

## HOLLYWOOD – PATRIARCHAL VIEW AND THE ILLUSION OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

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***Abstract:** What does Hollywood have to do with us or our everyday life? What does it have to do with language and literature, or education? What do politics and ideology? What does it have to do with anything other than pure fleeting entertainment? Well, it is (about) art – and art is not only a medium for presenting, representing or transmitting realities and ideas but also a means of moulding, shaping, transforming, reforming, educating. Hollywood does not merely tell stories, it does not only present societal, cultural, political, ideological aspects and views, it also creates and shapes them, it defines and transfuses them through its narratives craftly created in one of the most powerful combination – that of moving pictures, words, and music, in the form of high-end, absurdly costly produced art.*

***Keywords:** Hollywood, patriarchy, discrimination, diversity, inclusion.*

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Hollywood does not merely tell stories, it does not only present societal, cultural, political, ideological aspects and views, it also creates and shapes them, it defines and transfuses them through its narratives craftly created in one of the most powerful combination – that of moving pictures, words, and music, in the form of high-end, absurdly costly produced art. And if “a picture is worth a thousand words”, what is the power of 110 minutes (the average length of a feature film) and 144,000 frames of pictures and words and music? What is the power of Disney’s adaptations of fairy tales, legends, and historical truths? What is the power of heroes and stories – fiction and non-fiction – brought to life in the Entertainment Capital of the World?

In a society influenced by globalisation and cosmopolitanism, preoccupied with political correctness to the point of ridicule, the idea that Hollywood movies are still promoting a conservative view of our society, a patriarchal view characterised by class, gender, and racial discrimination<sup>1</sup> does not seem valid. Although the Hollywood film industry considers that it has progressed when it comes to discrimination, and some actors (among whom Daniel Radcliffe<sup>2</sup>) – who denounced gender and racial inequality – remain optimistic regarding the evolution of this aspect, the reality of the messages conveyed by a great part of the films produced in Tinseltown (beginning with the Disney animations), even of those openly pleading against discrimination, contradicts the claims of an evolved and progressive society. The portrayal of the characters in Disney films, the perpetuation of whitewashing – and not as an exception, and not lastly the attempt to attenuate African American discrimination by exploiting precisely the stereotypes that define it, as well as discrimination against other categories, as is the case of the film *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006, r.: Doug Atchinson), represent the arguments that will be further discussed and detailed.

“Classic Hollywood cinema was never kind to ethnic or minority groups... be they Indian, black, Hispanic, or Jewish, Hollywood represented ethnics and minorities as stereotypes... Classic Hollywood film [is] ethnographic discourse... Hollywood does not represent ethnics and minorities; it creates them and provides an audience with an experience of them.”<sup>3</sup>

“The ideological effects of these cinematic representations never disappear; they are present constantly in popular culture. [...] films do the ideological work of constructing and locating racial, gender, and class inequities within American social life. [...] Films do not mirror the real world; they create their versions of it (Hall, 1996a, b).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael RYAN & Douglas KELNER, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Indiana University Press, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Anya FELIX, Daniel Radcliffe Calls Out Hollywood Racism And Sexism, in *Inquisitr*, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ana M. LOPEZ, “Are all Latins from Manhattan?”, in *Unspeakable Images*, pp. 404-5, *apud* Norman K. DENZIN in *Selling Images of Inequality: Hollywood Cinema and the Reproduction of Racial and Gender Stereotypes*, in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, (eds.) Mary ROMERO & Eric MARGOLIS, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, p. 469.

<sup>4</sup> S. HALL, 1996a&b, *apud* Norman K. DENZIN in *Selling Images of Inequality: Hollywood Cinema and the Reproduction of Racial and Gender Stereotypes*, in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, (eds.) Mary ROMERO & Eric MARGOLIS, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, p. 470.

Due to the fact that Disney movies are a cultural staple not only of the West, but of the whole world, they can be analysed from the perspective of the message they transmit to children, who constitute the public that is most receptive to the attempt of shaping their identities through the values they convey.<sup>5</sup> In a society that is constantly changing, Disney wishes to move forward with the change while maintaining its American traditional values, thus, over the time it brought to the screen various characters from various cultural contexts and perspectives.

