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The Heroes of Hollywood

A journey into Hollywood's diversity and representation issues through on-screen characters

Master's thesis in Film and Video Production
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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to use and expand on the debate of race and gender representation in Hollywood produced films. The issues raised when it comes to race and gender representation were highlighted in the 2015 social media campaign #OscarSoWhite and is used in this thesis in order to analyze if there have been any changes in how black American characters are represented in Hollywood produced films compared to the white characters. This is done by analyzing the trope of the white savior characters and compare them to the black American hero characters in the chosen films. The films chosen are all Hollywood produced films that were distributed before and after the #OscarSoWhite campaign and who all won Academy Awards. By utilizing and exploring post-colonial, feminist and black feminist film theory in this thesis it is shown that there have been evident positive changes to race and gender representation in films after 2015, but the research done also show how there are still issues in the construction of black characters on-screen.

Sammendrag

Målet med denne oppgaven er å bruke og utvide debatten om rase og kjønnsrepresentasjon i Hollywood produserte filmer. Problemstillingene rundt rase og kjønnsrepresentasjon ble fremhevet i sosiale medier kampanjen #OscarSoWhite i 2015 og brukes i denne oppgaven for å analysere om det har skjedd noen endringer i hvordan afroamerikanske karakterer er representert i Hollywood produserte filmer sammenlignet med de hvite karakterene. Dette gjøres ved å analysere karakter tropen white savior/frelserfiguren og sammenligner dem med de afroamerikanske heltekarakterene i de valgte filmene. De valgte filmene er alle Hollywood produserte filmer som ble distribuert før eller etter #OscarSoWhite, og som alle vant en Oscar-pris. Ved å bruke postkolonial, feminist og afroamerikansk feminist filmteori i denne oppgaven ser man at det har vært tydelige positive endringer i rase og kjønnsrepresentasjon i filmer etter 2015, men denne oppgaven viser også til at det fremdeles er problemer med hvordan afroamerikanske karakterer i filmer er konstruert.

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1. Introduction

The black curtains draw back, and the only light is that of the flickering exit sign. The familiar sound of the Warner Bros Pictures intro sends shivers down my spine. Just the sight of their logo is enough for my mind to acknowledge that this film is undoubtedly going to be great. The further we are pulled into the protagonist's journey I cannot help but think; this is it; this is what an Oscar film should be like.

This is exactly how I felt when I went to see *The Blind Side* (2009) for the first time at the cinema in 2009. The film is semi-biographical, and introduce us to Michael Oher, an offensive lineman at the Baltimore Ravens in the National Football League. The narrative follows him before he became a famous football player. Michael Oher is a seventeen-year-old black[1] man who has been in and out of foster homes and is now homeless. Leigh Ann Tuohy invites Michael to stay with her and her family, and later adopts him. I cheered as the film won the Academy Award for Best Actress. This film represented inclusivity with characters and felt like a film that intended to bring us together. It took six years until my feelings towards and my understanding of *The Blind Side*, the Hollywood studios and the Academy Awards changed. Throughout my academic studies, my views on diversity issues and inclusivity changed as I was exposed to and learned more about how different characters are represented in films and what sort of consequences this can have.

This thesis will look at race and gender representation in Hollywood films with a focus on films that have won or been nominated for Academy Awards. The thesis asks how heroes are constructed in Hollywood cinema and if there have been any changes to relevant representational practices in recent years. This inquiry will be done by using the theory of the white savior. The precursor for the white savior in film is often linked to journalist Rudyard Kiplings' poem "White Man's burden" (1899). The white savior character in film is argued to be a modern interpretation of this poem. Patrick Brantlinger states in his paper *"Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' and Its Afterlives"* (2007) that Kipling sent this poem to Theodore Roosevelt who was his friend and governor of New York in 1898. Kipling's

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[1] I have chosen to use the term black instead of African American because this is more inclusive to people of color who are not of African descent. African American is used to refer to people whose ancestors were enslaved people (often taken from West Africa to America).

intension with the poem was to encourage the American government to leave the Philippines a better place than its current state without expecting any profit of resources. America had just won the Philippines from Spain and it became an American colony. Kipling believed the white man was morally obligated to help and civilize the non-white and help them progress to a colonized society. The poem was published publicly in 1899 and received a huge amount of criticism upon its publication. The English politician Henry Labouchere wrote a counter poem named "The Brown Man's Burden" (1899) which offered the viewpoint of the colonized people and Edmund Morel's book *The Black Man's Burden* (1920) also criticized Kipling's poem and racism in the United States (Brantlinger, 2007, p. 172). Kipling's view on the white man's superiority and moral duty to help the non-whites is one of the main elements of the white savior character in films. The white savior is a term that comes from post-colonial film theory and it describes a white hero character that "saves" or "helps" foreign/indigenous people or people of color that they befriend with their life situations. The white savior is portrayed as more capable than the other characters. The aim of this thesis is to further discussion on issues of representation of race and gender in Hollywood films by looking at hero characters in films from the 1980s and the 2010s.

1.1 The #OscarSoWhite campaign.

This thesis takes inspiration from the twitter campaign #OscarSoWhite from 2015. The #OscarSoWhite campaign challenged Hollywood film studios on their lack of diversity and representation. It also highlighted Hollywood produced films' tendencies to maintain euro-centric and patriarchal values. The campaign took shape after April Reign, a writer and former Washington DC lawyer, watched that year's Oscar nominations and noticed that not a single person of color was nominated for the support or lead actor categories. She argued that the campaign reflects a larger issue than just the lack of race diversity in Hollywood casting. In her article for Vanity Fair, April Reign (2018) explains what her purpose with the campaign was:

> "#OscarSoWhite refers to all marginalized communities and is not about quotas but asking inclusive questions when staffing films - from the actors cast to the boom operators and craft-services teams hired. It is about operating outside of the same

networks that have been used for years and instead providing opportunities to talented craftspeople from groups not usually included." (Reign, 2018, paragraph 2)

This statement conveys that the campaign touches on a larger issue of inclusivity in the Hollywood film industry. The #OscarSoWhite campaign speaks to the evident lack of diversity in Hollywood films as reported by the "UCLA Hollywood Diversity rapport" (2018), where Dr. Hunt *et al.* report that only 1,4 of 10 lead actors were of color in Hollywood big budget films from the year 2016 (Dr. Hunt *et al.*, 2018, p. 14). The paper also reports that women's role and inclusivity has not changed much over the decades. An example from this study show that in 2017, 31.8 % of all speaking roles were women and that 43% of the Hollywood films from 2017 did not include women of color. This can be argued to be an inclusivity issue and can also be argued to be a pattern in the Hollywood produced films to create female characters as only a visual pleasure instead of including them for narrative purposes (Carlin, 2018). This will be explored further in this thesis.

The campaign brings to light a persistent issue in character portrayal on screen during the last decades. Dr. Smith, Choueiti, and Dr. Pieper reports in "Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015" (2016) that in 2015, 92% of the top directors in Hollywood were men and 86% of actors in Hollywood films were white. This shows how deeply rooted the lack of diversity in the film industry is. It highlights the historical mistreatment of blacks and other minority groups in the US. This campaign demonstrates how people can use social media to create debate and put pressure on a billion-dollar industry such as the Hollywood film studios. Megan C. Hills (2020) reports that the Academy has given out 336 acting Oscars in its 91 year long run and only 32 of these were given to people of color. The UTCA public library's list "14 Black Actors who have won Academy Awards (Oscars)" (n.d.) notes that only 14 out of the 336 acting Oscars in total were given to black actors, and out of the 933 people nominated for an Academy Award in acting, only 64 out of these have been black.

This thesis will discuss the relevancy of the campaign in 2020 by looking at film hero characters. It will look at more recent Oscar winning films that came out after 2015 and compare them to older films to see if there have been any changes in the representation of race and gender. The films that have been chosen for analysis in Chapter One are *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Black Panther* (2018). The reason for choosing

these two films is that both films are action-adventure films that have a strong leading male hero. The two action-adventure films will be compared to see how the portrayal of the educated, strong and adventurous male savior has been redefined. Chapter Two will analyze the representation of gender by looking at the female character in the white savior film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and its redefinition in *Black Panther*. This chapter will also look at how the black female hero can be portrayed outside of the action-adventure/superhero genre by analyzing the films *The Help* (2011) and *Hidden Figures* (2016).

The #BlackLivesMatter movement and social media campaign happening in the United States in 2020 demonstrates how representation and diversity is an ongoing social problem outside of the film industry as well. This makes the 2015 #OscarSoWhite campaign still relevant as the way black stories and characters are being treated on screen to some extent reflects their treatment in society. In their article for Pew Research Center, Horowitz, Brown and Cox (2019) state that 65% of Americans, including majorities across ethnical groups, say that it has become more common for people to express or receive racial insensitivities (Horowitz, Brown and Cox, 2019, paragraph 7). This thesis cannot argue on the societal impact of the #BlackLivesMatter movement or the #OscarSoWhite campaign, but it will look at the chosen films as one of the mediums where changes can be done in an impactful way and where some of the biases can be challenged.

2. Method: Analysis of character and style

This thesis use film theory to analyze the chosen films. The analysis will focus on the representation of heroes in the chosen films from two methodological points of view: character analysis and the analysis of style. The thesis draws upon Jens Eder's paper "Understanding Characters*"* (2010), where he develops Murray Smith's ideas on characters from his book *Engaging Characters* (1995). Eder argues that how characters are portrayed in visual media has become even more prominent in filmmaking and spectatorship. He argues that research done within communication studies has found that viewers of visual media have a "parasocial interaction" with visual mediums such as film. In other words, many viewers create relationships and look to film characters and TV personalities as role models. Eder's

main point is to use character analysis to show why a character might get a certain reaction from the viewers. Eder (2010, p. 21) suggest that one can divide a character analysis into four different categories:

1. **Artifact**: analysis of aesthetic structure.
2. **Fictional being** what features does the character inhabit in the fictional world. It focuses on the mental models of character.
3. **Symbol**: if the character represents a higher meaning, message or allegories.
4. **Symptom**: analysis of causes and outcomes in the process of communications. The filmmaker's intent, viewers' reactions, socio-cultural context etc.

There is of course overlapping elements in all four categories, but this thesis will mostly analyze characters as symptoms as that puts the focus on the socio-cultural aspects of character portrayal. Eder argues that:

"The Umbrella term "Symptom" refers to reflections of viewers with regard to characters as socio-cultural factors and as casual links between production and reception. Once we have grasped characters as fictional begins, artifacts and symbols, we may question why they are as they are, and what effects this might have on the (other) viewers." (Eder, 2010, p. 33)

In other words, Eder makes a link between how the socio-cultural atmosphere effects how the filmmakers portray their characters on screen and how the audience reacts to these characters. This thesis will use character analysis to address the socio-cultural aspects of character portrayal and possible changes therein. This analysis will be linked to post-colonial theory, feminist and black feminist theory. In relation to Eder's socio-cultural character analysis, the thesis will also engage with analyzing dialogue. The aim of analyzing the dialogue in this thesis is as Walker, Gin, and Sawyer state in the paper "An Annotated Corpus of Film Dialogue for Learning and Characterizing Character Style" (2015):

"We believe that the stylized, crafted aspects of film dialogue are actually useful for our purposes because it is authored deliberately in order to convey the feelings, thoughts and perceptions of the character being portrayed. Furthermore, the screenplay often specifies the emotion of an utterance with psychological state descriptors. In addition, the dialogue is constructed to reveal or focus the viewer's attention on the character's personality and the key plot events involving a character and their perceptions." (Walker, Gin, and Sawyer, 2015, p. 1373)

In other words, excerpts of dialogue from the films will be included in order to directly show the socio-cultural issues the characters face from their point of view and it will be used to analyze the character development of the hero, as the dialogue reflects the characters' experiences of the world and their wants and needs.

Secondly, the thesis will also engage with analysis of style in order to fully account for character development in the chosen films. Here, the thesis draws upon Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith's definition of films style in their book *Film Art: An Introduction* (2017). The elements that Bordwell and Thompson mention in chapter three *Film Style* are: mise-en-scene, setting, makeup/costumes, lighting and staging (movement and performance). The analysis will focus on the framing of the characters by the camera and their movement in the scene, and how this effects how the character is constructed. The thesis also looks at costumes and setting in order to understand the world the character inhabits and how these factors contribute to how the character behaves.

