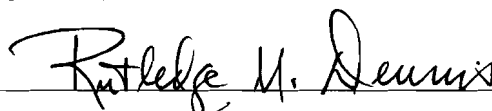


BETWEEN COLORBLIND AND COLORCONSCIOUS: SHIFTING RACIAL
IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD FILMS

by

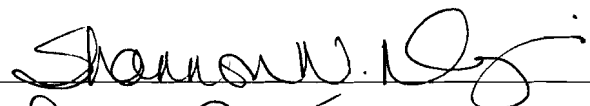
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A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
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Sociology

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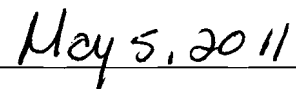




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Spring Semester 2011
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Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Shifting Racial Images in Contemporary
Hollywood Films

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at George Mason University

By

Jason Smith
Bachelor of Arts
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Spring Semester 2011
George Mason University
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to family, friends, and patient professors who had to put up with my zany ideas and sporadic undertakings. Appreciate all the ideas, feedback, and kicks in the butt.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those that had to put up with me while I undertook the writing of this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

BETWEEN COLORBLIND AND COLORCONSCIOUS: SHIFTING RACIAL IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD FILMS

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George Mason University, 2011

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The current racial context in American society is one that race scholars define as “colorblind.” In which the proliferation of racial inequalities are seen as individually based rather than accounting for the ways in which racially inequality has been built into the structures of societal institutions. One of the understudied areas in this field is that of the mass media, and in particular popular culture and the area of film. Taking this into account, the author seeks to look at the ways in which colorblind ideology is put forward in the space of Hollywood films. However, the proliferation of one ideology cannot be so simple, in that opposing ideas and images are also at play as well. Films which feature a level of black stardom that exhibit themes of colorconsciousness are present, yet constrained within the boundaries of colorblind ideology. This emergence of colorconsciousness, while small, is quite new and offers potentials for further exploration in the areas of race relations in 21st century.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

As our society has moved into a new century, some scholars (Brown et al. 2003; Holtzman 2000; Entman & Rojecki 2000) discuss the idea of a “colorblind” society, where the issue of color is no longer a reason for inequalities. The problem, however, is that we live in a society where African-Americans still face disproportionate inequalities (U.S. Census 2007a, 2007b): the per capita income between blacks (\$17,902) and whites (\$30,431); the poverty rate of blacks being 24.3% while that of whites is 8.2%; a little less than half (46%) of blacks own their homes while almost three-fourths (74%) of whites own theirs. “Colorblind racism” (Carr 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2003) explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics; where “whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:2). Brown and his colleagues (2003) note how “racial realists” contribute to the idea of a colorblind society by stating that racial inequalities are not because of white racism but by the failure of individuals to take responsibility for themselves.

Newer forms of racial inequalities are thus reproduced through new racism patterns which are subtle, institutional, and apparently “nonracial.” If there has been a shift in the way people view race in our society then it is important to observe how race is

viewed by analyzing features of our culture. The culture of a society is a “complex whole that consists of all the ways we think and do and everything we have as members of society” (Bierstedt 1970:123). What are central to any culture are the norms and ideas that are at play within, which become crucial in the formation of ideologies. Social institutions thus act to socialize members into a culture by making certain norms and ideas more central than others. As an example, mass media is one of the social institutions which socialize members of a society into the cultural ideas and values of the majority. Regarding culture, McQuail (2000) states that the mass media constitutes a primary source of definitions and images of social reality and are the most ubiquitous expression of a shared identity; the mass media also provides a shared “cultural environment” for most people – more so than any other single institution. Since the mass media is one of the largest social institutions in our society, it is important to analyze it in conjunction with the idea of a colorblind society – where blackness or color must demonstrate the alleged colorblindness of contemporary economic opportunity (Collins 2005). The area of mass media under analysis in this study is the motion picture. The portrayals African-Americans in film has been extensively studied before (Hardwick 1946; Lemons 1977; Bernardi 1996; Manatu-Rupert 2000; etc), as newer perspectives address the perpetuation of what can be called a “colorblind mentality” (Gabbard 2004). Thus, the goal of this study is to assess the way in which colorblind ideology displays itself in contemporary film.

Theory

Society is “a web of patterned interactions...[where] it is the task of sociology to study the forms of these interactions as they occur and reoccur in diverse historical periods and cultural settings” (Simmel cited in Staudenmeier 1997:8). Conflict within a society, according to Simmel, occurs between individuals and/or groups when one is threatened by the other. Once conflict emerges, hatred is “directed against a member of the group, not from personal motives, but because the member represents a danger to the preservation of the group” (Simmel 1964:48-49). Simmel’s work examines the relationship between the individual and the group at the “social level” – where as a collective, we seek to differentiate in society that which is rare and new from that which is old and traditional, thereby establishing a contrast between the individual and the mass (Frisby 2002). Simmel’s concept of “the stranger” is especially valuable in this regard, as it refers to the individual not “as a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and *stays* tomorrow” (Simmel 1950:402, emphasis added). The stranger who comes into the group is typically foreign and an outsider, whereby in staying rather than leaving, the stranger has put himself/herself against the society in which he/she is present. Coser (1977) comments that the stranger, in Simmel’s sense, is fixed within a particular place in the group, a position he/she never belonged to in the beginning. Another term that is similar to Simmel’s stranger concept and perhaps used more frequently today is the “other.” Those who are marginalized by the group become the stranger/other. Binary terms such as white/black or male/female are meant to establish meaning in relation to their counterpart (Halpin 1989). By comparing such

binary terms and labels to one another, the concept of the stranger denotes a socially created position in which the individual must act out his/her assigned roles.

Important to any ideology is the impact the ideology has on people within the society. Although ideological assumptions are held by the vast majority in a society, they are not necessarily accurate descriptions of social realities; instead much of ideology is oversimplification, distortion, and even myth (Marger 2005). In Simmel's view of culture, the spirit creates something independent and objective, but by doing this, the created element "is predestined to an autonomous development, which still consumes the forces of human subjects...without elevating them to its own height" (Simmel 1997:72). This is known as Simmel's "tragedy of culture," where the growth of culture creates negative implications that impose themselves on the individual. While the stranger enters into the group, he/she (or a collective group of strangers) becomes burdened by the established roles that culture has laid before him/her. Simmel's work was informed by a dialectical approach which focused on the connections and tensions between the society and the individual (Coser 1977). The conflict between individuals and social groups that Simmel asserts is that it doesn't solely exist side by side, but is intimately integrated by numerous cross-cutting conflicts within the society (Wallace & Wolf 2006). Thus, the notion of the stranger is of one who is separated from the group, but rather not one completely alienated from the group; rather, the stranger is also kept relatively close at times. By being neither a full outsider nor a full insider, the stranger is blessed with an objectivity that can be defined as a freedom by being bound to no commitments (Simmel 1950). It is here we see the depth of conflict which occurs between individuals and

groups. While those who are labeled a stranger, or other, are viewed in opposition and conflict to the more dominating group, the stranger often “receives the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional” (Simmel 1950:404).