Analysing briefly a few aspects of these films (*Aladdin* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1992), *The Lion King* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994), *Pocahontas* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1995), *Mulan* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1998), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2006)), both from a multicultural perspective and from a gender roles one, the message they convey is hardly the one that the producing company claims it to be.

In *Alladin*, the only female character is princess Jasmine, created by following the pattern of the other Disney princesses (Western characters) – long hair, slim waist, long legs, overemphasised feminine features, and she obviously has by her side a man who is always there to rescue her. Alladin also has the features and the accent of a(n) (innocent) American young man, while the villain looks as “oriental” as possible. Furthermore, the hero insists that people call him ‘Al’, typical American short form of a name, without any reference to an Arab name. The most evident racial stereotype – and probably the most offensive one – is in the verses of the opening theme song (*1001 Nights*) that state: “Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place/.../ Where they cut off your ear/ If they don't like your face/ It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.” Following the protests from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), after six months Disney altered verses four and five but maintained the sixth.

Another song with offensive message promoting the racial and the gender roles stereotypes is the one from *Mulan*, song stating that “(m)en want girls... with good breeding and a tiny waist.” Moreover, the portrayal of the characters in this film reflects the Western stereotypes regarding the Eastern population – they all have similar features, being hard to recognise them individually, and Mulan is exaggeratedly

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<sup>5</sup> Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 579.

masculinised – and although it could be argued that this is to reflect the idea of a strong and independent woman, it in fact represents the white population’s perception regarding the Asian woman’s image.

Another aspect that prompted a strong indignation by indigenous groups (Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink (CAC), 2006)<sup>6</sup> was the depiction of Carib Indians as savage cannibals in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*.

*The Lion King* is a very popular and well-liked animation film. Its proclaimed message is that good triumphs over evil, nevertheless the story promotes the idea that males must rule and that the elite of the society are entitled to this. The film does not depict any strong female characters, and Scar, the villain who rules the lower class of the kingdom, is assigned stereotypical gay characteristics. Although it is the first Disney animation film with the story taking place in Africa, it does not present cultural traits that are particular to the sub-Saharan African realities of life. According to Benshoff & Griffin (2004)<sup>7</sup>, the soundtrack (which lacks the African music authenticity) was composed by white musicians who were supposed to “give the music an African flavor.” Another aspect of the racial and class stereotypes is the fact that the hyenas (the other villains in the story) have African American and Latino accents, specific to urban ghettos, highlighting furthermore the idea that evil has a certain colour, and that it pertains to a certain class. At the same time, as Snyder & Chadha (2008)<sup>8</sup> remarked, although portrayed by African American actor James Earl Jones, king Mufasa speaks a cultivated British English.

Although Pocahontas is a real historical figure and the facts can be easily authenticated, the Disney film presents the events distortedly. According to historical documents (Golden, 2006)<sup>9</sup>, when Pocahontas meets John Smith, the male hero, she is approximately 10-12 years old, while he is around thirty. Pocahontas is depicted as being older in the film probably so as to support the development of the story’s romantic aspect. The film’s ending brings another idealised perspective when the English

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<sup>6</sup> The CAC Review, 2006, *apud* Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 584.

<sup>7</sup> *apud* Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 585.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 586.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 587.

(including John Smith), as an act of good faith and in order to keep the peace, leave Jamestown, while in reality the English remain in the New World, and the first colony is established precisely around Jamestown (Golden, 2006)<sup>10</sup>, and Pocahontas' destiny is the opposite of the one suggested in the film – in reality, she marries John Rolfe, travels across Europe being exploited for political purposes in the colonisation process, and dies of pneumonia within a short time.<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of the main female character's sexualisation, in addition to disregarding the real age, is represented by her physical features, which, as Aidman & Reese (1996)<sup>12</sup> observe, result in her bearing "a striking resemblance to a Barbie doll", and by her clothes (short dress with a slit), which are not even remotely comparable to "16th century Algonquian women's attire" (Strong, 1996)<sup>13</sup>, namely long dress with detachable sleeves (Golden, 2006).<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, in "Colors of the Wind" – the song that won an Academy Award for best musical score – Pocahontas refers to herself as being savage, and throughout the film Native Americans are constantly referred to as "savages", misconstruing even further the historical reality.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, just as in *The Lion King*, the difference between good and evil is also emphasised through the characters' accents, this time the villain (representing the oppressive colonist) has a British accent, while the male protagonist, John Smith (who is also English), has a contemporary American accent.<sup>16</sup>

Exploring whitewashing<sup>17</sup>, which means interpreting non-white characters by white actors and also displacing people of colour in a story in order to place the focus on white characters, even if current portrayals are not as offensive as those from nearly a century ago when these characters were depicted as being criminals, alcoholics, of low moral standards,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 587.

