Racism in Hollywood

African American Representations in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

Current Hollywood films and the history of the Hollywood film industry are examined in order to establish to what extent progress has been made in the representation of African Americans in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. First, the Academy Awards and the position of the white race have been analyzed as they reflect the current status of racism in Hollywood. After that, the origin of the Hollywood film industry and three specific time periods in the history of Hollywood films point out how detrimental representations and the ignoring of racism is ingrained in the classical Hollywood film style. Finally, two recent Academy Award winning films, *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Moonlight* (2016), are closely examined through which it becomes clear that Hollywood has made progress in the representation of African Americans by increasingly creating challenging films that deal with complex social issues. Even though there are still filmmakers wo fail to distance themselves from detrimental representations and the ignoring of racism, the most recent developments point out that Hollywood is slowly but gradually evolving into a diverse and racist free industry.

Keywords: Hollywood, racism, representation, African American, race, gender, sexuality

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1. Introduction

"Even in my dreams this cannot be true, but to hell with dreams, I'm done with it, because this is true. Oh my goodness…There was a time when I thought this movie was impossible because I couldn't bring it to fruition, I couldn't bring myself to tell another story. And so everybody behind me on this stage said, "no, that is not acceptable." So I just want to thank everybody up here behind me, everybody out there in that room, because we didn't do this, you guys chose us. Thank you for the choice. I appreciate it. Much love." - Barry Jenkins

These were the words spoken by an overwhelmed and humbled director during the 89th Academy Awards ceremony at the Dolby Theatre in the heart of Hollywood. Barry Jenkins accepts the top honor of receiving the Best Picture award for his film *Moonlight*. With an emotional audience of iconic and wildly acclaimed artists giving him a standing ovation, this moment will go down in history and it will always be remembered. Though the receiving of the Best Picture award is a great honor for every film, in this case there is more behind it. Loaded with social and political meaning, *Moonlight* and its Academy Award will change the lives of not only the people who made the film. In the words of producer Adele Romanski, it will inspire people, "little black boys and brown girls and folks watching at hom, who feel marginalized and who take inspiration from this beautiful group of artists" (Oscars). *Moonlight* is the first film with an all African American cast that deals with race and sexuality to win Best Picture. Never before has a film that portrays the complexity of race and sexuality in contemporary society been so wildly acclaimed. It could be marked as a turning point in Hollywood's long history of gender, racial, and sexual inequality.

As Barry Jenkins speech implies, the Academy Awards are the most influential and prestige film awards one can receive. The Academy can therefore reflect Hollywood, including what topics, themes, views, and problems are located in this industry. The win for *Moonlight*, considered as a 'black film', is an exception, as most awards go to 'white films' that often fail to include accurate representations of race, gender, and sexuality. Hollywood has been dealing with an increasing amount of criticism and racist accusations because of this. Ever since the origin of

one of the world's biggest film industries in the early 20th century, unfair representations and inequality in the business have been present. Over the years, it evolved alongside changes in society, which allowed filmmakers to get increasingly critical and challenge dominant ideologies. However, even though Hollywood has made great progress, some aspects point out that falling into old patterns is easy. Therefore, inequality has undeniably stayed almost an indispensable aspect of Hollywood. Every year at important events such as the Academy Awards, the problem is being addressed. As a predominantly white male controlled business, the gender pay gap between men and women is often still enormous. The casting of African Americans is still more an exception than a norm, characters can still heavily be stereotyped, and portraying anything other than heterosexuality is often still considered controversial. Since Hollywood's audience in the United States as well as across the globe is increasingly diverse, it is remarkable that only very few films represent the diversity of the audience.

Earlier research has been done in an attempt to provide a close analysis of the industry and explain its complexity. Maryann Erigha found that white men have, and still do, exclusively create the "narratives and myths that compromise Hollywood's cultural production, while narratives by women and racial/ethnic minorities are fewer and less prominent" (79). This leads to the trend of systematic disadvantages in opportunities, which in turn leads to the prevalence of stereotypes and a general lack of diversity on-screen. It becomes visible through the underrepresentation of African Americans and the amount of acclaimed award ceremonies that largely ignore them. Doctor Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Doctor Katherine Pieper elaborated on this by conducting a study proving that diversity behind-the-scenes has an impact on what can be seen on-screen. They found that films with African American directors contained more black and female characters (2). Also, as has been proven by Martha M. Lauzen and David Dozier, females in behind-the-scenes positions, such as producers and directors, incorporate more empowering female characters in their films that have more depth and appear on-screen longer (10). Ellen C. Scott focuses on the historical explanation for films tending to avoid being confrontational. She states that the censorship films received in the 1930s established how films would gross higher amounts of money if they followed the Production Code rules. This refrained them from being critical of politics and social issues. Even though this censorship is not in

practice anymore, the traditions and patterns that dominated Hollywood for so long still influence contemporary filmmakers, as challenging topics are often still considered a risk (21). Raiford Guins approaches the topic from a different angle, focusing on the progress already made. He found that digital technology, such as social media and platforms as Netflix and Youtube, offers more diversity than traditional media studios provide. The racial and gender diversity of online cultural production and its huge popularity inspire the film industry to also become more diverse, disrupting patterns of inequality in Hollywood (70).

All conclude that Hollywood has made great progress but still has a lot of racism to overcome. To provide a more clear understanding of the specific issues that withhold Hollywood from being as diverse as society itself, I intend to research to what extent progress has been made in the representation of African Americans in terms of race, gender and sexuality. The reason why gender and sexuality are included is because they are linked to and influence the complexity of the marginalized position of African Americans. For example, being African American and female means having to deal with the racism towards both aspects. Being African American and homosexual means the same, and being an African American female homosexual triples that amount of racism.

I will conduct my research by first giving an overview of the contemporary status of Hollywood representations on the basis of the Academy Awards, answering the question on what the current issues are with the representations of African Americans in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. I will also touch upon the role of whiteness in Hollywood. After that I will deal with the question on how Hollywood became such an influential industry and why its racism is problematic. Following this, I will analyze three specific time periods, the Antebellum period, the 1930s till the 1940s, and the 1960s till the 1980s, to point out the events and trends that still have an influence on today's film industry. Finally, I will provide two case studies on recent Academy Award winning films that touch upon race, gender, and sexuality, *Hidden Figures* and *Moonlight*. This will answer the question on to what extent Hollywood has made progress in terms of African American representations in film as well as off-screen.

The reason why this is relevant in the field of American Studies is because Hollywood film is a medium that reflects society. It shows how dominant ideologies can marginalize social

and political issues. However, film is also an accessible tool through which society can be influenced. By showing progressive attitudes in dealing with controversial and complex topics, film can teach people about these topics and open their minds to new perspectives.

2. Racism in Hollywood

2.1. Current Issues in the Representation of African Americans, Gender, and Sexuality

A way to examine the current representation of race in Hollywood is by looking at the Academy Awards. Often referred to as the Oscars, it is the oldest worldwide award ceremony for film and everything it includes (music, actors, costumes, directors, writers etc) with its first ceremony in 1929. Since the 1980s, major production companies started to make blockbuster films and started to receive media attention like never before. This is when the Oscars became the spectacle event as we know it today. The reason why this specific award ceremony is so important is because it focuses on popular cinema available for everyone, unlike, for instance the Cannes film festival. Other award ceremonies as the BAFTA's, Critic's Choice Awards, or the Golden Globes are influential as well, however, they do not attract an audience as big as the Oscars. In addition, when news outlets report about the winners of these award shows, it is often mentioned that this could mean an Oscar nomination or win as well. Reports about who won Best Picture at the Oscars never focus on what other awards they can win, suggesting it is already the top honor. The Oscars represent what is popular in Hollywood, one of the biggest film industries in the world, and therefore also how Hollywood deals with race, gender and sexuality. Because the Hollywood film industry and the Oscars are thus so heavily intertwined, the status of the representation of African Americans can best be established by analyzing the Oscars.