Simmel’s concept of the stranger and the tragedy of culture provide theoretical foundation(s) for studying ideological power and the perpetuation of stereotyped images in film. Regarding colorblindness, Simmel’s use of the stranger is fitting, since colorblindness has always been a part of American history in its exclusion of African Americans (Carr 1997). In approaching the mass media sociologically, McQuail (1985) states that a greater emphasis must be placed on the part played by the social structure and external social forces in defining and allocating the roles of ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ and relating these to each other. McQuail also points out that the media is not a neutral channel, but that messages are made up of theories, traditions, norms, and practices belonging to complex social institutions. Due to the growing power of the media and its place within a capitalist society, it is important to draw on ideas suggested by cultural Marxist; one of their basic arguments is that the globalization of the media and economic institutions allows the ruling classes to spread their ideology, allowing those in power to perpetuate the idea that “success is a function of willpower...and that those who fail have only themselves to blame” (Berger 2000:77).. In 1948, Harold Lasswell described three major functions of mass communications as surveillance, correlation, and transmission – all of which served to uphold a culture of those that controlled it (cited in Wilson et al. 2003:36). In the late 1930s and 1940s, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School saw

the culture industry of the media as a system of “mass deception” where the public was lulled into accepting oppression (Starr 2004). As they looked at mass-mediated cultural objects (film, music, books) within the context of industrial production, scholars of the Frankfurt School saw the culture industries as exhibiting the same features as other products of mass production – commodification, standardization, and massification (Kellner 1995). The modes of production and who is producing the cultural object is of importance in the economic sense; in which cultural forms emerge in specific historical situations that serve particular socioeconomic interest and carry out important social functions (Kellner 2008). The Payne Fund Studies, which took place between 1929 and 1932, involved researchers looking at how film affected particular audiences, but suffered from falling under the hypodermic needle assumption that values/images are “injected” into an audience, thereby allowing no room for agency (Tudor 2000). Mills (1956) also made the point that mass communication is a one-way process; where few people can communicate to a greater number and the audience has no effective way of answering back. While these views have been characterized as extremes which function to produce false consciousness – ignoring the diversity of values within the ruling class and the media (Chandler 2000), those scholars and their views reflected a particular historical time frame.

Rather than looking at the media only as a unified entity which transmits particular points of view, it is important to introduce the work of Gramsci and his use of the term “hegemony.” Hegemony refers to the ways in which consent is given by the population to “the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental

group” (Gramsci [1971] 2005:12). What is at play behind hegemony is the control and usage of ideology. Here, ideology is used to explain the unconscious mechanisms that bind different social subjects to a common society, and thus explain the makeup and extension of the culture. Under hegemony, ideology isn’t directly imposed, but is asserted through shifting alliances and compromises between individuals and groups (Chambers 1986). It is important to note, however, that certain individuals hold more power and material goods to promote their ideology over others; the prestige that the dominant group enjoys is because of its position in the world of production (Gramsci [1971] 2005), in which their aim is to resist social change and to maintain the status quo. While this sounds similar to the earlier notions of control mentioned above, one of the key features of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony was the reintroduction of will and individual consciousness (e.g., Hawley 1980) as they interact with mediated messages and images from dominating group(s). Turner (1999) states that although culture is subjected to hegemonic constraints it is a process rather than a permanently achieved state – where hegemonic interest and constituent ideologies can change. It becomes important to understand how Gramsci’s idea of hegemony is reflected in the production of films and the ideas and themes portrayed in films.

Film as “Big Business”

As the media industry has grown, it has expanded to include many products and technologies. Croteau and Hoynes (2003) state that since the mid-1980s major media companies have been engaged in a “feeding frenzy, swallowing up other media firms to form ever-larger conglomerates.” As a result of this growth, these large companies often

exploit the synergy created by having multiple media outlets – where the packaging of a single idea across multiple media allows corporations to generate revenue from a ideas that begins with a single core concept. As such, market pressures force film companies to make large profitable returns on their products, and homogenization, which is the imitation of previous successes, has become an unintentioned outcome of companies which seek to minimize risk and maximize profits (Croteau & Hoynes 2001). While some movies with more complicated and varied representation of minorities get made, they generally do not break the \$25 million barrier (Entman & Rojecki 2000), thereby dissuading film companies from producing films which more accurately reflect minority *characters*.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the motion picture industry was primarily an urban, working-class audience drawn heavily from new immigrant groups, and eventually came under the control of immigrant entrepreneurs (Starr 2004:295). The 1920s were boom years of massive growth and capital investments for the movies; Gomery (1979) states that in the 1920s the U.S. film industry became a complete “big business” where Hollywood-owned circuits increasingly presented a more standardized product on a national level, all directed by a central authority in New York. Using the example of the Publix Theatre chain, Gomery notes how the “scientific management” of these theatres created a universal system to maximize profits and that the merger of Balaban and Katz with Paramount Pictures established a dominating presence, resulting in Paramount theatres becoming the largest theatre chain in America. This vertically integrated system was so beneficial to the theatre chain and the film production studio

that it survived the depression, and served as the cornerstone of Hollywood's monopoly power. By the 1930s, movies had gone from an early decentralized and largely independent film production system to a corporate consolidation and a narrowing of ideological boundaries where films became longer and the star system was created, which increased production costs (Starr 2004). For example, between 1972 and 1984, a "New Hollywood" era had begun with blockbuster films in the forefront. The success of films like *The Godfather* and *Jaws* showed that the "right ingredients" and a consistent "formula" could capture a huge audience and that a blockbuster mentality could be created to bring in more profit (Baker & Faulkner 1991). Concentration of the industry on producing blockbuster films has made it harder for more modest and independent films to gain publicity or even distribution (Turner 1999). Thus, the film industry today is dominated by a small group of production/distribution companies known as "the majors" that maintain ties to "independent" film companies to give the impression of diversity, all the while using these independents to test and experiment with new actors/actresses and story lines (Garnham 1990).

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Film is an intricate site of cultural expression on race, where “media images still contain traces of long-standing cultural presumptions not only of essential racial difference but of the hierarchy that idealizes ‘Whiteness’” (Entman & Rojecki 2000:57). Thus, type-casting has been a curse in Hollywood. As Leon Hardwick said in the 1940s, there has been a “persistent typing of the entire Negro race as menials and buffoons, a tradition that has been followed ever since the establishment of the American film industry” (Hardwick 1946:234). Wong (cited Wiegman 2000) further elaborates, by stating that the stereotype is a form of representation in film that produces non-white cultures and characters as static and one-dimensional, operating between two simple poles: good/bad, noble/savage, loyal/traitorous, or kind-hearted/villainous. As such, mainstream Hollywood is severely limited to the extent that it will advance socially critical and radical positions; where representations of class, gender, race, and society are presented within rigid boundaries (Kellner 1995).

