characters, and with the release of *The Avengers* in 2012, Marvel paved its way to be the

biggest movie studio in the world. Yet, despite the Marvel comics consisting of countless Black characters, the studio did not bring any of them to the silver screen in the fear of financial loss. However, the scenario changes with the studio hiring Ryan Coogler to direct *Black Panther*.

The movie tells the story of Wakanda, a fictional country in Africa that has not been impacted by the European colonialism and is now flourishing with its rich natural and technical resources. The film also covers its relation with the contemporary America and its relation and history with slavery. Wakanda is a country that keeps its progress treasures hidden from the rest of the world in the fear of being invaded and looted. The protagonist of the movie, T'Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman is also intent on keeping with that tradition. However, the villain of the movie, Killmonger, played by Michael B. Jordan, is an African American and he has experienced the systematic oppression of his community in his own country. And that leads to his rage against his ancestors' silence in Wakanda, who remained silence for four hundred years, beginning with the inception of bringing slaves to the New World, to the current systematic oppression of the Black communities. Killmonger wants to use the resources of Wakanda to colonize those powers that once colonized his African ancestors, while T'challa believes in a free and progressive world. This collision between T'Challa and Killmonger is a powerful depiction of what Africa means to the Black minorities not only in America, but also the whole West, and a progressive Africa coming to terms with the outside world.

This film largely also works as a commentary on the unity of Africa and its nations. Despite going through centuries of colonial oppression and being one of the hubs of modern imperialistic greed, Africa is still full of resources and potentials. And the message of Black Panther is for African nations to work together in the modern era with their own independence, when war and

division is still ravaging through the continent. This movie addresses serious political issues like the relationship of Africa to the West, which is rarely seen in a blockbuster movie like this. Wakanda's suspicion towards the West is also a manifestation of our time, as, despite the end of colonialism, Western tampering in Africa's politics is still as powerful.

Killmonger is seeking retribution for the injustices leveled against people of African descent by many Western countries. Not only just slavery and segregation, but also issues like 'redlining', in which unfair government loan policies forced blacks to live in ghettos, and racial profiling by police, in which increased patrolling in impoverished Black neighborhoods contributes to the mass incarceration of black men in America.

Even though these injustices are only obliquely alluded to in the film, they form the subtext every time Killmonger mentions the plight of Blacks living outside of Wakanda, a plight that Wakanda could presumably fix. And this leads to one of the film's central question: should Wakanda do more to address the inequities of the outside world? However, Wakandans want to maintain their isolationist politics, and Killmonger wants to conquer the oppressors, thereby colonizing the old colonial powers. This juxtaposition of Isolationism versus Colonialism is one of several false dichotomies introduced by Killmonger that characterize the thematic Structure of *Black Panther*.

Jelani Cobb, a film critic writing in *The New Yorker*, discusses the divide between Africans and African-Americans, which he calls a "fundamental dissonance". He feels T'Challa and Killmonger represents "dueling responses to five centuries of African exploitation at the hands of the West. The villain, to the extent that the term applies, is history itself". Cobb adds that *Black Panther* is political in a way previous MCU films were not because in those "we were at least

clear about where the lines of fantasy departed from reality while this film is set in an invented nation in Africa, a continent that has been grappling with invented versions of itself ever since white men first declared it the 'dark continent' and set about plundering its people and its resources."

Throughout the film, Killmonger prompts a number of binaries such as Isolationism versus colonialism, or Traditionalism versus progress. But as the film ultimately reveals, there is no reason to look at these issues as a choice between two absolutes. There is usually a third way, a middle path between the two extremes, or what Aristotle called 'the Golden Mean', which defines T'Challa's character arc. T'Challa grows when he learns to avoid the simplistic solutions at the far ends of the spectrum.