In the article *The Birth of Oscar*, Andrew Essex provides information on the beginning of the Academy Awards and how it formed into the media spectacle known today. It started out in 1927 as merely an organization, created by Louis B. Mayer, the boss of major production company MGM. It was called the International Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Only a handful of producers and directors were considered eligible for joining. The next year,

Mayer created a "voting system for awards of merit for distinct achievement" (3). Budd Schulberg, son of the Paramount chief B.P. Schulberg, was 15 at the time of the first ceremony. He recalls that despite it being "like an assembly in a school auditorium… There was always a definite sense of competition" (4). This sense of competition is still present up to this day. Production companies plan their releases so that it gets the right amount of attention at the right time during the 'Oscar season'. The event is being broadcast in more than 225 countries, and afterwards it is being reviewed by countless news outlets, scholars, and magazines (Roxborough and Szalai 3). However, the attention it gets also consists of a lot of critique. In terms of representing race, the Oscars were, and some claim, still are, not diverse enough. Andrew Essex mentions, "The first Academy Awards ceremony — held May 16, 1929, in the Blossom Room of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel — did set the tone for its latter-year counterparts in one familiar way: It was a self-congratulatory party for a very exclusive club" (1). When looking at the nominees for the Oscars, one can definitely conclude it is exclusive. The first African American to ever get nominated and also win an Oscar was Hattie McDaniel who won the award for Best Supporting Actress in *Gone With The Wind* in 1940. However, it was not until she went to the producer David O. Selznick to show him the reviews in which her performance was being praised, that he considered submitting her for a nomination (Abramovitch 1). During the award ceremony, McDaniel was not aloud to sit at the *Gone With the Wind* table where Selznick and the other actors sat. Instead she was placed at a small table all the way in the back with an escort and her agent. The fact that she was even allowed to be there was already a great deal, because the Ambassador Hotel where the ceremony was held usually had a strict no-black policy (2). Despite what seemed as a progressive move by Hollywood, McDaniel was still only given stereotypical maid roles. Even her last wish, which was to be buried in the Hollywood Cemetery, was denied because she was black (4). The struggle of Hattie McDaniel and other African Americans in the business to get the recognition they would have gotten already if they were white males, shows that Hollywood and its Academy Awards really can be considered an exclusive club that is hard to enter for minorities.

Since the 90s, famous directors as Steven Spielberg started to pay attention to African American roots in films such as *Amistad* (1997). With an increasing amount of acclaimed black

actors, such as Denzel Washington and Halle Berry, the lack of diversity started to get addressed frequently. Of course, one can question whether positive discrimination is fair in a situation like this. Should a 'black film' win simply to send a message, even when other films are better? We must also keep in mind that the choices of nominees and winners are subjective. Everyone prefers different types of films or actors. But it cannot be denied that at almost every ceremony, African Americans get largely ignored, which can be traced back to the fact that the industry itself does not offer as many roles for minorities as it does for white people. Especially in the last couple of years, the Oscars have been under fire of racist accusations. For example, the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was used around the globe to point out Hollywood's favoritism of 'white films'. In the digital age we live in, with social media as an influential tool to spread opinions and start movements, this has caused a lot of stir. Many award winning actors and directors, such as Will Smith and Spike Lee, started to boycott the Oscars. Dustin Hoffman joined the boycot too and revealed in an interview, "There's a systematic race problem that goed beyond the Oscars. It's always been racism. It's kind of a reflection of what the country is" (Associated Press 3). At the Academy Awards itself, winners also address the issue. Alejandro G. Iñárritu, the Mexican director of the 2016 Oscar hit *The Revenant,* made a very clear point in his Best Director acceptance speech. During his speech, the music already started playing, which means that his time to speak is up, but he kept talking. He says, "I'm very lucky to be here tonight, but unfortunately, many others haven't had the same luck. There is a line in the film that Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) says to his mixed race son, "They don't listen to you, they only see the color of your skin". So what a great opportunity to our generation to really liberate ourselves from all prejudice… and make sure for once and forever that the color of our skin becomes as irrelevant as the length of our hair" (Oscars).

In terms of gender, the Oscars are more a platform to discuss gender inequality. Many women who win also touch upon the gender pay gap in their speeches, which is basically the most talked about topic when it comes to gender inequality. Award winning actress Natalie Portman once revealed that the gender pay gap is even worse than in other professions when woman make 80 cents to every dollar a man makes. In Hollywood it is 30 cents to a dollar (Mintz

3). Since the award show has categories for women only, there is no criticism within those categories unless they are about race.

This year, the Oscars were the most diverse it has ever been. For two years, not a single African American actor was nominated in any of the four categories (Best Lead Male, Best Lead Female, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Supporting Actress). Now, in 2017, for the first time ever, every category contains a nominee of color. The award for Best Picture did not go to the all-white film *La La Land* like everyone expected. *Moonlight* took home that award, making it the first Best Picture that touches upon race in combination with sexuality. Never before has there been a film, that is so successful while focusing on the LGBTQ community and its place in society.

In the article *Did #OscarsSoWhite work? Looking beyond Hollywood's diversity drought*, David Cox reflects on past Oscar nominations, wins, and how 2017 is looking so far. The organization of the Academy Awards is making efforts to diversify its members, the people who decide to whom the Oscars go to. It is planning to double the number of women and minority members in the next three years. However, a study conducted by the University of Southern California proves that this may not be as easy as it seems. The study found that from all the top-grossing films of 2017 so far, only 4% of the directors were women, 5% were black, and 3% were Asian. These numbers have stayed the same for years and it will also take years before its members are officially diverse (6,7). Viola Davis, Best Supporting Actress winner for the film *Fences,* says, "What is still a deficiency is that one year we have a plethora of African-American movies and then the next year nothing", suggesting her skepticism of the 'overcoming of racism in Hollywood' (5). Many critics also replied that they felt like the Academy only included blacks because they had to in order to avoid racist accusations. People also mentioned that the Academy was throwing the African American community a bone, saying that one year of diversity does not immediately make up for the 88 years without it. It was being compared to the notion that since a black president was elected, racism is over (MILO 6).

It can be concluded that the Oscars remain controversial and will proceed to be a platform with awarding and criticism as its core elements. It is hard to believe that the Academy with its major influence will ever be free of criticism, since, as has been mentioned before, no matter how

diverse its members are, the idea to choose one film over the other hundreds of films that are made each year, remains subjective. The future will have to point out whether diversity will become an indispensable and even ordinary element of the Academy Awards and thus Hollywood.

2.2. The Position of White Race

For now, we have only discussed race in regard to African Americans. In scholarly research, but also in everyday life, the term 'race' is always used to refer to non-white ethnicities. When it comes to film, one can easily notice that films can be referred to as a 'black film' or 'race film'. However, when a film with an all-white cast is being discussed, there are no mentions of it being a 'white film'. This suggests that in Hollywood, white is, perhaps unconsciously, the standard. This idea is hardly every discussed, but it is necessary to understand how the concept of whiteness is treated in relation to non-white. In *The Matter of Whiteness*, Richard Dyer provides an excellent explanation of what the problem with whiteness actually is. To begin with, he points out the lack of attention that has been paid to the studying of whiteness when it comes to race. In the Western world, being white is something that is never discussed. People are not conscious of it, neither do they see it as a vital part of who they are. Thus, "whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (3). This does not mean that white people cannot be stereotyped. In films, one can find many white stereotypical characters, however, they are based on religion, looks (not skin color), or abilities. For example, in almost every film that focuses on high school life, there are characters such as the dumb or mean blonde, guys that play sports are jocks, people in the drama club are nerds, etc. Rarely are they stereotyped based on their whiteness.

Peggy McIntosh, Senior Research Associate of the Wellesley Centers for Women, digs deeper into this topic. She states, "I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or illiteracy of my race. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group. Special circumstances and conditions I experience which I did not mean but which I have been made to feel are mine by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding 'normal'

person of goodwill" (6). She explains that this happens because in the Western world, white people are systematically privileged, and they often do not even see it themselves. They are taught to believe all they achieve is "to be accounted for in terms of their individuality. It is intolerable to believe that we may get a job or a nice house, or a helpful response at school or hospitals, because of our skin color, not because of the unique, achieving individual we must believe ourselves to be" (191). That is why the concept of whiteness is a problem. In Hollywood, representing a Western world view, the representation of whites is disproportionately predominant. This means that white people also create the dominant images of how the world should be seen. This can be traced back to, for example, the aforementioned Production Code of 1934, which established that films should not show challenging or unfamiliar ideas. It can be traced back even further to the 'Manifest Destiny' belief of the 19th century. Settlers of the still largely undiscovered North America believed that it was God's will for them to spread their ideologies as much as they could. Covertly, this includes the spreading of the white protestant race (Buscombe 180). As this means heterosexual reproduction, it also explains why homosexuality was seen as unnatural, because it threatens the reproduction of a certain race. The concept of race is therefore very much linked to sexuality. As Dyer explains, "All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorizing different types of human body which reproduces itself" (20).

The concept of whiteness as a predominant race originated long before films were ever made. The reason why it is still a problem, is because it is still evident that white people, also in Hollywood, often fail to acknowledge that racism is still an issue. They will not likely get rejected for roles because of their skin color, as for many films, white characters are still, consciously or unconsciously, the standard. Though a lot has already been accomplished in overcoming racism, Dyer emphasizes that we are not there yet until we understand the power of whiteness, acknowledge it, and end its rule (4).

3. Hollywood's History and Its Influence

3.1. The Beginning of Hollywood

Now that we have established the current status of race representations in Hollywood, the question of why this matters to society remains. This can be answered by looking at the history of Hollywood filmmaking and how the changes that occurred are linked to changes in society.