Portrayal of African Americans in Film

Lemons (1977) stated that the minstrel show was America’s first national and popular entertainment form; producing two classic stereotypes of blacks, the ‘Zip Coon’ and ‘Jim Crow.’ But the portrayal of blacks in modern film owes its beginning to the representations offered by G.W. Griffith in his 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which

Wiegman (2000) claims as the most important film to the history of the stereotype. The film legitimized segregation in America and fostered chauvinistic racial unity among whites, even becoming a recruitment tool for the Ku Klux Klan (Benshoff & Griffin 2004). While the film met with protest from black civil rights groups, it set a standard for Hollywood films in the direction of how to portray African-Americans on screen (Gallagher 1982; Ukpokodu 2000). Blacks in film were either not shown so as to avoid controversy, which would have potentially threatened a growing entertainment industry, or when blacks did enter into film, they did so in terms setup by Griffith's film as the "other". Bogle (1989) identifies five stereotypes that were prevalent in Hollywood films around the timeframe *The Birth of a Nation* was produced:

1. "The Tom" was a black house slave who was faithful to the master.
2. "The Coon" was a foolish buffoon that avoided work.
3. "The Tragic Mulatto" was a female character of mixed race whose life usually ended for the worst because of her "drop of black blood."
4. "The Mammy" was Tom's equivalent, typically an overweight woman who cared for the master's children.
5. "The Black Buck" was a hypermasculine male who threatened white establishment and was introduced in Griffith's film.

During the 1930s Hollywood turned to the 'southern' – presenting an idyllic, pastoral region of large plantations and gentry which was sustained by faithful slaves and showcased the rich (Campbell Jr 1993). Women were asexual wives and mothers, people of color were stereotyped servants, and homosexuals vanished from film altogether (Benshoff & Griffin 2004). It was only during, and after, World War II when images of blacks began to change in film. War movies of the time promoted American unity and showed members of different racial and ethnic groups working together as a unit

(Benshoff & Griffin 2004). A pivotal achievement in the representation of blacks in film was made in the film *The Negro Soldier*. With the success of *The Negro Soldier*, black filmmakers and writers had the chance to cultivate their craft of filmmaking (Cripps 1993). Cripps states that the film was significant in becoming a message of racial tolerance and marked a success in efforts to produce a positive image of blacks in film. Thus, films of the 1940s saw a decline of southern-oriented Hollywood films and a downplay of overt racial stereotypes. Emphasis on morale building as part of the war effort increased the use of black actors and a more interested black audience that were more observant of the roles assigned in film (Hardwick 1946).

The 'Race Films' of the 1940s, increased opportunities for black actors and questioned issues of race and America, but these were brought to a halt in the 1950s. The Red Scare of the early 1950s was a factor in Hollywood's decision to stop making films which questioned or challenged American values (Benshoff & Griffin 2004). Movies began to revert back to older traditions where blacks were presented in friendly and unthreatening ways (Van Deburg 1993). Nesteby (1982) marks the similarities of the portrayal of blacks in 1950s film to those of the 1930s, where the premier roles were that of "entertainer or coon."

The Civil Rights Movement and the rise of a black militant political movement shaped Hollywood's portrayals again during the 1960s and 1970s. "Blaxploitation films" of the era were primarily action-adventure films which showcased blacks in leading roles, and in which action took place in ghetto settings. Older stereotypes were dropped in "favor of more assertive and multidimensional black characters, as well as black-focused

themes and narratives; but throughout the Blaxploitation period, Hollywood developed more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen” (Guerrero 1993:70). However, while certain films made critical and analytical approaches to national institutions during the 1970s, a majority of the commercial films barely represented the dominate “political energies” of the era – where there was an absence of such issues as struggles over racism, the rise of feminism, and the public emergence of a gay and lesbian subculture (Sklar 1994:322). In the period around 1970, Sklar (1994) notes, there seemed to be two discourses: one in society, and one in the movies.

In observing the changing role of stereotypes in film, Artz (2003) links the expanding black middle-class to its impact on the changing portrayals of blacks in film. Artz notes that images of successful blacks working in established institutions have been accented more than the poor and working-class blacks by a corporate-run mass culture; with the new interracial buddy films, starting predominately in the 1980s, taking a firm root in the Hollywood movie formula. Artz also claims that buddy films help blacks and whites accept already existing social conditions, and reassured America of its continuing goodness. Artz signals out four characteristics of these films which attract both black and white audiences, which leads to a boosting of profits. Black characters in these films attract black audiences because (Artz 2003:72-76):

1. Black culture is recognizable and important to the story.
2. White characters provide convenient foils for the “street-smart wiles of the black buddy.”
3. Strong and smart black characters.
4. Pleasing interracial fantasy, as the black character works with the white one on an equal footing.

Likewise, there are four characteristics that attract the white audience:

1. There is a stereotype of black culture, with most black characters being hustlers/criminals/athletes and generally disrespectful.
2. White authority is still managed; while black characters might present some authority, they ultimately fall under the charge of white authority.
3. Black characters are isolated from their community and seldom have a romantic love interest.
4. Hegemonically comforting interracial fantasy, where fictional friendships ignore institutional racism.

In viewing detective films from the 1980s and 90s, Gates (2004) claims that Hollywood only allows the black male to be the hero when he is contained by a lack of sexuality or action, and is isolated from the black community. The reason that Hollywood does this is not to offend its white mainstream audience. During the 1980s, Gates states that the black male in the detective films was mainly a sidekick to the white hero. This combination of the white and black actor presented as buddies proved to be a winning formula for Hollywood with its mainstream white audience, and also the black audience. The 1990s saw black actors becoming leads in many detective films, however, they were still given a partner with which to rely on – a white female partner. The outcome of the white female partner in these detective films was one that denied the black male any romantic involvement and denied him the ability to perform heroically. The female would generally take over when physically bringing down the bad guy, therefore showing how “the female body becomes somewhat masculinized and the black body becomes somewhat feminized” (Gates 2004:24). Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin’s (2006) study of *Rush Hour 2* found that while the film deviates from the black/white buddy formula, using a black/asian buddy formula, the film reveals that racial hierarchy

is crucial to the film's narrative and that characters consistently conform to negative minority stereotypes. While both film leads were minority characters, they still operated under white patriarchal power. The authors note how both characters are "symbolically castrated men" that don't challenge white masculinity; where Jackie Chan's character is funny and desexualized and Chris Tucker's character being infantile and unable to protect himself without Chan's help.

Another avenue in which black actors, and some actresses, have made in-roads into film has been through comedies. The black comedian has been a successful role for black actors in Hollywood film. While black comedians might make the jump from stand-up to film, Haggins (2003) states that the black comic is constantly being retooled for mainstream consumption. In observing the careers paths of Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, Haggins found that these two actors had to negotiate their comic identities; moving from comedy routines that addressed issues of race to narrow film genres. Black comedians are thus in film roles where they are the "fish out of water" and where their jokes are part of a comedy of color-coded, colorblindness. They then become the sole representation of their race as a character in a story that is cut off from the black community. Boskin and Dorinson (1985) state that black humor has moved along two tracks: accommodating white society and functioning as a mechanism for survival, where black artists have had to participate in self-caricature, where succeeding meant perpetuating vile stereotypes.