The national and racial identities are crucial aspects regarding the discussion of the movie. The people of Wakanda are extremely nationalistic. They view the world divided into two groups: Wakandans and everyone else. This leads to an extreme nationalist attitude among many citizens, as can be found in several scenes in the movie. They have built walls, refuse refugees, reject trade, and offer no foreign aid, all in the name of protecting Wakanda, because they value the lives of those who share the same heritage and culture as themselves. Killmonger, however, having grown up in America, has developed a strong sense of racial identity. For him, because Wakandans have the same skin color as Blacks in the rest of the world, Wakandans should see themselves as part of a global Black community.

The debate between traditionalism versus progress is another important debate that comes up in the film. For all of its technological advancements, Wakanda is an extremely traditional society; regularly engaging in ancient rituals such as the combat for the crown, or the ingesting of a heart-

shaped her. For Killmonger, progress requires getting rid of traditions. On the other hand, for T'Challa, the middle ground means to keep what traditions he can but rejecting what is not working, especially Wakanda's isolation.

There is also room in the film regarding the discussion between 'isolationism' and 'colonialism'. Most Wakandans believe continuing their centuries old tradition of isolationism to be the most prudent path to maintaining peace, including T'Challa, at the beginning of the film. Killmonger, on the other hand, subscribes to a theory mentioned frequently in the film that the world is getting smaller and one has to be either the conquered or the conqueror. Killmonger's solution is that Wakandans should take part in the same harmful colonialism that afflicted Black individuals for centuries.

Killmonger seeks to repay historic injustices by arming oppressed Black communities around the world with advanced weaponry and inciting race riots and radical revolution. His political philosophy is reminiscent of the French Revolution, which was fueled by fantasies of the oppressed exacting revenge upon their oppressors. Killmonger's desire for vengeance is so impassioned that he seems to give no thought to governing after destroying Western society. Like his construction of color and race this too is a result of his American upbringing.

Killmonger's story is like that of many African Americans, for whom military service was the only viable path out of poverty. And it is this military which trained him in the art of regime change, his time in the Special Forces having been spent overseeing various coups and conquests in the middle east. Not only does this result in him being more interested in revolution than actual rule, it is also darkly ironic that he wants to colonize the so-called colonizers because that is what the colonizers taught him to do. This extremism of Killmonger is painted as a direct result of Western society grappling with its messy past of slavery and colonialism. Just as he

blames T'Challa for the actions of his father T'Chaka, he blames everyone else for their ancestors' actions as well. In this case, even though, T'Challa does not deny the wrongdoings of Westerners past, he acts without animosity towards their present-day descendants. This optimism allows T'Challa to chart a course between the extremes of isolationism and conquest.

On the other hand, writing for *The Atlantic*, [Adam Serwer](#) argues against the assertion that Erik Killmonger is a representation for black liberation, positing instead that he represents imperialism. According to him, this is emphasized through his actions, as Killmonger's attempts to take over several of the world's major cities notably include Hong Kong. Since China does not have a white Western hegemony in need of overthrowing, Killmonger's desire to conquer China was purely for the sake of power. Ultimately, he argues "*Black Panther* does not render a verdict that violence is an unacceptable tool of black liberation—to the contrary, that is precisely how Wakanda is liberated. It renders a verdict on imperialism as a tool of black liberation, to say that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house."

Black Panther, however, has also been met with negative responses as well, where critics have pointed out its weakness as just another concoction of a postcolonial Africa. Patrick Gathara in *The Washington Post* also describes the film as offering a 'regressive neocolonial vision of Africa', which, instead of being a redemptive counter-mythology, offers the same destructive myths. Gathara highlights that Africa in this film is still portrayed as an European creation, where Wakanda is run by the feuding elite that despite possessing unmatched technical abilities, still resorts to lethal combat for choosing a successor. According to Gathara, Wakandans still fit into the Western molds that created the dark continent and its dark people, where he points out the unsophisticated cultural representation. He writes that instead of liberating the African

narrative from Europe, its redemptive counter mythology further entrenches the tropes that have been used to dehumanize Africans for centuries.

