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The Black Male Identity in The Early 2000s: Analyzing Black Cinema

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***Abstract:** Black Masculinity in the film industry has been defined by drugs, capitalism, violence, and self-hatred. Black men became the primary focus of the film industry, beginning in the 1970s into the late 1990s, to sustain the industry and capitalize off the emotions of the black man after the civil rights movement. A content analysis of urban films in the early 2000s was conducted to compare if the portrayal of the black man differed from popular urban films in the 1990s. This study concludes that black men exhibit more signs of “maturation” and “success” in the early 2000s, as opposed to the 1990s. This shift pushed an ongoing, positive perspective and portrayal of “black masculinity” and what it means to be a black man in America today.*

Introduction

Previous studies in film have revealed that the following factors construct the black male identity: capitalism, self-hatred, and “ghettocentric” (Chan, 1998). Kenneth Chan highlights films used in the past to assess the black male identity. These films include *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Juice* (1992). For these and other authors, these films demonstrate how black men are classified into classes filled with poverty, crime, drugs, and violence. For example, the main character in *Juice*, Bishop, lived in a community that was consumed by gang violence and drugs. This community created Bishop’s identity and lust for power, which he felt was a necessity in order to survive. While media like this portrayed the black man as aggressive and violent, Tyrek notes how women are categorized into three categories: black queens, “nurturing” black mothers, or scandalous baby mamas (Tyree 2009). Studies such as Tyree’s and Chan’s explores black gender identity using qualitative approaches to assess the portrayal of black men and women. Ed Guerrero claims that “blaxploitation” in movies has emerged as a result of white-black race relations, rising identity consciousness, and

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social expectations of the black population. However, no studies have addressed how the black male identity progressed in movies in the early 2000s.

Media, particularly the film industry, has been used as a portal to display many visceral stereotypes and images of black men. The most popular roles in the 1990s revolved around drug dealers, gang members, and criminals. However, other typical roles include: the “sidekick” to a white protagonist, athlete, comedic relief, or over-sexed ladies’ man. The problem that exist among all of these one-dimensional characters is the ignorance of the whole experience of black men and what it means to be a “black man” in a “white America”.

This purpose of this study is to elaborate on how the stereotype of the black man has progressed from the nineties, using urban films to investigate the personalities, emotions, and experiences that construct black men by conducting a content analysis on the construct of the black man. According to many scholars, such as those involved in the Topos Partnership, when investigating issues related to black male achievement, it is imperative to understand the historical legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, economic disparities, and the role of the criminal justice system. The five links studied in assessing black masculinity includes: distorted portrayal of black lives, why media patterns are distorted, relationships between media and public attitudes, public bias, and consequences for the lives of black males.

Films and various media provides society with the opportunity to deconstruct the image of black males. This study draws on gender critical race theory to provide a context of how America exerts white privilege in the film industry and perpetuate marginalization of black men. Furthermore, a recap of black men’s response to the civil rights movement also provides a foundation to understand how these images came about in mass media. This paper demonstrates how urban films of the 90s portrayed black men as violent, while films of the 2000s progressed

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to reveal the success and motivation of black men. This suggests a shift in the perceptions of the African American male.

Literature Review

The Construct of the Black Man in the Nineties

The beginning of black films took root in the 1970s, giving rise to the term “Blaxploitation.” This wave of black films was due to, according to Ed Guerrero, socioeconomic conditions which affect decision making in white-dominated Hollywood. It was during the 1970s, filmmakers realized there was a need to appeal to the black audience through capturing issues that speak to African Americans. Guerrero argued that movies in the 1990s materialized out of climate of long-silenced black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions.

Kenneth Chan analyzes five black films set in black communities- *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, *Deep Cover*, and *Straight out of Brooklyn*. These films were used because they were labeled as “male-focused”, “ghetto-centric” and “action-crime-adventure” films. They were also used because these films appealed to the frustration and rage felt by black men. All characters oppose, flourish, or are assimilated into the political and social climate of poverty, crime, drugs, and violence. This was supposed to create an “inner city” black experience, thus feeding into this construction of “good” and “bad” blacks.

Capitalism is also at work in the majority of these films. *Boyz N the Hood* exhibits the work towards maintaining the rich at a certain socioeconomic status and suppressing the attempts of blacks to overcome poverty and suffering. According to James Nadell, capitalist expansion has been fueled by the oppression and exploitation of African and Third World labor and resources, leading to the enrichment of people of European descent and under enrichment of

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people of African and Third World descent. Images depicted in film of the frustration resulting from the inability of black males to overcome the system and achieve success evoke emotions in African American audiences. These emotions often lead to a lack of trust of the white dominant criminal justice system and racial self-hatred.