<sup>12</sup> *apud* Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 588.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine van WORMER & Cindy JUBY, Cultural representations in Walt Disney films: Implications for social work education, *Journal of Social Work*, 2016, 16(5), p. 588.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Amanda SCHERKER, Whitewashing Was One of Hollywood's Worst Habits. So Why Is It Still Happening? in *Entertainment*, Huffington Post online, 2014.

intellectually limited, being part of the story solely to bring comedic contrast to the main characters whose superior traits were thus highlighted, the mere fact that out of so many actors representing the racial minorities these roles do not go to them is proof of persistent racial inequality.

Among the examples over the time, Warner Oland (Swedish-American actor) portrays Chinese detective Charlie Chan in a series of films, of which the first was *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931). In *The Good Earth* (1937) – considered one of the most racist films in history – all the main characters were portrayed by white actors “wearing pounds of makeup and prosthetics to appear Chinese.”<sup>18</sup> Katharine Hepburn is Japanese Jade Tan in *Dragon Seed* (1944), Burt Lancaster portrays Apache warrior Massai in *Apache* (1954), and John Wayne (America’s star cowboy of the silver screen) plays the founder of the Mongol Empire Genghis Khan in *The Conqueror* (1956). The *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) has Marlon Brando as Sakini, an Okinawan resident, role about which even Brando confessed that it was “horrible” and “miscast”, and for which he had to undergo hours of makeup sessions daily in order to “appear even remotely” Japanese.<sup>19</sup> Charlton Heston, who was of Scottish and English descent, portrays Mexican DEA agent Miguel/Mike Vargas in *Touch of Evil* (1958). Mickey Rooney, American actor of Scottish origins, portrays I. Y. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961). Elizabeth Taylor is Cleopatra – the last pharaoh of ancient Egypt – in the homonymic film (1963), while for the modern adaptation Angelina Jolie was considered for the part. In 1965, British actor Laurence Olivier is the Moor Othello in the film adaptation of Shakespeare’s homonymic play, and Peter Sellers, English actor of Jewish ancestry, portrays Indian actor Hrundi V. Bakshi in *The Party* (1968). Jennifer Connelly, American of Irish, Norwegian, and Jewish descent, played Alicia Nash (mathematician John Nash’s wife in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)) who is of Hispanic heritage (El Salvador). In order to portray Marianne Pearl (whose father is Jewish and whose mother is African Chinese Cuban) in *A Mighty Heart* (2007), Angelina Jolie had to alter her appearance by darkening her skin and wearing a curly wig.<sup>20</sup> English actor Jim Sturgess is Ben Campbell, an

<sup>18</sup> Tanya GHAHREMANI, 25 Minority Characters That Hollywood Whitewashed, Complex, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Amanda SCHERKER, Whitewashing Was One of Hollywood’s Worst Habits. So Why Is It Still Happening? in *Entertainment*, Huffington Post online, 2014.

Asian American member of the MIT crew in *21* (2008), and, referring to British actor Max Minghella, Facebook's co-founder of Indian descent Divya Narendra stated that he was "initially surprised to see a white actor play him on screen" (*The Social Network*, 2010).<sup>21</sup> The prince of Persia is portrayed by American actor of Swedish and Jewish descent Jake Gyllenhaal (*The Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, 2010), and none of the film's main cast are of Eastern origin. Johnny Depp is Tonto, the Native American character in *The Lone Ranger* (2013), and Rooney Mara, American of English, Irish, French-Canadian, Italian, and German ancestry, is the Native American character Tiger Lily in *Pan* (2015).