The chosen films are all Academy awarded or nominated films. This thesis will compare two films from different decades and two other films that came out just a few years apart in order to explore if there have been changes in the roles of the male and female hero characters. This thesis will only look at whites and blacks in order to narrow down the analysis, but the debate about diversity in Hollywood films also includes Latinos, Asians and other ethnic groups. This thesis will also only look at male and female when it comes to gender but acknowledges that there is a larger debate when it comes to what the term gender entails.

In selecting films for analysis, a sample list of white savior films that have won/been nominated for the Academy Awards was created. There is no hiding that white savior films are highly profitable and successful in the box office worldwide. This list was used in order to look at how many films had won the Academy Award after *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was realized as this film is the entry point of the thesis. All of these films have a white savior character and it helped to narrow down which films this thesis wanted to look closer at in the analysis of the hero character.

Film	Awards/nominations	Studio	Film	Awards	Studio
Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom (1984)	Award: • Best visual effects	Paramount Pictures	*District 9* (2009)	Nominations: • Best adapted screenplay • Best picture	Sony Pictures
Mississippi Burning (1988)	Nominations: • Best actor - Gene Hackman • Best supporting actress - Frances McDormand • Best Director - Alan Parker • Best Picture	Orion Pictures (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)	*The Help* (2011)	Awards: • Best actress Nominations: • Best picture • Best actress • Best supporting actress	Walt Disney Studios and Motion Pictures
Dancing With Wolves (1990)	Academy award winnings: • Best Picture • Best Director • Best Adapted Screenplay Nominated: • Best actor • Best Supporting actor • Best supporting actress	Orion Pictures (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)	*Django Unchained* (2012)	Award: • Best supporting actor • Best Original Screenplay Nominated: • Best Picture	Columbia Pictures and The Weinstein Company
The Last Samurai (2003)	Nomination: • Best actor	Warner Bros. Pictures	*Lincoln (2012)*	Awards: • Best actor • Best Director Nominations: Twelve	Walt Disney Studios and 20th Century Fox
Blood Diamond (2006)	Nominations: • Best actor • Best supporting actor • Best film editing • Best sound mixing	Warner Bros. Pictures	*12 years a slave (2013)*	Awards: • Best Picture • Best supporting actress	Fox Searchlight Pictures

				Nominations: Nine	
The Blind Side (2009)	Awards: • Best actress Nominations: • Best Picture	Warner Bros. Pictures	*Hidden Figures (2016)*	Nominations: • Best picture • Best adapted screenplay • Best supporting actor	20th Century Fox
Avatar (2009)	Nominations: • Best Director	20th Century Fox	*Green Book (2018)*	Awards: • Best picture • Best original screenplay • Best supporting actor	Universal Studios

It is important to note that the selection of films has been limited in order to create a deeper look into the hero characters. The contemporary films that were chosen to fit the current societal demand for change, not just in the film industry, but in society more generally. The reason why *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984*)* and *Black Panther (*2018) were chosen was because of their prominent male leads which both have become iconic in their own rights. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was chosen because of its academically critiqued use of the white savior and of my own personal relationship with the film. This was a film that I have enjoyed watching since I was a child, and it was not until I started on my academic journey that I discovered how problematic its portrayal of the hero can arguably be. B*lack Panther* was chosen because of its depiction of black characters and the change of the male hero compared to *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. *The Help* (2011) and *Hidden Figures* (2016) were chosen because of their different portrayals of black female characters. *Hidden Figures* and *Black Panther* were also both chosen because they were distributed after the #OscarSoWhite campaign, which enables a closer look on the possible effects of the campaign.

It is important to acknowledge that there has been progress in the representation of black characters in Hollywood produced films. Films such as *Black Panther*, *The Best of Enemies*

(2019) distributed by STX Films, and *Harriet* (2019) distributed by Focus Features, have put black males and females in leading roles. Even though the film *Harriet* received two Oscar nominations, it will not be included in the analysis. It is a historical biopic about Harriet Tubman (1822–1913) who escaped slavery and became an abolitionist. She joined the anti-slavery movement in the United States active before and after the Civil War and saved around 70 enslaved people. This film is very important when it comes to representing female enslaved characters, but my focus will be on other types of black characters than the "enslaved person" or "the maid". One of the chosen films, *Hidden Figures*, has limitations in this regard, but this will be discussed later during the analysis.

3. Literature review

The main purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the film theories used to answer the thesis question and to put the question in an academic context. This thesis is located in the academic context of post-colonial film theory and feminist theory/black feminist theory. The thesis will also refer to several newspaper articles to demonstrate the relevance of the topic on public media platforms. This is done in order to argue that the choices made by the Hollywood studios effect a mainstream audience and not just academics.

It is also important to note that when the term race is used in this paper, it is to explain how groups of individuals, just by having a different skin color, have been separated from others throughout history. Teresa J. Guess argues in her paper "The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence*"* (2006) that:

> "It is now well accepted by social scientists, that the notion of "race" and whiteness, in their social significance, are guided not so much by any biological foundation as by the social meanings that are ascribed to them. That is, they depend on the social definition their situation is accorded. Uncovering or deconstructing the social definition of "race" and whiteness begins with a definition of the situation or context in which these ideas tend to define social interaction patterns." (Guess, 2006, p. 654)

In other words, one can argue that race is a social construct used to create inequality among humans. This inequality between the white and black characters is depicted in these films and can be argued to be a direct result of the socially constructed term "race".

This thesis also uses words such as female, male, gender, masculinity and femininity. There is an ongoing discussion regarding what biological sex and gender is, and if they are two different concepts. It is argued that sex is a biological composition of the human body and that gender is a result of external influences such as social, cultural and psychological factors. The World Health Organization's Genomic Resource Center[2] separates biological sex and gender. They argue on the website under the section "Genomic Resource Center: Gender and Genetics" that biological sex has to do with humans being born with 46 chromosomes in 23 pairs, and it is the X and Y chromosomes that decides a person's sex. Most men are 46XY and females mostly 46XX. This is argued to be a consistent pattern with most females and males. There are other factors like mutation that can affect this and make changes to the chromosome pattern (Gender and Genetics, n.d).

Gender is described with the terms masculine and feminine and it is argued to be a social construction that differs from culture to culture (Gender and Genetics, n.d). Mere Abram's (2019) list of gender identities show an evident acceptance and need for more labels and the inclusion of different labels, and not just the two sexes male and female. This arguably suggests that there is a larger discussion between the theory of biological sex and gender identity. These theories also argue for and against that one's behavioral patterns are based on a person's sex. This paper does not agree or disagree with the use of these ideas and acknowledges other theories surrounding this large topic of what is sex and what is gender. An example of this debate is in Judith Butlers book *Gender Trouble* (1990). In her book she disrupts the binary gender norms. One of her main arguments is that gender is not biological but is something we repeatedly perform because of social norms. This thesis will follow the World Health Organization's terms of biological sex when talking about female and male, and it will use the term gender as a set of social assumptions in behavioral patterns of these sexes. This is done in order to keep the analysis clear and focused.

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[2] *The World Health Organization* was created by the United Nations and is responsible for international public health

3.1 The white savior – a Hollywood industry formula

Post-colonial film theory looks at how previously colonized nations and people of color are represented compared to the white characters on screen. Chapter 4 "Tropes of Empire" of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994, pp. 137-178) depicts how Hollywood films have created stereotypes in how they portray people of color. These stereotypes are formed by tropes; metaphors or symbolism used to differentiate the white characters from the other ("people of color"). One of post-colonial film theory's main goals is to analyze how people are represented on screen through the lens of post-colonialism and to evaluate the consequences these portrayals have. In the chapter "Tropes of Empire*"* (1994) it is argued that:

> "Within colonialist discourse, metaphors, tropes and allegorical motifs played a constitutive role in figuring European superiority. For Hayden White, troping is "the soul of discourse, the mechanism without which discourse cannot do its work or achieve its ends. Although tropes can be repressive, a defense mechanism against literal meaning, they also constitute an arena of contestation: each is open to perpetuation, rejection or subversions. The idea of race, for example, can be seen as less a reality than a trope, as Henry Louise Gates Jr has pointed out, of difference." (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 137)

In other words, these tropes mentioned in "Tropes of an Empire*"* (1994) are used in films to explore what is different, different from whiteness. The tropes found in Hollywood films arguably suggest how Hollywood films still cling to whiteness as superior and everything else represents the opposite of whiteness, usually in a negative or less-than way. Kevin McDonald's further description of what post-colonial film theory's main purpose in *Film Theory: The Basics* (2016) fits well with the analysis of race and gender in this thesis: "Post-colonial theory is used to dissect and understand people of color's fight against racism and white supremacy*"* (McDonald, 2016, p. 115). Post-colonial film theory tries to uncover and highlight the ongoing discrimination and lack of representation in films, especially in Hollywood produced films.

Representation is a word used in this thesis and it is linked with post-colonial film theory. Stuart Hall, in the book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*

(1997), argues that we can divide representation into two systems. The first one argues that all events, people or objects interconnect with a set of concepts that we have in our head. If we did not have these concepts, we would not be able to interpret the world in a meaningful way. With these concepts, we are able to perceive people or objects or form concepts of quite abstract things like death and love. This is called a system of representation and it does not consist of individual concepts but is a way of organizing and classifying in order to establish relations between the different concepts and make meaning of them.

It is further argued by Hall that the "conceptual map" that everybody have in their heads is different from individual to individual. In other words, people interpret the world slightly differently. Nevertheless, we can communicate with each other because we share quite similar concepts of ideas which is often interpreted as "belonging to the same culture". Since we interpret the world in a generally similar way, with some individuality of thoughts and ideas mixed in, we are able to create a social world we occupy together. Culture is therefore often defined as "shared meaning or shared concepts" The second system of representation is language. In order for us to exchange our concepts of the world we must have a shared language. This is done with written words, spoken sounds or visual images in order to express ourselves to other people (Hall, 1997, p. 18-19).

Films fit these two systems of representation; shared concepts and shared languages (written, spoken and visual). The films analyzed are a product of common cultural concepts shared through a "visual language". This arguably depicts why characters in for example white savior films are interpreted in different ways because people have different cultural concept from each other. For a group of people and their culture identity it is quite important how they view themselves on screen and how others interpret them. A sense of misrepresentation can create negative ideas and thoughts against a certain culture and can have negative effects, such as racism. That is why white Americans might not view the white savior character as problematic, while a black audience would.

In order to be able to begin the analysis, it is important to explain what the white savior character is. The white savior is usually structured around a western white male who either encounters a new civilization/society or feels out of place in his own and takes upon himself the burden of leadership to help ethnic or racial minorities. It is often implied that the foreigners and the ethnic minority groups would not be able to overcome their struggles

without this western white male protagonist. The white protagonist in these films often acts as a literal savior or a guide for the non-white characters on their journey. The white characters are portrayed to have a deeper form of wisdom and insight than the non-white characters. Matthew W. Hugey argues in the book *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics and Consumption* (2014) that;

> "Given the diverse locations in which the white savior resonates, the anxious allure of saviorism has saturated our contemporary logic. This trope is so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized and pathological. While whites can emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities." (Hugey, 2014, chapter 1, p. 2)

In other words, this character endorses the "white" ideals because it portrays the white protagonist as superior and portrays them, her or him as the savior. His/her morals, culture and society are argued to be superior. This separates the white and non-whites into two groups: civilized and uncivilized, and the white protagonist's purpose is to civilize the uncivilized with his morals and ideals. It can also give the audience a false representation of another culture and society which then forms and can become their only perception of that group.

3.2 The white savior film

Matthew W. Hughey argues in chapter one "The Savior Trope and the Modern Meanings of Whiteness" from his book *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (2014) that the white savior film is "the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower or working class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate" (Hughey, 2014, p. 1). The white savior films are usually placed into three categories: biopics, fictional stories, and historical period films (What is the white savior trope, n.d. paragraph 2). Here examples of films from the list of white savior films presented above that fits into these categories are also included:

1. Biopics that tells the true story of a non-white person, but through the eyes of a white character or gives the white character more agency in changing the non-white protagonist's situation. In other words, the non-white person needs the white savior character to be able to succeed with their goals. Examples: *Hidden Figures* (2016), *The Blind Side* (2009), *Green Book* (2018), *Mississippi Burning* (1988).

