

A CULTURAL LOOK AT AMERICAN FILMS: THE CHALLENGE OF PICTURING MULTICULTURISM

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Introduction

Reading American society in a lot of ways is similar to reading a multi complex pluralism, consisting not only multi ethnic immigrants, but also multicultural forms. These various ethnic groups become the source of American academic discussion and inspire the making of its art. American movie is also one of them. For American curiouser, in fact, movie is the most easiest way to know the diverse American society. Not always in the sense of generalizing, yet what they know is what they see through American movies. However, how American movie depict the image of their reality are not always in a just and equal portion.

Concept of Self and Otherness

Before discussing further about racial relation in American fictitious world of film, it should be underlined how their relation in real American life since what depicted in film, though can not be generalized, reflects the society where the film is made. Race and racism in fact is an intimate component throughout American history, so closed that it has penetrated in every aspects such as economic, politic, social, cultural and artistics. Race becomes a social construction which put the stigma of non white as subordinate layer. Peter L. Rose gives comments that in race-conscious society like America those who are coloured (as opposed to 'white') have generally been put in inferior positions and treated accordingly. He furthermore says that :

In almost every American town, there has long been a close connection between the tasks people perform and the place in which they live, and the colour of their skin. Menial work is disproportionately the province of 'colored' citizens, shabbier neighborhoods their principal domain. White people have tended to have a greater percentage of better and more varied jobs and, in many instances, finer homes in better neighborhoods (1997,12).

The picture of such relationship is constructed socially based on philosophical ideas of "they" and "we", "inner" and "outer" group, that mostly created by American values and attitudes. Those ideas effect the concept of viewing other minority in diverse cultural community and reveals prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice according to Dale McLemore is an unfavorable attitude toward people because they are members of a particular racial or ethnic group (1983,108). The rising and declining of one's prejudice can be

measured by the extent to which a person accepts stereotypes, that is a largely belief or set of belief concerning the characteristics of the member of a racial or ethnic group.

This society is the source of how American films is created and produced. Filmmakers and their apparatus is part of various cultural life with its stereotype and prejudice. Aside from its creation process, stratified racist society also influence American film production in which films are produced to fulfill the demand of what the dominant group wants to see.

Racial-Cultural Relation

Watching and observing the depiction and experience of non white American in the American movies lead to two important aspects, that are how non white America is put in the white American society and how filmmaker characterizes them in the frame of racial relation.

To elaborate this issue, African American experience in American cinema become an interesting topic to be discussed. First of all, to view African American image in the screen can not be separated from how filmmaker and his apparatus define and give meaning to African American itself. The effort to define this ethnic relate with the development and changing of American society, though it refers to the same meaning since American historical background will point to African slavery in 17th -18th century. Plantation remembrance became the main topic and genre of Hollywood filmmaker from 1910s to 1970s. According to Guerrero (1993,77) the racism and romantic stereotype a la South plantation which become American film issue at that moment was influenced by American novelist and literary men.

Therefore, African American is firstly characterized of being weak, docile and dominated by Whites. To present these characters, violence scenes like lynching is very common. The image then is added by psychological dimension of African America as a white woman rapist. Commenting on the new stereotype Gayle (1976,37) points that "the darky entertainer and the docile child into insignificance alongside the 'brute Negro' who, out of lust and hatred, presents a clear and present danger to the purity and sanctity of white womanhood and civilized America as well"

As a sample of this South plantation stereotype is *Birth of a Nation*, film directed by D.W.Griffith in 1915. This anti-Black film is still the most controversial in American film history. *Birth of a Nation* shows clearly diverse stereotype of African American characters which become the market formula of the "plantation school". Apart from the image of weak and loyal African American, it also pictures violence scenes of African American rapist and lynching done by anti-African group Ku Klux Klan.

Twenty four years after *Birth of a Nation*, the depiction of African American changed into 'softer' characterization through the launching of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The character of Mammy is constructed as a loyal and

devoted house servants who knocks down two Yankees to help her white master. This Black mammy became a dominant, not *the* dominant, representation of black women on American screen. It replaced the depiction of violence and brutality of African American image, but still with the sounding of plantation genre.

The era of *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* passed as *Civil Rights Movement* emerged and struggled for fair and true picture of African American depiction on American screen. However the question remains the same, do Hollywood filmmaker really kill their plantation formula? or do they still keep this subordinate relation of Black and White in the same- but new package- formula?

Before answering the question, *Blaxploitation*, which emerged in militant political era signified by the rising of race identity consciousness and the expectation of African American upon the success of *Civil Rights Movement*, inspires Hollywood filmmaker to apply a new strategy in presenting Black and White relation. It is by producing action film genre with ghetto setting and relatively low cost film production. Film like *Do the Right Things* (1939) or *Jungle Fever* (1991) represents anguish and frustration of African American upon their social economic sufferings. These films explore mostly about African American social destruction, fragmenting violence by the availability of cheap guns and cocaines.