The distrust that exists within the criminal justice system is intensified by subtle racism, which hinders a number of African American men from rising beyond the economic state they are born into. *Deep Cover* appeals to this distrust, particularly among poor underclass blacks. In this film, the government is constructed as a selfish, pragmatic structure that gives little regard for the drug epidemic in the black community. Russell Stevens/John Hull sees his father rob a liquor store and is later killed by the shopkeeper. The film is set on a Christmas Eve where John has an emotional conversation with his father right before the fatal shooting. This spurs John to join the police force, where he soon is forced to pose as a drug dealer in an undercover assignment and later succumbs to the streets because of the stereotypes placed upon him (Chan 1998).

Along with the internalizing of stereotypes, African American men also undergo “autodestruction”. Guerrero observes that African American men are constantly struggling with nihilism, fragmentation, and self-doubt. These struggles, along with physical violence and the drug trade, are made evident in the 90s filmic depictions of black males. This evokes images of the black male as an endangered species. For example, *Boyz N The Hood* opens up with this quote “One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male.” This image of black-on-black crime supports Nadell’s argument of autodestruction due to limited resources available to black men and the internalization of racial hatred (Chan 1998).

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Due to this autodestruction that exists in the black community, filmmakers generally strive to posit a solution to the problem on black-on-black violence in films. Interestingly, however, this solution is usually enforcing black men to “take responsibility for their own actions.” This is seen in *New Jack City* when Scotty informs Pookit that he owes a lot of people, alluding that Pookit needed to make several amends to his misdeeds in the movie. Similarly, in *Boyz N The Hood*, Furious instructs Tre to be responsible for his own life.

Ernest Dickerson’s *Juice* provides a similar narrative about how personal choices inflict deep consequences. Quincy does not choose to give in to the temptation of using a gun to resolve the conflict between him and his friend, Bishop. Bishop, on the contrary, has given into the streets and resorts to using guns to kill his enemies. Bishop believed fate lies in our own hands. The choices that the characters made in this movie led them down two distinct paths—one towards safety and one towards ultimate destruction. Dickerson suggests in this movie that Bishop’s downfall is caused by psychological instability and need for control and power.

In critiquing 90s filmmaker’s interpretations of black men, the aspirations of African American men and their willingness to seek a better future is questionable. Films of the 90s feed into racist notions, portraying only “good” black people who have the wisdom to choose to leave the ghetto will become educated and morally “good” to succeed in a white world. What is an issue in this study is highlighting how black men have actually progressed from being portrayed as aggressive beings to men maturing into working citizens.

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative approach was used to analyze two urban films from the early 2000s. The two movies selected were “Baby Boy” and “ATL”. This study conducted a content analysis based on the following categories: success, survival, criminality, and maturation. The

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approach analyzed the portrayal of the black man on the basis on personality, experiences, and emotions. The use of content analysis is an effective approach in this study to document the trends of the film industry's portrayal of the black male figure in the film industry over time. Furthermore, according to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), this humanist approach to content analysis is essential to identifying how media content such as film reveal "truths" about society. This contributes to how films "create" public opinions, attitudes, and perceptions or "reflect" existing attitudes and culture.

Findings and Discussion

An analysis of two movies revealed that movies of the 2000s portrayed black men as evolving and mature versus violent and aggressive as movies of the 1990s. The following categories were assessed: success, survival, criminality, and maturation. These categories were assessed by viewing the black man's personality, experiences and emotions portrayed in the films. There are clear representations of maturation in the black men presented in both movies. Fundamentally, the emotions of the black man in these movies was used to progress them as thriving members of society. Criminality was evident, however, it served as a catalyst for maturation.

ATL presents two brothers-Rashad and Ant, whose parents died in a car crash and now reside with a uncle, Uncle George. Rashad is a high school senior, working part time to save money for Ant "to make it out of here" - out of their black neighborhood in Atlanta. Ant, however, sees a faster route, and chooses to succumb to the streets of Atlanta, selling drugs for a drug dealer. This movie, unlike movies in the 90s, does not focus on the drug trade or violence. Instead, it focuses on maturation, entering the workforce, falling in love, and planning for the future. For Rashad, every Sunday was time to avoid planning for the future by going with three

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friends to Cascades, a roller rink where the movie shows off intricately choreographed moves on the skating floor.

Rashad's friends-Esquire, Teddy, and Brooklyn-are seen throughout the movie as Rashad's confidants and support system. Esquire exhibits success with his top grades and job at a country club. Esquire meets the billionaire, John Garnett, where he seeks a letter of recommendation to go to an Ivy League school. Teddy worked in a grills shop and Brooklyn worked in a fast food restaurant. All young men reside in the Atlanta streets, striving to live life one moment at a time.

Maturation is displayed in *ATL* as the movie describes the warmth and heart of "good" kids raising themselves. While Uncle George stepped up to be the guardian of the growing Rashad and Ant, he does show much of a parental role. This is quite apparent in his immediate reaction to Ant selling drugs: "We can always use some money in this house." This not only forced Rashad to deter his brother on his own, but it forced Ant to become a man on his own.