2. Fictional stories that takes inspiration from historical happenings. Examples: *Avatar* (2009), *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Help* (2011). Or fictional stories were a white man or woman helps a non-white person or indigenous people with their struggles *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*

3. Historical period films with a conflict between two groups of races within a country. Example: *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

The white savior character is included in all of these films. These films usually portray the plot through the eyes of the white savior character or allow the white character more agency than the non-white characters. *The Blind Side* mentioned in the beginning of the thesis and the recent Oscar winning film the *Green Book* have time after time been accused of portraying black stories through the eyes of a white protagonist. *The Blind Side* is an adaption of *The Blind Side: Evolution of the Game* (2008) written by Michael Lewis on the black football player Michel Oher. The film's narrative, however, is told through the eyes of his adoptive mother Leigh Anne Tuohy. *Green Book* is based on the book *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936-1966) written by Victor Hugo Green, a road trip guide for blacks in the 1960s with information on where it would be safe to stay. According to Iowa Department of Human Rights there was a need for this book because of the Jim Crow Laws in the Southern states. These laws segregated whites and blacks from each other and made the Southern states quite dangerous for blacks. The film adaption of this book makes the white character, Frank Vallelonga, the protagonist and we as the audience watch the story from his point of view. This again takes away the opportunity for blacks to tell their stories and the struggles they face in the society they live in.

In postcolonial theory, it is argued that race is a social construction. A social construction is a set of beliefs and practices that are used in order to justify the division of people based on arbitrary phenotypical features and an uneven allocation of resources and privileges in society (Hugey, 2014, Chapter 1, p. 4). This divide is arguably only necessary to use if one

wishes to endorse a division in privilege and resources between humans as seen in imperialism, Eurocentric ideals and white supremacy. Some of the white savior films do to some extent show a formed collective unity that changes the system, but this can be just a surface resolution to the problem. The audience who identifies as white might think that racism is a thing of the past and it might make the audience feel that they have come farther as a nation then what is actually the case. By putting white saviors as protagonists in these white savior films it lessens the importance of the characters of color in their own stories. This is not to say that white characters cannot be present or of importance in these stories, it is just that the main viewpoint can be portrayed through the eyes of a character of color as well as a white character.

Tom Brook (2015) describes how Hollywood turns to white characters to tell non-white stories. One of the examples used in the article was *Peter Pan (2015)*. In the book *Peter and Wendy* (1911) written by J. M. Barrie, the character Tiger Lily is depicted as Native American. She is also depicted as Native American in the Disney version of *Peter Pan* (1953), but in the 2015 version of *Peter Pan* the director chose to hire a white actress to play Tiger Lily. The article states that this choice of hiring a white actress to play a Native American sparked outrage among the audience. It sparked an online campaign to boycott the film signed by 94,000 people who wanted to demonstrate against the "whitewashing" of characters and who were tired of white actors portraying characters of color.

Another example of this is described by Ew Staff (2019). It is stated that the screenwriter Gregory Allen Howard, who wrote the screenplay for *Harriet* (2019), wanted a white actress to portray the character of Harriet Tubman back in 1994 when he first started to write the screenplay. Harriet Tubman was an African American political activist born into slavery in the 1800s. He argued that it did not matter who played the character, because it was a long time ago. According to the article, he has later stated that society has changed and so has his opinion. The inclusion of his statement in this thesis is not meant as a personal critique against the screenwriter, but instead as an example of a mindset that might fit in with others in the Hollywood film industry. White actors are still cast to tell non-white stories in films.

In her article for CNN, Emanuella Grinberg (2015) adds another example of a Hollywood film casting choice of employing predominantly white actors in films that tell non-white stories. The film *Gods of Egypt (2016)* had a mainly all white cast, but the film takes place in

Egypt and is based on Egyptian mythology. The film studio and the director had to apologize to the public after receiving backlash for this on online forums and social media. The article argues that it is in a large part due to social media that the studios have been called out and are held accountable for their decisions in recent years. This claim can be linked to the twitter campaign that inspired this thesis: #OscarSoWhite. It is of course important to note that there are other societal and cultural changes in the last decades that are a part of the outcry for change. The social media campaigns can be argued to be one of the tools one can use in order to reach a larger audience and they can be viewed as being quite effective by the sheer number of articles written about the topic.

In Salvador Murguia's book *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films* (2018) it is argued that;

> "The Blind Side, Freedom Writers, and Dangerous Minds all reveal a media myth about whites and their relation to characters of color: white people know what is best, especially if they are middle class. This myth allows whites in the media to become the faces of charity, mercy and benevolence, while characters of color become the faces of crime, poverty, drug addiction, mental illness, aggression and pathology that only a white person can fix or save." (Murguia, 2018, p. 704)

In other words, as mentioned before, the white protagonist in these films often acts as a literal savior or a guide for the non-white characters on their journey. The white characters are portrayed to have a deeper form of wisdom and insight than the non-white characters. The white characters transform the blacks by their portrayed superior intelligence and assimilate them into western white culture. These depictions rob blacks of their voice and agency in solving their own problems. This creates a constant negative power dynamic between black and white characters. The Salvador quote touches upon why my own feelings for *The Blind Side*, *The Help*, *Hidden Figures* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* changed. I did not notice upon viewing them how my own whiteness reflected how I viewed the white savior characters. It was not until I started my academic journey that I started to question how I watch films and how my own socio-cultural background affects my opinions and who I relate to on screen. I was made aware of my own white privilege by post-colonial theory and Black feminism, as I had mostly identified with the white savior or the "good" white American who stood up against racism and helped those with less privilege than I was born into. By identifying with the white savior, I realized that I was a part of a bigger problem and

it showed me the importance of analyzing this topic. It is an important part of change to acknowledge that there is a problem and that is why this topic is arguably a contemporary and valid theme.

Angie Han (2017) suggests an interesting insight into what a few Hollywood filmmakers, mostly directors, have stated as the reason for not having a diverse cast. A few of these statements have been chosen out of the eight in total because they were the arguments that best fit with the topic of the thesis and give insight into how the directors chose actors for their projects. The first example is the argument that a story is universal. The producer of the film *Noah* (2014), based on the biblical story of Noah and the ark, cast only white actors in the main speaking roles. This is argued to be a comment on how only colored people can be boxed into different "races" while white people can portray every character because they do not have this separation of boxed races within what constitute as white and can therefore play anyone because of their "universalness".

The second example is the argument of "we wanted to avoid stereotypes". This argument was used by director Scott Derricks in relation to the film *Doctor Strange* (2016). The character of the ancient one is supposed to be of Asian descent but is played by a white actress. The thought behind this argument can be argued to be valid if one looks at stereotyped black characters in Hollywood films. The problem with this argument is that avoiding stereotypes of people of color does not solve the problem. It instead erases even more of the characters people of color can portray on screen. One way to solve this is to flesh out the characters that have stereotypical traits so that they become more than just their one stereotypical trait.

The last argument is that non-white stars are not bankable. This argument was used by director Ridley Scott when discussing his film *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) set in Egypt. The film tells the biblical story of how Moses helped the Jews escape Egypt (Han, 2017). This argument has been proven to not be true. *Exodus: Gods and Kings* had a budget of around 140-200 million and earned $268.2 million at the box office, while the film *Get Out* (2017), an American horror film with a black protagonist, had a budget of $4.5 million and earned $255.4 million at the box office. Also, the American western film *Django Unchained* (2012), which had a black protagonist who was a newly freed slave, had a budget of $100 million and earned $425.4 million at the box office. It is important to note that these

statements do not apply to every director in Hollywood, but they are used here to show the larger context in how Hollywood filmmakers view diversity and representation.

3.3 Orientalism: the theory of "the other"

The other main theory that will be used is orientalism. Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* (1978) that:

> "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident". Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on." (Said, 1978, p. 10)

In other words, Edward Said's concept of orientalism present in western texts is the mystification of the Orient/the Eastern world through the eyes of the Western writers. The East is often portrayed both in texts and in films as the savage and mystical compared to the more rational and sophisticated West. This division of the East and the West creates a sense of "otherness" were the East becomes the other for the West. The people of the Eastern world become more exotic for the Western readers and audience and becomes "the others". This shows how important representation is in both literature and film because these assumptions of the East have, as Edward Said mentions, been fabricated by writers throughout the centuries and have become the standard of how the East is portrayed, especially in Hollywood films.

In Hollywood the concept of the other does not just apply to the geographical East. The other seems to represent everything that is not considered white American or part of Western culture.

In the paper "The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence*"* (2006), Teresa J. Guess argues that: "This exploration of what it means to be "white" in American society raises a key question: Does American society, or merely one

sets of its constituents, benefit from the social construction of whiteness. According to one critic, "the critique of whiteness,…attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than authentic or essential identity" (Guess, 2006, p. 653). In other words, the sense of whiteness can be viewed as a social structure that can be argued to benefit white Americans and puts "whiteness" as the superior form of identification. Richard Dyer argues in his book *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997) that "this assumption that white people are just people, which is not far of saying that whites are people whereas other colors are something else, is endemic to white culture*"* (Dyer, 1997, p. 2). This notion of whiteness that Dyer presents makes everything and everyone else seem like the other. This sense of otherness can create a negative view of people who do not fit into the concept of American whiteness and can affect their self-identity negatively as well. The younger generation will, by separating what is white and what is the other, learn the same thought patterns of these societal constructions and will continue this cycle if it is not discussed, critiqued and challenged**.** This can be argued to be one of the reasons why the critique of Hollywood films' lack of diversity in the representation of race and gender is quite important. Another negative side to otherness is that it can also create stereotypes that do not represent a group of people correctly, e.g. stereotypes of angry black women found in films like *Precious* (2009) and the mammy character in *The Help* (2011), and this again creates a divide between us and them, just like the white savior character does in many Hollywood films**.**

To add to this, Homi K. Bhabha has a theory called hybrid identity that makes representation of "race" more complex. He argues in his book *The Location of Culture (1994)* that "hybridity can be temporal, political, racial, sexual, social or economic. These forms of difference reconfigured as spontaneous discrimination or systematic inequality, are neither historically synchronic nor ethically and politically equal. What the minorities' presence reveals are the limits of pluralist progress" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Hybrid identity means that a person can identify with several different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. This is again especially evident in the post-colonial era. This can to some extent possibly unite the different cultures and ethnic groups instead of dividing them. This theory can be used in film to show how we adapt and learn from each other instead of creating a division of what is considered "whiteness" and "blackness".

On the other hand, this again can take away the emphasis from the real struggle different ethnic groups have had and are still experiencing in America. There is a constant divide between the developed and rational West compared to the untamed other within America. The other, as Said argues, relates to how Hollywood portrays other continents, countries, people, societies and cultures that are not consider as part of the Western world. Bell Hooks in her paper "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" (1992) links Said's theory of the other with films that depict the white savior character in relations to black characters. She argues that these films make black life the backdrop of the films' story and makes it only acceptable to explore "blackness", or the other as Said states, if it is experienced through the eyes of a white character (Hooks, 1992, p. 374-375).

William H. McNeill argues in his paper "Western Civilization in World Politics: What We Mean by the West" (1997) that in the United States the West is used as a term that either refers to the Wild West in America or it has become a term that includes The Atlantic Littoral of Europe (The British Isles, France, the low countries, Scandinavia, France, plus America, Australia and New Zealand) (McNeill, 1997, p. 513). The divide between the good West and the evil untamed East can be found not just in relation to Europe versus the Middle East, but between the West and Africa and Asia as well. This terminology is also used to divide the Capitalist West from the Communist East etc. There seem to be a constant motif of western texts to write their history and stories depicted on screen as the good west versus the bad other like in the chosen film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). This can also be a reflection of how victorious countries of war shape how historic events and countries are depicted in history. The Western mindset in films that include the white savior are often linked with Eurocentric ideals and white superiority throughout history.