The town Hollywood was incorporated in 1911. It was the ideal place for filmmakers due to cheap land and labor available for studios, year-round sunny weather for lighting, and various landscapes close by such as mountains, deserts, and beaches (Benshoff and Griffin 31). The reason why Hollywood kept dominating the film industry in the United States was because of the oligopoly of the film companies. An oligopoly is a "state of limited competition, in which a market is shared by a small numbers of producers or sellers" (Longman Advanced American Dictionary 1105). The major film companies Warner Brothers, Universal, Columbia, Paramount, and 20th Century-Fox, had been created by the late 1920s. They controlled the entire industry by working together in order to weaken potential competitors (Bordwell 458). Smaller independent films struggled to get distributed, which meant that if filmmakers wanted to be successful, they were better off working for one of the dominating film companies, which kept the oligopoly firmly in place. Therefore, the Hollywood film industry has been the most dominant one since its beginning.

3.2. Hollywood Style and Its Influence

Over the beginning of the 20th century, the Hollywood film industry came to create the classical Hollywood style of filmmaking. The most important characteristic of this style was that the storylines and views portrayed in the film should not be too challenging for the audience. People like seeing storylines they are relatively familiar with and that matches the dominant ideology of their world (Benshoff and Griffin 32). It is important to note that from 1915, films were monitored by local and state censorships boards because the Supreme Court decided that the First Amendment, securing the freedom of speech, press, and religion, did not apply to films

(Gianos 46). The Supreme Court stated the following. "It cannot be put out of view that the exhibition of moving pictures is a business pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit, like other spectacles, not to be regarded, more intended to be regarded as part of press of the country or as organs of public opinion. They are mere representations of events, of ideas of sentiments published or known; vivid, useful, and entertaining…" (46). This suggests that people, and the government in particular, were aware of the fact that film could be considered as a powerful tool, an "unregulated social force" (Browne 54). It was very clear that film could have an influence on what an audience believes to be morally right or wrong. Therefore, the government tried to prevent people from questioning and challenging the social, political and economic principles of America. It was not until 1952 that the Supreme Court decided that films should be covered by the First Amendment (Gianos 46). But until then, filmmakers needed to make their films more suitable, matching the dominant social ideals of that time. The early years of cinema thus established a form of filmmaking that rather affirmed and pleased an audience instead of challenging them. After 1952, this tradition continued to exist even up to this day, because it also proved to be the most profitable.

This can be considered problematic because it means that filmmakers can decide what viewers should find important or not. The choices filmmakers make are often not even noticeable for the viewer, but they do adopt the ideas they see without being aware of it. "It limits the viewer's choice in what he or she is meant to find important" (Benshoff and Griffin 24). For example, when films continue to use stereotypes and portray villains with one certain physical appearance, viewers are going to link these certain physical characteristics to people in the real world, seeing them negatively. Because of influences like these, the Hollywood film industry with its style is not merely an industrial capitalism but also a cultural capitalism. It promotes and imposes ideas and ideologies throughout the world via cultural means (29). Note that this is not limited to the United States only. Hollywood also dominates the world's film industry which inspires foreign filmmakers to adopt the style because it attracts people. Therefore, the American ideologies and ideas can affect the entire world. It reflects what the nation's thoughts are on race, gender, and sexuality. Entire corporate America believed that women, especially African American women, were not suited for professional jobs, which means that Hollywood was not

any different. Both on screen as well as behind the scenes, special privileges were afforded to men. A lot has changed over the year, but the majority of filmmakers still are white males, which means that, according to the aforementioned study conducted by Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Doctor Katherine Pieper, the representations of women are rarely progressive.

Now that I have established how and why Hollywood became such an influential force as a film industry, it is important to have a deeper look at the history of Hollywood cinema. Three specific time periods, the Antebellum period, the 1930s till the 1940s, and the 1960s till the 1980s, contain social and political events that still have an effect on today's film industry.

3.3. The Antebellum Period

Ever since the first films were made in the Antebellum period, African Americans were heavily stereotyped. This was derived from the popular form of entertainment called 'minstrel shows'. These comedic performances often featured black characters played by white people who would paint their faces black, referred to as 'blackface'. The stereotypes continued to be used in cinema as well. Donald Bogle, a film historian, explains in his book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films,* that there are five prominent stereotypes that were used in the classical Hollywood films (13). The Mammy was usually a black woman who nursed the children, the Coon was a lazy, comedic character, and the Uncle Tom was the obeying house slave. These three stereotypes were always considered loyal and content slaves, which justified the slave system. The Tragic Mulatto was usually a mixed-race woman born from a slave mother and white master father. She and the last stereotype, the Black Buck, an animalistic and dangerous slave who was out for vengeance, emerged after slavery got abolished and suggests the fear of white people of former slaves retaliating. An example of a film in which these stereotypes are very prevalent is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). It celebrated the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group, to the extent that they even used it as their recruiting tool. According to Melvyn Stokes, Professor of Film History at University College London, the film was a 'historical reconstruction', meaning that it was presented as a

film that was based on so much research that people tended to perceive it almost as a documentary (175).

When this film came out, the Jim Crow Laws were in full practice. Enacted in the 1870s, the law enforced racial segregation in public facilities, at work and in politics (Urofsky 2). Therefore, many black characters in films like *The Birth of a Nation* were played by white people in blackface. Later on, during the late 1910s, there were all-black-cast films that were produced independently and got distributed to cinemas for black people only. These are referred to as race movies (Cripps 131). It was already seen as progressive because it gave African Americans a sense of self that they could not get from other mediums. They now had 'films of their own', which fit in with the 'separate but equal' ideology of the Jim Crow laws. However, these films were not yet free of racism since they were mostly made by white males who controlled how African Americans were portrayed (129). This continued to lead to the usage of stereotypes as described earlier by Donald Bogle.

3.4. 1930s - 1940s

In the 1930s, America faced increasing economic and social issues. The stock market crashed, unemployment doubled, and African Americans were still heavily discriminated against. However, despite the economic problems, the Hollywood film industry flourished. Movie theatre attendance reached an all-time high due to glamorous star-studded films. In *American Cinema of the 1930s: themes and variations*, Aaron Baker explains that the growing appeal was caused by films in which the extravagance overruled the scarcity people were facing at the time (26). Hollywood films portrayed what people had lost or what they desired. Thus, during a period of great economic crisis, people went to cinemas to escape reality, from which the film industry would benefit.

Not much progress was made in terms of equality in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. In 1934, the Motion Picture Production Code was implemented. It consisted of guidelines and rules on what was considered appropriate content for films. For example, miscegenation, attitudes towards public characters and institutions, willful offense to a certain race, and brutality were

'dont's' (Lewis 301,302). This meant that films were not allowed to be critical of racism, which is coherent with the Hollywood style characteristic of films not having to raise the question on whether their dominant ideology was morally right or wrong. Many successful films with black cast members were made, however, they were always stereotyped and supported the white main characters. In addition, the films were always written, produced, and directed by white men, which meant that the inferior position of African Americans heavily romanticized. The same goes for women and the concept of sexuality, as their inferior position was never questioned or debated. A perfect example is *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which is still one of the highest-grossing films ever made. The story of Scarlett O'Hara living on her plantation, set against the backdrop of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era, heavily romanticizes slavery and the inferior position of women. It is therefore remarkable that a film about the Civil War, never discusses the issue of slavery. It is portrayed as something that is part of a culture that does not hurt anyone, as the slaves in the film are very content with their lives and just as devastated about losing the war as the white characters are. The ignoring of racism under the Jim Crow laws suggests that escapism was extremely prevalent in the 1930s and the early 1940s.

This started to change during and after World War 2. While the United States fought against racist Axis nations, many Americans started to question whether their country could be considered 'better than them' in terms of racism. The workforce became more diverse with women and racial minorities also having to join. This meant that the stereotypes used in films, such as women and African Americans not being suited for certain jobs, were not accurate anymore. Hollywood began to function under increasing pressure with Civil Rights movements, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), trying to create more equality. Despite films like Disney's *Song of the South* (1946), which still heavily stereotyped and ridiculed its black characters, an increasing amount of independent films started to slowly tackle race and social issues, such as *Home of the Brave* (1949) (Gianos 133). It inspired the major production companies to also shift away from escapism and deal with racism, since it became evident that those films would also bring in money.

3.5. 1960s-1980s

The late 1960s gave birth to the Blaxploitation films. The civil rights movement became more violent with the assassination of Martin Luther King and the increasing popularity of Malcolm X. This was reflected in Hollywood with the emerging of the new genre blaxploitation. In *Blaxploitation: A Sketch,* Gary Morris explains the following about it. "Most are gangster melodramas with elements of social protest, dominated by a single (male or female) charismatic personality. They fall loosely into two overlapping categories. First, there are the stories of the pimp or pusher at a crisis point, caught between the needs of his people (black nationalism) and sellout pressure from The Man" (2). Filmmakers of this genre thus often used the same storylines involving drugs and social protest. Even though the portrayal of black nationalism can be considered progressive, and the fact that these films created a lot of job opportunities for African Americans, many still found these films controversial. They felt like the characters were too much derived from the Black Buck stereotype, portraying African Americans in a negative way. Due to this controversial debate, the film genre was only short-lived and its popularity died out in the 1970s.