The other distinctive feature of this *Blaxploitation* era is the use of *buddy formula*. Just as Laura Mulvey argues that dominant cinema positions and displays the female body as the sexual object of "the look" for the visual pleasure of the male spectator, so it can be argued that dominant American cinema constructs and positions the black image for "the look" of the norm, for the visual and narrative pleasure of white spectator consumer (Guerrero, 128). This form for fulfilling the pleasure of white spectator is by putting African filmic presence in the protective custody of a white lead or co-star. They are presence in conformity with white sensibilities and expectation of what blacks essentially should be.

Film like *48 Hr* (1982) presents the Black image being in the protective custody of white authority, as Eddie Murphy plays a convict who is temporarily guarded by a tough cop casting by Nick Nolte to assist in solving a series of crimes. Various *buddy formula* are also revealed in *Lethal Weapon* (1987) which portrays wise restraint of an older black cop (casting by Danny Glover) with risk taking violent action of his younger white partner (casting by Mel Gibson). Other interesting sample of *buddy formula* is Whoopi Goldberg's box office film *Ghost* (1990) which enable her to get Oscar as the best woman supporting character, the credit she got for casting as a mediator to help white American couple. Those films shows that though white character does not demand the black in subordinate role, whites still expect them as their

guardian, if not to say that they should serve physically to guard white existence.

As social and cultural development grow, the image of African American in Hollywood film also change continuously. There are instances when characters just happen to be black and are not cast in black roles/stereotype. Actors such as Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, Halle Berry or Angela Bassett have been in films where their race is not a focus. Some of these films include *The Pelican Brief*, *The Swashank Redemption*, *Golden Eye* (James Bond's sequel), etc.). The Black character presence in American film is looked upon as even more favorable by American moviegoers.

The depiction of non white in American films also portrays Hispanics/Latinos in Hollywood magic formula. Depicting usually as a criminal, if not low income group of people, Hispanics are drawn as a fast talkers who hard to adapt with English standard accent. In film *Spanglish* (2004) the character of Flor (casting by Paz Vega) who happens to be Mexican, serve as a house servant for white American family. Though her beautiful seductive appearance and challenging way of thinking almost make her white master attracted, again at the end of the film, she can not be more than "just" a servant.

In recent film like *Babel* (2006) that nominated for Academy Awards winner, Hispanics is also depicted as house servant (casting by Adrianna Barazza) who has to protect his two master's children when they were stranded somewhere in the border town dessert after a long chasing scenes by U.S police officer. The effort to protect other people's life is contrasted with the stereotype of Mexican as being a law breaker and illegal worker in American society. The formula of Mexican as a criminal in American film screen is still applied even in a film considered as the most agitative film on universal humanity.

Other minority who experience negative fragmenting of Hollywood screen in *Babel* is Asian. Asian, particularly Japanese, is depicted as workaholic figure and having difficulties in expressing his emotion and feeling even to his own daughter. Yasujiro, the Japanese businessman character in this film is in line with what Hollywood presents Asian male image as passive figure (Mahdzan, par.8).

The daughter of Yasujiro, which is casting by Rinko Kikuchi, happens to present Asian woman stereotype as a sexually active, exotic and eager to please. Aside from his physical handicapped, this deaf-mute young girl Chicko sexually seduces the police detective who investigate his father's business. From the perspective of stereotyping, this character strengthen Asian woman image as sexually seductive, even when she is in her own ethnic community.

Hollywood film industry leads to distorted view about people of Arabic descent as well. What appears in American films about character is everything that is anti-Western. They picture Arabs either as being wealthy, religious

fundamentalist or terrorist. Again in *Babel*, the character of Ahmed (casting by Said Tarchani), a poor Morocco man is accused of being a terrorist and therefore being rudely interrogated by the police. He was accused because the gun he sold to his friend to tend the goats made an American tourist injured. This Arab descent depiction is invariably tied to that of Arab as a terrorist.

Furthermore Arab population is viewed as uncivilized and irrational. The irrationality can be seen in film *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Mummy* (1999). The first film takes the setting in Iraq where the main character was firstly possessed by an evil, invisible irrational being according to Western way of thinking. In *The Mummy*, Arab character is described as 'smelly little friend' and 'sinky fellow'. These instances show that many American films picture Arabs as a people opposite to what white Americans perceive themselves.

However the depiction of racial relation in American films does not always in a negative frame. Film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) directed by Joel Zwick shows another perspective on how Greek and WASP America try to understand each other. Though the film talks about white community, there are many scenes in this film which capture the process of cultural assimilation, and also misunderstanding, between Taula Portakalos (Nia Vardalos) and Ian Miller (casting by John Corbett). Miller who wants to marry Greek woman Taula should be able to 'melt' his culture and faith into Greek culture, so that both of them can live happily in their marriage.

All in all, taking American films as learning materials for understanding multicultural complex of American life indeed is interesting. It will meet its great challenge especially if racial stereotype become the main focus to view the diversity. In one hand, the diverse racial character will enrich the learners with knowledge of cross cultural understanding. On the other hand, it will attract debate and arguments as the fragmenting of American minorities is not always in good and fair image. Quoting what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam says that film are not simply reflective, they are also experiential grids which national identity can be created, seemingly other non white filmmaker should take control upon their own representation image in American films by taking off the negative stereotype and leaving it behind, by creating more genuine understanding of themselves and others.

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