Similar to Wong's notion that stereotyped portrayals operate between two simple poles, the portrayal of African-American females in film has been addressed in a similar

way. Observing black women's sexuality in film, Manatu-Rupert (2000) states that films serve as a cultural lens through which black female sexuality is viewed; making note of two extremes of black females in film: prude and slut. The blatant sexuality of the black female portrayed is contrasted by the opposite of a subdued sexuality in the other. The author makes the general claim that the prude/slut duality may cause black women to be seen as not needing protection because they are self-sufficient and not having claims for protection because they give up that right.

Two very modern stereotypes in film are the "Black Angel" and "Magical Negro." Gabbard (2004) coins the term Black Angel as a character who works to displace the realities of black history into more viewer-friendly narratives while also separating the character from any real connection with black culture. By disassociating the Black Angel with other blacks it suggest "that white Americans can like individual black people but not black culture" (Gabbard 2004:173). In contrast to the Black Angel is the Magical Negro, which is a character in a film whose sole purpose is to help the white character achieve his/her goal (Kempley 2003). Commenting on the Magical Negro stereotype, film critic Noel Wood (2002) states that the Magical Negro is "stereotypical, outdated, and most importantly, racist as hell beneath the surface." Wood points out how movies which feature the Magical Negro are taken at face value and therefore seen as not harmful. In an interview with film director Spike Lee, his take on the Magical Negro character was that it was "old grateful slave shit." Lee would no doubt accept the view that the Magical Negro is reminiscent of past racial discrimination and works as a method of keeping blacks in that position (Crowdus & Georgakas 2001).

As stereotypes of African-Americans have altered through the decades, the focus should move from stereotypes to ideologies that shape both the theme and production of Hollywood films. Bryson and Davis (2010) note how the focus on stereotypes limits research in regards to race and gender because stereotypes place emphasis on individualized perceptions rather than structural processes. The focus on which ideologies are being used in contemporary films becomes the main object in which a sociology of race/ethnicity and the media must study.

CHAPTER 3: Research Question and Methods

Research Question

With the continually changing role that black characters play in Hollywood, new stereotypes seem to be created each decade in response to changes within society. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that racial ideology in our society is changing from overt to covert methods of racial oppression; this exploratory study analyzes how the issue of race is handled in popular culture. For the purposes of this study, the medium will be “blockbuster” Hollywood films, and the subject the ways race is acknowledged throughout the films. The main inquiry of this study is to assess if contemporary films take on a more “colorblind” ideology that ignores race, or does it include race as part of the world that the characters in the film inhabit? While both colorblindness and “colorconsciousness” can point towards conflict, the type of conflict they represent is fundamentally different – where colorblindness has the ability to mask important issues related to race.

Methodology

The sample used in this study was Hollywood-produced blockbuster films made within the past 20 years (1989-2009). A random purposive sample of 25 films was drawn. Movies classified as blockbusters were those that had box-office returns of over \$100 million – a list of the top-grossing Hollywood films was obtained from

BoxOfficeMojo (2009). Since a purposive sampling technique is used, the reason for selecting blockbuster films is that these films rely on particular formulas (certain plot structures and stereotype usage of race and gender), and are so successful indicates that a larger percentage of the film viewing audience sees these films, compared to other films made during the same period.

Animated and computer-generated films were excluded from the sampling population due to the use of animals/creatures or other would-be lifeless objects used as characters in the film plots. Movies which were still in theatres that had not been released for home viewing were excluded as well. In order to observe black characters, blockbuster films which did not have a black actor listed in the top five billing list were excluded as well. With the exclusions listed above a total of 82 films (approximately 20% of the top-grossing films in America) were left from which to randomly sample 25 for the study. In drawing the random sample, the 82 eligible films were first alphabetized then a random number generator was used (Random 2009) to select the 25 films. The films selected for analysis can be viewed in Table 1 – along with information regarding the films' company of production and year of release.

Since the unit of observation for this study was motion pictures, the most appropriate technique was that of a content analysis. While content analysis is considered by some as quantitative work, Weber (1985) states that the best content analysis research uses both qualitative and quantitative techniques. To aide in the reproducibility of content analysis work, the researcher must create categories that can be numerically observed and analyzed. This procedure can be considered a quantitative

Table 1: *List of films selected for study*

Film Title	Production Company	Year Made
2 Fast 2 Furious	Universal	2003
The 40-Year-Old Virgin	Universal	2005
American Gangster	Universal	2007
Bringing Down the House	Touchstone	2003
Collateral	Dreamworks	2004
Daddy Day Care	Columbia/TriStar	2003
Doctor Dolittle	20 th Century Fox	1998
Enemy of the State	Touchstone	1998
Eraser	Warner Brothers	1996
Evan Almighty	Universal	2007
Ghost	Paramount	1990
Hancock	Sony Pictures	2008
Hitch	Columbia/TriStar	2005
Jerry Maguire	Columbia/TriStar	1996
Lethal Weapon 3	Warner Brothers	1992
The Matrix	Warner Brothers	1999
The Matrix Reloaded	Warner Brothers	2003
Mission: Impossible II	Paramount	2000
Ocean's Thirteen	Warner Brothers	2007
Rush Hour	New Line Cinema	1998
Star Wars: Episode III	20 th Century Fox	2005
The Sum of All Fears	Paramount	2002
Traffic	USA Home Entertainment	2000
X2: X-men United	20 th Century Fox	2003
X-Men: The Last Stand	20 th Century Fox	2006

technique. But as Berg (2007) points out, the quantitative techniques only provide a means of identifying, organizing, indexing, and retrieving. When dealing with the study of popular culture, content analysis allows us to study the characteristics of messages delivered through the mass media (Schutt 2006), with the objective being to ultimately move from the text back to the culture which produced it (Turner 1999). The strength of using content analysis for studying the media comes from its use of the manifest and latent content. Using mainly quantitative techniques to measure the manifest content is the simplest level of content analysis research. The researcher is counting the elements which are physically present and are seen as the surface structure of the message (Berg 2007; Esterberg 2002). The latent content focuses on the underlying meanings that are within the document of study (the film in this instance), which would require a more interpretive reading from the researcher. Both the manifest and latent content were addressed in the study.

Assessing Colorblindness and Colorconsciousness

Valentine (1998) states that in the modern era designation has become especially significant, where there is a principle role in identifying the other. The measurement of colorblindness was no easy task – since it seems contradictory to purposefully label the other while saying that race/color doesn't matter. It became important to see where that contradiction existed, since labeling of the other has seemed to mask itself. It is often taught that it is racist to notice racial differences we see and a “badge” of our lack of prejudice to say that we don't notice them (Holtzman 2000). To guide the researcher in assessing the use of colorblindness in these films, it was useful to refer back to the

literature to look at key points made by other scholars. The lack of connection with the black community (Gates 2004; Haggins 2003) is important to keep in mind while viewing these films, as well as interracial buddy formula which uses fictional friendships to ignore institutionalized racism (Artz 2003). Important to the colorblind mentality is the ability of individuals to make it on their *own*, without the assistance of others. This point was crucial to the researcher when viewing and analyzing the films selected for study. Whereby by observing how black characters deal with their socially given roles within the film (their connection to the black community, how they interact with the main character and other white characters, their social position in the film, and whether there is background given into their lives), it can be observed whether colorblindness is evident. Three traits were used to assess colorblindness: (1) whether black characters are separated from the black community or issues affecting the black community; (2) whether blacks are assimilated into white society (relationship with main/secondary white characters); (3) whether individualized portrayals are given to achievement or fault for the character's social economic status or to problem the character is involved in for the plot of the film.