Eurocentrism and its ideals are argued to stem from the Europeans' depictions of themselves and their development. Zeynep Gulsah Capan argues in his article "Eurocentrism and the Construction of the "Non-West" (2018) that "As such, approaching Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge means analyzing how Europe is written in as the originator of all developments (democracy, sovereignty, human rights) and how that narrative structures the temporal spatial hierarchies through which we understand the development of the international" (Capan, 2018). In other words, eurocentrism is a result of how Europeans viewed themselves and their developments as superior to the rest of the world. Eurocentrism depicts Europe in the colonial period as the cultural center of the world. This theory is mostly based upon power

relations between the colonizing and colonized nations. This idea of Eurocentrism again reflects how white savior characters are used as the viewpoint in films, because their point of view can be argued to be more important or "right". The Western world consists of mixed cultures, especially today, but in relation to the white savior narrative it is usually viewed as one pure cultural and historical approach to how the European colonist viewed the colonized. Adventure films often display the benefits of imperialism and how important Western influence is to foreign countries in order to develop properly (according to Eurocentric ideas/ideals). In these Hollywood films the Eurocentric ideals have transcended into "euromerican" ideals.

3.4 Feminist film theory and the white savior

Feminist theory is used to uncover patriarchal ideologies and to analyze difference in the representation of gender and sexuality. Laura Mulvey in her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) presents the theory of the male gaze, which is a theory about female characters being used as objects of visual pleasure for male viewers instead of being the driving force for the plot in the films.

It is important to note that there are some limitations to only using Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. By only using the idea of the male gaze one excludes the female spectator and makes them passive watchers. Mary Ann Doane in her book *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s, Theories of Representation and Difference* (1987) develops a theory of the four female spectator modes; transvestism, masochism, masquerade and double identification. These are an extension of the male gaze and center around the idea that female spectators can relate and identify with both female and male characters and are not just bound to one identification. In other words, a female gaze is created. The reason why Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is applied in the analysis is because it captures one main reason for why the female characters in some action-adventure films are framed as objects to be desired and does not give the female characters agency to be the driving force of the plot. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze also embodies why the female gaze was often not considered important. The male gaze theory shows how the on-screen female characters and the female spectators both became repressed and passive.

The second theory that will be explored in relation to post-colonial theory is black feminist theory. Black feminist theory saw its rise with feminism and has evolved throughout the decades. It was and is a response to feminist theory that did not really include the black female experience of life in the United States. This was especially apparent in the 60s and 70s. Black feminist theory develops feminism through the lens of intersectionality. This theory became a prominent factor in black feminist theory after the lawyer and author Kimberlee Crenshaw used it in the paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine" (1989) and in the article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991). She argues that black women are theoretically erased and that their experiences are often viewed as a gender problem without seeing the connection to race. She wrote these papers with a focus on how black women were treated in the court of law. Her theory of intersectionality has been adapted by academic scholars and it is argued to be an important theory for analyzing interconnections between gender and race in the experiences of marginalized groups. Intersectionality describes how a person's social identity is framed by overlapping elements such as gender, race, class and age. This thesis, when looking at black female characters, will link race and gender together in an intersectional manner.

Kory Stamper (2018) explains that intersectionality has been used in queer theory, feminist, studies on race and gender and sexuality as it offers a framework when discussing a broader pattern of discrimination and oppression. He argues that the term intersectionality did not become mainstream until the Women's March on Washington in 2017, when the term was used to explain the aims of the march (Stamper, 2018).

In Jane Coaston's (2019) interview, Crenshaw herself states that she thinks it is interesting how her idea had to leave the world of law in order for it to become mainstream. The article also mentions how her term of intersectionality has received criticism. Ben Shapiro, a politically conservative American commentator, critiqued Crenshaw's intersectionality as the "hierarchy of victimhood, with the white male at the bottom" (Coaston, 2019). He states that intersectionality only creates a hierarchy of who is most victimized and thus benefits just one group of people. Crenshaw confirms in Coaston's article that she thinks that the critique of her theory is most often that the theory just creates another divide between race and gender; black vs white, male vs female and black female vs white females. She counters the criticism

by saying that "the most common critiques of intersectionality - that the theory represents a "new caste system"- are actually affirmations of the theory's fundamental truth: that individuals have individual identities that intersect in ways that impact how they are viewed, understood, and treated. Black women are both black and women, but because they are black women, they endure specific forms of discrimination that black men, or white women, might not" (Coaston, 2019). Intersectionality is not meant as a theory that divides people, it is instead a theory that gives room and inclusion for understanding how different factors play into a person's identity and how these elements overlap and create certain obstacles for that individual.

Both the theories of Laura Mulvey and Kimberlee Crenshaw are theories that were formed decades ago, but they can be argued to still be relevant today in the light of the Hollywood films which will be discussed later in the analysis.

4. Why the #OscarSoWhite campaign is relevant

In recent years, Hollywood box office successes nominated for the Academy Awards have begun addressing diversity in new ways. Some recent examples of this are the animation *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018*)* distributed by Sony Pictures. It has challenged the previous conventions of Hollywood films highlighted by the #OscarSoWhite campaign by placing the black character Miles Morales as the protagonist. The narrative in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* is structured around Miles, a teenager of black and Puerto Rican decent, who over the course of the film becomes the masked superhero Spider-Man. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider- Verse* had a $90 million budget and earned $375 million in total worldwide and it became Sony Pictures highest grossing film, surpassing *Hotel Transylvania 2* from 2015. Another example of this is the biopic film *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) distributed by Focus Features. It tells the story of how the Black cop by the name Ron Stallworth infiltrated the anti-black group called KKK. It had a budget of $15 million and earned $93,4 million at the box office. It won the Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. This shows that Hollywood has taken notice of the profitability of films that offers diversity in narrative positions and casting.

On the other hand, the films that includes a white savior continue to be rewarded with prestigious awards. In the research surrounding the #OscarSoWhite campaign there was an evident resurfacing of films that in the light of the campaign became problematic. One of them was *The Blind Side* (2009*)* as mentioned previously. Another recent example is *Green Book* (2018*)* which won the Academy Award for best film in 2019. These two films are what some will call Oscar bait. Oscar bait films are films that seem to only be produced in order to earn nominations for Academy Awards. Oscar bait films often appear at first glance to tackle racial struggles and seems diverse in representation which makes it appear like real progress is happening in Hollywood, but on a closer look these films only serve as the Hollywood studios' "feel good take on race" that undermines the racial struggle in the United States. These films create a racial reconciliation fantasy targeted to a mass audience. In these films there is an interracial friendship that develops after the white character is exposed to the black character for a long time. This friendship enhances the white protagonist's humanity and makes him or her stand up to "save" or help the black character. This is the formula both the mentioned films use.

The #OscarSoWhite campaign seem to still be quite relevant. In her article for Variety, April Reign (2020), the maker of the campaign, notes that the Academy's answers to why there is still lack of diversity in their nominations was that it was not enough diverse film that had been submitted. She argues that:

> "Since I started #OscarSoWhite, the pushback has often been, "Well there just weren't enough diverse films to nominate". But that clearly was not the case in 2019, with films like "Just Mercy", "US", "Luce", "Clemency", "The Farwell" and so many others. When we have this wealth of talent in front of and behind the camera, and they are still not recognized by what is considered the pinnacle in the industry, then we need to take a closer examination of who the Academy membership is, what the voting process is and see where we can make systematic change." (Reign, 2020, paragraph 2)

To further discuss the point made by Reign in this quote, Emma Dibdin and Rosie Fletcher (2020) report that 84 % of the voters were white, while 16% were of people of color and 31% were female. This can be argued to show that the Oscar bait films' target audience is white males. So, on one hand it is evident that there is a shift in inclusivity, but films like *Green*

Book can to some extent still be a reflection of Hollywood's studios' reluctance to reform the Hollywood hero.

April Reign also makes a point about the power of the consumers in what films are made, because if films that endorse the white savior hero receive huge profit then it will not make it easier to change Hollywood's formula of portraying either white stories or tell black stories through white characters. To achieve change it is important to support smaller films produced by either lesser-known Hollywood studios or support filmmakers outside of Hollywood. This is of course not the only solution, but it is a way of letting the Hollywood studios know that there is a need for diversity in storytelling, casting of actors/actresses and within production teams. Reign lastly notes that the #OscarSoWhite extend further than just ethnicity. It tackles the lack of diversity of representation of gender, sexuality, disabilities and so on. The white savior character is, as mentioned, this thesis' chosen entry point to this debate on representation in Hollywood films.

5. The white male savior

This chapter sets the scene for the discussion of Hollywood heroes with an analysis of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). It compares the film to *Black Panther* (2018) in order to evaluate some of the changes that have taken place in depictions of the savior in Hollywood films. The chapter also discusses the importance of these changes in relation to identity and the spread of misinformation which can cause fear, misunderstandings and racism.

5.1 A brief summary of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Black Panther*

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom is an American action-adventure film directed by Steven Spielberg, produced by Lucasfilm Ltd and distributed in 1984 by Paramount Pictures. It is the second instalment in the Indiana Jones franchise and acts as a sequel to the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)*. It had a budget of $28 million and grossed $333.1 million at

the box office. It won the Academy Award for best visual effects. The narrative follows an archeology professor called Indiana Jones as he travels to India after being asked by a small village to find their lost/stolen stone and rescue their children who have been taken as slaves by a small group of Indians who live a cult-like life in the mountains by the village. He saves the children from the "evil cult" and returns the holy stone to the villagers and is received as a hero.

Black Panther is an American action-adventure-superhero movie directed by Ryan Coogler, produced by the Marvel Studios and distributed in 2018 by Walt Disney Studios. It had a budget of $200 million dollars and grossed around $1.347 billion at the box office. It is ranked as the 12th highest grossing film of all time. The film's production team and cast were predominantly black. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards. It won for best costume design, best original score and best production design. The narrative in *Black Panther* follows T`Challa who is from the country of Wakanda, which consist of five African tribes. The story follows T`Challa's struggle to become the King of Wakanda and the superhero known as Black Panther. After his father dies T`Challa has to go back home in order to take his place as the King of Wakanda. The antagonist Killmonger challenges him and by accepting the challenge T`Challa risks putting both Wakanda's inhabitants and the world in danger. He defeats the antagonist by using his power as the Black Panther with the help of his allies.

5.2 The meaning of the white savior

The character Indiana Jones can in view of history be seen as a reflection of a cultural/historical shift and that of "white guilt". The film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was made after the civil rights movement era. Through the lens of post-colonial theory one can argue that the character of Indiana Jones is a reflection of racial anxiety of the time experienced by some white Americans. He reestablishes white superiority and endorses the rightfulness of "white intervention" as a selfless act of protection and rescue towards an indigenous group. The Indiana Jones franchise does also to some extent try to separate bad "white" characters from good "white" characters in order for the audience to be able to identify with the good white character. This diminishes white guilt over racism, as the spectator is invited to identify with the white savior. This is done in for example *Raiders of*

the Lost Ark by portraying Indiana Jones as the likeable good white hero and the Nazis as the evil white characters. Even though there is a large gap between Indiana Jones and the evil indigenous tribe in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* he comes off as a much more flawed character in this film because of how he interacts with the main female character, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

This notion of white guilt is discussed in the paper "Feeling bad and Precious (2009): Black suffering, white guilt, and intracorporal subjectivity*"* (2017) written by Katariina Kyrölä. This paper focuses on how white middle class students reacted to viewing the film *Precious*, the winner of two Academy Awards for best supporting actress and best adapted screenplay. *Precious* is an American drama film that follows a black female's life in Harlem, New York City. Kyrola uses Rachel Griffins' argument taken from the paper *"Pushing into Precious: Black Women, Media Representation, and the Glare of the White Supremacist, Capital Patriarchal Gaze"* (2013) that a film is successful if it includes racism or black protagonists and very importantly "relieves white audiences of guilt and accountability" (Kyrola, 2017, p. 13). It can be argued that the use of the white savior character in Hollywood produced films is a product of a need for redemption of America's racist past. The white saviors separate the audience from the "bad" and "racist" white characters by creating white characters that see and acknowledge that minority groups are being mistreated and stand up against this mistreatment.

Kyrölä found in her study an evident sense of middle-class guilt from the test group in relation to the film in how the protagonist is treated and their living situation. This sense of guilt can be a reflection of how the audience already sense a noticeable divide in how white and colored people are treated in society. This can be argued to be a good thing because it makes the white audience more aware of the societal struggles of blacks and other minorities. On the other hand, Kyrölä mentions the black feminist writer Audre Lorde who in her book *Sister Outsider* (1984) argues that white guilt can have a negative effect: "The negative side of white guilt and why it might not be such a good narrative tool to use in films because expressions of feeling bad about white privilege can function contrary to their purpose as a form of self-centeredness. Through the focus on white guilt, white subjects can turn the attention back to themselves as the ones whose feelings matter the most" (Kyrölä, 2017, p. 18). In other words, when the focus is on white guilt, the stories being told will cater towards a white audience and will not create a change in representation.

Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon points out an interesting statement in their book *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fiction of Whiteness (2003)*:

> "The White American self, torn between serving himself and serving others embodies the contradictions of capitalism. He is the classic American Hero seen in such characters as Rick in Casablanca (1941) and Han Solo in Star Wars (1977). And in movies such as Stargate and Temple of Doom, although white Americans may initially have a profit motive in going to foreign lands, they soon abandon it to free the oppressed masses." (Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 38*)*

In relation to this statement one can by watching many action-adventure films quite easily see the ideals of the grander qualities of white Americans portrayed by the protagonist and their victories against "evil" indigenous tribes or the blooming friendship between the white protagonist and the kind, but naïve indigenous character that shows an immense loyalty towards the white protagonist. Even though these movies are under the fiction genre they still play an important role in representation and self-identity for the audience. Pat Henderson (2019) states that according to U.S department of State-Bureau of Consular affairs' records around 42% of Americans holds a passport. This means that around 191,1 million Americans do not travel outside the United States' border (Henderson, 2019, paragraph 1). This could mean that most of the representation of other countries, cultures and societies is probably viewed and interpreted on screen. This shows how much power film and other media can potentially have on a large part of the population's conception of the rest of the world. This idea is often portrayed in these films as the indigenous tribes do not have a cultural or a specific history until the "white man arrived" and guided them, and if the indigenous tribes do have a culture it is often viewed as evil. Practices such as voodoo, black magic and human sacrifices are often found in action-adventure films.

In order to compare the shift from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* to *Black Panther*, it is important to first analyze how Indiana Jones demonstrated the white savior's character traits. Indiana Jones acts as a Messiah like character in the Temple of Doom. This character trait of the white savior is best described by Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon in *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fiction of Whiteness (2003)*:

> *"*The messianic white self is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease,

or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival. This is a narcissistic fantasy found in many Hollywood films.*" (Vera and Gordon, 2003, p. 33)

In other words, in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* there seems to be a commitment to building upon a fantasied white identity which stems from the colonial period. The very basics of how the white savior character is framed is captured in the scene (Figure 1-3) where Indiana Jones first comes to the village

| Figure 1. | Figure 2. | Figure 3. |

Figure 1-3. Indiana Jones as the messianic figure. *Frame enlargement of video* (21:00-21:49, time frame in the film).

The characters around him react to his arrival with a desperate plea for help. Indiana is always center stage in the frame while the villagers flock around him and raise their hands towards his face. The camera frames Indiana as the long-lost savior the villagers have been waiting for. This framing makes his arrival and actions throughout the film seem more than justifiable because of the villager's reaction to him. His role as the savior is also enhanced by the smoke added in the close up of the villagers touching his face. It can be argued to almost symbolize that he has risen out of the smoke/the negative path he was perhaps on and found his rightful path, one where he leaves behind his hunt for archeological treasures and uses his skills to help others.

The audience is made quite aware of what is at stake and the camera has done its job in framing Indiana as the right person for the task. He is dressed in simple clothing, but stands out from the crowd because of his more Western suit. His facial expression shows mindfulness as if he is preparing mentally for the journey ahead as the villagers surrounds him with prayers and cries for help. The villagers are always framed as smaller and Indiana's gaze is always downwards towards them. Indiana Jones has a calm demeanor throughout

most of his interactions, this scene included. The only exception from this is when he interacts with the main female character, Willie Scott, but this will be discussed in the next chapter. The use of enslaved children and their rescue by the white protagonist seems to appeal for sympathy and to make the protagonist seem morally superior to the savage kidnappers. This messiah character is the white savior who abolishes the "evil" dark and primitive religion displayed in the film.
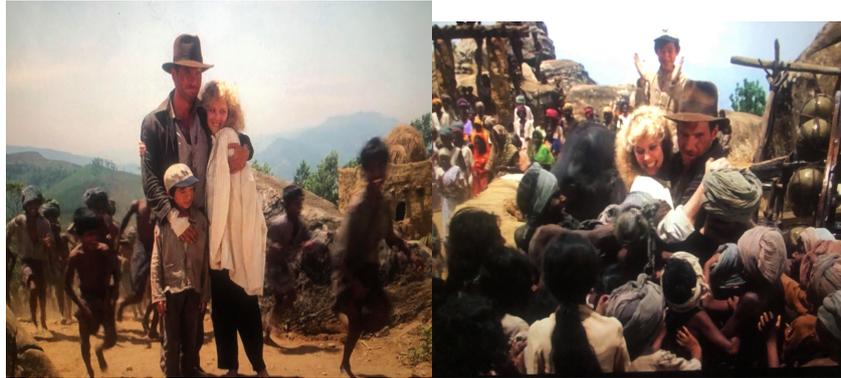

Figure 3.   Figure 4.

Figure 3-4. Indiana Jones as the white savior. Frame enlargements of video (1:50:31-1:53:18, time frame from in the film).

This is depicted in the end sequence (see figure 3-4) where the children run towards their parents Indiana is again framed in the middle and the children embrace him in the end as their savior. The village chief even states in the scene that Indiana's completion of the task has restored life in the city.

It is important to note that Indiana Jones as a character also shows respect toward the villagers and their culture in the film by following and seemingly respecting their traditions. On the other hand, Indiana Jones is depicted as a morally ambiguous character which to some extent can reflect how the white saviors do not always have the best in mind for the indigenous people. One can never really tell his intensions and his moral ambiguity can make the audience question his actions to the very end of the film. In the end he chooses to do what he deems morally right instead of following his own wants. He gives the villagers their statue back even though he knows that bringing it home to the United States would give him fame and fortune. It seems that for a moment Indiana could discard his initial want to travel to foreign lands in search of rare artifacts and instead help the villagers without any material

profit. This shows that even the white saviors in Hollywood films are not just painted as good or evil, but possess some redeeming qualities that make the character of Indiana Jones a little more than just a white savior.

5.3 Redefining the hero in *Black Panther*

The Black Panther was created as a comic book character in the civil rights era to echo the political moment of black power. It has since had significance in redefining what black characters can be in Hollywood films. Usually, Hollywood narratives have had little room for black characters. These characters have mostly been reduced to either enslaved persons, such as in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), or servants as in *The Help* (2011), or characters of lower intelligence or financial means who need the assistance of a white person in order to prosper in this world, such as in *The Blind Side* (2009). There are of course other representations of black characters, but these are the characters most commonly found in films that land nominations or awards from the Academy. The genres that usually depict these characters are civil rights stories or biopics.

Black Panther, on the other hand, shows that black people can be heroes in their own stories. It gives power and pride back to black protagonists outside of the white American gaze. Jamil Smith argues in his article for TIME that the redefinition of the hero in *Black Panther* is important to cultural and historical identity:

> "Those of us who are not white have considerably more trouble not only finding representations of ourselves in the mass media and other arenas of public life, but also finding representations that indicate that our humanity is multifaceted. Relating to characters on screen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us. When it doesn't happen, we are all the poorer for it." (Smith, paragraph 3)

This shows the importance of representation in defining one's identity. Seeing oneself represented on screen is important because it enables one to relate to others with similar struggles or who think and feel like one does. The character of T`Challa is shown to be able to go through an emotional journey which is often denied from the white savior characters

who seem to lack emotional depth. He is also depicted as more morally driven than the Indiana Jones character. This is done by always having T`Challa referring to his duties and their importance to him. He always seems to put his people first and his own wants and needs in the background. He also tries to put his own ego away and listen to what the people around him have to say, while Indiana Jones seems to mostly only listen to himself and does not take other thoughts and ideas into consideration. This make T'Challa appear as more of a leader and savior than the white savior.

In the white savior films, the other is used to distinguish the white protagonist's culture from the more savage indigenous inhabitants' culture. They can be viewed as a set of assumed stereotypes that create a "false" history written and formed by the "white gaze". In other words, it is the western world that writes and decides how the history and culture of the other is to be presented to the western audience. This is evident in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The portrayal of the indigenous inhabitants is compared and formed through the eyes of the white character. It is the white character that gets to discover and explain the other cultures. As Indiana Jones is an archeology professor at an American University where he lectures about foreign cultures he gets to form and present other cultures through western written texts and his own experiences, but these experiences will bear the perspective and reflection of a white male born in America. The Indigenous inhabitants does not get a chance to explain their way of living which could give a better understanding of their actions instead of judging them through only a western cultural perspective. It is also almost a sense of the other being discovered and created by the white characters in the white savior films. This is far from the truth, as there have been thriving developed societies in these countries for many centuries, some of them were even more advanced than the European countries for a long period of time.

Emeka Dibia Emelobe notes in his paper "Filmic representation in postcolonial discourse: A study of selected texts*"* (2009) how Hollywood has affected African identity in a negative way:

> "It is worthy of note here that the problem of Hollywood representation of Africa in films is not really that of the legitimacy of the representation, but the discourse behind it. The continent and people represented are in fact imagined and invented. Furthermore, early images of Africa on screen were not only those of misrepresentation or appropriation of African identity, but early films shot and shown

in Africa were part of the colonial endeavor, contributing to the implementation and solidification of colonial policies in general." (Emelobe, 2009, p. 218)

When it comes to representation of culture and non-white people in the white savior film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* versus the *Black Panther,* they are portrayed quite differently. One of the elements that creates "the other" in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is the use of tropes depicted in "tropes of empire" (Shoat and Stam, 1994). These tropes are often symbolic metaphors or plot devices used to distinguish the white savior from the indigenous people. These tropes create the sense of "the other" to enhance the white savior's rightfulness in their actions and morals. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* the trope of animalization is used to portray the indigenous evil tribe as barbaric. They seem more like animals than civilized men. They perform voodoo and human sacrifices. This sets up the notion of evil strangeness that legitimizes and privileges the white character's behavior and point of view. By portraying a group of people as "savages", "dumb", "animalistic" and "unmoral" a divide is created between the white characters and the other characters with different racial background.

In *Black Panther* the sense of the other seems to reflect the outside world of Wakanda. Wakanda and its people are portrayed as morally good and with a highly functional political system and society. While they talk of the outside world as more barbaric and uncivilized because of their constant need for expanding their powers and harnessing more resources. The outside world according to the Wakandans is filled with hate and war. There has been a switch from the West being superior in *Indian Jones and the Temple of Doom* to the people of Wakanda being superior in *Black Panther*. This is clearly stated in the dialogue and the images in the opening scene (see figure 5-6). The images on screen and dialogue depict slavery and wars done and started by the outside world.

Figure 5.   Figure 6.

Figure 5-6: The story of Wakanda and the world. Frame enlargements from the video (01:19-01:45, time frame from the film).

> **King T'Chaka**: Wakanda used vibranium to develop technology more advanced than any other nation. But as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos. To keep vibranium safe the Wakandans vowed to hide in plain sight keeping the truth of their power from the outside.
>
> **Young T'Challa**: Do we still hide Baba?
>
> **King T'Chaka**: Yes.
>
> **Young T'Challa**: Why?

The people of Wakanda have never interfered with the struggles and wars of the outside world. In the beginning of the film, it is clear that T'Challa stills clings to the old tradition of Wakanda to stay out of foreign matters. The female character and love interest to T'Challa, Nakia, tries to challenge him about his views in the marked scene (see figure 7):

Figure 7.

Figure 7: The marked scene. Frame enlargement from video (33:31-34:27, time frame in the film).

> **Nakia**: I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing.
>
> **T'Challa**: What would you have Wakanda do about it.
>
> **Nakia**: Share what we have. We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better.

T'Challa: We are not like these other countries, Nakia. If the world found out what we truly are. What we possess. We could lose our way of life.

Nakia: Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time.

The antagonist Erik Killmonger tries to use Wakanda's technology in order to get back at the oppressing powers in the world. His ideals are quite similar to those of imperialism. He states in the film that "The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire" (for time frame of dialogue, see figure 8). He wants to use Wakanda's resources in order to colonize the rest of the world and get back at the previous colonizers. In this scene Killmonger blames the Western World and its predominantly white inhabitants for the struggles of his people (people of color). He states this in the scene (see figure 8) after he has defeated T*Challa:

Figure 8.