Aligning with Gathara, Christopher Lebron in his piece for *Boston Review* has called the film racist because the film shows that because of the harsh reality, rife with poverty and oppression, many members of the Black communities are being relegated to the lowest rung of the political regard, as it exemplifies Killmonger resorting to crime and violence, instead of choosing the high road. According to Lebron, the movie portrays African Americans as a community that still resort to crime and violence for redemption, which is problematic in the current political environment. He sums up by commenting that "In 2018, a world home to both the Movement for Black Lives and a president (Donald Trump) who identifies white supremacists as fine people, we are given a movie about black empowerment where the only redeemed blacks are African nobles (who) safeguard virtue and goodness against the threat not of white Americans or Europeans, but a black American."

The deeper analysis of the film has polarized critics regarding many aspects when it comes to the representation of Africa and African American culture. However, the impact of this film is nothing short of remarkable. In 2018, when MCU is the most profitable entertainment franchise in the world, *Black Panther* changes all equations regarding movies with mostly Black cast. The film grossed over a billion dollars at the global box office. It also became massively popular to non-white audiences proving the assumption wrong that Black filmmakers and actors cannot be financially viable.

Even after *Black Panther*, Wakanda plays an important role in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), the third highest grossing movie of all time. In this film, a major takes place in Wakanda, on which

depends the future of humanity, putting an African backdrop at the center of attention. In that battle, along with other super heroes such as Captain America and Hulk, T'Challa leads his army against an alien invasion. However, in the final film of the Avengers saga, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), when Black Panther becomes the first character to appear to help the Avengers to beat Thanos and his army, theaters across the globe erupted in cheer, marking a major milestone for a Black character in the eyes of the global audience, demolishing the stereotype that Black actors are not bankable.

Get Out: A Critique on White Condescension

Jordan Peele is another rising African American filmmaker who started out as a comedian. With his debut film *Get Out* (2017) Peele has dug deep into the White America's consciousness regarding race relation.

Jordan Peele's social thriller takes aim at unlikely target- White liberals. According to writer/director Peele, the story came to him after reflecting on how many Americans thought the Obama presidency signified a 'post-racial' era. The film argues that so called post-racial liberalism is something more terrifying than most would imagine. Throughout the film, the protagonist of the film, Chris, played by Daniel Kaluuya, is confronted with White people that replicate the progressive left that has moved beyond racism. It explores how this disavowal seems to reinforce a relationship with Black people that is, at its best, suspicious.

The first act of the film shows how the attempts of people to show Chris how 'not racist' they are only serves to further alienate him. Inspired by the plot of *Look Who's Coming to Dinner*, Peele constructs *Get Out* along that same line, where the Armitage family, Chris's to-be in-laws, seems

unnaturally eager to bring up their ‘state of normalcy with Black people and culture’ around Chris, as if this proves that they are not racist.

This tendency to over-perform the ‘acceptance’ of everything about Black culture only further cements the difference between them, and makes Chris extremely uncomfortable. Despite Chris’s efforts to get through the day with normalcy, everyone around him, almost all of whom is White, keeps reminding him that he is Black, thus only making him feel more ‘different’. This also leads to a situation where any actual racism can be excused as long as one can show how familiar they are with Black culture and anti-racist ideas.

The second act exposes Chris to a number of White people at a party who are fascinated with Chris’s Blackness. Party guests want to know what it is like to be Black in America, and even feel compelled to tell him that “Black is in fashion”, mirroring the term ‘negrophilia’. The term was first introduced in Paris in the 1920s, when the White majority, especially the young people, were fascinated by the Black culture. According to writer Petrine Archer-Straw, for Parisians Blackness was a sign of ‘modernity.’ But the biggest problem in this regard was that “Black personalities were either lionized or demonized in a manner that denied normality.” In other words, they could never be presented or represented as actual people, instead existed as one of two stereotypes: brilliant artists or uncultured animals.