Defining whether colorconsciousness exists in these films will reflect the opposite of methods used to code for colorblindness. As colorblindness seeks to individualize race and ignore the inequalities that are linked to it, the process of coding colorconsciousness seeks to make apparent the ways in which race is a factor in the daily lives of black characters. Colorconsciousness was coded as: (1) whether black characters are connected to the black community or issues affecting the black community; (2) if black characters

are in white society/setting, but separate from it in a way; (3) whether structural/macro reason for character's social economic status or to problem the character is involved in for the plot of the film. Important to observing the colorblind and colorconscious aspects portrayed in these films, open and descriptive coding took place beyond the categories created for each. The main focus was placed on the interaction between characters of different races and how race was understood and experienced between them.

The code sheet used for this study (see APPENDIX A) was developed to guide the researcher through each film and to assist in the measurement of colorblind and colorconscious imagery – as displayed by the characters in the films. The three categories used to assess colorblind and colorconsciousness were based on previous studies. To determine if a film fit into each category, an overview of the collected notes was performed at the end of each film viewing. Based off what was viewed, the researcher used a dichotomous “yes” and “no” scale to label each category. Bivariate correlations, using a significance level of $p < .05$, were also calculated to determine the relationship between colorblindness and colorconsciousness – this being the appropriate method of analysis due to the dichotomist view that characters should either be perceived as colorblind or colorconscious. This method allowed the researcher to determine if colorblindness and colorconsciousness were related when pertaining to the characters in the sampled films; and if related, the magnitude and direction of the relationship. To look for trends of the type of characters that are portrayed, basic demographics were coded as well: usage of the interracial buddy formula, age category (under 30, 30-50, and over 50), sex (male and female), social economic status (low, middle, and upper), type of

role being played (lead, primary, and secondary), number of scenes, scenes that either show the character in the foreground or background, and whether or not the characters are alone in their scenes or if those scenes are shared with other main characters.

CHAPTER 4: Results

Analysis

Colorblindness was significantly associated with five variables, three of which showed *weak negative correlations*: films with black female stars ($r = -.145$), films with one black male star ($r = -.275$), and films made in 2004-09 ($r = -.282$). Two variables showed *moderate positive correlations*: films with more than one black star ($r = .318$) and films which were made 1989-93 ($r = .473$, $p < .05$). Colorconsciousness was significantly associated with six variables, three of which showed *weak negative correlations*: science fiction films ($r = -.134$), films made in 1989-93 ($r = -.144$), and films made in 1994-98 ($r = -.134$). One variable showed a *moderate weak correlation*: films that were dramas ($r = -.457$, $p < .05$); one variable showed a *weak positive correlation*: films made in 2004-09 ($r = .282$); one variable showed a *moderate positive correlation*: action films ($r = .468$, $p < .05$).

Noted earlier was the benefit in utilizing a content analysis that relied on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. While the correlations listed above show the degree of association between colorblindness and colorconsciousness, they don't fully extrapolate the images and narratives observed in the films analyzed. For example, a majority of the correlations were weak, making it more difficult to draw direct inferences about certain film characteristics. In order to create or construct categories supporting a

deeper analysis, two approaches were taken to enhance the qualitative analysis. During the viewing and coding of the films, an “ethnographic content analysis” (Altheide 1987) approach was used to collect data. This approach adheres to pre-established categories and variables used for the study, yet allows for new categories and variables to emerge – which can be used to verify theoretical relationships. Throughout the coding process, the researcher was reflexive in viewing the films and engaged in a constant comparison between them throughout the coding process; this allowed for notes and links between films to be made throughout the coding stage. The second approach was more traditional, in that a thematic analysis based on the correlations was used to search for analytical themes (Crabtree & Miller 1999). Through these approaches, three themes emerged with which to understand the nature of both colorblindness and colorconsciousness in contemporary film: the blending of social settings, helper reversals, and identifying racists.

Emergent Themes

Blending of Social Settings

One unique factor in a colorblind era in U.S. society is the entrance of blacks into once all-white social settings (work, neighborhoods, and friendship groups). This is a contemporary reality and represents a world where formal racial segregation is no longer present or accepted. The other side of this coin is the recognition of embedded racial segregation practices that exists despite the presence of a large number of blacks in more integrated social settings than in the past (Adelman 2004; Iceland & Wilkes 2006). Within the films studied, there is a mixing of the social worlds of black and white

characters –in the work place, residency, and friendship groups.

The concept and use of space is significant to note because it is linked to the acceptance, or non-acceptance, of blacks in specified social settings. The films depict a variety of places where characters came into contact, although most focus on the work place. The ideas of colorblindness and colorconsciousness exist as two opposite ends of a spectrum in which the images and narratives of these films fall in between. The fully colorblind or the fully colorconscious does not exist in any of the social settings. What does appear in the films is a convoluted image of the ways in which colorblindness and colorconsciousness are exemplified within certain social contexts and settings. This is why in varied settings blacks are seen as both encroaching upon spaces and/or a part of those spaces.

Workplace

In a number of films the characters interact in an interracial setting in the work place. This exists in films such as *Dr. Dolittle*, *Enemy of the State*, *Eraser*, *Rush Hour*, *The Sum of All Fears*, and *Traffic*, which exemplify the notion that blacks are in positions comparable to whites – positions such as doctors, lawyers, and police officers. The mere presence of the black characters raises no alarms or causes any problems for their fellow co-workers. Yet a distinct absence of discussions about home life is characteristic of the black characters in relation to their white co-workers. Other than their one white co-worker friend, black characters in the workplace generally have no one with whom to share their concerns. This is seen, for example, in the film *Dr. Dolittle* in which John Dolittle, amidst the selling of his successful medical practice to a large medical company,

becomes burdened with finding out he can talk to animals while also trying to find time to devote to his family. Although the addition of a supernatural ability is added to the narrative, John is forced to undergo the stress and physical inconvenience of performing needed daily activities by himself. While throughout the film he is able to vent his frustrations verbally to the animals with which he comes into contact, he is utterly alone in the workplace. Likewise, in *Enemy of the State*, Robert Dean works as a successful lawyer in an expensive Washington DC law firm, in which he is almost completely alone and his personal and home life kept separate from his work place. Despite being friends with a white fellow-lawyer at his firm, when his world is turned upside-down by the antagonists of the film, Robert's friend becomes non-existent, and only when information out of context about his life is brought to the firm's attention do they take notice of it by firing Robert. The extent to which blacks enter the work place in these films is limited; they live a contained and lonely existence that is often marginal, and to a certain degree, separated from whites.