The debate about gender equality also started in the 1960s. By the late 60s, women's equality movements had been formed that aimed to overturn the white heterosexual male power structure (Benshoff and Griffin 238). Women in films were much more objectified, which can be linked to sexuality as well. As a filmmaker or director, it was acceptable to film a woman in an objectified way, since that did not clash with the traditional dominant heterosexual ideology. Therefore, it was also acceptable for the audience to look at an objectified woman on screen, as they would be comfortable with the fact that it was filmed by a man. However, when a man was shown on screen in an objectified way, it would be considered unacceptable because it meant that the director had filmed another man like this. The audience, disturbed by homosexuality, would then also be forced to gaze at another man in a sexual way which discomforted them (251). However, it was ironic that if a woman was gazing at another woman in an objectified way, it was acceptable. The avoidance of portraying something that could be associated with homosexuality

was established in this period, which again can be traced back to the idea that film should not challenge the dominant ideology.

The early 80s became even more paradoxical since many African American artists and actors, such as Michael Jackson, Bill Cosby, Whitney Houston, and Oprah Winfrey, became extremely successful but still struggled with gaining power in Hollywood (90). Films with predominantly black casts, such as *Coming to America* (1988) and *Harlem Nights* (1989), gained increasing popularity. However, despite the successful ones, films with all-black casts were still considered a financial risk for production companies. Producers found that biracial casting, where a black main character support a white main character, attracted a white as well as an African American audience, which was profitable for major film companies. This can be considered a medium for that time. Steven Spielberg broke free from the traditional Hollywood films of that time with *The Color Purple* (1985). It starred celebrities as Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg and dealt with black women's struggles with sexual, psychological, and physical abuse during the slave era in the South. Though the film sparked debates about its controversy, it gained huge attention. However, many filmmakers found that in order to make a profitable film, it was still smarter to follow the traditional Hollywood formula that did not challenge social issues too much.

4. Case Studies: *Hidden Figures* (2016) & *Moonlight* (2016)

In order to formulate a better answer to the question on to what extent the representation of race and gender has made progress, I will closely analyze two recent Oscar winning films that touch upon these topics, *Hidden Figures* and *Moonlight* (Poster 1,2). I chose *Hidden Figures* because it is a historical film based on true events that deals with race and gender. The story is set against the backdrop of the early 1960s, an era in which a lot changed in terms of Civil Rights. Also, the story revolves around NASA's Mercury Project. The goal was to send the first man into space, which ties in with the notion of Manifest Destiny, the idea that Americans were destined to expand their freedom and knowledge even beyond earth. Because this belief is such an important aspect of U.S. history, it is very interesting to see how Hollywood treats this belief in contemporary films. The reason why I also chose to analyze *Moonlight* is because it deals with race and sexuality, but the story is set in the present. As both topics are still considered controversial in today's society, it is important to analyze how this film portrays the complexity of the combination of race and sexuality.

1. *Hidden Figures* Poster (IMDb)

2. *Moonlight* Poster (IMDb)

4.1. Case Study: *Hidden Figures* (2016)

Hidden Figures came out in December 2016 as an adaption of the same named non-fiction book by Margot Lee Shetterly. The historical biopic, produced by 20th Century Fox, was directed by Theodore Melfi and contains award winning actors, such as Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monáe, Kevin Costner, Kirsten Dunst, and Jim Parsons. In February 2017, it got nominated for 2 Oscars in the categories Best Motion Picture, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay. The film was also nominated for 75 other prestigious awards, such as the Golden Globes, Screen Actors Guild Awards, and the BAFTA's. It won 31 of them (IMDb). The film is a huge box-office success, grossing $22.8 million and counting (McClintock 2).

Hidden Figures tells the story of three African American women who worked as mathematicians at NASA in the early 1960s. Katherine Johnson (Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Spencer), and Mary Jackson (Monáe) were part of the computer team at the Langley Research Center in Virginia. As NASA becomes increasingly eager to complete Project Mercury, the first United States' human spaceflight, the women deal with racial segregation and gender biases. Their inferior position keeps them from excelling at work. Katherine, the mathematical wonder, is part of the Space Task Group. It is thanks to her that the mission succeeds. Mary aspires to become an engineer, but is not aloud to attend the classes needed at an all-white school. She goes to court with the case, wins, and goes to work as an engineer at NASA. Dorothy learns that she and her co-workers will soon be replaced by the IBM electronic computer. She then teaches herself how to install and work the computer, something the other men cannot do. Because of this, she is offered a permanent position as supervisor of the IMB computer.

4.2. Character Analysis

What makes this film particularly interesting is the fact that the main characters deal with a double inferior position, as they are women and African American. Even though they face the same racial issues, they deal with them in slightly different ways.

Katherine Johnson is a single mother of three children and a mathematical genius. She is a timid woman who is far too glad that she gets to be part of the Space Task Group. Therefore, she remains behaving correctly towards her 'superiors' and accepts her place and the fact that she has to work ten times as hard. However, there are some situations in which she proves to be more complex. For instance, there is no colored bathroom in the building she works, which means she has to walk a half mile to the segregated Computer Division to go to the bathroom. Shots show her running in her heels and neat dress holding the giant pile of work folders. She actually does her work while she is in the bathroom. She does not address this problem herself until the head of the Task Group, Al Harrison, calls her out for taking too many breaks. She snaps and explains the ridiculous extents she has to go to in order to do her work and how under appreciated she feels. She walks out of the room with her office supplies as if she already accepts the fact that she has been fired. However, she maintains her job and Al Harrison personally demolishes the 'colored bathroom' sign so that everybody can use the bathroom they please. The fact that she only dares to address the issue when someone else points it out and immediately accepts that she will be fired for addressing it, shows how she tries very hard to be a civil person, but she has her limits. She does not want to let the color of her skin affect her work, but she also cannot avoid it.

Dorothy Vaughan is a bit more assertive than Katherine. She keeps addressing the problem that she is expected to work as a supervisor but does not get the wages of one. No one ever tells her that it is because of her being African American, but it is the unspoken reason. Though she also remains correct towards her mean white employer, Vivian Mitchell, she is not afraid to speak her mind. An example is when she runs into Vivian in the newly unsegregated bathroom. Vivian makes a careful compliment on Dorothy's work on the IBM computer. She says, "You know Dorothy, despite what you may think, I have nothing against y'all". Dorothy replies with, "I know… I know you probably believe that". The way in which Vivian refers to Dorothy and African Americans in general as the 'others' is very condescending and shows that she is very racist, no matter how hard she tries to deny it. Dorothy's response is very calm and correct, yet also dissing. Moments like these suggests that Dorothy is, perhaps because she is also the oldest of the three, the most balanced in terms of addressing racism. She does remain correct but also does not let people completely walk all over her.

Mary is more on the other end of the scale, as she is the most assertive one, which is not always being appreciated. In the beginning of the film, the three women are on their way to work but their car breaks down. A police car approaches them and they get agitated and nervous. Dorothy says, "no crime in a broken-down car", to which Mary replies, "no crime in being Negro, neither". Katherine then responds in an irritated voice, "Button it up Mary. Nobody wants to go to jail behind your mouth." "I'll do my best", Mary says. Her reaction to the police car pulling up shows how she is not afraid to talk back and that makes the others nervous. Her attitude is a personality trait, but is also perhaps being influenced by her husband who is a Civil Rights activist.

Now that I have established the different ways in which the women respond to the issues they face, it is also interesting to look at the main white character in order to explain how the film portrays whiteness. The most important main white character is Al Harrison, the head of the Space Task Group. This character is not based on one specific person, but it is a composite character of three directors at NASA. The reason why he is so important is because he gives Katherine the chance to excel at work by not paying attention to race. He brings Katherine to briefings, demolishes the segregated bathroom sign so she can use any bathroom close to her office, and buys her an engagement gift. He basically treats her like any mathematician and comments on the fact that others do not. On one hand, this can be considered a problem because he can be considered the hero of the story. Because of him, Katherine gets the opportunity to do her work properly. When dealing with a story about racism, it is quite anti-progressive to have a white male function as the hero. There is a point to be made that he was perhaps so focussed on succeeding at the Mercury Project, that he would not let anything stand in his way, including racism and segregation. However, on the other hand, this is a biographical film which means that his role in the life of Katherine, and many other African Americans at NASA, was indispensable and could not have been omitted.