Figure 8: Killmonger`s speech to the council. Frame enlargement from video (1:29:49-1:30:50, time frame in the film).

Erik Killmonger: You know, where I`m from… when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower… or the resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Hmm? Yeah, all that ends today. We got spies embedded in every nation on earth already in place. I know how colonizers think. So, we're gonna use their own strategy against 'em. We're gonna send vibranium weapons out to our war dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world… So they can finally rise up and kill those in power. And their children. And anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us!

The antagonist Erik Killmonger makes T'Challa rethink how he looks at the outside world. He starts to question if the decision of not interfering with the struggles of other people is wrong. T'Challa does not agree with Erik Killmonger's view on how to help the oppressed

people of the world. In the final fight scene (see figure 9) between T'Challa and Kilmonger, T'Challa argues that it is not morally right to do the same as the previous colonizing powers as it will only do more harm than good and will not make them any better than the previous colonizers.

Figure 9.

Figure 9: The last fight. Frame enlargement of video (1:50:23-1:50:40, time frame in the film).

> **T'Challa**: You want to see us become just like the people you hate so much! Divide and conquer, just as they did!
> **Erik Killmonger**: Nah, I learned from my enemies! Beat them at their own game!
> **T'Challa**: You have become them!

In the end T'Challa defeats Erik Killmonger and with him his ideals of imperialism. At the end of the film, they decide to venture outside their borders in order to help the outside world (the rest of the world) with their problems. They open a Wakandan international crisis center in California. T'Challa in the end credit scene (see figure 10) travels to a FN meeting in Austria and delivers a speech to the council:

Figure 10.

Figure 10: The FN meeting. Frame enlargement of video (2:05:35-2:06:27, time frame in the film).

T'Challa: For the first time in our history, we will be sharing our knowledge and resources

with the outside world.

Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows.

We cannot.

We must not.

We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat

each other.

Now more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very own existence.

We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us.

But in times of crisis the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers.

We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.

This speech is presented as a huge positive change for the world and it can also be argued to be just that. On the other hand, in a way they overtake the role of the white savior. They do seem to have superior resources and believe that their way of living is the better option compared to that of the rest of the world. They set out to be the helping hand that the world needs in order to save itself from destruction, just like the white savior characters set out to do in the other white savior films.

6. Female representation in white savior films

The objective of this chapter is to elaborate on female characters in relation to the discourse of the white savior. The analysis will first focus on the female characters in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of* D*oom* and *Black Panther*. It will explore how female main characters are portrayed in the action-adventure genre. Then, in relation to *Black Panther's* more diverse female representation, the chapter will look at how black female characters in Academy Awarded films have developed into having more agency and bigger range of character traits,

while still being attached to the white savior trope. The films that will be discussed in the latter part of the chapter are *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. Both of analysis sections include one film that was released before the #OscarSoWhite campaign and one that was released after to be able to analyze what has changed and what might still be the issue with these Hollywood heroes.

6.1 The male gaze in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*

Female characters in action-adventure films can be described in two ways: the damsel in distress and the sexual temptress. The characters often feel one-dimensional and lack their own desires and goals, and they rarely drive the narrative. Laura Mulvey captures the essence of female characters in action-adventure films in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures (1989):* "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the women has not the slightest importance*"* (Mulvey, 1989, p. 444).

There have not really been many action-adventure heroines. The most well known in recent years are Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (2001) and the superheroes from the Marvel universe; Wonder Woman, Black Widow and Captain Marvel who are all white characters. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984*)* the female character/heroin who goes on the journey with Indiana Jones is Willie Scott. She is a white American nightclub singer who Indiana meets in Shanghai. Her character is the neurotic damsel in distress and the love interest of the protagonist.

In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* the female character of Willie Scott is portrayed through what Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze. The theory of the male gaze uses psychoanalytic terminology in order to analyze how patriarchal society structures films and female characters. Mike Hibbert (2016) states that Mulvey argues that the anxiety of the male characters toward the female characters comes from the fear of the other. The females represent the other by having feminine traits. In other words, there is an anxiety towards that which does not fit into what is considered masculine: "Mulvey defines women's role in film as a source of anxiety. To be investigated, punished and forgiven (e.g vertigo) or she is to be

idolized and fetishized*"* (Hibbert, 2016, paragraph 5). Female behavior is viewed as less than male behavior and a strong female presence awakes anxiety in male character. This anxiety is linked to Freud's Oedipus Complex where the male child must break free from identifying with his mother because of the fear of emasculation. This fear can be argued to stem from a patriarchal viewpoint where being a man means that you have the dominant power in society. To avoid the treat of the female, Mulvey argues in her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*"* (1975) that women are fetishized in the films in terms of building upon physical beauty in order to make the female characters acceptable in regard to the male characters and the viewers and reduces the female characters presence to that of an object to be only looked at. She argues that:

> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to cannot to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey, 1975, p. 442)

This is the concept that she calls Scopophilia. It means that the viewers are taking pleasure in watching a passive female character as an object and not a fully developed character/person. Most of the action-adventure films are written and directed by men which plays a big part in the portrayal of women. That is not to say that male writers cannot write engaging female characters, it is more of a highlighting of what could be the reason behind the lack of diverse female characters. This also plays into the male protagonist ego and male viewers, because the female characters are then only in the narrative to serve as an ego boost for the male protagonist and builds him up as a desirable male role model because he gains control over the female character.

In *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*, Willie Scott does not do anything other than complain and she does not do much to drive the story. She is seemingly present only to observe what Indiana does, be attractive to him and to find him attractive. At the end of the film (see figure 11-13), Indiana captures Willie with his whip, she starts to fight back, but eventually gives in and kisses him. This seems to indicate that he has tamed her.

Figure 11	Figure 12	Figure 13

Figure 11-13. Willie is tamed by Indiana. Frame enlargements from video (1:52:12-1:53:00, time frame in the film).

Mulvey's concept of Scopophilia also relates to Orientalism because one can argue that the female characters are "the other". The females seem to exist outside of the white and patriarchal worldview of the white savior. The female characters are viewed through this lens as less than the male characters. Linda Napikoski (2020) mentions a quote by Yvonne Aburrow that captures why women are often viewed as the other, combining Edward Said's orientalism and feminist theory:

> "The patriarchal/kyriarchal/hegemonic culture seeks to regulate and control the body -
> especially women's bodies, and especially black women's bodies - because women,
> especially black women, are constructed as the Other, the site of resistance to the
> kyriarchy. Because our existence provokes fear of the Other, fear of wilderness, fear
> of sexuality, fear of letting go - our bodies and our hair (traditionally hair is a source
> of magical power) must be controlled, groomed, reduced, covered, suppressed."
> (Napikosi, 2020, paragraph 17)

In other words, females are seen as the other just as people of color because they are deemed as something different from the male, something that will lure the white male characters to abandon their virtues. This thought pattern is as Napikosi argues a reflection of a patriarchal/kyriarchal/hegemonic culture. Patriarchal means a society administrated by men and hegemony means that one group dominates over another (in this case men over women). Kyriarchal is a further expansion on patriarchy and it includes intersectional look at gender such as race. The concept of kyriarchy was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fironza in her book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992) and she argued that gender is not the only factor in who gets accesses to power in a society, but that there are other intersectional issues as mentioned beyond just gender (Osborne, 2015, p. 11).

Female characters have often little to no dimensions to them and are often bound to the fantasies of the males who write and watches these characters. This male gaze projects male fantasies onto female characters. Indiana Jones throughout the film downgrades Willie's intelligence, practical skills in the jungle and uses patronizing words such as "Doll". He often has a child-like approach when speaking to her. Her constant complaining as they venture through the jungle is played up against the calm and collected Jones. She is often put in situations where she comes across as naïve. They do not bond very well, and their relationship does not develop until Indiana Jones decides to have sexual relations. This sexual or romantic relationship is not really developed throughout the film. In the climactic moment were Indian Jones has returned with the rescued children and return the stone, Willie tries to get away from him only for Jones to use his whip in order to restrain her from leaving and kisses her. It can be argued that he seems to almost constantly have a need to show his control and dominance over her.

6.2 Redefining female character in action-adventure films

The female action-adventure hero has surfaced as a challenger to the male savior. In *Black Panther* the female characters are redefined beyond the damsel in distress. They are a driving force in the narrative, and they have varied character traits. This shows more diversity in the representation of what female characters can both do and be. They are not formed by the male gaze like the Indiana Jones female character. They do to some extent abide to the spectacle of the female body, but it is not evident here that this is in order to appeal to the male gaze. The women in this film offer comic relief, but this is not done by playing on their weaknesses like in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, but rather by investing in their individual senses of humor.

Figure 14 (Nakia)   Figure 15 (Okoye)   Figure 16 (Shuri)

Figure 14-16: Frame enlargements from video of female characters in *Black Panther*.

Three of the main female protagonists that reflect this change are Nakia, Okoye, and Shuri (Figure 10-12). Nakia is an undercover spy for Wakanda. In the film we are first introduced to her as she is rescuing kidnapped women from Nigeria. She is the protagonist's ex-lover. Her romantic relationship does not really develop throughout the film, even though it is implied that she and the protagonist still have feelings for each other. This shows an evident shift from the damsel in distress and lover character Willie Scott in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. She is portrayed as intelligent, strong and patient. She challenges the traditions of marriage and chooses her passion for her work over love. This shows that a female character is not inclined to only care about the affection of a male, but have their own wants and needs. The second character is Okoye who is the female guard/special force in Wakanda called Dora Milaje. She also acts as the protagonist T'Challa's personal bodyguard. The third character is Shuri who is 16 years old and the protagonist's sister and the princess of Wakanda. She works with designing new technology for her country. She is known for her intellect and her entrepreneur skills. She is often paralleled with that of the character Tony Stark/Iron Man. Shuri reflects how a female character can match the intellectual brilliance in a man (Tony Stark).

These characters do not shy away from leaping into action and they become active in the narrative. They want their countries to develop and are a part of this consistent development of Wakanda. They exude impressive military/fighting skills. They appear as the polar opposite of Willie Scott. There seems to be a more balanced relationship power wise between the male and female characters. The females have to some extent their own goals and desires. The male characters search out the advice of the women surrounding them. In *Black*

Panther`s universe the female characters have an important role of the political, economic, and social growth in their surroundings. It is also refreshing to see a depiction of women fighting for their country. This is often only reserved for male characters in Hollywood films. Wakanda's society does not oppress women because of their gender, but rather encouragers them to develop and explore their talents. *Black Panther* can be argued to be a utopia were gender is not of importance for your role in society. These female characters have been a part of broadening who the female audience can identify with, after the male gaze has narrowed it down throughout the decades in the action-adventure film genre.

The characters are portrayed as having different strengths, but there seems to be a notion that in order to create engaging and empowering female heroes in action adventures they just add strength. It is also possible to argue that the female characters do also fit stereotypes such as the tomboy character often used in other Hollywood films where the white female characters are portrayed as strong by just replacing the male hero with a female, e.g. Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*. The characters that fit into this stereotype are often portrayed as having masculine traits, but they get to keep their sexual side with a hint of innocence. This can be argued to link back to the quote used in the paragraph above by Mike Hibbert (2016) because it argues that women are to be "idolized and fetishized". This is done by dressing the female characters in revealing clothes like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* and by giving her character few personality traits or skills outside of being good at combat.

It is important to note that the females in *Black Panther* do not fit this stereotype entirely as they are not portrayed in an overtly sexual way with their choice of clothing or behavior. The female heroes do become more powerful by adding both physical and mental strength to the characters, but this does show that female characters are not yet viewed as strong if they embody more emotional/sensitive sides. It can be argued that the same formula that is used to categorize the male hero is then just used on a female in order for the character to become diverse and empowering for a female audience. This again takes away the notion that feminine qualities can also represent strength, and instead can suggest the more masculine features associated with an action hero to be the ideal both for men and women. It can be argued that the female characters in *Black Panther* does not have much character development and complexity. They are portrayed as almost superhuman like and they act and look almost flawless. The more complex questions raised in the film is between the male protagonist and the antagonist. This takes away an opportunity to discover a more complex

and maybe a more morally ambiguous female, or who can become emotional in the face of a crisis. A person can be so much more than just strong and smart.