Throughout the film, both sides are portrayed vividly. Chris is celebrated for his cultural background, yet it is the White people that decide how Black people are defined. And this negrophilia is not just confined to the desire for Black culture, it can be the desire for the Black body itself both sexually and athletically. For these White characters, it is never about understanding the Black culture, it is about using them to satisfy their own desire, which is not understanding human, rather collecting them. And while *Get Out* exemplifies classic

Negrophilia, at the end there is a classic leap forward to the literal colonization of the Black body, yet the White Characters in the film refuse to attribute any of it to racism.

This film also offers insight into the psychological experience of Black Americans navigating White America. At the very beginning of the film, we see a Black person lost in a White suburb. The physical maze of White suburbia sets a clear parallel for the emotional maze that Chris will have to navigate. Many of Chris' interactions seem modulated specifically for his White audience, as it is seen during his interactions with the police, when he complies with the police officer's demand to show his ID, despite his White girlfriend's protest. This whole experience in the middle of an overwhelmingly White space leaves Chris anxious, as he tries to navigate through it.

Franz Fanon describes a similar experience as a Black man living in the 20th century France. Fanon describes meeting "the White man's eyes" as placing the burdensome weight upon him, on that left him feeling uncomfortable in his own body, and out of place in a world dominated by Whiteness. Like Fanon, Chris is burdened by the weight of trying to fit in a world from which he is fundamentally excluded. He is trying to integrate himself into a White society, while at the same time trying to retain his own identity. And to navigate this overwhelming White pressure, Chris has to silence his own identity, a process made literal during a hypnosis where he is viewing his own reality through a screen, known as 'the sunken place'. The sunken place is a state where one's mind is separated from their body, and they are left to passively view their own experiences through a screen, without any agency or voice to make themselves heard. It cements the notion of a society built upon inequality that inevitably leaves those on the outside without a voice, or a tempered version of it.

According to sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, the term double consciousness, is the internal conflict experienced by African Americans living in a structurally racist society. These societal conditions lead Black people to see themselves through the perspective of the dominant societal force, in this case, White people. Chris is repeatedly evaluated by the measuring tape of White society, and in particular, certain forms of White desire. The experience of being constantly examined leads to what Du Bois calls a ‘two-ness’ in the Black soul, as he writes, “One feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two sould, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This imposition leads to confusion about the authenticity of one’s experiences, and for Chris, this double consciousness has left him like a helpless spectator. And all these scenarios present a scathing critique on the condescending understanding of Black people and culture among the White society.

Get Out cost only four and half million dollars to make, which made over two hundred and fifty million dollars at the box office, becoming one of the most commercially successfully movies of all time worldwide. With the commercial success of Get Out, Jordan Peele has overnight transformed into a master of horror and a brand name for the elevated horror genre. Even his next feature *US* (2019) also became a massive commercial success, which feature a majority black cast. Despite having a distinct visual style and an underlying social commentary, Jordan Peele’s name recognition functioned as a major publicity for the film that ensued an outstanding commercial and critical success. Even Peele’s upcoming movie *Nope* is being considered to be one of the most anticipated movies of 2022, with the trailer getting over twenty million views in two months.

Recently in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Peele recently said “I Don’t See Myself Casting a White Dude As the Lead” which led to some debate online, but mostly the consensus was in support of Peele, bolstering the fact that African American filmmakers now have more of a ground to make movies centering black people. Jordan Peele’s ability to say this without facing commercial repercussion marks a major advancement for Black filmmakers. Some on twitter even used his statement to counter Riddly Scott’s opinion when he said that actors with a Muslim name will not garner enough attention from the audience. Peele’s films stand as concrete proof that movies with racial and social depth can attract the audience and enjoy commercial success.