Workplace and the Home

Other films observed depicted interracial settings both in the work place and in the home of the characters. Due to racial mixing and interaction both at work *and* in the home (or community), more interracial friendships were seen in these films. Films which demonstrated this were *40 Year Old Virgin*, *Bringing Down the House*, *Daddy Day Daycare*, *Jerry Maguire*, and *Lethal Weapon 3*. The common thread throughout these films was the use of the "buddy formula" (Artz 2003) – where the interracial friendships exhibited were usually kept one-on-one; that is, between the white main character and his

one black friend, with the exception of *Daddy Day Care* where the tables were turned and a black character was the main character. The interracial friendships in these films, like the films which only displayed interracial mixture in the workplace, are placed within certain boundaries. However, these boundaries are less rigid than films with depicting an interracial workplace. The singularity of the black friend heightens their presence yet also offers moments of deep colorconsciousness to emerge, offering a glimpse of issues that affect the black community.

Korgen's (2007) study on black/white friends revealed three behavioral patterns by which the friends dealt with issues of race in their friendships: ignoring or avoiding race, joking about race, and seriously discussing racial issues. Certain films (*40 Year Old Virgin* and *Daddy Day Care*) ignored racial issues, yet the other films walked a tightrope of joking about race and discussing racial matters. *Bringing Down the House* and *Jerry Maguire* had moments in which colorconsciousness was apparent – whether it is Charlene (in *Bringing Down the House*) commenting that whites refuse to step outside what they deem acceptable, or Rod (in *Jerry Maguire*) commenting that he has to “dance” for NFL corporates – but positioned such issues in contradictory terms.

Most notable was the film *Bringing Down the House* in this regard. The contact between Peter, a successful white male lawyer, and Charlene, a black female who is an escaped convict, moves between the fine line of joking/discussing racial issues. Peter's social world takes place in an upper-middle class environment – ranging from the high rise city law firm, the exclusive country club, and the pristine suburban neighborhood. The introduction of Charlene, from the moment she first appears on Peter's doorstep and

greeting him with a *swerve* of the head and shoulders, is a break in this social world. Various jokes throughout the film are made at Charlene's expense in which she has to play along in order to stay in this social world. An example of such an occurrence is when Charlene surprises Peter at his country club and the *only* reason Peter can give to explain her presence there is to say she is his children's nanny. While giving into Peter's plea to play along, Charlene responds,

"Yessir. Now I'm gonna go on down to the pool wit the child'n, maybe we can make fun of the white folks again, huh kids?"

While giving into Peter's needs to "keep her under wraps," Charlene exhibits her own form of resistance that calls out both Peter's and his fellow whites' subtle forms of discrimination. The use of a satirical "slave" dialect to address Peter's actions creates a counterpoint to the contemporary setting in which the film takes place. By invoking the slave response, Charlene is able to signal the institutionalized racism that is present at the country club – where the presence of a black female can only be described by her position as a care taker. Examples like this occur often in the film, and comedy is often introduced to negate its too serious impacts, operating in a context of what Hughey and Muradi (2009) would call "hyper-irony and manic-satire" – where the line between authentic and satirical racism is blurred. However, the contact between Charlene and Peter is one that pushes the boundaries of understanding one another. Peter's assumptions of Charlene are transformed over the course of the film as he realizes that his position and status offer him many privileges. While this element of colorconsciousness is present, it still is placed within a colorblind boundary in which it is

an individualistic understanding of race – where the individual comes to grips with his/her own racial standpoint, not the systemic (Feagin 2006) and structural (Bonilla-Silva 1997) ways in which race is perpetuated in society.

Encroaching on White Residence

Noted earlier in these films was the complex way in which blacks can be both a part of the social settings, while at the same time encroaching on these social settings. This will be explained in detail here. The boundaries set forth for the black characters in a number of these films have allotted room for colorconscious themes to emerge, although confined to more dominant colorblind categories. As was just stated, in the film *Bringing Down the House* there is a clear sense of the “fish out of water” (Haggins 2003) role that Charlene fulfills. Whites housed in these defined spaces of whiteness react in an exclusionary manner towards those of color. As blacks, or other minorities, enter these areas, defenses rise inquiring why they should not be there. Part and parcel of the colorblind framework though, it is not because these characters are black that they are not allowed in these spaces, but rather due to various defects within the individual.

One strategy for hiding this exclusion is the use of “exceptional exceptions” (Chito Childs 2009) that in some ways reflect the best among dominant culture practices. Black characters who are already present in these settings, but who exhibit extreme characteristics that “distinguish” them from other blacks, are used to maintain a colorblind ideology in which their presence proves that color does not matter. This is best demonstrated in the film *Lethal Weapon 3*, in which Roger Murtaugh, a black police officer and family man, lives in a suburban neighborhood in Los Angeles. The well-

rounded and loving Murtaughs are definitely a positive image of a black family which would defy traditional stereotypes, but when the film throws in the threat of black gangs entering the neighborhood, this multiplies the effect of the colorblind ideology. Roger and his family are the *only* black family in this otherwise all-white neighborhood. When the threat of the black gang enters the picture, it falls upon Roger to fix this. Throughout a majority of the film, Roger's partner, Martin Riggs (the main white character of the film) is the one "jumping into action." However, after Roger shoots a black teen gang member, in a case of being fired upon first by the teen, he becomes, for a brief period, the "man of action" in the film. Attending the funeral of the young teen he shot, Roger is slapped in the face by the boy's mother when he tries to offer his condolences, to which the boy's father says,

"You want to do something Sergeant Murtaugh? You find the man that put the gun in my son's hand."

This throws Roger into the forefront of the action for the next few scenes, for now he is responsible for tracing the leads to the selling of illegal firearms throughout Los Angeles. Roger's exceptional status is accented in a scene in which he interrogates a black criminal:

Roger: "Where did this gun come from?"
Criminal: "Fuck you!"
Roger: "Ever heard of the word 'genocide?'" Have you, stupid motherfucker? Have you heard of genocide? You fools are killing yourselves! You're killing us! I'm tired of it! I'm tired of it!"

This individualized moment, accentuated by Roger stating "*I'm tired of it!*" thrust the problems of crime faced by inner-city blacks upon the black community's shoulders.

During the scene, the shot also shows Martin standing beside the car, face hidden under his arm as he appears to be peeking over it to watch Roger. This further adds to the image that gang/inner-city violence is up to blacks to solve. The exceptional status of Roger, who has “made it” to a middle-class suburban life, shows that black crime is individualized and hints at a black subculture of violence. Colorblindness is both exhibited and maintained in this example, as structural reasons why inner-city violence (Cao et al. 2000; Shihadeh & Flynn 1996; Shihadeh & Maume 1997) and segregation (Hirschl & Rank *In Press*; Massey 1999) occur, are left out of the picture. Other films which featured exceptional blacks, although not to the extreme and depth of *Lethal Weapon 3*, were *Doctor Dolittle*, *Hitch*, and *The Sum of All Fears*.