Furthermore, many of the headlines surrounding *Black Panther's* release praised the film for being a feminist revelation, and as discussed above that is to some degree the case, but there is still a long way to go. The feminist writer Minna Salami (2019) wrote an interesting statement; *"We are at a strange point in our culture where it is considered more progressive to encourage institutions such as Hollywood to offer people of color problematic roles that they were previously denied, rather than to envision new roles that can empower everyone"* (Salami, 2019, paragraph 11).

In other words, progress should not perhaps just involve allowing black characters roles that used to be offered to white actors if the characters are not complexified to reflect intersectional issues in black lives and struggles. This does not mean that *Black Panther's* redefining of the female character is not important or progressive. It is more an observation of Hollywood's reluctance to write complex black characters. Secondly, there is still an apparent patriarchal structure in *Black Panther,* and this is depicted in the patriarchal monarchy. This society is organized around a male leader and is dependent on a male successor to take over the throne and the duty of being the *Black Panther*. On the other side, there is an evident female presence in Wakanda's government, where women are part of the political structure.

6.3 A brief summary of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

The Help is an American period drama directed by Tate Taylor and distributed by Walt Disney Studios in 2011. It is based on the fictional novel with the same name published in 2009 and written by Kathryn Stockett. The film had a budget of $25 million and grossed $216.6 million at the box office. It received four Academy Award nominations and won the award for the best supporting actress. The narrative follows the young, white middle class woman and aspiring journalist Eugenia Phelan, also nicknamed Skeeter. The story follows her growing relationship and later friendship with two black maids Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. The story is set in the 1960s during the civil rights movement. As Skeeter's

friendship with the two women grows, she decides to write a book from the point of view of the black maids in order to expose the racism they face every day.

Hidden Figures is an American biopic drama directed by Theodore Melfi and distributed by 20th Century Fox in 2016. It is roughly based on the nonfiction book with the same name published in 2016 and written by Margot Lee Shetterly. It had a budget of $25 million and grossed $236 million at the box office. It was nominated for three Academy Awards. The narrative follows the black female mathematician Katherine Johnson who works for NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). The story takes place during the cold war and the growing space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The story shows how Katrine faced racism and had to fight for her place to work at NASA. The narrative also follows her friends Dorothy Vaughn, a NASA supervisor, and Mary Jackson, a NASA engineer, as they try to get more education in order to further their careers at NASA but are faced with racial discrimination and inequality.

6.4 What and who can the black female hero be and become?

Both films depict the lives of black women in the 1960s and reflect the social atmosphere of that era through the eyes of the 21st century. Both depict intersectional struggles involving race, class and gender. Hazel V. Carby in the paper "White women listen! Black feminism and boundaries of sisterhood*"* (1997) describes how black women have been treated in both written and visual representations. It explains why looking at black feminist theory is important in relation to how black characters are depicted on screen. This is because feminist theory is mostly written by white women and that women's history is written about, and for white women. In other words, it is argued that the black female experience is lost in feminist theory:

> "The black women's critique of history has not only involved us in coming to terms with "absence"; we have also been outraged by the ways which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the western world, have been endowed. We have also been defined in less than human

terms. Our continuing struggle with history began with its discovery of us." (Carby, 1997, p. 110)

Again, pointing to that, it is quite important how characters are depicted, in relation to this thesis: on screen, in forming a perception of one's societal identity and belonging. Joseph Vecci and Tomas Zelinsky state in their paper "Social identity and role models*"* (2016) that the reason why representation is important is because a person's identity is based on their belonging to a group such as race and gender. This social identity offers the person with a set of rules that administer group behavior. This is argued to explain behavioral patterns across groups (Vecci and Zelinsky, 2016 p. 2). This is arguably why stereotypes are negative in the way that they limit what a black audience think they can be. It is of course important to note that films are not the only medium that forms a person's self-identity. Dr. Jhangiani and Dr. Tarry (2014) argues that factors in forming one's self-identity consist of different institutions like the family, community, and the school. The important take here is that we look to others in how we view ourselves and if the people we identify with are shown to behave in only a certain way it can create limits in the view people have on themselves and make them behave in a negative pattern (Dr. Jhangiani and Dr. Tarry, 2014, p. 3).

The Help and *Hidden Figures* are examples of including black characters to the front of a story while still holding on to the white savior in two different ways. In both films the use of a white savior is evident. In *The Help,* the white female character of Eugena "Skeeter" Phelan is the protagonist, and the audiences follows her point of view. She is the one who seeks out relationships with the black characters, the maids. If one takes away the character of Skeeter the story would not work, because she is the one who gives the black women in the story a voice. She is the one who sets out to write down the maids' stories to publish them. This connects to *The Blind Side* and *Green Book* where black characters are more or less side characters in their own stories.

In *The Help,* Skeeter is portrayed as the only one willing to see and hear about the struggles of the black characters and one of the few who has published anything that depicts the black maids' struggles. This makes her seem like a savior and only diminishes the black characters' own effort in bettering their conditions. Another white female character in *The Help* called Celia, offers the audience a more 21st century view on race. She does not seem to care or follow the social norms. She is also portrayed as an outsider herself within the white

community. She and Skeeter are portrayed as the good while the other female characters are portrayed as the evil in the story. There is an evident problem with this portrayal of the "colorblind" white characters. In Mollie K. Murphy and Tina M. Harris's paper "White Innocence and Black subservience: The Rhetoric of white heroism in The Help*"* (2017) it is argued that: "Although depictions of whites as colorblind and paternalistic are all too common, they often appear alongside racist depictions of Blacks as inferior/and or subservient. These stereotypes include (but are not limited to) the mammy, jezebel, athlete, magical Negro and Uncle Tom" (Murphy and Harris, 2017, p. 6).

This portrayal of the white characters diminishes the fact that these characters have the privilege to act this way because of their whiteness. These types of white savior characters might desensitize the audience to what is really progress just because the black characters encounter a few "good" white characters. An example of this in *Hidden Figures* is the scene where the character Dorothy talks to her white female supervisor Mrs. Mitchel in the restroom after they can use the same restroom (Figure 17). Mrs. Mitchel has denied Dorothy's applications for becoming a supervisor several times even though she acknowledges she is right for the job.

Figure 17.

Figure 17: Bathroom scene. Frame enlargement of video (1:34:52-1:35:04, time frame in the film).

> **Mrs. Mitchel**: Despite what you think, I have nothing against you.
> **Dorothy**: I know. I know you probably believe that.

The camera in this scene frames them as equal, but they almost only look directly at each other in the mirror, as to say that they are finally beginning to see each other for who they

are, but there is still a long way to go. The dialogue captures the white ignorance of Mrs. Mitchel and the other white employees' own behavioral pattern in relation to racism. The character of Mrs. Mitchel can to some extent reflect the mindset of someone denying their own racist tendencies. Mrs. Mitchel does never say anything racist, but her actions reflect how she puts herself above Minny because of her whiteness.

One thing to note is that in *Hidden Figures* and *The Help* they do not shy away from depicting the segregation of whites and blacks in the 60s. The black characters in *The Help* are portrayed as the others quite clearly because they are denied the same rights as the whites. They are dehumanized through the segregation of toilets, busses etc. The white antagonist Hilly denies her Maid Minny the use of their bathroom. The separation of toilets is also evident in *Hidden Figures*. Also, *The Help* portrays the stereotypical role of the mammy/the maid. The black women who raise white children instead of being able to tend to their own because they have limited opportunities of education and careers. Stereotypes of black women creates a negative identity of what the black woman can be and offers a limited view for the mass audience about how black women are. This reflects how the inclusion of white saviors and the use of stereotypes of black women contributes to the social hierarchy of the division between the better "whiteness" above "blackness."

In *Hidden Figures*, the three main female characters face economical and educational struggles in relation to how they are denied certain jobs and promotions. In *The Help,* white girls are allowed education while black girls have to quit their education to become maids. Economics and the opportunity for education is a big factor in developing skills and better your life situation which is in *The Help* denied from the black characters. This shows again how important it is to look at the struggles of black female characters through a black feminist's theory lens as it includes intersectional elements to understand the struggles the characters face. Intersectionality enables understanding of how a person's identity in regard to social, political, race and gender aspects can create both privileges and discrimination. Intersectionality looks at difficulties and advantages people face in their everyday life because of these aspects of identification.

Both films can be argued to show the importance of intersectionality because in order to understand the female protagonist's experience one has to look at gender, race, and class. There are some evident racial privileges of the white characters in *The Help* and *Hidden*

Figures: the white character can publish a book, advance in their careers, and get educational opportunities. In *Hidden Figures,* the character Paul puts Kathrine and her work down. He also exploits his privilege in front of her by hiding important information. He tells her she is not welcome to join classified meetings that he himself is allowed to attend and that she would also need to attend in order to be able to solve her tasks.

Hidden Figures can be argued to be a redefinition of character type of the working Black women. In *The Help,* the black females are depicted as the stereotypical maid/mammy characters while the female characters in *Hidden Figures* are allowed to break free from this stereotype and gets to portray black women working in other positions. *Hidden Figures* shows what an impact black woman have had on American history and development in relation to the American Space Shuttle Program that they worked on. In *Hidden Figures* the protagonist and the two other female characters are portrayed in ways that make them have more dimensionality in their personalities and lives. It also offers a different take on the strong female character compared to the *Black Panther*. The protagonist Kathrine is a single mom, with a career at NASA. She is educated and has a university degree as a mathematician. She contradicts several stereotypes such at the angry black woman or mother, as seen in the film *Precious*. She is portrayed as compassionate and kind to her children whom she raises with the help of her mother because her husband died. She is the breadwinner of the family. She is in comparison to the female characters in *Black Panther* not physically strong, but social and smart. She also shows that strong female characters can be vulnerable as we see in her interactions with the white characters in the story, which will be discussed later in the chapter. She is portrayed as having loving relationships with the other main female characters Mary and Dorothy. They are also depicted in the same manner as the protagonist Kathrine. Mary and Dorothy represent a new take on the black best friend stereotype in films. This stereotype has been used in films like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *High School Musical* (2006), *Tall Girl* (2019) and *Clueless* (1995) where they exist only to provide support to the main protagonist and do not seem to have a life of her own. These two characters and their lives are more fleshed out and they are individually given more screen time. All three have a life of their own, while the black female characters in *The Help* almost only seem to exist in the white characters' world and the audience does not see much else besides their interactions with white characters. The protagonist Kathrine offers a different take on the hero character. She gives black females an opportunity in film to exist outside of the white viewpoint, as she tells her story through her own eyes and gives a

different take on the strong and smart black character. Kathrine also turns down a man who does not agree with women in the workplace and talks negatively about her position at NASA. It is through their first interaction scene (see figure 18) that their different opinions are stated, and it is the reason why Katharine does not pursue him further until he apologizes for his remarks about women in the workplace.

Figure 18.

Figure 18: Meeting Colonel Jim Johnson. Frame enlargement from video (36:47-37:34, time frame in the film).

Colonel Jim Johnson: They let women handle that sort of.

Colonel Jim Johnson: (sees Kathrine is looking offended by his remark) That is not what I mean.

Kathrine: What do you mean?

Colonel Jim Johnson: I'm just surprised at something so taxing.

Kathrine: Oh Mr. Johnson, if I were you, I'd quit talking right now.

Colonel Jim Johnson: I don't mean no disrespect.

Kathrine: I will have you know I was the first negro female student at West Virginia University graduate school. On any given day I analyze the velometer levels of air displacement, friction and velocity. And compute over ten thousand calculations by cosine, square root and lately analytic geometry. By hand. There are twenty, bright highly capable negro women in the West computing group and we're proud to be doing our part for the country. So yes, they let women do some things at NASA, Mr. Johnson. And it's not because we wear skirt. It's because we wear glasses. Have a good day.