While *ATL* focuses on the maturation of the black man, John Singleton's *Baby Boy* is a criticism of black men who father babies, neglect responsibility, and are not encouraged to mature by their black mothers. This movie introduces Jody to its audience, a 20-year-old man who has two children by his two baby mamas, Peanut and Yvette. Neglecting his responsibilities as a father, Jody still lives in his room in his mother's house. This movie is analyze in the following categories: maturation and criminality.

Jody exhibits a lack of maturation in this movie, where he sponges off two women-his mother and Yvette, who has a job. Furthermore, Jody refuses to make a commitment to Yvette and she accepts it in a particular way. This is shown in an argument where Jody claims, "I'm out in these streets telling these hoes the truth. I lie to you because I care about your feelings." While

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this is happening away from his home, his actual residence is intruded by his mother's new boyfriend, Melvin. Melvin is the example of criminality and success in the movie. Melvin is an ex-convict, serving 10 years in prison, but determined to travel a straight path to own his own landscaping business and landscaping the mother's backyard. Melvin encourages Jody's maturation in the movie in an intense fighting scene, where prior to the brawl he states, "You know what your problem is, baby boy? You got shit all twisted. You got an Oedipus complex. You want your mamma to be your woman, but this is my woman. *My* woman!" Not only is Melvin enlightening Jody, but he also shows how Jody has refused to grow up because of his mother. He has depended on her, and she has shielded him. Thus, it has led to man who is not only handicap but must come to grips on what it means to be a man.

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Table 1 Differences in the Portrayal and Experiences of the Black Man in Early 2000s Black Cinema

	ATL	Baby Boy
Characteristics of the Black Man Personality	Ambitious, Promiscuous, Aggressive, successful, Comical, Integrity, hard-working, lazy, courage, sacrifice	Criminal, Hostile, Violent, comical, irresponsible
Experiences	Desire to “get out of the hood”, selling drugs, peer pressure, preparing for college, becoming a man	Desire to “change the game”, desire to make money, baby mama drama, drug use, gang violence, jobless
Emotions	Anger, Guilt, loyalty, regret	Anger, loyalty, regret, disappointment

Experiences and Emotions of Black Men

The two movies used in this study both showed significant experiences and emotions that shape the black man. In fact, both movies used anger and regret as a catalyst for maturation. These films contained scenes in black “ghettos”, which suggested black men to also be consumed with poverty. Men were portrayed as trying to “get out of the hood” and beings that have the potential to flourish as “good” citizens and not “gangsters”, “thugs”, or “dope boys”. Drugs were evident in

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ATL as a means of capitalism and entering a “grown man business”, as said by Marcus, the dealer who Ant works for in *ATL*.

Maturation and success are the dominant representations in these movies, versus crime, drugs, and violence evaluated in movies on the 90s. The black men in these films both exhibited inward struggles that they felt the need to overcome in order to become what they thought it meant to be a real man. In *Baby Boy*, Jody desired make money but never felt the need to “leave the nest” as he mother said. This is an example of a lack of gender equality. Mothers tend to raise their daughters to be strong and responsible, yet coddle their sons.

Baby Boy opens with fully grown Jody inside his mother’s womb juxtaposed with grown Jody standing outside a medical clinic while his girlfriend Yvette is receiving an abortion inside. This shows Jody’s neglect towards fatherhood and lack of commitment to even support Yvette shows his immaturity and selfishness as a result of being his mother’s center of attention. More importantly, the beginning of *Baby Boy* reflects the film’s ultimate vision-black masculinity.

The experiences of Jody revolve around him coming to terms with his status as a father. While Yvette is employed, Jody is not, spending time with her and their son than with his other baby mama and his daughter. The idea of manhood that one must carry on their legacy is reinforced here, and this is Jody’s feelings and way of “being a man”.

Conclusion

The Hollywood film industry has used urban films to appeal to black audiences and portray their representations of inner city black communities and black men. In the 90s, this was space to portray black men as poor, aggressive, and violent. Movies of the 2000s shifted from this and are currently continuing to evolve. Not only have black men been portrayed in a more positive light,

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but movies have now ventured into exploring the black man's sexuality in conjunction with masculinity.

Barry Jenkin's *Moonlight* explores the life of Chiron-a gay, black man in the inner city of Miami, across three periods in his life. He is taken in by a couple and ages, exhibiting self-hatred and isolation because of the way he moves and looks. Growing up, Chiron faces bullying from his classmates and mother, who all call him "faggot" because of the way he moves and dress. Chiron's way of retaliating and dealing with this is portraying the "look" of a "real man." As Chiron grows older, he realizes his need to conform to the heteronormative idea of black masculinity. He's faced with two choices: embrace his sexuality or perform the identity of a straight black man and live a closet life.

Movies such as *Moonlight* stand as a testament that there is more space for black men in Hollywood and more freedom black men to exert their own ideas of masculinity. Now, in order for this shift to continue, it is imperative that black men remain in the film industry. Outside of the industry, it is important for black men to work through their inward and outward struggles that face them in a "white" America. This includes issues with the political, racial, economic, and social structures that work to oppress them.

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