Helper Reversals and Shared Struggles

As described above, the social settings in which these films take place are done so within boundaries. While colorconsciousness is alluded to in certain instances, it is overshadowed by the dominant colorblind images. Falling within the boundaries of the social settings in these films is the way that the black and white characters interact. Distinct from earlier historical blocs of Hollywood films, contemporary films show black and white characters in a reciprocal relationship of aiding one another. Often blacks served as secondary characters in past films, placed there for the purposes of aiding the main white character. Although in a majority of the films viewed in this study the main character was white, and was aided by a black character in various parts throughout the film. Whites also engaged in helping their fellow black characters in these films.

This reciprocity of help that a number of these characters display, speaks to the

current social context in which these films are made. However, what marks the distinction between the colorblind and the colorconscious is the way in which help is received and/or given. Glenn and Cunningham (2009) note how one of the characteristics of the contemporary magical negro stereotype in film is the magical negro's ability to appropriate folk wisdom to aide in alleviating the problems that whites face. An interesting twist occurs in films where whites are aiding blacks; opposed to the use of folk wisdom there is use of rational-discourse and methodical thinking to address the problems black characters have. This distinguishing mark is what aides in the perpetuation of a dominating colorblind discourse that serves to redress the importance of race while at the same time still maintaining a racial status quo of white privilege. Despite the reciprocal undertakings of aide the characters engage in throughout these films, the methods used by the white characters still uphold a "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz 1998) that works to mask/distort the claims of black characters in solving of problems occurring in the films.

When Weber (1960) discussed the concept of legitimate authority, he distinguished a conventional form of it as maintaining its validity through a collective "probability that deviation from it...will be met with relatively general and significantly perceptible disapproval" (75). Operating on claims to authority through the use of both class and status, white characters maintain their legitimate class and status authority as they aid the black characters in these films. In films such as *Bringing Down the House*, *Ghost*, *Hancock*, and *Jerry Maguire*, when whites aided or worked along-side black characters they did so through legitimate methods that connected them to conventional

forms of authority – Peter uses his abilities as a lawyer to help Charlene (*Bringing Down the House*); Sam, although dead and a ghost, relies on the knowledge he had as a Wall Street banker (*Ghost*); Roy relies on his expertise as a public relations expert and connections to the corporate world to “remake” Hancock into a superhero (*Hancock*); Jerry’s status as a sport agent and knowledge of the law to get Rod a better contract deal (*Jerry Maguire*). In contrast to these, black characters in these films all relied on variations of their folk wisdom and magical abilities to aid their fellow white characters overcome moral hurdles and sometimes undergo life-changing events/decisions. They are still, however, removed from forms of legitimate authority in contemporary society. When black characters have access to legitimate forms of authority, such as in the films *Enemy of the State* and *Eraser*, the use of rational-thought seems to evade them. Instead, the two black characters in these films are reliant upon other white characters with access to legitimate authority to come to their rescue – further restraining black character use or engagement with dominating power structures.

The film *Hitch* however was the only film to have a complete reversal of the white “thinker” and “feeling” black characters. The premise of this film featured Hitch, a black male, as a dating consultant for (mainly) white men. Having perfected the art of dating, Hitch proceeded to give clients a “step-by-step how to” in landing the women of their dreams. In comparison with Rod from *Jerry Maguire*, who assisted Jerry to tap into his emotions and feelings, Hitch has largely removed this aspect from the solution to the problem by the use of rational-thought. In the opening scene of the film, which posits that women are always wanting to be swept off their feet, Hitch breaks up this sense of

romance by stating,

“Basic principles...No woman wakes up saying, ‘God, I hope I don't get swept off my feet today.’...You believe that? Neither does she. You know why? Because she's lying to you, that's why...It's not a bad time for her. She doesn't need any space. She may be into her career...but what she's really saying is, ‘Get away from me now.’ Or possibly, ‘Try harder, stupid.’ Well, which one is it?”

60% of all human communication is nonverbal. Body language. 30% is your tone. So that means that 90% of what you're saying...ain't coming out of your mouth. Luckily, the fact is that just like the rest of us...even a beautiful woman doesn't know what she wants until she sees it. And that's where I come in. My job is to open her eyes

The use of a scientific method to assist in acquiring love from women by Hitch is employed throughout the film: acting a specific way, talking about certain topics, and engaging in certain activities. Like a majority of romantic comedies though, it ends with the “true meaning of love” that places emphasis on the feelings that one has for the other person. However, in order for Hitch to come to that full realization requires the insight of a white male who forgoes all of Hitch’s advice near the end of the film and gets his dream girl – to which Hitch then follows suit and lands his own love interest. However, what is unique in this case is that Hitch, while utilizing rational thought, lacks any means to legitimate authority like other black characters in films where they rely on folk wisdom. His skills and services are offered entrepreneurially rather than being based in an occupation that links his status with existing power structures such as the law or medical professions, which require advanced degrees and high levels of social capital (and often, economic capital). Although Hitch has made a comfortable living for himself – seen in the film through his access to fancy New York City apartments and activities such as jet skiing to the Statue of Liberty on a first date – his status is merely based on

individualized talents and characteristics in the economic world, not in relation to access to any means of structural power.

Similar to past films, the helper status of blacks in relation to whites is exclusionary in the sense that positions of power are often reserved for white characters. Although some black characters were in positions of power, in films such as *Star Wars: Episode III* and the *Matrix* films, their authority was largely still dependent on supernatural abilities, rather than rational means; as well as being unable to utilize legitimate authority in the films *Enemy of the State* and *Eraser* when access to it was available. The helper reversal and shared sense of struggle that occurs in these contemporary films operates mainly within the realm of colorblindness. While the social settings of the films allowed for a mixture of colorblind and colorconscious portrayals to intersect, the methods by which the black and white characters engaged and aided one another failed to allow colorconscious portrayals to emerge.

Identifying Racists

Theoretically colorblindness operates as a unique way of thinking which requires us to not “see color” among those around us, and to focus instead, on the merits of each individual. What is contradictory in this logic is that it displaces the impacts of structural racial practices which excludes and limits opportunities for those of color in society, thereby maintaining and reinforcing existing inequalities between racial groups. Thus, to be a “racist” in contemporary society means that you are aware of and acknowledge race in the everyday experiences of yourself and others. This can equate to the idea that to be colorconscious is to be a racist. As Doane (2006) has noted, the ascendancy of the

individual definition of racism has worked to solidify the dominance of colorblind racial ideology by shaping and conditioning how those in society view racial events.

Throughout these films a majority of white characters were noncognizant of race in the context of their situations, only becoming aware of race when other minority, and white ethnic, characters made reference to it. The maintenance of colorblindness is upheld in this manner as pertinent to those who operate on the margins of society (those of color), and who are the ones more likely to continually make reference and grievance to the significance of race. Thus, the use of race as identifiers in these films operates on an individual level – where those who reference race are imposing the effects of race on others by bringing it up. The individualized nature of references to race in these films demonstrates that race is a concern, not to whites (who profit the most from the established racial hierarchies) but by people of color. In this regard, the colorblind context in which identifying race is practiced is similar to the “race message” films made between the 1940s and 1960s which required masking the practice of northern racism by outsourcing the image of those who practiced racism as ignorant, white southerners (Nickel 2004).