The supporting white characters, Vivian Mitchell and Paul Stafford, show what African American women had to deal with and the process of accepting desegregation. Paul Stafford is very mean to Katherine throughout the story and does not let her put her name on the notes for the briefings. However, he learns to accept that, without her, the project would be hopeless, which

is shown at the end of the movie when Katherine signs her name on the notes and Paul brings her a cup of coffee, something he would never do earlier. Vivian shows less progress in terms of her attitude towards Dorothy. However, she does offer Dorothy the supervisor position she has been asking for and calls her Ms. Vaughan instead of just Dorothy. Despite her straight emotionless face, this is a way of her showing more respect.

4.3. Mise-en-scène Analysis

There are several ways in which the film's mise-en-scène contributes to the themes of race, inequality, and sexuality. I will use three examples of camera technique, lighting, and clothing that support this.

A very important shot in the film is one at the beginning of the film. One can see a young Katherine in a classroom full of much older students. The teacher asks her to solve a math equation on the board and hands her the crayon. The image shifts to a close up shot of the teacher's hand holding the crayon and Katherine's hand slowly reaching for it and grabbing it (Screenshot 1). This is a very meaningful shot because it symbolizes the opportunity Katherine was given, that many African Americans did not get. Without education, she would have never been able to achieve such great things with her knowledge. The close up technique emphasizes the importance of the moment. This particular shot returns later in the film when Katherine is in an important meeting and Al Harrison asks her to also solve a math problem on the board in front of the head of NASA. Again, one can see the close up shot of Al handing her the crayon (Screenshot 2), but this time the shot symbolized more than just an education opportunity. It symbolizes the overcoming of racism and how it starts with giving someone fair opportunities.
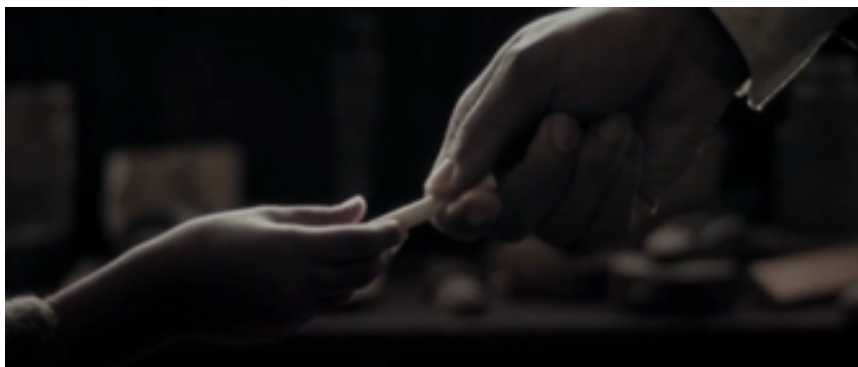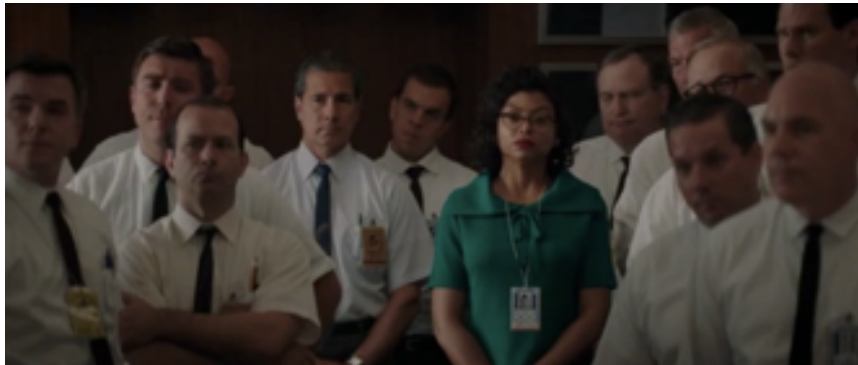

1. *Hidden Figures* (00:01:41)
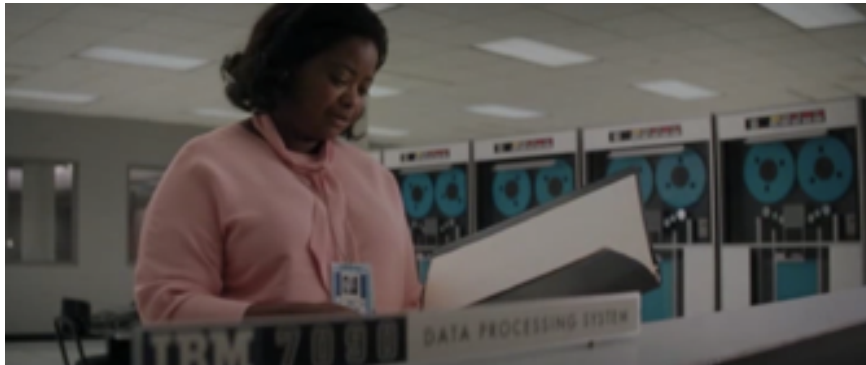
2. Hidden Figures (01:24:08)

Another important technique used in the film is clothing. Whenever Katherine, Mary or Dorothy are in a white male environment, they stand out not only by the color of their skin, but also by their bright colored clothing. In the office of the Space Task Group, Katherine wears colorful dresses which provides a strong contrast with the other men who all wear a white shirt and grey or black trousers (Screenshot 3). The same goes for Mary in the classroom of her all white school and Dorothy in the computer lab (Screenshot 4,5). This adds focus to them being different from the rest, in terms of race as well as gender. The fact that bright colors are used to contrast the whiteness of the white people and white laboratories can be considered as a metaphor of how the women added color, literally and figuratively, to NASA, emphasizing their positive influence.
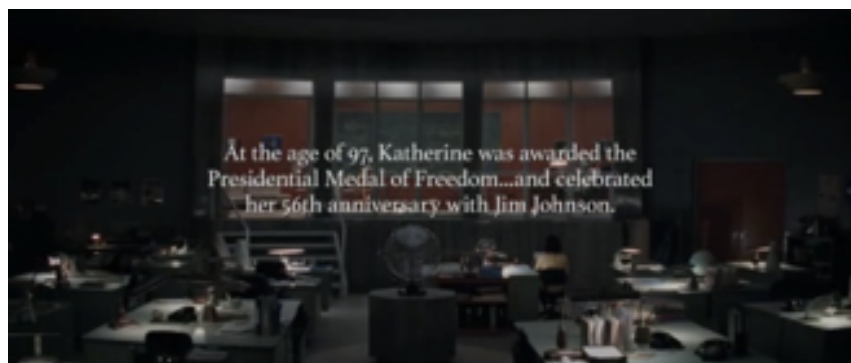

3. Hidden Figures (00:54:57)

4. Hidden Figures (01:31:34)

5. *Hidden Figures* (00:59:47)

Finally, a very important shot in the film is the ending shot. Katherine can be seen sitting at her desk with Al Harrison and Paul Stafford in the upper part of the office. As the camera zooms out, a text appears that reads that Katherine kept on doing calculations for NASA and eventually was awarded with the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the age of 97 (Screenshot 6,7). Katherine is sitting in the dark while in the upper part of the office the light is still on. The contrast in light symbolizes how she was the hidden figure of the Mercury Project. The placement of Katherine in the lower part of the office suggests how she was the base of the mission, as it probably would have failed without her. The text that appears on screen in combination with this shot emphasizes how she was the foundation of many further NASA projects and also an important pioneer in terms of race and gender equality.

6. *Hidden Figures* (01:58:36)

7. *Hidden Figures* (01:58:57)

4.4. Progressiveness, Accuracy & Reception

It can be concluded that *Hidden Figures* is progressive in terms of portraying race and gender issues when compared to earlier films that touch upon the historical events. The film is critical about the position of African American women in the 60s and portrays it in a direct way since there are actual conversations in the film about this very topic. What is also worth noting is how the makers of the film were not afraid to point out the flaws of people that are considered very heroic and important in the history of NASA. For instance, the character Paul Stafford. Even though he is a fictional character and represents the men in the Space Task Group in general, he is portrayed as a racist. The film does not make him and other white characters seem better or nicer simply because they were part of an important part of history. This shows how the film celebrates the achievements of NASA, but it does not shy away from the negative aspects of how the African American female employees were treated.

This is very different from other films about NASA and American heroes. The films *Apollo 13* (1995) and *The Right Stuff* (1983), which are also about the Space Race, were both nominated for and awarded with Oscars. *The Right Stuff* deals, just as *Hidden Figures*, with the Mercury Project. However, there are no mentions of Katherine Johnson, her calculations, or other African American women working at NASA. The focus lies on John Glenn, the astronaut, and his experience of being the first man in space. Even the important and historically correct moment in *Hidden Figures* when Glenn says, "Get the girl to check the numbers. If she says the numbers are good, I'm ready to go", is not present in *The Right Stuff (Hidden Figures)*. This could be left out because the film does not deal with the math of Project Mercury at all, which therefore means that the female African American computers were left out too. The same goes for *Apollo 13*, for which Johnson also did the calculations. Though there are scenes that take place in the control room where one would expect Johnson to be, there is no sign of an African American woman, and neither in the other scenes. These films thus focus on celebrating the American heroes who went into space, instead of the people on the ground who got them there and what their working

experience at NASA was like. *Hidden Figures* is therefore a progressive turn on the well-known stories that provides insight from a never seen before perspective.