In other instances, like in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010), the main characters who in original scripts or animation series belong to non-white groups are played by white actors, while villains and minor characters retain their initial race. Although these utterly unfortunate casting choices prompt critical adverse responses and indignation from the groups impacted by these situations, and from those interested in maintaining the authenticity of the original stories, the industry does not appear to want to evolve and depart from the years so heavily marked by discrimination – years that it has been trying to forget.

*Akeelah and the Bee* is another example of stereotyping and racial discrimination. Even though the message has a positive emotional charge, and the film wishes to promote universally applicable, legitimate values and rights, including those guaranteed by the American Constitution, it is constructed on a series of gender, racial, and class stereotypes. Akeelah, an African American girl, is 11 years old living in the ghettos of Los Angeles, in a single-parent family, with her widowed mother being the sole financial provider of the family (overworked and therefore very little sympathetic towards her youngest's interests), an older brother enrolled in the army and another one in the local gang, and a sister who has a baby. Akeelah is very intelligent and has an ability that embarrasses her – she can spell complicated, difficult words. But she does not want to be recognised as a "brainiac" because that does not suit the status she should have in school or in the neighbourhood she lives in. When the school's principal gives her the home address of the professor who would prepare her for the competition, Akeelah's awe is perplexing: "He lives around here? I thought he was important." (~ min. 15 in the film)

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

A highly inauthentic representation is the reality of the ghetto gangs, which is completely minimised when the leader of such a group becomes one of Akeelah's most fervent supporters<sup>22</sup>, even assisting her in preparing for the national phase of the competition.

Then the entire racist element is transferred to the Asian and African American groups when, throughout the film, the father of Akeelah's (Chinese) opponent berates him for not being able to "(barely) beat a little black girl", and an African American supporter of Akeelah states that he cannot stand the "Korean kid", actually referring to the aforementioned Chinese contestant, these being merely a part of the most evident stereotypes and discriminatory elements of the movie.

All these representations – gender roles, class, and racial inequalities, insensitivity towards cultural differences or the misrepresentation of multiculturalism, sexualisation of female characters in animation films, whitewashing non-white characters or using blackface, brownface, and yellowface, the interchangeability of certain groups' heritage when there is clear distinctiveness in appearance, language, accents, and culture, transferring stereotypes and racial tendencies towards other non-white groups – in all types of Hollywood productions prove that the industry is still undeniably anchored in discriminatory mentality and discourse, even when the intended objective is to oppose and rectify discrimination, and to promote the idea of equality, inclusion, and diversity.

The 2015 Hollywood Diversity Report's conclusion is as trenchant and indicative as possible: "Unfortunately, there's no magic bullet for Hollywood's race and gender problem. It's a multi-dimensional problem that requires innovative interventions on every front. It's *not* a problem that will simply fix itself in the normal course of business. [...] Flipping the script will require genuine commitment and considerable persistence."<sup>23</sup>

In the interim, the perpetual endeavour for all-encompassing political correctness endlessly overstretching to avoid cultural appropriation (discussed by some not solely in terms of race and ethnicity, but also gender identity and sexual orientation) manages to achieve ever new levels of ludicrousness, not only not accomplishing inclusion and diversity, but also having the opposite effect. By taking special pains to ensure appropriate

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<sup>22</sup> Peter BRADSHAW, *Akeelah and the Bee*, in *Film*, The Guardian online, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Darnell HUNT & Ana-Cristina RAMON, *2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script*, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies de la UCLA, 2015, p. 54.



discourse and representation, without discriminating or offending anyone, attempting to create new ways to be inclusive and diverse, as social crusaders keep coining new terms and generating new situations that are not only comical and peculiar but also move the discrimination and exclusion target from one group to another, Hollywood keeps following its decades-long pattern of discriminatory practices by devising ever fresh variations of its ever-established tradition of inequity. While strenuously and zealously chasing absolute inclusion, diversity, equity, and political correctness, the industry – as a(n) (im)perfect mirror of society – does not (want to) comprehend that it moves ever further away from the universally coveted aim, and with (almost) each step taken to eliminate existing prejudice and inequity, it actually manages to lay foundation for additional exclusionary and discriminatory practices and representations.

The solution cannot be constructing on already proven incorrect, inappropriate, damaged, compromised foundations – what it needs is a serious reconsideration and reformation of our (fundamental) humanity (or the lack thereof) and common sense.

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