The Next Direction

The delusion of America’s Obama-era post-racial vision is more apparent in the discrimination and lack of opportunities that are still prevalent in the American film industry, and this new generation of filmmakers are responding to that social state. Black filmmakers are still making movies following the same responsive technique of the early filmmakers where they bring up the stories of the socially persecuted minorities, mostly Black. F. Gary Gray’s *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) tells the story of a budding hip-hop group N.W.A. in the late 80’s who are also navigating through several racial profiling, despite their contributions to American culture. *Straight Outta Compton* covers a wide range of topic that is still affecting the Black communities all over America, such as racial discrimination, economic deprivation and police brutality. Despite the movie’s global critical and commercial success, it was shunned from any major Oscar nominations, demonstrating the racial discrimination in the industry.

However, many Black filmmakers are also focusing on stories that are more spiritual and solely tell Black stories centered on their families and societies, without any outside racial hindrance.

Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) are such examples where the filmmaker is focusing on the growth of a Black character as a person and a human being within his own social and filial surrounding. The cast of both these movies are also mostly Black, which also is an example of African American filmmakers working with Black actors to tell more focused and relevant stories.

The female African American filmmakers still have a long way to go, and there have only been a few notable works done by Black female filmmakers. Ava DuVarnay and Kasi Lemmons are only the two filmmakers that have made a remarkable dent in their field. DuVarnay's *Selma* (2015) and Lemmons' *Harriet* (2019), both are historical dramas, where *Selma* tells the story of Martin Luther King Jr. leading the 1965 voting right marches during the civil rights movement. In this film, DuVarnay also explores the divisive nature of America that the Black communities are still navigating through, from politics to daily life, echoing with today's socio-political discourse. Lemmons' *Harriet* also tells the story of a former Black slave Harriet Tubman, whose bravery and audacity also helped many other Black male, female and children break the shackles of slavery.

In the recent years there have been a number of movies made by White filmmakers that display a certain understanding or sympathy towards the Black characters, yet they have routinely fallen in the category of 'white savior' movies. In the 2016 film *Hidden Figures*, the story of three Black women who helped NASA during the first moon-landing is brought to the fore, which has been mostly unknown before. However, in many of the scenes of the movie it often shows White characters standing up for the equal right for these women as well, often going to the extent of distorting the facts. Even though, it paints a friendly picture about a multi-racial America, this kind of portrayal becomes more about the White people, instead of showing the true struggle of

an ethnic minority. Another similar subtext can be found in *Green Book*, a 2018 film that tells the story of a Black gay man being driven around the Southern states of the US by a White man. In this story the White man becomes the hero by showing the Black character how to eat chicken and protecting him from a hostile southern demographic, demonstrating an ongoing condescension when it comes to race relation.

On the other hand, *Django Unchained* (2012) by Quentin Tarantino is a fantastic example of a white filmmaker truly understanding the value of Black culture and the hypocrisy behind their years of oppression. Tarantino also subverts the tropes of John Wayne's Westerns where a white man is playing the role of a savior from the savage others. This movie however, shows that the White plantation owners, who claim to be the fore bearer of civilization are the true savages, while at the same time shows the agency of a once-enslaved Black character and his heroics.

The current political environment in America has an extremely profound impact on the Black culture, and it is needless to say that this impact will also influence the future filmmakers. In the recent years there has been an upsurge of anti-Black sentiment in many American states especially in the south, where there have been neo-Nazi marches in the streets, while the President of the United States calls them 'very fine people'. Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, a 2018 biographical crime film, takes aim at this rising nationalist and racist mentality, where he structures the film meticulously to have comedic affects, even though it covers a strong topic. Lee tells the story of a Black detective going undercover to investigate KKK, while in the process mocks it as well. The meaning of this film becomes far more contemporary and relevant when Donald Trump hesitates to reject KKK leader David Duke's sponsorship for his presidential candidate and rubs elbows with many alt-right personalities and news media, that fundamentally look down upon every ethnic minority.

It can very clearly be said that the future of the African American cinema very much depends on the political environment of America and its aesthetic analysis by the Black communities, while the current filmmakers will always keep inspiring them. Needless to say, the narrative of response in the African American films are often contemporary and as the paper shows often relies upon the past materials to tell or craft a story, which in the future is also going to play its part to inspire more authentic stories.