There are aspects that can be considered as possible criticism. As has been mentioned earlier, the character of Al Harrison is very important because he gives Katherine the opportunity to excel at work, despite her gender or the color of her skin. This puts him in the hero position, but there is a point to be made that he wanted the Mercury Project to succeed so badly, that nothing would stand in the way of his own success. Even though it is clear in the film that he respects Katherine, it is never clear wether he respects her because she deserves equal opportunities or because he simply needs her for the project.

Another aspect that is worth to point out is the fact that the film only focuses on personal success. The three women slowly overcome the issue of racism, but in a very civilized way. When Dorothy walks down the street with her children and they see a group of men protesting, she says, "Pay attention now, we are not part of that trouble" (*Hidden Figures*). Also Mary's husband, who is part of a Civil Rights activists group, thinks that NASA will never let Mary live up to her potential, and that by staying there to work for them she does not send the right message. However, Mary refuses to listen to him and eventually finds a way to become an engineer. Dorothy mentions in the film, "Any upward movement is movement for us all", and that is exactly what this film focuses on. Richard Brody explains in his article for *The New Yorker* that this narrows the actual experience of African American women in the 1960s. The three characters in the film are relatively isolated from the way other African Americans fought for civil rights. This is the case because they were not only working full time but also had to play the role of the mother and homemaker, and as for Katherine, she was also the sole breadwinner. No attention is paid to their lives before working at NASA which was in the deep age of Jim Crow (15). However, one must realize that every way of portraying history, written or filmed, faces constraints that require selectivity. In *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Trevor B. McCrisken and Andrew Pepper explain that in films, historical time has to be collapsed, or emphasize people or events over others, in order to support an argument and provide focus and interpretation (3). An example of this is the fact that many white characters in the film are composite characters based on several people. They also point out, "Our point is that

we cannot make discriminations about historical films based upon problematic claims to accuracy… The issue is not that Hollywood films have always constructed 'bad' histories by compressing, reducing, and simplifying past events…Our point is simply that the question of whether particular films make 'good' or 'bad' history requires us to develop or appropriate a critical idiom that considers these issues of genre and style in the context of broader concerns about the relationship between pedagogy and representation" (5). This reflects the way an audience should look at *Hidden Figures*. The film raises questions, such as "What about their lives before NASA?", "How does the Civil Rights movement in its many forms influence their lives?, and "To what extent did the white women working at NASA experience racism?". One must understand that the fact that a film raises further questions does not make it historically incorrect. It suggests that the film reveals something about the historical event and also sheds light on the contemporary cultural and political moment (15). The fact that films as The Right Stuff and Apollo 13 did not focus on the women working at NASA points out that today's society values the attention paid to gender and race inequality more. Especially due to the election of President Trump, a white male who is often considered a racist towards African Americans and women, the country already deals with a lot of controversy. The harsh reality of Trump's ideology ruling the country has made people more critical of society. Thus, it is being appreciated that well-known stories are being told from different perspectives, adding focus to race and gender as this is relevant in today's society as well.

However, it is important to note that *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13* should not be considered historically incorrect because they did not include the role of African American women. As mentioned by McCrisken and Pepper, these three films simply chose to focus on different aspects of what happened at NASA. The same goes for the fact that *Hidden Figures* only focuses on the personal achievement of the three women, leaving out much of the many other ways civil rights were achieved. It would simply not make sense to create a film about them and adding focus on aspects that were not part of their lives. Therefore, it is important for an audience to realize that films cannot cover every aspect of a historical event and that they are often merely representations of different perspectives.

4.5. Case Study: *Moonlight* (2016)

Moonlight came out on October 21st 2016 and is based on the semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Tarell Alvin McCraney. It was directed by Barry Jenkins and contains acclaimed actors in leading parts, such as Mahershala Ali, Janelle Monáe, and Naomi Harris. Immediately after its release, the film received much praise. In just 7 months it got nominated for 250 awards, from which it won 208 (IMDb). Besides *Moonlight* being the first all-black cast and LGBT related film to win Best Picture at the Oscars, it broke many other boundaries as well. Mahershala Ali won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, which made him the first Muslim to ever win one. Joi McMillon, the editor, was also the first African American nominated for an editing Oscar. The story is set in the present and takes place in Miami. It is divided into three chapters called Little, Chiron, and Black. Each chapter focuses on a different stage of in the life of Chiron, an African American boy growing up in a poor drug-plagued neighborhood while struggling with his homosexuality. With a drug addicted mother, he finds shelter at Juan's, a drug dealer played by Ali, and his girlfriend Teresa, played by Monáe, when he is still a child. Especially in his teenage years, Chiron struggles with the establishing and expressing of masculinity. It seems as if the people around him know about his queerness long before he realizes it himself. He grows closer to his friend Kevin, who during a night on the beach admits to reciprocating his love. However, Chiron gets bullied a lot and eventually ends up in juvenile prison due to a fight with one of his classmates. Adult Chiron has changed into an influential drug dealer. His masculine appearance is a constant guard for his true identity. He gets in touch with Kevin again and they meet up. It becomes clear that Kevin is still the only person who ever got to know the real Chiron, as his entire life has been a struggle trying to hide it. Though the film has a relatively open ending, as it is not clear whether Kevin and Chiron end up together, the film ends with Chiron leaning on Kevin's shoulder while he comforts comforting him, which suggests that they have finally found the courage to let down their guard.

4.6. Character Analysis

A remarkable aspect about the film is the fact that it is divided into three chapters. This means that the director had the ability to divide the development of the characters into three parts, making it very clear how they do or do not change.

Chiron, the main character, is played by three actors, Alex Hibbert as the child, Ashton Sanders as the teen, and Trevante Rhodes as the adult. They all portray Chiron as a shy, withdrawn, and lonely person. For instance, child Chiron barely speaks to Juan and Teresa, even though he is very much drawn to them and considers it a place of refuge. Though he is mostly silent during this chapter, his plain emotionless expression says a lot about his oblivion about the struggles he is already facing at a young age. It is also during this time when he already asks Juan what the word 'faggot' means and how he would know if he was gay. His awareness of his sexuality is apparently already present. Teen Chiron portrays more loneliness and anger towards the bullies at school and his mother. However, he is still portrayed as fragile, and someone who is constantly holding his guard up, avoiding people, and questioning what he can or cannot say and do. Adult Chiron has changed drastically compared to his child and teen appearance. He is very muscular and comes across as very tough. His attitude towards his mother is very mature as he dares to stand up to her. The three portrayals of Chiron are different from each other and only contain the same characteristic of being guarded. It is interesting to note that this was also the purpose of Barry Jenkins. In an interview at an Oscar panel, Rhodes explains that Jenkins was very adamant about not letting him see or meet the kids who played the younger version of Chiron. "We were trying to find some resemblance of what the younger versions were doing, whether it'd be a walk or how they carried their head or held a fork… but he [Jenkins] didn't want us to focus on mimicking… and show that throughout our lives we change so drastically, depending on what happens to us. And this person is someone who's been through so much, I guess the casting of three different people really had to push this through" (Oscars).

Juan is a very important character to the development of Chiron. He functions as a mentor for him and is also the first person to tell him that it is okay if Chiron were to be gay. Though portrayed as an influential drug dealer, Juan breaks the stereotype by being kind and gentle with

Chiron. He does not mentor him towards the drug business, but instead provides him with comfort, such as opening up his home to him and leaving him be when he does not feel comfortable talking. Especially the scene where Juan teaches Chiron how to swim is very important. It is presented as a warm memory of a fatherly presence in Chiron's childhood and functions as a metaphor for Juan teaching him how to survive the struggles the young boy is facing and will have to face in the future.

Chiron's mother, Paula, experiences an interesting development throughout the three stages. She is introduced as a caring and concerned mother, but soon one learns that she is a drug addict. When Chiron is still a child, she still makes an effort to hide it from him. However, Chiron sees her unravel slowly. She puts Juan in a complicated position as he sells her drugs, but he feels responsible for her son. When Chiron is a teen, Paula is in the depths of her addiction which is very painful to watch. She throws tantrums whenever Chiron does not want to give her money for drugs, but also tries to persuade him by taking advantage of his sensitivity and taking on the mother role by saying, "But I'm your mama ain't I?…Teresa isn't your mama, I'm your blood! You're my child, and you better tell that Bitch she don't forget it" (*Moonlight*). This suggests that despite her addiction and the fact she's glad Chiron is at Teresa's all the time, she still sees him as her son. Motherhood is a form of property and control for her she does not want to loose, since she already lost control over herself. In the third chapter, Paula is in a rehab facility and still takes on a motherly role by getting angry at Chiron for working in the same business that destroyed her. This is also when she admits to her mistakes and says, "I love you Chiron, and you ain't gotta love me. Lord knows I did not have love for you when you needed it. But you gonna know that I love you, you hear me Chiron?". This characteristic shows how she functions as a complex burden in Chiron's life, leading him to be sensitive enough to keep visiting her, but feeling disconnected from what he is supposed to feel for a mother.