In our contemporary social environment, the label of “racist” in these films is reserved for minorities and white ethnics. Although overt racism was rare in a majority of the films in this study, when overt racism was expressed it was done so by these two groups. Examples were seen in films such as *Enemy of the State*, *Ghost*, *Jerry Maguire*, and *Rush Hour*. Part of maintaining the colorblind definition of racism as an individualized practice, films which take place in past historical periods of U.S. history

uphold this definition through the extent they handle race. For example the film *American Gangster*, while centering on the rise of a black gangster in 1970s New York and the cop who works to arrest him, displays the most overt racism than any other film in the study but fails to acknowledge structural elements of inner-city poverty and offers us an extreme example of how bad race relations *used* to be. By taking place in a historical moment that was ripe with social and political changes (e.g., Tuck 2008) and ignoring those processes, with a focus on how individuals viewed those of a different race, the film acts as reminder of the progress our country has made in decreasing overt racist attitudes by placing contemporary viewers into a post-civil rights context that aligns with colorblind ideology. The shaping of individualized racist actions (or just being aware of race) in these films serves as a method to effectively remove the impact of a colorconscious ideology that can help reshape how audiences view racial inequalities.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study looks at the ways in which colorblind and colorconscious ideologies were present in contemporary Hollywood films. When compared to past studies on film that involve race relations and which focused on stereotyped portrayals of black characters, the results of this study show a shifting in the portrayals of contemporary black characters. The presence of a colorconscious ideology, which is presented in films that feature a level of “black star power,” assist in creating avenues for alternative presentations to be displayed on the screens of theatres, home television sets, and computer screens. However, colorconscious ideology is largely contained and constrained by the more dominating discourse of colorblind ideology. Consistent with theories of hegemonic control and representation in regards to culture, the ability for black actors and actresses to create displays of colorconsciousness in film is competing with larger discourses of colorblindness that limit the scope and impact of a colorconscious ideology that challenges individualized definitions of race, racism, and inequality. It is unique though to find that stereotyped portrayals in certain contemporary films allowed room for colorconscious ideologies to emerge and take some shape. Most notable was the film *Bringing Down the House* in this regard and the ways in which the character Charlene utilized old-fashioned stereotypes to expose the structural racial practices that exist in contemporary society. Further, the shared sense of struggles that

black and white characters undergo in these films point to a changing dynamic that has potential for opening the doors to more colorconscious themes and situations to occur. The break from white led narratives is still a new and potentially revolutionary change in contemporary Hollywood film. These gains are only realized though once certain obstacles that adhere to a colorblind ideology are overcome – primarily the lack of access to legitimate authority that black characters have and the highly individualized nature of Hollywood storytelling. It should also be noted that other practices in these films still maintained individualized definitions of racism (e.g., Doane 2006) that allow for a designated outlet in which audiences can label “racist” – displacing their own involvement in racial practices that (re)produce inequality. Colorblind ideology’s masking of “who is a racist” is problematic because it distorts views of groups that work towards racial equality at the structural level. The use of white ethnics as racial-slur-name-calling characters is an example of this, especially when current survey research (Torkelson & Hartmann 2010) shows that self-identified white ethnics hold contrasting views between having a shared vision of America with African Americans and adhering to colorblind ideals – yet are not significantly more colorblind or conservative than their non-ethnic white counterparts.

The shifting of racial images in the films studied point to both a complex and fluid dynamic in how race relations are carried out. Hughey (2009) points to a cultural structure of “cinematic racism” that espouses antiblack stereotypes and narratives of white heteronormativity, yet this view fails to offer insight into how colorblind ideology can be challenged. While I agree with Hughey that there is a cultural structure of

systemic racism in the production of Hollywood films, the means by which individuals and collected groups can alter dominant discourse is key for overcoming this structure. The shifting spaces that take place in these films, while still maintaining colorblind ideology and discourses, point to less rigid boundaries of control and exclusion in which in-roads can be made to break up the white heteronormativity that Hughey discusses. Focusing solely on cinethetic racism structures within film (and parallel structures across other artifacts of popular culture) limits the potential for understanding how marginal voices disrupt dominant ideologies, and the ways in which dominant ideologies react back to limit those marginal voices. The research in this project is one that points in directions similar to Feagin's (2010) work on the "white racial frame." Although Feagin emphasizes the importance of a white dominant discourse that shapes various aspects of life – similar to Hughey's assumptions – he is aware of the power that marginal groups have in their ability to offer counterframes that disrupt the white racial frame. The brief and limited assertion of colorconscious themes and images in these films are a beginning to the counterframing process in Hollywood films. While this exploratory study shows brief elements of colorconsciousness, the fact that it is there in these mainstream blockbuster films is something quite new. In the past, critical images and discourses of race in film were left to films which were specifically targeted to minority audiences (Chaisson 2000; Entman & Rojecki 2000), thereby making these films marginal and not seen by white audiences. A space once occupied solely by white heteronormativity, mainstream blockbuster films are undergoing a unique transformation in ways that race is conceived and portrayed.

Taking all of this into account, there are many ways in which further investigation into this subject matter can proceed. Most obviously, expansion of this project would be a likely first step. The size of this exploratory study is limited to its sample of 25 films, where a more vast and detailed content analysis of a greater scope might elaborate on the ideas presented in this study – challenging and/or improving on the ideas presented here. In addition to the expansive content analysis, a critical look into specific “key players” in these mainstream films should be undertaken. For example, the actors Will Smith, Morgan Freeman, and Eddie Murphy were collectively in a total of seven films in this random sample; also of note is that only two of the films featured directors of color (John Singleton, *2 Fast 2 Furious* and John Woo, *Mission: Impossible II*). Focusing on the ways colorblind and colorconscious themes emerge in films which feature highly successful black stars, directors, or producers might elaborate how race is played out on screen in more detailed and nuanced ways. Yet it is often the “behind the camera” look that provides insight as to how these colorconscious themes make their way to the screen, requiring the challenging opportunity to gain access to these places of script (re)writings, on-site filming, and post-production wrap-ups.

The area that requires the most investigation however, is the ways in which audiences engage with these colorblind and colorconscious themes on screen. Sociology as a discipline has overall been negligent in regards to media studies and popular culture (e.g., Katz 2009), with sporadic investigations into what popular culture means towards issues surrounding race. While this study focuses on the ideologies that are being battled over on the screen, the most critical and important next step is to ascertain how

individuals work with these ideologies in their everyday lives. As recent media and communications scholars (Deuze 2011; Napoli 2010) have noted, there is a shift in the way audiences engage with modern media. The changing dynamic of technology and social media has worked to engage audiences with the media products they consume more intimately than ever before – where the popular culture artifacts become building blocks for individual identity and group collectivity. However, the field of communications limits its conclusions to how *individuals* make use of their popular culture consumption(s) and production(s). Sociology should reinvigorate media studies with a stronger emphasis on popular culture that investigates the relationship that popular culture has with collective group identities and the ways in which popular culture artifacts are used when discussing or advancing race relations among collective groups.

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