The male love interest has to gain her trust and affection by changing his mindset and their love for each other grows steady. This is quite different in comparison to the relationship of

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Willie Scott and Indiana Jones and how Willie is framed as a character. In *Hidden Figures* the love interest has to change and develop for the better over time in order for Katherine to give him the time of day, while Indiana Jones talks down to Willie and forces her to kiss him in the film. This relationship comes off as more forced than in the *Hidden Figures,* where more agency is given to the female character in her relationship with the male love interest.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative in *The Help* would not have played out without the white protagonist. This is not the case in *Hidden Figures,* where you can remove the white savior and the story would still have to some extent a positive impact on representing black women, but what the character is able to reach would be more limited as the white character offers opportunities for her to reach her goals in the film. She takes agency of different situations where she is faced with discrimination against the color of her skin and her gender. One of the most powerful scenes in the film is when Kathrine has walked to and from the colored restroom at the NASA facility, and she takes full agency of the situation. She comes into the office soaking wet and is confronted by her boss Al Harrison.

In this scene (see figure 19) she is framed lower than Al by the camera. This can suggest that at this point she is seen as lower in status, which is also reflected in her dialogue. Her voice is powerful, but yet it captures a vulnerability in her and the situation. She knows what she is risking by speaking up, but the audience understands from the dialogue that she has hit rock bottom. She cannot take it anymore.

Figure 19.

Figure 19: Confrontation between Kathrine and All Harrison. Frame enlargement of video (1:01:22-1:03:21, time frame in the film).

Al Harrison: Where the hell have you been? Everywhere I look you are not where I need you to be. Where do you go every day?

Kathrine: To the bathroom, sir.

Al Harrison: To the bathroom? For 40 minutes a day. What are you doing there? We are a T – zero here. I put a lot of fate in you.

Kathrine: There is no bathroom here.

Al Harrison; What do you mean there is no bathroom for you here?

Kathrine: There is no bathroom for me here. There are no colored bathrooms in this building, or any building outside the west campus, which is half a mile away. Did you know that? I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relive myself. And I can't use one of the handy bikes. Picture Mr. Harrison. My uniform, skirt below my knees and my heels. And simple necklace pearls. Well, I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay the colored enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog day and night, living on coffee from a pot none of you want to touch! So, excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day.

This scene gives Kathrine agency of her own actions and portrays how unjustly she is being treated. She manages to speak her mind and accepts the consequences. This scene is then followed by the scene where her boss Al Harrison destroys the sign that says "Colored restroom" with several strokes of the hammer and takes away the colored label on the coffee machine. He has then diminished some of the racial divide between the white and black employees at NASA and states "We all pee the same color here". This scene shows that Kathrine's choice to speak up had an effect, which makes her apart of the driving force of the narrative. On the other hand, this still show that her actions of speaking up would not have mattered had it not been for her less "racist"/" colorblind" boss Al Harrison.

Another scene (see figure 20) where Kathrine again takes agency of her situation is when she tells Paul that he can no longer hide information from her about the racket launch, and because they get new information every day in the meetings, she would like to attend them. This demonstrates that because she is a woman she is not included and do not have the same rights as men.
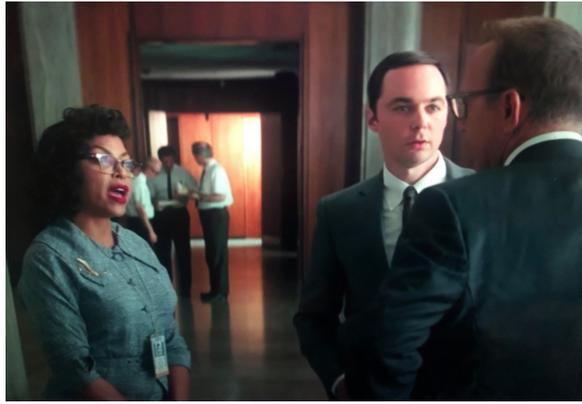
Figure 20.

Figure 20: Argument about classified meeting. Frame enlargements of video (1:21:42-1:22:05, time frame in the film).

Paul: Pentagon briefings are not for civilians. It requires the highest clearance.

Kathrine: I feel like I am the best person to present my calculations.

Al Harrison: You are not going to let this go.

Kathrine: No, I am not.

Paul: And she is a woman. There is no protocol for a woman.

Al Harrison: I get that Paul. Within these walls who decides the rules?

Kathrine: You sir. You are the boss. You just have to act like one.

This again shows Kathrine's determination and her passion for her work. It also shows how women were treated in the 60s within the workspace. Kenneth T. Walsh (2010) summarizes what women faced in the 1960s in the United States as they entered the workforce: "In the 1960s, deep cultural changes were altering the roles of the women in American society. More females than ever were entering the paid workforce, and this increased the dissatisfaction among women regarding huge gender disparities in pay and advancement and sexual harassment at the workplace" (Walsh, 2010). In other words, how women were looked at as less capable and less deserving of equal rights in the workplace than men, had a negative effect on women who ventured outside of the heteronormative nuclear family ideal structure of the 50s and into the paid workforce. Secondly, black women like Kathrine, Mary, and Dorothy faced another obstacle intersected with their gender which was that they were not white. This shows that in order to understand the struggle these women faced it is important to look at the intersectional elements of the struggle to fully grasp the characters journey. The Jim Crow laws created a divide between white and black which favored white Americans. As

Kathrine states in the film; *"My uniform, skirt below my knees and my heels. And simple necklace pearls. Well, I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay the colored enough to afford pearls!",* that she and the other black females are not paid the equal amount for their work as the white females. These political decisions of segregation still effect black individuals in the workplace today. In her article for Centre for American Progress, Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro (2019) points to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistic from 2018 which show a wage and employment gap for people of color: "While Black or African American, Asian, and Hispanic or Latino people comprise 36 percent of the overall U.S workforce, they constitute 58 percent of miscellaneous agricultural workers; 70 percent of maids and housekeeping cleaners; 74 percent of baggage porters, bellhops and concierge. Slavery and Jim Crow devalued these types of work, and the legacy of these institutions continuous to inform the American economic system and its outcome" (Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro, 2019). This shows that there is still a difference in employment and wages between white Americans and people of color in America. This puts the #OscarSoWhite campaign into a larger social context and shows how the film industry is a part of this, especially Hollywood films which do not, as discussed earlier, hire a wide range of people of color.

It is important to note the intersectional struggles women faced in order to understand the characters in *Hidden Figures*. Another scene (see figure 21) where gender and skin color effects what the female characters can do and be is when Mary talks to one of the NASA engineers who is a polish Jew. She solves the problem on one of the space crafts he is working on. He tells her that she should be an engineer. She responds with:
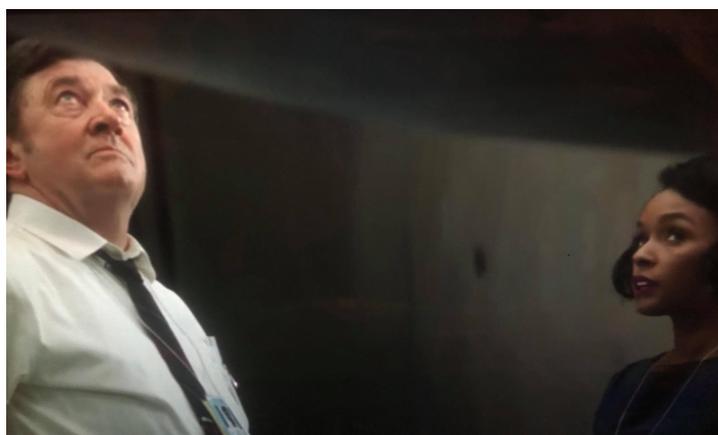

Figure 21.

Figure 21: The issue of becoming an engineer. Frame enlargement from video (15:16-15:45, time frame in the film).

Mary: Mr. Zilenski, I'm a negro woman. I'm not going to entertain the impossible.

Mr. Zalinsky: And I'm a polish Jew whose parents died in a Nazi prison camp. Now I am standing beneath a spaceship that is going to carry an astronaut to the stars. I think we can say. We are living the impossible. Let me ask you. If you were a white male, would you wish to be an engineer.

Mary: I wouldn't have to. I would already be one.

This scene with Mary leads her on the way to becoming the first black female to be able to attend night school at Hampton High School, which was an all-white school. She managed to break down barriers of race and gender and made progress towards what women and women of color were allowed to do and be. One can argue that by portraying female characters like Mary, Dorothy, and Kathrine it can show the audience that black women can be more than just one thing and that they can have agency over their own life. It can make a new generation of black women inspired and give them role models to look up to. They can also see someone who looks like them represented in a positive light by letting black stories and characters be made.

The white savior character of Al Harrison is made up for the film. In the book *Hidden Figures*, published in 2016 and written by the real Kathrine Johnson, she states that she took a stand herself on the matter of the segregation of bathrooms. She refused to use the colored bathroom and she explained that she used the "white one". Veronica Wells (2017) stated that the director of *Hidden Figures* was asked about why he added the white savior character and his response was: "There needs to be white people who do the right thing, there needs to be black people who do the right thing. And someone does the right thing. And so, who cares who does the right thing, as long as the right thing is achieved?" (Wells, 2017).

This statement can be argued to be one of the main problems of these films, especially *Hidden Figures,* as it takes away the agency and accomplishments of the black female characters. It puts them to the side and makes the white man the hero who steps in and "ends segregation". The film's main purpose is to show how these three women used their skills to stand up against discrimination, but it ends up downplaying these efforts by creating a

fictional white savior character. *Hidden Figures* argues through its characters that equal opportunity in society benefits most people. The film debates and argues that equal opportunity is the most beneficial and productive way to create progress in the workspace. This is reflected on in the character Katherine Johnson. Her mathematical skills are crucial in the rocket launch and without her, the mission could have ended badly because of miscalculations done by the team before she arrived to help.

7. Conclusion: A hero never dies.

The death of the *Black Panther* actor Chadwick Boseman was truly sad news to receive on August 28th 2020. It was evident that this news had a large impact on people, and it was quite clear from reading newspaper articles and social media posts that he and his portrayal of the Black Panther meant a lot to people and especially the black community. His portrayal of King T'Challa/Black Panther was a remarkable step in representation for the black community. The psychologist Roselyn Aker-Black (2020) summaries in her article for National Geographic how the death of the *Black Panther* actor affected people and especially children: "A symbol of excellence that all children could aspire to be, but especially children of color. The portrayal of him as king provided a visual that we as a people are regal, intelligent, and simply Black excellence" (Mckenzie, 2020, paragraph 11*)*. This quote summaries why representation is so important for how people view themselves and their culture, and also how others outside of that culture view them. It also demonstrates why the push for change in the film industry continues to be important and why analyzing the white savior narrative is still relevant.

In his article for BGR, Chris Smith (2020) reports that the Black Panther character will most likely be replaced by actress Letita Wright who plays Shuri, Black Panther's sister in the film. It is important to note that this is only speculations and it is not yet official, but it would be a huge milestone for race and gender representation for black Americans, especially for black American women. Black Panther 2 will then be one of the very few black female lead superhero Hollywood produced films. There have only been one other Hollywood produced superhero film were a black female had the lead and this was *Catwoman* (2004). The choice of making the character Shuri the next Black Panther could arguably open up more doors for both black American and female lead films. Making the Black Panther character a female

would have been an interesting continuation to analyze in relation to the research question in this thesis.

On the other hand, it is also important to mention that the Academy Awards have expanded their membership list. In his article for LA/IST, John Horn (2020) states that following many years of criticism (he refers back to the #OscarSoWhite campaign) against who the voters were at the Academy Awards, hundreds of new members have been invited, with a focus on including more women and non-white people (Horn, 2020, paragraph 5). This expansion together with the films analyzed in this thesis shows that there is progress in representation in Hollywood, but there is still a long way to go. As shown in this thesis, it is evident that positive changes are being made. The films analyzed in this thesis have introduced remarkable changes to what a Hollywood hero can look like and be like. Some of the films have proven that black characters have a range of traits beyond the stereotypes that Hollywood had previously afforded them. *Black Panther* illustrates how black characters can be superheroes, warriors, kings and queens. *Black Panther* and *Hidden Figures* give black women agency and expand on what black female characters can do. The analysis conducted in this thesis also shows how the white savior trope is still rooted in Hollywood productions. To conclude, the issue at stake is not about white people being bad and black people being victims and therefore inherently good. It is more about the fact that it is possible to represent both white and black characters in a way that more truly responds to their diverse experiences. Humans are not just good or bad, we are mix of both and the battle between the two sides often creates more engaging stories.

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