Teresa appears in the first two chapters and is a stable factor in Chiron's life. She takes care of him as if she is his mother, yet she never judges or speaks badly about his real mother. Teresa's kind and warm personality gets Chiron to open up about his sexuality as a child as she tries to break through his walls in subtle ways. In Chiron's teen years, she sits with him at the dinner table and asks him how he is feeling. Chiron answers that he feels good, but Teresa replies

with, "No, I've seen good and you ain't it. And stop putting your head down in my house. You know my rule, it's all love and all pride in this house" (*Moonlight*). This shows that Teresa genuinely cares about Chiron's well-being unlike any other person in his life. Despite the fact that Chiron is quiet and does not talk about his struggles, Teresa remains in a caring position. She is very important in his life, because she does not have to ask about his inner turmoil, she knows.

Kevin, Chiron's love interest in the story, appears in all three chapters and remains unchanged. He is a kind and social person who is the only one of Chiron's peers who treats him as a friend. Though Kevin appears to be straight, talking very openly about his experiences with girls, he gives Chiron his first sexual experience during a night on the beach. Their relationship becomes even more complicated when Kevin is being forced to fight Chiron by bullies at school. He does not refuse though it is obvious he does not want to do it. This suggests that Kevin too struggles with the obligated feeling of expressing masculinity through fighting, but in a different way than Chiron. Kevin already has a masculine image and feels the pressure to maintain it. There is a point to be made that Kevin could be bisexual, also because as an adult he has an ex-girlfriend and a child, but either way, he is the only person in Chiron's life that really knows who he is and sees right through him. His impact on Chiron's life becomes clear when the two are talking as adults and Chiron says, "You're the only man that's ever touched me. The only one. I haven't ever touched anyone since" (*Moonlight*).

4.7. Mise-en-scène Analysis

The mise-en-scène of *Moonlight* strongly supports the themes and emotions of loneliness and frustration. Interesting camera techniques, editing, and color contrasts function as tools that assist the development of the characters and the story.

There are three important aspects of camera technique being used. First, the scenes that take place on the streets or at school are filmed with a lot of movement. This has the effect of the viewer experiencing what the characters are experiencing. An example of this is whenever Juan is walking down the streets and talks to his dealers. As they are talking they do not stand still but rock a bit back and forth. The camera moves like this as well, providing the viewer with a

perspective as if they are there with him. These movements intensify when the mood of the scene also intensifies. For instance, during the fight at school the camera moves very hectic and occasionally loses focus, which matches the heavy turmoil experienced by Chiron and Kevin. Second, scenes in which the facial expressions and dialogue are the center of attention are filmed with little movement. An example is when Chiron has his first sexual encounter with Kevin on the beach. This is a heavy and meaningful moment where the camera is very still, only showing different shots without moving from one image to another. The same goes for when Chiron and Kevin meet as adults. The camera focuses mainly on their faces because their facial expressions during the conversations carry that last part of the story by showing how complex, and most of all oppressed their feelings for each other are (Screenshot 8, 9).

8. *Moonlight* (01:44:33)

9. *Moonlight* (01:42:36)

A third important camera technique used are the angles from which scenes are filmed. When Juan teaches Chiron how to swim, the camera is placed on the waterline while the waves go over and under it. This effect gives the viewer an oppressive feeling, as if one is drowning. However, it matches the overall emotion of Chiron feeling like he is lost, drowning, and oppressed. Another example of this is when Chiron is crying in the principal's office. He holds his head down as she talks about how she wants him to press charges. The camera is placed next to Chiron in a lower position through which the viewer can see his face looking down. The principle next to him is out of focus which, in combination with the muting of her voice, makes Chiron the center of attention. Most of all, it shows his facial expression that suggests that he is tired and done with the bullies and that there is nothing the principal can do to ease his struggle (Screenshot 10).

10. *Moonlight* (01:03:04)

The use of lighting is another aspect that is used a lot to support the mood and emotions of the story. When looking at the three chapters in general, it can be concluded that in the first two chapters, many scenes are during the day and contain a lot of light. This forms a contrast with the last chapter in which most of the scenes are dark. This supports the idea that in the final chapter, Chiron has grown into a man who has accepted the oppression and has still never let his true self come out. In addition, many intimate and painful scenes that touch upon Chiron's sexuality take place in the dark. For example, the dream he has of Kevin having sex with another girl, the scene where his mother is screaming at him when he is a child, and the moment where

Kevin and Chiron drive away from the beach (Screenshot 11, 12, 13). Only little light shines on the characters, usually coming from the side, which creates a lot of shadows and darkness. This gives a sense of the scene's space, which is very small (Bordwell 178). It suggests that these intimate emotions that occur during these scenes are hidden deep as the causes of Chiron's loneliness. It also adds to the overall theme of the secrecy of his sexuality.

11. *Moonlight* (00:42:50)

12. *Moonlight* (00:29:53)

13. *Moonlight* (00:55:46)

Finally, a mise-en-scène aspect that stands out is the setting. The story is set in Liberty City, a poverty-stricken ghetto area in Miami. The director as well as the author of the play are from this neighborhood and the scenes were shot at places they were familiar with. Many scenes take place outside on the streets, which contributes to the portrayal of the harsh reality of growing up in a ghetto. It shows how the peoples' lives, like Chiron's, are dominated by what happens on these streets, such as the encounters, the drugs, the bullying, etc. What supports this even more is the fact that the very meaningful and intimate moments are set on the beach. This is where Juan tells him, "At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you" (*Moonlight*). This is the only moment someone ever actually tells Chiron it is okay to be his true self (Screenshot 14). At the beach is also where Chiron has his sexual encounter with Kevin (Screenshot 15). The fact that these important moments do not occur in urban areas supports the idea of these moments being meaningful as well as separated from the expected masculinity of the urban environment.

14. *Moonlight* (00:17:08)

15. *Moonlight* (00:55:06)

4.8. Progressiveness, Reception & Accuracy

There are quite a few factors that point out how progressive *Moonlight* is. First, its Best Picture Oscar win proves how much the themes and topics of the film are being valued, even by people outside of the LGBT community. Alex Davidson explains that many of the leading film festivals, such as Cannes, have separate categories for LGBT films, which means that they are rarely able to win the top award (11). The placing of LGBT films in a separate category also separates the topics and conversations it generates from people who are not directly involved. As long as people are not used to seeing and talking about homosexuality, acceptance will for a large part hold off. *Moonlight* winning the top award at the Oscars thus expanded its audience, which will grow awareness of the LGBT community.

Note that there are Best Picture films that contain LGBT characters. However, as Davidson states, these films are "Rebecca (1940), The Silence of the Lambs (1991), and American Beauty (1999), which feature, respectively, a psychotic lesbian, a serial killer, and a neo-Nazi" (5). Little to no attention was paid to these characters personal experiences of being LGBT. This is very different from *Moonlight* in which this is the main focus of the entire film. When comparing *Moonlight* to other films that do have LGBT characters as leading roles, it can be concluded that *Moonlight* stands out because of the aforementioned multiple layers of racism and the fact that their struggles are not romanticized, for example as in *BrokeBack Mountain* (2005), or *Carol* (2015). Though the characters in *BrokeBack Mountain* struggle with the same expectations of masculinity, it is portrayed as very romantic. The harsh reality of growing up gay in a ghetto is not romantic at all and even though the viewer might want to see Chiron and Kevin being happily in love, an idealized happy ending is not what *Moonlight* provides. Also, Chiron and Kevin are poor, black, and homosexual, meaning that he is in a subordinate position when it comes to class, race, and sexuality. Again, this is different from films where the LGBT characters are white. Therefore, it is particularly interesting how Peter Debruge in a Variety review points out the irony "that his peers, who will themselves spend much time of their lives battling with prejudice of being pigeonholed as black men from the projects, are so quick to force one of their own into a subcategory" (6). This can be explained by the fact that the subordinate position

people are already in by being black and living in the ghetto, puts people in a 'survival of the fittest' state of mind in which weaker forms of expected masculinity are easily singled out.