Major Findings

Despite being subjected to prejudice and stereotypes since the beginning of cinema history, African American characters soon found their own voice through their own agency. When entrepreneurs like Oscar Micheaux set up their own studios to give opportunities to Black filmmakers and to create an avenue for Black stories to be a part of the main discourse, stories that had gone unnoticed graced the screens of American cinema with enriching historical accuracy and cultural impact. Initially these films mostly attracted audience from the Black community and were not considered mainstream among the majority White audience. But as decades went on, many African American cinema soon found a firmer ground in American discourse, mostly because of creative tenacity of Black filmmakers and the rise of many Black movies stars, and their conviction towards telling their meaningful stories.

Financial freedom and agency is a major step forward for Black storytellers to have their own voice heard. Not only set up their own studios to create opportunities for African American filmmakers, but the financial success of these films and studios was a major factor that later only widened the path for more future filmmakers to rise. Filmmakers like Gordon Parks, John Singleton and Spike Lee made their marks because of their commercial success along with critical praise. Many filmmakers like Lee and Singleton later found a wider audience in the

mainstream with commercial successes with Lee directing *Inside Man* (2006) and John Singleton delving into *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2002), a blockbuster action film, which in turn also gave them the freedom to more nuanced racial stories with mainstream Hollywood budget.

However, despite commercial and critical success, Black characters can still often be subjected to stereotypes and prejudices. In the 70s, when many Black filmmakers were telling the stories of characters who live on the margins of society and find it difficult merge with the urban culture in a lawful way, these characters were portrayed to tell meaningful stories. Soon however, many of these character traits, such as violent and criminal, became go-to characteristics for mainstream Hollywood to make their Black characters appealing to the audience. Even in more recent years, films like *Green Book* (2018) and *Hidden Figures* (2016) have been accused of sidelining the struggle of African American characters to highlight the bravery of their White counterparts to create racial equality, which only perpetuates the narrative of White savior.

Filmmakers like Jordan Peele and Ryan Coogler have been expanding their horizon using their financial and critical success, which gave him the liberty to experiment with genres. After *Get Out* Peele's second feature *Us* (2019) tell a harrowing tale that does not quite focus on race, instead it tells a story with striking imagery and filmmaking. Even though the subtext of *Us* is not as on the surface as *Get Out*, *Us* garnered positive reviews from critics and went on to become a major commercial success. Jordan Peele's latest film *Nope* (2022) is a deconstruction of alien invasion movies, that revolves around a ranch that lends horses to Hollywood studios for their movies. Because of Jordan Peele's previous successes *Nope* was already a trending topic on YouTube and Twitter when the trailer released.

Like Peele, Ryan Coogler has also made good on his success and influence. After retelling one of the most beloved stories of an American hero in *Creed* (2015) with his own imagination, Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) became one of the most highest grossing films of all time centering mostly on an African nation, albeit imaginary, with Black characters and depictions of African culture. The sequel to this film, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, is slated to be released in November 2022, which is going to be about the women of Wakanda, focusing mostly on the female characters. It is only because of the success of its predecessor that Coogler is being able to tell a women-centric story in one of the biggest franchises. The trailer of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* has become the most viewed trailer among movie trailers released during the 2022 San Diego Comic-Con, which met global praise and is expected to even become the highest grossing film of 2022.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of misrepresentation, subjugation, stereotypical and prejudiced portrayal, Black representation in American cinema has been often been a sensitive issue. However, African American filmmakers and storytellers took up the charge onto themselves once they realized that their stories deserve to be told in a truthful and humane manner. The chronological history of African American cinema, divided in many eras, has seen many strides that brought the stories of this unsung minority into the mainstream, while there have many any setbacks that perpetuated the same old prejudices, knowingly or otherwise by the people at the helm. With monumental commercial and critical successes, African American filmmakers told nuanced stories elevating their cinema with prestige. Both *Get Out* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018) continue that endeavor with equating commercial success with critical racial narrative was often thought an either impossibility or rarity.

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