Another way in which the film is progressive is, ironically, through the use of stereotypes. As mentioned before, the character of Juan can be seen as a derivative of the Blaxploitation era drug dealer stereotype. However, Jenkins also broke the stereotype by giving this character depth. His drug dealing business is not the main aspect that defines him, it is his caring attitude towards Chiron. In addition, attention is being paid to the complex role the drug dealing business plays in the lives of the characters. For example, Juan sells drugs to Paula, which is how he makes money. However, this is in conflict with his ethics and wanting to protect Chiron. Also the fact that Chiron ends up being a drug dealer himself, despite knowing how it destroyed his mother's life as well as his own, points out the complexity of incarceration for people like Chiron. Prison is supposed to put people on the right path, but the environment people are then forced to live in is perhaps even worse than the ghetto. With little attention paid to rehabilitation into society, youth like Chiron end up worse by going to prison. Another stereotype that in the film that is portrayed with depth and meaning is Paula, played by Naomi Harris. In an interview she states, "I've always wanted to portray positive images of women in general and black women in particular, and I drew the line at crack addiction. And then I got presented with this incredible script, which sent me into a tailspin… He [Barry] explained to me that was his mother's story and he wanted to tell his story that necessarily involved that of his mother. I then realized that he was someone who was emotionally invested in insuring that this character wan't a cliché, wasn't a stereotype, but was given the full humanity and emotional depth that she deserves" (Oscars). This suggests that Jenkins found a way to acknowledge the existence of stereotypes, but uses them to break free from their clichés by giving them depth and humanity.

All of these aspects that have been mentioned so far contribute to the film's authenticity, which is why the film has been so wildly acclaimed. Kamal Ani-Bello, a student at Miami Northwestern Senior High School, got to play an extra in the film. He states, "The best thing about this movie is they actually went into the projects and shot it, and they let kids from around Liberty City be in it…Usually people make 'hoods on movie sets, but this actually shows the real thing, and that's why it won best picture" (Associated Press 3). Another student, Larry Anderson,

adds that Barry Jenkins graduated from the same high school and has roots in the same housing project that is nicknamed as 'Pork & Beans'. "Knowing that he came from the same, not just Miami, but Liberty City, same Pork & Beans, Miami Northwestern and the same programs that I've been part of, it tell me I can achieve the same way as him" (6). This suggests that the film means even more than just attention for the LGBT community. It is inspiring to people from Liberty City and other ghettos who usually only see their environment being a backdrop for rap music or athletes. As the principal of Miami Southwestern says, "The film's theme of self-acceptance is one students and the community overall particularly need to hear" (10). Other reviews by *Variety* and *The New York Times* touch upon the same aspects of originality and authenticity when pointing out how special *Moonlight* is. Even though the film portrays a complex part of American society, it is being praised in Europe as well for the same reason. In addition, its artistic character is admired. For example, Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* mentions that the combination between hiphop and classical music provides the perfect mix for dealing with the themes of masculinity, loneliness, and love. The film is a hymn for the night, a moment when people can relate to each other in completely new ways (Bockting 6). It can therefore be concluded that *Moonlight* is very progressive and accurate in dealing with race and sexuality and is therefore being proclaimed as a much needed film in today's society in which sexuality is often still an issue.

5. Conclusion

The role of African Americans in terms of race, gender, and sexuality in the Hollywood film industry has been problematic due to underrepresentation and detrimental representations. However, despite the fact that many escapist films are still being made, such as *Spider-Man* (2017) and *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), the success of films dealing with complex issues proves that today's society appreciates being challenged and critical. People value the new perspectives on the roles of African Americans in society and their experiences. The attention paid to the lack of diversity in Hollywood has grown and is being discussed by prominent figures in the industry. It has inspired the Oscars and the film industry itself to be more progressive by, for example, diversifying its Academy members. However, as the study conducted by the University of Southern California has pointed out, this will take years. An increasing number of Americans get nominated, but many are skeptical about Hollywood's overcoming of racism and scared that it will not be permanent. The predominant representation of whiteness has established the perception of the white race being the standard, making it unable for many to acknowledge the fact that racism and inequality is still an issue.

The relevance of this problem lies in the fact that Hollywood is the most influential film industry, making it an industrial capitalism but also a cultural capitalism that promotes and imposes ideas and ideologies throughout the world via cultural means (Benshoff and Griffin 24). The oligopoly of the major production companies created in the late 1920s made Hollywood the most dominant film industry. The style that emerged from those production companies was influenced by the Supreme Court ruling that the First Amendment, securing the freedom of speech, did not apply to films (Gianos 46). It established that films should not question or challenge social, political, or economic principles of America, which is problematic because it limits the audience's choice in what they find important.

As has become clear, three time periods in American history have had a great influence on the representation of African Americans, from which the effects can still be felt today. The Antebellum period established the concept of the stereotypes created by the dominant white ideology. In the 1930s till the 1940s, the stock market crash gave birth to the heavily

romanticizing and downplaying of issues, establishing the popularity of escapist films. The Motion Picture Production Code, implemented in 1934, elaborated on the Supreme Court ruling of the First Amendment not applying to films. The influence of World War 2 led to the start of films tackling social issues and providing critique on current and past state of events. Critical thinking was increasingly being valued. The 1960s till the 1980s elaborated on the stereotypes through blaxploitation films, which shows that old patterns kept on influencing filmmakers. During this time, it also became evident that 'black' films and controversial topics were considered a financial risk, leading many filmmakers to avoid these aspects.

Overall, the core of the problematic representations of Africans Americans lies in the fact that throughout history, filmmakers avoided challenging audiences and tackling race and social issues out of fear of their films not making enough money. Because this has been in practice for so long, the standard attitude towards portraying challenging topics is hard to change. The still predominantly white male controlled business refrains Hollywood from being more progressive, meaning that not only the representations, but also the gender pay gap for example, are issues that are still prevalent in today's film industry.

The increasing amount of films that are critical and address social issues suggest that Hollywood keeps making progress. *Hidden Figures* proves this by being critical of a story that is normally glorified and considers the contributors of NASA heroes. In this case, the heroes are portrayed with flaws and the inequality of African American women is the central of attention. However, because this story is narrowed on the personal experiences of three women, the film deals with the issue that the personal experiences of these three women do not account for other African Americans trying to obtain civil rights in much harsher ways. The Oscar Best Picture win for *Moonlight* shows much progress in terms of Hollywood dealing with LGBT topics. The accurate representations of African Americans dealing with poverty, living in ghettos, and struggling with the expectations of masculinity breaks down barriers, since earlier LGBT films, such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Carol*, romanticize the struggles experienced only by white people. The portrayal of sexuality in combination with race, the multiple layers of racism, is thus new. The most interesting way in which *Moonlight* is progressive is through its use of stereotypes that are given depth and humanity and therefore also break those same stereotypes. However, the

fact that the actors, such as Naomi Harris, worry about portraying negative stereotypes and are often hesitant in taking on roles, shows that films like *Moonlight* and how it deals with stereotypes is still more an exception than a rule.

It can be concluded that the Hollywood film industry is getting more diverse and is becoming increasingly progressive, however, only with small steps. The history of filmmaking with its establishment of stereotypes, laws as the Production Code, and the escapist tendencies are so ingrained in the Hollywood filmmaking style, that many directors, producers, and actors are often hesitant to distance themselves from these traditions. This emphasizes that Hollywood being an industrial capitalism, focused on making money, is also part of the problem. *Moonlight* winning Best Picture is thus a sign that it is possible to create high-grossing films that break stereotypes and touch upon controversial topics, which will inspire other filmmakers.

However, the critique on narrowing stories like *Hidden Figure*s received will continue to be an issue when dealing with the representation of African Americans. As Andrew Pepper has mentioned, films are limited in what they can incorporate. Time often has to be collapsed, minor characters have to be simplified, and certain events have to be emphasized in order to support the argument of the filmmakers and show their perspective (3). One film cannot cover all experiences from people involved in certain situations or events. Because of this, discussions about accuracy and giving certain characters more depth than others will never go away. However, this does not have to be problematic. Since films can be such an influential tool, the sparking of conversations about different perspectives of stories means that it reached out to people and made them think about the topics involved. This can therefore influence the audience in a positive way, making them more aware of important issues.

The conclusion of this research raises further questions, such as wether racism among other ethnicities as Asians or Latinos is being experienced in a different way. Does the progressiveness of *Hidden Figures* and *Moonlight* also influence the low-budget commercial B films that often have the tendency to downplay or simplify issues? Do initiatives such as separate categories at award shows for queer films or the BET awards, that are only meant for African Americans, contribute to creating equality, or does it create more separation? Ultimately, there is still much to be researched about inequality in Hollywood. The film industry produces hundreds

of films each year, meaning that it is evolving constantly. Progressive films as well as films that fall into old patterns of portraying African Americans in a negative way or ignoring them at all will be made. The Oscars can contribute to positive and accurate representations by diversifying its nominees and winners, which will ultimately create more equality in Hollywood. This will take time and most of all growing awareness, because the first steps in solving a problem is recognizing that there is one (Aaron Sorkin 1). As Richard Dyer states, equality will not be achieved until we understand the power of the problem, "put it in its place, and end it's rule" (4).

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